DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 409 387 UD 031 777

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TITLE Alternative Model for Urban Middle Level Schooling: An Evaluation Study.
PUB DATE Mar 97
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Catholic Schools; *Disadvantaged Youth; *Educational Environment; Grade 6; *Institutional Characteristics; Intermediate Grades; Males; *Middle Schools; Models; Program Evaluation; Public Schools; *School Effectiveness; Teacher Role; *Urban Education; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS *Jesuits; Middle School Students

ABSTRACT

This study evaluates an alternate model for middle school education, which was introduced into depressed urban settings in the 1970s by the Jesuit religious order, in two parochial middle schools, one coed and one all-male established in 1993 in an Eastern city. Comparisons of school structural characteristics, attendance figures, report card grades, school social and learning environments, and students' perceptions of self-worth, school stress, and motivation were made between the model schools and a more traditional parochial school and two public middle schools in the same city. Students selected from the public schools for the evaluation were matched with students in the model Jesuit school on fifth-grade standardized test scores. Participants were 20 male sixth graders from each of the public schools, 20 males (19 African Americans) from the Jesuit school for boys, 10 male students from the Jesuit coeducational school, and 15 male students from the traditional parochial school. Results show that the coed model middle school provided an environment that distinguished it from the other schools in terms of student involvement in learning, teacher-student affiliation, teacher supportiveness, order and organization, and innovation in teaching. This school was characterized by many of the factors shown in previous research to predict school success among disadvantaged minority youth in the inner city, including strong instructional leadership, caring teachers who spent extra time with students, orderliness, and a strong emphasis on basic skills. The Jesuit all-male school demonstrated the lowest absentee rate and highest grade point average of all the schools. In addition, the students in the model schools showed a greater increase in self-esteem during the school year than did students in the comparison parochial school. Results are discussed in light of previous research on education for minority disadvantaged youth in the inner city. (Contains 22 references.) (Author/SLD)

Alternative Model for Urban Middle Level Schooling:

An Evaluation Study

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ABSTRACT

The present study evaluates an alternative model for middle school education, which was introduced into depressed urban settings in the 1970s by the Jesuit religious order, in two parochial middle schools, one coed and one all-male, established in 1993 in an Eastern city. Comparisons of school structural characteristics, attendance figures, report card grades, school social and learning environments, and students' perceptions of self-worth, school stress, and motivation were made between these model schools and a more traditional parochial school, as well as two public middle schools in the same city. Students selected from the public schools for the evaluation study were matched with students in the model Jesuit school on 5th-grade standardized test scores. Results showed that the coed model middle school provided an environment that distinguished it from the other schools in terms of student involvement in learning, teacher-student affiliation, teacher supportiveness, order and organization, and innovation in teaching. This school was characterized by many of the factors shown in previous research to predict school success among disadvantaged minority youth in the inner city, including strong instructional leadership, caring teachers who spend extra time with students, orderliness, and a strong emphasis on basic skills. The Jesuit all-male school demonstrated the lowest absentee rate and highest GPA of all the schools. In addition, the students in the model schools showed a greater increase in self-esteem during the school year than did students in the comparison parochial school. Results are discussed in light of previous research on education for minority disadvantaged youth in the inner city.

Alternative Model for Urban Middle Level Schooling:

An Evaluation Study

Keeping adolescents in school and engaged in the learning process is a particularly difficult challenge in cities where truancy and dropout rates are high, especially among Black males (National Center for Educational Statistics, NCES, 1992, 1996). According to several researchers (e.g., Eccles et al., 1993; Harter and Connell, 1984; McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1986; Natriello, 1984), the middle school years mark a time of declining school motivation and performance for many young people that often leads to academic failure and eventual dropping out of school. The difficulties early adolescents face in middle school and high school appear to be more abundant and problematic for Black and Hispanic students than for White students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Grannis, 1992; Munsch & Wampler, 1993; Polite, 1992), as shown in the poorer school performance and lower standardized scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) of Black and Hispanic students as compared to White students in the middle school and high school grades (NCES, 1996).

A recent model has emerged for the education of at-risk male minority students in the inner city that is being tested in several U. S. cities. This model calls for an educationally rich program in an intimate environment removed from the threats of violence and drugs experienced by many inner city students. The extended day and Saturday sessions allow for extra tutoring as well as athletic and cultural experiences for the 18-to-20 students selected into the program at each grade-level. The first of these schools was instituted by the Catholic religious order of men, the Jesuits, in a Spanish-speaking area on New York City's lower East Side, in 1971, and has grown slowly until the 1990s when four new middle schools were

opened by the Jesuits and several others by other religious orders (Posiadlo, 1993; The Evening Sun, 1992; Turbyville, 1995). To date, the Jesuit efforts have focused exclusively on male students while other religious orders have opened all-female and coed schools.

