An Investigation of the Concerns of Fifth Graders Transitioning to Middle School

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Abstract

Entering middle school can cause apprehension for young adolescents who face many cognitive, physical, social, and emotional changes. A quantitative, descriptive study was designed to identify and explain the concerns of rising sixth graders (n = 225) regarding their transition to the middle grades. Survey data were analyzed with regard to gender, race, and school type (i.e., inner city, urban, suburban, and rural). Undressing in front of others for P.E. was the most frequently rated area of high concern. There was a significant effect of gender on the level of concern for getting lost, changing clothes for P.E., peer pressure, being bullied, and academic performance. There was a significant effect of race on the level of concern for using a locker, having enough time to eat lunch, and going to the restroom. There was a significant effect of school type on the level of concern for making friends, belonging to the right clubs and groups, getting lost, having enough time to eat lunch, going to the restroom, and new school rules. Findings suggest at least a moderate level of concern by most fifth graders regarding various issues associated with middle school transitions, thus confirming the need for special programs to assist new students in acclimating to these changes and further research to determine their impacts.

Keywords: middle school, middle level education, transition programs, young adolescents

The middle grades can be very tumultuous for students who are navigating profound and often complex changes (Conklin, 2014; Manning & Bucher, 2012). As they enter puberty, young adolescents encounter cognitive, physical, social, and emotional changes that are foreign to them. Adolescence is a process and a time of key changes representing one of life's critical transitions, second only to infancy in terms of the tremendous pace in growth and transformation (World Health Organization, 2013).

Jackson and Davis (2000) contended that "early adolescence [is] a period of enormous opportunity for intellectual and emotional growth, yet one fraught with vulnerability and risk" (p. 2). It is the time when many middle grades students begin engaging in risky behaviors such as drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco, and consuming unlawful drugs. Jackson and Davis portrayed many middle schools as larger and as more impersonal than elementary schools in which students typically stay in the same classroom with the same teacher. They wrote that it is important for young adolescents to sense they belong to a group in which they feel valued and useful.

Middle schools have been described as more academically rigorous and larger in size and as having more rigid behavior standards than elementary schools. New sixth graders must adapt to these differences and also adjust to having multiple teachers, possibly leaving behind elementary friends, and changing from being the oldest to youngest on campus (Wiles, Bondi, & Wiles, 2006). These many differences give rise to numerous concerns, such as being able to find the right classroom, correctly working one's locker combination, and facing peer pressures that have been collectively characterized as "transition trauma" (Richardson, 2002, p. 1).

Transitioning from elementary school to middle school is a substantial adjustment for young adolescents already facing so many changes. For many students, this transition compounds the confusion and anxiety that already exists as they are faced with educational and interpersonal changes on top of the biological changes endured during the stage of early adolescence. The purpose of this study was to investigate the concerns of rising sixth graders and to examine their concerns with regard to gender, race, and school type. Specific research questions were:

1. What concerns to fifth graders have regarding their transition to middle school?

2. Do fifth grade students' concerns regarding their transition to middle school differ based on gender?

3. Do fifth grade students' concerns regarding their transition to middle school differ based on race?

4. Do fifth grade students' concerns regarding their transition to middle school differ based on school type (e.g., inner-city, urban, suburban, rural)?

The concerns of elementary school students transitioning to middle school campuses are important for educators to consider for a number of reasons. First, successful experiences in the middle grades have been linked to future academic success for students (Balfanz, 2009). Second, identifying and addressing issues associated with the transition to middle school can reduce student anxiety and prevent transition trauma. Finally, considering the immediate and long-term impacts of a smooth transition to middle school, findings from this study will be of interest to parents and middle level educators charged with providing such programs.

Literature Review

Balfanz (2009) found correlations between students' middle grades experiences and their rates of success graduating from high school. His research indicated that the middle grades are pivotal in the success students will achieve later in life. He wrote:

> A student's middle grades experience is critical to his or her life's chances. It is during the middle grades that students either launch toward achievement and attainment, or slide off track and placed on a path of frustration, failure, and ultimately, early exit from the only secure path to adult success. (p. 13)

Balfanz maintained that the first year of middle school is the most critical because it is when students develop off-track indicators such as failing in math and English, having high absenteeism rates, and acting out in class. Andrews and Bishop (2012) emphasized the difficulty of students making the transition to middle school, arguing that "some students find the move between schools so difficult that they 'unlearn' skills and content, beginning a potential spiral toward being retained or even dropping out" (p. 1).

