

**Bar-Ilan University**

**Transition from the elementary school to  
the middle school in the era of social  
networks: Correlation between Social  
Support and Loneliness**

Shir Lev

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Master's Degree in the School  
of Education, Bar-Ilan University

Ramat Gan, Israel

2019

## **Abstract**

During the transition from elementary to middle school, the student experiences changes that affect him/her at the educational, social, and emotional levels (Benner & Graham, 2009; Newman, Newman, Griffen, O'Connor, & Spas, 2007), which can also overcome a sense of loneliness (Benner, Boyle & Bakhtiari, 2017). During this time, due to the challenges the student experiences in transitioning to middle school, the importance of the social connections of the student increases and gives social support (Crosnoe & Benner, 2015). It is necessary to re-examine this aspect due to the era of social networking. This is because of the formation of new combinations and patterns of real and virtual societies for today's youth (Cohen-Dolev and Nessim-Buniel, 2013). Therefore, it is of great importance to investigate the extent of social support and the sense of loneliness in relation to the new social ties that are formed in this era of social networking during the transition from elementary school to division.

The current study focused on first-year students in the middle school, with the aim of examining the nature of the following three variables found in the transition from elementary to middle school. The ratio of real-world social connections to the virtual world; the degree of social support; the level of loneliness that the student reports.

Transition from middle school to high school involves changes that affect students' quality of life and achievements. These changes require from them the mental strength and coping skills needed to adapt to the new emerging situation in the transition (Elder, 1998). Due to the change, there is a decline in student commitment, motivation and achievement (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Benner & Graham, 2009). In addition, their levels of both loneliness and anxiety tend to increase (Benner & Graham, 2009; Newman et al., 2007) especially among girls (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Storch, Brassard, & Masia-Warner, 2003). Relationships created within the school with other educators and students are important for their academic and socio-emotional progress (Crosnoe & Benner, 2015). Therefore, there are various factors associated with students coping with transition challenges. The center of this study concerns that the social support and sense of loneliness are among these various factors (Benner et al., 2017).

Social support is defined as a concept, action, or gesture that leads one to believe that they are loved, valued, and cared for and belong to a network of committed and mutually beneficial social connections (Cobb, 1976). The social support that comes

from relationships with relatives, family support, relationships with friends, and community support has been found to help the individual cope with changes he experiences during his life (Schlossberg, 1981). In addition, optimal social support has been found to increase a person's sense of security and protect him from crises and illness (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984; Cobb, 1976).

Loneliness is a concept that describes a human existential experience shared by all humans (Rokach & Shaked, 2013). Loneliness, which is very common in modern society and is prevalent among all age groups, is defined as a social-emotional state that expresses lack of belonging, distancing from people and a human environment that accompanies the gap between a person's desire to belong to a social relationship and his or her social connections (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). Significant changes occurring in the social world of youth increase the risk of developing feelings of loneliness (Spithoven, Bastin, Bijttebier & Goossens, 2018). Loneliness has serious implications for the mental and physical health of both adults and adolescents, including depression, suicidal thoughts, aggression, obesity and cardiovascular disease and may increase the risk of premature mortality (Goossens, 2018).

Students spend many hours on social media, including managing virtual and networking friendships (Rosenberg, 2015). The social network creates previously unfamiliar situations, for example, the student can maintain some of the friendships he has grown in the real world through the media, and form new, and varied, relationships. Before the era of social media, schools inevitably entailed a significant change in the social environment during the school transition. However, in the present era, the virtual age can affect the stability and even the extent of the social connection cycle (Cohen-Dolev & Nessim-Buniel, 2013)

The research literature to date leads to two forms of observation of what is happening in the era of social networking during the transition period that creates two two-faceted hypotheses. On the one hand, social networking may increase the level of social support when the student passes into the division and reduce her sense of loneliness during this sensitive period, because there are aspects that may contribute to the student's ability to better cope with transition challenges (Benner et al., 2017). On the other hand, the very use of social networks contributes to a high sense of loneliness in the student even during the transition period. Although relationships in the virtual world during this period may expand due to social media, the level of loneliness will

be high due to the influence of social networks (Pittman & Reich, 2016). This sense of loneliness may impair the student's ability to best deal with the challenges of transition.

The current study was conducted among 100 seventh grade female students from a religious state middle school in Central Israel. The students answered questionnaires at two waves in the academic year of 2018, at about four months apart (response rate = 95%). The study was approved by the chief scientist of the Ministry of Education and passed by the research editor without the school staff to ensure confidentiality. A student answered three questionnaires: a questionnaire developed for the current study of mapping students' friendships in the real and virtual world, a social support questionnaire (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987), and a questionnaire assessing the level of loneliness (Asher & Wheeler, 1984).

The main finding that emerged is that a sense of loneliness predicts an increase in alienation, which then predicts an increase in the ratio between virtual/real friendships. The key conclusion that should be supported by follow-up research is that it is essential to encourage students to develop connections in the real world regardless of the connections they have in the virtual world.

Analyzing the pattern of simple correlations between the two waves indicated a strong and significant negative correlation between social support and a sense of loneliness. As the degree of social support increases the degree of how loneliness decreases. In addition, the central research question was examined using "Cross Lagged Analysis" using "Structural Equation Modeling", where the relationship between the three variables was examined: real-virtual friendships, social support, and the feeling of loneliness. A mediation model was found so that the "degree of alienation" is the variable that mediates the sense of loneliness and virtual-reality friendships. That is, a sense of loneliness predicts an increase in the degree of alienation that predicts a decline in real and virtual friendships.

Through "Cluster Analysis", a mapping is done that divides the subjects into several groups, with each group characterized by its similarities and differences from the other groups. This cluster analysis showed that there is diversity in the study population and the subjects are divided equally among 4 groups and allows to look at the results with the understanding that they cannot all be united in one group, but for each group there is a different pattern of social interaction in their world.

The results of the study indicate a relationship between the real and virtual friendships established in this era of social networking, and the degree of social support

and the student's sense of loneliness during the transition from elementary to middle school. But, surprisingly, this connection is found to be the opposite of what is surmised. Beyond that, a mediation model that predicts change and implies a process over the transition period that was not previously estimated.

The findings can be explained through a broad theoretical framework in which one theory of social networks intertwined in social life today (Turkle, 2017) explains the surprising reversal in hypotheses, and the other, which deals with adolescents' loneliness, explains the change that was detected over the transition period (Goossens, 2018).

This study has various limitations, both regarding the focus on girls and on the focus on students who moved from elementary to middle school without comparison to students who went to seventh grade in the same educational institution and did not experience transition. It is therefore possible to offer further studies on these issues.

The present study contributes to expanding theoretical knowledge about social support as opposed to sense of loneliness in the era of media and social networking during the transition from elementary to middle school.

The current study offers a new variable for the research of the students' social world in this era of social networking that reflects the ratio between the real social relationships and the virtual world. It also highlights the importance of conducting longitudinal studies in the transition period, through a two-waves examination over this period, so that it can predict a change in the processes that occur. The findings of the present study may clarify the centrality and role of the educational system during the transition period and emphasize the importance of making real connections during this period.