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Extracurricular Participation and the Transition to Middle School

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Abstract

Research demonstrates a host of negative student outcomes associated with the transition to middle school. As school personnel seek to connect students to the new school, extracurricular participation, in particular, has the potential to influence student belonging and promote positive academic and psychosocial outcomes. Data from this investigation reveals that participation in multiple extracurricular activities relates to academic achievement and school connectedness. Implications for transition and extracurricular programming are included.

Introduction

The stress and challenge in the transition to middle school perpetuates developmental challenges for all students. Individual or personal transformations during puberty and ecological differences between elementary and middle school are extensive. For example, there is a greater emphasis on relative ability and competition (Schumaker, 1998), and students experience fewer personal relations with teachers in middle school (Mizelle, 1995; Wells, 1996). At the same time, students negotiate rapid and diverse physical, cognitive, social, and emotional change. Taken together, most research confirmed that school transitions play an important role in the developmental trajectory of students (Eccles et al., 1993; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991).

Student declines related to the transition from elementary school to middle school are both academic and psychosocial. Not only have students reported concerns about failure and keeping up with assignments (Arth, 1990), but increased depression and declines in self-esteem have been documented (Eccles et al., 1993). In particular, students express concern about receiving lower or failing grades during a school level transition (Mizelle & Mullins, 1997). Research has also documented significant declines in academic motivation (Anderman, Maehler, & Midgley, 1999; Eccles et al., 1993) and academic performance (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Wampler, Munsch, & Adams, 2002).

Perhaps related to academic declines, decreased self-esteem (Eccles et al., 1993; Wigfield et al., 1991), increased daily hassles (Fenzel, 1989), and peer group changes (Crockett, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989) affect students during the move to middle school. Prior to the beginning of middle school, students often fear that they will be picked on, teased, and victimized by older students (Lord, Eccles, & McCarthy, 1994; Mizelle, 1995; Wells, 1996). Research completed after the transition has documented student reports of feeling alone and difficulty in making friends (Mizelle, 1995; Scott, Rock, Pollack, & Ingels, 1995; Wells, 1996).

Although academic and psychosocial risks appear inherit in the transition to middle school and research has demonstrated negative outcomes in several studies, others (Fenzel & Blyth, 1986; Proctor & Choi, 1994) have not replicated these effects and some have even found positive perceptions of the transition (Akos, 2002). One influential factor in a successful transition appears to be students' feelings of connectedness to school. Just as student alienation has been associated with dropout, connectedness has been linked to a host of beneficial factors including academic achievement, social and personal attitudes, and participation in school (Osterman, 2000). Eccles et al. (1993), for example, indicated that school engagement or connectedness to school might serve as a protective factor against transitional problems. Additionally, research by Akos and Galassi (2004a) suggested that students' connectedness to school can both influence and serve as an indicator of the actual success of that transition.

Promising research has demonstrated that ecological factors in the school and family can affect a student's experience of a school transition (Felner, Ginter, & Primeau, 1982; Ruble & Seidman, 1996). For example, homeroom advisories, physical proximity of classrooms, building tours, and orientation programs have been designed to promote positive experiences during transitions. Programs such as STEP (School Transitional Environment Project) have been successful in adapting the high school ecology to help ease the transition process (Felner et al., 1993). Furthermore, transitional outcomes have been improved by providing information (Kurita & Janzen, 1996), drama programs (Walsh-Bowers, 1992), shadowing experiences (Ferguson & Bulach, 1994), and a combination of classroom and group counseling supports (Greene & Ollendick, 1993) to support the move to middle school. Clearly, well-organized and supportive school environments (Felner et al., 1982), including the pedagogically organized middle school (Ruble & Seidman, 1996), have the potential to mitigate risk in school transitions.

Research on Extracurricular Activity Participation

One aspect of schools that has received increased attention in the research literature is extracurricular participation. A review of current research substantiates the utility of student participation in structured extracurricular activities and reveals the many benefits of active engagement for middle and high school students (Gilman, Meyers, & Perez, 2004). Extracurricular activities are discretionary activities that are physically or mentally stimulating to the individual and contain some structured parameters (Larson & Verma, 1999). These programs can be extracurricular activities or clubs, nonacademic programs during or after school, after-school programs in the school building, or community programs. These activities are distinguished from leisure, as extracurricular activities require effort and a forum to express an identity and passion. Activity participation reflects involvement in school that capitalizes on student interest and individual strengths (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997).

