

The Fourth Grade Experience:  
Insights Toward the Transition to Middle School  
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Abstract

The transition from elementary school to middle school can be an exciting as well as scary time for young adolescents. The stress of this transition can be decreased by incorporating transition programs that address student needs and concerns. This qualitative research study was designed to gain an overall sense of fourth grade in order to better understand the experience that elementary school students have prior to transitioning to middle school. In this qualitative study information was gathered through fourth grade teacher interviews, observations of fourth grade classrooms, as well as the collection of artifacts from fourth grade. From the information collected three areas were identified as being characteristic of fourth grade: structure, math, and behavior.

## The Fourth Grade Experience:

### Insights Toward the Transition to Middle School

Making the transition from elementary school to middle school is a huge step for most students. Overall, these young adolescents anticipate this transition with a mixture of excitement, hesitation, and in some cases anxiety. In their new world of middle school, students are met with numerous challenges not experienced before. Changing classes, using lockers, showering after gym class, as well as more independence, are but a few of the aspects of middle school that elementary students have not had to manage thus far (Diemert, 1992).

Developmentally at this time students are entering a time period when their biological, cognitive, psychological, and social characteristics are beginning to evolve. During this time students are adjusting to changes in “self,” as well as changes towards their family and their peer group. It is often a bewildering time for students, their families, and the other adults in their lives that support their healthy development and learning (Lerner & Galambos, 1998). It is within this developmental context that students make the transition from elementary school to middle school.

### Problem

As a school counselor I have observed and supported students making the transition to fifth grade in our middle school for many years. Yet, as an educator who has always worked at the middle level, I have very little knowledge of the experience that students have in fourth grade prior to arriving at middle school. Because of this my main purpose for conducting The Fourth Grade Experience research project is to gain knowledge, insights, and an overall understanding of the experience that students have in fourth

grade. This information will provide a greater sense of the needs of students entering middle school, and will facilitate a smoother transition overall to fifth grade. As a school counselor it is vital to know what students “bring with them” from fourth grade in terms of what they need to be successful in middle school. Knowing what they have experienced in the classroom, on the playground, and in the lunchroom is important for providing a solid foundation from which to support student growth and success as they begin their journey through middle school.

#### Review of Literature

Students who are making the transition from elementary school to middle school are “crossing the threshold” to a new phase of their education. At the same time these young adolescents are in the midst of a period of development characterized by the need for intimacy, autonomy, cognitive challenge, and feelings of competence. These students are beginning to strive for more control over their lives and a sense of identity that is separate from their families. They are becoming more knowledgeable and are beginning to develop abstract reasoning and critical thinking skills (Kohlberg as cited in Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Besides the physical changes that pre-adolescents experience there are the social changes that also occur. Typically students at this age seek approval from their peers rather than from adults, and value friendship and belonging as the most important aspects of school. With this increased social focus some young adolescents may neglect the academic importance of school to pursue this “social realm” (Diemert, 1992).

In the midst of these personal changes comes the move from elementary to middle school, adding to the potential challenges. In elementary school students experience an

environment that is very structured and often self contained in one classroom. They develop a solid connection with one “core” teacher who directs the structure of the day. It is from this setting that young adolescents leave the safety and comfort of a familiar setting to make the leap to middle school. In middle school, students are faced with navigating a new building, learning new rules, managing new expectations from several teachers, as well as adjusting to greater academic responsibilities at school (Shoffner & Williamson, 2002).

While the transition to middle school can be stressful for both students and their parents it is also a time to explore new possibilities for growth and development not possible in elementary school. With an appropriate approach to transition for incoming students, middle schools can capitalize on numerous opportunities to support young adolescents who are making this transition. In *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development as cited in Shoffner & Williamson, 2000), this period of life is described as one in which young people are highly receptive to positive intervention. With this in mind developing a structured plan to support students during this transition is a vital part of setting students up for a successful middle school experience.

Part of developing a comprehensive approach to supporting students’ transition to middle school is to determine what they are looking forward to and what they are most concerned about. According to Odegaard & Heath (1992), students are looking forward to meeting new friends, having their own lockers, having study halls, and switching classes. The areas of greatest concern include getting lost in a new school, being late to class, and the possibility of physical or verbal abuse by older students. With this understanding transition programs need to meet the needs of young adolescents by

addressing autonomy, competence, as well as nurturing student/adult relationships.

