

IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF PUPILS IN THEIR TRANSITION TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the process of transition from elementary to middle school. It begins with the definitions of the main terms, particularly of American, English, Czech and Slovak researchers in the field of pedagogical psychology.

It explores social and emotional changes that children face during this time and the way they can be helped to deal with these changes. Harmonious adaptation to middle school results from the child's ability to satisfy his/her needs within the environment. School staff and parents need to pay attention to friendships and social well-being; emotional well-being and self-esteem of pupils.

Further attention is devoted to traditional and contemporary research of transition to middle school, specifically to physical development, identity development of a child and the growth of abstract thought.

Keywords: developmental transitions, emotional well-being, preadolescence, self-esteem, school transitions

1 Introduction

In the introduction of the paper we try to explain the significance of transitions and define the terms connected with transition from elementary to middle school. The importance of having a successful start from elementary to middle school is essential because of the long-term benefits this has on future learning. Not only is a calm start seen as being influential in helping children to learn, but also, because childhood is regarded as having the potential previous for adult neurosis (1), each new start becomes important for the future. According to Pascal the first impression that children have of new school environment may affect subsequent attitudes as memories remain with us and may still affect our behavior many years later (2).

Positive transitions:

- can lead to a virtuous cycle of transitions;
- are significant for children's well-being and continuing cognitive development;
- are cost-effective in the long term;
- can help children develop an understanding of change;
- involve parents and settings working together.

School transitions are often defined as the process of moving from one environment to another. They sometimes depict the moves that students experience within a school and they include:

- A change such a long-term physical move from one class stage to another one;
- Alternation of teachers during, or at the end of a school year;
- Increase of school subjects and duties;
- The moves that students make in any given day between educational settings.

The process of transition is seen as a phase of intensified and accelerated developmental demands that are socially regulated (3) and is not complete until the child once again is in a state of well-being or feels "like a fish in water" (4). It is not necessarily linear, but rather a

series of interactions where the diversity and complexity of transition needs to be valued and understood (5) and often starts some time before entering a new environment with discussion, planning and preparation.

In much of the literature the term transitions is used interchangeably with transfer. However, transfer is generally used in the context of the move from one school to another, or one phase to another, once full time, statutory education has begun (6).

2 Transition to Middle School

School transitions seem to be quite a topical theme today, because there is increasing number of children with specific problems within the period. It is not easy to ensure their relevant care. It is important to highlight that transitive period is not only transition from one social surrounding to another one, for example to the other school, or level of education. Transition in the context of education is not only “transfer”, even if it includes both. It is “change and movement in identity and competences of how the individual successfully continues during educational process. From this point of view the transition is varicoloured, polymorphous process, but it is also the shift from one identity to the other one (...)“ (7). It involves the change in “identity and behaviour” of individual in the continuance of child’s shift through individual levels of education. It is the process of change which happens during the move from one social surrounding to the other, until the child acclimatizes to the new environment. Changes concern relationships in the classroom, alternation of teaching styles of teachers, expansion of the space, shorter time for movement in specialised classrooms, new sounds, new subjects, meeting new pupils. All these can create the potential for emergence of fear, disorder and discomfort of pupils and they relate to transitions (8). Change is only situational: new place, new authorities, new surrounding, in our case also new school politics. Bridges (8) claims, that transition is psychological process of individual’s adaptation to new situation. Change is thus outward and transition is inward: psychological redirection of an individual to a new situation. Even if the change itself might not seem a problem, what is important is to realize that the transition lasts for a longer period during which individuals go through three difficult phases (Figure 1).