Participation in school activities provides an opportunity for high-risk youth and peers to form a positive connection with the school, its faculty, and values that may be otherwise unavailable (Mahoney, 2000). While participation in school-based extracurricular activities can benefit all students, these activities can be particularly important for students who do not identify or are new to their school. Involving these students in extracurricular activities may enhance their connectedness with school, which may lead to positive academic and psychosocial outcomes (Gilman et al., 2004). School engagement also takes time away from risky opportunities, provides learning in constructive activities, and increases the possibility to establish positive social networks (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992). According to research done by Connell, Halpern-Felsher, Clifford, Crichlow, and Usinger (1995), engaged students reported more positive perceptions of competence, autonomy, and relatedness in the school setting than did students who were less engaged. Furthermore, students (especially high-risk students) involved in school extracurricular programs were less likely to drop out of school and be involved in delinquent activity (Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997).

The benefits of extracurricular participation have also demonstrated a positive influence even beyond formal school years (Gholson, 1985; Mahoney, 2000), as consistent participation in extracurricular activities across adolescence was positively linked to educational status in young adulthood (Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003). In fact, Zaff, Moore, Papillo, and Williams (2003) found consistent participation in extracurricular

activities in 8th–12th grade predicts academic achievement and prosocial behaviors (e.g., voting, volunteer work) in adulthood, even after controlling for process variables.

Considered together, the beneficial outcomes of extracurricular participation provide an appealing opportunity to mitigate risk and promote more positive outcomes in the transition to middle school. This is particularly salient in promoting a sense of belonging or connectedness in new middle school students. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between extracurricular participation and students' psychosocial and academic adjustment in the middle school transition.

Method

Participants

All students came from one middle school in a medium-sized, Southeastern school district. The sample included 173 sixth-grade students (approximately 72% of the sixth grade class). The sample included 83 males (48%), 86 (50%) females, and 4 students (2%) who neglected to provide information about gender. By race, the student sample was composed as follows: 57% Caucasian ($n = 99$), 20% African-American ($n = 34$), 9% Asian ($n = 15$), 8% Latino ($n = 14$), 4% multiracial ($n = 7$), and 2% ($n = 4$) who did not specify race. The sample was reflective of the entire sixth grade population in terms of race (57% Caucasian, 23% African Americans, 9% Asian, 9% Latino, and 3% multiracial) and gender (55% male, 45% female).

The medium size school district included eight elementary schools, four middle schools, and two high schools. The middle school comprised sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, drew students primarily from three of the elementary schools, and was in its second year of operation. Overall, the school district can be characterized as high performing, with more than 90% of the students attending post-secondary education.

Instrument

The School Transition Questionnaire (STQ) (Akos & Galassi, 2004b) is a retrospective measure of student perceptions over the course of the transition. The researchers developed the questionnaire in collaboration with school personnel to tap context-relevant considerations and student perceptions unique to the transition in this district. The questionnaire assessed a variety of information about the transition, including students' overall perception of the transition, their sense of connectedness to the new school, and the concerns and positive factors students perceived in the transition. These students' perceptions served as a proxy for psychosocial adjustment to middle school.

A four-point, Likert-format question (e.g., How was the move from elementary school to middle school for you?) was used to capture student's overall perception about the transition. The response choices were difficult, somewhat difficult, somewhat easy, and easy (range 1-4). School connectedness is a variable that assesses a student's integration and feelings of belongingness to school. Connectedness questions included feeling close to other students, feeling a part of school, feeling that teachers care about students, and feeling happy at school. Each question used a five-point Likert response format—strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree (range 1-5). These questions were adapted from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a study undertaken in response to a mandate by the U.S. Congress in the NIH Revitalization Act of 1993 (The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 1998). A connectedness score for each student was calculated based on the mean of the four questions, and the coefficient alpha for the four-item connectedness measure in this study was .71.

The researchers also assessed students' perceived concerns and positive aspects of the transition. Based on previous transition research (e.g., Akos, 2002; Odegaard & Heath, 1992) on student perceptions, students responded in a checklist format (e.g., 15 transition concerns and 18 positives) about factors they looked forward to and were concerned about in the transition to middle school. Students also had an opportunity to write in items in either group. A total number of indicated concerns and positive factors were calculated for each student. Finally, the questionnaire included a checklist for school-sponsored extracurricular activities in

which they have been involved since coming to the middle school. Students could choose from a checklist of six different extracurricular activity groupings (e.g., student government, choir, drama, sports) or add additional activities in the “other” classification, similar to categories used in previous research (Anderson, Funk, Elliot, & Smith, 2003).