While there are numerous ways for schools to meet these student needs, the most common transition activities include meetings with incoming students and their parents, visits to the middle school, and interactions between the school counselors and the elementary school staff. However, as Shoffner & Williamson (2000) point out, “It is important to recognize that the attributes of successful transition programs include a sensitivity to the anxieties accompanying such a move, and that becoming comfortable in a new setting is an ongoing process, not a single event.”

Besides being an ongoing process it is important for transition programs to target the developmental needs of young adolescents making the move to middle school. Without this approach as a foundation for creating transition programs a “developmental mismatch” is created between the needs of the students and the environment of their new school. To avoid this a school can be “developmentally responsive” by increasing students’ opportunities for decision making, developing closer contact between students and “person-oriented” teachers, decreasing the numbers in student groupings, as well as facilitating more “task oriented” assessment goals (Mullins & Irvin, 2000).

Successful transitions from elementary school to middle school incorporate a comprehensive approach toward supporting students. Shoffner & Williamson (2000) offer an overview of transition activities intended to make the move to a new school environment smoother. Including teachers, counselors, and administrators as part of the process for planning transition activities engages all those involved as active participants. During the spring prior to the students’ transition the school counselors and administrators can visit the elementary school to provide students with information about

the school. Including current students in this visit “personalizes” the new school and provides a chance for students to have their questions answered by a peer. Creating a video or a handbook that addresses first year concerns, offering “chat” groups with current students, as well as visits to the middle school are all ways to address the various concerns of students preparing to make the transition to middle school. In addition offering numerous activities for parents of the transitioning students to assure parents that their children will be comfortable in a new setting helps the parents to feel connected to the new environment. Having an open house in the spring for incoming students and their parents allows parents to become familiar with the school’s programs and physical layout. Mailing the middle school newsletter to parents of the incoming students in the spring also promotes a feeling of belonging to the middle school. Pairing a middle school class with an elementary school classroom to write letters to one another also facilitates a sense of being welcomed by the middle school students (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Once the school year is underway it is important to remember that students need continued support to fully “acclimate” to their new school setting. Providing opportunities for students to practice finding their way in the building, to use their lockers, or to work on their organization skills are all beneficial in helping students adapt. In addition, offering support groups with the school counselor to discuss transition concerns provides students with support in a smaller setting (Akos & Martin, 2003).

In conclusion, developing a solid transition program from elementary school to middle school can help to bridge the developmental span from childhood to early adolescence. While it is important to acknowledge student and parent concerns surrounding transition, it is equally important to demonstrate the possibilities that middle



school has to offer. Providing students with the needed support that offers a sense of connectedness and belonging, as well as opportunities for autonomy and independence, in turn facilitates a feeling of security and helps to foster a healthy sense of self. With this students are better prepared to navigate and enjoy all the exciting opportunities that middle school has to offer.

### Methodology

I used a phenomenological approach for this qualitative research project in an effort to gain an overall understanding of what fourth grade is like. I collected information using a triangulation of interviews, observations, and artifacts for a comprehensive overview of the experience of fourth grade. Through naturalistic inquiry and inductive analysis I was able to identify the underlying “patterns, themes, and relationships,” from the information that I collected (Patton, 2002).

### Methods

After gaining approval for this research project from the elementary school principal, I presented information about this project along with the informed consent forms to the fourth grade teachers. When the informed consent forms were returned I conducted tape-recorded interviews (Appendix B) with the four fourth grade teachers. All of the teachers were experienced teachers who have taught at this elementary school for several years. Upon completion of the interviews and observations I transcribed the tapes and field notes and utilized Spradley’s Descriptive Question Matrix (1979) domains to identify the areas that emerged as consistent domains throughout the interviews. These domains included activities, actors, and goals.

In addition to conducting interviews, I spent time at the elementary school observing the four fourth grade classrooms, as well as observing lunch and recess. I spent approximately forty minutes in each of the four classrooms observing a “typical day” in fourth grade. During this time I documented the observations through field notes, and collected a variety of artifacts relevant to fourth grade. The artifacts that I collected were parent newsletters, project outlines, a token economy point sheet, and a Saxon Math worksheet. Information from the classroom observations and the artifacts collected were reviewed and compared to the data from the four teacher interviews. This additional information was found to be consistent with the patterns of information that emerged from the interviews.

