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ABSTRACT

Junior high schools have been blamed for failing to meet the needs of early adolescents. Proponents of the new middle school structure favored moving grade nine to the high school and moving grade five and or six from the elementary school to the new structural organization. The uniqueness of the middle school is in how the philosophy behind this structure gets translated into a more "student-centered" environment. This study sought to identify students' attitudes regarding their middle school experience. This research study was limited to 8th (N=192) and 9th (N=187) grade students in private schools regarding their self-reported concerns and attitudes with respect to their middle and high school experiences during the 1986-87 school year. This study shared similarities to one using public school students by Mitman (1981). In general, it was found that those students achieving a higher grade point average exhibited a more positive attitude toward school. As was expected, it was also found that females were more positive in their attitudes toward school, while eighth graders showed a greater general dislike of school than did their ninth grade counterparts. Students felt that directions and goals were not clear and that teachers were not helping them to learn and understand or to take into account what they were interested in. Students were more confident, felt teachers were friendlier, but felt less like they were making good progress, and had a lower sense of self-efficacy than those in Mitman's study. The implications from this study indicate that the differences in private school norms, rules and regulations are likely to influence achievement outcomes, as well as serve as an added source of pressure. (ABL)

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THE CONCERNS AND ATTITUDES OF EARLY ADOLESCENT
MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS IN TRANSITION

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Intermediate education in the United States began with the founding of the first junior high school in September of 1909 (Brimm, 1963). This organization was intended to bridge the gap between the elementary and high schools.

During the late 1950's, dissatisfaction with the junior high school began to arise among parents and educators alike. The dissatisfaction which developed was not with regard to the goals and objectives of the junior high school, but with the failure of the junior high school to fulfill these goals (Devita, Pumerantz and Wilkow, 1970).

A new organizational pattern began to emerge in the early 1960's with regard to the philosophy of education for the early adolescent. Junior high schools across the country were blamed with the failure to meet the needs of this special age group. Proponents of the new "middle school" structure favored moving grade nine to the high school and moving grade five and/or six from the elementary school to the new structural organization. This change in organizational structure was accompanied by a philosophy which stated that middle schools should provide a program especially adapted to the wide range of individual differences and special needs of the "in-between-ager"; create a school order arrangement that promotes continuity of education from school entrance to exit; and facilitate, through a new organization, the

introduction of the needed innovations in curriculum and instruction (Alexander and George, 1981).

The uniqueness of the middle school is in how the philosophy gets translated into a more "student-centered" environment. This environment entails block scheduling, team teaching, and an overall spirit of cooperation rather than one of competitiveness.

The special characteristics of the "in-between-ager" have been identified by Erikson as a search for self-identity, a need for independence from parents, reliance on friends and peer groups (Erikson, 1963). A period which is sometimes referred to as being "traumatic" for a child of this age.

In support of Erikson's theory, Protinsky found that pre- and early adolescents were far more confused, less secure and experienced, more anxious, and less integrated than their older counterparts. He also determined that younger adolescents were less willing to wait for future gratification and were less certain of and less comfortable with themselves (Protinsky, 1975). It has also been found that during this period of the adolescents' life, friends (Jersild, 1978) and peer relationships (Kaplan, 1984) are extremely important.

Among the many environmental factors that may affect adolescent views of themselves are those connected with school. Studies have shown that during the transition period between middle school and high school is also the same period during which there occurred the greatest change

in the stability of the self-image (Simmons, 1973). The results also show that this age group is more self-conscious, has less positive attitudes toward themselves, and view others (parents, peers, and teachers) as seeing them more unfavorably (Simmons, 1973). In addition, studies involving the self-concept of adolescents have shown males to consistently exhibit a greater self-concept, as well as being more positive, than their female counterparts (Monge, 1973). And, that adolescents with older-aged siblings exhibit better ability in adapting to changes in their environment (Bowerman and Dobash, 1974).

