

Fahrenbacher Consulting

EDPSY 320 Midterm

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On Superiority of Middle Schools

As many adults will testify, life during junior high and adolescence is viewed as a trial by fire, filled with emotions and conflict. It is true that many adolescence go through a period of "storm and stress," although this characterization is more a generalization than a rule. Along with the transition from elementary school to junior high school and the onset of puberty, adolescence go through a plethora of changes, potentially making their lives extremely stressful. In light of these circumstances, I believe the research and collected evidence on adolescence development show that the junior high school model is inappropriate for developing students and the middle school model would more aptly help adolescents through a difficult stage in life. In the key areas of motivation and peer interactions, mood and rebelliousness in relation to cognition, and biology, the middle school model aids instead of hinders the development of adolescents.

One facet of adolescence that is commonly observed is a steep drop in motivation for performing well in school (Hicks 18). This drop off usually occurs during the transition period from elementary school to junior high school. Socializing with friends is a common scapegoat for this drop on motivation. Proponents of this argument would point to evidence that adolescents begin to be motivated to socialize with peers at around the same time that they lose motivation to perform in school. The argument is therefore a zero-sum one; as one focuses on peers, one focuses less on school work. There are two important things to take away from this analysis. One, it indicates that these proponents believe that interactions between adolescents can have negative implications for motivation in school, and two, that by controlling peer interactions, motivation will shift in the zero-sum relationship from peers to school work. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

First of all, the relationship is clearly not zero-sum. Students consistently say that being with friends is their main reason for going to school (Hicks 19). And this includes those students that earn high marks and do very well in school. Therefore, motivation for

peer interactions and doing well in school are not mutually exclusive, nor inherently competing interests. Additionally, cooperative learning and group work are hardly seen as negative forces in classroom motivation even though they encourage peer interactions. Instead, teachers who use cooperative learning know that by using peer interactions, they can help encourage their students to be motivated to do well in class. It's precisely because students want to socialize more in the transition period from elementary to junior high school that students are turned off to administrators and teachers that try to limit adolescent socialization.

A proponent would quickly argue that peer groups generally have an implicit mentality that academic achievement, although not bad, is something to not go after very hard (Steinberg 145). Considering that adolescents spend so much time with their peer groups as is, it would follow logically that it would be best to minimize the amount of time that teens spend together so as to minimize the chances that peer groups persuade students to not be motivated to do well in school. So which comes first, administrative policies that turn off students to school and so the group as a whole look down on school, or do peer groups first look down on school and then administrators create their policies afterwards? Because the observed drop in motivation occurs specifically after the transition to junior high school, it is clear that it is the change in environment and rules that cause peer groups to dislike performing well in school. Therefore, if junior high schools did not discourage peer interactions and such, then peer groups would probably not encourage mediocrity in school to the degree that they do today.

This all agrees with person-environment fit theory, which holds that "behavior, motivation, and mental health are influenced by the fit between the characteristics individuals bring to their social environments and the characteristics of these social environments" (Eccles, et al 91). Therefore, because early adolescents desire peer interactions, and because many pillars within the junior high school institution believe that peer interactions are negative, there exists a bad fit between the environment and the students. Also, junior high classes are characterized by more teacher-led lessons, leaving students disjoint and unconnected from each other, while elementary school classes usually foster group work and cooperation (Eccles, et al 93). Additionally, around this transition period, adolescents are beginning to desire more autonomy, but junior high's generally "tighten the leash" of

control at a time when it should be loosened (Eccles, et al 93). All these common characteristics of junior highs make them bad fits for the students with respect to their stage in development. Therefore, this mismatch can explain why students and their peer groups are not motivated to do well in schools, an alien and uncomfortable environment.

