

ADOLESCENCE AND SCHOOL TRANSITIONS: WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

by

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review the research on issues related to adolescent school transition. The definition of school transition in this paper includes the adjustment experienced when leaving one's elementary school and moving to a middle, junior, or secondary school. The specific transition issues reviewed are students' perceptions of the transition, and defining the challenges and contexts of adolescence. This paper looks at the characteristics that hinder success during school transition: perceptions of competence and motivation, culture and socioeconomic status and gender differences. Conversely, the characteristics fostering success during transition are discussed: risk and resilience, attachments and friends' influence on adolescence during transition. The implications of these issues are important in planning and implementing counseling and transitional programs. The effects of full, partial or no program are also discussed. Suggestions are made to those working with adolescence at the school level during transition to utilize a team approach.



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## Introduction

Recently, while I was sitting in an adolescent counseling course as part of my graduate studies, the professor asked us to define “adolescence.” He feverishly wrote out our numerous responses on the chalkboard, with a noticeable downward slant to his script. He forced us to then examine our perceptions of adolescence. There was a stunned silence. The comments slid helplessly down the board. We hadn’t said anything positive. He had written our comments with a sarcastic downward slant on the board to emphasize the negativity in our perceptions of youth.

Defining adolescent development and addressing how one perceives this age group is necessary in order to work positively with adolescents. Most research focuses on adolescence as a time of crisis and the assumption is that all adolescents are “at-risk,” when most actually pass this developmental period with little turmoil or stress (Eccles, J.S., Midgley, C., Wigfield, A., Miller Buchanan, C., Reuman, D., Flanagan, C., & Mac Iver, D., 1993). The research tends to focus on the dropout rates, arrest rates, and alcohol and drug use amongst adolescents (Eccles et al.). We often hear negative research that describes: smoking, academic failure, underachievement, victimization amongst teens, high teen pregnancy rates with many adolescents unprepared to support themselves - let alone their babies (Catterall, 1998). All too often we research the characteristics of those who are perceived to be in crisis or failing at school, rather than focusing on what is working for an adolescent who is successful in school.

Our negative perceptions of adolescence can create self-fulfilling prophecies with detrimental educational outcomes. Adolescents may be vulnerable during this transitional stage of their development; however, we cannot assume all adolescence are in this transitional state of flighty, unexplainable, and uncontrollable emotions. Catterall (1998) suggests that researchers addressing risk groups, such as adolescents, hazard “the framing of their analyses

to equate risk with group membership” (p. 304). A potential consequence of labeling adolescence as a period of constant flux, turmoil and stress, might be to convince us that all, or the majority of adolescents are at risk when in fact they are not. Wagner (1996) who developed the theory of “optimal development” for adolescents is one pioneer in the field trying to foster a positive perspective. Apart from that of Wagner, very little research embraces the positive aspects of adolescence or conceptualizes the good things that are also being experienced. Our limited perspective on adolescence curbs and impoverishes our youth.

Those working with adolescents need an education into the world of being a teen. This means going beyond grasping the cognitive, emotional, and physical stages described in isolation in most child psychology texts. There is an adolescent culture that we need to start trying to understand. To do this, we must look at adolescents in context and assess their perceptions of their own realities. Methods to assess adolescent stress and coping have only existed since the 1980’s (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995; Zitzow, 1992).

In researching the nature of adolescents, Seiffge-Krenke found that adolescent stress was mainly interpersonal in nature, even within the domain of “school.” There is a shift from looking at major events in isolation as stressful for adolescents, to recognizing their stress as more of an accumulation of minor events. This shift is important to mention because it is from the adolescent perspective on stress and coping. As adults we need to be reminded to look not only at adolescent issues from their perspective, but also from within the adolescent culture in which they live.

During this transitional state called adolescence one school transition occurs; the school transfer from elementary school to a middle, junior, or senior high school. Few children can escape this transition, and whether it is a positive or negative experience has been a research discussion for decades. To understand the school transition, Chapter One starts with a

literature review of three studies that assess student perceptions of their school transition.

The researchers of these studies are Youngman (1978), Mitman and Packer (1982) and Mekos (1989). These studies found that collecting information from the adolescents' perspective is crucial to determine patterns of adjustment in order to create guidance programs. Chapter Two defines adolescence and outlines other characteristics of this at-risk group that impact their school transition success. Chapter Three reviews literature on characteristics hindering success during the school transition, and discusses the problematic issues associated with early adolescent development and school transition: perceptions of competence and motivation (Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992), culture, socioeconomic status and gender differences. Chapter Four includes research about adolescent resiliency, stress and coping as applied to school transition (Catterall, 1998, Compas, 1987; Seiffge-Krenke, 1995), and the influence of friends' related to adjustment (Cotterell, 1992; Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Berndt, & Hawkins, 1985). Chapter Five addresses how schools respond to transition by looking at schools who had full, partial or no transition program at all (Smith, 1997). At the school level, the team approach is recommended (Hertzog and Morgan, 1996).

Through analysis of these studies, this paper seeks to answer several questions: what are the issues of school transition from the student's perspective? What are the challenges and contexts of adolescence during school transition? What hinders success for an adolescent in a school transition? What fosters a successful school transition, and how can schools respond to transition?

## Chapter One

### School Transition from the Adolescent Perspective

For some, the school transition represents stimulating growth and a chance to start over. For others, this transition can be negative academically or socially, and potentially lead to dropping out (Catterall, 1998). While undergoing numerous physical, emotional, and cognitive developmental changes, adolescents are also expected to leave their secure learning environment-elementary school-and go to a new setting with new teachers, peers, classes, and expectations. This new experience is potentially a positive one, but it may also be negative.

Brammer (1992) defines life transitions for the general population as “sharp discontinuities with the previous life events” (p. 239). This is a definition that can apply to all ages, yet no clear explanation of what transition means to adolescents can be found. Sometimes people choose their transitions and conversely, sometimes transitions are imposed. The outcomes of transitions can be energizing (e.g., a new job boosts creativity, teaches new skills, eases boredom); however, for most there is a sense of loss (change of relationships with others, and a decrease in self-esteem if one is unsure of oneself in one’s new role).

Brammer (1992) makes another important point; the way in which a person perceives the challenge faced in a transition influences the outcomes they will experience in going through that period. The identification of transition issues, adjustment patterns and the various possible outcomes of transition are important. If those working with adolescents could understand how an adolescent perceives the school transition, opportunities for success could be enhanced. Transitions impact on student learning and personal development. In the spring of 1999, I visited all five of our elementary feeder schools as part of our transition program. At one particular elementary school, I was asked to meet with a group of six grade seven girls who would be attending my junior high school in the fall of 1999. They had fought as a group

throughout their grade seven year, and this included RCMP involvement. Their elementary school counselor and teachers wanted me to do more extensive transition work with this small group before they were to attend our school. This was to provide a preventative approach to their transition, based on group activities. During small group brainstorming sessions they shared their perceptions of high school, which were subsequently ranked in order of importance. I found their beliefs about high school to be firmly entrenched. Their certainty about the way things would be in high school developed as a result of stories they had heard from parents, older siblings, and friends. These stories caused a major build up of anticipation. The excitement became compounded when elementary teachers started to coach them about preparing for high school, and high school counselors and other school personnel visited. These aspects of the transition process shaped their perceptions prior to their arrival in high school. By visiting regularly to listen to their concerns, I was able to diffuse some of their concerns and plan a more relevant preventative program for their arrival. My experience with these girls underscores the importance of understanding the adolescents' perspective regarding transition in order to develop relevant school transition programs that foster and promote success. Adolescents' issues are based on their perceptions, and as adults we need to listen and learn from them.

#### Students' Perceptions of School Transition

To identify adjustment patterns and specific adolescent concerns related to transition, Youngman (1978), Mitman and Packer (1982) and Mekos (1989) studied students' perceptions of the school transition experience. Prior to Youngman (1978), research suggested academic ability hindered success during the transition to secondary school. Youngman wanted to break down the transition process to an individual level. He examined individual reactions to school transition by assessing intellect, personality, self-concept and attitude pre- and post-transition.



To do this he used two samples, one representing rural ( $n=390$ ) and the other, city ( $n=454$ ) children. To determine individual reactions, both groups were assessed before and after their transition to secondary school. The students from three rural comprehensive schools were tested in May before transferring to the secondary school the following September. The tests included non-verbal reasoning, achievement in mathematics and reading, academic motivation, self-concept and attitude to school transfer. Two terms after the transition, the children were re-tested on the motivation and self-concept scales, and on a modified version of the attitude scale. Achievement testing was at the end of the second year in secondary school. In the first year of testing, the rural sample included 390 children (211 boys, 179 girls). After the second year, the sample included 290 children (146 boys, 144, girls). The loss of 100 students in the second year of testing was the result of school changes or absenteeism. The city sample had 454 children (232 boys, 222 girls) and then 359 (183 boys, 176 girls) on the last testing. When the characteristics of the two samples were compared, the rural sample excelled on all intellectual measures. The higher intellectual rural sample also had higher junior academic self-concept scores, less anxiety towards secondary school and lower scores on their attitude, while in secondary school, towards primary school. The samples were analyzed separately using a cluster analysis. Six different groups were replicated in both samples.

Youngman (1978) identified six different reactions to school transfer after adjustment. Three were classified as high ability reactions and the other three were of low ability. The high ability reaction groups were identified as academic, disenchanted, and capable. Firstly, the characteristics of the academic profile included high ability, performance, motivation and self-concept, and low anxiety. The academic group consisted of twenty percent of the overall sample, and this included an equal portion between sexes. Secondly, the disenchanted group characteristics were low attitude to secondary school, low academic self-concept and

motivation, associated with moderately high academic performance. This reaction covered twelve percent of each sample but the number of boys was fifty-three percent for the rural sample and only thirty-one percent for the city. Thirdly, the characteristics of the capable reaction group were relatively competent performance, low personal and social self-concept, and a moderate attitude toward secondary school. The city sample had six percent in this category and it was predominantly male (eighty-nine percent boys), while the rural group which was twice as large, had only forty-two percent boys.

The low ability reactions were labeled as contented, disinterested and worried. The contented group had below average intelligence and above average motivation and self-concept. Twelve percent of both samples with equal proportions of boys and girls were in the contented group. The disinterested group was average across attitude towards secondary school and personality measures. Attitude and motivation declined on transfer specifically with the city group. The rural groups showed a gender difference in this category with sixty-seven percent of its members being boys. The rural group was also smaller in this reaction category. Lastly is the worried group, which consisted of twelve percent of each sample, about forty percent of which were boys. The worried group was also low in intellectual ability, however it is distinct because high anxiety and low self-concept characterize it.

The two reaction styles of the disenchanted group and the worried group raised concerns. The disenchanted group had moderately high ability with some indication of inferior performance. And when this group transferred schools, attitude and motivation decreased; thus, the failure to adjust could be perceived as a waste of potential. The worried group had high anxiety and low self-concept and these features seemed to worsen upon school transfer. The substantial differences in patterns of adjustment that Youngman (1978) found through this research suggest that despite the difference in academic ability between the disenchanted group

and the worried group, the school transition still caused a negative impact on personal development. Overall, all adolescents experienced transition issues, whether they were successful or not. These findings show how transition affects individuals differently, and although I am loathe to label students by categorizing them, this data would be valuable for planning school transition programs on an individual and group level.

In recognition of the impact that transition has on individuals, Mitman and Packer (1982) undertook a study that examined students' changing perceptions and their concerns regarding the challenge of school transition. To achieve this, Mitman and Packer (1982) provided a "Concerns Questionnaire" to grade seven students during their fifth week of school. The assessment tool had thirty-two potential transition concerns in which the students had to indicate the degree of which each issue concerned them. Five weeks after their transition into junior high, their concerns were assessed again. The students had to compare their concerns from when they first arrived ("In the past"), to their concerns at present ("Today"). "In the past" means when they entered junior high school and "Today" means after five weeks of being in junior high school. The Concerns Questionnaire had four specific sets of questions:

- (a) What did students perceive to be their greatest concerns upon entering junior high school, and did these concerns change after students experienced junior high school?
- (b) Did students' total expressed concerns change after transition, and did these concerns differ as a function of student sex, participation style, and previous classroom organization?
- (c) What was the underlying factor structure of the Concerns Questionnaire, and did students' scores on the main factors differ according to student sex, participation style, and previous classroom organization?
- (d) What were students' responses to open-ended questions about transition to junior high school, and how did these responses mesh with the other results from the Concerns Questionnaire? (p. 320)

Two hundred and eight students in grade seven were sampled with complete data.

These students were classified under six different participation styles: success, social, dependent, phantom, isolate, and alienate.

A "success" student was almost always involved in some form of work, carried out several tasks concurrently and well, gave correct and complete answers when called

upon, seldom needed the teacher's help but asked for it if necessary, and seldom interrupted work to talk with other students. A "social" student mixed brief periods of concentration on assigned tasks with high involvement's in conversations with others, only some of which were academic. The "dependent" student needed frequent assistance, feedback, and other attention from the teacher or others to remain on task. "Phantom" students almost always attended to instructional activities, but with little or no active involvement. "Isolate" students showed sporadic involvement in tasks, gazed around or played with miscellaneous objects though not disturbing others, and purposely separated themselves from other students. "Alienates" often appeared in confrontation with the teacher or other students, seldom attended to assigned tasks or responded to questions, and frequently disrupted the class. (p. 321)

There were 107 girls and 101 boys. Most were identified as success (60, or 29%) or dependent (57, or 27%) students. The other classifications consisted of 18% social, 16% phantom, 7% alienate and 3% isolate. The students were identified by the type of classroom organization they had in sixth grade; either cluster or a no-cluster class. These terms referred to whether or not the student had multiple teachers versus one teacher in a self-contained classroom. Seventy-two percent had cluster arrangements in their elementary classroom, giving them some exposure to multiple teachers. The students did not indicate many concerns from the items given to them and on the initial "Concerns Questionnaire" and identified even fewer concerns after the transition. The concerns noted were more related to academic schoolwork than social relationships.

Table 1, adopted from Mitman and Packer (1982), shows the Ten Highest-Ranked Concern Items, from "In the Past" and "Today." Eight of the "In the Past" top ten concerns continue into the "Today" top ten-concern list. Half of the "Today" concerns are related to academic work, and the others are peer relations and logistical concerns. The only issue that became more important to the students was dating, which went from twentieth position to sixth. One may conclude that the physical onset of puberty and new social changes, or the expected behavior of the older students, might explain this. The other issue that rated highly "In the Past" and "Today" was the issue of victimization by older students and theft of



personal belongings. Overall, the students studied did not have many concerns prior to the transition and those that they had, decreased after the transition.

Another point that this research demonstrated is that the student-type, as classified by their participation style, is connected to their perceptions of the transition:

“Success” students expressed less concern about the difficulty of schoolwork and that the “alienate” group expressed more concern about the difficulty of schoolwork. Alienates were defined as students who openly rebelled in school and had poor achievement; yet, they may have cared about performing acceptably. The “dependent” and “social” groups were also expected to be among the mid-to-lows in terms of expressed concern over the difficulty of schoolwork, although it was somewhat surprising that “dependent” students ranked below the “social” students in the “today”. The relative positioning of the “phantom” and “isolate” groups was plausible. (1982, p. 331)

Again, while I am cautious to label students, these findings reinforce my premise that all students experience transition issues. More specifically, because this is an individual process, different types of students will react differently to school transition. This research also reveals that transition issues depend on aspects of the students’ prior environment and experiences. For example, Mitman and Packer (1982) showed that students who came from a single teacher elementary experience were more anxious about transition to their new school than those from cluster organized classrooms. Although this research identifies concerns relevant to school transition, it is important to note that it was conducted over only a five week period. In my experience, transition issues continue throughout the school year. Therefore, to verify the information, one must look at other research that examines transition over a longer period; Mekos (1989) conducted such a study.

Table 1. Ten Highest – Ranked Concern Items, “In the Past” and “Today”

IN THE PAST			TODAY		
Item Rank	Item #	Concern	Item Rank	Item #	Concern
1	19.	Concern about having too much homework to do	1	18.	Concern about being able to get work done on time
2	26.	Concern about getting to class on time	2	19.	Concern about having too much homework to do
3	1.	Concern that schoolwork will be difficult	3	1.	Concern that schoolwork will be difficult
3	18.	Concern about being able to get work done on time	4	15.	Concern about the difficulty of homework
5	15.	Concern about the difficulty of homework	5	32.	Concern that personal possessions will be stolen
6	13.	Concern about finding the rooms of different teachers	6	17.	Concern about being able to understand what teachers say in class
7	4.	Concern that junior high teachers will be harder than elementary school teachers	7	26.	Concern about getting to class on time
8	10.	Concern that older students may bully or beat you up	8	10.	Concern that older students may bully or beat you up
9	32.	Concern that personal possessions will be stolen	9	28.	Concern about being bored in class
10	28.	Concern about being bored in class	10	6.	Concern about dating (not having a girlfriend or boyfriend)

In her longitudinal study, Mekos (1989) examined positive and negative perceptions of junior high students moving from sixth to seventh grade, and related these perceptions to social and academic adjustment. Assessments were done in April of sixth grade and November and April of seventh grade students. One hundred sixth graders, 48 girls and 52 boys from a white, middle class suburban community, were asked: "1) how they felt about junior high, 2) what they liked most about junior high, and 3) what they disliked about junior high" (p. 5). Results indicated that the changes in perceptions of junior high school were different for boys and girls. Initially, the girls had concerns about peer relations and these dropped significantly after the transition. The boys' concerns stayed low in terms of peer relations, but overall by the fall of grade seven, positive perceptions were forming around these associations. The boys who had more significant concerns about victimization decreased after the transition. The girls' concerns about victimization stayed low.

Academically, the girls went into high school with higher academic concerns than the boys, and after the transition, the boys' concerns rose to match those of the girls. The transition to the new school itself was a significant concern for all students and the succeeding with academic subjects was the main cause of negative perceptions of junior high. Overall, the initial focus of concern was social issues. Then the focus shifted to liking or disliking the schoolwork and the actual school. Friends and the school itself became the positive aspect of the junior high transition after the student's had made the move. This could suggest that their concern about peers was temporary and schoolwork and the new school environment were more enduring issues.