Procedure

The STQ was administered near the end of the first quarter to all sixth graders at the participating school. Approximately 72% of the middle school students chose to participate in the study. Homeroom or home base teachers administered the questionnaires, and no incentives were given for participation in the study. Each questionnaire was precoded so that no school personnel were able to identify student responses. Students returned the questionnaire anonymously in each classroom, and they were collected by a school counselor and delivered to the researchers. A research team worked with school personnel to gather 1st quarter grades from the four core classes (math, language arts, science, and social studies) for students by precoded ID numbers.

Research Design and Data Analysis

To explore the research question, data were analyzed based on participation in extracurricular activities. Frequency totals were calculated for participation in extracurricular activities, and students were assigned to one of three groups based on the variance of the distribution. Students not participating in any activities were coded as no participation (NP). A second group, termed limited participation (LP), included students participating in one extracurricular activity. A third group, termed multiple participation (MP), included students who indicated participation in two or more extracurricular activities. Using extracurricular participation as an independent grouping variable, the researchers conducted a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on five dependent variables: students’ GPA, perception of transition difficulty, total concerns, total positives, and feelings of school connectedness.

Results

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed statistically significant differences on student GPA ($F(2,158) = 5.95, p < .003$) and students’ feelings of connectedness ($F(2,161) = 3.56, p < .03$). In terms of GPA, Tukey HSD post-hoc tests revealed a statistically significant difference ($p < .006$) between those students in the multiple participation (MP) group ($x = 3.37$) and students in the no participation (NP) group ($x = 2.71$). Differences for GPA between the MP group and the LP group ($x = 2.72$) were also statistically significant ($p < .01$). Tukey HSD post-hoc tests revealed a statistically significant difference ($p < .03$) between students’ feelings of connectedness for the NP group ($x = 14.48$) and the MP group ($x = 16.04$).

Students’ total number of positive aspects approached significance ($F(2, 166) = 2.71, p < .07$). Although total positives for the MP group ($x = 8.98$) was higher than the NP group ($x = 7.56$), the difference was not quite statistically significant ($p < .06$). No significant differences were found for students’ perceptions of concerns ($F(2,162) = .04, p = .96$) or students’ overall perception of the transition difficulty ($F(2,168) = 1.38, p = .26$). Table 1 presents means and standard deviations graphically.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Participation Groups

| | Multiple Participation (MP) | | Limited Participation (LP) | | No Participation (NP) | |
|--|-----------------------------|--------|----------------------------|--------|-----------------------|--------|
| | X | (sd) | X | (sd) | X | (sd) |
| GPA*** | 3.37 | (0.96) | 2.72 | (1.12) | 2.71 | (1.10) |
| Connectedness** | 16.04 | (2.61) | 14.72 | (3.17) | 14.48 | (3.58) |
| Total Positives* | 8.97 | (2.92) | 7.96 | (3.40) | 7.56 | (3.37) |
| Total Concerns | 6.62 | (4.12) | 6.64 | (4.79) | 6.82 | (3.74) |
| Overall Perception (range difficult 1-4 easy) | 3.16 | (0.83) | 3.02 | (0.96) | 2.87 | (1.04) |

* p < .070, ** p < .031, *** p < .003

Discussion and Implications

The results of this study indicate that GPA, students’ feelings of connectedness, and to some degree, perception of positive aspects of the school transition are related to participation in extracurricular activities. Previous research (Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999; Gerber, 1996) has consistently linked extracurricular activities to higher test scores, class grades, and/or achievement. In fact, Marsh (1992) also suggested that extracurricular participation increased students’ investment in school and may promote better academic attitudes and habits. While the results of this research do not substantiate a causal relationship, previous research (Camp, 2001; Cooper et al., 1999) has found causal findings or links to residual grades, suggesting the link is not a result of high-achieving students self-selecting into extracurricular activities. While these data do not imply directionality, these findings in combination with previous research provide promising results.

