

TRANSITION TO MIDDLE SCHOOL: SELF CONCEPT AND STUDENT
PERCEPTIONS IN FOURTH AND FIFTH-GRADERS

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ABSTRACT

The transition from elementary to middle school is a significant period of change for adolescents and is remarkable for several reasons, including the opportunity for new experiences and the potential for other developmental changes to occur simultaneously. Existing literature on transition includes both positive and negative outcomes for adolescents in areas of achievement, peer relations, self-esteem, and self concept, with gender differences including more negative outcomes for girls.

The possibility of multiple transitions occurring simultaneously (i.e. puberty and academic transition), along with literature suggesting that the elimination of the middle school model and replacing it with a K-8 building configuration would reduce negative student outcomes, provided the rationale for the current study: an examination of early adolescents either making an academic transition following the fourth grade or remaining in a K-8 building, and the potential influence on self concept. In addition, student perceptions of school related issues were surveyed.

A repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance revealed no significant interactions of time and either group status or gender on self concept. The information from the student perception survey suggested students in the Transition group were more likely to report school as being very different before and after transition. Environmental factors, such as having a locker and more choices in the cafeteria, were more important to students than making new friends or facing increased difficulty in academics. The findings of the current study lend support to academic transition occurring at an earlier age and suggest a greater emphasis on environmental aspects of transition and protective factors in facilitating positive outcomes.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Transition is a term used to refer to a significant change, such as a move to a new area, beginning a new job, or starting a new school. Students moving from one school building to another, such as from a middle school to a high school or from an elementary to a middle school, experience an academic transition (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000; Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998; Fenzel & Blyth, 1986). The focus of the current study is on transition between schools that is a result of changing grades, such as going from elementary school in the fifth grade to middle school in the sixth grade. The middle school transition is unique, as there are a number of potentially significant changes occurring simultaneously. This includes changes in peer relationships (Buhrmester, 1990; Gavin & Furman, 1989; Hardy, Bukowski & Sippola, 2002), aspects of achievement (Anderman, Maehr, & Midgley, 1999; Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Zanobini & Usai, 2002), and puberty (Brooks-Gunn & Reiter, 1990; Dubas, Graber, & Petersen, 1991; Simmons, Blyth, & Bush, 1977; Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987).

Previous research examining the relationship between transition and constructs of self concept, self esteem, achievement, and peer relationships includes results indicating

adverse effects (Chung et al., 1998; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994; Wigfield, Eccles, MacIver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991), and either no effect or positive outcomes following transition (Nottelman, 1987; Proctor & Choi, 1994).

Gender differences observed in several studies (Dubas, Graber, & Petersen, 1991; Simmons, Blyth, & Bush, 1977; Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987) suggest boys and girls exhibit different outcomes following transition. The observed outcomes were primarily negative for girls, although declines in achievement and school participation were also present for boys. The current study further explored a possible relationship between gender and self concept as related to transition outcomes.

Several researchers have suggested interventions or counseling programs as means of facilitating school transition (Felner, Brand, Adan, & Mulhall, 1993; Greene & Ollendick, 1993). These programs can vary from a visitation for students to explore the new building to become familiar with the future new environment, creating student “teams” when they arrive at the middle school to create a peer network, or counseling groups to prepare students for the transition and identify students at risk for negative outcomes, such as academic failure or delinquent behavior. One example of such a program (that will be discussed in more detail in the review of literature) is a group counseling session where students identified as being at-risk for difficulties following transition completed different activities aimed at helping prepare them for the move to middle school (Akos and Martin, 2003).

Expectations about middle school will influence the way in which students perceive the transition. Weldy (1991) surveyed students prior to transition at three different times (home to school, elementary to middle school, and middle school to high

school) and noted that students expressed anxieties and uncertainties ranging from being in a new building to having new classmates and teachers at each transition. Lord, Eccles, and McCarthy (1994) found sixth grade students were concerned about being picked on or bullied by peers. Conversely, Berndt and Mekos (1995), in a study of adolescents transitioning from sixth to seventh grade, found that adolescents made more positive than negative comments about transition at all times, suggesting they perceived transition as more desirable than stressful. Students who have positive feelings about transition, such as being excited about having a variety of classes, meeting new people, and increasing their independence may fare better than students who have negative perceptions, which could include being concerned about finding the way to classes, facing more difficult academics, and not making new friends. Students' perceptions of the classroom environment (including opportunities for cooperation, competition, grading, and opportunities for autonomy) following transition suggested they felt there was less autonomy and fewer opportunities to give input than in classrooms before transition (Feldlaufer, Midgley & Eccles, 1988). Further, students reported more comparison of grades with peers, and they perceived teachers as being less friendly and less supportive after transition.

Several studies focused on students' self-esteem, the feelings one has about his/her sense of worth (Eccles et al., 1989; Nottelman, 1987; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994; and Wigfield et al, 1991). Eccles and colleagues (Eccles et al., 1989; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994) found that self-esteem declined immediately following transition after students left sixth grade, but recovered during seventh grade. In contrast, Nottelman (1987) found significant, positive changes in perceived competence (self-esteem) across a one-year

period following transition from fifth to sixth grade in both transition and non-transition groups, suggesting most children make a systemic transition without great difficulty.

Although several researchers have addressed self-esteem, few have addressed self concept. Self concept is a more global construct that includes one's beliefs, attitudes, abilities, and attributes an individual feels define him or her (Berk, 2008). Eccles et al. (1989) examined self concept and self-esteem in their study of transition between the sixth and seventh grade and found that students' self concepts in different areas, including math and English, declined following transition. Although students' self-esteem showed a recovery during the seventh grade year, students' self concept did not increase to initial levels following transition. If these results regarding self concept were to be replicated in future studies, it would help underscore the need for programming to stabilize student self concepts in preparation for a systemic transition.

An additional factor that may influence transition is timing. The grade in which students begin middle school can be anywhere from fifth to seventh grades, with some schools housing kindergarten through eighth grades in the same building, whereas others transition after fifth or sixth grade. The existing literature does not include any scientific studies examining students making a transition to middle school between fourth and fifth grades. Eccles et al. (1993) suggested a developmental mismatch between the needs of students and the timing of transition, which is supported by data from studies suggesting a decline in academic performance across transition (Chung et al., 1998; Eccles et al., 1993; Simmons and Blyth, 1987), coupled with research finding students in a K-8 school were more engaged in school, better prepared, less truant, and were more likely to show an increase in achievement in the sixth grade (Alspaugh, 1998; Eccles, Lord & Midgley,

1991). Outcomes following the transition to middle school are areas within the literature that need to be better understood in order to determine what programs and interventions would be effective at keeping students engaged in the school environment.

Purpose of the Study

The current study examined a younger age group making a transition from an elementary school in fourth grade to a middle school in fifth grade. Although the transition from elementary to middle school has been explored, researchers have not examined how younger students navigate transition. Further, there are no published studies that compare students who make a building transition to students who remain in the same school. The current study was designed to determine whether any possible changes in self concept were due to transition or developmental status, as opposed to a control group of students who do not make a building transition.

Major Hypotheses

The purpose of the current study was to examine: (a) the effect of transition on students' self concepts, (b) students' perceptions about transition before and after transition and (c) differences in self concept and student perceptions based on gender in fourth and fifth grades. Based on previously reviewed literature, the following hypotheses were put forth:

- (1) There would be significant differences in self concept based on transition status and gender.

- A) Participants who made a transition from elementary to middle school would report lower self concept following the

transition as compared to those who did not transition from elementary to middle school.

B) Participants who did not transition, thus remaining in the same school building, would exhibit similar self concept levels at Time 1 and Time 2.

C) Boys would display higher self concept across transition as compared to girls.

(2) There would be significant differences in student perceptions of their school based on transition status.

A) Participants who made a transition would report school as being more different when compared to participants who did not transition.

B) Participants who made a transition would report increased level of difficulty in academics as compared to participants who did not transition.

C) Participants who made a transition would report greater dissatisfaction with their school when compared to those who did not transition.

Definitions of Terms

Several important terms are used in the course of this study; in order to clarify the meaning of these terms with regard to the current study, their definitions are given below.

Transition: A period of change for an individual. For the purposes of this study, transition will be used to mean a change in academic environment.

Self concept: the attitudes, beliefs, abilities, and attributes an individual perceives as defining himself or herself (Berk, 2008). For the purposes of this study, self concept will be referred to in either global or domain specific terms.

Academic self concept: the beliefs an individual develops as he or she evaluates personal achievements, as well as his or her experiences and functioning abilities in other school-related activities.

Affect self concept: the attitudes and beliefs an individual has about his or her reactions to situations he or she is involved in across environments. An individual's affective behaviors occur before, during, and in response to those situations.

Competence self concept: how individuals perceive their competence in different situations across multiple environments. This is influenced by individuals' successes and failures in attaining goals, functioning within their environment, and solving problems.

Family self concept: the beliefs individuals have about their positions and roles within their family unit. Family is used as a generic term to refer to those people individuals depend on for nurturing, care, and support.

Social self concept: influenced by the reactions of other people, the positive interactions of others toward an individual, and the ability of an individual to use social interactions to achieve goals.

Early adolescence: period of development from childhood to adolescence, generally between 10 and 15 years of age.

Middle school: academic institution for early adolescents, typically for students between grades 5 and 8. For the purposes of this study, middle school will refer to a building for students in grades 5 to 8.

Puberty: physical and biological changes occurring in early adolescents/adolescents; a period of development that is significant in the life span (Berk, 2008).

Significance of the Study

The current study examined transition at a younger age, from fourth to fifth grade; previous studies examined effects on individuals when transition occurred between fifth and sixth or sixth and seventh grades. The investigation of transition occurring at a younger age was an attempt to learn more about not only self concept and perceptions of early adolescents, but also the potential impact of developmental status on student outcomes both prior to and following transition. In addition, the current study was designed to include a group that did not transition, allowing for a clearer understanding of the effect systemic transition had on student outcomes. Simmons et al. (1987) theorized that multiple transitions occurring simultaneously could place an individual at greater risk of negative outcomes. The proposed study attempted to control for the possibility of puberty as an added change, although it is possible that some subjects could have early onset puberty and be experiencing changes in physical development.

The construct of self concept is an area that has not been extensively researched, and the opportunity to compare self concept in two groups of individuals that differ primarily in the status of transition will provide valuable information about whether and how student self concept is impacted by transition. Whereas some students may view

academic transition as a desirable event overall, when asked about specific topics, such as teacher support or autonomy, they may be more negative in their reports.