Rationale

Alexis Mitman, John Mergendeller, Thomas Rounds, Martin Packer, Gerald Dadey, Beatrice Ward and William Tikunoff (1981) identified students' concerns and attitudes regarding their elementary and junior high school experiences. The rationale was that if students' concerns and attitudes were known regarding their transition into junior high school then adjustments in the design of the transition process and teaching practices could be made so as to alleviate these concerns.

Two separate instruments were used to collect information on students' opinions and concerns about school. Both of which revealed very clear factor structures regarding students' concerns.

The Student Opinion Survey asked sixth and seventh grade students to respond to statements about school. Mitman et al. identified seven

factors, as a result of factor scores, believed to be of some degree of concern to those students anticipating transition into junior high school. Those factors were identified as need for self-direction, confidence about academic performance, friendship, belongingness in school, poor progress with schoolwork, general dislike of school, and positive attribution.

The Concerns Questionnaire utilized by Mitman asked seventh grade students to indicate the importance of 32 possible concerns associated with the transition from sixth to seventh grades. A factor analysis revealed that difficulty of schoolwork, negative peer, privacy, classes, less control, friends, and newness of junior high school were the areas of greatest concern to these students. In analyzing data, no relationships were identified between the total scores on each of the instruments and the factor scores for each of the factors resulting from the factor analysis.

Results of a literature search have shown that no such study has been attempted to identify the concerns and attitudes of middle school students regarding their experiences in school, as well as the transition process into high school. Using Mitman's work as a guide, the methodology was adapted for use with students anticipating transition into high school. It is important for educators to understand this critical period of the adolescent at transition points and how particular school environments interact or influence students' concerns.

The purpose of this study is to identify students' concerns and

attitudes regarding their middle school experience, as well as their transition into high school.

In this study, the adaptations made to the Mitman et al. study were in 1) age group, 2) research design, and 3) sampling. With respect to the age group used in the study, eighth and ninth grade students were used so as to gain an understanding of the specific concerns these students have with regard to their transition into high school. Mitman's study used sixth and seventh grade students so as to identify the concerns of students entering middle school.

Another difference in the present study as compared to Mitman's study is the variation in research design. The original longitudinal design was found to be faulty since it required the same students to respond to the same survey twice within a very short interval of time. It was believed by Mitman and his colleagues that this may have permitted students to recall the manner in which they originally responded to the questions and therefore respond in the same fashion (Mitman, 1981) For this reason a cross-sectional design was utilized for the present study which prohibited any student from responding to the instrument more than once.

The sample for the present study was drawn from private schools rather than public schools as was the case in Mitman's work. One might speculate that concerns identified among students in the private sector would only be magnified among their public counterparts.

It is the authors' contention that although some of the student concerns will be similar between the public and private sectors,

by and large they will differ due to the differences in environment and clientele found in private schools. One might speculate that students attending private schools might have fewer concerns than their counterparts in public school. These students are more likely to be better prepared, receive more parental support and encouragement etc. Private schools generally have a stronger value/norm system geared toward increasing academic achievement. Some of these notions have been supported in research, Coleman indicated that students attending private schools show higher learning rates with greater levels of achievement in both vocabulary and mathematics than those students attending public schools. In addition Coleman found the level of discipline to be stronger in private schools, as well as more fair than those practices usually reported by public schools (Coleman, 1981). Another of Coleman's studies suggests that achievement among private school students is about two grade-levels higher than in the public sector due to school culture norms (Coleman, 1981).

Parents may send their children to private schools because they want a better education, a "quality" education for their children. By "quality" education, they mean

an education that includes religious and moral values, an education with rules and discipline, an education that treats their children with respect, an education provided by teachers and staff who care about their children and their image, and impress on them high

levels of expectation, an education to which they themselves contribute labor and services, an education that makes their children so interested in learning that they discuss school at the dinner table (Gaffney, 1981).

The differences in age group, sampling, and research design in the study will not permit comparisons with the findings reported by Mitman. However, these adaptations provide a stronger test of the null hypothesis in that concerns, if any, are isolated in the proposed sample, they would more likely be magnified in a more heterogeneous, public school cohort.

