

Edward W. Chance Dissertation Award For Doctoral Research in Rural Education

The Transition Practices of One County's Rural Elementary School Districts and Their Receiving Independent School District

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The purpose of this study was to describe the transition implementation experienced by rural elementary school district students entering the ninth grade at an independent school district, and to describe the ties to the school that exist among these same ninth grade students. This qualitative research involved interviewing 11 ninth grade students, six rural elementary school district counselors and/or administrators, and one independent school district counselor. Conclusions of the study revealed that the independent school district in the study does not have a structured transition implementation program to assist rural elementary school district students. Despite literature that supports the success of transitional programs for students and the fact that the county in the study once had a transitional program, there is currently no program in place. The one thing every rural elementary and independent school district staff member agreed on was that the transition process for the rural elementary students needs drastic improvement. Suggestions were provided by all participants to assist with improving transition.

Students make many transitions during their years of schooling: from home to school, elementary to middle school, middle to high school, and high school to college or work. These transitions are usually major events in the lives of their students and their parents. The stresses created by these transitions can be minimized when the new environment is responsive to each particular age group (Shumacher, 1998). In an attempt to make the student transition from middle school to high school less traumatic, several schools have begun to develop transition programs (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999). These programs are designed to assist the incoming ninth grade students with feeling more comfortable in their new surroundings. Most schools, however, have done little if anything to assist students in making the transition. The scattered data about student transition from the middle level to the high school suggest that this area is rich in its unexplored vastness (Hertzog & Morgan). For the purpose of this study, the term "middle level" includes all middle grade and junior high school configurations.

Literature Review

There is limited research on transition implementation practices used to assist students transitioning from a rural elementary school district to an independent school district. There is little doubt that transition from a rural elementary school district to an independent school district is a traumatic event for students especially when it requires the student to spend more time on the bus, adapt to a larger student population, lose the comfort of strong ties to develop new ties, adjust to a new class schedule and curriculum, try

to integrate into the extracurricular programs, and adapt to teachers that provide less individual attention.

Adults who fail to recognize the need to reduce the stress of students associated with the transition to high school need only observe the transformation in students from the spring of their last middle level year to the fall of their entry year at the high school (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998). When students have difficulty with these transitions, schools often provide additional support through school social workers or special programs to enhance school success. As the transition to high school approaches, the stakes become higher as students begin to connect school success or failure with perceived life chances (Hurrelman, Engel, Holler, & Nordlohne, 1988). For students who already have had difficulty negotiating these changes at the middle level, high school success may seem impossible.

The most basic idea behind a transition is that one travels between definable and different points (Smith, 1997). Transition points are generally acknowledged to be home to school, elementary to middle school or junior high, middle level school to high school, and high school to college or career. These troublesome transition points are fraught with hurdles and stumbling blocks for many students. Students become anxious and distraught over the uncertainties of abrupt changes in buildings, teachers, classmates, and programs. Such needless anxiety and apprehension interferes with learning and impairs confidence and self-esteem (Weldy, 1991). Transitions are both difficult and exciting as they mark points of risk and opportunity for student development. Some suggest that students have serious problems making multiple, simultaneous transitions (Simmons, Blyth, Van Cleave,

Bush, 1979). Coleman and Collinge (1991) call the students' positive attitudes toward school bonding. These are times when it is most critical to bond students to the school level where they will spend the next few years (Odegaard & Heath, 1992). If there are no programs of transition or inadequate programs, this makes the transition for students even more difficult.

Hertzog and Morgan (1998) stated that, "Programs to assist students in moving from the middle level school to the high school are all but nonexistent" (p. 94). They believe that transitional studies have finally begun to gain more attention, especially from organizations such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the National Middle School Association (NMSA), and the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. Hertzog and Morgan (1997) found that high schools with minimal or no transition programs (two or fewer transition practices for eighth and ninth grade students at the middle and high school level) reported a retention/failure rate in grade nine as high as 40 percent. Furthermore, the researchers found a positive relationship between a decrease in student retention and dropout rate for both male and female students and the degree of implementation of transition program practices.