Although past research has examined student perceptions of transition, there are currently no studies that have attempted to examine whether a relationship exists between self concept and perceptions of school by students. The information gained from the current study may be useful in designing programs aimed at preparing students for transition and in the development of support systems for students during and following transition.

Basic Assumptions of the Study

The current study was based on the following assumptions:

1. The measure of self concept (the Multidimensional Self Concept Scale) was administered according to standardized procedures.
2. The individual protocols were scored accurately according to standardized instructions.

Basic Limitations of the Study

The current study was limited in the following ways:

1. The sample consisted primarily of Caucasian students from a rural school district in the Midwest. Consequently, the results obtained cannot be generalized to students in other geographical areas. Students with difference racial backgrounds and of different geographical locations and socioeconomic status may differ from the students in the current population.
2. The measures completed by students were translated and scored by one

researcher; therefore, mistakes may have been missed with the absence of a second researcher confirming that the scores were accurate.

Summary

This study focused on building level transition for students advancing from an elementary to a middle school. Specifically, this study examined how student self concept would be affected by making a building transition, comparing students transitioning from a K-4 to a 5-8 building to students in a K-8 building who did not make a transition. Student perceptions about school and related aspects were also examined. It was hypothesized that students making a transition would report lower self concept and more negative perceptions about school. With regard to gender differences, it was hypothesized girls would exhibit lower self concept than boys.

The proposed study is limited to the examination of students' self concepts and perceptions about school. However, in order to better understand the different factors that could have a role in student outcomes across transition, an overview of the existing transition literature will serve to provide a framework for the current study. Several of these issues have been mentioned briefly prior to this point, but now they will be considered extensively.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Introduction

Human development is characterized by numerous changes occurring in the individual, including physical transformations, such as those that take place during puberty; modifications to social relationships; and development of a unique identity (Berk, 2008). The purpose of this review was to gain a better understanding of the factors affecting adolescents, and how these factors may be expected to affect the transition to middle school from elementary school. Transitions experienced in late childhood and early adolescence are a source of much interest in recent research, particularly given that the onset of puberty and related physical, personal, and psychological changes often coincide with these transitions. Because most students experience at least one academic transition in late childhood and early adolescence, there are a number of studies that examine areas potentially affected by transition (Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Chung et al., 1998; Fenzel, 2000; Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994).

Transition that is developmental, including changes associated with the aging process such as puberty, and transition that is systemic including going from one school to another as part of a natural progression, can occur simultaneously, resulting in potential stressors for the individual. For the purposes of this review, developmental

transition refers specifically to puberty (i.e., biological changes that affect the individual physically and psychologically) (Berk, 2008). Although individuals experience changes throughout the life span, puberty is a stage when development is more pronounced and noticeable than any other time. An individual's developmental status may impact how the individual adapts to the opportunities and challenges of a new educational setting.

Academic transition, or moving from one school building to another, can also be referred to as a systemic transition. A systemic transition involves a significant change in a system, such as a school. Anderson et al. (2000) focused on systemic academic transitions and how most students are affected. Examples from prior research include a decline in grades (Blyth, Simmons & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Petersen & Crockett, 1985), or a decrease in self-esteem (Eccles et al., 1989). Although these declines are temporary for most students, systemic academic transitions can be particularly problematic for some students, placing them at a greater risk for dropping out of school prior to graduation (Roderick, 1993). Anderson et al. (2000) emphasized the need for comprehensive transition programs that take academic, environmental, and developmental changes into account. The focus of the current research is on systemic academic transition.

One important transition involves the move from elementary school to middle school. This is a major transition for individuals, and can occur around the same time early adolescents begin puberty, creating a period when individuals are experiencing both a developmental and a systemic transition (Nottelman, 1987). For most students, this academic transition presents a marked change in school environment. In elementary school students generally spend the entire day with the same peers, the same teacher, and a similar routine. In contrast, middle school is organized in such a way that students

spend time in a number of different classrooms, with different teachers and peers. In addition, there are students from different elementary schools in the middle school, presenting new social challenges along with a novel academic situation. Existing literature on transition addresses a number of issues facing individuals and how those issues affect outcomes during early adolescence. Previous research on transition in early adolescence, with an emphasis on the transition between elementary and middle schools has focused on the effects of puberty, environment, personal perceptions, social contextual factors, and achievement. (Anderson, et al. 2000; Crockett, Petersen, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989; Fenzel, 2000; Lord et al., 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994). Issues of transition timing and self concept have been studied to a lesser extent (Crockett et al., 1989; Eccles et al., 1993; Wigfield et al., 1991; Zanobini & Usai, 2002). Each of the above factors will be reviewed to gain a better understanding of how multiple factors affect individuals during transition.

Puberty

A key developmental occurrence for adolescents is puberty (Brooks-Gunn & Reiter, 1990). The physical changes that take place create new challenges for adolescents; these include but are not limited to increasing independence, changes in family and peer relationships (including dating and potential sexual activity), and developing personality characteristics (Brooks-Gunn & Reiter). Studies examining the effect of puberty on transition outcomes indicate a complicated, interactive relationship between gender and pubertal timing in particular (Dubas et al., 1991; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Simmons et al., 1977; Simmons et al., 1987).

Dubas et al., (1991) examined the effects of pubertal timing and pubertal status on achievement across sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. A significant negative relationship between pubertal timing and achievement was observed for late-maturing boys, while late-maturing girls displayed higher achievement levels. An interesting finding was that pubertal status did not predict achievement; that is, an individual's physical development alone was not a predictor of academic performance. Instead, the timing of puberty onset (early, on-time, or late) was the primary contributing factor to achievement in both positive and negative directions. Dubas et al. suggested the feeling of being different from one's peers as a possible factor in achievement differences, although this relationship was gender specific, as noted above. A follow-up in the twelfth grade indicated any effects of pubertal timing on achievement had disappeared. This finding suggests the negative impact of transition on achievement was temporary, although that does not diminish the loss in achievement at any point.

In a study examining the effects of puberty and transition on self-esteem, Simmons et al. (1977) compared a group of students making a transition from elementary to middle school after sixth grade to students who did not transition and remained in a K-8 building. They found that girls who made a building transition reported lower self-esteem following transition compared to girls in the K-8 building, while no effects on self-esteem were observed for boys. The findings of Simmons et al. suggest pubertal status alone does not contribute significantly to self-esteem, as there were not changes observed in both groups making a transition and those remaining in the same building; however there was an interaction when multiple changes occurred at once, with girls who had an early onset of puberty reporting lower levels of self-esteem; further, those girls

who reported multiple changes (i.e. puberty, dating, transition) reported the lowest levels of self-esteem. Boys were unaffected by the school type; making the difference in self-esteem between boys and girls even greater following a building transition.

Simmons et al. (1987) examined the effect of multiple changes (i.e. puberty, transition, onset of dating behavior) on self-esteem, academic performance, and school involvement; comparing students who made an academic transition to a group that did not transition. Puberty itself was not a significant contributor to self-esteem, achievement, or school involvement, however, negative effects were observed when several changes happened simultaneously. Declines in achievement and school involvement were noted for both boys and girls, with girls showing a decline in self-esteem. Again, while puberty was a contributing factor to negative outcomes, this only occurred when other transitions happened at the same time, suggesting a cumulative effect that would support either an earlier or later academic transition to diminish negative outcomes due to multiple life changes happening simultaneously.

Environment

Differences in School Structure

Several researchers have emphasized environmental differences between elementary and middle school and the effects on transition. Although elementary school provides an environment that is comforting and constant, middle school is considered to be more impersonal and institutionalized (Anderson et al., 2000; Fenzel, 1989; Wigfield et al., 1991). Reasons for the more impersonal atmosphere of middle school include the importance placed on achievement, evaluation, and social structure (Anderson et al., 2000; Feldlaufer et al., 1988). Anderson et al. (2000) compared the elementary school

environment to the primary family context and the middle school environment to a large business; impersonal and defined by rigid rules. The comparison suggests an elementary school environment is more comfortable and familiar than a middle school environment, making transition a potentially stressful experience.

Adolescence is a time when individuals begin asserting independence, are expected to think for themselves in more situations, and are forming a sense of identity (Erickson, 1963). Following this thought, middle school structure should encourage individual thought, increased independence, and opportunities to express beliefs. However, middle school classrooms were structured to place greater emphasis on rules, competition, and result in less personal relationships with teachers (Anderson et al., 2000; Mizelle, 1995; Wells, 1996). This could result in less support and feedback for students as they develop critical thinking skills and their identity is shaped.

Environmental differences between elementary schools and middle/junior high schools raise an interesting developmental question: Are the educational practices of middle schools complementary to the development of adolescents? As mentioned in a previous section, changes associated with puberty interact with other transitions and can result in negative outcomes (Dubas et al., 1991; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Simmons et al., 1977; Simmons et al., 1987). Seidman, Aber, and French (2004) suggested that restructuring schools to a K-8 and 9-12 format as a primary means of eliminating the overlap between transition and developmental changes taking place at the same time. In schools where this is not feasible, Seidman et al. proposed creating smaller “learning communities”, or teams of students who attend classes together and are given guidance by a group of teachers would reduce the perception of students that middle school is

impersonal. The organization of those student teams would provide the individual student a stable network of peers and teachers, decreasing the overall changes presented during transition. The organization of schools is rarely looked at as a factor or as a potential solution when considering the negative outcomes experienced by some adolescents. Seidman et al. suggested many middle schools are based solely on grade rather than emphasizing the overall well-being of the students by creating an environment conducive to the development of students. Further, they suggested the transition to middle school is a critical time to introduce interventions aimed at keeping students engaged in the school environment, thereby lessening the negative outcomes seen in high school. This position has been supported by research indicating a drop in academic performance for students who transition to middle school (Chung et al., 1998; Eccles et. al., 1993; Simmons and Blyth, 1987) compared to research finding students in a K-8 school were more engaged in school, better prepared, less truant, and had an increase in achievement in the sixth grade (Alspaugh, 1998; Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991).