The model appears to incorporate findings from the well-known research of Ronald Edmonds (1979) on successful inner-city public schools and the work of Joan Lipsitz (1984) on exemplary middle school programs. Edmonds (1979) found that schools in which students perform on standardized tests at levels above that expected from the socio-economic characteristics of its surrounding area are characterized by strong leadership which sets a tone for learning in the school, clearly communicated high expectations for students, a strong reading emphasis, an atmosphere that is orderly, relatively quiet, and pleasant, task-oriented teachers, outside volunteer aids, frequent monitoring of student progress, and access to resources in the community. These findings have brought hope where other researchers have concluded that schools could not influence academic attainment of children disadvantaged by social class and family dysfunction (Polite, 1992), although Polite has recognized that inner-city public schools suffer from a multitude of problems that have negative effects on its students, in particular, African-American and other disadvantaged minority students.

The factors recognized as contributors to the success of the Jesuit middle school model include small size; a committed teaching staff that includes some members of religious orders, laity, and religious trainees; an extended day for athletic activities, quiet study, and tutoring; and extended school year which includes summer learning camps; and follow through which helps to place graduates in parochial high schools with scholarship aid (Posiadlo, 1993; Turbyville, 1995). The environment created is expected to provide the balance between

challenge and support necessary for healthy academic and social development (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The goals of the present study were to evaluate the middle school model with respect to the learning climate, students' academic performance and attendance, students' perceptions of self-esteem, motivation, and competence, and teacher ratings of students' work effort and social behaviors. One of the model schools was opened by the Jesuits for male students and the other was opened by a group of nuns from several religious orders for boys and girls. Two public middle schools and one traditional parochial middle school were used for comparison purposes in many of the analyses.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in the present study were male 6th-grade students from 5 middle schools in Baltimore city. The participants included 20 males (19 African American) from the Jesuit-model middle school for boys, 10 male students (5 African American) from the Jesuit-model coeducational middle school of the same size opened the same year as the model boys' school, and 15 male students from the traditional coed parochial middle school (27 students enrolled in 6th grade altogether). In addition, two public schools were picked as representative of the areas in the city in which students from the model boys' school lived and 20 male students, matched on 5th-grade standardized test scores in mathematics and reading achievement with the students at the all-male model school, were selected from the two schools. The matching procedure was conducted by guidance counselors at the two public schools. Only boys were used in the evaluation because the funding source for the evaluation was interested primarily in the all-male model school. Mean fifth-grade standardized test scores measuring academic

achievement in reading and mathematics (given in percentiles) for the five groups of male students were as follows: 49th for the model male school; 29th for the model coeducational school; 38th for the comparison parochial school; and 53rd and 48th for the comparison public schools.

Materials

The evaluation consisted of observations made of the classroom climates of the five schools, focus group interviews of students in each of the schools, official school academic performance and attendance data, teacher evaluations of student academic and social behaviors, and student-completed surveys of attitudes and behaviors. (The teacher and student surveys were conducted in the three parochial schools only.) Analyses of classroom climates were made by two trained observers of two classes, taught by two different teachers, providing a total of four observations per school, using seven subscales of the Moos and Trickett (1987) Classroom Environment Scale, Form R. These subscales consisted of assessments of student involvement in class learning activities, student affiliation (getting along with and working together with classmates), teacher social support of students, task orientation of the classes, classroom order and organization, teacher control and discipline, and classroom innovation and flexibility. Interrater consistency of the independently made ratings was high. Rating scores were established by averaging the four scores provided for each of the four observations.

Focus group interviews with male students in each of the five schools were conducted by the two observers. The number of student participants ranged from 5 to 8 in the groups. All boys present from the two model schools and boys, selected either randomly or by the school administrator to reflect boys adjusting both well and poorly, from the other three

schools comprised the five focus groups. The format was semi-structured with questions regarding various aspects of school climate designed by the first author.