The Dimensions of Middle School Transitions

The concerns young adolescents have as they make the transition into middle school are many and varied, and successful transition programs must address this complexity. As Koppang (2004) noted, "Many transition programs address academic and procedural issues associated with the transition and fail to address the social and emotional issues that cause student anxiety" (p. 1). Understanding the multiple dimensions of middle school transitions from the perspective of students is also important. Akos (2004) analyzed 350 letters of advice written by eighth graders to sixth graders just entering middle school. The advice they gave tended to relate to three themes: social (being nice to people, getting to know the other students, and choosing friends carefully), academic (doing homework and developing good study habits), and organizational (following rules and respecting the teachers).

Richardson (2002) focused on the importance of students' emotional intelligence and reasons why some students may be more successful at dealing with "transition trauma." She contended that "students with more emotional intelligence skills will be able to cope and adapt more easily, resulting in stronger

abilities to succeed both academically and socially" (p. 2). She noted that emotional intelligence can be nurtured, so educators need to be knowledgeable of its existence and teach students components of emotional intelligence such as coping strategies, acquiring and using information, working with others, and managing personal growth.

Students transitioning to middle school go from being in the highest grade in elementary school to the lowest grade in middle school, and this repositioning may make them more vulnerable to bullying. As Farmer, Hamm, Leung, Lambert, and Gravelle (2011) noted, "middle school is considered to be a heightened period for involvement in bullying because the lack of a defined dominance hierarchy is thought to promote jockeying for social positions among students" (p. 1106). Their research on bullying in middle schools with and without transition programs found that schools that had transition programs had fewer bullies and that "the social dynamics in schools with a transition appeared to be less supportive of bullying" (p. 1106). They suggested that bullying may be more prevalent in schools without transition programs.

Kingery, Erdley, and Marshall (2011) found that student achievement could be related to the social aspects of middle school transition. The authors suggested that "it may be particularly important to focus intervention efforts on those children with low peer acceptance to increase their social support network" (pp. 238-239). Including sessions that focus on the students' psychosocial development, such as how to make and maintain friendships and how to work cooperatively with others, could help students more positively adjust to the transition process

Model Programs
In an effort to counter the traumatic effects of moving from an elementary to middle school campus, several transition programs have been established for rising sixth graders. The literature suggests that schools should begin transition activities before students enter middle school (Koppang, 2004; Lorain, 2012; Rosen, n.d.; Wiles, Bondi, & Wiles, 2006). As an assistant principal at a middle school in the Great Plains region, Koppang (2004) implemented a transition program that included student orientation sessions as well as parent sessions that addressed parental concerns and set the foundation for successful and continued parental involvement. Other activities recommended in the literature include middle school teachers and selected students visiting elementary

students, elementary students taking a tour of the middle school, and conducting parent orientations. Additionally, Wormeli (2011) suggested five key mind-sets for successful transition programs: (a) understanding students' concern about belonging, (b) empathizing with students, (c) understanding the characteristics of the age group, (d) focusing on the positive, and (e) building hope. It is critical for schools to involve parents in their children's time of transitioning to middle school.

The Georgia State Department of Education (n.d.) and its partners developed *Middle School Matters: A Guide for Georgia Schools on Middle School Transition* to provide educators, students, and families with a toolkit of transition activities. The guide states: "School transition is not a 'one size fits all' approach, but a framework that includes strategies as well as policies and procedures tailored to meet the needs of students, schools, and communities" (p. 4). The guide suggests that the activities start in the fourth grade rather than the last semester of the fifth grade so students will be more receptive to smaller amounts of information over time. The guide recommends many activities, including middle school staff conducting information sessions at the elementary school, elementary school students visiting the feeder middle schools, peer mentoring, and a middle school transition night.

The Bayport-Blue Point School District (2013) in New York included in their three-component plan (1) a student ambassador program in which middle school students visited feeder elementary schools, (2) middle school visits in which elementary students visited the middle schools, and (3) optional summer visits in which elementary students were invited to visit a middle school and were instructed in using their lockers and locating classrooms.