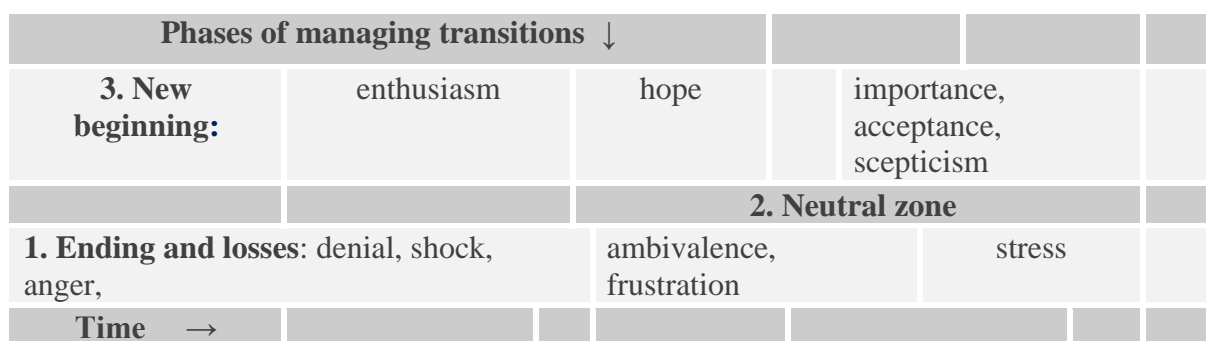


Fig. 1 Three Phase Process of Transition according to Bridges (8)

In the first phase ‘Ending and Losses’, it is important for the individual not to continue in those activities in which they were successful in the past. New school situation requires give up previous experience with the sense of identity, or reality. Author says that as soon as children are able to leave the “old way” behind, still it will be hard for them to start new beginning. The second phase ‘Neutral Zone’ (terrain exploration), which is full of insecurity and confusion. Thus many of pupils try to escape to the past, or they run fast onward through this phase. However, successful transition requires school and pupils persist in this phase, because here is hidden the energy of transition, where the change happens. Finally the third phase so called ‘New Beginning’ is also difficult for children, because they start behave, think

and do in a new way. This may cause them inner imbalance. The most uncomfortable are punishments, or bad marks, which can induce that some individuals observe how the others “go through” this phase, however at the same time they consider it too risky to manage it themselves.

On the other hand certain styles of teacher behaviour have been found to be related to increased pupil learning. Therefore the teacher’s attitude plays an important part to pupils’ new setting and in establishing routines and classroom ethos. “Schools that ‘really trust’ their students, schools that value, respect, and know their students, are schools that foster resiliency for their students. Such schools are full of adults who believe that all students are capable of learning the habits of mind to use their minds and hearts well. These adults understand how important it is for student learning and for student hopefulness that all students know that they are cared about, that expectations are high, that purposeful support is in place, and that their participation is valued.” (9)

Fthenakis (3) defines educational transition as the period of accelerated developmental demands which is socially regulated and is not finished until the pupil is not balanced spiritually.

A number of renowned authors (2, 5, 7) indicated that children, parents and teachers have different perceptions and expectations about what is important during the transition to school. Children and parents all have mixed feelings at the transition to middle school. This is connected with more formal environment and accelerated pace within school process. How can children be helped to make a successful transition? It might be helpful to start with a definition of school success. Ladd’s (10) definition of success in school is very straightforward and includes several aspects of children’s adjustment to school: “A child can be seen as successful in school when she or he:

- develops positive attitudes and feelings about school and learning;
- establishes supportive social ties with teachers and classmates,
- feels comfortable and relatively happy in the classroom rather than anxious, lonely or upset,
- is interested and motivated to learn and take part in classroom activities (participation, engagement), and
- achieves and progresses academically each school year.”

It means that successful transition to middle school requires social skills, relationships, cognitive skills and metacognitive competence.

This second quite important educational transition (the first one is from kindergarten to elementary school) can be viewed as an opportunity for families and the education system to work together to build children’s dispositions to engage with change, whilst sustaining their capacities to learn.

2.1 Friendships and Social Well-being

It is unlikely that all children react to school and its environment in the same way. The reason may be that there are several life transitions that make the same impact on everyone and various people respond differently to the effects of major social experiences (11). In the age of preadolescence it is important to start transition with a friend. This can give them further confidence.

Harmonious adaptation results from the child’s ability to satisfy his / her needs within the environment. One of these is the child’s ability to establish social relations with other children and adults. However, differences in social skills may lead to differences in participation and opportunities to be actively involved. If children are socially skilled, they are more likely to have “a succession of positive experiences with other children that, in turn often brings a sense of well-being” (12).

Children are less likely to learn well and profit from school without the support of friends. They can be helped to make friends by adults modelling friendship, giving children time to make friends, introducing children to one another and by using their names so they

know who is in their classroom. Margetts (5) found that children who began the transition to middle school with a familiar peer in the same class had higher levels of social skills and academic competence and less problem behaviours than the other children.