Middle schools, on the other hand, provide a better fit for developing adolescents. Instead of creating restrictions to interactions between peers, middle schools embrace such interactions while at the same time encourage individual activity. One of the original intentions of the junior high was to serve as a transition from elementary school to high school. But as Alexander points out, the junior high has come to be more like the high school than a transitional institution to the high school (21). Therefore, to ease the transition from a mostly group oriented environment to a mainly individual oriented environment, the middle school would incorporate both peer interactions and individual direction within the classroom. And this orientation would have to start from the top and propagate downward, as administrators design the rules and policies which help create the mood and feel that students and teachers perceive about how the school is to operate. The fact that adolescence desire interactions and seek them out is undeniable; the only question is whether schools will stand in the way of those interactions or feed off of them.

Another qualm that some have with young adolescents in junior highs is their mood; that is, that their mood changes with such frequency and to such a great degree. At one moment, a junior high student may be extremely happy, and then several minutes later that same student may be terribly depressed. Explanations for mood swings can be at least partly found in the discussion of storm and stressed, mentioned earlier. Studies using beepers have found that from childhood to early adolescence, there is a dramatic swing in mood shifts, especially negative ones, essentially indicating a “deflation of childhood happiness” (Arnett, 321). But the introduction of these swings seem to have less to do with biological changes and hormones than cognitive changes that allow adolescents to see deeper meaning (and, consequently, threats and dangers) in surrounding circumstances (Arnett, 321).

At the same time that adolescence are being moody, they are increasingly rebellious and take part in other risky behaviors, such as drinking and smoking. These are definitely more a result of the culture in America than concrete biological law, as other nations

that have existed in separation of Western society have less severe cases of rebellion and risk taking (Arnett, 321). For both mood and risk taking, it seems clear that the environment around students does much of the work in creating these issues. The junior high model, with its emphasis on control and structure helps in bringing these issues to the front. First of all, junior high's are different in multiple ways than elementary schools, making life especially stressful for adolescents, and consequently making it more likely that they can have shifts in mood. Additionally, controlling authoritarian figures are conflicting directly with these students' desire for autonomy and say in the decision making process, making rebellion against rules more likely. Interesting enough, these rules that are trying to create order are more likely creating more disorder and conflict.

The middle school philosophy, however, would help mitigate these issues. Junior high school, as cited earlier, is a very dramatic shift away from the way elementary schools operate, while middle schools are a much more gradual change. This was the original intent of the junior high, to be a buffer between the two completely different worlds of elementary and secondary school. The middle school model gets back to that original philosophy, gradually exposing students to stresses in a more manageable way. Additionally, by presenting students with more autonomy over junior highs, middle schools help circumvent the creation of rebellious attitudes, and by creating rules that do not imply that students are inherently bad, middle schools do not encourage as much risky behaviors that deviate from rules setup by the school and society at large. Ultimately, this analysis breaks down to an application of person-environment fit: the junior high model poorly fits the development of adolescence, while the middle school model is a much better fit.

This analysis of cognition makes one point clear: adolescence are more developed psychologically than the junior high model would give credit for. In fact, some studies indicate that the first year of junior high is actually a step back in terms of cognitive difficulty instead of a step forward, advancing with students' developing cognitive state (Eccles, et al 94). Adolescents are able to think in multiple dimensions, to contemplate their own thinking process, and to consider issues relatively, something that the junior high model takes for granted (Lecture 2/7). One area that could be incorporated into a middle school that would make sure that the cognition of students is accurately challenged would be an in-depth discussion of the media, or media literacy.

Media literacy is an educational program that pushes students to evaluate the media centric world within which they live. Many parents and teachers are already concerned about the implications that media-inundation can have on how youths develop, as many explicit and implicit messages are passed on without a parental filter. And now that many types of media crossover into one another (pop stars do movies, TV stars do records, movie stars do TV shows, etc.), the messages in the media are conveyed in a plethora of ways, increasing the likelihood that these messages get across in some way. As one example, the advent of music videos has helped create a visual representation for adolescence to latch onto which they may miss in the lyrics. It therefore seems important to teach young minds, capable of critical thinking although still early in development, how to interpret media images and underlying meanings that they may otherwise miss and secretly internalize.