Mekos (1989) also concludes that students with better grades prior to transition had more concerns about the transition than those students identified as disruptive and aggressive. After the transition, those with good grades had fewer concerns and those more disruptive and

aggressive students rated the move more negatively in terms of social and academic adjustment. From this study, it is apparent that the students with good grades worried about a distorted reality. Their expectations were focused on fitting into their new social world; however, after the transition, their concerns evolved around liking or disliking academics and the new school environment. The decline in concerns that related to peers makes the students' initial concerns seem unwarranted. Those students, who were aggressive and disruptive in grade six, were not concerned with the transition and therefore expected further success in high school. But the opposite was true, because they were the least prepared for the new challenges and became increasingly negative over the course of the school year. This means that more intervention and prevention needs to be done to prepare all students for their move to junior high school.

This research gives insight into how adolescents perceive the school transition and their specific concerns. Prior to transition, Mekos (1989) discovered that girls have more concerns about peer relations while the boys worry about victimization. After transition though, concerns regarding academics and the new school environment increased for both groups. In Mitman and Packer's (1982) Concerns Questionnaire, five of the top ten results identified academics as being of particular concern. These are similar to the findings of Mekos, which indicates academic concerns increase after the transition. It is interesting to note that while the social world is more of a worry before the students' arrival at high school, this soon changes to academic related concerns after transition.

Although this research shows how adolescents' perceptions change, in isolation the methods used in each study may not be sufficient to acquire a broad understanding of the complete adolescent experience. Mitman and Packer (1982) noted that eight of the original top ten concerns continued to the present top ten concerns' list, and that students did not indicate



many concerns initially, and even fewer after the transition. But, this study was a single questionnaire conducted after five weeks of attending junior high school, and because of this makes no allowance for the fact that students may have already resolved certain issues that concerned them on arrival at the school. Therefore, a five week assessment period seems unsatisfactory when considering that these studies show how students' perceptions change over time. Transition issues cannot be isolated to the fall or the beginning of the school year. Mitman and Packer acknowledge that this lack of a comparative baseline may have skewed their data. But the advantage of Mitman and Packer's method is that they ask direct and focused questions that require specific answers. In my experience, not all students will disclose intimate details of their lives when asked open-ended questions, but will respond to a direct question.

Despite Mitman and Packer's concern regarding the method of their study, the research of Mekos confirms their results in that there is a general shift from social concerns to academics. Unlike that of Mitman and Packer, Mekos' (1989) study established a baseline and was conducted over one year, but her questions were open-ended, and this may be a difficult format for students. For example, I have found that students often fail to comprehend what is being asked of them in this open-ended format. Some students resist the physical act of writing, while others seem to lack the ability to reflect through writing without the prompt of a direct question. However, the length of Mekos' study provided three opportunities to collect information on perceptions current to the students. This time period allows an element of trust between the researchers and the students to develop, and thus the information gained might be more comprehensive as the year progresses. Therefore, I find the studies of both Mekos, and Mitman and Packer valuable in that the combination of direct and open-ended questions addresses the broad spectrum of the adolescent experience during transition.

While the previous research sought to determine the changing perceptions of adolescents during transition, Youngman (1978) acknowledges all adolescents experience transition issues, but differentiates their individual reactions to transition based on personality, intellect, self-concept and attitude. Youngman's study is valuable because it examines a larger population of students from both urban and rural schools, and this allows him to identify consistent patterns. Although I am resistant to categorizing and thus labeling students, Youngman's Six Reactions to school transfer show all students would benefit from a transition program. In my experience, individualized transition programs are designed only for those students designated through the special education department.

Overall, all adolescence experience transition issues: boys, girls, low ability, high ability, compliant, disruptive and aggressive. But, while this research demonstrates that all students need some degree of support during transition, in my experience, it is only the students identified as "at-risk" who currently receive support. A school transition program must be a unique experience that reaches and connects with all students. From these studies, school transition programs need to respond to the students' initial concerns regarding peers, victimization, and academics; but furthermore, respond to their changing concerns throughout the transition year.

## Chapter Two

### Challenges and Contexts of Adolescence

While the previous chapter outlines transition as an individual experience that changes throughout the process, this chapter addresses the characteristics of adolescence that can influence the challenge of a school transition: puberty and concurrent issues such as car

accidents, smoking, suicide, pregnancy, abortion, and substance abuse. The most important of these characteristics are the biological changes associated with the onset of puberty.

Santrock (1998) describes puberty as a transitional state that occurs mainly during early adolescence, and involves physical maturation that consists of hormone and bodily changes. The stage of puberty has the fastest rate of development compared to any other life stage except infancy. The onset of puberty, which is dependent on heredity, nutrition, health, and body mass, has been decreasing, with the beginning of menarche declining by an estimated four months per decade for the past one hundred years.

The influx of hormones in boys and girls caused by the onset of puberty can affect adjustment during the transition because of the physical and psychological changes that occur at this time. The physical or external changes are those related to height, weight and sexual maturation. Santrock (1998) raises the point that hormonal effects looked at in isolation may account for some variance in adolescent development; however, connecting behavior and hormone changes needs future investigations. External changes characterize puberty for both girls and boys. For girls, an estimated two year growth spurt begins at approximately age ten and a half. The boys begin their two year growth spurt at twelve and a half. In terms of height increases, girls grow about three and a half inches each year and boys grow four inches. The weight gain starts at approximately the same time as the height growth spurt, with girls weighing more than the boys do, but with time the boys surpass them. Puberty is also a time of sexual maturation with a clear sequence of events for males; but, changes for girls lack continuity. The onset of puberty for boys can be from ten to thirteen and half years of age, and end from age thirteen to seventeen years of age. When looking at girls, puberty begins with the first menstrual period and which may happen between ages nine to fifteen. It is clear from the data that the changes of puberty occur over a protracted period of time, but on an individual

basis these changes could occur at any point within this time period. Therefore, it is important to recognize the individual experience within this time frame.

Santrock (1998) identifies that these individual variations in puberty can have psychological effects related to body image and, specifically for girls, the menstrual cycle. At this stage of development, adolescents are not only immersed in checking out, but are also forming their perceptions of their body image. However, there are gender differences in how adolescents perceive their bodies. Girls are more dissatisfied, while boys tend to like their bodies. A possible explanation for this is that the girls' body fat increases at this time, thus precipitating their dissatisfaction. Conversely, the boys are happy because they are gaining weight as their muscles increase. The onset of puberty is an individual experience and whether or not a student is early or late maturing may have implications for their school transition. For example, the emphasis on menstruating affects how some girls perceive themselves; for some it can cause an identity crisis. At a time when it is crucially important for a teenaged girl to be comparable with her peers, the absence of menstruation may mean social ostracism. Alternatively, the early maturing girl will face a similar dilemma. In my experience, this is a status symbol and adolescent girls will lie about the presence or absence of menstruation in order to maintain positive relations with their peers. Puberty is a dynamic period of change that cannot be overlooked when working with adolescence during transition.

As well as the physiological changes that occur during puberty, other concurrent issues have been identified that predispose adolescents to poor school transitions: external causes of death, specifically car accidents; smoking, suicide, pregnancy, abortion, substance abuse, and accidents. Suicide or accidents threaten this emotionally chaotic time more than illness. According to the Canada Year Book 1999, car crashes are the leading external cause of death amongst our ten to fourteen year olds. While car accidents caused four out of ten teen fatalities



in 1993, suicide accounts for an estimated one-quarter of all adolescent deaths and is the second leading cause of mortality for adolescents aged fifteen to nineteen. The rate of suicide for males has increased fivefold, and threefold for girls aged fifteen to nineteen years old over the last thirty years, evidently because of the openness and decreasing social stigma associated with suicide. Substance abuse (tobacco and illegal drugs) in Ontario between 1993 and 1995 increased amongst grade seven students (Canada Year Book, 1999). The most significant increase was with the use of marijuana and hashish, and "magic mushrooms." One-third of all nineteen year-olds smoked in 1993 and three-quarters smoked daily. Also from 1980 to 1994, there was a significant mortality rate amongst young cyclists. One thousand six hundred and sixty-five bicyclists were killed during this period, and an estimated six out of ten were under twenty years of age (Canada Year Book, 1999). Two-thirds died from head injuries; and it was noted that between 1994-95 of the teens aged fifteen to nineteen, only eight percent wore a helmet. Another significant finding is that in 1994, 81% of teen mothers were single whereas in 1974, only one-quarter of pregnant teens were alone (Canada Year Book, 1999). As well, the number of teen pregnancies in 1994 was down while the number of abortions went up. This concurrent combination of behaviors and issues impact school transition.

Recognizing the dramatic number of changes related to the individual process of puberty, and the concurrent issues, Rice, Herman and Peterson (1993) identify concerns related to the phenomena of adolescence: the types of changes, the number of changes, timing, and synchronicity. Rice et al. describe a model for understanding the role of stress in adolescent development and it is based on a set of assumptions about stages in a life course as changes confront the adolescent. According to Rice et al. (1993) the types of changes adolescents might face simultaneously during a school transition could include "normative life events" and "non-normative life events." Across society, normative life events occur for most people at a

similar stage in their life course. Societal policies or norms often define these normative events, for example, entering Kindergarten, puberty, or retirement. Rice et al. define non-normative events as neither common nor predictable, for example, parental divorce. A concern is non-normative events that are not common or predictable, like the death of a parent. In addition, if a non-normative event takes place simultaneously with a developmental transition, the normative event may have more or adverse effects. These researchers suggest a parental divorce will change an adolescent's relationship with each adult and possibly with siblings. It may also affect school attendance, peer relationships, extra-curricular opportunities and their day to day living their lives. This research highlights how changes experienced on all levels may interact. Rice et al. also note the high number of changes occurring at this time, and that girls are more likely to experience conflicting challenges during adolescence than boys. For example, "the organization of the prototypical U.S. junior high school, in contrast to that of the typical primary school, is oriented toward the types of goals, behaviors, and roles that boys are taught to value and away from those into which girls are usually socialized" (Simmons and Blyth, 1987, as cited in Rice et al., 1993, p.239). This research suggests to us that adolescence may be more stressful for girls than boys because girls are experiencing conflicts amongst their values and roles. If the timing of the onset of puberty is different from the norm, problematic outcomes could be expected; thus, potentially influencing the success of school transition. Rice et al. are also concerned about the synchronicity of events taking place during adolescence. Synchronicity means that, when some adolescents experience transition before or at the maximum of their puberty development, they have lower ratings of self-image than do those who transitioned and then experienced puberty. The findings of Rice et al. confirm the developmental concerns raised by Santrock (1998) that state that puberty is an individual experience that could have detrimental educational outcomes if it occurs simultaneously with

school transition. The types of changes, number of changes, the timing, and synchronicity of puberty can impact a student's success or failure. Difficulties result if there is mismatch between the needs of the changing adolescent and the available support. Therefore, educators and families who lack awareness and understanding of these developmental stages could compound the students' adjustment difficulties.

Focusing on the individual needs of each student is critical in order to create a relevant and successful transition experience. But, in order to facilitate a developmentally appropriate program, the students must be considered on an individual basis within the context of their environment and experiences. Urie Bronfenbrenner (1987) developed an environmental view of child development that addresses this perspective. Bronfenbrenner's sociocultural perspective is a bio-ecological theory comprised of five environmental systems, which combine biological and environmental changes. His belief is that success is dependent on the numerous direct and indirect relationships a child has with parents, teachers, the community, society, and time. Bronfenbrenner suggests that a child should be looked at as developing within relationships that are part of multiple environments. These relationships are bi-directional and reciprocal because a child's personality and biological development can influence the behavior of adults. Therefore, the success or failure of a school transition could be predicted by understanding the child in relation to his or her social context.

In Figure 1, the child can be seen as placed in the middle of five concentric circles with these circles extending outward from the child. These five circles create five levels which interact with each other: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem. School transition for the adolescent is therefore a multidimensional experience, the success or failure of which is dependent on the adolescent's whole life.

Although Bronfenbrenner's five levels are interactive, they are also distinct. The microsystem is the setting the child lives in and experiences directly. This includes the child's family, school, peers, and neighborhood. The child is viewed as an active participant in constructing his or her environment. The school transition can be affected by the child's attachments to parents, parenting skills, peer relationships, and past school experiences. The mesosystem involves the relations between microsystems. This highlights the need to look at a child in multiple settings. For example, a child that has been rejected by his parents might have difficulty forming relationships with his teachers. The exosystem is the social setting in which the child does not have an active role, however it can affect the child in an immediate context. For example, the parents' work place is part of the child's exosystem. An exosystem can break down when a parent is unemployed or works in an isolated area away from the child. Although this is out of the school setting, the way these levels interact with each other show how a child can experience his or her environment in an indirect way. Therefore, the exosystem may influence the success or failure of their school transition.



Figure 1. Urie Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Model as a model for child development.

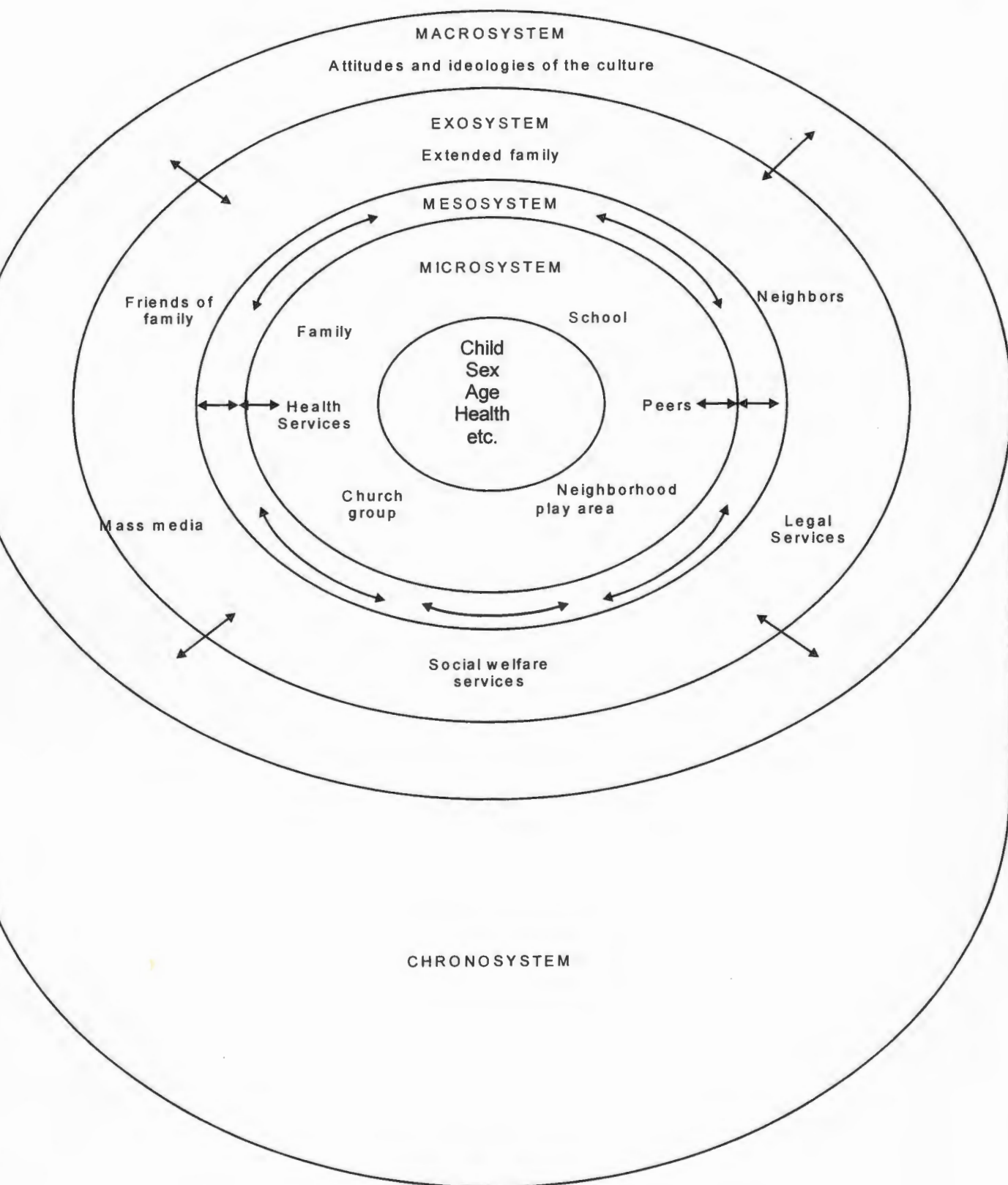


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Systems Theory

The values, beliefs and laws of a culture also influence school transition.

Bronfenbrenner (1987) calls these influences a child's macrosystem. Adjustment difficulties might arise if culture is not taken into consideration. For example, if a First Nations' student attends a school with a primarily non-native population, his or her school transition might be difficult or unsuccessful because the culture is not recognized. Most recently, I have been working with First Nations' students who have been adopted by non-native parents, and they are struggling to develop their own identity and understanding of their culture. They feel their adoptive parents are unable to teach them about their culture; specifically, about spirituality and sacred beliefs. This reminds educators that culture, beliefs, and values impact the success or failure of students if overlooked.

The last circle in Bronfenbrenner's model is called the chronosystem. The chronosystem, which is also known as the sociohistorical conditions, is the pattern of events in the environment that occur throughout the life course of a person. For instance, an example of a sociohistorical condition is that girls are encouraged more today to attain a professional occupation than they were in the past. Another example is the effects of parental divorce on a child in the first year following this divorce, as compared to subsequent years. The chronosystem considers the impact of time, as it relates to specific events experienced by an individual. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's model demonstrates the complexity of each individual life, and it reminds those working with students during transition that there is need to look at the whole child.