Limitations

This research study was limited to 8th and 9th grade students regarding their self-reported concerns and attitudes with respect to their middle and high school experiences during the 1986-87 school year. The study was also limited to four private institutions within the suburban Philadelphia area which utilize a middle school organizational structure thereby separating it from the elementary or high school setting, although physically it may be housed in the same facility. The sample population selected is homogeneous with respect to race and socioeconomic status.

Only students in eighth and ninth grades who have completed the preceding year of their education in the institution they are currently attending were included in the study. The rationale for such a limitation is an attempt to provide a more accurate indicator of the influence of the middle schools in preparing the students for transition

to high school.

When students make the transition from the middle school environment to the high school environment, they experience many changes. In many instances they move to a new school site, one that has new and larger groups of teachers and students. Even if students have come from a middle school where they had more than one teacher during a particular grade level, they meet greater differentiation and diversity in high school. While these observations characterize the objective aspects of transition to high school, little is known about how students themselves perceive the transition experience. A better understanding of these perceptions is needed to understand what, if anything, makes the transition experience difficult or enjoyable. These student perceptions also are important because they serve partially to explain the impact of the new school environment on student behavior. In other words, students' own definitions of the situation help us to gain understanding of the students' overt behavior in that situation.

In order to plan better for organizational, instructional, or curriculum changes necessary to bring about a gradual adaptation to the high school environment, it is necessary to assess the concerns and attitudes of students currently experiencing the transition process. The findings from this analysis may then be of potential use in improving the quality of these middle schools.

Research Design

Quantitative data collected for each school were analyzed using a cross-sectional design. As with any cross-sectional design there are threats to validity which may prohibit direct causal determination of the factors investigated. However, due to the lack of research in this area, this study is viewed as being exploratory in its investigation of the concerns and attitudes of students in transition from middle school to high school.

The nature of the problem described in this research study mandates that the descriptive method of research be utilized. A cross-sectional method of data collection was implemented sampling eighth and ninth grade students.

A printed survey questionnaire was distributed to the sample population through the group administration process. Participants were given a brief introduction about the nature of the study and general directions concerning their responses to the individual questions. They were given a assurance of confidentiality.

Population and Sample

The target population for this study was four private institutions with a 6th through 8th grade middle school organizational structure.

The sample included 95% of the eighth and ninth grade students attending the four institutions. Those students who had not attended the same school for at least one year were not included in the study. The resulting sample size was 192 eighth grade and 187 ninth grade students. The sample composition was 92% white, 8% black, 51% female, and 49% male (see Table 1). In addition, 96% of the students came from middle class homes as evidenced by their ability to pay tuition while 4% of the student population received some form of tuition aid.

In order to insure that the schools selected were functioning as middle schools and not in name only, they were rated on the extent to which the schools have implemented programs and strategies characteristic of middle schools. The characteristics are those common across studies reviewed and are:

1. A statement of philosophy and schools goals that is based on knowledge of the educational needs of boys and girls of middle school age and is reflected in school program planning and evaluation.
2. A curriculum plan for the middle school population that provides for their continuous progress, basic learning skills, use of organized knowledge, personal development activities, and other goals as locally determined.
3. An interdisciplinary teacher organization which provides for team planning, teaching, and evaluation, and for interdisciplinary units.
4. Block scheduling and other time arrangements to facilitate flexible and efficient use of time.
5. Instruction which is individualized to learner needs.

Table 1
Eighth and Ninth Grade
Sample Characteristics

Characteristics	Eighth Grade (N=192)	Ninth Grade (N=187)
RACE		
White	93%	91%
Black	7%	9%
GENDER		
Male	49%	51%
Female	51%	49%
GRADE POINT AVERAGE		
A	3%	4.3%
B	23%	29.3%
C	48%	45.0%
D-F	26%	21.4%
SIBLING		
Had an older sibling	27%	25%
No older sibling	73%	75%
HAVE BEEN ATTENDING PRIVATE SCHOOL FOR MORE THAN 1 YEAR		
	95%	95%

A rating of the characteristics was determined through on-site observations, and analysis of written documents; e.g. school plans, curriculum guides, and handbooks. The subjectivity of such ratings is recognized but were found to be necessary to estimate the level of middle school functioning. Each of the schools was found to be in compliance with at least four of the five characteristics. Students comprising the sample were found to be similar in the areas of socio-economic status, race, and values (i.e. Christian education).