The effect of school structure on student outcomes was the subject of several studies. Byrnes and Ruby (2007) compared student achievement in three different settings: existing K-8 schools, middle schools, and newly created K-8 schools by conversion from middle schools. The results indicated students in existing K-8 buildings performed better on measures of math and reading achievement compared to both middle schools and newer K-8 buildings. Although this effect was reduced when population demographics were factored in, Byrnes and Ruby assert that K-8 schools displayed consistently higher achievement, suggesting K-8 schools may be the preferred configuration for optimizing student outcomes. Weiss and Kipnes (2006) compared

outcomes for students in K-8 schools compared to middle schools and found that achievement outcomes were poorer for students in middle schools. Specifically, the number of students who failed a course in the 8th grade was significantly higher for students in a middle school compared to those at a K-8 school. Students in the middle schools had significantly higher absences from school and reported feeling less safe in their school compared to students in a K-8 building. Finally, Weiss and Kipnes (2006) found that self-esteem was a factor in student achievement, and had a greater impact on the achievement of students in middle schools, suggesting self-esteem acted as a protective factor in student achievement.

The differences in achievement outcomes found by Weiss and Kipnes (2006) and Byrnes and Ruby (2007) raise the question of how middle schools differ from K-8 schools. Yecke (2006) suggests the focus of middle schools became encouraging students to focus on developing their identity, often to the detriment of academic development. Yecke reviewed three separate longitudinal studies comparing students in K-8 schools to students in a middle school setting. Offenburg (2001) observed higher achievement for students in the K-8 model compared to a middle school model, with significantly higher achievement in math. Simmons and Blyth (1987) found similar results in a longitudinal study of schools in Milwaukee; in addition, they found that students in K-8 schools participated in more extracurricular activities. Finally, Baltimore City Schools (2001) found students in a K-8 building scored better on standardized measures of math, reading, and language arts.

Teaching Methods

Another important consideration is the teaching method utilized at both levels. In elementary school, students are more likely to have a variety of learning experiences, with these experiences affected by the classroom environment. Teachers are assigned the same group of students for the entire day, and are therefore better able to recognize the learning styles of those students and cater activities to their needs. Further analysis of how students who are exposed to an environment where they have more than one teacher in elementary school might reveal how classroom environment affects adjustment during transition. It is possible that students who are exposed to the styles of several different teachers while in elementary school are better equipped to cope with having more than one teacher in middle school. Conversely, as suggested by Seidman et al. (2004), restructuring schools so students make only one transition to high school, or creating “learning communities” for students in middle school that are similar to elementary school classrooms could provide similar support. In middle school, there is less variability in teaching style, as teachers are under a greater time constraint and they only have each group of students for a specified amount of time. It would be expected, therefore, that less consistency in instruction exists at the middle school level, a change which may initially create some distress for students. Instruction at the middle school level typically involves direct lecture and note taking, with occasional cooperative learning and group projects, creating an environment where students feel they are just another face in the class, magnifying the impersonal nature of middle school (Feldlaufer et al., 1988).

A number of middle schools attempt to improve student experiences by creating a team-teaching structure, where a group of students are assigned to a team of teachers and spend their day with the same peers and teachers, compared to a traditional middle school structure where students have classes with different groups of students and teachers for each subject. Berndt and Mekos (1995) compared the perceptions of students in a team-taught middle school to students who attended a traditional middle school. Although all students made more positive than negative comments about the transition to middle school, students who attended a team-taught middle school (i.e., several teachers working together to teach academic subjects) had a more positive attitude toward their academic work compared to students who attended a traditional middle school. It is possible that the team-teaching format fostered a more personal environment and students perceived greater academic support, suggesting the method of instruction is an important factor to consider in transition. Conversely, students at a traditional middle school reported higher levels of independence compared to students in the team-taught middle school (Berndt & Mekos, 1995). A potential explanation for this finding is that students in the traditional middle school felt more independent because they had less contact with teachers and less reliance on peers due to being with different groups of students during the school day. Berndt and Mekos suggest the need to identify the factors that make middle school stressful or less enjoyable, as well as the need to identify students who are at risk for poor adjustment to middle school.

Student Perceptions of Environment

Feldlaufer et al. (1988) investigated student perceptions of the mathematics classroom environment before and after the transition to junior high school. The schools

included used a traditional teaching model: one teacher presenting mathematics to students, rather than a team approach. The reports from students indicated they were given less input into activities, had fewer opportunities for interaction, and the use of whole class instruction increased. Additionally, students perceived their relationship with the junior high school math teacher less positively than student-teacher relationships before the transition (Feldlaufer et al.). Although these findings cannot be directly compared to the Berndt and Mekos (1995) study, the findings of both studies suggest the middle school/junior high school environment affects student's perceptions of teachers, academics, and personal roles in the school setting. It is possible the configuration of middle school creates an impersonal environment where students feel isolated from teachers. Moreover, differences in expectations between teachers could lead students to feel overwhelmed or a loss of control over their academic situation.

Given what is known about development at early adolescence, the previously mentioned findings suggest the structure of middle school may not provide students with the opportunity to think creatively or independently at a time when these types of thinking are proliferating. It appears, then, that there may be a developmental mismatch between the independence expected by adolescents and the educational environment they are engaged in. Preadolescents are expected to expand their thought patterns and explore new possibilities (Eccles et al., 1989). However, the educational environment of most middle schools is competitive and focused on ability, forcing students to learn and express their knowledge in concrete ways (Seidman et al., 2004), which is in contrast with Erickson's (1963) assertion that adolescents are asserting their independence and learning to think for themselves.

Social Contextual Factors

Family

Family is another important influence on the individual, particularly in childhood, when most of an individual's time is spent in family interactions. As an individual enters adolescence, there is a natural progression toward independence, potentially changing the parent-child relationship (Eccles et al., 1993). Lord et al. (1994) examined adolescent perceptions of their parents and found that adolescents who felt their parents supported their need to become more independent displayed better adjustment across the transition to middle school, while adolescents who perceived parents as being less supportive of independence exhibited lower self-esteem across transition and more difficulty with adjustment following transition.

Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, and Hevey (2000) investigated maternal involvement and transition to middle school by obtaining ratings from students, parents, and teachers on school, cognitive, and personal involvement as well as support of independence; their findings indicated adolescents with mothers who were more involved at the cognitive level (e.g. talking about current events or exposing adolescents to cultural experiences) and the personal level (e.g. asking the adolescent about what is happening in their life) had less decline in their perceived competence, while adolescents whose mothers who were more supportive of developing independence displayed fewer acting-out behaviors and learning difficulties.

Both studies suggest the importance family relationships, particularly the parent-child relationship, affect how adolescents adjust following transition. The perception of the adolescent appears to be most important, rather than the actual level of support,

although further research is needed to investigate this idea. The actual level of support may not be as important as the adolescent's perception: if an adolescent believes they are receiving the support they need, they demonstrate better outcomes following transition. Conversely, an adolescent may report higher perceived levels of support because they are actually receiving the support that matches their developmental need.

Peer Relations

Family relationships, however, are not the only social context that influences responses to a transition. Given the importance placed on social activities and belonging in adolescence, peer relationships also play an important role. Adolescence is a time when relationships increase in intimacy and the level of sharing, both in friendships and dating relationships (Berk, 2008). Although these changes in interpersonal relationships are not directly related to educational transitions, the timing of a transition can influence the changes in behaviors in relationships. For instance, girls may feel an added pressure to begin dating in middle school, which may be further complicated by the changes brought on by the onset of puberty. This pressure, along with the new school environment, may cause even greater stress for girls. Hardy et al. (2002) found that girls reported more instability in their peer relationship compared to boys. In addition, girls who transitioned from a larger elementary school were more likely to seek out friendships with unfamiliar peers more quickly than males or girls from smaller elementary schools. This observed tendency of girls to begin looking for new friends immediately following transition to middle school could potentially place girls at greater risk of establishing friendships that results in further negative outcomes.

The role of peer friendships is also an important aspect of adolescence that impacts transition. Fenzel and Blyth (1986) found that the quality of the friendships was more important than the actual number of close friendships in adjusting to a new school. There were noticeable gender differences, with girls listing more important friendships than boys, including more opposite-sex friendships. An interesting effect was found within these groups: boys who reported more intimate friendships had higher self-esteem levels following the transition, while girls with closer friendships actually declined in self-esteem. A potential reason for this difference was girls with lower self-esteem after the transition lacked family support, suggesting that although peer relationships are important to adolescents, they are not as influential as the support provided by parents. This is supported by previous research that found adolescents are more likely to turn to peers before going to parents or other adults with concerns, and that female adolescents experience greater stress and reliance on both family and peers for support (Burke & Weir, 1978; Siddique & D'Arcy, 1984).

The significant changes occurring in school settings offer adolescents many choices for peer groups, activities, and a variety of classmates. Due to the number of changes, friendships at this time often have less stability – friends come and go on a regular basis (Berndt, 1999). The average length of a friendship in adolescence is several months (Berndt & Hoyle, 1985), which could create increased instability across transition as adolescents try to establish meaningful peer relationships. Personal characteristics of adolescent also have potential influence on school adjustment and performance. Berndt (1999) reviewed literature on peer influence and suggested that both the positive and negative characteristics of the peer group could influence a student's response in the

school setting. For example, a student with friends who are high in academic achievement would be more likely to demonstrate an increase in their own achievement while an adolescent who socializes with peers who are not motivated, lack interest, and are disruptive in school may display lower achievement (Berndt, 1999).

The instability and number of changes make this time period more volatile, possibly making the individual more vulnerable to symptoms of depression, anxiety, and somatization (Hirsch & DuBois, 1992). The presence of positive peer support prior to a transition may protect an adolescent from difficulties during the middle school transition. Hirsch and DuBois (1992) suggested that adolescents with positive peer support could maintain those relationships and use that support as a source to cope with the stressors of an educational transition. Kingery and Erdley (2007) examined the effects of peer acceptance, friendship quality and quantity on adjustment across transition to middle school, measuring adjustment through loneliness and school involvement. Peer acceptance was a significant predictor of loneliness but not school involvement, while both friendship quality and quantity were correlated with adjustment. Kingery and Erdley also observed a decrease in the number of mutual friendships across transition, with a gender difference of girls reporting more mutual friendships than boys following transition. While the number of friendships declined across transition, peer acceptance remained consistent, lending further support to the findings of Hirsch and Dubois (1992) of the importance of positive peer relationships during the transition to middle school. Potential changes in peer relationships, particularly when occurring simultaneously with academic transition, could affect an individual's response to transition; the role of peer

friendships as a protective factor also needs to be considered when considering programming to facilitate transition.