A Teacher Evaluation Form (TEF), designed for the present study, was completed by teachers of students in the three parochial schools late in the Spring semester. (These forms were distributed to the two public schools but not completed.) On this form, teachers rated each student on 24 social and academic behaviors on a 3-point scale, with respect to whether the behavior was Not True (scored 0), Somewhat or Sometimes True (scored 1), or Very True or Often True (scored 2) of the student. The items and format were based on some of the items contained in Achenbach's (1991) Teacher's Report Form. Three subscales of behaviors were derived from the TEF through a factor analytic procedure. The three orthogonal factors included Social Cooperation (8 items; alpha=.91), which assesses students' levels of cooperation and avoidance of disruptive behaviors, Work Involvement (11 items, alpha=.90), which assesses quality of work and effort in the classroom, and Frustration Tolerance (3 items, alpha=.68), which assesses students skill and tolerance in dealing with peers. Two of the 24 items did not load on any of the factors.

In addition, students at the three parochial schools completed a written survey in early October (pretest) and late May (posttest). (This survey was delivered to the public schools but not administered.) This instrument assessed levels of school-related stress (15 items, alpha=.83; based on Fenzel, 1989), self-worth (8 items, alpha=.77; based on Rosenberg, 1965, and Harter, 1981), intrinsic motivation for school work (including desire for challenge and curiosity; 10 items, alpha=.77; based on Harter, 1985), academic competence (5 items, alpha=.74; based on Harter, 1981), and behavioral competence (staying out of trouble, 6

items, alpha=.78; based on Harter, 1981). For the stress scale, students read each of the statements and indicated the extent to which the statement described something about school that bothered them on a 4-point scale from 0 (indicating no frustration or stress) to 4 (indicating high level of frustration or stress). Item scores were summed and divided by 15 to obtain a mean stress score. Items reflect sources of stress from teachers' expectations, difficulty of school work, and relations with peers at school.

Items for the remaining scales were mixed together into a single format. The student read a statement and checked one of four boxes that indicated whether the statement was Really True, Sort of True, Sort of Untrue, or Really Untrue of them. Items were scored on a scale of 1 to 4 with higher numbers indicating higher levels of the construct. Scale scores were obtained by summing the item scores and dividing by the number of items on the scale. Some items were written to capture the presence of the construct and others to capture the absence of the construct. The four-choice format was designed to maintain similarity with Harter's (1981, 1985) instruments but to reduce the confusion some children experience with her two-stage response format. Several items in addition to those of the scales named above were included in this 65-item instrument to address attitudes toward religion, citizenship, and the arts that were requested by one of the schools. These items were not part of the present study.

RESULTS

School Characteristics

Table 1 shows comparisons of the 5 schools on characteristics such as school size, size of 6th grade, average class size, student/teacher ratio, and length of school day. These data

show that both model schools meet the criteria established for the middle school model of small size and individualized attention and show benefits over all three comparison schools, most notably the two public schools, in all characteristics examined.

School and Classroom Climate

Table 1 also shows the comparison of schools on the seven classroom environment measures. These results showed the model boys' school to be below the mean in four categories: student involvement, teacher support, order and organization, and classroom innovation. Ratings near the mean were recorded on the remaining 3 scales: student affiliation, task orientation, and teacher control. These findings show that the classroom environment at this school (at least on the day observations took place) exhibited a normal amount of control and task orientation, suggesting that learning was indeed taking place.

The school for which the data showed the most positive classroom climate is the model coed school. Ratings for this school were the highest of all the schools for student involvement, student affiliation, teacher support, and innovation. In addition, ratings for task orientation, order and organization, and teacher control were all at or above average for the schools.

Focus group interviews also examined the social and learning climate of the schools. Data showed that the most stressful and least comfortable climate seems to exist at the public school located closest to the inner city, where students described the stressfulness of needing to prove oneself as a "macho" male early on in the school year, the numerous fights that took place at school, the greatest number of references to drugs and weapons in the school, and the most disruptive classroom behaviors. Students at this school reported higher levels of peer

jealousy over clothing and higher levels of peer distractions to taking school seriously, such as threats of fighting and threats of physical consequences for not going along with things like hooking school. Students in the other public school did not report nearly as contentious or distracting a peer atmosphere, although there was some beginning-of-the-year conflict over what school one came from.

It was clear that in most schools, students wanted teachers to treat them more fairly and with greater respect, to challenge and engage them more in the learning process (rather than talk "at" them for much of a lesson), and to be friendly and helpful toward them. It seemed that in every school, at least one teacher was singled out as being someone the students perceived as least fair or most arbitrarily strict. However, teacher-student relations were reported to be the most mutually respectful and least strained at the coed model school. Boys at this school reported frequently that teachers listened and cared, that they made learning fun, and that they expected a great deal from the students at the same time.