A successful school transition program then, incorporates an understanding of puberty, identifies concurrent issues facing adolescents, and looks at youth in context or from a bio-ecological perspective. Understanding the changes of puberty is not only integral to appreciating the individuality of this experience, but also to understanding how puberty causes

variance in adolescent development. For some students the psychological dimensions of puberty can create declines in performance that affect both physical and academic success. For example, I have counseled many girls who refuse to participate in their Physical Education program, or claim they are ill during that particular block because of issues related to body image and the menstrual cycle. Some of these girls fail PE. If, in the process of transition, we minimize the concerns of these students we could cause detrimental declines in development. Many issues occur concurrently with school transition, and educating students about these issues is necessary so that they may identify what it is they are experiencing. Concurrent issues cannot be ignored because when we work with children we work with the whole child. Many students that 'surface' in the fall (i.e. those who unexpectedly become visibly needy) and appear to have adjustment difficulties, actually have issues outside of the school that they need support with in order to concentrate and participate in their education. This demonstrates the need to use a bio-ecological perspective, which acknowledges that the child is the center; however, all those around the child in their five environments influence adjustment and the outcome of transition. The challenge is in recognizing, and thus addressing, the developing needs of the adolescent in order to create the opportunity for a successful school transition.

### Chapter Three

#### Characteristics Hindering Success During School Transition

Taking the bio-ecological theory into account, it is clearly necessary to examine the child in the context of his or her changing environment beyond the issues of puberty. Several researchers have discovered characteristics besides the aspects mentioned in Chapter Two that hinder the success of school transition. These include: perceived competence and motivation, culture and socioeconomic status, and gender differences.

## Perceived Competence and Motivation

Harter, Whitesell, and Kowalski (1992) discovered that the effects of an educational transition on an adolescent's perceptions of competence and motivational orientation may hinder that student's success. They investigated both of these areas and found that transition difficulties are linked to lower perceptions of academic competence, lower academic motivation, and diminishing intrinsic motivation. Historically, the literature has examined self-evaluation and motivation related to transition between the elementary school grade six program and the grade seven at the junior high school; however, it is unclear whether the child experiences changes in perceptions of competence and motivation because of the new grade, the new junior high school, or both.

Harter et al. (1992) tried to control for these factors through two studies. The first was a longitudinal study that would allow for an analysis of the independent effects of grade change and changing to a new school on scholastic competence, motivational orientation, anxiety and general affect toward school. They hypothesized, that after transition, the students would compare their scholastic ability with that of their new peer group; a comparison that occurs in response to the emphasis on external evaluation of competence through the use of grades. In Study One, the subjects involved four transition groups:

- (a) Students making the transition from sixth to seventh grades, moving from an elementary to a junior high school (with grades seven, eight, and nine); (b) students making the transition from fifth to sixth grades, moving from an elementary to a middle school (with grades six, seven, and eight); (c) students making the transition from sixth to seventh grades within the same middle school; and (d) students making the transition from fifth to sixth grades within the same elementary school. (p. 780)

Using this sample, Harter et al. were able to study each of the following variables independently: the effects of school transition, the move into seventh grade, and the combination of both.



The purpose of the first study was to look at the "individual differences" in students' reactions to educational transitions through a seven month longitudinal study. In this study, students were tested before and after the transition. Harter et al. (1992) predicted three groups would emerge: those with a decrease in perceived competence and intrinsic motivation, others with no change, and those with an increase in perceived competence and intrinsic motivation. They derived their theoretical model from previous work, claiming that student experiences and environmental events determine students' perceptions of competence, which, in turn, create an affective reaction. Consequently, a student's affect and perception of competence governs the individual's motivational orientation. Using this model, Harter et al. predicted that a change in schools and a larger reference group - in conjunction with a school's different educational philosophy that focuses more on social comparison and ability - would cause students to self-evaluate their academic competence against their peers. As a result, perceptions of competence might increase, decrease, or not change at all. These researchers predicted that changes in perceptions of competence would result in parallel changes in motivational orientation. For example, students with an increase in perception of competence would also experience an increase in intrinsic motivation. A student with a decrease in perceived competence would show more extrinsic motivation, and those students with no change in perceptions would experience no change in motivational orientation. Harter et al. expected the students' level of perceived competence would directly determine the students' level of intrinsic motivation.

In Study One, Harter et al. (1992) examined students from two school districts. One had a junior high school system and the other had a middle school system. Four hundred and sixty-three students participated before and after the school year transition. Both school districts had comparable socioeconomic levels, including lower- middle to upper-middle class.

Both the junior high and middle school had four feeder schools and three grades. The junior high had grades seven, eight, and nine, and the population was 462. The middle school had grades six, seven, and eight with a population of four hundred and thirty-five. Structurally, both schools had students move class to class each period, with various teachers for specialized subjects in different locations. The students moved through the whole school in a day. Harter et al. began by assessing students in May, and again in December after these students had transitioned into their new grade and for some, the new school setting. By December, the students had received two report cards, the feedback from which could affect their perceptions of their academic competence in the new grade. The researchers also felt the students would be more familiar with their new grade, or school by December, and the “honeymoon” period would be over. By waiting until December to do the second assessment, Harter et al. believed they would collect more realistic self-appraisals of students’ academic and social issues.

Four questionnaires were administered within classrooms to the students involved: (a) the Perceived Competence Scale for Children (Harter 1982a), (b) a self-report scale of intrinsic versus extrinsic orientation in the classroom sub-scales called Preference for challenge, Curiosity/Interest, and Independent mastery (Harter, 1981), (c) Schoolwork Performance Concerns subscale (Buhrmester (1980a, 1980b), and (d) an assessment of their affective reaction to schoolwork. The results from the Time 1- Time 2 correlations for perceived competence were comparable across the four groups. They showed perceived competence was only moderately stable across these grade changes. The findings revealed that some students’ perceptions of competence altered over the transition. Based on the students’ initial level of competence, the types of change in perceived competence were grouped into three titles: increasing, stable, and decreasing. Harter et al. wanted to examine the increases and decreases independent from the students’ initial perceptions of competence. There were variations

between each level; however, more students initially described a perception of low competence that increased over the period of the study. Another equally notable group was those students with an initially high perception of competence that decreased over the study. In terms of changes in motivational orientation, those children identified as having a decrease in perceived competence over the transition showed a decrease in intrinsic motivation. Those whose competence was labeled stable showed a minimal to slight increase in intrinsic motivation, while those with increases in perceived competence across transition had significant increases in intrinsic motivation. Although the initial level of perception of competence did not demonstrate a direct relationship to motivation change, there is a clear relationship between the changes in perceptions of competence and the changes in motivation. When looking at affect and anxiety, the “significant change” group showed that those who had an increase in their perceptions of competence had the most positive affect towards school unlike those whose perceptions of competence decreased. Those with lower perceptions of competence had the most negative affective reactions to school.

In all four groups, the study showed that perceptions of competence, and motivational orientation are associated with one another and with affect towards school. After transition, students with high levels of competence reported more intrinsic motivation and positive affect. The significant finding amongst all the transition groups was between academic anxiety and perceived competence and motivation. Students with low perceptions of their scholastic ability and low intrinsic motivation, experienced anxiety about school tasks when faced with moving to a new school, but not in their old school. These researchers found that anxiety negatively correlated with perceptions of competence and motivation in those students who changed schools. However, students with high perceptions of their scholastic abilities and intrinsic motivation showed less anxiety in a new school environment. Overall, these findings



indicate that a move to a new school causes all students anxiety regardless of when the change occurs: between grade five or six, or grades six and seven; but, it is more detrimental for those equipped with very little intrinsic motivation.

In Study Two, Harter et al. (1992) assessed if students really experienced changes related to their grade in the school setting. Over a one-year period, they examined whether the middle school students identified the predicted changes in their environment, and whether their subsequent perceptions were connected to scholastic competence. The subjects included 338 lower middle to upper-middle class, middle school students were the subjects. There were 110 sixth grade students, 111 grade seven students, and 117 eighth grade students. Although this sample came from the same middle school as in Study One, it used new subjects. The instruments were administered over a two day period in December and they included: a Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985), a perceived academic environmental change scale, an adapted measure of motivational orientation called Preference for challenge, Curiosity/Interest, and Independent Mastery Scales by Harter (1981), a measure of scholastic anxiety from Burhmester's (1980b) School Concerns Scale used in Study 1, affect questions, and a measure of the importance of academic success. The revised Self-Perception Profile for Children looked at perceptions of academic competence. The perceived academic environmental change scale was used to look at the hypothesis that most students perceive changes in their school setting between their last and present grades. The measure of motivational orientation examined intrinsic and extrinsic motivation independently. The scholastic anxiety scale not only assessed students' perceptions of past school worries but also those of their current year. Harter et al. (1992) wanted to measure the affective reactions to school performance, so they used the affect questions from Study One to determine how students felt about their marks and work, and how they felt about their own abilities.

According to a factor-analysis of the environmental change scale, the results of the research indicated all students experienced changes at the three different grade levels. This means the middle school students perceived an increase in external evaluation and performance with each new grade as compared to their previous experience. The most significant increases were external evaluations of competence and academic abilities reported amongst eighth grade students who would be making a transition into high school. The second largest increase in this category was noted by the sixth grade students making the transition to middle school. The least amount of change noted was by the seventh graders, who were staying in their familiar school. Harter et al. also found that social comparison increases amongst all children from the past school year to the present. Again, the greatest effect was with the eighth graders.

Harter et al. (1992) also predicted that students with higher reports about external emphasis on academic performance, competence evaluations, and social comparison would demonstrate more extrinsic motivation, scholastic anxiety and value school success. Their findings confirmed this expectation. The high group showed significantly more extrinsic motivation, anxiety and valued school success. If students did not perceive these changes in the new educational setting, they did not have similar experiences with anxiety or motivation, as with the other two groups; neither did they value school success as much as did the other students. Only 44 students reported low on external emphasis on academic performance and competence evaluation.

The effects of perceived competence and grade level was assessed by comparing the motivational scores of students with different perceptions of their scholastic ability. Harter et al. (1992) found that the intrinsic motivation of students with high perceptions of scholastic competence was associated to their grade level. Students with low perceptions of competence

had slightly lower intrinsic motivation, specifically when grade seven was compared to grades six and eight. Those students with moderate levels of perceptions of competence had moderate levels of intrinsic motivation for all three grades. There was no relationship found either between extrinsic motivation and perceived competence, or with any grade level. It was highlighted that in an educational setting that emphasizes performance evaluation, the students gained more of an extrinsic motivational orientation.

Harter et al. (1992) also notes that, in an evaluative environment, all students, despite their perceptions of academic competence, experience anxiety. In terms of individual affect toward school, students with a high perception of their competence definitely felt more positive about their schoolwork and school experiences, as compared to their peers with lower perceptions of competence. Harter et al.'s final assessment about the importance of school showed that students with high perceptions of competence considered scholastic success to be more salient when compared to students with lower perceptions of competence. It is important to mention that even in those students with lower perceptions of competence, "rating of importance" (regarding the value of school) was considerably high. This shows us that "although the less able students did appear to discount somewhat the importance of school relative to the more competent students, they did not disavow it" (p. 800).

In the discussion of their findings, Harter et al. (1992) support their hypothesis that, when confronted with school transitions, students perceptions of competence would alter. They found that the number of students reporting notable increases or decreases in competence perceptions was 50 percent. They also found that an increase in the student's perception of competence was associated with an increase of intrinsic motivation. Conversely, students with a decrease in perception of competence had a decrease in intrinsic motivation. Harter et al. reveal how environmental change affects perceptions of competence and in turn, influences



motivational orientation. In both Study One and Study Two, they found that changes in perceptions of academic competence were related to the degree of positive affect toward school, which illustrates the impact of these changes in the students' lives. Anxiety about schoolwork was associated with negative perceived competence and motivation for students who had moved to a new school, regardless of when a change of school occurred; in grade five, six or seven:

“Although transitions force children to reevaluate their competence, which can result in increases, decreases, or no changes in perceived competence and motivation, the reevaluation process itself appears to create anxiety as children face the uncertainty of not knowing how they will perform in a new school amid new peers, new teachers, and new educational practices.” (p.803)

The second study also confirmed that most students do perceive changes in their environment; specifically an increase in external evaluations of their abilities and social comparison. It was noted as well that a small group of students reported only minimal changes in their environment. These researchers suggest that this small group should be examined further to determine whether these students are preoccupied by outside issues, or whether they are resisting the changes with denial. Harter et al. wonder if these students, at this young age, are at-risk of dropping out of school because of their lack of understanding of the system and their lack of commitment to it.

The work of Harter et al. (1992) is important because it continues to identify and confirm that the transition experience is an individual one. By using the four different groups in Study One, they reveal that a change of schools does have detrimental educational outcomes. These findings show educators the importance of promoting positive perceptions of competence amongst all students because of the demonstrated relationship with motivation and affect. But more study is required to determine why some students' perceptions of competence increase and others decrease to try and foster an increase for all students. Knowing how a

student's perception of competence is associated with motivational orientation, educators need to reflect on how their school makes students feel about themselves academically. Students' low perceptions of competence depict a poor learning environment. Students should feel good about their abilities and feel safe to take risks in new learning situations. There are two ways in which I would like to criticize this study: one is that there were no low socioeconomic participants; and two, although they call this a longitudinal study, Harter et al. only did two assessments, one in May and one in December. The absence of low socioeconomic students is a concern because at a time of critical peer comparison, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds become victims of excessive stigmatization due to their obvious material differences. Having witnessed the social stigmatization transfer into the classroom experience, it would be interesting to identify the perceptions of competence of the low socioeconomic students before and after transition. This lack of acceptance from their peer group often preoccupies these students and distracts them from their work, which decreases their affect towards school. Sometimes it is difficult to get these students to participate because they are so emotionally disturbed by this alienation that they disengage from the class activities. Other students from the low socioeconomic group develop anger towards their peers, or what appears to be an "attitude" problem, which results in misbehavior. Perceptions of competence are altered by transition to a new school setting, but Harter et al. fail to explain what aspects of this process contribute to the negative changes. Low socioeconomic status, unfortunately, is one aspect that negatively influences a student's perceptions of competence and creates adjustment difficulties during transition. In talking to these students, I find that they do not feel supported by classroom teachers when faced with putdowns and negative slander. It is obvious from this example, that educators need to go beyond Harter et al.'s categories of increases, decreases and stable perceptions of competence,



to determine the actual issues that cause these changes in perception. My second criticism of this study is that it only occurred in May, before transition, and in December, four months after attending the new school. After learning about the maturational differences related to the onset of puberty, transition issues should really be viewed over the entire year. I

Study Two confirms that most students experience changes like an increase in letter grades, ability evaluation, and competition with each new grade. It is unfortunate that these same students reported having more extrinsic motivation because this decreases what should be the real focus; the learning process. In my experience, learning is a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. This study found most students reported more extrinsic motivation, and therefore, educators need to reflect on the evaluation methods being used because these evaluations influence students' motivational orientation. By fostering intrinsic motivation, we would be promoting lifelong learners. The weakness of Study Two is the small sample size and the fact that it was only administered at a middle school. Many school districts do not have middle schools and it would be of interest to do this study at a junior high school as well. Therefore, transition programs should be a necessity in either middle or junior high schools when a new educational setting is part of the transition. The transition program should promote positive perceptions of competence, and improving evaluation methods that foster intrinsic motivation could attain this.

Another perspective that builds on the work of Harter et al. (1992) is evident in the research of Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan and Mac Iver (1993) who also identified structural (now termed environmental ) issues that impact adolescents' transitioning to a new school. Eccles et al. (1993) sought to determine why so many adolescents experience difficulty with transition. They wondered whether or not something distinct puts adolescents at-risk for difficulty. They developed the hypothesis that some

negative psychological changes identified with adolescent development occur because of a mismatch, or lack of goodness of fit, between the needs of developing adolescents and the opportunities available to them. On an individual level, most adolescents experience a decline in academic motivation, as well as noted increases in family conflicts. If a social environment like school does not match the psychological and developmental needs of an adolescent, then this adolescent will not likely be successful. Transition will be a successful experience if the school program is welcoming, developmentally appropriate, and enhances student self-perceptions. The research of Eccles et al. illustrates how transition can be a negative experience because some students experience developmental declines. They believe systemic differences exist between the elementary classroom and the junior high schools that account for these declines.

Eccles et al. (1993) argue that transition difficulties arise when a child transfers into a “developmentally inappropriate educational environment” (p.92). This would be particularly true if the new school environment offers less opportunity for growth than the students’ previous school:

There are developmentally inappropriate changes in a cluster of classroom organizational, instructional, and climate variables, including task structure, task complexity, grouping practices, evaluation techniques, motivational strategies, locus of responsibility for learning, and quality of teacher-student and student-student relationships. (p.92-3)

Eccles et al. suggest that these changes have a negative impact on students’ motivation and achievement-related beliefs. They acknowledge that there is insufficient data on systemic differences between elementary and junior high school classes; however, what research has been done endorses their hypothesis. Eccles et al. (1993) report a series of studies they undertook related to the effects of school transitions on adolescents. Consequently, they have

identified six patterns of systemic differences that occur between elementary and junior high school transition.

The six patterns they noticed begin with the emphasis junior high school teachers' place on establishing more control in class as well as the decrease in opportunities for students to take ownership of their program. At a time when students are seeking autonomy, their needs are mismatched by the opportunities in their junior high classes:

Ward et al. (1982) found that upper elementary school students are given more opportunities to take responsibility for their schoolwork than are seventh-grade students in a traditional junior high school. In our work (Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1987) both seventh graders and their teachers in the first year of junior high school reported less opportunity for students to participate in classroom decision making than did these same students and their sixth grade elementary school teachers one year earlier. In addition, using a measure developed by Lee, Statuto, and Kedar-Voivodas (1983) to assess the congruence between the adolescents' desire for participation in decision making and their perception of the opportunities for such participation, Midgley and Feldlaufer (1987) found a greater discrepancy when the adolescents were in their first year in junior high school than when these same adolescents were in their last year in elementary school. (as cited in Eccles et al., 1993, p.93)

Second, the students reveal that their interactions with junior high school teachers are not as positive, personal or as fulfilling as at their previous school. The third difference that consistently emerges involves the structure of the class. Students have reported that the junior high school shifts more to whole-class task organization, and streaming of students based on ability. At junior high school, the common teaching practice was group instruction in grade seven, with little work done in small groups, and no individualized programs were observed. At the junior high school, most courses have all the students working from the same text. These students have the same assignment, they each receive the same amount of time from the teacher in class, and all have the same homework. Eccles et al. found that as a result of these changes to group instruction, social comparison increases. They suggest that these changes cause negative self-perceptions and decrease motivation because the students' scholastic abilities become public through the whole-class marking of work; here, students or teachers



read aloud the answers and test scores to the whole class. They suggest the fourth systemic difference, in which the junior high school teachers reported feelings of ineffectiveness as educators, specifically in relation to low-ability students, was the most significant finding. The fifth difference noticed was that adolescents' abstract thinking abilities increase because of their maturation process, but the class work at junior high school is on a lower cognitive level than what the students were doing at elementary school. The last systemic difference Eccles et al. (1993) describe was how most students' grades drop when they move to junior high school. The high school teachers also evaluated students on subjective standards as well as academic ability, and this practice negatively affected letter grades. Interestingly, the above-mentioned decline in grades conflicts with adolescents' scores on standardized achievement tests, which reflects "a change in grading practices rather than a change in the rate of the students' learning" (Eccles et al., 1993, p.94). Because adolescence is a time of psychological vulnerability, Eccles et al. express concern about the negative impact such subjective grading practices might have on adolescents' self-esteem and motivational orientation.