Krovetz (9) and Goleman (12) consider that developing social competence, such as cooperation and consensus-building, fosters a good start and the ability to cope with change. To establish positive relationships with adults and peers children need skills of social understanding. This is to do with the ability to make friends, to enjoy the company of others, to express their own ideas and feelings, to listen to others, to explore across boundaries of associated ideas with others and elicit responses.

Starting middle school with a friend can help with social confidence, but children need knowledge about ways to mix with and talk to other children and adults in different situations and for different purposes. Aggressive children will certainly have difficulties as they will collide with others and perhaps lose potential friends. Certainly children can find socialisation stressful and tiring.

Manniová says that there are complications and collisions at all levels of life, it means at school too (13). They have roots in disrupting basic rules of interpersonal communication. These conflicts are proven mainly in relationships and in disability to respect freedom of the others. It can have impact on problem acceptance of changes in general, for example during the transition to middle school.

Responding positively to the demands of the new environment and to different working practices depends to a large extent upon children's social well-being. Social aspects can be confusing for children when they are expected to work with unknown children in groups chosen by an unfamiliar teacher. During this time they might find a social and cultural gap between elementary and middle school; there will be a challenge of becoming part of a new group, making new friends and, for some, the loss of friendships. Social interactions will be affected by:

- Physical layout of the classroom,
- Having to relate to older pupils, as well as children of a similar age,
- Staffing ratios,
- The words and language of school that might be unfamiliar.

2.2 Supporting Emotional Well-being During Transition

A lack of emotional well-being limits the ability to build relationships and become active participants in life and learning. Emotional stability, positive attitudes and the ability to communicate effectively are seen as essential foundations for learning (14) because secure and happy children are able to fully participate in, and engage with, the educational challenges confronting them. In short, emotional well-being empowers children as learners. By ensuring that aspects of the learning environment and the routine of the day are familiar, children are likely to become confident and have a sense of control over their lives.

Children need the scope to pursue their own approach, to act independently and exert some control over their environment in order to have a sense of their own identity and develop autonomy (9); to build up persistence, to think through new possibilities and have the courage to see them through requires a certain amount of risk-taking, while working within their own abilities. Praise and genuine feedback can help them to gain self-esteem.

For children to feel confident they need:

- A good knowledge of their classroom – building of school;
- Knowledge of their teachers and the way they think;
- An understanding of the language of the school;
- An idea of the nature of the activities that take place in school;
- Strategies to make friends;
- A sense of the culture of the classroom.

Adaptation does not mean that children passively fit in and strictly follow the programmed classroom context. They are active, creative and strategic practitioners. They have their own ways to reconstruct the classroom, and these ways are suitable for them. They might strategically “negotiate” and respond creatively to the situated classroom. This is a

dynamic and continuous negotiation process for children in order to adapt to the situated classroom and pupils.

2.3 Self-Esteem and Emotional Well-being

Learning is dependent on the child's emotional state. Children need to feel secure and happy in order to deploy all their faculties fully to meet the challenges presented to them through the school curriculum. They also need to feel emotionally ready for middle school in order to meet new challenges with confidence (12). Self-esteem is a significant factor in being a successful learner and will affect the way in which children perceive their level of success. Gajdošíková-Zeleiová (15) believes that if there is a lack of well-being, the child's development is likely to be threatened. Some children are "at risk" of not transferring well and develop problems caused by the stress of not settling into school. If they cannot cope with the change of circumstances then they are unlikely to engage fully in the life of the class, might under-perform academically and perhaps express frustration by demonstrating poor behaviour. According to Králová & Král (16) children need support at the start of their journey through school to overcome these anxieties and develop resilience which will give them a sense of mastery their own lives.

Acquiring skills such as being able to anticipate change, adapt their learning styles, understand in less familiar situations and develop conceptions of themselves as learners in the school situation are all part of making sense of school. Those children who are successful have developed social competence, resiliency and agency that will enable them to "read" the teacher, make meaning of the nature of school and to deal with new situations. In other words, they are able to function at school and have expectations about learning.

