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PREVIEW

EXPERIENCES OF AT-RISK ELEMENTARY STUDENTS  
IN TRANSITION TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

by

Cheryl F. Blue

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Interdepartmental Area of Administration, Curriculum  
and Instruction

Under the Supervision of Professor Alvah Kilgore  
and Professor Jack McKay

Lincoln, Nebraska

December, 1995

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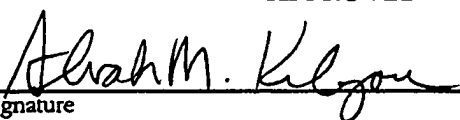
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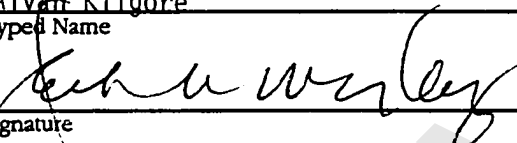
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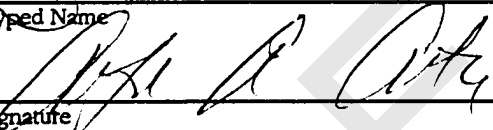
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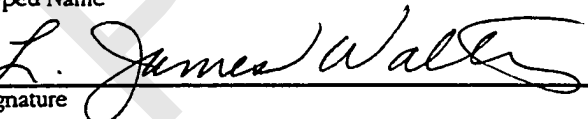
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# EXPERIENCES OF AT-RISK ELEMENTARY STUDENTS IN TRANSITION TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

Cheryl F. Blue, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 1995

Advisors: Alvah Kilgore and Jack McKay

The purpose of this study was to provide a qualitative portrait using the case study method of ten at-risk elementary students who moved from fourth grade at the elementary level to fifth grade in a middle school environment.

Three separate interviews were conducted with each student. In addition, interviews were conducted with fourth and fifth grade teachers. Documents, including permanent records and student portfolios, were reviewed. Data were analyzed to formulate conclusions and working hypotheses and were compared to current research related to transition programs and at-risk students, with the goal of developing appropriate theories about the transition experience of these students.

The findings of the qualitative study were:

1. Based on information received from three interviews of each of the students, a review of their attendance and disciplinary records, and an interview with fifth grade teachers at the end of the first quarter, the transition experience for the ten at-risk students appeared to be positive.
2. Students expressed concern prior to their entrance in the middle school about three issues: (a) being in the same building with older students;

(b) the amount and difficulty of the work; and (c) the actual physical facilities of the middle school.

3. The ten students expressed surprise at several features or events in the middle school which included better teachers; having fun and not being in as much trouble; fifth grade being better than fourth grade; work that was much easier than anticipated; and switching classes so many times during the day.

4. Parents were the only sources of information about the middle school for three of the students. The information was supplied by older siblings for seven of the students.

5. Nine of the students had positive experiences. One female student had a negative encounter with friends of her older brother.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Context of the Study

Most individuals can remember the first day of middle school or junior high. Entering a new and somewhat strange environment was stressful and exciting. In the United States, more than 88 percent of all students move to a new environment when they leave elementary school (MacIver & Epstein, 1991). The transition from elementary school to middle school presents a variety of feelings and experiences for all students, even under ideal conditions. The experiences may be somewhat different if the student is identified as "at-risk."

Many students who appear to be academically and socially competent in the elementary years may fail in middle school environments, while other students who may have not been academically adept begin to thrive in the new learning atmosphere of middle school or junior high. School personnel attempt to design transition programs to meet the needs of all students. The design of such programs is a challenging task, one that will be ineffective unless school personnel are aware of the needs of elementary students in transition, especially those who are at-risk.

The transition experience, not only for students but also for adults, has been the subject of various studies, where researchers have attempted to pinpoint the qualities necessary for a successful experience. Odegard and Heath (1992) surveyed 225 fifth and sixth graders in a Midwestern

community to determine transition needs of students. These students responded to questions in three general categories of relationships; physical plants; and issues regarding programs, practices, and activities. Responses to the survey identified specific anxieties and areas which seemed to be of the most concern to students. Mitman and others (1981) indicated that the transition to junior high or middle school was a time of crisis for one or two of every ten students. In a longitudinal study of seventh graders in the San Francisco area, Mitman and others attempted to discern why students perceived the transition experiences as difficult or enjoyable and how to partially mediate the impact of the new school environment on students. Since the surveys were conducted ten weeks after the transition took place, however, Mitman and others concluded the responses may not have accurately indicated student concerns or problems with transition.