The reason transition is usually so difficult for a student from middle school to high school is the difference in philosophies of education that are practiced at the two different buildings (VanSciver, 1985). The purpose of middle level education is to be developmentally responsive to the special needs of the early adolescent learner (Clark & Clark, 1994; Lounsbury, 1991; Lounsbury & Clark, 1990; NASSP, 1985). "Middle level schools must (a) be comprised of a unique, autonomous unit separate from the high school, (b) contain programs that are developmentally appropriate including interdisciplinary teaming and teacher advisories, and (c) provide a content that connects with the everyday lives of the students and instruction that actively involves them in the learning process" (Clark & Clark, 1994, p.4). The junior high was to be based on the characteristics of young adolescents and concerned with all aspects of growth and development (George, Stevenson, Thomason, & Beane, 1992). It was established as a school whose design was twofold: (a) continue to provide for the furthering of skill development, and more importantly, and (b) bring added depth to the curriculum (Wavering, 1995). The junior high is a step away from middle level environment and a level that moves the student towards the preparation of high school. Transitional practices are imperative to assist students in making this move.

For the purpose of this study, transition practices identified by the Johns Hopkins Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools (Epstein & MacIver, 1990) and supported by the National Middle School Association (MacIver & Epstein, 1991) was used as a baseline for comparing transitional practices used at both this county's elementary school districts and independent school district. The 10 most frequently used practices were:

1. Middle grade students visit the high school for an assembly.
2. Middle and high school administrators meet together on articulation and programs.
3. Middle grade counselors meet with high school counselors or staff.
4. Parents visit high school for orientation after their children have entered school.
5. Middle and high school teachers meet together about courses and requirements.
6. Parents visit the high school while children are in the lower grade.
7. High school students present information at middle grades schools.
8. Middle grade students attend regular classes at the high school.
9. Summer meetings at the high school for parents and students.
10. Buddy or big brother/sister programs pair new students with older students.

In spite of the research that supports multiple transitional activities for student success, many schools choose to do very little to support students in transition. It is assumed this anomaly exists for various reasons including the lack of leadership to support the implementation of transitional programs, the time constraints of planning and implementing such programs, the lack of staff to help in carrying out the initiative, and the determination that no problem exists.

Theoretical or conceptual frameworks impact our traditional understanding by questioning the ideological categories we use and the goals we think we want to achieve (Liston & Zeichner, 1990). This study examined the transition of students from a rural county's elementary school districts to an independent school district. This sociological theory of racial segregation, originally developed by Braddock (1980), and expanded by McPartland and Braddock (1981), stated that segregation tends to repeat itself "across the stages of the life cycle and across institutions when individuals have not had sustained experiences in desegregated settings earlier in life" (p. 149). Braddock (1980) derived this theory by focusing on the tendency of Black Americans to perpetuate racial segregation. While Braddock's theory did not preclude the existence of real structural constraints to racial integration, his focus was on how individual agents adjust their behavior to accommodate, and thus perpetuate, these constraints, and how exposure to integrated settings can change this behavior (Wells & Crain, 1994). Hoelter (1982), in his study, supported the findings of Braddock (1980) when he concluded, "black-white status inequality is perpetuated when blacks remain segregated from the knowledge concerning educational and occupational opportunities and methods of attaining specific goals" (p. 7). On the other hand, African American students from desegregated high schools are more inclined to continue their education in

predominantly white settings (Braddock). Wells and Crain reported that “desegregated black students set their occupational aspirations higher than do segregated blacks, and these career goals are more realistically related to their educational aspirations and attainment than those of segregated blacks” (p. 539). They further noted that interracial contact in elementary or secondary school can help blacks overcome perpetual segregation.

Wells and Crain (1994) expanded Braddock’s perpetuation theory by including the concept of network analysis: that being, “segregation is perpetuated across generations because minorities lack access to informal networks that provide information about and entrance to, desegregated institutions and employment” (p. 533). In conjunction with perpetuation theory, they incorporate Granovetter’s (1973) work, which analyzes “strong ties,” as well as, the strong impact of “weak ties.” Wells and Crain draw from Granovetter’s (1973) work, which showed the strong impact of weak ties or less formal interpersonal networks – that is, acquaintances or friends of friends – on the diffusion of influence, information, and mobility opportunities. These are avenues through which information and mobility opportunities are obtained. Weak ties play a critical role, because according to Granovetter (1986), they are a bridge to social cliques different from our own.

Strong ties include close relationships between individuals with similar thoughts and beliefs, for example, family members and close friends. Homans (1950) stated “the more frequently persons interact with one another, the stronger their sentiments of friendship for one another are apt to be” (p. 133) and the more similar they are, the stronger the tie connecting them.

Lin (1990) and Montgomery (1992) argued that people on the bottom of the social structure, including African-American students from low-income families, have more to gain than white and wealthy students from the use of weak ties because these ties will invariably link them to more affluent and better connected people, whereas strong ties usually connect them to family and close friends who are also poor.