The Beaver Dam Unified School District (2013) in Wisconsin implemented a sixth grade transition program by having sixth graders visit every elementary school each spring to help calm anxieties fifth graders might have had about transitioning to middle school. Additionally, they conducted a sixth grade camp every August that consisted of spending a full day in the middle school "to learn about organization, academics offered, support services, and library/technology services" (p. 1).

The Boomerang Project (2014) houses an internationally recognized middle school transition program known as

WEB, which stands for "Where Everybody Belongs." It is comprised of four components focusing on middle school orientation, academic success, social development, and leadership skills.

These are just some examples of the many ways in which schools can organize middle school transition programs. Regardless of the model a community chooses or develops, "the benefits of a well-designed, well-managed program are enormous and will result in students who are better adjusted to new school life and who, ultimately, will be more successful" (Baylor University's Community Mentoring for Adolescent Development, n.d., p. 141).

Methods

Sample
Participants were 225 fifth graders from four different elementary (K-5) schools in the same school district in southern Alabama. At the time of the study, the school district served approximately 60,000 students and covered a substantial geographic area with 114 school sites. The schools used in this study varied in size, type, and population and were selected to represent the student diversity in the district. Each of the elementary schools fed into a middle school of the same type: rural, suburban, urban, and inner-city. Demographic data about the participants are presented in Table 1.

Data Collection and Analysis
The study was conducted over a two week period in mid-March. Each elementary school's counselor

Table 1
Participant Demographic Data (N = 225)

Gender*	
Male	112
Female	111
Race	
American Indian	5
Asian	8
African American	48
Hispanic	7
White	140
Other/Blank	17
School Type	
Inner-City	31
Urban	23
Suburban	90
Rural	81

Gender breakdown totals 223 due to missing data.

administered a 15-item survey developed by the researchers to provide a quantitative description of rising sixth graders' concerns regarding their transition to middle school (Creswell, 2003). The survey, which was given to those students whose parents consented, contained three demographic items and 12 items related to typical areas of concern for students making a transition from an elementary school to a middle school identified through an extensive review of literature (see Appendix A). Participants rated their level of concern using a Likert-like scale ranging from 1(not concerned) to 4 (very concerned). Participants also had the option of identifying one additional concern not already listed. Face validity for the instrument was determined by a group of graduate education majors who assessed the content, format, and instructions in relation to the survey's stated purpose.

We used the IBM PASW Statistics for Windows, Version 18.0 to analyze data and determine if there were significant differences in responses based on the variables of gender, race, and school type. We used one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine differences in the level of concern for each independent variable (e.g., gender, race, and school type). When we found significant differences between means, we conducted post hoc comparisons to determine exactly how the means differed. The alpha value for comparison was set at .05 with 95% as the confidence level. Effect sizes were calculated using eta squared. Following Cohen (1988), we determined an effect size of .01 to be a small effect, .06 to be a medium effect, and .14 to be a large effect.

Results

We calculated frequencies to describe and examine the participants' overall concerns related to sixth grade transitions. As shown in Table 2, 146 of the participants reported being either very concerned or somewhat concerned about undressing in front of others for P.E., making this the most frequently highest rated area of apprehension. Participants also frequently rated having harder subjects and tests (119), being bullied by older students (99), and using a locker (97) as areas in which they were very or somewhat concerned. Areas rated most frequently as being of no concern were going to the restroom (145), meeting students of the opposite sex (137), having enough time to eat lunch (119), new school rules (116), and belonging to the right clubs or groups (106). Peer pressure to drink or smoke was both an area of apprehension (92) and of no concern (107).