In addition to achievement, psychosocial adjustment and in particular, students’ feelings of connectedness and perceptions of positive aspects following a transition into middle school were also moderately related to participation in extracurricular activities. Related findings for positive engagement and social networks were demonstrated by previous research (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Connell et al., 1995; Mahoney, 2000) on extracurricular activities. Still, extracurricular involvement did not influence students’ perceptions of transition difficulties, or the overall perception of transition difficulty in this study. Transition concerns tend to be focused on increased academic demands (Akos & Galassi, 2004b; Mitman & Packer, 1982) and organizational aspects like the larger size of the middle school (Akos, 2002; Odegaard & Heath, 1992). While extracurricular participation may be related to some outcomes, it may not be potent enough or the temporal nature (Akos & Galassi, 2004b) of student organizational concerns (intense at the start of middle school) may overwhelm early perceptions.

For students making the transition, extracurricular participation may be a protective factor that impacts both achievement and psychosocial adjustment. These relationships suggest that extracurricular participation may be one of the many ecological factors that can be manipulated to foster more successful school transition experiences. In fact, Holloway (2002) suggested that educators can generalize the lessons of student engagement in extracurricular activities to inform classroom practice and improve school climate and culture to boost motivation.

Extracurricular activities can appeal to student interests, encourage peer interaction, promote cooperation, build student-adult relationships, provide structure and challenge, and connect students to school (Holloway, 2002). Eccles and Templeton’s (2002) comprehensive review of extracurricular and out of school activities

suggests common elements of successful programming that include social support from adults and peers, inclusive social networks/organization, strong and clear social norms, intentional learning experiences, motivational scaffolding, and opportunities to experience mattering and leadership. A variety of factors, such as parent support and encouragement, gender, and socioeconomic status (Anderson et al., 2003) also influence participation. Capitalizing on the benefits of extracurricular programming for the transition to middle school requires considerable investment and developmentally appropriate programming.

For example, participation in extracurricular activities in middle school is often limited to students in seventh and eighth grade. This is especially true in interscholastic sports participation. While it may be against policy or difficult logistically to include sixth grade students in each extracurricular offering, it may in fact be more appropriate to create distinct extracurricular offerings that are developmentally appropriate for sixth grade students. Eccles et al. (1993) and others have written extensively about the person-environment or developmental fit in classrooms for students moving to middle school. Interscholastic athletics may not be developmentally appropriate or the most useful as they emphasize competition (Hovland, 1990). Non-athletic or intramural extracurricular offerings that emphasize social networking, leadership, and intentional learning experiences may be more useful. In fact, these types of offerings could be made available for both fifth and sixth grade students together, where a school district can intentionally connect elementary school students to the middle school (the physical location of the extracurricular activity) and provide a bridge where elementary and middle school students begin to form supportive networks under adult supervision.

This type of restructuring of the school ecology parallels previous proactive or preventative school transition interventions (e.g., Felner et al., 1993), activates aspects of resiliency (e.g., meaningful participation), and corresponds to key elements of middle school philosophy. It also provides a shared emotional connection through membership and integration, which are foundational elements of a community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Policy level discussions of achievement and behavior problems “seldom focus on students’ needs for belonging or the role of the school in meeting these belongingness needs” (Osterman, 2000, p. 361). Increasing the opportunity for extracurricular participation for sixth grade students in the transition to middle school is one way to implement systemic change that supports student achievement and development. Griffen (1988) suggested that student activities need a high degree of support by students, faculty, administration, and the community, and that this “hidden curriculum” needs more systematic approach and analysis.

Limitations and Future Research

The results of the study should be considered in light of limitations. Cross-sectional data are not able to capture factors that influence adjustment prior to the transition, and measures of type, longevity, and patterns of participation were not examined as they have been in previous research (McNeal, 1998; Schreiber & Chambers, 2002). It is also important to interpret the data as relevant to the context of the high majority, high performing district. It may be possible that high socioeconomic school districts have more offerings and more parental support and encouragement for extracurricular activities. Even so, extracurricular participation has been suggested as a protective factor for at-risk students in previous literature as well (Gilman et al., 2004).

Future research must also examine casual relationships between extracurricular activities and positive outcomes, as well as contextual aspects (developmentally appropriate) of each particular extracurricular offering. It may be possible that too much involvement in extracurricular activities would prohibit an academic focus (e.g., homework completion) and limit usefulness. It may also be possible that alternative ecological supports (e.g. academy structures, advisory programs) like extracurricular activities are mutually supportive for students making the transition to middle school. Qualitative investigation of the abundant process factors involved (e.g., demographics, social networks, family influences) in both extracurricular activities and school transitions are needed. Finally, transition and extracurricular policies must be examined in relation to what is practical, but also what is most supportive for new middle school student’s academic and developmental growth.

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