## Findings

### *Teacher Interviews*

Through Spradley’s (1979) domain analysis several patterns of data emerged from the teacher interviews in three areas of response including structure, math, and behavior. Information from the observations and artifacts supported these themes as well.

*Structure.* Information regarding the domain of structure had to do with the format of the school day, the style of the classroom lessons taught, as well as the teachers’ styles of teaching. The following teacher responses from the interviews illustrate the overall theme of structure.

Teacher #1: It’s a fairly structured thing, Responsive Classroom as a resource for announcements and the layout of the day.

Teacher #2: The day is very structured. We give out directions, basically one at a time, you know one step at a time and follow it...Even when they are done their

work it is very clearly laid out what they can be doing.

Teacher #3: Just in general you need to have a structured environment, and they need to know the expectations of what is coming up.

Teacher #4: You can call organization structure, and so I'm pretty big on being in control of their structure, like the homework folder...

*Math.* The next domain of teacher responses focused on math. According to teacher interviews and classroom observations the math curriculum is one of the main academic areas of the fourth grade. Through observations it was noted that each fourth grade classroom has a Math Corner where the math meeting takes place each morning. Information referring to the math program emerged in numerous areas throughout the teacher interviews. The following responses demonstrate the focus that math has in fourth grade.

Teacher #1: With Saxon Math lessons they incorporate the math meeting, and then there is a scripted lesson, and we do Side A of a paper with the students, and they take Side B home for homework.

Teacher #2: The math program we use is difficult, but they've been used to it since it's the same program we build on.

Teacher #3: The students have math homework every night unless they had a math assessment that day.

Teacher #4: Around February the math program becomes really difficult, and they become really challenged...I've had kids who are really intuitively good math students and they get to that point and that program really throws something at them that I think is good for them.

*Behavior.* The teacher responses regarding behavior focused mainly on how students' behavior changes throughout the year, and how they learn to manage themselves. In addition the teachers seem to anticipate these fluctuations in student behavior especially in the spring, and have set up reward systems in the classroom that serve to reinforce positive behaviors.

Teacher #1: I would say that we use a lot of motivators that help them to buy into the classroom, and making the classroom run it pays off in the springtime when their development kind of kicks in and we see a lot more behaviors in the springtime.

Teacher #2: They probably need more teacher direction at the beginning of the year. By the end of the year, they are ready to move on to middle school. That's the only way I can describe it. You can tell they are ready. They are able to do more things on their own, I think.

Teacher #3: This group in particular, they are very hands on group and you have to keep them busy because I find that if they have a moment when they can start to talk, it kind of just gets out of control.

Teacher #4: By now they usually have a little more self control than they did earlier, and it just kind of continues to grow through the year... After February vacation they end up with early spring fever or something. I don't know, their hormones are starting up or something because they start a slow decline or unraveling sort of.

While the themes of structure, math, and behavior reflected the overall focus of the data collected on fourth grade, it is important to note additional information that was

generated by several of the interview questions regarding homework, parent/teacher contact, and the top things that students should know when they leave fourth grade.

*Homework in fourth grade.* According to teacher interview responses the most consistent focus in terms of homework was on math.

Teacher #1: Twenty minutes a night of reading... Their Side B for the Saxon Math paper, typically four nights a week they'll have that.

Teacher #2: We do have in our math program; there is math almost every night ...It's a worksheet, and they do B Side for homework...and additional spelling words.

Teacher #3: Students have math homework every night unless they had a math assessment... We have a word a week...and two to three times a month they are given a paragraph prompt.

Teacher #4: It's pretty much a math sheet, and twenty minutes of reading every night... and also studying for weekly spelling words... There are also book reports that are ongoing throughout the year.

*Teacher and parent contact.* Using Spradley's (1979) domain analysis the following words in Table 1 were used in the interviews to describe contact between the fourth grade teachers and parents. It is clear from the interview responses that the fourth grade teachers have a great deal of parent contact through phone calls, written notes, newsletters, as well as various school wide events that include parents.