Transition Timing

A question that continues to be debated is at what age is it best to transition students (e.g., from an elementary school environment to a middle school)? Within the educational system, there are not guidelines for when transition should occur, and schools typically vary from a K-12 building to a K-5, 6-8, 9-12 configuration, or a K-6, 7-9, 10-12 configuration, with variations of these used according to the size and budget of the school system. These decisions are often made based on what is financially feasible and beneficial for the system, at times without regard for the developmental needs of the students. It has been hypothesized that waiting to have students transition until major developmental changes brought on by puberty would reduce some of the negative outcomes, although researchers note the need for further research in this area (Blyth et al., 1983; Crockett et al., 1989). Blyth et al. (1983), found significant a decline in self-esteem for students who transitioned at the end of sixth grade. The students in this group also reported junior high was more impersonal than elementary school, and they viewed themselves as “anonymous faces” to teachers. These researchers also found that students who transitioned at the end of seventh grade did not experience these negative outcomes to the same extent as the first group.

The timing of transition may be particularly salient for girls. Simmons and Blyth (1987) hypothesized that significant developmental changes are more likely to be occurring for girls at the time of transition, namely biological changes during puberty. Following this hypothesis, it is possible for girls the effects of transition are magnified by

not only their physical development, but by the reactions others have toward them as their physical appearance changes. For boys, this may not be as pronounced, as boys normally do not experience those changes until some time following transition, resulting in fewer changes occurring at once. Girls must deal with changes brought on by puberty (e.g. physical appearance) and the resulting changes in social relationships, including the introduction of dating relationships (Nottelman, 1987). Crockett et al. (1989) studied three groups of students: one making a transition at sixth grade, one making a transition at seventh grade, and a group making a transition at both sixth and seventh grades, and found that students who made a transition at seventh grade displayed a smaller decrease in grades and self-esteem compared to students who transitioned from at sixth grade, although the group that made two transitions displayed even greater decreases in grades and self-esteem.

Personal Perceptions

Lord et al. (1994) found that adolescents with a more positive view of the upcoming transition made the transition with greater ease than did peers who reported the transition as intimidating and overwhelming to them. Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, and Kurlakowsky (2001) suggested a similar relationship between the perceptions an adolescent had of the transition (stressful or a challenge), and the ease of the transition. Students who had negative perceptions of their academic abilities reported greater difficulty with the middle school transition. There was also a significant difference in depressive symptoms: students who had negative beliefs about their abilities reported higher levels of depressed symptoms.

Several researchers have examined the self-reported concerns of individuals both before and following an academic transition (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Mizelle, 1995; Wells, 1996). In the pre-transition phase, students reported a number of concerns including: finding their classes, getting to their locker, being picked on by others, being less safe than in their present school, and getting lower grades (Mizelle, 1995; Wells, 1996). Following the transition, students confirm some of their concerns, reporting that classes are more difficult, teachers are stricter with rules, and making friends is more difficult (Mizelle, 1995; Scott, Rock, Pollack, & Ingels, 1995). These concerns are likely due to a number of factors, including changes in environment, expectations, and the emphasis placed on achievement.

Berndt and Mekos (1995) found that adolescents reported expecting some aspects of the transition to be stressful; however, overall, more positive statements were made. Adolescents' self-regulatory beliefs, that is, the extent to which adolescents believed they had the ability to control their own outcomes, also had a significant effect on the transition to middle school (Rudolph et al., 2001). These studies suggest that the ability to make the transition to a middle/junior high school with ease depends to some extent on the optimism of the individual. If a student expected the transition to have mostly negative outcomes, their report after the transition was mostly negative.

Achievement

Changes in academic environment, emphasis on grades, and teaching style may also play a role in the importance of achievement for adolescents. According to Wigfield et al. (1991), sixth-graders reported placing a higher level of importance on English, Math, sports, and social activities prior to the transition to junior high school, compared

to ratings following the transition to seventh grade. The ratings for all four areas decreased, with English being the least-enjoyed subject, followed by Math, social activities, and sports. The importance placed on each of the areas by students may influence the effort put forth by students, thereby affecting their achievement in each of these areas. For example, a student who perceives English as a less desirable subject may lessen their study time, resulting in lower grades.

Several studies have looked at course grades, along with academic competence and achievement goals across transition (Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Blyth et al., 1983; Eccles et al., 1989). Blyth et al. (1983), found that students who transitioned at the end of sixth grade experienced a decline in overall grade-point average compared to students in a K-8 school who experienced a slight increase in grade-point average. The researchers suggested that students with low achievement in elementary school have difficulty with transition to the next level mainly for the reason that they are not prepared to handle more advanced work. This, coupled with the more controlled and impersonal nature of a middle/junior high school, may increase the concerns of low achieving students. On the other hand, students who have experienced continued academic success in elementary school are possibly better prepared for the transition academically. However, Anderman and Midgley (1997) found that perceived academic competence decreased significantly for students of high ability compared to students of low ability, and Rudolph et al. (2001) found that in self reports of concerns for the transition, low achieving students reported readiness for the academic changes while high achievers reported worry over the rigors of middle school curriculum. Following the transition, however, low achievers reported more difficulty with academics, and high achievers acknowledged the increased difficulty

but felt they were handling it well. These self reports prior to the transition were likely a reliable representation of high and low achievers; when the importance each group placed on academics is considered. For low achieving students, they may not be concerned about the difficulty of academic work simply because they have always had difficulty and are expecting the same in middle school, while high achieving students have rarely struggled, and are more concerned they will not do as well in middle school due to the high level of importance they place on academics.

Self Concept and Self-Esteem

Within the literature on transition, self-esteem and self concept appear in a number of studies (Cole et. al., 2001; Eccles et al., 1989; Fenzel, 2000; Nottelman, 1987; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Wigfield et al., 1991, Zanobini & Usai, 2002). How individuals estimate their worth and the feelings associated with that worth are primary components of self-esteem (Berk, 2008). Self-esteem can be influenced by factors including interpersonal relations, achievement, physical ability, and physical appearance. There is some disagreement in the existing literature, with some studies finding self-esteem decreases across transition, although others suggest self-esteem actually increases several months following transition. Wigfield et al. (1991) conducted a two-year longitudinal study, and found that adolescents' self-esteem was at its' lowest point soon after a transition took place. An important finding was that the adolescents' self-esteem recovered during the seventh grade year, to a level similar to self-esteem before the transition. It is possible that the adolescents experienced high levels of self-esteem in the academic year before the transition, due to their familiarity with the routines and

relationships in sixth grade. Following the transition, their self-esteem dropped in response to the numerous changes that took place.

Additionally, gender differences in self-esteem have been observed, although these have not been extensively reviewed within the construct of transition. Nottelman (1987) found no significant decline in self-esteem was reported in a group that transitioned or in a non-transition group. An analysis of each group, however, found significant differences between genders, with boys reporting higher self-esteem and physical competence than girls. A grade effect was also observed, with sixth-grade students reporting higher social competence than seventh-graders, regardless of transition group. The most interesting finding by Nottelman (1987) was that students in the transition group had higher general competence than students in the non-transition group. One potential explanation for this finding relates to an earlier discussion of the perceptions students have of the transition: students in the transition group may have possessed the coping skills needed to effectively make the transition, which resulted in a greater sense of overall self-competence.

A three-year longitudinal study by Wigfield and Eccles (1994) examined the self-esteem levels of elementary school children in first, second, and fourth grades, evaluating students once a year. There were no significant changes in self-esteem across the three years, nor were there any differences in self-esteem across age groups. The findings suggested that self-esteem is a relatively stable construct during elementary school, which has implications for self-esteem research at transition. Although Wigfield and Eccles did not follow students across transition, the stability of self-esteem observed in elementary school lends support to the hypothesis that changes in self-esteem during early

adolescence are a function of transition. Although there is some agreement with regards to the decrease of self-esteem across a transition, followed by a rebound, there exists no research extending beyond the first year of transition. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the long-term effects of transition on self-esteem, or what additional external factors (such as achievement or peer relationships) may be affecting self-esteem.

Self concept, the set of attributes, abilities, attitudes, and values and individual believes defines who he or she is (Berk, 2008), is not as evident in the literature; however, several studies have examined self concept. Eccles et al. (1989) examined general self-esteem and self concept ratings in math, English, social and physical skills activities between sixth and seventh grades, following a transition. The results indicated academic self concept for Math and English, as well as self concept of social ability, declined following transition.

In a separate study, Zanobini and Usai (2002) measured self concept across the transition from elementary to middle school and found a significant decrease in academic self concept following transition, but no significant differences in social, physical, or competence self concept domains. However, Wigfield et al. (1991) found that self concept of students changed significantly over the transition from sixth to seventh grade for all four areas. The largest difference in self concept occurred in social activities. Although the self concept of students' social ability increased over the sixth grade year, there was a marked decline immediately following the transition. Over the seventh grade year, a slight recovery of social self concept was observed; however, student's social self concept was still much lower following transition than prior to the transition (Wigfield et al., 1991). Although the changes were not as significant for sports, English, and math,

there were declines in self concept in each of those areas. Students reported enjoying social activities the most, followed by sports, math, and English. It would be expected that the activity adolescents placed the most importance on would be most affected by the transition. The changes in social interactions are far different in middle school compared to elementary school, and students, particularly in early adolescence, want to “fit in” and be socially acceptable. The new environment they are placed in presents new challenges, and they must redefine what being accepted means. A student who was well-liked by peers and perceived as acceptable in elementary school may arrive at middle school and find there are many other students who are like them, and then must find where they fit in. Conversely, a student who fit the role of a class bully may find that there is a bigger, meaner bully at the middle school, and must redefine their role in the new environment.

The previously mentioned studies suggest academic self concept is affected by transition; however, there are no further studies that examine self concept in the context of transition to middle school. This is an area of the literature that needs to be research further, particularly in light of the significant declines in academic self concept observed in each of these studies.

Protective Factors

As suggested by some researchers (Crockett et al., 1989; Simmons & Blyth, 1979), the occasional overlap of the transition from elementary to middle school and the onset of puberty may make the transition more stressful. Although this review has focused on the negative factors related to transition, there exist protective factors that act to facilitate the navigation of transition. What factors might affect how adolescents perceive an educational transition? Berndt and Mekos (1995) found that adolescents’

perceptions prior to and following the transition from elementary to middle school were both positive and negative. Several factors were important in the students' perceptions of their new environment, including achievement, misconduct, and their expectations of middle school (Simmons and Blyth, 1987; Berndt & Mekos, 1995). Students made both positive and negative observations, suggesting the perceptions of transition are not clear-cut for adolescents, and their outcomes are affected by a number of factors. The previous attitudes and behaviors displayed by students were observed to have an effect on how individual students perceived the transition. For example, students who engaged in problem behaviors in elementary school made more negative reports of their junior high school, and experienced greater difficulty with the transition, although students with higher academic achievement prior to the transition were more positive about the transition (Berndt & Mekos, 1995; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). These results suggested that the characteristics of the students, as well as their prior experiences in the school setting influence their reactions to the transition. Berndt & Mekos (1995) suggested that both the positive and negative perceptions of adolescents regarding middle school can be self-fulfilling, indicating the dispositional traits of adolescents do not change significantly across settings. The stability of dispositional traits is related to personality theory, which states that although personality is a dynamic set of processes, it is displayed in patterns and there is consistency among traits (Allport, 1961).