Related to teacher-student relations was the nature of the discipline system at the school. The boys in most of the schools, the exception being the coed model school, reported some system of referrals, being sent to the office, detention, or suspension for discipline problems. Students at three of the schools, the boys' model school, the comparison parochial school, and the public school located farther from the inner city, indicated that the guidelines as to what infractions resulted in what consequence were not always clear and not uniformly enforced. The students at the boys' model school and comparison parochial school viewed their schools as the most strict with respect to discipline. On the other hand, students at the inner-city public school believed that their teachers let kids get away with much misbehavior

rather than disciplining them at least in part because of a fear of the students striking out against them in return.

Students at all three parochial schools felt that they were learning more at their schools than their friends were in public schools or than they did in public school in 5th grade. The small class and school sizes were likely factors in this assessment, as well as the less time used by teachers to attend to discipline matters. Students at these schools felt that they were being taught more and that teachers checked on their work more. A clear majority of these students had aspirations for attendance at good high schools and colleges. The students' attitudes toward the benefits their schooling would have for their futures, as well as toward the value of learning in the present, were most pronounced at the coed model school. Students at the public schools also expressed aspirations for college attendance and for a desire to be challenged academically.

Students at all five schools indicated that their parents, grandparents, or guardians held strong positive attitudes toward the importance of schooling and of performing well in school Students in all schools also reported doing 15 minutes to one hour of homework nightly.

A unique feature of the programs at the two model schools was the extended day which included a period of time for homework completion. This was received particularly well (although not across the board) by students at the coed model school, although students in both schools wished for a shorter day and more time at home.

Academic Performance and Attendance Data

The boys' model school, with an mean of 6.0 absences per student for the year, showed better attendance than did the public schools (16.7 absences), the coed model school (11.0 absences),and the comparison parochial school (8.2 absences). Grade point averages did not differ significantly among the three parochial schools with students scoring in the C+ to B- range on the average. Grades were as follows: boys' model school, 2.8 or B-, coed model school, 2.4 or C+, comparison parochial school, 2.5 or C+ to B-. Although little can be made of these differences due to different grading policies and standards, the contrast with public school students is somewhat more meaningful (2.1 or C average for both schools).

Students' Self-Perceptions and Behaviors

Complete pretest and posttest data for the student surveys were obtained from 23 boys at the two model schools and 10 boys at the comparison parochial school. For the boys in the model schools, results show a significant increase in self-esteem from pretest to posttest, $t(22)=2.19$, p(1-tailed)$=.020$. An increase in stress during the school year was found also, $t(20)=2.23$, p(2-tailed)$=.027$. No significant increases in intrinsic motivation, academic competence, or behavioral competence were found.

A comparison of self-perceptions of boys from the model and comparison schools showed no Time 1 differences in any of the six measures. At Time 2, a significant difference in self-esteem was found with boys from the model schools scoring higher than boys from the comparison school, $t(31)=1.79$, p(1-tailed)$=.042$. No other differences in self-perceptions of stress, academic competence, intrinsic motivation, or behavioral competence were significant. When differences in residual changes (change from pretest to posttest, controlling for pretest

scores) were examined, only the difference in residual self-esteem was found to be significant, with the boys from the model schools showing greater gains in self-esteem than boys from the comparison school, $t(31)=2.76$, $p(1\text{-tailed})=.006$.

A comparison of teachers' ratings of school work engagement and behaviors of the boys showed a significant difference in teachers' ratings of frustration tolerance, with boys from the model schools exhibiting lower frustration tolerance than did boys from the comparison school, $t(33)=2.18$, $p(2\text{-tailed})=.036$. No significant differences were found between the two school styles for teacher ratings of school work engagement or cooperative behaviors..

DISCUSSION

The present study was designed to describe and compare school characteristics related to size and student/teacher ratios, evaluations of school and classroom climate, students' perceptions of school social and academic climate, academic performance, school attendance, teacher ratings of student work engagement and behaviors, and students' perceptions of self-esteem and other self-perceptions at five middle schools in a large East Coast city. The schools consisted of two model parochial middle schools, a comparison parochial middle school, and two public middle schools. The two model schools were in their first year of operation and adopted a model of inner-city education for disadvantaged minority early adolescents which had been instituted in several parochial schools in the United States by the Catholic religious order of the Jesuits. This model emphasizes small school and class size, a low student-to-teacher ratio, and extended day and year-long educational programming

(Posiadlo, 1993; Turbyville, 1995). One of the model schools was a Jesuit institution for boys and the other a coed school operated by a group of nuns from various religious orders.