It is the belief of Eccles et al. (1993) that these school environmental changes are harmful when not appropriately matched with the developing needs of an adolescent. Adolescence is a state of being that not only incorporates seeking independence, but developing an identity, self-reflection, dating issues, abstract thinking, and socialization. And when these characteristics are matched with a competitive environment that invites social comparison, a preoccupation with performance, creates negative transition outcomes. Therefore, the practices of the schools may negatively affect the needs of developing adolescents:

schools decrease decision making, and choice at a time when the desire for control is growing; they emphasize lower level cognitive strategies at a time when the ability to use higher level strategies is increasing; and they disrupt social networks at a time

when adolescents are especially concerned with peer relationships and may be in special need of close adult relationships outside of the home. (p.94)

Eccles et al. illustrate the schools negative characteristics which undermine the true motives of teachers and students. They argue that the grading, subject departments, and size of the school make it hard for teachers to have good relationships with students. It is even more difficult when a teacher has a different class of 25-30 students every hour. Teacher efficacy might be low because educators realize they cannot help all of their students, and as a result implement more discipline to control such large numbers.

To test the influence of the differences experienced when changing schools and classes, Eccles et al. (1993) investigated the impact such changes in the educational setting had on the students' achievement-related beliefs, motives, values, and behaviors. They administered the Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions (MSALT), which is a four wave two year longitudinal study. The sample consisted of 1500 early adolescents from 12 school districts in middle-income communities in southeastern Michigan. The adolescents were moving from the sixth grade in an elementary school to grade seven in a junior high school. When they arrived at junior high school, the students did not move as a class, rather they were put into various classes. The questionnaires were given at school in the fall and spring over two consecutive school years.

They found, in terms of teacher efficacy, a significant difference existed between the confidence of elementary teachers as compared to their high school counterparts. The grade seven teachers reported less confidence than the grade six teachers. Eccles et al. (1993) indicate this difference may decrease an adolescent's perceptions of their competence and potential. They determined these results by studying their student sample in four groups according to the teachers' personal efficacy rating. Five hundred and fifty-nine students transitioned from a high-efficacy grade six math teacher to a low-efficacy math teacher at the



high school. A different group of 474 students moved from low-efficacy teacher both years; another 117 students moved from low- to high-efficacy teachers, and 179 students had high efficacy teachers for the two years. Overall, 78% of the students moved to a grade seven classroom with a teacher having a low-efficacy rating. The results showed that those students who went from a high to low efficacy math teacher had

lower expectations for themselves in math, lower perceptions of their performance in math, and higher perceptions of the difficulty of math than did the adolescents who experienced no change in teacher efficacy or moved from low- to high-efficacy teachers. (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 95)

A major concern was the larger decrease in confidence for lower ability students who went from a high to low-efficacy math teacher. Eccles et al. suggest this larger decrease in low ability students could be the beginning of a downward movement in academic motivation, potentially leading to dropping out. As part of the learning environment during school transition, they conclude that teacher efficacy, rather than the developing needs of adolescence, causes the decline in motivation during transition.

The second pattern mentioned was a decline in the quality of the teacher-student relationships after transition to junior high school. Eccles et al. (1993) suggest that a consequence of transition into a less supportive classroom can have a detrimental effect on a student's interest for a particular academic subject. They examined the value attached to math that 1300 students had before and after the transition, based on the differences in support they felt they received. If students moved from an elementary school where they perceived their elementary teacher to be low in providing math support, and then moved to a junior high school math teacher that they perceived to be high in support for math, they gave higher value to math. Conversely, when students perceived their elementary school teacher to be supportive in math and then went to a junior high school where their new math teacher was less

supportive, they showed a decrease in the value given to math. An important concern to mention here is that low ability students were more at risk in less facilitative classrooms after the transition. This example used by Eccles et al. (1993) shows that decreases in academic motivation are preventable because "these declines are associated with specific types of changes in the nature of the classroom environment" (p.96).

To test their stage-environment fit theory, Eccles et al. (1993) also assessed the person-environment fit as it relates to changes in motivation or self-perceptions. Using data from MSALT, they questioned both the teachers and students regarding whether or not students had ownership over decision making in the classroom. The decision making could be about homework, the class rules, seating arrangements and the plans for the day. The findings showed that the grade seven teachers and students reported less decision making compared to the teachers and students in the grade six class. Conversely, the students' desire for more decision making increased over the transition year. Eccles et al. also examined maturational differences in relation to the desire for autonomy. Specifically, they looked at the early maturing female students' desires for decision making as compared to the later maturing females in the same class. Although they are all in the same class, the early maturing girls wanted more ownership over the decision making in their classes than the later maturing girls. Consequently, the early maturing girls perceived a decrease in the opportunities for decision making, which was not reported by the later maturing girls. The main finding is that a mismatch does occur for female adolescents between their desires and their perceptions of the opportunities in their classes. This mismatch is associated with their stage of puberty. If the person-environment fit theory demonstrates a mismatch between the developing needs of the student and his or her perceived opportunities, Eccles et al. suggest that this student's intrinsic motivation will decline.

Overall, Eccles et al. (1993) provide evidence that teacher efficacy and teacher-student relationships impact student success during transition. Students do perceive changes in their educational environment and for most these changes have negative effects, especially for low ability students are more at-risk. Student success is dependent on the many qualities of the teacher that go beyond this teacher's specialty training. Some teachers may need to realize the importance of having a relationship with their students as part of the school day. If students have a good relationship with their teachers, or even one teacher, they would have someone to go to when faced with adjustment difficulties. To promote good teacher-student relationships, junior high school teachers need a timetable structure that fosters the development of relationships. For example, such a timetable would incorporate a semester system that limits the student to teacher ratio and allows time for teachers to promote leadership through an advisory role. The resulting positive relationships would allow teachers to appreciate the individual student needs. This series of studies also confirms that the previously mentioned maturational differences related to the onset of puberty could contribute to transition difficulties. By implementing the concept of a person-environment fit, this work continues to look at a child in context during transition. Therefore, this research promotes the idea that all students can attain optimal development given a developmentally appropriate environment.

#### Culture and Socioeconomic Status

The influences of culture and level of socioeconomic status during the transition process are revealed best in the following American longitudinal study. From 1988 to 1990, the National Education Longitudinal Study of the Eighth Grade Class took 1052 schools and 24, 599 Grade 8 students and examined their transition process between elementary and secondary school. The study concluded that 6.1% of eighth graders left school without completion by the spring of 1990. These findings were consistent with other studies by

Kaufman, McMillen & Whitener (1991) where Hispanic and black students had a higher dropout rate than their white counterparts. Between 1988 and 1990, the dropout rates were as follows: Hispanic students 9.3%, black students 10% and white students 4.9%. If the students dropped out after grade eight, this statistic was not included in the study. Also 14.9 % of low socioeconomic status students dropped out at grade eight, unlike 1.6 % of the higher socioeconomic group. This study shows the importance of including the variables of culture and socioeconomic status when discussing school transition.

### Gender Differences

As previously mentioned, student perceptions prior to the transition were different for girls and boys (Mekos, 1989) but evidence suggests that girls experience more difficulty (Eccles et al., 1993). Although the girls' focus prior to transition was the social world, girls went into the transition with more academic concerns than the boys. Using a cumulative stress theory, Simmons & Blyth (1987) and Simmons et al., (1979) documented that greater negative change occurred among adolescent females during the transition to junior high (as cited in Eccles et al.1993). For example, in the female adolescent, the need for input into the decision making in the classroom is related to her level of maturation rather than her age. A significant finding occurred when the girls' perceptions of opportunities were examined over a one year period. The less mature girls reported a decrease in opportunities to participate, while the reverse happened for the late maturing girls who reported an increase in these opportunities. The main point of the above study is the mismatch between the adolescent females' needs for input into the classroom decision making process and what opportunities they perceive associated with their puberty status. A more mature female adolescent experienced more of a mismatch than a less mature female.

By the end of the school year, almost twice as many early-maturing female adolescents reported experiencing the "can't but should" type of mismatch (e.g. answering no to the



question "Do you get to help decide what math you work on during math class?" but yes to the question "Should you have a say about this?") as did their less physically mature classmates. (Eccles et al., 1993, p.97)

These results and the work of Simmons and her colleagues (e.g., Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Simmons et al., 1979, as cited in Eccles et al. 1993, p.97) suggest that the stage of puberty an adolescent female is experiencing during the junior high transition is associated with "changes in their self-esteem and their self-reports of truancy and school misconduct" (Eccles et al., 1993, p.97). The higher the level of physical maturity of a girl during transition the higher the truancy and misconduct after the transition. "Magnusson (1990), in a Swedish sample, also found higher rates of a variety of problem behaviors, including truancy, academic problems, drug and alcohol use, running away, and shoplifting, among early-maturing girls than among later-maturing girls" (Magnusson cited in Sroufe, Cooper, & Dehart, 1992, p. 495). Eccles et al. (1993) postulate, that the negative outcomes described above could be due to the simultaneous occurrence of school changes and pubertal transitions that create this at risk behavior. Another explanation might be that the mismatch between the students' perceptions and the opportunities afforded them in their school environment is what puts them at risk.

Compas (1987) suggests the need for future research to examine the different social contexts and coping behavior of adolescents, with specific reference to gender identity. Gender may affect the types of coping styles used by boys and girls. Seiffge-Krenke (1995) explored stress, coping and relationships in adolescents and found females of all age groups report a higher frequency of self-related problems. This does not mean that adolescence is harder for girls than boys; however, for girls the greater frequency is attributed to greater concern about their appearance and identity insecurities. Seiffge-Krenke (1995) also found that the younger adolescents reported greater stress and that girls had higher stress related to friends, leisure activities and self. Seiffge-Krenke's work concurs with that of others



(Hamburg, 1974; Peterson & Spiga, 1982 as cited in Seiffge-Krenke, p. 124), which suggests that the stress of early adolescence is due in part to the school transition.

Cotterell (1992) found that different forms of socialization influence the type of support adolescents seek. Whereas girls require social support that is sought from parents and adult non-kin, the boys created a number of supportive ties with friends related to level of academic adjustment. Surprisingly, adolescent females dominate my caseload and my experience is that females rely more on their social networks to cope as compared to males. Conversely, I often need to identify at-risk boys and then build a relationship with these students. I find the males reluctant to seek my counseling support and I wonder if it is because they are male, and my own gender is an issue. According to Seiffge-Krenke, (1995) "male adolescents present themselves as less open and sociable, but they appraise the problem more optimistically and do not show resignation or withdrawal from a situation as frequently as females do" (p. 127). I'm skeptical of the research that constantly presents adolescent girls as having more stress than boys. It could be that girls are socialized to connect more with others as compared to boys and to articulate their concerns more often. Maybe we need to socialize boys to be more open. In contrast to Seiffge-Krenke (1995), my experience is that boys do not appraise problems more optimistically, rather they appear to have the same levels and types of stress as girls but they deal with it more covertly. Regardless, an appreciation of gender differences is valuable when discussing the stress of school transition.

The work of Harter et al. (1992) and Eccles et al. (1993) highlights how the environment and experiences a student has influences their academic performance; their affect toward school and consequently, determines their motivation orientation. Educators need to recognize that during transition students' perceptions of competence do change. Transition programs need to be in place to foster positive perceptions of competence. Those students,

whose perceptions of competence increased, had substantial increases in intrinsic motivation, positive affect towards school and more importantly, less anxiety. This notable increase in intrinsic motivation, related to perception of competence, needs to be acted on at the classroom level to improve the low perceptions of competence for others. In addition, the focus on extrinsic motivation using performance evaluation can be damaging for students. However, as Eccles et al. (1993) suggest, the motivational consequences due to transition are negative but not necessarily inevitable.

In my experience, the negative environmental changes mentioned in this chapter not only affect students with low perceptions of competence, but also gifted students. Specifically I am witness to the junior high school teachers feelings ineffectiveness with low ability students. In classrooms, low ability students' needs are often ignored, along with those of the gifted students. Junior high school teachers are too often driven by successfully delivering the curriculum and when a student is unable to do so in the manner the teacher wants, variations appear to create denial and anxiety for the teacher. My experience has been with the teacher who resigns from creating an individual program for two reasons: lack of knowledge about how to adapt or modify the program, and fear of lowering expectations. This form of teacher resignation results in the failure for those students.

Teachers' feelings of ineffectiveness compounds the difficulties students with low perceptions of competence already have. Low ability students demonstrate different behaviors because they think they cannot do their work, whereas gifted students 'act out' because they are bored. The behaviors might include talking, daydreaming, misbehaving, cheating, and failure to complete daily work. The failure to complete work gets so unmanageable for some students that the teacher often generates a list of the missing or incomplete work and gives a copy to the students, the parents, and the counselor, in an effort to encourage "catch up." At

this point, these students often see themselves as stupid because they invariably get sent to the “dumb room” where learning assistance is provided. They perceive themselves as academically inferior to their peers and often try to gain social acceptance by becoming the class clown. The assumption is often made that these students do not care and that they have the right to fail. When I counsel these students, I find that although they value school, they do not care about the value given to their work in grade 8, because the extrinsic evaluation process has little or no meaning to them. This form of social comparison ends up being detrimental to their education because it not only determines their perception of competence, but their social status as well. As well, the gifted student often sits bored in class, possibly working ahead or pursuing something of interest at their seat that has nothing to do with the class discussion. So, although he does get 100% on the unit test, he fails because he is not perceived to have participated in any of the class work. However, I agree with Harter et al (1992), students with lower perceptions of competence still value the importance of school but this increasingly extrinsic environment we have created does not work for all students. This should also be extended to gifted students who do not work to their potential and who do not give into the system because they resist the external evaluation process. Students with low perceptions of competence are still capable students, and educators, while maintaining their academic standards, need to reflect on how these students learn and implement more relevant evaluation methods. I believe that the gifted students will apply themselves when they want to, but we risk losing them altogether if they continue to be bored. Educators are in schools for ‘learning’ not teaching. Harter et al. (1992) reveal that ‘schools teach the best and forget the rest’ in the current environment. If the principle of ‘all students can learn’ guides educators then we should not have the letter grade ‘F’, and during transition we see the decreases in



perceptions of competence, decreases in intrinsic motivation, or decreases in affect towards school.

Despite these negative school environmental concerns which decrease perceptions of competence, educators also need to recognize that low socioeconomic status puts students more at risk during grade eight. In schools, there are fees for certain elective courses (e.g. wood for woodwork, fabric for sewing, and money for outdoor education courses), student cards, dance tickets, ski trips, yearbooks, and in school stores promoting school clothing. It appears that money is becoming a necessity to participate in the public school system. Even paper is not provided in most computer classes. Educators need to ensure accessibility to all school activities is attainable and equitable for the entire school population. In my experience, students are identified as 'welfare' by their peers when they do not wear the right clothes, wear dirty clothes and even drink no name brand pop. These cruel putdowns must influence perceptions of competence. Socioeconomic status can negatively impact transition and schools should identify those students needing support. For example, the student that is on a supported lunch program at elementary school should continue to receive that service in some capacity at the high school level. It should not be left to the student to try and figure out how to cope with their new environment.

Lastly, the discussion regarding gender differences and transition emphasizes that the stage of puberty an early adolescent female is experiencing impacts her success. This is a valuable finding because it shows that transition and puberty are processes and when these events occur simultaneously, difficulties could arise. Also, the types of concerns girls and boys have could be addressed in a transition program by providing group or individual activities to support both girls and boys.

## Chapter Four

### Characteristics Fostering Success During School Transition

Historically, most research has focused on the negative aspects of the challenges and contexts of adolescence; but, there has been a recent shift toward viewing adolescence as a time of opportunity and positive growth. This chapter explores the research that defines some of the characteristics that foster a successful transition: risk and resilience, the influence of friends on adolescents, and adolescent stress, social support and adjustment.

#### Risk and Resilience

Grossman, Beinashowitz, Anderson, Sakurai, Finnin, and Flaherty's (1992) conducted an exploratory study that examined the impact of risk and protective factors in adolescence, and determined that protective factors are predictors of the adolescents' ability to adapt. In this study, they reviewed risk and resilience research in order to decrease the influence of risk and prevent at-risk individuals from the detrimental effects predisposed by a history of risk. These researchers also identify the supportive resources in a child's environment that promote success for all youth regardless of their background of risk factors.

Grossman et al. (1992) identify that there has been little work done which focuses specifically on risk and resilience of adolescence. They define risk as any psychosocial factor that increases risk for a child or adolescent to the point where psychopathology develops. A protective factor for an adolescent is context dependent. Grossman et al.'s model conceptualizes risk and resilience for adolescence as complicated interactions between the various forms of risk and protective factors, which impact individual adaptation. Instead of focusing on the students who are having difficulties, this research shifts the focus to what is working for the student who is successful. By identifying what is working positively for that student, these protective factors could be promoted to improve adjustment difficulties.



Grossman et al. believe that there are resilient children, who despite risk factors, demonstrate good adaptation.