In addition to these cognitive changes, adolescents go through many important biological transformations. These pubertal changes include the standard height, weight and body mass, and skin appearance (Lecture 1/17). But not all adolescents enter adolescence at the same time, and so it's important to consider what effects the timing of puberty has for students in junior highs and middle schools. For students entering puberty early, at least for boys, they usually develop muscle and body fat before the rest of their classmates, giving them the upper hand in athletic competitions and social interactions (possibly invoking explicitly a fear of physical violence). "Early bloomers," therefore, are more likely to do well in athletics, comprehend complex systems, and stand out from the crowd. For young early developing boys, this can help usher them into the role of "popular," although later in life they usually do not compete as well as their late blooming counterparts who are generally more academically inclined (Lecture 1/17). Early pubertal changes can also have big implications for females. Early blooming girls are more likely to have serious health issues later in life, including depression and eating disorders because of a negative body image, possibly because their physical attributes are pointed out by parents and teachers and other students pick on early blooming females (Lecture 1/17). For both it can mean entering into practices and risks that are associated with older adolescents, such as smoking and consuming alcohol. Given all these changes, it would appear that schools would have a difficult time dealing with this age group, but, fortunately, a well designed middle school

could help adolescents through these biological changes.

First of all, junior highs are generally more competitive in all aspects, including grading and athletic competitions (Eccles, et al 93). Middle schools, on the other hand, do not make the jump from implicit to explicit grading in such a dramatic fashion. In elementary school, most grading is either informal, or at worst discrete and not very public. In junior high, though, that all changes. There is great emphasis put on rigorous testing and on social comparisons, either encouraged by curious parents or teachers in search of a motivational tool. Additionally, because peer groups are forming, there are more opportunities for social comparison based on how one is doing in school; perhaps this is another reason why peer groups rebel against school: they are trying to avoid the pressures inside the classroom. The middle school philosophy encourages the use of cooperative lessons that focus on the learning shared between students, not competition amongst students.

Additionally, it's apparent that many of the students leaving elementary schools will be at varying stages in their development process, either early, on time, or late bloomers in terms of pubertal changes. This means that the best environmental fit for adolescents of this age group must be extremely flexible, something that many junior highs are not. With their emphasis on controlling students from the day they enter the building, many junior high's resemble prisons in some ways more than schools. As illustrated in Patricia Hersch's book on a school system in America, "A Tribe Apart," administrators and teachers seem to feel that a class of students is bad before they even enter the building and create rules and regulations accordingly. But because adolescents are gaining the ability to think about complex concepts, they are also able to understand what these rules mean: that they're suppose to be bad, and teachers and authority figures predict that they are going to be bad. In essence, these restrictions become a self-fulfilling prophecies, describing the way junior high students should act, and then students mold themselves into that description.

Fortunately, the middle school model does not assume that students are inherently evil, only that it needs to be flexible and allow students to have a say in what goes on around them. A flexible school system like the middle school allows students to mold a schedule that meets their needs in reference to their development within the guidelines of state requirements for graduation. This autonomy and self-determination fits well with the adolescents' desire for autonomy and controlling decisions that deal with their lives, and so

will help provide an environment more conducive for learning. Additionally, the middle school model creates counselors and other authority figures that students can go to for help, and excellent resource for early bloomers who may have had no one to turn to under the junior high model.

As clearly presented above, the middle school model presents a plethora of advantages over the junior high school model. By considering the developmental stages through which adolescents are passing through, the middle school model best fits the needs of these students and facilitates their development as whole people and academically interested individuals. In the areas of motivation and peer interactions, mood and rebelliousness in relation to cognition, and biology, the middle school provides a good fit and would provide an excellent alternative to the dated junior high model that often times leaves students uninterested in academic endeavors and creates unnecessary stresses for an already stressful time in adolescents' lives.

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