Table 2
Overall Frequency of Ratings

	Not Concerned	A Little Concerned	Somewhat Concerned	Very Concerned
Friends	94	59	38	33
Groups	106	57	36	26
Lost	74	67	37	47
Lunch	119	49	31	24
Locker	66	61	47	50
P.E.	49	30	36	110
Restroom	145	27	25	28
Rules	116	54	31	24
Opposite Sex	137	41	22	25
Peer Pressure	107	26	22	70
Bullying	85	41	30	69
Academics	39	67	70	49

More than 40% of the participants chose to identify a concern not already listed, though the 95 write-in responses covered various concerns with limited regularity. Only three topics were listed more than five times each—getting lost, fighting, and teachers. Eleven percent of students ($n = 24$) from all participating schools listed "other" concerns related to teachers, making this the most frequently identified concern in the "other" category. Half of these responses ($n = 12$) specified "mean teachers" while other terminology included "bad" teachers, teachers who "won't like me," and "strict" teachers.

Research Question 1: Transition Concerns by Gender

We performed twelve one-way ANOVAs (one for each concern rated by participants) to test for differences in level of concern among males and females across all school types. The results of these one-way ANOVAs for gender are reported in Table 3. At the $p < .05$ level, there was a significant effect of gender on the level of concern for getting lost, $F(1, 222) = 8.16$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .04$; changing clothes for P.E., $F(1, 222) = 7.07$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .03$; peer pressure, $F(1, 222) = 8.879$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .04$; being bullied, $F(1, 222) = 21.1$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .0$; and academic performance

Table 3
Results of One-Way ANOVA for Gender and Student Concern

Concern	df	F	H	p
Friends	1	2.59	.01	.110
Groups	1	0.02	.00	.900
Locker	1	0.60	.00	.440
Lost	1	8.16	.04	.005*
Lunch	1	1.78	.01	.180
PE	1	7.07	.03	.008*
Restroom	1	0.01	.00	.920
Rules	1	0.93	.01	.340
Opposite Sex	1	1.05	.01	.310
Peer Pressure	1	8.88	.04	.003*
Bullying	1	21.10	.09	>.001**
Academics	1	10.83	.05	.001**

* indicates significance at a .05 level
** indicates significance at a .001 level

Table 4
Results of One-Way ANOVA for Race (White/African American/Other) and Student Concern

Concern	*df*	*F*	*H*	*p*
Friends	2	2.19	.02	.12
Groups	2	0.29	.00	.75
Locker	2	3.62	.03	.03*
Lost	2	0.55	.01	.58
Lunch	2	3.10	.03	.05*
PE	2	0.27	.00	.76
Restroom	2	4.06	.04	.02*
Rules	2	1.69	.01	.22
Opposite Sex	2	1.63	.01	.20
Peer Pressure	2	0.03	.00	.97
Bullying	2	0.89	.01	.41
Academics	2	0.27	.00	.76

* indicates significance at a .05 level
** indicates significance at a .001 level

$F(1, 222) = 10.83$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Female students were more concerned than male students about getting lost, $M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.06$; changing for P.E., $M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.17$; peer pressure, $M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.4$; being bullied, $M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.26$; and academic performance, $M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.98$.

Research Question 2: Transition Concerns by Race
We used twelve one-way ANOVAs (one for each concern rated) to test whether there were differences in levels of concern based on race (see Table 4). There was a significant effect of race on the level of concern for using a locker, $F(2, 223) = 3.62$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .03$. According to post hoc tests of least significant difference (LSD), the difference between White students and African American students was statistically significant, $p = .04$) with the mean for African American students being higher. African American students were more concerned than White students about using a locker, $M = 2.59$, $SD = .159$. The difference between White students and students of other races was statistically significant, $p = .03$, with students of "other" races being more concerned than White students about using a locker, $M = 2.66$, $SD = .188$. The difference between African American students and other non-White students was not statistically significant.

There was a significant effect of race on the level of concern for having enough time to eat lunch, $F(2, 223) = 3.10$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$. According to LSD post hoc tests, the difference between White and African American students was statistically significant, p-.04, with the mean for African Americans higher. African American students were more concerned than White students about having enough time to eat lunch, $M = 2.06$, $SD = .15$. The difference between White students and students of other races was not statistically significant.

There was a significant effect of race on the level of concern for going to the restroom in middle school, $F(2, 223) = 4.06$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .04$. According to LSD post hoc tests, the difference between White and African American students was not statistically significant. The difference between White students and students of "other" races was statistically significant, $p < .005$, with students of other races more concerned about the restroom than White students, $M = 1.74$, $SD = .153$. There was not a statistically significant difference between African American students and students of other races.