Protective factors are qualities about a child or his or her environment that alleviate and prevent psychopathology from developing, regardless of elements of risk factors in a child's life. They identified three types of protective factors: individual, familial, and social environmental. Individual factors that protect adolescents from risk are self-esteem and internal locus of control. Familial factors constitute having a positive relationship with a minimum of one parent, and having family relations that lack marital discord. An example of a social environment protective factor is a positive relationship with another adult figure. Historically, the literature they reviewed has not only been about resilience, but also about adolescent stressors, the risk-reducing benefits of family coping strategies, and risk enhancing influences like various coping styles. These researchers conceptualize the outcome of family adaptations as dependent on the multi-dimensional nature of the individual, family, and community variables. Within this multi-dimensional perspective, individual adaptation results from the interaction between various risk and protective factors. Because of the lack of research on adolescence and resilience, the traditional view was that adolescence is a time of inevitable difficulty and conflict. However, a changing perspective, which views adolescence as a transitional state with unavoidable stressors, suggests normal adolescents should not have significant turmoil. Grossman et al. describe how the dramatic developmental changes and concurrent issues, like school transition from elementary to high school, expose previously undetected vulnerabilities. They state the influences of past risk factors, and the security of protective factors, are most visible during adolescence. Their purpose was to study risk and protective factors in adolescence in order to develop a tool to measure risk in children. Their specific goals were

(a) to examine the role of protective factors in facilitating good adaptation in 14-year-olds, (b) to determine whether the identified protective factors function only in the presence of risk, (ie., protective factor-by-risk interactions) or whether they function more directly as positive factors in the lives of youth (i.e., protective factor main effects), and (c) to establish the usefulness of a new simple method (Risk Scale) for assessing the history of vulnerability in adolescents. (p.532)

This study examined the role of risk and protective factors in a middle and lower income school district, and was conducted in two phases. The first phase was carried out in classroom groups and in individual interviews with the students. The second phase was done three months later. In the first phase there were 199 grade nine public school students from a city with a large lower middle class population. In the second phase, 105 females and 74 males of the original group were re-examined. Twenty dropped out because five families refused permission for their children to participate, two left school, two were in grade ten and ineligible, ten had too much data missing, and one was in the hospital for psychiatric difficulties.

The first phase proceeded by using three types of assessment: the Risk Questionnaire (Rem, R., Grossman, F. K., Anderson, L., Sakurai, M., and Finnin, L. (1986), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and a demographic self-report measure devised by the researchers. These were administered to a classroom group during homeroom time. The second phase, which used a semi-structured interview, began with the drawing of a family tree. Following this, they administered three self-report measures: the Parent-Adolescent Communication (Barnes and Olson, 1982), Locus of Control (Novicki and Strickland, 1973), and the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale II (Olson, Portner, and Bell, 1982). As well, students were asked questions from the Deviance Scale (Dornbusch, Carlsmith, Bushwall, Ritter, Leiderman, Hastorf, and Gross, 1985), the Distressed Mood and Health Risk Behaviors Scale (Moos, Cronkite, Billings, and Finney, 1982) and a summary of social supports, which included a list of significant others and details about them and their roles. Lastly, the students completed a

self-report, which examined how they spent their time, and their involvement with family members.

Grossman et al. (1993) determined an adolescent's degree of risk, initially, through a 16 question self-administered scale (Rem et al., 1986). This was repeated three months later but respondents were asked only 12 of the original 16 questions. The interview results in both tests were consistent with each other. To learn about an individual's protective factors, Grossman et al. measured five different protective factors. Family adaptability and cohesion was measured with a 30-item self-report that asked the adolescents to rate their families. Locus of control was assessed with a 40-item yes-no scale. A 20-item self-administered report determined the quality of parent-adolescent communication (mothers and fathers were assessed independently). The adolescents' relationship with a significant non-parent adult was determined through an interview.

The results on the Risk Scale showed a small but notable difference between the mean scores for boys and girls. The girls reported a slightly lower risk than boys:

66.6% of the girls and 78.4% of the boys had risk scores of 26 or less, indicating the presence of two or more risk factors. Forty-six percent of the girls and 61% of the boys had more than three risk factors, and 33% of the girls and 40% of the boys had more than four. (p. 536)

For girls, lower risk was connected to lower deviance, better mood, higher self-esteem, and better grades; and, occurred if they had four of the five protective factors (cohesion, locus of control, communication with father and communication with mother) present. There was one exception, the girls grades were not affected by the quality of their communication with their fathers; however, the quality of communication with the father predicted three other outcomes: mood, deviance, and self-esteem. This was not so for the boys, where grades were the only outcome measure associated with risk. The most important protective factors were family cohesion, locus of control, and communicative interactions with mother. With both boys and



girls, lower risk was connected to increased family cohesion. In the girls group, lower risk was related to internal locus of control and better communication with both parents; yet for boys, lower risk was related to better communication with father. "Intriguingly, for boys, the greater the history of risk, the more likely boys were to describe a relationship with a significant nonparent adult" (p.538). This statement implies that when boys are troubled they are more likely to turn to a non-parent adult for help. This study also found that the frequency that one or both parents had dinner at home with the adolescent was a predictor of many outcome variables for the girls but not the boys. Girls who had a parent home during dinner tended to do better in their daily lives. Grossman et al. offer no explanation for this, but they do state that boys' risk scores did not predict adaptation as well as it did for the girls, and speculate that boys may underreported their risk factors.

There are two main findings of this research. First, protective factors do predict certain outcomes. For example, "cohesion and communication with mother independently of risk predicted all four outcomes for girls and two of four outcomes for boys" (p.546). The locus of control scores predicted only two of four outcome variables for boys, and three of four for girls after risk was taken into account. Regardless of a background of risk, all youth in this sample benefited from family cohesion, good communication with parents, and a more internal locus of control. These findings affirm the importance of family involvement in the daily lives of adolescents. Good communication with their parents is a predictor of healthy adaptation. The second significant finding was that regardless of an adolescents' risk status, the protective factors outlined in this study benefit all youth. This research highlights the need to continue the search for resources in the environment that protect high-risk youth. Though the findings suggest adolescents would benefit from increased family ties and good relationships with other



adults, "the specific factors that will be of use in any given case are dependent on the particular context of the individual's life" (p.547).

While Grossman et al. (1992) studied the beneficial effects of cohesive family life, another study of risk and resilience by Catterall (1998) outlines the need for action when labeling adolescent groups as 'at-risk.' Catterall criticizes how we use the term "at-risk" in rather general ways, because unclear definitions confuse the issue when developing policies for dealing with at-risk adolescents. This study summarizes how numerous measures used by the U.S. Census and National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reinforce the public perception of group association by claiming that the following risk factors for our youth are at a critical level nationally:

As many as half of all youngsters are thought to drop out of school or graduate without adequate reading, problem-solving, or learning skill. Substantial percentages of children start school unprepared because of poor health or undernourishment; too many live in impoverished, drug-addicted, or abusive households. Increasing numbers of children speak little or no English when they enter school. Many give birth to children while unprepared to support themselves, let alone provide for children of their own. Youth involvement in violent crime is visible in the nation's cities. (p. 303)

Generalizations such as these distort our perceptions of youth by insinuating that all youth are potentially problematic.

Catterall (1998) discusses two streams of criticism regarding how we think about "risk" and how society responds to problems connected to risk. He argues that researchers and educators have contributed more to describing and classifying the conditions of risk than actually creating successful solutions. The second criticism addresses what risk means, while questioning the qualities of risk and how it works in the lives of children. The term risk implies a form of group membership that defines risk by association. For example, students in low socioeconomic situations, or disadvantaged minority racial or ethnic families, are labeled at-risk simply because of their association with this group. Catterall argues group definitions

of risk need to be challenged because such labeling creates stereotypes that indict group members as a whole. Thus, a whole student group could be labeled at risk when in fact there is only one member who is actually experiencing difficulties in performance or social integration. The term resilience can therefore be seen to describe a student who surpasses the expectations of failure when associated with a group identified as at-risk. Catterall highlights how resilience research, unlike that of risk research, recognizes how each adolescent reacts differently to a given school environment, and factors that pose a challenge for one child may stimulate another to excel. His research suggests that risk might be a positive factor that promotes student success, and more research in this area needs to be done to identify those youths that really are at risk. The point being made is that during this transition, labeling youth as at risk through group labeling or membership may result in detrimental educational outcomes. Catterall argues that the conception of risk for adolescence needs to be challenged, because when a group is identified as at risk, this form of risk by association could be also construed to mean guilt by association. This means a group could become globally characterized (e.g. a "culture of poverty") and such labeling could result in a failure to appreciate individuals for who they are rather than the stereotypical view.

Criticisms of the general use of the term risk, and its lack of clarity, have ignited an interest in the measures society can take to alleviate risks factors. For example, rather than focusing on the drop out rate, more attention could be given to prevention programs that emphasize how optimal development is attainable for all children. Instead of group definitions of risk, Catterall proposes a different approach that views risk in relation to difficulties in school and independent of other qualities. This would prevent individual adolescents from being labeled at risk when really they are not.

Catterall's (1998) new approach concerning risk for children is called a

"performance-based" conception of risk. His work focuses on two things: first, he emphasizes that adolescents considered as at risk should be viewed as individuals; and secondly, his work attempts to analyze resilience in terms of the individual adolescent getting back to normal from low performance and alienation. In this study, he looks at grade eight students who demonstrate low achievement measures. He also examined another group that did not believe they would graduate, and who lacked a solid commitment to finish high school. Part of the analysis focused on the low achieving grade eight students who showed improvement, and the other part examined those who failed to commit to finishing high school, but who acquired confidence to complete high school over the same time period.

The study design included three clusters of questions that related to dropout behavior, commitment resilience, and academic resilience. The three questions focused on

(1) student decisions to drop out of school between grades 8 and 10, (2) resilience of commitment to persist in school for eighth graders who expressed doubts about eventually graduating, and (3) resilience of academic achievement by grade 10 among eighth graders who had shown signs of academic difficulty. (1998, p.307)

Catterall (1998) took his sample from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88). This was a national sample of eighth graders, which started in spring 1988 with follow-up every two years. In the first wave, a total of 24, 588 students were included in the sample. In the follow-up grade ten study, 20, 706 students participated. The students that had been assessed late in their grade eight year were also assessed in their grade 10 year. A sub-sample identified 4, 000 students who lacked confidence about completing high school, and 7, 000 students who were achieving C's, or lower, in English class over their grades six to grade eight school years.

The dropout behavior analysis investigates what the probability is of a grade eight student leaving high school before the spring of their grade ten year. For this analysis,

Catterall (1998) makes the assumption that the family and school environments contribute to drop out behavior; therefore, he uses them as indicators of the probabilities of dropping out. Commitment resilience encompasses those students who doubted themselves in grade eight, but improved their perceptions of their success by grade ten. Academic resilience is demonstrated when students with low levels of academic achievement in grade eight, attain higher grades in tenth grade. For example, students with mainly C's in English improved their grades by grade 10. He elaborates that, although the previous mentioned letter grades of C's seem adequate, the bottom 26 percent of all grade eight students function at this level. In addition, Catterall highlights that an estimated 40 percent of grade eight students have difficulty reading, and between 25 and 43 percent of eighth graders have writing difficulties that warrant at-risk status. He was interested in the degree to which a student improved from grade 8 to grade 10, and more resilience was assigned to those with the greater increase in grades. The data he collected for all the analyses came from reports by teachers, schools, parents, and students.

Catterall's (1998) school dropout study was based on the NELS: 88 survey, which looks at dropping out between eighth and tenth grade. This study provides unique data on dropping out at this earlier age because most prior research focused on older school drop outs. According to the NELS: 88, which obtains its findings from school reports and follow-up responses, approximately 6.1 percent of all students in this group dropped out between grade eight and ten. This data should be viewed as conservative because another five percent of the students were declared status unknown; school personnel did not know the whereabouts of this five percent. To understand drop out behavior, Catterall examined the significant sources of influence on school success such as school, family, community, and individual resilience. By this, he intended to assess the relationships between these influences and the decision to drop



out of school. The findings were similar to higher level student dropout research that shows the probability of dropping out is high for low-SES students; students with lower GPA, students who participate less in school functions, and students who lack confidence about completing school in grade 8. Catterall controlled for SES and parent education and found cultural background did not influence drop out behavior. Low SES was shown to be a definite predictor of dropouts. He had one finding that differed from other researchers: teacher responsiveness to students was not associated with early dropout. Catterall suggests that this difference occurs because the data was collected at the grade eight level and therefore, these findings did not fairly reflect the real experiences with teachers afterwards. Those students that did drop out, left after the survey in grade eight, and so this model had “low explanatory power.” He cautions that leaving school between grades 8 and 10 may be caused by influences unidentified in this study. Catterall also suggests the prediction of early dropout is more complex than that of the students who drop out later.

The most common reasons for leaving school given by those adolescents who dropped out during the NELS: 88 survey included disliking school, conflicts with teachers, and failure to cope. As well, one-fourth of all the female dropouts cited being pregnant or giving birth as their reasons for quitting school prematurely. Just over one tenth of the dropouts were asked to leave. An estimated 20 percent left because of employment opportunities; but, interestingly, the majority blamed failure and alienation in school as reasons for this, rather than commitments like a job or supporting a family.

Catterall (1998) defined student resilience as recovery from performance below one's ability or lack of commitment to school, rather than as variables that protect members of an at-risk group from detrimental outcomes. He describes “a tale of mobility” wherein 58 percent of the grade eight students with C's in English improved: 17 percent received A's, 41 percent

went up to B's, 33 percent continued to have C's, while 9 percent experienced a decline in performance levels. Even though fifteen percent of students in grade eight were uncertain they would finish high school, Catterall found an increase in grades causes a decrease in the students uncertainty. He also found that 42 percent of these students reported that they most likely would finish school and 50 percent confidently report they would graduate. A significant amount of students improved academically from grade eight to grade ten. Catterall estimates 64 percent of these grade eight at-risk students showed some form of resilience.

The findings of Catterall show that individual resources, family support, other supports from one's environment, success and participation, individual attitudes, and the school's responsiveness are sources of possible influence on recovery of commitment and performance. The significant factors to examine when looking at resilience, are the positive behaviors of a supportive family, student participation in activities, and the school's response to the individual needs of its students.

In terms of commitment resilience, all groups indicating doubts about finishing high school showed higher levels of resilience. Catterall (1998) states at the beginning of the two year period, higher resilience of confidence regarding graduation resulted from the student's SES, achievement scores, letter grades, and family support regarding schoolwork. He goes on to elaborate that more resilience amongst students not only equates with more participation in school activities, but also with more participation in extracurricular functions, higher teacher responsiveness, and fairer perceptions of the school's fair discipline cycle. Catterall noted that Hispanic youth demonstrate less commitment resilience regarding graduation confidence overall. In schools with high numbers of Hispanic youth gangs, the Hispanic students had fewer opportunities to improve their confidence about finishing school. Catterall also expressed concern with the predictors of resilience that did not appear within his work. He

expected that gender and family background would be a factor in resilience. But, contrary to his expectations, Catterall found that student gender does not influence commitment resilience, and that SES and parent education were not related to resilience for Hispanic and African American youth. While SES did not matter in the previous groups, for the overall group, SES was found to affect commitment resilience, specifically amongst white students.

An adolescent's academic resilience depends on the support of the family and the school's responsiveness to the student. For example, family restrictions on the amount of time children were allowed to watch television resulted in improved English grades. As well, student participation in school life was a factor in increasing academic resilience; however, gender was not. It appears that the lower the marks were, the more a student recovered. A pattern emerged in that some grade eight students who had low English marks and higher math marks recovered academically. Catterall suggests the high math marks might be an indicator of higher initial academic ability. He also concludes that those students most confident about graduating experienced more academic resilience.

Catterall's (1998) findings challenge the perception of schools and policymakers who consider that adolescents' achievement marks are static and do not vary over their academic career. He shows educators that resilience exists in our youth that appear to struggle academically in school, or lack commitment to complete their schooling. He demonstrates that our youth are not as at-risk or as underachieving as grade eight teachers and the general public might think. He also reveals how resilience can be influenced by different factors like the school responsiveness, students participation in school activities, gang problems, and the support of family related to school. A key point this work illustrates is the need to conceptualize risk based on the performance of individuals, rather than labeling all those within a group as at-risk. It is clear, from the 64% of the students who demonstrated



resilience, that many adolescents perform well and are dedicated to school even though they are part of an identifiable at-risk group. Another key point is the “tale of mobility” that demonstrates how half the grade eight students deemed at-risk improved significantly by grade ten and were no longer labeled as such. His findings present a catalyst for change in schools because stereotypes and fixed ideas about how students will perform academically, or about their commitment, can cause failure and alienate these students. Catterall wants teachers to think more optimistically about slow learners, and slow learners to be more positive about themselves. Lastly, he points out the important influence that student participation in school based activities and extracurricular events has on resilience; yet, to some degree it is up to policymakers to ensure equity exists for all students to participate: “resource allocations make activities more (or less) available to children; school scheduling systems increase or limit opportunities; provision of transportation can assist or hinder; and incentives and rewards can alter student, teacher, and parent choices” (p.327). This study of risk and resilience asks educators and policymakers to concentrate on looking at each student as an individual, and to reflect on the value and necessity of district policies regarding stereotypes as they relate to at-risk groups. Studies on resilience promote a positive perspective about this transitional state called adolescence, and foster the belief that all students can learn. This study continues to demonstrate the individual differences amongst early adolescents, especially amongst this large sample of grade eight students from the NELS: 88. A learning environment must accept all learners, and adapt its programs to meet the needs of the students. A letter grade of a ‘C’ in grade eight should not be considered predictive of that student’s career, because a ‘C’ student in grade eight can be an ‘A’ student in grade ten. This work also makes educators realize that letter grades for early adolescents must be viewed in the context of this transitional state called



adolescence. Teachers of early adolescence should decrease the external emphasis on performance evaluation and concentrate on the actual learning process.

### The Influence of Friends on Adolescence during Transition

By studying research on how friends influence an adolescent during transition, interventions can be designed to enhance the positive impact of these friends. Good peer relationships can impact the success or failure of a stressful life event like school transition. Hicks (1997) suggests educators need to view students' social motivation not as problematic, and in conflict with academic learning, but rather to think about ways to address both social and academic goals. If adolescents do not develop satisfactory friendships, they are more at risk of academic and adjustment difficulties in their later schooling and beyond. Adolescents are concerned about changes in their friendships during school transition. Friends influence adjustment. Specifically, the stability and closeness of friendships are important, rather than the number of friends. Information about friendships during adolescence is important if we wish to improve the success of school transition.