Instrument

The Student Opinion Survey (SOS) is a slightly modified version of an instrument developed by Power and Cotterell (1979), and also by Alexis L. Mitman (1981). In Part A, students are asked to respond to statements about school (e.g., "I like my teachers" and "I am making good progress with my work") by marking one of three alternatives: True, Uncertain, or False. The following categories are incorporated into Part A of the instrument but are not scored as identifiable subscores: need for self-direction, confidence about academic performance, friendship, belongingness in school, poor progress with schoolwork, general dislike of school, and positive attribution.

Part B of the instrument asks students to respond to four curriculum concepts (English, Math, Social Studies, and Science) and two general concepts (School and Teachers at School). For each concept, students will be asked to make a mark on a 7-point scale for each of

five bipolar adjective pairs (interesting/dull, bad/good, easy/difficult, useless/useful, confusing/clear).

In the eighth grade form of the SOS, students are asked to respond to the two additional concepts of "High School" and "High School Teachers." These two concepts were placed under a heading called Part C. Also in Part C, eighth grade students are asked to answer two open-ended questions about three problems and three things they looked forward to upon entering high school. Ninth grade students are asked two open-ended questions under Part C about problems and things they enjoy in high school.

The Concerns Questionnaire presents ninth grade students with thirty-five different concerns and is a slightly modified version of an instrument developed by T. L. Good (1980). The questionnaire asks students to respond to each concern item in two different contexts. In Part A, students are asked to indicate how great each concern was when they entered high school. Part A is subsequently referred to as the "since coming to high school" portion of the questionnaire. In this section, students respond to each concern item by marking one of three alternatives: "A Great Concern," "A Small Concern," or "No Concern at All." The following categories are incorporated into this portion of the instrument: difficulty of schoolwork, negative peer, privacy, classes, less control, friends, and newness of high school.

The Concerns Questionnaire also contains three open-ended questions about the differences and similarities between eighth and ninth grades and what was good and bad about the first weeks of high school. These

questions make up Part B of the complete Concerns Questionnaire.

Content validity of the original version of the Concerns Questionnaire was achieved by the jury method of instrument construction. During this process five different sources were utilized in the development of the instrument. Those sources used for this procedure were: students in transition, parents of students in transition, principals of these students, their teachers, and students' written responses to open-ended questions regarding the transition process. Items brought into question by a majority of those serving on the panel were eliminated from the final version of the instrument (Mitman, 1981).

In order to insure that the minor modifications made to each questionnaire used in the study were appropriate to the task, seven middle school teachers and one district superintendent were asked to review the changes. Additional modifications were necessary due to their recommendations regarding phraseology and the unsuitable nature of several items. In making these revisions a "standard" rule was developed by the researcher whereby any item which was found to be unsuitable by more than three out of the eight panelists, that item was automatically dropped from the instrument. This process served to increase the content validity of the instruments. An internal consistency (split-half) reliability test was performed on the data which produced a Spearman-Brown correlation coefficient of .70 (N=379).

Major Findings

In general, it was found that those students achieving a higher grade point average (GPA) exhibited a more positive attitude toward school. As was expected, it was also found that females were more positive in their attitudes with respect to school, while eighth graders possessed a greater general dislike of school than their ninth grade counterparts.

At this point it must be noted that the sample used in the present study was found to be quite different from the sample used in the Mitman et al. study. Both eighth and ninth grade students comprising the present sample exhibited quite distinct negative attitudes toward school. It is the speculation of the researcher that these differences are due to the private school setting, underlying philosophy of Christian Education, and the existence of tighter rules and regulations as compared to their public school cohort.