Research Question 3: Transition Concerns by School Type
We used twelve one-way ANOVAs (one for each concern rated) to test for differences in level of concern among students attending an inner-city, urban, suburban, or rural school. Table 5 illustrates the results of these ANOVAs for school type.

There was a significant effect of school type on the level of concern regarding making new friends, $F(3, 223) = 5.44$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Based on the Sidak post

Table 5
Results of One-Way ANOVA for School Type and Student Concern

Concern	df	F	H	p
Friends	3	5.44	.07	.001*
Groups	3	4.11	.04	.010*
Locker	3	2.44	.03	.065
Lost	3	2.90	.04	.040*
Lunch	3	7.96	.01	<.001**
PE	3	2.23	.03	.090
Restroom	3	5.17	.07	.002*
Rules	3	4.90	.06	.003*
Opposite Sex	3	0.98	.01	.400
Peer Pressure	3	1.23	.02	.300
Bullying	3	1.44	.02	.230
Academics	3	3.70	.05	.230

* indicates significance at a .05 level
** indicates significance at a .001 level

hoc test, the only statistically significant difference was between students at the inner-city school and students at the suburban school, $p < .001$. Inner-city students showed more concern about making new friends than suburban students, $M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.43$.

There was a significant effect of school type on the level of concern about belonging to the right clubs or groups, $F(3, 223) = 5.44$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .0$. Based on a Sidak post hoc tests, the only statistically significant differences were between suburban and inner-city students, $p = .01$, with inner-city students reporting more concern than suburban students, $M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.29$.

There was a significant effect of school type on the level of concern about getting lost, $F(3, 223) = 2.90$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Based on Sidak post hoc test, the only statistically significant difference was between suburban and rural students, $p = .05$, with rural students reporting more concern about getting lost, $M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.18$.

There was a significant effect of school type on the level of concern about having enough time to eat lunch, $F(3, 223) = 8.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$]. Based on Sidak post hoc tests, there was a statistically significant difference between inner-city and urban students, $p < .001$; inner-city and suburban students, $p < .001$; and between inner-city and rural students. Of the statistically significant differences we identified, participants in the inner-city school had the highest concern about having enough time to eat lunch, $M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.09$.

There was a significant effect of school type on the level of concern about going to the restroom, $F(3, 223) = 5.17$, $p \leq 002$, $\eta^2 = .07$]. Based on a Sidak post hoc test, there was a statistically significant difference between inner-city and urban students, $p = .009$, and inner-city and suburban students, $p = .02$. In both cases, the participants in the inner-city school had a higher level of concern about going to the restroom, $M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.35$.

There was a significant effect of school type on the level of concern about new school rules, $F(3, 223) = 4.90$, $p \leq .003$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Based on a Sidak post hoc test, there is a statistically significant difference only between inner-city and suburban students, $p = .001$. Participants in the inner-city school were more concerned about new middle school rules than students in the suburban school, $M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.26$.

Limitations

There are several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. Because we used a convenience sample of students whose parents consented, participants may not have accurately represented the entire population of each school, thus limiting the generalizability of findings. Similarly, the study sites may not have been representative of all elementary schools in the state or nation. Further, data were collected through self-report methods. While the nature of self-report methods presents the possibility that participants may have been tempted to respond as they deemed

was expected, we perceived this risk as minimal because the surveys were completed independent of any interaction with the researchers and all responses remained totally anonymous.

Discussion

Unlike the four elementary schools in this study, all of the middle schools into which they feed require students to change clothes for P.E. classes. Concern about undressing in front of others for P.E. was most frequently the highest rated area of apprehension, especially for females. This finding is not surprising, given the dramatic physical changes that occur during early adolescence and the self-consciousness middle school students commonly feel about their physical appearance. For young adolescent females, body image is one of the most significant stressors (Kilpatrick & Joiner, 2012). Krouscas (1999) reported that attitudes toward P.E. declined as students progressed to higher grades, noting that one of the reasons sixth grade females in his study would not choose to enroll in a P.E. class was due to changing clothes, which they perceived as negative in nature. He recommended "separating the students according to grade level [to] alleviate some of the awkwardness that many of the younger students feel (sixth grade females in particular) when they are forced to change in front of further developed older students" (p. 86).

