

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**The Effect of the Transition from Elementary to Middle  
School on Behavioral, Emotional, Cognitive and Social  
Engagement in Learning**

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## Abstract

Transitions between schools involve many changes, such as new expectations, new students and teachers. Findings have suggested that transitions from elementary school to middle school and to high school, significantly affect the development of the growing children (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). For example, transition between schools during the adolescence may impact self-efficacy, interest in studying, achieving and forming social connections (Blyth & Simmons, 1987).

In Israel, starting in 1968, a widespread education reform was initiated (Knesset, 1960) that comprised a structural change of the school system: the move from a two-phase structure (elementary school from first grade to eighth grade, high school from ninth grade to twelfth grade) towards a three-phase structure (elementary school from first grade to sixth grade, middle school from seventh grade to ninth grade, and high school from tenth grade to twelfth). The implementation process of that reform lasted five decades and today most towns and municipalities in Israel have adopted the latter structure (Rush, 2008).

The age of transition to middle school in Israel corresponds to the beginning of adolescence for the students. This is an age when meaningful development happens in many areas, including physical, emotional, cognitive and social transformations. Most studies that dealt with transitions within the school system addressed the transition from middle school to high school, and found that this transition coincides with a decrease in motivation, in engagement and in academic achievement (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). On the other hand, some studies point to positive outcomes from the transition, such as a better perception of the personal and academic potential of the

student after the transition (Barber & Olsen, 2004). Therefore we can see that there is no consensus in the findings of studies that compared the achievements, motivation and abilities of students from systems with and without middle school.

Several former studies compared seventh grade students from systems with and without middle school. The studies observed motivation, achievements, academic engagement, achievement goals etc. For example, Eccles (2004) found that middle school students had lower academic achievements and lower motivation than students of the same grade that did not transition to a middle school. Also, studies found that middle school students showed less interest, less self-efficacy, and that their self-confidence was negatively impacted after the transition (Simmons & Blyth, 1987).

The major innovation of the present study will be the focus on four different types of academic engagement of the students and the use of updated measuring indexes from the study of motivation in the field of educational psychology. The study will be conducted as a longitudinal study by comparing between students that transitioned to middle school and students that did not, at the same age.

In the present study, I will observe the changes in academic engagement as a measure of the student's adaptivity in the educational environment. Generally, academic engagement relates to the quality of the connection between the student and the school, the student's level of effort in his/her connection with other students, teachers, studies, goals, the activities and values of the school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). In recent years, the consideration of academic engagement has become part of the kernel program of schools, and the goal is teaching the students how to study, and mold them into learning adults living in a society based on

knowledge (Gilbert, 2007). Former studies attempted to define the concept of academic engagement according to various categories that expand the outlook on academic engagement much further than the student's grades.

In the present study I will focus on four categories for academic involvement:

**(a) Behavioral engagement:** participation of the student in academic, social curricular and extra curricular activities. **(b) Emotional engagement:** positive feelings and reactions of the student towards the school, the teachers and other students. **(c) Cognitive engagement:** for all things related to the cognitive domain, the student displays effort, investment, usage of learning strategies and self regulation (Fredricks et al., 2004). Also, this involvement includes learning goals and progress towards those goals. For example, a student that wants to progress in a topic will produce an effort in deeper studying of the topic rather than superficial memorization. **(d) Social engagement:** a combination of feelings from the student, the feeling of belonging to the school, acceptance of the school goals, a feeling of connection with and acceptance by his/her age group, and the experience of relationships with adults that connect with him/her as an individual (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009)

Each type of engagement will be measured with a specific measure. The behavioral and emotional engagement will be measured using the Skinner's scale (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). The measure for behavioral engagement relates principally on effort and perseverance, and includes indicators of mental effort, attention and concentration. The measure for emotional engagement relates to the emotional energy, enthusiasm, interest and enjoyment. On the other hand, the cognitive and social engagement will be measured according to the theory of achievement goals (Dweck, 1986) that focuses on the goals that lead the student at

the time of the execution of tasks. At its beginnings, the theory of achievement goals focused on the academic domain, and through the years extended to the social domain with the understanding that the social aspect is an integral part of the success and motivation of students at school (Covington, 2000).

Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to analyze the changes in the level of behavioral, emotional, cognitive and social engagement as a result of a transition to middle school, by comparing between students that transitioned to middle school (i.e., transition) and students who did not transition to middle school (i.e., no transition). The subjects will be studied via longitudinal study with questionnaires given to 415 students from sixth-seventh grade. Students completed the surveys at four time-points across the span of two years (beginning and end of the sixth grade, beginning and end of seventh grade). All variables were assessed using Linear Hierarchical Modelling (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).

The results of the study show that students experience certain difficulties during the transition into middle school. We found that emotional engagement and the cognitive performance goal impact the transition period. Students who did not transition experienced an increase in emotional involvement, whereas those who did not transition experienced a decrease. Likewise, students who transitioned demonstrated a decrease in the cognitive performance goal, whereas those who did not transitions remained stable on this measure. It's important that teachers and other educators be aware of the changes in the students' engagement as a result of the transition and to know what to expect and how to react. In addition, we saw that the majority of measures are not affected by the transition and that the students' transition around the adolescence which presents various difficulties irrespective of

the transition. As such, it's important to understand that in light of the previous literature on the matter in conjunction with the results of the current study, we can assume that for students at the adolescence, in 6th and 7th grade, the transition to middle school or remaining in an 8 year elementary school is not the most meaningful and impactful factor in student engagement. Rather, it is the degree to which the students' environment meets his or her developmental, emotional and social needs that plays the most prominent role.