A factor analysis of the Student Opinion Survey (Alexis L. Mitman et al. study) was performed which resulted in the following factor structure, or areas of concern being identified: (1) Need for Self-Direction; (2) Confidence About Academic Performance; (3) Friendship; (4) Belongingness in School; (5) Poor Progress With Schoolwork; (6) General Dislike of School; and (7) Positive Attribution (see Table 2).

Another factor analysis of the Student Opinion Survey (Sierer/Winfield study) was performed and a listing of concerns

TABLE 2

Subscale Items On Student Opinion Survey
(Alexis L. Mitman et al. study)

Item #	Item	Factor Loading
FACTOR 1 - NEED FOR SELF-DIRECTION		
3.	A lot of what we are supposed to do at this school does not make sense.	-.650
4.	My teachers are helping me to learn and understand.	.456
7.	Normally I feel quite relaxed at school.	.556
9.	I wish we were free to do things our own way instead of being told exactly what to do.	-.466
12.	My teachers take into account what I need and what I am interested in.	.552
FACTOR 2 - CONFIDENCE ABOUT ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE		
13.	During exams I worry that I might fail or do badly.	.816
16.	I tense up when the teachers ask me questions in class discussion.	.652
25.	I am often afraid I will make a fool of myself in class.	.426
26.	When exams are due, I feel quite confident I will do well.	-.470
FACTOR 3 - FRIENDSHIP		
14.	At this school I do not have as many friends as I would like.	.683
20.	I am accepted and liked by most of the kids in my class.	-.760
22.	Nobody in this school seems to notice me or care what happens to me.	.765
FACTOR 4 - BELONGINGNESS IN SCHOOL		
5.	In school I am often able to work with people I like.	-.615
8.	Some teachers are really against me.	.548
10.	I like school better than most other kids.	-.401
11.	My teachers are friendly towards me.	-.410
15.	The way this school is run leaves me so confused, I do not know where to turn.	.712
FACTOR 5 - POOR PROGRESS WITH SCHOOLWORK		
4.	My teachers are helping me to learn and understand.	.456

Mitman et al. study (Cont.)

Item #	Item	Factor Loading
19.	I am making good progress with my work.	.742
23.	It is hard for me to do as well at school as my parents expect.	-.597
26.	When exams are due, I feel quite confident I will do well.	.497
28.	I am quite satisfied with how my schoolwork is going.	.751
29.	It is hard for me to do as well at school as my teachers expect.	-.597
FACTOR 6 - GENERAL DISLIKE OF SCHOOL		
1.	I look forward to coming to school each day.	.521
2.	I like my teachers.	.817
6.	I do not really enjoy anything about school.	-.689
10.	I like school better than most other kids.	.524
11.	My teachers are friendly towards me.	.610
27.	I get upset when my teachers do not come to my help when I need it.	.572
FACTOR 7 - POSITIVE ATTRIBUTION		
17.	In this school people like me do not have any luck.	.521
21.	I think that people like me will never do well at this school no matter how hard I try.	.651
24.	A good deal of school work is just to keep busy.	.630

comparable to that found for the Mitman study was identified. The factor structure was supported by the responses given by students to the open-ended questions located at the end of the Student Opinion Survey (see Table 3).

In reviewing the various factors identified on the Student Opinion Survey the following findings were apparent (it should also be noted that although the magnitude of the factor loadings may be similar, the direction of these loadings are in opposite directions). In Factor 1, Need for Self-Direction, students in this sample, unlike students in the Mitman sample, felt directions and goals were not clear and that teachers were not helping them to learn and understand or took into account what they were interested in. Students in this sample also did not feel relaxed in this school setting, and tended to want more freedom in doing things their own way. In Factor 2, Confidence About Academic Performance, students in this study, unlike those in Mitman's study, were more confident about their academic performance. In Factor 3, Friendship, students in the present sample tended to have more friends, feel accepted and feel that individuals cared. In Factor 4, Belongingness in School, unlike students in Mitman's study, students felt they were able to work with people they liked, felt teachers were friendly, and felt schools were well organized. With regard to Factor 5, Poor Progress With Schoolwork, unlike Mitman's sample, students felt teachers were not helping them to learn and understand nor were they making good progress with their work. Students also felt that it was hard for them to do as well as their teachers and parents expected.