In addition to being concerned about changing clothes for P.E., female students were significantly more concerned than male students about getting lost, being pressured by peers to drink and smoke, being bullied, and meeting academic challenges. Collectively, these findings seem to suggest that female students tend to be more apprehensive than males regarding their transition to sixth grade. These findings are consistent with other studies that found females were more uneasy than males throughout the entire period of sixth to eight grade. Kilpatrick and Joiner (2012) recently used the term "drama years" to characterize the middle school years for girls. They interviewed numerous 10- to 13-year-old girls and selected this label upon realizing that the word "drama" was used in every interview, much as adults would use the word "stress."

Manning and Bucher (2012) noted that peer pressure in the middle grades "represents a powerful and often underestimated source of influence in the social, academic, and overall development of behavior and attitudes" (p. 41). They identified tobacco, drug, and alcohol abuse as a risky behavior that can be caused by peer pressure. A recent longitudinal study found that friends have a greater influence on an individual's decision to smoke in the middle grades than in high school (Liao et al., 2013). Data analysis revealed that females were significantly more concerned about peer pressure than males with no noted difference related to race or school type; however, the most frequent rating for all respondents was not concerned (107). Participants' apparent lack of concern regarding peer pressure could indicate their limited understanding of the powerful influence their peers can have on their behavior.

Unlike the elementary schools in this study, all of the middle schools required students to use a locker with a combination lock. Difficulty opening lockers is identified in the literature as a typical concern of middle grades students (Colorado Department of Education, 2002; Lorain, 2012) and a factor that may contribute to lost instructional time at the beginning of the school year (Fields, 2002). Our analysis revealed differences based on racial background, as both African American and students of "other" races were more concerned with using a locker in middle school than White students.

Results showed a significant effect regarding time to eat lunch for both race and school type. African American students were more concerned than White students about having enough time to eat lunch, and inner-city students were more concerned than students at the urban, suburban, and rural schools. More than 90% of the African American students in this study were enrolled at the inner-city schools, and these schools also had the highest percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch. The inner-city students may have shown a higher level of worry regarding sufficient time to complete their meals at lunch because of a lack of access to sufficient meals outside of school. Also, lunch lines tend to be longer at schools with high numbers of students receiving free or reduced lunch, so students toward the end of the line have less time to eat.

Regarding restroom use, concern levels differed by both race and school types. Students of other races were more concerned about using the restroom than White students or African American students. Students at the inner-city school had a higher level of concern about going to the restroom than students at the urban and suburban schools. The highest percent of students of other races, however, was not at the inner-city school.

Inner-city students showed more concern than suburban students about making new friends and belonging to the right clubs or groups. These findings may suggest that social relationships are of greater importance to students at the inner-city school. One possible explanation for this difference could be that suburban students tend to have greater opportunity for socialization through extracurricular activities outside of school (e.g., team sports, competitive cheer/dance, performing arts classes). Additionally, students at the inner-city school were more concerned about learning and following new rules in middle school than students in the suburban school.

Rural students in this study were more concerned about getting lost than suburban students. Rural students in this study attended the smallest elementary school, with a total school population of only 527 students, and would be entering one of the largest middle schools, with a total student population of over 1,500 students. Considering the notable difference in school size, it is understandable that fifth graders at the rural elementary school would express some concern about getting lost on the much larger middle school campus.

While teacher quality did not appear in the review of literature as a typical middle school concern, having "mean" or "bad" teachers appeared as a write-in concern for 11% of the participants. This perception of middle school teachers may be attributable to the manner in which they are depicted in popular culture. For example, James Patterson's New York Times bestseller, *Middle School: The Worst Years of My Life,* features lonely sixth-grader Rafe Katchadorian who has a "dragon-lady" teacher. Similarly, the well-known book and film series, *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, portrays Gregg's P.E. teacher, Coach Malone, as insensitive and domineering.

Pickhardt (2011) noted that middle school teachers may seem less responsive and harder to reach than their elementary colleagues simply because they are responsible for many more students who, as a natural result, they do not know as well. Another important point of distinction that must be communicated to entering sixth graders is that middle school teachers may exhibit caring differently than their elementary school counterparts. Because self-management is a major goal in the middle grades, middle school teachers may be less nurturing or coddling than elementary teachers.