Lounsbury and Johnston (1988) conducted a study in which 100 sixth graders across the continental United States were shadowed for one entire school day. Twelve aspects of middle school programs were emphasized in the study to describe appropriate programs for emerging adolescents. Lounsbury and Johnston focused the results toward the instruction and curriculum of middle schools. A detailed description of the activities of sixth graders in various locations is provided in the resulting document, Life in Three Sixth Grades. Lounsbury and Johnston indicated that the placement of sixth graders in elementary, middle school, or junior high schools is not as important as the instruction and curriculum given to these sixth graders. Their grade placements were secondary to the type of treatment they

received from staff and the type of instruction they received. Hands-on activities with active participation to engage the learner were favored.

Dawson (1987) described a comprehensive, board-based program for assisting at-risk students at the middle school level. This school program dealt with the identification of students prior to entry in the middle school, but did not emphasize orientation or transition programs. All programs dealt with students in the context of the middle school program and included peer counseling and mentoring, a homework club, advisor-advisee programs, and a classroom guidance curriculum emphasizing study skills and work habits.

As a former elementary principal and a current middle school principal, the researcher was keenly aware that the transition to a new learning environment can create anxiety, fear, apprehension, concern, and curiosity among all students, but more so with students who may be identified at-risk. Although this may happen year after year with new teachers or new classrooms, the move to a middle school seems to signal an altogether new phase in an adolescent's life. In the last four years, the researcher has witnessed the transition of approximately 150 students each year.

Numerous transition activities, based strictly on what this researcher thought might be appropriate, not necessarily on student needs, were developed. There was little time to observe the process, describe in-depth individual experiences, and research appropriate data. The researcher realized the process would be difficult, but the judgment came from personal experiences during adolescence. This assumption was also reinforced by the

review of literature. For students who are identified or perceived as at-risk, the transition may be more difficult.

Do some students, regardless of their identified qualities, naturally react in a positive manner to change? There are a number of students each year who seem to have no fear about moving to a new learning environment, while others cannot even find their classrooms the first day. These "wonderings" were the basis for this study.

Qualitative studies cited in the literature review focused on analyzing student responses on a given day or on a single criterion. Additional research addressed the characteristics of adolescents, as well as the necessity for specific, developmentally appropriate curriculum practices to meet those needs. Several non-researched-based orientation programs were described in the reviews, but those programs were mainly developed as the brainchild of an administrator and were not research-based, focusing instead on perceived student needs in the transition. Siehl and Gentry (1990) discussed the necessity of creating a program that would cover the insecurities created by the inherent characteristics of change from elementary to junior high and from childhood to adolescence. Their orientation program addressed personal and academic objectives and included a presentation about school rules and regulations, a tour of the building, a parent coffee, and a slide presentation by current students.

Smith (1991) described a several-pronged approach, where students new to his 5-8 program were given tours and a "nuts and bolts" booklet describing the middle school program. The students also viewed a teacher-made video about curriculum and instruction. Pohl (1991) described an

orientation program of incoming sixth graders that simultaneously occurred with a program aimed at middle school students transitioning to high school. Both of the programs had the same components, including tours, parent orientation nights, and information booklets; however, neither program specifically addressed the at-risk population.

The studies of at-risk students in particular have been limited to early childhood or high school programs. Although the current literature contained ten specific orientation programs described by counselors or administrators, only one program was organized to consider the actual feelings and experiences of students, albeit those at-risk (Odegaard & Heath, 1992). The smooth transition between these two phases of an adolescent's life is important to teachers, administrators, parents, and students. The student transition to both middle school and high school is critical to the academic careers of early school leavers (Roderick, 1993).

### Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this study was to determine the actual transition experiences of ten at-risk students when they moved to a new learning environment in the middle school. If those problems, anxieties, or areas of concern could be addressed by teachers and administrators through the development of new programs or greater attention to current programs, at-risk students would have a greater opportunity to succeed at all levels.

Although there is increased attention on student achievement, social interaction, and the identification of at-risk behaviors in the middle school years, little attention has been given to the design of transition programs to

meet students' actual needs (Roderick, 1993). The variables affecting a successful transition experience for at-risk youth have not yet been identified nor is there a theoretical base that can explain this phenomenon; there are, however, data about transition and at-risk behaviors.