The Study

The state this study was conducted currently has 541 public school districts. One hundred twelve of those offer pre-kindergarten through eighth grades (PK-8) and are known as rural elementary school districts. These districts have a three-member board of education and are not affiliated with a district having grades kindergarten through twelve (K-12). When the students in these districts complete their academic requirements, they must transfer to a K-12 district, which, in some cases, are many miles away. The interesting aspects of this transition are that most of these PK-8 elementary school districts are located in rural areas and many of the students may have more than one K-12 district option. For the purposes of this study, PK-8 districts

will be referred to as rural elementary school districts and K-12 districts as independent school districts.

It can become a dilemma for students knowing they may be attending different independent school districts than their current classmates. In most American school districts, students move from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school, and they face the sometimes difficult tasks of dealing with a greater number of peers and balancing their competing needs for social support and increased autonomy (Compas & Wagner, 1991). The students in these rural elementary school districts make a major transition by moving from the eighth to ninth grade and by transferring to another district to continue their education. Using the lenses of transition implementation and perpetuation theory’s social networks, the purpose of the study was to describe the transition experienced by rural elementary school district students entering the ninth grade at an independent school district, and to describe the ties to the school that exist among these same ninth grade students.

Method of Research

This qualitative study is about eighth grade students transitioning from nine relatively small rural elementary school districts to a K-12 independent school district. The independent school district has four elementary schools, one junior high school with grades 7-9, and one high school. Thus, the rural elementary school district students attended three different schools in two school districts in three years: eighth grade in a rural elementary school district, ninth grade at the junior high in the independent school district, and tenth grade in the high school of the independent school district.

The study involved a single case study and focused on the transition of eighth grade students from rural elementary school districts to the ninth grade of an independent school district. The districts involved in the study were from one county located in a south central mid-western state. One difference of the three independent school districts is that two are K-12 and one is a K-11. The K-11 district was a rural elementary school district until three years ago when it decided to add the four grades of high school and become an independent school district by the start of the 2004-05 school year. Since the majority of the eighth grade students in seven of the nine rural elementary school districts chose to attend the largest independent school district, the focus of the study was on these seven districts.

The long interview method was the primary source used for collecting data. The “main purpose of an interview is to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective; to obtain a special kind of information, and to find out what is going on in someone else’s mind” (Merriam, 1988, p. 72). Interviews were conducted with counselors and administrators at each of the seven rural elementary school districts and a counselor at Central City Junior High to determine the types of transition practices being used. A set

of pre-determined questions was created to collect the thoughts and perspectives of each counselor and administrator. A pre-ethnography was conducted to help determine the questions to be used. This included interviewing counselors at a junior high site other than Central City that transitioned ninth grade students to the tenth grade at a high school site.

One male and one female ninth grade student who attended each of the seven rural elementary school districts were interviewed. Questions were asked to solicit participants' thoughts and feelings about the transition practices used in preparing them to enter Central City Junior High. The counselors at Central City were asked to randomly select these students, who they considered to be mature, astute and of average academic ability. Each student interview was conducted in a private room at Central City Junior High. The interview questions for both the counselors and students were derived from the literature that focuses on middle level transition practices (Weldy, 1991; Epstein & MacIver, 1990) and a descriptive study on rural elementary school districts conducted by a state university (McBee & So, 1995).

An observation was conducted at each rural elementary school district site and at Central City Junior High to determine the type of climate and culture the students left and entered respectively. The researcher was a complete observer, meaning he entered the setting and remained physically detached from the activities with little or no social interactions (Anderson, 1998). Observations were conducted near the end of the spring semester and on average lasted around two hours. The observations allowed the researcher some perspective on the references made by the students during the interview process about their former rural elementary school district.

Findings

When asked what ideas the rural elementary and independent school district staff members had for improving transition, there were several responses:

- more parental involvement during transition;
- more peer shadowing activities;
- moving the ninth grade class to the high school building to eliminate students from making two transitions in two years;
- involvement and communication between the rural elementary schools and the junior high;
- do not wait until the end of the school year to begin transition activities;
- using "school within a school" concepts to make the junior high smaller;
- Central City configuring their style and approach to instruction to better assist the rural elementary students;

- more visits from Central City staff and students to the rural elementary schools;
- structured social interaction programs with the rural elementary and independent school district students;
- developing an intramural program for the students who are unable to compete in activities at the independent school district level.