In one study, students who perceived more family support and had more positive self-perceptions handled the transition to seventh grade better than peers with less perceived support from family (Lord et al., 1994). Additionally, Fenzel and Blyth (1986) found that girls who did not experience close familial relationships had more difficulty in

transition. The results of these studies suggest the importance of family support in handling transition effectively. Adolescents who felt a lack of family support did not fare as well during a transition compared to individuals who perceived positive family support. It should be noted, however, that these are only two studies, and further research looking specifically at protective and risk factors, particularly ones other than family support, are needed. Although not identified specifically as protective or risk factors, constructs including achievement, peer relations, and self-esteem are potential directions for research in this area.

Programming

One of the primary goals of researching adolescent outcomes following academic transition is to inform the development of programs intended to facilitate transition. Some researchers have suggested interventions or programs as means of facilitating school transition (Akos & Martin, 2003; Greene & Ollendick, 1993; Odegaard & Heath, 1992). These programs can vary from a visitation for students to explore the new building and familiarize students with the future new environment, creating student “teams” when they arrive at the middle school to create a peer network, having an older peer mentor to show a younger student around the school, an open house for parents and students to meet teachers and learn about the expectations and routines, or counseling groups to prepare students for the transition and identify students at risk for negative outcomes such as academic failure or delinquent behavior.

In one study examining a program aimed at helping at-risk students prepare for transition, Akos and Martin (2003) conducted five sessions with three groups of students: an all female group, an all male group, and one mixed gender group. Students were

selected based on both their interest in participating in the group, and on recommendation from a teacher that a student might be in need of such a group. Each of the five sessions had a defined agenda/activity including: a pen-pal activity, where members wrote a letter to students already at the school and discussed the responses received; a discussion about academics; organization tips; discussion about personal and social concerns; and a summary and termination session.

Greene and Ollendick (1993) examined the effects of group support on students who were displaying poor academic performance following the transition to middle school. This study differed from the program developed by Akos and Martin (2003), as it did not intervene with at-risk students until after they transitioned to middle school and were demonstrating a negative achievement outcome. This program had two groups, one complete treatment that focused on heightened teacher support, problem-solving training, social skills training, and self-monitoring skills; and a second treatment group that only received increase teacher support. Greene and Ollendick found that students in the complete treatment group displayed significant higher achievement performance, less behavior problems in class, and fewer reports of depressive symptoms.

While the two programs mentioned above serve the purpose of helping at-risk students negotiate transition, there does not exist in the literature an analysis of programs intended to address the needs of all students whether they are at risk or not. The goal of the current study is to determine the needs of the general student population as well as to identify areas of self concept and student perceptions that might need to be further investigated for an at risk population. The development of comprehensive programs requires an understanding of the scope of students' needs during transition, including

student expectations and perceptions, self-esteem, and self concept; the proposed study is an attempt to add to existing literature and to examine transition at a younger age.

Conclusion

Throughout this review of literature on transition, it became clear that there was not a consensus on how students are affected. Prior research indicates a wide range of results supporting both the difficulty of transition to a new educational setting, as well as possible positive outcomes. Marked differences in academic environments between elementary and middle school are potentially significant factors in how adolescents handle transition. Additionally, previous experiences in the learning environment likely shape how the individual approaches this transition. Prior behavior and past school achievement may affect expectations of and response to transition. Although individuals change in a variety of ways as they enter adolescence, many characteristics and behaviors remain the same, and these previous patterns must be considered when helping students make a positive transition to middle school. Research in this area indicates although concepts such as self-esteem, self concept, and achievement may decline as a result of a transition, some adolescents recover in these areas with time. However, for some students, the declines in achievement, self-esteem, and self concept persist and may place these students at greater risk for dropping out of school.

Although a substantial amount of research on transition exists, there are still many areas that require further research in order to better understand the experience of adolescents. Another area of the literature that must be considered is the social network of the adolescent, including family and peers. As was discussed earlier, family support appears to have some effect on adolescents' adjustment, with more parental support and

involvement indicative of a less troublesome transition. Another resource for adolescents that is nearly as important as family is peer support, which becomes increasingly important in adolescence. Although the number of friends is not crucial, the quality of those friendships and the level of intimacy an adolescent perceives in friendships appear to be an important protective factor in making a transition. Additionally, the characteristics and values of friends can influence how the adolescent behaves and responds to school.

Given the number of influences on adolescents as they make simultaneous developmental and systemic academic transitions, limitations in the research are primarily related to difficulty separating the various factors involved. In order to better understand the relationship between developmental and systemic academic transition, future research must attempt to clarify the roles of environment, achievement, self concept, timing, and personal perceptions. A thorough understanding of how adolescents deal with transition is needed in order to develop interventions and programs to prepare students for an academic transition.

Despite conflicting views of how adolescents handle transition, the possibility of detrimental factors point to the need for programs that address the needs of individuals making an educational transition. Throughout this review a number of factors have been presented as potential mitigating factors in transition. Few studies, however, have focused on the effects of transition programs, and this is an area where research is needed to determine the effectiveness and direction of such programs. One potential direction for programming is to focus on the expectations individuals have for the transition. It was mentioned previously that some adolescents view the transition as exciting and

challenging, although others viewed it as stressful and intimidating. A program that allows students to experience a day in the middle school setting may act to decrease those negative perceptions. Another area discussed in this review was peer relations, and the fact that in middle school adolescents are exposed to a much larger peer group with which to interact. In this respect, programs to allow for increased peer interaction both prior to and following the transition may prove beneficial. Academically, adolescents experience a number of changes in middle school, including exposure to more teachers, an increased importance placed on grades, and higher expectations. The use of a student-team approach, where a small group of students are assigned to a teacher whom they can go to with questions and concerns, is another direction for transition programming. A mentoring program with older students may also provide more security for adolescents as they transition to middle school.

The purpose of this review was to gain a better understanding of the nature of factors affecting adolescents, and how these factors affect the transition to middle school. The existing literature on transition indicates there are still areas that require further research; particularly in the areas of self concept and the timing of a systemic transition. In developing transition programming, all of the factors discussed here, as well as developmental issues should be taken into consideration to best prepare adolescents for the significant changes they will experience. To that end, the current study attempted to provide more insight regarding how self concept is affected during transition and how student perceptions of transition may be a factor in navigating this transition.

Chapter III

Methodology

Restatement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of the relationship between self concept and transition from elementary to middle school, whether any gender differences existed on self concept, and any potential interaction between transition status and gender on self concept across time. Student perceptions of school and related aspects such as teachers, peers, and homework were also investigated.

Description of Participants

Subjects were 102 fourth-grade students who attended one of three schools in a rural town in the Midwest. Students were between the ages of 9 and 11 over the course of the study. The district consists of one elementary school (K-4), two schools with Kindergarten through 8th grade, a middle school (grades 5-8) and a high school (grades 9-12). All fourth grade students were eligible for the study, including students at the two K-8 schools.

School District Statistics

The school district sampled in the study was located in southeastern Indiana. According to information on the Indiana Department of Education website, preliminary enrollment for school year 2008-09 was 2995 students. 30% of students were involved in

the free lunch program and 11% of students received reduced lunch rates. The graduation rate for the district in 2007 was 79.6%. For the school year 2007-08, 17.4% of students in the district received special education services, comparable to the state average of 17.8%.

In the two school years data collection occurred, enrollment in the district was 3,117 for the 2005-06 school year, and 3,030 for the 2006-07 school year. Enrollment in the 4th grade for the 2005-06 school year was 228 students; 118 girls and 100 boys. The ethnic composition of the 4th grade population included 226 Caucasian students and 2 multi-racial students. Enrollment in the 5th grade for the 2006-07 school year was 224 students; 111 girls and 113 boys. The ethnic composition of the 5th grade population was 222 Caucasian students and 2 multi-racial students.

The K-4 elementary school enrollment in the 4th grade was 111 students. 29% of students in the building received a free or reduced lunch. Out of 111 students given the opportunity to participate in the study, 68 returned signed parental permission for a return rate of 61%. In the first K-8 building, 54% of students received a free or reduced lunch. Enrollment in the 4th grade was 64 students; out of that number, 21 returned signed parental permission for a return rate of 31%. At the second K-8 building 24% of all students received a free or reduced lunch. Enrollment in the 4th grade was 53 students; of those students 29 returned parental permission, a return rate of 54%.

Procedure

There were two components to the study. The first involved students completing the Multidimensional Self Concept Scale (MSCS) (Bracken, 1992) at two different time points: May and September. The MSCS is described in more detail in the next section. The second component of the study involved a school transition perception survey

completed by students regarding their perceptions of school. These protocols were completed on the same day.

Students were recruited by a visit to their classrooms. Students were told that the investigator wanted to learn more about how students felt and thought about themselves and school in both fourth and fifth grades. All students were told their parents needed to give permission; however, each student also had the choice of whether or not they wanted to participate in the study. Each student was given a packet containing a detailed letter describing the nature of the study and where parents could view the MSCS and student survey, as well as a form indicating parental permission for participation in the study. All students who wished to participate in the study and returned parental permission were included in the subject pool. A raffle drawing was held for all students who returned the signed parent permission form, with gift certificates from local restaurants given as prizes in an attempt to increase return rates.

Students completed the MSCS during the school day, supervised by the investigator, who was available to answer questions or read items aloud. Students completed the school transition perception survey immediately following the MSCS. All packets and corresponding documents were assigned a coded subject number. Students were instructed to not place their name anywhere on the MSCS or survey, and all parent permission letters were stored separate from the completed materials. All students completed a subsequent MSCS and school transition perception survey in late September, approximately one month following their entrance into fifth grade.

Measures and Instruments

Two instruments were used: the Multidimensional Self Concept Scale (MSCS) (Bracken, 1992), and a school perception survey developed by the examiner.