### Research Questions

#### Grand Tour Question

What are the experiences of at-risk elementary students during the transition to a middle school environment from that of an elementary school?

#### Research Sub-Questions

1. What are the expectations of these students about moving to the middle school?
2. What are the concerns of at-risk students in transition?
3. What do at-risk students anticipate will be interesting or different?
4. What surprises are encountered during the transition experience?
5. How do students' sources of information affect their level of concern?
6. What are the positive and negative encounters that students experience during transition?

### Definition of Terms

The following definitions of terms were used throughout the study.



At-risk students. Students in danger of dropping out of school instead of graduating from high school. They are frequently characterized by high absence rates and low academic grades. At-risk students were described in the literature as early as 1980, but by 1987, the categories expanded to include school and academic failure, potential dropouts, educationally disadvantaged, and underachievement.

At-risk students in this study were chosen after a review of permanent cumulative records and after permission to interview and observe was received by parents.

Case study. "An examination of a specific phenomenon such as a program, an event, a person, a process, an institution, or a social group" (Merriam, 1988, p. 9). Case study was defined in this study as an end product that is a rich description of the phenomenon under study. Each individual student was considered a unit; there were ten separate units, each its own unique case study.

Elementary school. A learning environment for younger children generally characterized by self-contained classrooms with one teacher. The grade levels included may vary, but generally include kindergarten or prekindergarten through grades five or six (Turning Points, 1990).

Exploratory classes. Classes designated as exploratory are art, music, industrial technology, family and consumer science, computers, and library/media. Students explore each of those subjects, but do not focus on one particular strand during the middle school years.

HyperQual 2. A software program designed by Padilla (1993) for conducting qualitative data analysis. This program allows the researcher to

create HyperCard stacks and code pieces of data which are then sorted to identify relevant categories or concepts.

Junior high. Typically, an introductory high school first conceived by the Committee of Ten in 1892 (Turning Points, 1990), with the basic concept of providing better articulation between the elementary school and the senior high. Grade configurations vary to include grades 7-9 and 7-8 (Melton, cited in Johnson, 1980).

Middle school. The learning environment between the elementary and high school years, characterized by programs designed to specifically meet the needs of the student between ages 10-14. These programs may include curriculum teaming, advisor-advisee, interdisciplinary curriculum, curriculum themes, and exploratory programs. Grade configuration varies between districts and states and may include grade 5-8, 6-8, 7-8, or 7-9 (Lounsbury, 1984).

Transecent. A child who is experiencing "the stage of development which begins prior to the onset of puberty and extends through the early stages of adolescence . . . . The transecent designation is based upon the many physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes that appear prior to the puberty cycle" (Eichhorn, 1980, p. 15).

Transition. The psychological process people go through to come to terms with a new situation. Transition is internal and can be categorized into three phases: an ending, followed by a period of confusion and distress leading to a new beginning (Bridges, 1993). The transition of students for this study included the summer prior to the transition, the first two weeks in a new environment, and the time after the end of the first quarter.

### Limitations and Delimitations

In qualitative research methods, one of the most frequently addressed limitations is that it is not generalizable in the quantitative sense. The aim is to develop shared constructions of reality that may be shared with others for further investigation. The term "expansion research" may be applied (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen 1993, p. 45) because this study could be expanded by another researcher at another site. Expansion research may examine the credibility or transferability of the realities found in one setting in a different setting. Expansion research may investigate findings using different methodologies, seeking to change the traditional paradigm to a more naturalistic nature by communicating expanded meaning. In addition, expansion research may examine changes over time. Because educational institutions are dynamic, animate, and changing environments, what might have worked several years ago may or may not be appropriate. This type of research takes into account the dynamics and complexities of a changing society (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). The students studied in this project may be similar to other middle schools students, but there may be no firm generalizations applied to other schools and programs. Rather, the constructed realities of these students could be applied to other situations.

Other limitations included the number of students studied, observed, and interviewed. This study was limited to ten fifth grade students in one specific rural/suburban school district in the eastern part of Nebraska.

Observations and interviews were conducted by the researcher and reflected some bias since the researcher was a current middle school administrator at the time of the study. The focus on the identified students and the use of interviews and special attention by the researcher served to ease some of their concerns allowing them to be more expressive than they would have been..