Data collected confirmed that the model programs boasted student/teacher ratios of 5 or 6 to 1 and instructional class sizes of 9 or 10, figures not equaled by any of the comparison schools. The coed model school obtained the best marks from two trained observers and the male students on several indicators of positive school and classroom climate. This school was above the mean on observers' ratings of student involvement in learning, student affiliation, teacher supportiveness of students, order and organization, and classroom innovation. These assessments were supported by information collected from male students in all five schools in focus group interviews.

Results also showed that the boys in the model schools received higher school grades than did boys in the other schools. The strong emphasis on academics in these model schools may make it easier for minority students (as well as others) to do well academically without the fear of recrimination from peers (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), because all students in the more intimate environments of the model schools are expected to perform to the best of their abilities. The level of challenge, as well as support (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979), is likely to be felt more by students in these more intimate school environments. Higher levels of self-esteem were another benefit to boys in the model school programs, shown in end-of-the-year self-report assessments and in changes in these self-esteem assessments over the course of the school year, when compared to boys in the comparison parochial school. This finding could reflect this high level of support students may feel from teachers and staff.

Results showed that structural characteristics alone do not establish the social and learning climate of the school. Factors that placed the coed model school ahead of the pack, and of the other model school, could be summarized in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) formula of the need for optimal levels of support and challenge to facilitate healthy development. It was clear from the findings that the model coed middle school provided both challenge and support in good measure. The all-male model school may have suffered in the support arena from having first-year inexperienced and poorly-trained teachers. (There was one teacher in particular whom students identified as a source of difficulty for students, who exercised fairly strict discipline practices.) Instructional leadership, a factor emphasized as important by Edmonds (1979), could have played a role in the obtained results as well. There was evidence of superior instructional leadership in the coed model school.

Results showed a very promising beginning for both the all-male and coed model schools. Although the evaluation showed that there are areas of improvement needed in the all-male school program, it also showed that students at this school benefited over the public and, in some cases, parochial school programs in school attendance, school performance, time on task, and exposure to a social environment facilitative of learning and social interaction. Future evaluations will help determine if the nearly all-female teaching staff of the coed model school will provide benefits for the male students as they get older.

The present study is important as a beginning of the exploration of alternative middle school programs for at-risk urban minority early adolescents. With the difficulties experienced by public school personnel in helping disadvantaged inner-city youth remain in school and committed to the learning process, alternative educational models are clearly needed. As

Lipsitz (1984) reported in her well-know investigation of exemplary middle school models, small size is an important structural factor in such schools. Small size, which can be accomplished by organizing the grades within a school into smaller houses or teams, has the advantage of facilitating supportive and caring relationships between teachers and students (Lipsitz, 1984). Such relationships are central to healthy early adolescent development and help facilitate student engagement in the learning process (e.g., Eccles et al, 1993).

Worthwhile evaluations, such as the one presented here, benefit from carefully selected comparison groups. Such evaluations should incorporate more data, especially more quantitative data, than is presented in this study. A shortcoming of the present study was the lack of comparison data on student self-reports and teacher ratings of student engagement in the learning process. Comprehensive evaluations should be undertaken, as this one was, to inform the participating schools of findings in order to encourage beneficial changes in the school program during the course of the school year or prior to the next school year. Follow-up evaluations will determine if the model has medium-term and long-term effects, such as high levels of middle and high school performance, high rates of high school completion and college attendance.

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TABLE 1
Comparison of School Characteristics and Climates

School	School Size (Grs 6-8)	Student/ Teacher Ratio	Size of 6th Grade	Typical Class Size	Length of School Day (hrs.)
Model boys	19	5.9:1	19	9	9
Model coed	19	4.7:1	19	10	8.5
Parochial comp	91	14:1	27	21	6.4
Inner Public	860	16:1	330	40	6.2
Other Public	1050	16:1	375	35	6.2

Mean Ratings of Climate Scales*

School	Involve	Affiliation	T.Support	Task Or.	Order	Control	Innovat.
Model boys	.50	.83	.52	1.00	.60	.82	.15
Model coed	1.00	.94	.90	1.00	.85	.89	.68
Parochial comp	.80	.86	.40	1.00	.85	.61	.00
Inner Public	.53	.71	.79	.84	.52	.73	.48
Other Public	.59	.86	.50	.91	.89	.93	.33
Overall Mean	.69	.84	.62	.95	.74	.80	.33
(SD)	(.21)	(.08)	(.21)	(.07)	(.17)	(.13)	(.26)

*Scores range from a low of 0 to a high of 1.

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Corporate Source: American Educational Research Association

Publication Date: 3/26/97

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(Rev. 6/96)