The MSCS was used to assess self concept. This self-report scale provides an overall self concept score, as well as domain specific self concept scores in social, family, affective, academic, physical, and competence areas. Self concept scores are reported as standard scores with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. The MSCS is appropriate for use to obtain a global self concept, and individual subscales can be administered separately. The MSCS was developed to provide a more comprehensive and reliable measure of self concept and is appropriate for use in the school setting. Bracken, Bunch, Keith, & Keith (2000) performed a factor analysis study that found the MSCS to be reliable for measuring multiple dimensions of self concept. The organization of the MSCS into subscales allows for specific domains to be interpreted with respect to personal characteristics.

The MSCS is a 150-item scale, with each of the six subscales consisting of 25 items. Each of the subscales contains items that are specific to that domain of self concept. For example, the items that compose the social domain assess individuals' perception of their competence in social situations. The items were developed implementing a forced-choice Likert format, to ensure individuals could not endorse items in a neutral manner. Items were worded in both positive and negative ways, so as to avoid response sets. Additionally, items were written to reflect personal perspectives, in order to allow individuals to report their personal opinions of self concept. The materials needed to administer this scale include the instructions for administration, individual

record forms, and a writing utensil. The MSCS can be administered individually or in a group setting. The involvement of the examiner is minimal: they must be available to provide oral directions (provided in the manual) and to answer any questions or clarify meaning of items on the scale. Although the MSCS is recommended for children between ages 9 and 19, the ability of each individual child to read and comprehend the items in a meaningful manner must be determined. The level of reading difficulty is appropriate for the ages the MSCS is intended to evaluate: the items are concise and clear in their meaning. Individuals read each statement and rate it on a four-point scale for the extent it applies to them.

The directions provided in the manual provide prompts for the examiner to give children when they want to know how they should answer an item. Individuals completing the scale have the option of answering items in any order they choose, and there is no time limit for completion of the scale. Generally, administration of the MSCS takes between 20 and 30 minutes, although children who are at a lower reading level may take longer.

Internal consistency of the scale was provided for each of the subscales and the total scale by grade, using the standardization sample. Overall, the MSCS total scale displayed internal consistency of .98. Internal consistency coefficients for subscales of five of the scales (Social, Affect, Academic, Family, Physical) surpassed .90, however, the Competence subscale displayed internal consistency of .87. Bracken (1992) states although this reliability supports the contribution of the Competence subscale to the total self concept score, when this subscale is used alone, it should be interpreted with caution.

Test-retest reliability, determined by administering the MSCS to a group of 37 eighth-graders, with a follow-up administration four weeks later found moderately strong test-retest stability coefficients, ranging from .73 for the Affect subscale to .90 for the total test. These results suggested the stability of the total scale was high considering the four-week interval between administrations; however, the test-retest reliability study sample consisted only of eighth-graders, which does not match the sample for the proposed study.

The content validity of the MSCS is believed to be adequate when compared to the multidimensional model of self concept outlined by Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton (1976). Concurrent validity has been established by Bracken et al. (2000), comparing the MSCS to four established self concept scales including the Piers-Harris Self concept Scale, the Marsh Self-Description Questionnaire-II, the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, and the Tennessee Self concept Scale-Revised.

To obtain specific information regarding students' perceptions about their current grade and how they felt about the next grade, a school transition perception survey developed by the examiner was administered. The items on the survey asked students questions about their perceptions of school work, feelings about their school, and what they were excited and/or worried about for the next school year. Items were accompanied by answer choices; some items had a YES/NO response, a Likert-type response, or several answer choices for students to select. There were two versions of the survey: one intended for the Transition group and another for the Non-transition group that did not contain the question about going to a new school building for the next year. With the exception of that one question the surveys were identical.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using several different statistical analyses to address each of the proposed hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: There would be significant differences in self concept based on transition status (1) and gender (2).

- (1) Analysis: Global and domain specific (Social, Affect, Academic, Family, Physical) self concept scores for both the transition group and the non-transition control group were compared to look for changes in self concept based on transition status. A difference in self concept scores was expected for the Transition group, with lower self concept scores observed following transition. There was no difference expected in self concept scores for the Non-transition control group.
- (2) Analysis: Global and domain specific self concept scores for boys and girls within groups were compared to look for differences in self concept between gender across time. A difference in self concept scores was expected to be greater for girls than boys, with lower self concept scores observed for girls following transition. There was no difference expected in self concept scores between genders for the Non-transition group.

Hypothesis 2: There would be significant differences in student perceptions based on transition status.

- (3) Analysis: Differences in student perceptions between groups were analyzed to determine whether students in the Transition and Non-

transition groups reported similar responses on the student perception survey. It was expected students in the Transition group would expect more changes, more difficulty in academics, and more concerns about school compared to students in the Non-transition group.

Chapter IV

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Participants in the initial phase of the study ($n=121$) were 53 boys and 68 girls. The Transition group ($n = 69$) was comprised of 31 boys and 38 girls. The Non-transition group ($n=52$) included 22 boys and 30 girls. To calculate mean ages for participants, all subjects listed their birth date in the appropriate section of the Multi-Dimensional Self Concept Scale (MSCS) at Time 1 (Spring) and Time 2 (Fall). The mean age of participants was 10.51 years. At the time of initial data collection, participants in the Transition group ranged in age from 9.83 years to 11.58 years, with a mean age of 10.51 years. At the time of follow-up data collection, they ranged in age from 10.25 years to 12.0 years, with a mean age of 10.93 years. In the Non-transition group, participants ranged in age from 9.5 years to 11.67 years old, with a mean age of 10.51 years. At the time of follow-up data collection they ranged in age from 9.92 years to 12.17 years, with a mean age of 10.93 years. There were no significant differences in the ages of participants between groups.

There was some subject attrition during the study, resulting in a loss of ten students in the Transition group and nine students in the Non-transition group. At Time 1, during the initial data collection, a student in the Non-transition group requested to

discontinue participation in the study. Between Time 1 and Time 2, two students attending a Non-transition school moved within the school district, enrolling at the Transition middle school. While these students were given the opportunity to participate in the fall data collection, their data were not included in any of the analyses. Between Time 1 and Time 2, a student in the Transition group was retained and did not participate in the second portion of the study; this participant's data were not included in any analyses. Between Time 1 and Time 2, four students in the Non-transition and five students in the Transition group moved out of the district; their information was not included in any analyses. In the final data analyses, participants ($n=102$) included 46 boys and 56 girls, with the Transition group ($n=59$) comprised of 26 boys and 33 girls, and the Non-transition group ($n=43$) comprised of 20 boys and 23 girls. Mean ages did not vary based on attrition, with a mean age for both Transition and Non-transition groups of 10.93 years.

Standard scores on the MSCS were obtained for all six clusters and global self concept. These scores were used to obtain mean standard scores and the standard deviation for group and gender within each group.¹

An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

¹ See Table 1 for mean self concept scores and standard deviations for groups. See Table 2 for mean self concept scores and standard deviations for gender within groups.

Table1: Self Concept Means and Standard Deviations by Group

		Transition		Non-Transition	
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Time 1 Spring	Social Self Concept	94.46	15.28	95.02	18.40
	Competence Self Concept	96.61	16.09	96.14	17.31
	Affect Self Concept	98.89	14.614	97.72	13.35
	Academic Self Concept	103.08	17.95	98.81	13.92
	Family Self Concept	104.41	12.82	101.00	13.07
	Physical Self Concept	102.49	16.47	102.09	13.29
	Global Self Concept	100.42	15.25	98.98	12.39
Time 2 Fall	Social Self Concept	97.19	17.05	99.28	20.38
	Competence Self Concept	101.15	15.42	100.67	14.13
	Affect Self Concept	100.41	14.91	102.21	14.67
	Academic Self Concept	105.15	15.79	101.02	17.57
	Family Self Concept	105.66	12.89	99.77	15.12
	Physical Self Concept	101.97	15.67	99.88	13.46
	Global Self Concept	102.49	14.38	100.93	15.65

Table 2: Self Concept Means and Standard Deviations by Gender within Groups

		Girls				Boys			
		Transition		Non-Transition		Transition		Non-Transition	
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Time 1 Spring	Social Self Concept	91.76	16.12	93.00	23.45	98.12	13.53	97.14	11.15
	Competence Self Concept	91.18	16.27	96.55	22.15	98.56	15.96	95.71	10.67
	Affect Self Concept	97.76	15.95	99.27	12.25	100.44	12.73	96.09	14.34
	Academic Self Concept	101.79	18.33	98.27	12.02	104.84	17.37	99.38	15.95
	Family Self Concept	103.15	13.67	102.59	12.29	106.12	11.61	99.33	13.94
	Physical Self Concept	101.38	16.90	103.55	14.60	104.00	16.07	100.57	11.93
	Global Self Concept	98.76	16.67	100.45	12.51	102.68	13.07	97.43	12.38
Time 2 Fall	Social Self Concept	95.15	17.25	99.05	24.92	99.96	16.73	99.52	14.83
	Competence Self Concept	100.56	15.11	105.55	15.24	101.96	16.11	95.57	11.05
	Affect Self Concept	98.50	16.34	105.32	15.33	103.00	12.58	98.95	13.54
	Academic Self Concept	105.41	13.47	102.64	17.16	104.80	18.79	99.33	18.25
	Family Self Concept	103.15	13.67	102.59	12.29	108.00	12.78	100.19	16.77
	Physical Self Concept	101.38	16.90	103.55	14.60	104.16	17.20	96.76	11.04
	Global Self Concept	100.94	14.05	103.86	16.88	104.60	14.84	97.86	13.99

Hypothesis One: There will be significant differences in self concept based on transition status and gender.

Self concept data were analyzed with repeated measures Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) to determine the relationship between self concept scores and transition group status and gender across time. Three potential interaction effects were examined: a Time X Group, a Time X Gender, and a Time X Group X Gender, with Time as the within subjects factor and Group and Gender as the between subjects factor, yielding a 2 X 2 X 2 repeated measures design. The resulting *F* ratios were not significant for any of the interactions, indicating subjects did not differ significantly on any measure of self concept across time based on group status or gender.² As there were no significant interactions observed, no main effects analyses were interpreted.

² See Table 3 for Repeated Measures Multivariate Analysis of Variance, and Table 3a for within subjects univariate analysis of variance.