While we did not include "teachers" as a concern on the instrument, the investigation of elementary students' perceptions of middle school teachers may provide an excellent avenue for further research. A study including focus group interviews as a means of data collection might enrich our understanding of why middle school teachers are perceived as being mean. Conklin (2010) reported that 75% of secondary teacher education majors prefer teaching at the high school level to the middle school level, so it would also be interesting to investigate the traditional, though possibly inaccurate, stereotypes teachers associate with middle school students.

Conclusion

Our findings indicated that most fifth graders in the sample had at least a moderate level of concern regarding various issues associated with the transition to middle school. Entry anxiety is common among rising sixth graders, and attending a school orientation or participating in an established transition program helps students, as well as parents, normalize fears and provide assurance by establishing a sense of familiarity with new school environment and routines (Pickhardt, 2011). While there are various transition program models that may help students acclimate to these transitions, there is a lack of empirical research on the implementation and success of these models (Ryan, Shim, & Makara, 2013). Therefore, further research is warranted to determine the essential characteristics of effective middle school transition programs.

Additionally, Ryan, Shim, and Makara (2013) expressed concern that research in this area was primarily with White students and, hence, neglected the concerns of African American students. We found significant effects of race, specifically between White and African American students, related to concerns about using a locker and having enough time to eat. We also found significant effects between inner-city schools, which serve primarily African American students, and suburban, urban, and rural schools. In all cases, the African American students had the highest concerns about making new friends, having enough time to eat, and going to the restroom in middle school. These findings raise many questions regarding which factors—race, location, or socioeconomic status—actually account for the observed differences, and these are all areas in which further study is warranted.

It is not uncommon for race, location, and socioeconomic status to coincide in many urban and inner-city areas. Thus, the number and level of middle school concerns may be compounded for a group of students that is arguably already facing the greatest obstacles to high school completion: urban and inner-city African American students. Rather than develop a district-wide transition program that is the same for all of its schools, we urge districts to establish guidelines that allow individual schools to establish specific plans to meet the concerns of their diverse populations.

The school district in which this study was conducted had a transition program at one time, but it had not been implemented for several years due to a lack of resources. The elementary counselors in the four schools featured in this study reported similar transition activities in their schools, mainly consisting of elementary counselors visiting a middle school or the middle school counselor visiting the fifth graders. Opportunities for the fifth graders in this study to visit feeder middle schools had been eliminated for various reasons, including time constraints—largely as a result of increased testing—and a lack of cooperation from middle school administrators. The development of transition programs should be a coordinated team effort and not rest on the shoulders of counselors. Middle school and elementary school teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents need to work together to determine the concerns of transitioning students, to study program models, and to create, implement, and evaluate a transition program specifically tailored to the school's student population.

Meeting the academic, psychosocial, and emotional needs of young adolescents is too important to ignore. Middle school students are familiarly characterized as "caught in the middle" or "lost in the middle." Perhaps strong transition programs will allow rising sixth graders to be more aptly described as "secure in the middle."

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Appendix A

Middle School Transition Survey

Do NOT put your name on this survey.

Demographics: Please read the following items and check the circle that fits your description.

Gender: ○ Male   ○ Female

Age: ○ 9   ○ 10   ○ 11   ○ 12

Race: ○ African American   ○ Asian   ○ White   ○ Hispanic

         ○ Other———————————— (Please write in your race)

Directions: We would like to know about any concerns you may have about going to middle school next year. Please read the items and using the scale below, write the number that best meets your level of concern.

4 = Very Concerned   3 = Somewhat Concerned   2 = A Little Concerned   1 = Not Concerned

———— Getting lost

———— Having enough time to eat lunch

———— Using my locker

———— Undressing in front of others for P.E.

———— Making new friends

———— Being bullied by older students

———— Peer pressure to drink or smoke

———— Having harder subjects and tests

———— Meeting students of the opposite sex

———— Belonging to the right clubs or groups

———— Going to the restroom

———— New school rules

You may list one (1) concern you have that is not listed on this survey.