Berndt and Hawkins (1985) studied the effects of friendships on students' adjustment after the transition to junior high school. They acknowledged that transition could be a positive or negative experience for adolescents. They describe school transition as a normative transition; meaning that it happens at an expected time. Despite the predictable nature of a school transition, Berndt and Hawkins recognize that reactions to normative transitions vary depending on the adolescent. And, they suggest that the type of social support available to the student is responsible, in part, for these individual differences. Friendships are a large source of social support for adolescents and play a significant role in adjustment following school transition. Therefore, school transitions may be stressful because of the anticipated changes in friendships. In order to determine the effects of friendships on students' adjustment after the

transition to junior high school, they addressed the following three questions: (1) was the transition to junior high school stressful for the average sixth grader in the study? (2) how did the transition affect the children's friendships? (3) was the stability of the students' old friendships, or the support derived from their new friendships, associated with the adjustment to the new school?

To answer these questions, Berndt and Hawkins (1985) studied 101 students from four elementary schools. This longitudinal study took place over a one year period. The initial grade six group was assessed in the spring of 1982 and a second grade six group from the same school was assessed in the spring of 1983. Then, both groups were assessed for a second time in the following fall, when they would be in grade seven, and a third time in the spring of their grade seven year. First, the Perceived Competence Scale was used to measure the students' self-esteem (Harter, 1982), and second, the Classroom Environment Scale was used to determine the students' attitudes toward school (Moos and Trickett, 1974). Third, open-ended questions were used to assess students' overall attitude towards the transition. In addition, these students were asked what their likes and dislikes were about junior high school. To learn about the students' friendships, individual interview took place. The questions in this interview examined the students' relationships with their three closest friends: the frequency of their talks, the intimacy of their conversations, what they talked about and why, friends' faithfulness, and the amount of contact with friends. From the students responses, Berndt and Hawkins measured the students' responses about their friendships with four measures: first, the stability of the friendships was measured between any two times of the assessment periods, secondly each feature of friendship was measured through open-ended questions, third the amount of contact with friends was measured based on their responses to a set of questions about contact, and fourth, a measure of the quantity of close friends mentioned.

The responses of these questionnaires indicated a decrease in social self-esteem after the transition. Berndt and Hawkins (1985) suggest that this decrease is the result of moving to a larger school, and that making friends in this new school was harder than it was in their elementary school where they may have only had one class per grade. However, Berndt and Hawkins note that the decrease in social self-esteem did not change from the fall to the spring, which indicates that adjustment to a new junior high school takes more time; perhaps longer than in the grade seven year. Moreover, attitudes toward participation in class, and working with other students, declined after the transition. As well, attitudes towards school did not improve from the fall to the spring of grade seven. Conversely, students' feelings toward junior high school improved from the spring of grade six to the fall of grade seven. Apparently high school was not as bad as the students had originally thought. By the end of grade seven, though, they were not as happy with their new high school as they had been with their elementary school. When asked about their perceptions of high school, grade six students, before the transition, liked the idea of making new friends and had a general excitement about going to a new school. By grade seven, their likes centered on the increased responsibility of junior high school, and the new structure of their day. But, by the spring of grade seven, the novelty of the new structure had faded. In grade six, the students were concerned they would lose old friends in the transition, and there were comments about fearing older students and victimization. After the transition however, their dislikes included such things as specific classes, the increase and challenge of their academic work, the school structure, and the rules of the junior high school. They found these dislikes decreased by the spring of grade seven, although there was a shift to disliking certain teachers.

In the same study, Berndt and Hawkins (1985) found that the quality of friendships, not the quantity, were important determinants of a successful transition. In their sample, half of



those students who had close friendships in grade six retained these friendships until the fall of grade seven. Friendship stability did not change; it was no higher between the fall and the spring of seventh grade. After the transition, some students reported having fewer close friends, and this decrease continued from the fall of grade seven to the spring. After the transition, Berndt and Hawkins found an increase in the quality of friendships, and this increased even more from the fall of grade seven to the following spring. By the end of grade seven, students based their friendships on similarities, increased intimacy, and more mutually responsive interactions. Therefore, friendships are affected by transitions, and Berndt and Hawkins suggest that these changes may result from the students' social development and increasing maturity during grade seven. Lastly, Berndt and Hawkins did not find any correlation between friendship stability and measures of adjustment after transition. There was, however, a significant correlation between the closeness and contact with friends, and adjustment. For example, if students had more contact with their friends, they had increases in social self-esteem. And, if students had closer friendships, they also had higher ratings of affiliation among their peers. Friendships provide social support during school transitions and most adolescents appear to worry about changes that could occur in their friendships at this time. Although students reported a decrease in social self-esteem after transition, these friendships were of a better quality. Berndt and Hawkins' main conclusion is that the quality of the adolescents' friendships is related to the students' social adjustment both before and after the transition. This study continues to view adolescents positively during transition, and acknowledges that transition issues need to be assessed throughout the year. And, while this study recognizes that transition may be a positive or negative experience for adolescents, it shows how educators can support struggling adolescents during this time. By building friendships into the educational program, social support systems may empower adolescents to



cope with this essentially normative transition. These findings highlight how it is not just the quantity of friends that alleviate transition difficulties, but rather, the quality of close friendships.

Building on this concept, Berndt (1989) went on to examine supportive friendships amongst children because, in his view, good friendships act as stress reducers during major life events like a school transition. He attempted to determine the benefit of friendships on students in transition by examining prior research on the features and types of support available from friends. From this review, Berndt isolated the experiences of two students, a grade six boy and a grade six girl, to demonstrate how friends impact transition. Through the grade six girl, Berndt illustrates how a student's perception of future changes in friendships can set up the expectation of a traumatic transition:

I'm scared about the kids that I'm not going to know that are coming from other (elementary) schools. Mary (her best friend) isn't going to my school; I'll be by myself. I sort of want to be by myself, but I'm nervous starting out in a new school without a best friend right there with me (p. 308).

However, the comments from the grade six boy did not show the same concerns:

I think I really want to go, since I've been in this school since kindergarten and I want to change, and a lot of my friends will also be going to (the school)." When asked what he else he liked about moving to junior high, he said, "for the change, to meet new friends (p. 308).

These two excerpts suggest that the transition to junior high school is not so bad for these children so long as their friends are also going to the new school. Recognizing the importance of friends' support, Berndt poses the following questions: is the support received from friends clearly beneficial when confronted with stress, and what accounts for the individual differences in the types of support received?

In attempting to answer these questions, Berndt discovered four types of social support that a good relationship with others provides: esteem support, informational support,

instrumental support, and companionship support. The term "esteem support," which is also referred to as "emotional support," relates to how the statements or actions of others determine individual feelings of self worth.

"Informational support" is advice that helps an individual cope with problems. This is also referred to as "intimacy," and it should be noted that this form of support increases significantly between middle childhood and adolescence. Berndt (1989) regarded the development of intimate self-disclosure amongst adolescent friends as the transition in friendships from childhood to adolescence. This increase in intimacy demonstrates how most adolescent friendships become more supportive as the child matures.

"Instrumental support" describes the resources friendships provide in a time of need. He found that elementary aged children did not share as much with close friends, or with their peers, when confronted with situations where they might lose by sharing. Although he did find that junior high school students shared more with close friends than with other peers. This data supports the belief that adolescent friendships are more supportive than that of younger children.

"Companionship support" describes a situation in which the student develops a sense of belonging through having companions with whom to share activities. Berndt (1989) states that companionship is a significant part of friendship for children and adolescents; however, he is uncertain if companionship is more important in adolescence.

Although the features of support are comparable between childhood and adolescence, he states that various forms of close friendships provide different types of support. The support from friendships varies depending on age. Berndt's findings show adolescents experience more informational and instrumental support from friends than do elementary age children. He also identifies other features of support from adolescent friendships such as

affection, reliability, and faithfulness. However, Berndt's research illustrates that friendships are not entirely positive, because the students reported conflict and competition with friends as well. Thus, the effects of friends on adjustment can be explained only if both the supportive features and the problematic aspects of the adjustment are addressed simultaneously.

Although there has been research on adults that demonstrates the positive effects that friendships have on health and coping skills, there has been very little investigation of similar effects in children. Little research has been completed to assess both the quantity of friends that children name and the perceived support obtained from those friends. Children that reported fewer friends shared that their friendships were more supportive. As well, the quantity of friendships identified by children was unrelated to the measures of adjustment during transition. Based on these findings, Berndt (1989) shifts his focus onto the type of support children perceive their friends to provide rather than the number of friends acquired. Berndt's (1989) hypothesis, that supportive friendships positively affect adjustment, appears to have been substantiated by this data; but in order for these positive effects to occur, certain criteria must be met.

He states that friendships decrease negative reactions to stressful situations, but there is an exception: if the stressor includes the loss of a friendship, a student will have difficulty coping. If a friendship terminates, the absence of the support that was once provided can be a significant factor in mental and physical problems. Using the quotes from the boy and girl mentioned previously, Berndt highlights how the children anticipated the trauma that changes in friendship would cause when moving to a new school. And this fear appears to be justified because during the first year of junior high school, there are significant changes in friendships:

In the school transition study (Berndt & Hawkins, 1987), only about half of the close friendships identified in the spring of sixth grade were still close friendships in the fall



of seventh grade. Only about half of the close friendships identified in the fall of seventh grade were still close friendships in the following spring. (as cited in Berndt, 1989, p. 316)

These findings are significant because fluctuations in friendships appear to affect the success of the students' junior high school transition. Those children who had stable relationships between spring of grade six and the fall of grade seven had increasing popularity, and were assessed by their classmates as more social and less aggressive during the first part of junior high school. However, those who made many new friendships upon arrival at the new school were identified by classmates as less social and more aggressive; and teachers rated them as more involved in misconduct. This data shows educators the importance of stable friendships during a time of environmental change. It is important to note that when a student is making new friends, upon entrance into junior high school, it is not necessarily a sign of success; rather, the student may be having difficulty maintaining old friendships. Children benefit from the stability of their friendships during environmental changes because these friendships contribute to self-esteem and identity, and aid the development of qualities fostering resilience to life stress.

Berndt (1989) observes that, in a school transition, the significant source of stress is the new social environment and the primary stress reliever is friendship. At the beginning of a transition, a popularity contest begins that establishes sociometric status. This hierarchy of popularity may be viewed as stressful because the position an adolescent takes in a peer group has implications for both social life and self-concept. Friendships are influential in determining the position a child attains in a peer group at junior high school. The support from friends can improve social adjustment in various settings; however, Berndt emphasizes that the type of support needs to match the stressor in order to be beneficial. He also found that adolescents are quite specific about the type of help they seek from certain friends; for



example, a particular friend might provide emotional support, while another friend may be valuable only for math support.

To address how children access the various forms of support from friends, Berndt (1989) also looked at the personal and environmental determinants of such support. For friendships to be supportive, a student must be active in seeking that support. This ability to seek support is an indicator of one's ability to cope, thus children who claim that they have more support could be expected to have greater coping skills. Despite having good friendships though, personal factors and individual characteristics of a child, as well as the child's environmental factors and experiences, could hinder access to support.

Using Berndt's (1989) findings, school transition programs and other forms of interventions can be developed to decrease the disruption to children's friendships. The importance of friendship stability needs to be recognized and integrated into the student's transition program. He states that differences in friends' support depend partly on a child's personal characteristics, thus programs that focus solely on social issues may not be enough to support an individual child. Some students need not only a supportive learning environment, but they also need to learn the skills to make and maintain friendships. Lastly, Berndt has shown educators that being in a social relationship is one skill, but it is quite another skill to access and obtain specific support from friends. A student may have friends but may not be receiving the relevant support he or she needs.

Berndt and Keefe (1995) studied the influence of friendship on students' adjustment after the transition to junior high school. One purpose of this study was to identify how much a friend's adjustment to school determined another adolescent's adjustment. Secondly, they investigated how certain features of friendship affect adjustment differently. To determine how the individual characteristics of friends can influence transition, they set up three goals.

First, they wanted to know how much a friend could influence another's adjustment during transition. Goal number two involved using two measures to compare the estimates of their friends' influence. The third goal was to see whether there was a difference in the influence of friends between boys and girls. Berndt and Keefe used a short-term longitudinal study that looked at the characteristics of student friendships in the fall, and then related these characteristics to changes in student adjustment to school between the fall and the spring. To summarize their goals, Berndt and Keefe determined how the success of a friend influences an adolescent's adjustment, and how the characteristics of this friendship affects their school adjustment.

Berndt and Keefe's (1995) subjects were from three public schools and all the grade seven and eight students were invited to participate. The original sample had 305 students, however eight students moved throughout the year so the final sample had 297 students; 194 girls and 103 boys. The mean age of the students was thirteen years and eight months. Over 95 percent of the sample were white, and the families were from working-class or middle-class families. In November or December, a series of questionnaires were administered within a 40 minute period asking students about their behavior, their best friends' behavior, and the characteristics of their best friendships. Assessment of involvement and disruption was assessed with six items from the scale of Berndt and Miller (1990). Disruption was assessed with six items adapted from the Devereux Elementary School Behavior Rating Scale (Spivack and Swift, 1966). The data about students' reports on friends and perceptions of friends' behavior was collected by asking them to list the names of their three best friends in numerical order, and 91 percent of the student's named three friends in both the fall and spring. Eight percent identified only two friends, and the other one percent listed one friend or none. To assess friendship features, students answered questions adapted from Berndt and Perry (1986).

Students were asked 20 questions about each of the friends they identified. Twelve questions focused on the positive features of friendship (intimate self-disclosure, self-esteem, and pro-social behavior) and the other eight questions were about the negative features. During the same forty minute period, the English and Math teachers also rated the students' involvement and disruption in class on a similar questionnaire.

In this study, the researchers make the assumption that the first friend named was the student's best friend. Based on this assumption, a mean score was calculated for the positive features listed for the best friend, the second friend, and the third. The results showed that students view their best friend more positively than the second friend and the second friend more than the third. The results also indicated friendships were perceived to be more positive in the spring than the fall. Students also perceived their best friend to have less negative qualities than their second or third ranked friends. In addition, students felt they had a more stable relationship with their best friend, and the researchers used this fact to indicate the first friend really was their best friend.

Perceived similarity, accuracy of students' reports, and actual similarity determined the influence of the friends' adjustment to school. Perceived similarity describes how students equate their experiences at school with that of their best friend. Berncrt and Keefe (1995) found the correlations for the students' perceptions of behavioral similarities with their friends were significant. The girls thought they were more like their friends in regards to disruptive behavior than the boys. If a girl perceived her friend to be more disruptive in the fall, she claimed more disruption for herself during the year. Interestingly, although the students think they are similar to their friends, the research showed that the accuracy of these perceptions had very low correlations, especially for the boys. The accuracy of these student's self-reports indicated otherwise, meaning that of the 16 accuracy correlations, all except one were

lower than the parallel correlations for their perceived similarity. For example, when the boys were asked about their friends' involvement and disruptive behavior, their answers were inaccurate. It seems that boys were less knowledgeable about their best friends than the girls, specifically about their friends' behavior during school.

In terms of actual similarity, the students were less similar to their friends than they perceived themselves to be. However, it should be noted that many of the actual-similarity correlations were significant. For example, there were 20 correlations regarding the similarity to multiple friends, and 15 were higher than the correlations for being similar to a best friend. This means there was more similarity between the student and their group of friends. Another interesting finding was that the teachers rated 13 out of 16 correlations for friends' actual similarity about involvement and disruption, and these were higher than what the students reported. This means that teachers think close friends are more alike than what their students actually reported.

An analysis of the relation between friends' adjustment and the changes in students' adjustment showed students' adjustment from the fall to the spring was strongly related, and this demonstrated continuity. Berndt and Keefe (1995) used the measures of perceived adjustment of friends to predict student adjustment. If, in the fall, a student perceived his or her friends to be more involved in school life, then that student became more involved during the school year as well. Similarly, students became more disruptive if they perceived their friends to be disruptive in the fall. Therefore, self-reports about student involvement and disruption depend on an individual's perceptions of their friends' behavior. Other predictors of adjustment from the fall to the spring were not only dependent on how a particular friend adjusted, but also on how the involvement of a student's multiple friends was rated by their teacher in the fall. Also, different self-reports about disruptive behavior could be determined



by the disruption reported by best friends and multiple friends. Students' academic letter grades could be determined as well, by the letter grades of their multiple friends in the fall. This study by Berndt and Keefe shows how friends influence adjustment in school.

These findings not only confirm that friends influence school adjustment, but also they found that certain friendship features affect school adjustment. For girls, a best friend had more of an impact on adjustment than for boys. If a girl noted more disruption by her best friend, her self-report of disruption increased throughout the year. However, the boys did not demonstrate this in their self-reports.

Students' involvement and disruption was determined by the students' perceptions of their friendships. For example, if the students perceived their friendships positively, they reported higher involvement in their self-reports. The teachers of these students also rated them as more involved. Conversely, if students' perceived their friendships negatively, they reported less involvement and were more disruptive at school. Teachers also rated them as more disruptive if these students viewed their multiple friends negatively. If students described stable friendships, their self-reports indicated that they had less disruptive behavior, better letter grades, and teachers identified them as being more involved and less problematic.

Although student adjustment in the fall was the best predictor of adjustment in the spring, the positive and negative features of friends affected adjustment. Self-reported involvement was determined by the positive attributes of a student's best friend. If a good friend was very supportive, this increased the friend's involvement. A similar pattern emerged in which best friends' and multiple friends' negative attributes predicted changes in self-reported disruption. Students' disruptive behavior rises with negative relationships with friends.