TABLE 3

Subscale Items On Ninth Grade Student Opinion Survey
(Sierer/Winfield study)

Item #	Item	Factor Loading
FACTOR 1 - NEED FOR SELF-DIRECTION		
3.	A lot of what we are supposed to do at this school does not make sense.	.587
4.	My teachers are helping me to learn and understand.	-.652
7.	Normally I feel quite relaxed at school.	-.520
9.	I wish we were free to do things our own way instead of being told exactly what to do.	.430
12.	My teachers take into account what I need and what I am interested in.	-.610
FACTOR 2 - CONFIDENCE ABOUT ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE		
13.	During exams I worry that I might fail or do badly.	-.660
16.	I tense up when the teachers ask me questions in class discussion.	-.837
25.	I am often afraid I will make a fool of myself in class.	-.720
26.	When exams are due, I feel quite confident I will do well.	.641
FACTOR 3 - FRIENDSHIP		
14.	At this school I do not have as many friends as I would like.	-.687
20.	I am accepted and liked by most of the kids in my class.	.824
22.	Nobody in this school seems to notice me or care what happens to me.	-.659
FACTOR 4 - BELONGINGNESS IN SCHOOL		
5.	In school I am often able to work with people I like.	.462
8.	Some teachers are really against me.	-.467
10.	I like school better than most other kids.	.636
11.	My teachers are friendly towards me.	.596
15.	The way this school is run leaves me so confused, I do not know where to turn.	-.669
18.	What happens in this school goes on no matter what the pupils may do or say.	-.823

Sierer/Winfield Study (Cont.)

Item #	Item	Factor Loading
FACTOR 5 - POOR PROGRESS WITH SCHOOLWORK		
4.	My teachers are helping me to learn and understand.	-.652
19.	I am making good progress with my work.	-.590
23.	It is hard for me to do as well at school as my parents expect.	.760
26.	When exams are due, I feel quite confident I will do well.	-.641
28.	I am quite satisfied with how my schoolwork is going.	-.649
29.	It is hard for me to do as well at school as my teachers expect.	.742
FACTOR 6 - GENERAL DISLIKE OF SCHOOL		
1.	I look forward to coming to school each day.	-.798
2.	I like my teachers.	-.601
6.	I do not really enjoy anything about school.	.492
10.	I like school better than most other kids.	.636
11.	My teachers are friendly towards me.	-.596
27.	I get upset when my teachers do not come to my help when I need it.	.697
30.	I feel that my teachers deal with students fairly.	-.590
FACTOR 7 - POSITIVE ATTRIBUTION		
17.	In this school people like me do not have any luck.	.639
21.	I think that people like me will never do well at this school no matter how hard I try.	.703
24.	A good deal of schoolwork is just to keep busy.	.560

They were not confident about performance nor satisfied with how their schoolwork was going. Findings also indicate that there are more academic pressures which are evident within the private school setting. In Factor 6, General Dislike of School, students in this sample, unlike Mitman's sample, did not like coming to school each day, did not like teachers and felt teachers were not friendly or fair. Lastly, in Factor 7, Positive Attribution, unlike Mitman's sample, students in this sample had a low sense of self-efficacy and felt schoolwork was just to keep them busy.

Implications

Although numerous studies have been conducted of middle schools, few have examined effectiveness from the students' viewpoint. Since this study is limited to the perceptions of students in private school settings, concerns and attitudes found indicate the need to explore this area in other populations. This study also indicates the need to look at how schooling influences affective outcomes which influence achievement. It must be remembered that the rationale for establishing middle schools was to meet the very special needs of the ten to fourteen year old child going through a unique period in his/her growth and development.

The implications resulting from this study indicate that the differences in private school norms, rules and regulations are likely to influence achievement outcomes, as well as serve as an added source of

pressure. Affective outcomes may also be influenced in terms of the attitudes and concerns of middle school students within the private setting. This study also tends to validate the claims of the literature which state that students at this age need flexibility, freedom and a growing sense of autonomy.

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