

NMSA Research Summary #8

Grade 5 in the Middle School

Question: What research supports grade 5 (and/or grade 6) being included in middle schools?

Due to the large percentage of public school students (88%) who make the transition into the middle grades in a new building (Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992), the research area of transition for young adolescents has received some attention. However, most studies of school-transition target grade 6 for the sample population and do not address the appropriateness of grade 5's inclusion in elementary or middle schools. Aside from district considerations of building capacities, zoning, and enrollments, research centers on the match between the developmental status of fifth/sixth graders and the setting of the host school, the effects of transition on the students, and school programs to familiarize the student with the new school environment.

As a result, the "direct" answer to the question emerges as "It depends." There is a lack of empirical research, but in general, fifth grade inclusion depends on (1) the student and (2) the program. If the student is ready and the school is a bona fide middle school, then fifth grade might be appropriate even in the absence of empirical research.

The Issue

Two questions warrant attention: (1) Do 5th graders exhibit behaviors and characteristics that would benefit from participation in a responsive middle level environment or would they benefit more from the traditional self-contained environment of the elementary school? (2) Do 5th graders possess characteristics to withstand the transition from elementary to middle schools?

Many researchers and practitioners claim that 5th graders would benefit from inclusion in the middle school (Alley, 1992; Jenkins & McEwin, 1992), contending greater similarities between 5th and 6th graders and 7th and 8th graders (Alexander, Williams, Compton, Hines, Prescott, Kealy, 1968). Jenkins and McEwin (1992) concluded their study of programs and practices in three grade organizations (K-6, K-8, and 5-8), "Therefore,... it is recommended that fifth graders be either placed at 5-8 middle schools or be provided with a more appropriate curriculum in K-5 or K-6 schools" (p.13).

However, the debate centers not only on the age-related characteristics of fifth graders, but on the educational setting of the receiving school. Although middle schools are planned to create learning environments for young adolescents, many schools for adolescents do not implement recognized practices appropriate for young adolescents. Epstein (1990) reported that more developmental responsive practices are found in middle school grade configurations (6-8 and 7-8) than junior high schools (7-9) and middle/high combination schools (7-12). McEwin and others (1996) concluded that in general 5-8 schools have higher implementation levels than other organizations of programs and practices that provide a better match between characteristics and needs of most fifth graders. The issue therefore relates to the match between the characteristics of the young adolescents, the type of pedagogy at the new location, and contextual variables.

Stresses of Adolescence

The issue is complex for several reasons. First, the developmental rate of young adolescents is not uniform, where high stress for one youngster may be optimal challenge and stimulation for another, such a transition is accompanied by a plethora of new stresses inherent in making adjustments to new teachers, expectations, schedules, and classmates. These additional changes coincide with the developmental factors of young adolescence. Fifth graders enter an age of simultaneously adjusting to puberty, an increased capacity for abstract thought, and social changes with peers and authority figures. Some students are also adjusting to family moves, divorces, deaths in the family, and other high stressors. When several of these adjustments occur at the same time as a move to a new school stress is the result.

Developmental Level

Young adolescents have been maturing at an earlier age, resulting in the 6th graders of the 1900's being similar to the 5th graders of the 1990's. Furman and Luke(1992) referred to the early maturation studies of Eichhorn and Tanner that documented the young adolescent's increase in "size, concern about appearance, interest in opposite sex, greater social consciousness and desire of independence" at a younger age (p.4).

Type of Middle School

Although elementary school settings are uniformly termed "nurturing," "child centered," and "self-contained," descriptions of middle school learning environments are inconsistent. Middle schools may implement enabling practices, such as interdisciplinary teaching, thematic units, flexible scheduling, and flexible grouping to address student needs. On the other hand, middle schools may mirror traditional high school departmentalization, 50 minute classes, and ability groupings. Some middle schools are organized to create a gradual transition from self-contained to departmental configuration. For example, the fifth grade is self-contained, the sixth grade has 2 person teams, the seventh has 2-3 person teams with larger blocks of time, and the eighth grade has 4 or more teachers each specializing in a subject area. With such a variety of middle school configurations, any discussion of transition therefore examines the substance of the setting young adolescents are entering before addressing the appropriate grade of transition.

A Rationale for 5th Grade Inclusion

Alley (1992) built a rationale for including 5th grade in middle school by addressing the benefits to students and teachers in six areas: (1) *Physical*: the daily physical activities of a middle grades program focuses on the physical development needs of the 10-14 year span (2) *Social*: the cooperation, teaming arrangements, and social activities of a middle school addresses the young adolescents need for socialization and interaction with peers (3) *Individual Learning Needs*: the teams of teachers, variety in grouping patterns, opportunities for remediation, and integrated learning units, and acceleration as part of a middle school target the learning needs of fifth graders (4) *Guidance*: the guidance services and advisory programs at a middle school provide assistance to students on a personal level, either individual or in a small group setting (5) *The*

developmental nature of middle school programming: middle school programs, such as exploratory, flexible scheduling, and varied instructional methods accommodate characteristics of young adolescents and target their needs (6) *Teachers*: students benefit from teachers working together, planning activities, groupings, and advising students as a team, as compared to the traditional isolation of elementary classroom teachers.

Other Options

The concern that inclusion of 5th grade in a K-6 or K-8 school may incorporate the danger of a pedagogy focused on younger children has been addressed in a variety of ways. Hough (1995) proposed the elemiddle school that include both primary and middle grades as a student-centered structure for preadolescents. Furman and Luke (1992) described a district decision to divide the middle school into two divisions, one for grades five and six and one for grades seven and eight.

Associated Factors of Transition

Several researchers have looked at the effects of the transitions to new schools and reported on a variety of related factors. Most effects were found to be negative with some differences between genders. The decline in motivation and performance, and loss of self-esteem particularly in girls was reported by Simmons & Blythe (1989). Crockett, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, and Ebata (1989) noted the negative impact of transition, particularly two transitions, on course grades and somewhat on self-image. Alspaugh and Harting (1995) found a decline in school grade level achievement means during the transition years for all grade level transitions from self-contained classrooms to departmentalized classes, with the schools recovering the losses in the following years. Eccles and Midgley (1989) reported a decline in motivation and performance after the transition and an increase in social comparisons in the schools. Elias and his colleagues (1992) looked at the link between difficulties in transition, self-concept, and perceived competence, finding that boys and girls value peer relationship, with boys having more conflict with authority and academic tasks. Fenzel (1989), on the other hand, in a suburban community study found that transition strain decreased during the middle level school transition with positive relationships with teachers and peers contributing most to the decrease. Boys, he noted, experienced reduced strain in the middle school environment "that responded less antagonistically to their aggressiveness and restlessness" (p. 224). He concluded that findings about the school-transition stress depended on community context and characteristics of students and their families. Other researchers propose that the ability to adjust to the stresses of transition are dependent on the amount of resources the student brings with him/her to school, such as family support, self-esteem, and perceptions of competence.

Decisions about which grades are included in a school are important and should be made carefully. Research repeatedly confirms the importance of the type of program and qualities of the learning environments, not grade organization, as the key to successful experiences for 5th graders (Jenkins & McEwin, 1992; Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990).

Related Articles

- Alley, R. A. (1992). Fifth grade in the middle school? Yes! *Middle School Journal*, 23(4), 26-29.
- Epstein, J. L. (February, 1990). What matters in the middle grades-grade span or practices? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 71, 438-444.
- Jenkins, D. M., & McEwin, C. K. (1992). Which school for the fifth grade? Programs and practices in three grade organizations. *Middle School Journal*, 23(4) 8-12.
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