### Methodology

The purpose of this study was to provide a qualitative portrait using the case study method of ten at-risk elementary students who moved from fourth grade at the elementary level to fifth grade in a middle school environment. Three separate interviews were conducted with each student: one before the beginning of the school term, one after the first two to four weeks of school, and one at the end of the first quarter after parent teacher conferences. In addition, interviews were conducted with fourth and fifth grade teachers. Documents, including permanent records and student portfolios, were reviewed. Data were analyzed to formulate conclusions and working hypotheses and were compared to current research related to transition programs and at-risk students, with the goal of developing appropriate theories about the transition experience of these students.

The data for this study were collected at a medium sized middle school, the only middle school in the district. The Plattsmouth School District, 18 miles south of metropolitan Omaha, had a student population of 1,599 during the year of the study. Located in Cass County on the Missouri River, the Plattsmouth community was comprised of a wide range of

socioeconomic classes, with over 67 percent of the working adults commuting to Omaha and its suburbs. The county and the school district were growing, and new facilities were currently planned for grades K-12 by fall of 1996.

During the time of the study, Plattsmouth Middle School had an enrollment of 489 students in grades five through eight. The enrollment of minority students was less than one percent. Thirty-three percent of the students in the middle school during the year of the study qualified for special services. One hundred and eight fifth grade students were housed in five separate, partially self-contained classrooms. These students moved among the five rooms for math, reading, social studies, and science. In addition, five exploratory classes were scheduled during the week: art, music, computers, physical education, and library. The fifth grade students participated in all other activities within the school, including assemblies, pep rallies, and intramural sports. Of these 108 students, 37 qualified for special services. Students at the middle school typically continued their education at Plattsmouth High School, which housed grades nine through twelve. A parochial school in Plattsmouth also had programs for students in kindergarten through eighth grade.

### Significance of the Study

This study provides a qualitative portrait of select elementary students and their specific concerns and curiosities as they progressed to another educational environment. The qualitative portrait of students and their teachers provides insights before and after the transition. The study is

unique because it focused on the experiences of ten at-risk students. This detailed picture is significant to educators who are striving to understand the needs of elementary students as they move into the middle school setting. The well-textured description of these students provides valuable information for educators in developing specific programs for the transition periods of at-risk students.

Of additional significance is the discussion by current and previous teachers about individual students and their specific impressions regarding at-risk behaviors. The discussions held with classroom teachers of each of the students enhanced the possibility of developing positive perceptions of students who are classified at-risk and openly discussing ways to work closely to assist students. It is possible that the increased awareness of the staff of the effect of negative or positive perceptions would increase student success. By sharing this study with classroom teachers, the specific needs of at-risk students during this period can be understood and addressed.

To successfully manage the transition for an at-risk student may mean the difference between failure and success in that student's academic and personal life and between dropping out and graduation. Educators cannot afford to lose one student, to have one student confused about the learning environment, or to have one student judged solely on hearsay or others' opinions. Helping elementary students have a positive transition, especially those thought to be at-risk, is essential for students to be an integral part of the learning community and to be recognized for their abilities and differences and challenged with high expectations. Too often, at-risk students are categorized, stereotyped, and cast away by school personnel

who view them as troublemakers, unable to learn, and unworthy of the time and effort assigned to other well-behaved, academically talented individuals. Teachers and administrators cannot continue to cast away any part of the society, but must make every attempt to provide programs that meet all students' needs. Programs must be developed with all actual needs in mind; the programs should not be simply replicated from other areas or levels. The understanding will begin in studies such as this one, where students actually express their thoughts and concerns. Hopefully someone will be listening.

PREVIEW

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

For this review of literature, three bodies of research were reviewed. One involved the unique needs of adolescents and school programs designed specifically for adolescents. The second body of research dealt with transition experiences and transition programs, and a third set of information and research dealt with at-risk students. The chapter closes with a set of conclusions drawn from the literature.

#### Unique Needs of Adolescents

Paul Valery, a French poet, stated that “Every beginning is a consequence. Every beginning ends something” (Bridges, 1993, p. 39). The ending of childhood and the beginning of adolescence frequently characterize students as they leave elementary buildings and enter junior high or middle schools. In order for transition experiences for adolescents to be understood, there is a need to understand adolescent development and the unique needs of adolescents. The grade levels that accommodate these individuals vary from district to district and state to state. Eichhorn (1980), in Toward Adolescence: The Middle School Years, stated that for years there has been considerable disagreement about the appropriate school programs for students who are classified as adolescents. Students in the “transitional” school are very different from their counterparts in the elementary or high school programs. Eichhorn used the term