3 The Developmental Transition from Elementary to Middle School: Traditional versus Contemporary Research

The transition from elementary to middle school represents for many pupils a rite of passage. Despite the development of cognitive competence, the prepubescence (at the age immediately before puberty; often marked by accelerated growth) is the period of changes in the content, progress, duration and way of experiencing and outward exhibition of emotions. Emotions are differentiated and new ones, such as: Sense of injustice and insult, stage fright, envy, mischief; or positive emotions such as solidarity are emerging. Children can gloss over their real emotions with various expressions. They also become less egocentric, are able to be solidary and helpful to the others (17).

With no formal rite of passage into adulthood, the stages of prepubescence (early pubescence) and puberty can be seen as the formative struggle from childhood to adulthood. Cromwell (18) believes that with the exception of the first 18 months of their life, pupils experience more changes between the ages of 10 and 14 than at any other time in their lives. The significant individual developmental changes that arise, in combination with the transition from elementary to middle school, have important implications for school staff. Many are characteristic to the challenges associated with the transition to middle school to two serious and simultaneous changes: early pubertal change and school change. In the following sub-chapters there are emphasised aspects of early pubertal change and aspects of developmental change that happens for most students who move from elementary to middle school.

Early adolescence is a qualitatively different developmental phase. The preadolescent is often portrayed as impulsive, out of control, confused, self-centred, rebellious, withdrawn (17, 19). This is quite a negative opinion of early adolescence may cause many school teachers and educators to lower expectations or be negative.

Traditional Developmental Research

3.1 Physical Development in Prepubescence

This time of turbulent and worried transition has little pattern or structure, because this specific human development sequence does not follow a constant schedule, or plan. As the rate of physical maturity varies, it can be from this point of view quite a difficult period of development. No two students will experience the same degree of growth or development. Pupils, especially girls, are often in the middle of physical and hormonal change during the transition to middle school. This fact makes an interesting challenge for school staff. From this point of view prepubescence can be advantageous for boys as they often participate in sports and seek social recognition. On the other hand, it can be problematic for girls as they experience menstruation, some of them gain body fat and confront heightened careful observation from their schoolmates. This can be source of higher rates of depressive symptoms and lower evaluating of body mental image. Some pupils feel pressure to gain acceptance through their appearance, which can sometimes result in mood swings, bullying and frequent changes in opinions.

These opinions have demonstrated that the timing of prepubescence rather than its status is associated with depression for early-maturing girls. Thus school staff needs to be sensitive to physical development and its potential implications during the transit to middle school.

3.2 Identity Development

Pupils in elementary school may begin the process of self-awareness, but in middle school they use this knowledge to establish a sense of identity. Parents and educators can sometimes witness fast changes in appearance, opinions and moods in preadolescents as they try to form their identities.

A German-born American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1902 -1994) emphasised these turbulent years, where struggles concentrate on the psychological aspects of the child's life and especially the examination of independence and the concept of self. He saw early adolescence (ages 7 – 11) as a time of exploration and identification of talents and capabilities. Struggling with increased peer competition, youth fear being left behind or judged as substandard. Pupils who lack success at this stage of transition can activate negative feelings toward school, teachers, and friends, as well as low self-esteem.

According to Erikson the social environment is a prime determinant of overall well-being. Relative to move into adolescence, Erikson explained the “identity vs. role confusion” psychosocial stage as a powerful and influential period of human development in the terms of self-discovery. As pupils try to answer the question “Who am I?” the new environment around them provides an endless flow of experiences, influences and motives. This can lead to great deal of confusion and anxiety for preadolescents.

The process of discovering “who I am” may be quite disorganised by the transition to middle school. A pupil might find it quite difficult to examine or feel good about his or her competences when negotiating a new environment. Similarly, peer comparisons enlarge exponentially, and inferiority and failure might be an unavoidable aspect of growth.

3.3 The Growth of Abstract Thought

Swiss developmental psychologist and philosopher Jean Piaget (1896 – 1980) characterised preadolescence by a change from concrete to formal operational thought. Concrete thinkers (ages 7 – 11) begin by applying logical operations and principles to explain their experiences and use objective and rational thought more than intuition.