This data echoes situations I see amongst grade eight students and their friends in a junior high school setting. Although I can identify with many of the positive aspects in this research, a few criticisms need to be mentioned. This was a small sample based only on three schools, and an urban population was absent. Another criticism is that this study excluded students from low socioeconomic groups and so the impact of poverty on friendships remains unexamined. Lastly, this was only a five month longitudinal study. Friendships do change with transition, and there is a range of emotions being experienced with these fluctuations over the initial year, and perhaps even longer. Some students appear to be okay with changes in friendships upon arrival, and others find the loss of old friendships difficult to accept. I often hear "I don't hang out with so and so anymore but we are forever friends." Some students experience changes immediately in September and, for others, the loss or changes in friendship do not occur until later in the year. My concern is that there is an assumption in this study that the majority of students have friends, when in reality this is not always so. I believe friends do affect adjustment, however the absence of friendships is not addressed in this study, even though one percent of the students could not name one or any friends. Most students in high school want to belong, therefore it is dangerous to ask them to name their friends, because in the absence of friendships, they will invent close friends in order to not be different. Few students are going to admit they have no friends. At lunch, many students who do not fit in, ask teachers if they can sit in their classrooms to avoid the social scene. This may be an individual choice to sit alone or go to a classroom, but some students have not found acceptance amongst their peers, or they do not have the social skills required to build and maintain a friendship. There is a definite need for guidance programs promoting how to make new friends during this transition year to ensure these students benefit from the positive aspects of friendship. I also see the negative features of certain friendships predicting

increases in the disruptive behavior of others. In the frenzy of the new term, students try to establish where they fit in socially amongst all these same age and older students, and this reaffirms Berndt and Keefe's (1995) hierarchy of popularity. In this time of peak vulnerability, I have seen students get rejected by their old friends and thus seek acceptance from any group that will take them. For example, one particular boy decided to make friends with what we call our "smoke pit crew." This group started leaving the school property to go to a far corner of a field to smoke marijuana. The Vice-Principal caught this group one afternoon, and when I spent time with this grade eight boy, he was open about experimenting because he wanted to fit in. The family was shocked and steps were taken afterwards to support this boy in making better choices for himself and his friendships.

A key point in the study is that the similarity correlations for multiple friends' adjustment were higher than that of a best friend's adjustment. This means that the students identify themselves more with a group of friends. The need to belong to a group is so strong that new grade eight students will try anything or say whatever is necessary to fit in. In my experience, these groups of multiple friends give the students their identities, whether that is the jocks, the computer geeks, the student council, the preppies, hoodies, or the red neck alley kids. Without support from the environmental factors like teachers or counselors, it is difficult for grade eight students to change their social status within the school. Knowing that good, stable friendships are positive for adjustment, more work needs to be done in schools to support those students wanting to make changes amongst negative peer groups. It is not easy for a student to change friends, especially in a small school setting. There is loyalty and faithfulness amongst our youth regarding friendships that is like a secret code that cannot be known to adults. Disruptive students who want to change have great difficulty leaving a particular social group and they report feelings of helplessness when attempting to alter their



social status. It often takes a positive peer or multiple friends support to ensure change can occur.

I have two concerns about this study, one is how the grades of multiple friends predicted changes in a student's grades, and the other is how teachers' perceptions of students' involvement can be predicted by multiple friends' involvement. This means that educators could be making assumptions about students' ability and learning styles based on who these students keep as friends. Teachers may have different expectations for someone if they identify them with a particular group of students. This puts that student at risk when maybe they are not. The increase in the closeness of adolescent friendships, that this new level of intimacy does provide positive support, suggests educators need to help those who have not developed these friendships or who have lost their friends due to transition. The types of support peers can offer one another is an underutilized resource in our schools. As peer tutors or peer counselors, adolescents can be empowered by their teachers and counselors to provide emotional, social, and academic support to one another, to improve adjustment difficulties during school transition.

#### Adolescent Stress, Social Support and Adjustment

As mentioned previously, many adolescents experience no difficulties when faced with educational, physical, emotional, cognitive, and social changes. However, some adolescents experience adjustment problems like decreases in self-concept, less motivation, and feelings of depression towards school. Instead of perceiving these difficulties to be part of adolescence, Wenz-Gross, Siperstein, Untch, and Widaman (1997) investigated the different types of stress occurring during middle school and identify how these stressors relate to adjustment. Beyond identifying the different types of stress students experienced, the researchers wanted to know if certain stressors affected adjustment more than others. To adjust to stress, and deal with



changes in their environment, adolescents use their social support to alleviate stress.

Understanding an adolescent's social support by learning about the source and type of support provided could lead to enhanced adjustment strategies.

It was expected that the differing types of stressors and social supports would relate differentially to adjustment outcomes and reflect a general matching of domains of stress and domains of support in predicting the differing types of adjustment (1997, p.132)

These researchers predicted that certain stressors and, their sources, and types of social support available would influence not only an adolescent's affect towards school, but also how they felt about themselves, and their feelings of depression. First, these researchers hypothesized that academic stressors (any incident impeding a student's perceptions of competence) and the emotional and problem solving support provided by the family and adult support in the school, would contribute most significantly to an adolescents' self-concept. They predicted that peer stressors and peer companionship would play the greatest role in an adolescents' social self-concept. Their second hypothesis acknowledges the developmental and emotional value of friends during adolescence: and that stress related to peers would be the greatest stressor at school, and would determine feelings of depression. The third hypothesis was that any type of school stress would be connected to how the student felt about school.

The participants for this study on stress, social support and adjustment included 482 students: 197 sixth graders (86 boys and 111 girls), 151 seventh graders (63 boys and 88 girls), and 134 eighth graders (63 boys and 71 girls). Seventy-one of the participants (34 girls and 37 boys) were involved with special education services, either in a resource room or had support in the regular classroom. The students were all from three middle schools in middle- to upper-middle income suburban communities in the Northeastern United States. Measures were taken for school stress, social support, adjustment and adolescent characteristics. To measure school stress, the students were assessed using the School Stress Inventory (Siperstein, and Wenz-

Gross, 1997). This measure indicated whether or not a student experienced a stressor in school, and if yes, the adolescent then identified the amount of stress that that particular stressor inflicted, ranging from not upset to very upset. To measure social support and the four different types of support (emotional, informational, instrumental and companionship), an interview called "My Family and Friends" was used (Reid, Landesman, Treder, and Jaccard, 1989). Students identified who they would go to for support and their choices were put into relationship categories: "people in the home, adults outside the home and peers" (1997, p.135). Four measures were used to determine adjustment: two sub-scales from the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985), called the Scholastic Competence and Social Acceptance sections; the Children's Depression Inventory-Short Form (Kovacs, 1992), the School Environment Scale (Elias, M. J., Ubriaco, M., Reese, A. M., Gara, M., Rothbaum, P.A., and Haviland, M., 1992), and lastly, the Liking of School Questionnaire, which was created for this study. The adolescent characteristics mentioned are grade point average (GPA), gender, academic placement (special education setting or regular classroom), and current grade level. Trained personnel took the measurements sessions, one week apart. To introduce this study, the students were told its purpose was to not only identify from a student perspective, the significant stressors in middle school but also to determine who the students sought help from when they were stressed. How they felt about school and themselves was also shared.

The results were discussed in terms of academic self-concept, social acceptance self-concept, feelings of depression, and the liking of school. The researchers predicted the academic stressors and the support from the family, and adults not in the home could determine academic self-concept. This was partially true. The results indicated that lower academic self-concept could be predicted if the student had any of the following features: a low GPA, increased academic stress, little peer stress, were involved in special education, or

has less emotional support from the family. They also predicted that social acceptance self-concept would be influenced by stress related to peers, and their companionship support. The data provided support for this prediction. Low social acceptance self-concept could be predicted if a student had any one or more of the following features: a grade eight student, attained a high GPA, experienced increased peer stress, had less stress about their teacher/rules, received less companionship support from peers, and had greater problem-solving support from peers. Wenz-Gross et al. also hypothesized that feelings of depression could be predicted by the stress related to peers and the type emotional support from the family. This study provided support for this hypothesis. The main findings demonstrated that girls with higher academic stress had more feelings of depression. Furthermore, a family's emotional support moderated the effects of peer stress on feelings of depression; but only when peer stress was high. It played no role when peer stress was low. The hypothesis that the liking of school would be influenced by the academic, peer related, and teacher/rule related school stressors, as well as the emotional support from the family and adults not in the home, was only partially supported. They found that grade seven or eight boys with more teacher/rules stress, and little emotional family support, did not like school as much as a grade six boys with the same profile. Also associated with liking school was the problem solving support from adults not in the home, which decreased the effects of teacher/rule stress, especially when teacher/rules stress was high.

These findings suggest that it is important not only to know the type of stress an adolescent experiences, but also the source and type of social support available to adolescents. The data shows that different stressors and different sources and types of support could be utilized to predict adjustment outcomes. In terms of how adolescents feel about themselves, academic, peer related and teacher/rules stressors all have a role. For example, high academic

stress is viewed as connected to poor academic self-concept, and high peer stress is linked to poor self-concept. "These findings reflect a match between the nature of the stress and the area of adjustment that is domain specific and predictable" (1997, p.144). Strangely, some findings contradicted the predictions of Wenz-Gross et al. in that greater peer-related stress predicted higher academic self-concept, not lower. Another contradiction is that higher social self-concept occurred with increased teacher/rules stress. Based on a developmental perspective, the researchers explain this finding by suggesting that capable academic students might be seen as "nerds" and as a result they may get more peer stress through teasing. Conversely, those students who are defiant and break the rules might be seen as "cool" and thus gain social acceptance. The findings of Wenz-Gross et al. (1997) were consistent with those of Eckert, who concluded by stating "no person who is simply docile toward adults can retain status in adolescent peer society" (as cited in Wenz-Gross, 1997, p.145). These cultural norms of adolescence may explain how higher peer stress is associated with higher academic self-concept, and greater teacher/rules stress corresponds to increases in social acceptance self-concept. "This may change in high school, however, when students are more comfortable with who they are and cliques and niches are more solidified" (Wenz-Gross et al., 1997, p.145).

This research also shows us how types of support are related to adolescents' feelings about the self. The degree of parental involvement predicts a student's academic achievement, and the quality of peer support determines the adolescent's sense of self socially. Peer stress was the most significant stressor related to feelings of depression. This highlights how having a sense of belonging to a peer group is crucial at this age. At the same time, although adolescents are seeking their independence away from their home relationships, and developing deeper peer relations, the family alleviates the negative emotional influences of problems with peers. In terms of liking school, the only stressor that decreased liking school



was teacher/rules stress. This stressor depicted a student's relationship with their school and the staff, at a time when adolescents are seeking autonomy, a conflict with a teacher may influence whether or not they like school. Finally, an adolescent's characteristics like their GPA influence their academic and social self-concept. If a student had a high GPA, they had a high academic, but low social self-concept. This reaffirms that being smart is not perceived to be cool in middle school.

The major contribution of this research is that it looks at stress, social support, and adjustment related to adolescence. A strength of this study is that the data is based on the student perspective. Using the student perspective acknowledges that an adolescent culture does exist, and that adults cannot assume adolescents' stress and social support are comparable to adults. It is also worth noting that this study also includes students involved in the various special education programs, because these students often get pulled out when surveys are administered. It would be interesting to pursue a more in depth study of the specific stressors and the sources and types of social support of students involved in special education programs. I have two criticisms of this study: one, as I have mentioned in regards to previous studies, is the absence of low socioeconomic students, and two is that it occurred only over a one week time period. In my experience, low socioeconomic students experience similar stressors, like peer related stressors; however, the issues are not the same as those for the middle- to upper class students. The types of social support and sources of support for low socioeconomic students need to be examined.

This study provides an understanding of the various stressors and lead to ways of improving and enhancing adjustment during adolescence could be developed. This work acknowledges the enormous amount of stress adolescents face, both developmentally and school-related, which occurs at a time when their relationships with peers, family, and school

personnel are also changing. This approach helps educators learn about specific stressors and defines the specific supports required in order to improve adolescent self-concept, and enhance students attitudes towards school.

This chapter offers a more positive perspective regarding adolescence during stressful situations like school transition. The risk and resilience research challenges educators and policymakers to use the term risk cautiously. Catterall's (1998) work is valuable because he emphasizes the need to conceptualize risk on an individual basis, and not to classify individuals as at-risk based on membership in at-risk groups. In my school, there is a group of students that hang out in the "smoke pit" and they wear hoods. They are referred to as "Hoodies." Many teachers conclude that the members of this group are at risk because of their association with each other and their dress code. These teachers also report how surprised they are when these students excel on tests. The attitude of these teachers highlights Catterall's concern regarding our rather general use of the term risk. Catterall provides a positive example of academic resilience through his tale of mobility, and educators should be discussing these important findings. The enormous changes occurring in Grade 8 affect the students in so many ways that getting a letter grade of a C at this time is not always indicative of their potential.

The protective factors identified by Grossman et al. (1992) can be identified and used as part of a transition program. During transition both the elementary and high schools should communicate with each other regarding the individual needs of each child. For example, if a child is in a low SES setting, or has low self-esteem, a prevention plan to provide the necessary support should be put in place for that individual prior to their arrival at junior high school. Grossman et al. (1992) confirmed not only the need for family involvement in the transition process, but the need to recognize the powerful effect a child's perception of family cohesion

can have on school success. For example, inviting families into the school for a pancake breakfast, or a fun day could improve communication between the student, school and family, thus enhancing adjustment.

The findings of Berndt and Hawkins (1985) confirms the important influence of friends during transition. And as Hicks (1997) states, educators need to view a student's social motivation positively, and not in conflict with academic learning. As Berndt and Hawkins point out, it is important to note that it is not the number of friends that is significant, rather the child's perception of the quality of friendships. Good, stable friendships are stress reducers during school transition. Therefore, it is not necessarily positive if a student begins to make numerous new friends. Educators need to recognize the different types of support various friends provide, and that utilizing peers throughout the transition process should improve adjustment. For example, peer tutors and peer counselors provide invaluable support to a transitioning child because they alleviate concerns regarding older students and victimization.

## Chapter Five

### How Schools Respond to Transition

A school's response to helping students make important transitions begins with an awareness of the nature of transitions that students must make. Transitions involve numerous changes and, whether or not these changes are significant depends on the individual. O'Dell and Eisenberg (1989) wrote an article specifically for school counselors that explains the nature of transitions; however, this information could be implemented by all school staff. This article outlines six types of transitions, some of which may occur simultaneously.

The first transition is environmental, which occurs when a student moves from one setting to another. The second is a physical transition that happens when there are changes within a person's body, while the third is a status transition that describes a change in a

person's life role – as would occur when leaving middle school for high school, or changing jobs. The fourth category describes a behavioral transition in which a person acquires new skills and thus acts differently within their environment. Fifth, is a psychological transition that results when a person changes how they perceive and process information. And the last transition refers to a change within a family system, like birth, death and divorce. O'Dell and Eisenberg (1989) also outline the common characteristics and emotions of transitions. First, it is important to recognize that all transitions involve both internal and external change. Secondly, the nature of transitions is that they incorporate novel and different situations. Thirdly, transitions involve an element of loss - either closure, leaving, or a form of separation. The last characteristic is that coping and adaptation are required for all transitions. The level of coping and adaptation depends on how serious the individual perceives the particular nature of the transition to be. The authors hold that three central emotions of every transition are excitement, anxiety, and sadness. The excitement for many adolescents is not only the new freedom from their parents' control, but also the new opportunities presented to them. Anxiety is experienced when the student feels unprepared for the transition, and this anxiety can reach a point where the student may detest the new situation. Sadness is part of the loss experienced with a transition; however, this should soon pass, and school personnel need to recognize when a student's sadness persists, especially in a situation that promotes excitement and happiness. Moreover, the unique aspect of a transition is that the intensity of the emotions depends on the particular individual.

O'Dell and Eisenberg (1989) categorize several influential supports and obstacles that are important to recognize when managing transitions: internal conditions, external conditions, and inherent conditions. First there are internal conditions, which incorporate a person's expectations, skills and self-confidence. Students making the transition from elementary



school to junior high school who are unsure of themselves and think it will be a horrible experience are likely to make this transition a difficult time. Conversely, students who perceive themselves as confident, and making lots of new friends, will likely make the experience exciting. Secondly, O'Dell and Eisenberg describe external conditions, which include the influence that others have on a student. For example, an older sibling who has had a bad transition from elementary school to junior high might instill a negative perspective or belief system prior in their younger siblings prior to this siblings arrival at junior high school. O'Dell and Eisenberg (1989) highlight how responding to transition begins with the above-mentioned awareness which can then be transformed into action.

Therefore, they propose a school guidance program based on the following two questions:

1. What are the predictable transitions I can expect the students assigned to me to be encountering now in their lives? 2. What are the possible nonpredictable transitions the students assigned to me may encounter now in their lives? (O'Dell & Eisenberg, 1989, p.290)

A school change from elementary school to junior, middle, or high school is a significant predictable environmental transition. O'Dell and Eisenberg (1989) regard these predictable transitions as excellent topics for group guidance. By using a group approach, coping skills could be taught to decrease anxiety. Also, if necessary, individual counseling may be provided for some students who need privacy and safety to move through their transition. Informing parents about what constitutes a predictable transition, and teaching them how they can be supportive, is also beneficial. Overall, a school staff that understands transitions can use this information to create group and individual programs which will add give the adolescent skills that will not only be useful for future transitions, but also give them a sense of self control over future "important life events."

Elias, Ubriaco, Reese, Gara, Roghbaum, and Haviland (1992) developed measures of adaptation in schools in order to identify issues of transition adjustment and student stress related to adjustment. They called this measure the Survey of Adaptational Tasks of Middle School – SAT – MS. For example, evidence from Elias et al. suggests that competent students leaving elementary school will have difficulties with transition to middle school; therefore, schools could use the results of these adaptation measures to understand which tasks create the difficulties. Elias et al. have developed a “measure of adaptation” that addresses academic difficulties and interpersonal matters that occur in middle school. The basic principle of this measure focuses on “behavior-in-situations” experienced by students coping with a transition. The types of situations a student might experience at their new school may include: “eating in a larger cafeteria, forgetting one’s locker combination, being made fun of in the locker room, and having harder schoolwork” (Elias et al., 1992, p.44).