Table 3: Within Subjects Multivariate Analysis of Variance

	Time * Group			Time * Gender			Time * Group * Gender		
	Value	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Value	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Value	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Pillai's Trace	0.06	0.67	.69	0.08	1.19	.31	0.03	0.44	.87
Wilks' Lambda	0.95	0.67	.69	0.92	1.19	.31	0.97	0.44	.87
Hotelling's Trace	0.05	0.67	.69	0.09	1.19	.31	0.03	0.44	.87
Roy's Largest Root	0.05	0.67	.69	0.09	1.19	.31	0.03	0.44	.87

** Hypothesis df = 7.00, Error df = 92.00 for all multivariate analyses*

Table 3a: Within Subjects Univariate Analysis of Variance

	Time * Group			Time * Gender			Time * Group * Gender		
	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Social	31.59	.25	.62	83.43	.66	.42	13.86	.11	.74
Competence	0.02	.00	.99	380.87	3.17	.08	157.78	1.31	.26
Affect	96.75	1.33	.25	77.33	1.06	.31	77.36	1.06	.31
Academic	1.68	.02	.89	200.35	2.22	.14	1.75	.02	.89
Family	78.30	1.00	.32	82.26	1.05	.31	27.67	.35	.55
Physical	40.37	.51	.48	11.56	.15	.70	57.35	.72	.39
Global	.21	.00	.95	32.24	.66	.42	22.83	.47	.49

Hypothesis Two: There will be differences in student perceptions based on transition status.

To examine patterns in student perceptions based on transition status, a chi-square analysis was completed for responses at Time 1 and Time 2. Individual items included in the analysis were as follows:

1. How different do you think school will be next year? (Different next year)
2. Is your schoolwork this year too easy, too hard, or just about right? (School work difficulty)
3. Do you think you are trying as hard as you can this year? (Effort)
4. How do you feel about your school this year? (Feelings)
5. What are you most excited about for next year? (Excited)
6. What are you most worried about for next year? (Worried)

Items one, two, and four were rated by students on a three point Likert scale. Item three was a Yes or No response, and items five and six consisted of four forced choice items (making friends, teachers, grades, and other).

Chi-square analyses of individual items between groups revealed several significant associations. First, at Time 1 and Time 2 there were significant associations between transition status and perception for Item 1 (Different next year), $\chi^2(2) = 18.88, p < .00$ (Spring), and $\chi^2(2) = 10.35, p < .01$. At Time 1 there was also a significant association between transition status and perception for Item 2 (School work difficulty),

$\chi^2(2) = 8.57, p < .01$. Finally, a significant association was found between transition status and perception for Item 5 (Excited), $\chi^2(2) = 9.62, p < .02$.³

Post-hoc interpretation of the significant associations included an examination of individual cells to better describe the observed significant associations. These examinations were limited to within group comparisons, due to the difference in N for each group. For Item 1 (Different) at Time 1, students in the Transition group were more likely to report the perception that school would be ‘very different’ the next year, accounting for 71% of responses for the Transition group. Students in the Non-Transition group were more likely to report the perception that school would be ‘a little different’ the next year, accounting for 70% of responses for the Non-Transition group for Item 1. At Time 2 a similar trend was observed, with 54% of students in the Transition group reporting school was ‘very different’ and 62% of students in the Non-Transition group reporting school was ‘a little different’.

At Time 1 for Item 2 (Schoolwork difficulty), students in both Transition and Non-transition groups were more likely to report the difficulty of schoolwork as being ‘just about right’, accounting for 77% of the total responses. By comparison, only 7% of students in the Transition group reported schoolwork was ‘too hard’ while 23% of students in the Non-Transition group reported that perception. For Item 5 (Excited), students in both the Transition and Non-Transition groups reported being excited about ‘Friends’ in the next school year, although within groups only 37% of students in the Transition group selected this answer compared to 63% of students in the Non-Transition

³ See Table 4 for chi-square analyses of student perceptions.

group. 31% of students in the Transition group reported being excited about 'Teachers' for the next school year.

Table 4: Chi-Square Analysis: Student Perceptions by Group Status

			Transition	Non-transition	N	χ^2	Sig.
Time 1 Spring	Different next year	Not at all	1	1	102	18.88*	.00
		A little	16	30			
		Very	42	12			
	School work difficulty	Too easy	8	1	102	8.57*	.01
		Just about right	47	32			
		Too hard	4	10			
	Effort	Yes	49	36	102	.01	.93
No		10	7				
Feelings	Good	37	31	102	1.01	.61	
	Sort of good	17	9				
	Bad	5	3				
Excited	Friends	22	27	102	9.62*	.02	
	Grades	11	9				
	Teachers	18	4				
	Other	8	3				
Worried	Friends	8	2	102	4.47	.22	
	Grades	31	19				
	Teachers	13	16				
	Other	7	6				
Time 2 Fall	Different next year	Not at all	1	5	101	10.35*	.01
		A little	26	26			
		Very	32	11			
	School work difficulty	Too easy	5	1	90	3.16	.21
		Just about right	46	28			
		Too hard	4	6			
	Effort	Yes	45	24	90	2.10	.15
		No	10	11			
	Feelings	Good	39	23	90	4.89	.09
		Sort of good	16	9			
		Bad	0	3			
Excited	Friends	23	19	90	3.91	.27	
	Grades	11	5				
	Teachers	10	2				
	Other	11	9				
Worried	Friends	3	1	77	2.18	.54	
	Grades	33	19				
	Teachers	3	1				
	Other	8	9				

* Significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Chapter V

Discussion

The current study attempted to expand the existing literature on self concept and to examine transition in a younger age group. Middle school transition and the effects on self concept were investigated in several previous studies (Eccles et al, 1989; Wigfield et al., 1991; Zanobini & Usai, 2002), with declines in academic self concept across transition. The findings in these studies suggest that other areas of self concept, such as social, competence, and physical either remains stable (Zanobini & Usai, 2002) or declines (Wigfield et al., 1991). Developmental status is also a potentially interacting factor in adolescents' reaction to transition (Brooks-Gunn, Petersen, & Eichorn, 1985; Dubas et al., 1991). The current study was an initial step toward understanding developmental status better in the context of transition, by examining a younger age group making a transition.

Transition has been the focus of a number of studies (Alspaugh, 1998; Anderson et al., 2000; Berndt, & Mekos, 1995; Lord et al., 1994; Zanobini & Usai, 2002). Existing literature focused on constructs of family support (Lord et al., 1994), peer social support (Hirsch & DuBois, 1992), self-esteem (Eccles et al., 1989), and achievement (Alspaugh, 1998; Anderman & Midgely, 1997). The previously mentioned studies investigated populations that transitioned to middle school at an older age, suggesting developmental

status is an important factor in transition outcomes. In the current study, the younger age of students may have acted as a protective factor; aligning with the assertion that early adolescents may handle transition better when not presented with simultaneous changes (Simmons et al., 1987). Although there are a number of studies examining transition, the current study is unique in that it compares students making a transition to a group that does not transition, providing a control group to examine how transition impacts student self concept.

The primary hypothesis of this study: that transition status would affect self concept, with a potential interaction of gender with group status, was not supported. There were no significant interactions found on the self concept clusters based on group status and/or gender across time. The lack of a significant relationship between self concept and transition status has two potential explanations.

First, it suggests a transition occurring earlier could result in fewer negative outcomes for students. The current study examined transition from 4th to 5th grade, compared to previous studies that examined transition from 5th to 6th or 6th to 7th grades. Although the current study did not find any significant relationship between self concept and transition, the results need to be replicated in order to understand the relationship between self concept and transition at a younger age.

Second, although the MSCS is indicated for use with individuals beginning at age 9 years, it is possible students were not developmentally capable of understanding the item content. A small group of 9-year old individuals were included in the standardization sample, and Bracken (1992) reported that students in the younger age

groups needed some item content explained. The maturity level of students is a related factor in this explanation: although an individual at this age is beginning to describe his or her self concept in terms of competencies and attributes (Berk, 2008), when asked to quantify those competencies on a scale like the MSCS it may be more difficult for the individual to understand the terms. It is possible participants tended to answer items in a positive manner if they did not understand an item.

Third, the excitement and changes that come with a new school year could act as a protective factor. Students in both groups have a new teacher or teachers and may see the new school year as a ‘clean slate’ where they can create new success and build positive relationships.

Student responses to the perception survey resulted in some interesting patterns. Students in both groups were more likely to respond that school would be different in the next year, and maintain that perception after the next school year started, regardless of transition status. In addition, the majority of students in both groups felt the difficulty level of their schoolwork was “just about right”. Finally, when given choices of things to be excited or worried about, more students in both groups selected “Friends” for the ‘Excited’ item. However, no specific information was gathered about what specifically students were excited about with relation to their response. It was interesting that students in both groups were more concerned with the social and environmental aspects of school, rather than academics.

An open ended question posed to students in the Transition group revealed what students were concerned about prior to transition, and what they felt was the most

different about their new school following transition. Prior to the transition, students reported being concerned about getting their lockers open, learning their locker combination, and being bullied by older students. Following transition, lockers were not mentioned as a concern by any student. Students were primarily concerned with making new friends and maintaining already established friendships. One potential explanation for the differences in what students were concerned about is their experiences prior to and following transition. In the spring when students are anticipating transition, they likely have stable friendships and are comfortable with their social standing and place in their school. As a result, the things students are more concerned about are environmental in nature that they have not experienced, such as having their own locker with a lock. In addition, students see themselves as being the oldest in the school and are concerned about what will happen when they become the youngest in their school instead, prompting concerns about being teased or bullied by older students. When the same students were asked the same question following transition, the change in their responses might be due to the immediate experiences they have had since starting at their new school: things they were concerned prior to transition may not have happened, allowing them to transfer their concerns to more personal issues such as making new friends and maintaining their current friendships.

When asked about differences at their new school, students in the transition group reported a wide range of changes. Having their own lockers was the most frequently mentioned change (mentioned by eight students); followed by changes at lunch (such as being able to buy different kinds of food and being in a larger lunch room), changing

classes, new teachers, and being in a larger school. Students reported other differences less frequently, including: harder work, stricter teachers, getting detention, and having older students in the building. Three students in the Transition group reported “nothing” was different about their new school.

An interesting observation is what students in the Transition group reported as being the most notable changes. Things that were perceived as being important, such as having one’s own locker and being able to buy different food at lunch are not factors that would be expected to directly impact the student’s academic experience in the same way having different teachers, more difficult work, and changing classes would. Students may see the changes of having a locker and the ability to select what they eat for lunch as an opportunity to be more independent and make their own choices. In elementary school they did not have a closed space (i.e. a locker) to keep their personal belongings, nor were they able to choose what food they would eat if they had a school lunch. The addition of both of these things in middle school could be seen as an increase in privacy and freedom, respectively. Although having a personal locker and more choices of what to eat may seem like relatively minor changes, the results from the current study suggest the need for further investigation into what students identify with and the impact of minor changes on how students respond to transition. That is, it may not be the actual process of transition that affects students, but rather the summation of small changes and their effect on a student’s sense of independence and ownership.