Table 1

*Teacher and Parent Contact*

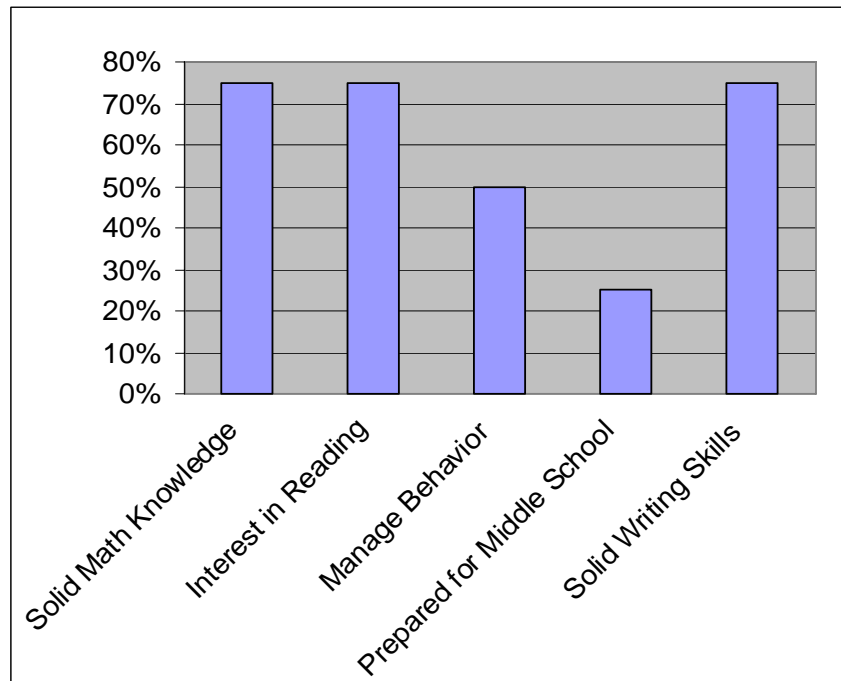
class newsletter	parent volunteers	education fair
pride newsletter	open house	parent conferences
phone calls	parent meetings	field trips
written notes	pumpkin week	fourth grade projects

The interview response from Teacher #3 presents an overall sense of the teacher and parent contact in fourth grade:

They get the Pride that is a weekly newsletter here at school, they get that each week and I usually write a classroom newsletter twice a month. Then I will call parents for positive or negative things that they need to work on whenever I need to... So, I would say that we have pretty open communication. We talk when we need to.

*Top things students should know before leaving fourth grade.* The responses that were generated from teachers when they were asked what the top things are that students should know when they leave fourth grade covered five general areas. Seventy-five percent of the fourth grade teachers interviewed mentioned solid math knowledge, interest in books and reading, and solid writing skills as important skills for students to acquire before leaving fourth grade. Fifty percent of the teachers mentioned students being able to manage their behavior as important before leaving fourth grade, and twenty-five percent of the teachers responded that being prepared for middle school was important by the end fourth grade. This information illustrates the overall importance of academics in fourth grade, as Teacher #2 responded that, “Well, it’s very academic. We work straight through.” The results of these interview responses are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Top things students should know when they leave fourth grade.



### Observations

The observations of fourth grade supported the interview response domains of structure, math, and behavior. While the layout of each classroom was somewhat different, there were numerous “structural” features that were consistent from room to room. All four fourth grade classrooms had a math corner and a reading area. The math corner was where students gather each morning for their math meeting. Included in this area was the math bulletin board with a calendar, a multiplication chart, a clock, the problem of the day, and the number of the day. This area was clearly a focal part of the fourth grade math program and was an integral part of each classroom.

Each classroom also had a group of cubbies in the room that the students used as their “mailbox” to organize and collect information and papers that were supposed to go home each day. Throughout the day teachers put returned work into the student cubbies.