Within the social class/environment it is easy to see the differences that exist between early adolescent pupils in relation to relationships. Concrete thinkers tend to group their

peers as friends or enemies. Many middle school pupils shift hourly, daily, or weekly as to whether they consider someone a best friend or an enemy. Gradually after they develop more formal thought, they tend to view their classmates on a continuum coexisting with varying levels of relationships. It means variation exists in when and how consistently early adolescents use formal operational thought.

At the same time, middle school pupils tend to question and look for alternatives to new main concepts introduced through school, society and family. With formal thought tends to ponder risk taking activities on the part of these early adolescents. According to Piaget, early adolescents also think about future possibilities, exploring alternatives and choices more thoroughly than those who deal only with “here and now” perspective.

It may be useful for schools to engage students in more formal operational thought by including participatory activities in orientation programming or team building.

Recent Developmental Research

Even if period of preadolescence doesn't belong to the most rapid and stormy, preadolescents can also encounter serious problems, especially when the others underrate them. The onset of the puberty with its new biological, social changes and stress can cause children various neurotic symptoms (19). Their therapy lies in reduction of negative potency of environment, but also in strengthening of inner resistance. Overwork of children can be demonstrated by functional problems such as disorders of concentration, sleep, memory, vigilance (the ability to maintain attention and alertness over prolonged periods of time), emotions of fatigue, or psychosomatic problems, such as gastric problems.

On the other hand, although traditional research has primarily characterised the problems experienced by the developing adolescent, recent research demonstrates that more than half of preadolescents do not experience significant problems. Roeser et al. (20) found 40% of preadolescents to be well adapted, compared to 33 % who had problems based on a variety of academic and mental health factors in middle school for a diverse population. Similarly, other researchers (20) have indicated that many preadolescents appear more or less quietly disturbed. In fact, most preadolescents develop increasing competence and self-esteem over the preadolescent decade. Often adults overreact to the apparent developmental changes what increases the conflict.

Eccles et al. (18) studied psychological defensive risk factors that are most likely to affect adaptation after the transition to middle school. The anxiety and self-consciousness that is typical for early preadolescent development are negatively related to self-esteem and adjustment after the transition. On the other hand, child's feelings of competence and personal efficacy soften the impact and success in academic and social areas predict self-esteem increases across the transition.

With the accompanying stress in the transition to middle school, encouraging coping abilities is vital to encouraging positive individual development across the transition.

Through personal change may heighten the stress of the transition to middle school, contemporary research views prepubertal changes as an opportunity rather than a crisis. Recognising, understanding, and fostering preadolescent development in the transition to middle school allow school staff more precise and developmentally appropriate intervention.

Individual development still remains important, but it alone does not provide all the necessary information to understand student in transition. Recent studies of Anderson et al. (18) suggest that the environment can be as important as individual developmental change. Throughout transition to middle school, teachers can provide possibilities for every child to experience social and academic success by using classroom strategies that support social development as well as the strategies addressed to individual learning needs. However, recent transition studies highlight that a more comprehensive approach to this period is needed.

These studies are based on a commitment to teamwork and collaboration where educators, parents and students work together in planning and implementing transition programmes.

4 Conclusion

These opinions indicate that after transition to middle school children need support and help to manage changes. Pedagogues can be helpful in this period by realisation of educational activities, active interest in the lives of pupils, and also by their effort to understand their new changed needs. We assume that it is useful to include in educational process the activities which support their socio-emotional health, pay attention to building relationships, self-confidence and courage to learn. That is to say a child accustoms to new surrounding mainly via new friendships between peers, by development of his/her identity, but also by bridging the culture of a child with the culture of new environment. This can help him/her confidently accept change and not to be afraid of demands of new environment. It is required to redefine and enlarge the tasks toward declassification of school from the side of educators. They need to plan transitional curriculum in this sense and so contribute to enhancing of endurance and stability of a child whom they can help manage also other changes in the future (18).

Successful transitions include:

- Taking into consideration the anxieties that accompany a transition to new school environment;
- The importance of school staff and parents in this endeavour;
- The appreciation that becoming comfortable in a new school setting is a discontented process.

In planning and implementing various programmes and interventions to address the needs and concerns of pupils who move from elementary to middle school environments, it seems that collaboration among parents, pedagogues and other school staff who share responsibility and concern for pupil's welfare is the most effective transition strategy that can be employed.

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