Limitations and Future Research

It is important to note the current study is limited in its' application and further research is still needed in this area, as self concept and student perceptions are only two components within the literature on transition. Future research with age groups similar to the current study and examining other constructs such as achievement, self-esteem, and peer relations is needed to better understand transition at a younger age and how it affects students, with the goal of developing effective programs to assist students during what could potentially be a stressful period. A comprehensive study comparing students making transitions at different ages against students not making a transition at similar ages that investigates achievement, self-esteem, and peer relations would extend the current study's examination of transition occurring at a younger age.

In addition to the more limited scope of the current study and the focus on self concept and student perceptions across transition, there are other limitations that are important to mention. The first limitation is the nature of the population sample. The school district involved in the study is located in a rural area and is not representative of school districts in suburban and urban areas. The current study is unique in that it assessed two distinct groups within the same school district: a group making a transition, and another group that would remain in the same school building. The nature of this school district provided a control group, allowing for analyses and comparisons that were not present in the existing literature.

A second limitation of the current study is the age of the population. While the purpose of the current study was to examine the effects of transition on self concept in a

younger sample, this limits the generalization of any results to a similar aged population. Similarly, as there are no other published studies that examine transition with a younger sample, further research is necessary with this particular age group before any conclusions can be made regarding how younger students manage and respond to transition.

Third, although the sample of the current study should be homogeneous in nature, it is possible that some selection bias occurred, with a specific type of student agreeing to participate in the study. It is not possible to know whether the population sample is an accurate representation of the school population. Also, there was a disparity among the three schools included in the current study for both the percentage of students receiving a free or reduced lunch in the school, and the return and participation rate in each building. While the free/reduced lunch and return rate for one of the K-8 buildings and the K-4 building were similar, the other K-8 building had a much higher percentage of students receiving a free or reduced lunch and a lower return rate of permission to participate in the study. However, self concept scores between the two K-8 buildings did not differ upon inspection. It would be possible to eliminate the data obtained from the second K-8 building; however, this would reduce the overall N and create groups of unequal size, making any analysis questionable.

Finally, the nature of the self concept scale, as well as the method used to collect the data in a large group setting may have affected student response to the self concept scale. Students were in the same room during data collection, and although there was adequate space between students, it is possible students felt the need to answer items on

the self concept scale in a socially desirable manner, so as not to look deviant compared to their peers. In examining individual mean self concept scores, the majority of scores fell within what is considered the Average range; a small and sporadic number of self concept scores were in the Low range, and an even larger number were above Average.

As mentioned previously, future research is necessary with this age group to better understand how students handle transition and the effects transition can have on constructs including achievement, self-esteem, and self concept; and how mitigating factors such as peer relations, perceived competence, current self-esteem or self concept, and family support can influence a student's transition experience.

This was the first known study to examine transition in a younger age group; as such, future research with this age group is needed before any assumptions can be made about transition at this age. The current study suggests one of two outcomes: first, transition at this age is more advantageous as it does not coincide with changes associated with puberty; second, self concept is not significantly affected by transition at any age, and any differences that are observed are small in nature and actually beneficial to the student.

Summary and Conclusions

The current study suggests there are not significant differences in self concept between students who transition and students who do not, and no significant differences in self concept based on gender. The lack of significant effects of transition on self concept in particular suggests a higher importance on the timing of transition and the benefits of a K-8 school structure. This study focused on a group of 4th grade students

making a building transition into 5th grade, which is earlier than most traditional middle school transitions that occur following 5th or 6th grades. While students who did not transition did not report many concerns about the next school year, students who did transition had a variety of issues they were concerned about, ranging from getting their locker open to being bullied by older students. Following transition, fewer worries were reported about the new school; most concerns were related to peer relations, more difficult work, and teachers who were described as “mean”. Students in the transition group also noted many changes they had not considered at the initial time sampling, including: being able to buy different food at lunch, changing classes, being in a larger building, and having classes with different students, rather than the same students all day.

The purpose of the current study was to expand the existing literature on self concept, and to examine transition in a younger age group, to better understand the role developmental status might play in an academic transition. The current study suggests transition has little effect on self concept, as students did not report any decline in self concept across all areas measured. The results of the current study do not support the findings of existing literature in regard to negative outcomes; the current study makes an argument for the importance of having transition occur at a younger age and suggests transition at a younger age could have fewer negative implications for students. The current study is an initial step in understanding the impact of transition with a younger population. Further research with this age group is needed to understand how other outcomes might be affected by transition and that information used to help adolescents handle transition with fewer negative outcomes.

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Appendix A

School Perception Questionnaire – Transition Group

4th grade questions:

1. Did you attend this school in: (check all that apply)

Kindergarten _____

First Grade _____

Second Grade _____

Third Grade _____

Fourth Grade _____

2. Do you like your school this year?

YES	NO
-----	----

3. How different do you think school will be next year?

Not at all different	A little different	Very different
1	2	3

4. Is your schoolwork this year too easy, too hard, or just about right?

Too easy	Just about right	Too hard
1	2	3

5. Do you think you are trying as hard as you can this year?

YES	NO
-----	----

6. How do you feel about your school this year?

Good	Sort of Good	Bad
1	2	3

7. Are you looking forward to going to a new school next year?

YES	NO
-----	----

8. What are you most excited about for next year? (Check only one)

Making friends

Grades

Teachers

Other (specify)

9. What are you most worried about for next year? (Check only one)

Making friends

Grades

Teachers

Other (specify)

10. Do you think your schoolwork will be too easy, too hard, or just about right next year?

Too easy	Just about right	Too hard
1	2	3

School Perception Questionnaire – Transition Group

5th grade questions:

1. Did you attend this school in: (check all that apply)

Kindergarten _____

First Grade _____

Second Grade _____

Third Grade _____

Fourth Grade _____

2. Do you like your school this year?

YES	NO
-----	----

3. How different is your school this year?

Not at all different	A little different	Very different
1	2	3

4. Is your schoolwork this year too easy, too hard, or just about right?

Too easy	Just about right	Too hard
1	2	3

5. Do you think you are trying as hard as you can this year?

YES	NO
-----	----

6. How do you feel about your school this year?

Good	Sort of Good	Bad
1	2	3

7. What are you most excited about this year? (Check only one)

Making friends

Grades

Teachers

Other (specify)

8. What are you most worried about this year? (Check only one)

Making friends

Grades

Teachers

Other (specify)

9. What is the most different thing about school this year compared to school last year?

School Perception Questionnaire – Non-Transition Group

4th grade questions:

1. Did you attend this school in: (check all that apply)

Kindergarten _____

First Grade _____

Second Grade _____

Third Grade _____

Fourth Grade _____

2. Do you like your school this year?

YES	NO
-----	----

3. How different do you think school will be next year?

Not at all different	A little different	Very different
1	2	3

4. Is your schoolwork this year too easy, too hard, or just about right?

Too easy	Just about right	Too hard
1	2	3

5. Do you think you are trying as hard as you can this year?

YES	NO
-----	----

6. How do you feel about your school this year?

Good	Sort of Good	Bad
1	2	3

7. Are you looking forward to school next year?

YES	NO
-----	----

8. What are you most excited about for next year? (Check only one)

Making friends

Grades

Teachers

Other (specify)

9. What are you most worried about for next year? (Check only one)

Making friends

Grades

Teachers

Other (specify)

10. Do you think your schoolwork will be too easy, too hard, or just about right next year?

Too easy	Just about right	Too hard
1	2	3

School Perception Questionnaire – Non-Transition Group

5th grade questions:

1. Did you attend this school in: (check all that apply)

Kindergarten _____

First Grade _____

Second Grade _____

Third Grade _____

Fourth Grade _____

2. Do you like your school this year?

YES	NO
-----	----

3. How different is your school this year?

Not at all different	A little different	Very different
1	2	3

4. Is your schoolwork this year too easy, too hard, or just about right?

Too easy	Just about right	Too hard
1	2	3

5. Do you think you are trying as hard as you could this year?

YES	NO
-----	----

6. How do you feel about your school this year?

Good	Sort of Good	Bad
1	2	3

7. What are you most excited about this year? (Check only one)

Making friends

Grades

Teachers

Other (specify)

8. What are you most worried about this year? (Check only one)

Making friends

Grades

Teachers

Other (specify)

9. What is the most different thing about school this year compared to school last year?

Appendix B

Study forms and permission letters

Self concept and Student Perceptions in fourth and fifth Grades

Permission for Student Participation

I would like you as a parent to give permission for your child to participate in a research project investigating self concept as students prepare for and begin attending middle school. Each child will be administered the Multidimensional Self concept Scale and a brief survey in May 2006, and again in September 2006, to assess self concept and personal perceptions about school.

This project will help us learn more about how students perceive the transition from elementary school to middle school, as well as how students perceive their grade. It may also provide more information on what types of programs could make the transition from elementary to middle school easier for students. At your school, I will supervise the research project, including the administration of the self concept scale and survey. This activity will last about 30 minutes on two school days, once in May 2006 and again in September 2006. This administration will take place during lunch time, so as to minimize the disruption of classroom time. Participants in the study will not be excluded from any important class activities and will be provided with a pizza lunch.

Benefits

The findings from this study will enable teachers and school officials to plan programming and resources to facilitate the transition to middle school.

Withdrawal

You are free to withdraw your consent and your student may discontinue participation in this project at any time. Prior to student participation he/she will be asked again if he/she would like to participate. If he/she indicates they would not like to participate they will not be included in the study. Your withdrawal would not have any influence on any future care you or your student may receive at Ball State University.

Cost to Participant

There are no costs for participation in this research.

Risks and Discomforts

There are no risks or discomforts involved in this project.

Questions

If you have any questions about this research, Alice Hensley will be pleased to answer them. Alice may be reached at (765) 207-0099.

Questions regarding the rights of research participants may be addressed to Ms. Melanie Morris, Coordinator of Research Compliance, Office of Academic Research and Sponsored Programs, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070.

Self concept Across the Transition to Middle School
Franklin County Community School Corporation

Agreement

Your signature below indicates you have decided to allow your student to participate, that you have read (or been read) the information provided above and you have kept a copy of this consent form (previous pages.)

Please Print Student's Name

Student's Birth Date

Signature of Parent or Guardian

Date

Witness

Date

Agreement of Student

This project has been fully explained to me, _____ (student's name.) I understand what I have to do and agree to participate in the study on going to fifth grade.