Elias et al. (1992) chose 33 transition items to investigate the tasks that cause the difficulties and that required more adaptive effort. In Study 1, the researchers used 78 grade six boys and 77 grade six girls from a middle school (Grades six to eight) of 550 students. The assessments were done approximately one month after the students transitioned to middle school. In a suburban community of 15, 000, this school had four elementary schools feeding into it and was predominantly white, blue-collar, and had an average rate of parental separation and divorce for its region. Besides the assessment of middle school adaptation, SAT-MS, these researchers administered the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale for Children (Piers, 1969); the AML (Cowen, E., Trost, M., Izzo, L., Lorion, R., Dorr, D., and Isaacson, R., 1975), which is rated by teachers to cover acting-out, moodiness, and learning; an evaluation of achievement was done by obtaining the first marking periods report cards, and a series of direct questions regarding adjustment to middle school. The questions included

How much do you like middle school (1 = very much, 3 = it's ok, 5 = not at all)?  
 How long has it taken you to get used to middle school (1 = a few days, 2 = 1 - 2 weeks, 3 = 1 month, 4 = not used to it yet)? How hard has it been to change from elementary to middle school (1 = very easy, 3 = a little easy and a little hard, 5 = very hard)? (p. 45)

By using these measures, they identified four categories of adaptational tasks: Substance Abuse, Peer Relationships, Conflicts with Authorities and Older Students, and Academic Pressures.

Study 2 was to determine whether or not the SAT-MS would be stable when applied to a different population. This study was undertaken with a predominantly nonwhite, urban, inner city group of grade six students. The students' characteristics in this study were: low socioeconomic status, high parental marital disruption, substance abuse, social mobility, crime, and frequent use of mental health and child welfare agencies. It is important to note that the assessment for this group was not done until two months into middle school, as opposed to the first study that examined students after one month. The urban participants reported more problematic adaptation issues. The girls had decreases in their perceived social competence if they had adaptational difficulties related to peers. The girls also had lower perceived cognitive-academic competence if they experienced academic difficulties at this time. If boys had lower competence, it was associated consistently to problems with peers. Boys' perception of competence was related to more categories of adaptation difficulties than that of the girls.

Interestingly, Elias et al (1992) point out in their discussion that students who keep up with their work, keep their peer and substance abuse issues outside the class, and maintain good relationships with school staff, can appear to be well-adjusted; however, adjustment must be addressed in context, and information from outside sources should be collected in future assessments. This research illustrates patterns of difficulties to educators and policy makers



and enables the modification of programs to promote successful transitions through preventative interventions. The researchers concurred with Felner and Adan (1988, as cited in Elias et al., 1992, p. 54) that modifying the organization of secondary schools could create less flux in student groupings and increase contact with a core set of teachers during the first years in the school.

Zitzow (1992) developed another valuable tool for assessing student stress is the school adjustment rating by self-report. He states that educators need to improve how they respond to student stress by taking into account the intensity and patterns of experiences of students. His work highlights that individual perception of stress is paramount in determining the stressor's intensity. His measure was designed to assess student self-perceptions of stress, including normal and extreme adjustive demands. The results ranked the top twenty stressors according to whether they were academic, personal or social issues. Some of the academic issues included school suspension, which ranked as number four; receiving the letter grade D or F on a test was number six, public speaking was number eight, and pressure to attain the letter grade A or B ranked number twelve. Personal issues also ranked in the top twenty; specifically, responsibility for unwanted pregnancy, feeling worthless, feeling guilty, fear of pregnancy, and anxiousness. Social issues in the top twenty included being teased, pressure to use substances, pressure to have sex, feelings of not fitting in, and fear of physical harm. Zitzow states that the academic, social, family, and personal environments all influence the students' perceived stress and ability to adjust to the school environment. He also found urban areas reported more social items as stressors when compared to rural and semi-rural environments. This self-assessment encourages the educator to pursue beyond the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic to adolescent developmental and adjustive issues and provides valuable information for school counselors and teachers. This tool will help to improve the school's response to



transition by considering the intensity of stress and identifying the commonality of student experiences. Zitzow suggests these self-reports could be used as report cards to school districts and policy makers to set priorities for programs and the allocation of resources.

The results of Zitzow's (1992) findings indicate the need for a transition program to prevent adjustment difficulties in schools. The research of Smith (1997) investigated three types of transition programs: full, partial, and none at all; and in the process of this analysis discovered that the type of program available seemed dependent on the demographics of the school's catchment area. She studied the effects of eighth-grade transition programs on high school retention and experiences. Specifically, she investigated the long term effects of transition programs in terms of students' dropping out and their performance in high school through their grades. For this, she used the data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey including the base-year, 1988, the first follow-up, 1990, and the second follow-up in 1992. The NELS:88 sample included 1,035 public, Catholic, and private schools, and she randomly chose 30 grade eight students from each school. She only examined the data from grade eight students in the public schools and the students had to have made a transition to a separate high school. The data also included information from eighth graders; their parents, teachers, and schools. There was also a follow-up survey for students no longer in school four years later. She grouped the school transition programs according to their target audience – parent, student or school staff. A 'full transition program' offered programs involving all three target audiences. Schools that targeted only one or two of these target audiences were considered to have a 'partial transition program.' Lastly, schools that offered nothing to any of the above mentioned target audiences were identified as not having a transitional program.

After comparing the different programs, Smith (1997) analyzed the most and least common practices. The most common practice in full and partial programs was for the new

counselor to meet the incoming grade eight students. Implementation of this practice occurred in 83% of the full transition programs and 74% of the partial programs. The least common practice was to match older siblings with their grade eight sibling. This occurred in 15% of each category. The most significant difference between the full and partial programs, were the various approaches used with the parents or staff. Seventy-eight percent of the full transition programs had their new grade eight parents visit the high school, whereas only 35% of schools with partial programs had their parents visit. In addition, the full transition programs had a meeting between the middle and high school teachers 63% of the time, and of those schools with the partial programs, only 14% of the schools had this form of communication between schools. The main difference between the full and partial transition programs was the level of adult support for the transition process. Smith noted a significant background difference between the students. Those students receiving the full transition program were from higher socioeconomic status families, which had higher parental education, and occupational status. Smith observed an inequity regarding resources for transition programs based on particular community's socioeconomic status. There were no differences between students' academic and behavior backgrounds; however, whether or not students took advantage of the programs available to them was debatable. School differences suggest that those with full transition programs had more support from their parents, and in those schools, the students reported having better learning relationships with their teachers. She observed that schools with full transition programs also had the highest number of grade eight students. But, these programs were not always implemented to deal specifically with transition, rather "to compensate for the greater organizational demands involved in keeping track of large numbers of eighth-grade students" (Smith, 1997, p.147).

Smith (1997) praises middle schools for their commitment to support student transitions and she associates this commitment with past reasons for developing these schools. Students with access to either a full or partial transition program had a lower drop out rate when compared to students with no program. Similarly, full transition programs were not only more effective at preventing dropouts, they also increased academic performance. Making the assumption there are no differences between the students or their schools, Smith states students on either a full or partial transition program had higher GPA when compared to students without either program in their school. Partial transition programs were not as effective as full programs with regards to student retention. Therefore, Smith concluded by stating that transition programs are effective in supporting student success in high school. The key points were that the full transition programs in middle schools decreased drop out rates and increased academic performance in high school. The benefits of transition programs work only with the commitment of the school, and the shared vision is for all students' successful transition. The commitment to developing a full transition program is critical, and must be acknowledged within the context of other school aspects. For example, she insists educators cannot overlook the fact that elementary schools have higher retention rates than middle schools. She discusses how transition programs reduce the negative affects of the transition, although some of the programs appear to be designed for organizational purposes to compensate for the overcrowding. As a result of her findings, Smith concludes by suggesting organizational changes in schools:

There is clearly greater good to be gained by reducing the contextual problem initially—by reducing the numbers of students for which school staff must be responsible. This result is supported by the positive effects on retention noted by the presence of supportive school learning environment. (p.150)

Knowing the necessity and benefits of transition programs, how should a school respond to a student during transition? Smith (1997) recommends that the success of students is dependent on the commitment of all the players in the transition process: the students, school staff, parents, and the community.

Hertzog and Morgan (1996) suggested developing a 'Transition Team' to break the barriers between middle school and high school for student success. This team would include staff and students from each of the schools, and parents from both the sending and receiving schools. When selecting the students to participate on the team, they suggest considering 'marginal' students rather than the stereotypical high academic or socially adept students. The purpose of the parents becoming part of the team is to alleviate their fears because parental fears are transferred to their children. Hertzog and Morgan build their transition team beginning with a retreat to develop a shared vision. On this retreat, the team develops a timeline for the school year with a minimum of one transition activity per month. During the summer before the students arrive at their new high school, they suggest a fun activity. Some of the suggested activities for transition teams include: an eighth grade culminating activity, registration activities conducted by the school counselor, parent information nights, pen pals (ninth grade/eighth grade), mentoring programs (high school/middle school), visits to the high school, student shadow (buddy program), high school administrator shadow of an eighth grade student, advisory program at the high school, and a cocurricular fair. The transition team provides support throughout the year to the new students and the program ends in the spring of their first year in high school. The team approach helps "eighth grade students develop an understanding of the academic rigors and cocurricular options at the high school" and "the team concept also enlightens the high school faculty about the academic and social needs of the incoming class"(p.36). This team approach gets the participating schools interacting;



builds partnerships with parents, gives students a voice and ownership of their transition, and reduces student stress.

The implementation of transition programs needs to continue, and ideally, educators will strive to develop more comprehensive programs for the success of students. As a school counselor, I see the classroom teacher not only overwhelmed by the number of students she is responsible for in a day, but she is subject to increasing isolation due to curriculum driven academic specialties. The timetable system also limits the quality of relationships between colleagues, students, parents and the community. Therefore, the teacher alone is not capable of ensuring success; the transition process requires a team approach. I reviewed the 'team' approach because change and improvement lie with the power of the community that includes students, parents, school staff and the community.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusions

The transition from elementary to middle, junior or high school is an individual process influenced by the dramatic number of developmental changes, and the presenting opportunities provided by an adolescents varying levels of social environments. As Youngman (1978) noted, there are numerous reaction styles to adjustment despite academic ability, gender, socioeconomic status, and culture. If, during school transition, the individual needs of students are not met this may result in detrimental educational outcomes such as decreases in attitude, motivation, self-concept, and increases in anxiety. All students experience transition issues, not just those students identified as at-risk from the elementary feeder school. A successful transition involves identifying the issues firsthand by surveying and meeting with incoming students, collecting information about each student from the feeder school, and involving the parents. And, through this process, school personnel can design a relevant program.

To examine and analyze transition issues related to adolescence, it is necessary to have both longitudinal and bio-ecological perspectives, in order to address the multi-dimensional aspects of transition. Because different students react in different ways to transition, and because these reactions change throughout the process, individual needs must be recognized. In recognition of this individuality, a longitudinal perspective could be utilized in order to plan for transition throughout the year. This is because some students may experience transition issues prior to their arrival, immediately in the fall, throughout the year and perhaps longer. Consequently, school transition programs should not be limited to the beginning of the school year. The bio-ecological model considers the individual, their experiences, and the environments that influence them, and demonstrates the need to appreciate all aspects of a student's life during transition in order to foster success. Also, although transition difficulties extend beyond issues related to puberty, the impact of puberty should not be overlooked. While the stereotypical view of adolescence as a state of hormones run amuck is not quite the truth, puberty and its onset are enormous elements in the transition process. Understanding puberty beyond hormones, and learning about the individual variations of the onset of puberty is paramount. As well, the psychological effects of puberty cannot be underestimated. Transition success or non-success can be determined by the relationship between maturational differences as they relate to puberty. Junior high school teachers are experts in their area of concentration; however, they also need to become experts on the period called "adolescence." Educating our colleagues, parents, community, and students themselves about current theories regarding this transitional state, would not only help develop a positive view towards adolescents, but also increase tolerance of differences. Alongside puberty are the increasing concurrent issues adolescence face in their daily lives. Transition is impacted by a student's prior experiences and environment. This includes topics

like abortion, suicide, and divorce that some people would rather not see brought into schools; yet, students carry their concerns regarding these issues into the school environment, and consequently this affects their success during transition. Transition programs need to ensure new students have opportunities to discuss concurrent issues, acquire information, and have access to the relevant support. For example, many new students do not know who the school counselor is, or what this counselor's role is in the school.

Those professionals working with adolescents should have a conceptualization of transition as it specifically relates to adolescents. Brammer (1992) stated that "transition theory offers a kind of map that helps counselors and their clients to conceptualize what is happening to them during intensive life changes" (p. 239). If we can learn to understand how adolescents perceive issues like school transition, we can match the particular stressors with the appropriate support mechanism and thus build skills. Adolescent stress is increasing and identifying what is stressful at school to adolescents is unclear. Although the research suggests an accumulation of minor events, rather than a major event burden adolescents, as adults working with adolescents, we cannot minimize their perceptions of what constitutes stress. In Chapter One, the concern of victimization appeared in two different studies from the student perspective. Considering the Reena Virk case, and most recently, the media coverage about a 14 year-old boy who committed suicide in Vancouver, as a direct result of bullying and teasing, student concerns are real and must not be ignored.

School transition has serious implications for student perceptions of competence, in that the performance of a student who is placed in a developmentally inappropriate educational setting will be compromised. This is a time in which students reevaluate themselves amongst a new peer group and teachers. With an increase in external evaluation on their performance, their perception of competence will increase, decrease or remain stable. The connection

between perceptions of competence and motivation needs to be addressed throughout transition. A student should be placed in a developmentally appropriate setting that positively increases the student's perceptions of competence. A move to a new school, and negative experiences in classes, will decrease the student's perception of competence, intrinsic motivation and possibly their affect for school. If a student is not succeeding, the "goodness of fit" or "Person-Environment fit" approaches encourage educators to reflect on the environment being created for this student. Time tabling the new grade eight students on an individual basis enables schools to match the needs of the student with a teacher who demonstrates the qualities and skills necessary for the success of those students. Another part of the environment that impacts a student's perceptions of competence is the preconceived beliefs that teachers develop and then enact about a student's abilities based not only on letter grades, but group associations and friends. Despite external evaluations emphasizing performance, the majority of students value the importance of school. Low marks, or association in particular groups at school, seem to get students a label of "at-risk," when in fact they are not. The 'tale of mobility' demonstrates the fallacy of such labels through the example of those students with lower letter grades in grade eight, who became highly successful A or B students by grade ten.

Three supportive forces for students during transition are their relationships with teachers, families, and friends. First, students noticed a negative change in their teacher-student relationship from elementary school to junior high school. This negative change can decrease a student's interest in a subject, and possibly, school. Positive relationships and perceived support by teachers are valuable at this time. Timetable structures should promote the opportunity for students and teachers to form positive relationships, and not work to undermine them. In order to achieve this, though, administration and school policies should limit the number of students a teacher works with across a school year. Another strategy to



improve student-teacher relationships is to have the same counselor stay with the transitioning student, year to year, until graduation. A team teaching approach for new junior high school students where one teacher instructs for half the day (Math, Science, and Electives) and another teacher for the other half (English, Social Studies, and Art) has also proven successful in improving student-teacher relationships. The second valuable resource at this time is the family. Full transition programs should incorporate families because the resilience research highlights the benefits of the protective factors within a cohesive family. An adolescent's perception of family cohesion is crucial for good adjustment. For good adaptation of all youth, family involvement on a daily basis improves adjustment. As educators, it is our role to invite parents to participate in a transition program, and to inform them of the benefits provided by simple family activities like having dinner together on a daily basis. Parents need to be more aware of their powerful ability to influence their child because, as supportive parents, they are the main buffers of negative emotional influences from peers. The third supportive resource during transition is friends, although ironically, the potential change of friends with the move is a main concern for most. Adolescents benefit from stable, quality friendships when confronted with the challenges of transition. As well, adolescents are influenced by their friends' behaviors; therefore, positive opportunities and interventions in a transition program that promote extending friendships are necessary for all students. Since friends' disruptive behavior influences that of others, educators need to limit the public recognition and labeling of particular groups of students. Some students may even need to learn how to be a friend. It is the element of stability and closeness associated with adjustment that develops the sense of self and self socially, and therefore, encouraging students to have many social school functions needs to be part of the educational process. Traditional perspectives on teaching that incorporate not only the use of regimental rows of desks, but the

expectation of complete and utter silence in the classroom as a sign of a true learning environment, does not provide the social support necessary for students who are experiencing transition. Collaborative group tasks in the classroom do more to allow students to interact with peers and form good relationships.

The population that concerned me the most in regards to the transition process, are students who have low ability and are identified as at-risk. The low ability and disruptive students did not indicate as many concerns about transition as did the other students. Adolescents with low ability often have low self-esteem as well, and if their perceived level of competence decreases, concurrent with the increased emphasis on grades following transition, this will decrease their affect towards school and damage their personal growth. If this damage is compounded not only by the perception of these students that high school teachers are unsupportive, but also by low teacher efficacy in dealing with these students, the stage is set for nonsuccess and alienation. School staff need to learn to adapt and modify programs in order to ensure that perceptions of competence increase so that there will be an increase in intrinsic motivation.

As Mekos (1989) points out, gender also influences adjustment; and therefore, it is important that transition programs identify that while girls and boys have some similar concerns, these may also be very different. For girls, maturational differences related to the stage of puberty being experienced during transition can impact the adjustment process. Opportunities to discuss these concerns need to be planned in formats like class discussions, small single-sex groups, and individual settings if necessary, in order to facilitate transition success.

Low socioeconomic status and poverty can negatively influence transition. Schools need to ensure that all students can afford to participate in any school function. Fees for

classes and school functions exist in our public schools. It is difficult for many students to pay for these school activities, and this puts stress on families. In my experience, poverty is a silent characteristic hindering success because of the student's pride, the family's pride, and often ignorance on the teacher's behalf, who gets mad that a student has not returned their permission slip and money in on time without considering the child's reality. I often learn from students after an event that they wished they could have gone, but they could not afford the event. Catterall's (1998) research demonstrates how student involvement is a predictor of student success and therefore, consideration must be given to the financial abilities of all students when planning school functions.

Transition programs make a difference. They reduce the potentially negative aspects of transition. Those students who receive a partial or full transition program showed higher grade point averages and decreased drop out rates. The individual perception of this transition is paramount; therefore, a generic packaged transition program that helps manage the high number of grade eight students for organizational purposes is not acceptable. All students would benefit from a transition program, but it must match the needs of each student in any given school. A transition program should include a team approach because students need good relationships with teachers, peers, and families. A team approach not only acknowledges the inability of one teacher to address the needs of every transitioning student, but allows the empowerment of the individual within their context.



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