Additionally, the researcher makes three recommendations for practice based on the data collected:

1. Transition activities must be ongoing and begin in the fall semester of the eighth grade year.
2. The staff at both the rural elementary districts and independent school district emphasized the need for communication to develop quality articulation.
3. A person or persons, whether administration or staff, must drive the initiative of developing and maintaining a consistent, quality transition implementation program.

A final recommendation would be for Central City Junior High to review the ten practices presented in the report provided by the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools (Epstein & MacIver, 1990) for consideration of implementation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Central City Junior High does not have a structured transition implementation program in place to assist rural elementary school students. The one thing every rural elementary and independent school district staff member agreed on was that the transition process for the rural elementary students needs drastic improvement. Transition is transition regardless if students are moving from an elementary school to a middle school or a middle school to a high school all within the same school district, but rural elementary school districts do offer a different scenario. Upon the completion of their eighth grade curriculum, these rural elementary students must be transported daily, in some cases many miles, to attend another school in another community to meet high school graduation requirements. They must enter an environment that is foreign and do their best to fit into the social setting that is already established. Thus, if these students have no "strong ties" to the school, the transition is even more difficult. In most cases at this age the social aspect is far more important than focusing on academics. At a time when friendships and social interaction are particularly important for young adolescents, the normative transition into high school often serves to disrupt friendship networks and, thereby, interferes with students' success in high school (Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis & Trickett, 1991). Thus, it is vital for transition programs to include activities that will provide incoming students social

support activities that give students opportunities to get to know and develop positive relationships with older students and other incoming students (Hertzog, Morgan, Diamond & Walker, 1996; MacIver, 1990).

Something else to consider is how many of these students are unable to participate in after school activities due to no transportation. This was a concern of more than one student in the study and, even though it was not the only reason the extracurricular participation rate dropped from 100 percent in the rural elementary school to 55 percent at the junior high, it was part of the reason. Research has shown that participation in extracurricular activities significantly declines in the first year of high school (Gifford & Dean, 1990; Seidman, Aber, Allen & French, 1996). In addition to those who do not get to participate, those who do participate in athletics have a difficult transition because of being behind and trying to compete with more students and stronger competition. This has an affect on their social assimilation and self-esteem. The rural elementary students also become frustrated with coming into a program, such as choir, far behind the junior high students because the rural elementary school was unable to offer that curriculum. Thus, the structure of Central City Junior High, the travel distance, and the lack of bussing mitigate against participation in extracurricular activities.

The social aspect of transition is vitally important to a smooth transition as well. Using Granovetter's (1973) strong and weak ties, research on the development of weak ties to other rural elementary schools and the independent school district that can turn into strong ties after making the transition needs to be considered. The data in this study revealed that the development of weak ties through the participation in rural elementary school extracurricular activities seemed to develop into strong ties for the students upon their arrival to the junior high thus assisting with a smoother transition. In addition to Granovetter's strong and weak ties, McPartland and Braddock's (1981) perpetuation theory helped support the notion of perpetual "institutional" segregation. Because of the unique nature of rural elementary school students transitioning to a new school district in a new community, the aspect of rural elementary students perpetually segregating themselves from the non-rural elementary school district students may occur. Research to assist in eliminating this type of segregation and division before these students arrive to the independent school district needs to be considered.

In support of Central City Junior High, the school has had a recent turnover in administrative staff with the principal and two counselors on the verge of completing their first year. Each of the three understood that there is work to be done in finding ways to make the transition smoother for these incoming students.

Transition implementation was examined through the lenses of Epstein and MacIver's (1990) Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, McPartland and Braddock's (1981) perpetuation theory, and Granovetter's

(1973) Social Networks. The data and findings of this case study resulted in the following additional specific conclusions:

1. Transition activities are necessary to assist rural elementary students with a smooth transition.
2. Transition activities help establish positive beliefs by the students about the new environment they will be entering.
3. The process of transition is the responsibility of both the rural elementary districts and independent school district, but for success needs to be driven by the independent school district.
4. Rural elementary students who participate in extracurricular activities in their elementary schools generally develop weak ties that turn into strong ties upon transitioning to the junior high and participating in similar activities.
5. Perpetuation theory can explain the perpetual "institutional" segregation that tends to exist with some of the rural elementary students who cling to their strong ties instead of developing new or weak ties at the junior high.

The transition practices being recommended need to be considered and implemented within every rural elementary school district and the independent school districts that receive students from these schools. A committee involving administrators, counselors, teachers, parents, and students should be established to maintain and refine a consistent transition process (Smith, 1999). Additionally, the recommended practices would apply to larger public school districts that transition elementary students to a middle school and middle school students to a high school.

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