Also in each classroom were “In Boxes” where students placed their homework upon entering the class in the morning. In three of the fourth grade rooms the desks were lined up in horizontal rows while Teacher #2 had the student desks situated in groups. It was clear that there were specific areas of the classrooms for particular activities and subjects. Overall, the organized layouts of the classrooms provided a sense of clearly defined spaces in which to learn. In all the fourth grade rooms the behavioral expectations were visible on a poster on the wall. In Teacher #4’s class there was also a poster stating the Class Pledge which had been written by the class earlier in the year and addressed behavioral and learning goals for the class as a whole. It was also noted during the observation that in two of the classrooms Teacher #1 and Teacher #2 were using head set systems that were connected to speakers in the ceiling of the classrooms. Teacher #2 felt that her students were much less distracted when she used the head set and that it led to more “on task” behavior for the students. In addition a large bulletin board displayed a “community puzzle” that the class had created about individuals coming together to create a community.

The academic routines that I observed in the four classrooms flowed from subject to subject in the same room. The fourth grade students have all of their classes with one fourth grade teacher, and leave their class for one block in the morning to attend a unified arts class. Each class has a fifteen minute snack break in the morning when students can socialize, eat, play board games etc. in their classrooms. Besides this break most of the time in the classes was academically focused and the teachers appeared to keep the students organized and on task by varying the activities every thirty to forty minutes, and by having something ready for them to do when they completed the lesson. Overall, the



design of the fourth grade classrooms, combined with a focused curriculum, and directed teaching styles, provides a structured academic environment with clear behavioral expectations.

### *Artifacts*

Besides taking pictures to collect artifacts from fourth grade, the fourth grade teachers also provided me with what they felt were important items to note. Teacher #4 suggested a picture of the Math Corner and gave me a copy of a Saxon Math worksheet. Teacher #2 provided me with a copy of her token values sheet for her behavioral rewards system that she has set up in her classroom to reinforce positive student behaviors. While each behavioral reward system in each classroom was somewhat different, all were intended to reward desired behavior such as completing homework, helping others, and being on task. At the end of the week chips and “money” are traded for pencils, erasers, and penny candy. Other artifacts that were collected included parent newsletters, a picture of the community bulletin board, and a parent letter about the Fourth Grade Project. While these items reflect the overall themes of structure, math, and behavior for the fourth grade, they also illustrate the importance of each class as a community, as well as a strong connection with parents.

### Conclusion

It is important for schools to become aware of the needs of students making the transition from elementary school to middle school. It is during this stage of life that students are first experiencing a degree of independence and self exploration that they have not experienced before. In addition, transitioning to middle school requires learning and adapting to a whole new set of procedures and rules (Diemert, 1992). To meet the

needs of students transitioning to middle school it is important to develop transition programs that are “developmentally responsive” and offer a comprehensive approach toward supporting students (Mullins & Irvin, 2000). With this in mind, part of meeting student needs and developing transition activities that are age appropriate begins with understanding the environment that students are transitioning from.

For this research project the goal was to gain an overall understanding of fourth grade in order to facilitate a smooth transition to middle school from elementary school. Through interviews with fourth grade teachers, observations of fourth grade classrooms, as well as artifacts collected from fourth grade, three main areas of focus in fourth grade were highlighted. These areas were structure, math, and behavior. With these results in mind it is important to recognize that students transitioning to middle school from elementary school come from a highly structured environment. Within this structure numerous routines are established both academically and behaviorally and are reinforced through success, praise, and tangible rewards. Knowing this about fourth grade, it is vital to develop a transition program that adequately addresses the students’ current base of knowledge and experiences in relation to the new expectations of middle school. Developing transition activities that address student needs at different times throughout their transition “period” can provide the necessary support over time to facilitate a sense of belonging and comfort in middle school. However, this research project is only one small view of the overall picture of transitioning from elementary to middle school and further research is needed.

Suggestions for further study include interviewing fourth grade students regarding their anticipated transition to middle school. This could also include administering

surveys to students about this transition to gain their perspective on what they feel would be helpful to them during this time. It also would be beneficial to study what the fifth grade teachers' view as areas of strengths as well as areas of difficulty for the fifth grade students once they have arrived in middle school. This additional information would be helpful for designing comprehensive transition programs that would include students and fifth grade teachers as important contributors to meaningful transition activities.

Ultimately, the goal is for students transitioning from elementary school to middle school to feel more comfortable and supported over the entire period of adjusting to a new learning environment.

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