

Middle Grades Schooling and Early Adolescent Development

An Introduction

Allan Wigfield
University of Maryland
Jacquelynne S. Eccles
University of Michigan

In this special issue of the *Journal of Early Adolescence*, the focus is on the important topic of schooling and early adolescence. Although the early adolescent period has long been thought of as an especially important time of development, the quality of the school experiences of early adolescents often has been questioned. Silberman (1970) put it rather bluntly: "The junior high school, by almost unanimous agreement, is the wasteland—one is tempted to say cesspool—of American education" (p. 324). Efforts to reform middle grades schooling are currently at center stage of many education reform initiatives. Stimulated in part by the landmark 1989 *Turning Points* report of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development as well as by other national calls for school reform, many state offices of education currently are taking a close look at how their middle grades schools are organized and structured. Many also are in the process of changing their middle grades schools to serve better the needs of early adolescents. Although current reform efforts have not met with unqualified success and often are not proceeding as rapidly as we might hope (see Mergendoller, 1993; Urdan, Midgley, & Wood, in press, in Part II of this special issue), it nevertheless is very encouraging that so many reform efforts are underway.

At the same time that these reform efforts have begun, more and more developmental researchers have become interested in studying development during the early adolescent and adolescent years. One indication of this

Journal of Early Adolescence, Vol. 14 No. 2, May 1994 102-106
© 1994 Sage Publications, Inc.

interest is the thriving Society for Research on Adolescence, which began in the mid-1980s. Much of the important recent work on early adolescent and adolescent development was summarized in the Feldman and Elliott (1990) edited volume on the adolescent years, and from the chapters in that book, it is clear that much is being learned about the developing adolescent. One clear conclusion from this and other work is that adolescence is a time of great change. Historically, psychologists often referred to this developmental period as one of storm and stress and difficulty for adolescents (e.g., Blos, 1979; Hall, 1904). Adolescents experience the biological and social changes associated with puberty, changes in their friendships and in the ways they interact with both same and opposite-sex peers, changes in their relations with their parents, and changes in the school environments they experience as they move first from elementary school to middle school and then to high school. Certainly these changes can pose important challenges that many early adolescents must successfully overcome to maintain positive developmental trajectories. Yet recently, different researchers have questioned whether these changes should necessarily be characterized as stormy and stressful (e.g., Brooks-Gunn & Reiter, 1990; Dornbusch, Petersen, & Hetherington, 1991). As more knowledge about early adolescence accumulates, these changes will be better understood, and researchers and practitioners will understand more clearly why some adolescents manage to cope successfully with the changes and others struggle with them. The new knowledge about early adolescent development also should be a great help to those undertaking the reform of traditional middle grades education. The major purpose of this special issue is to provide an outlet for some of the exciting new work both on the nature of early adolescent development and on efforts to change schools to better meet the developmental needs of early adolescents.

In our own work, we have done major studies of early adolescents' achievement beliefs and motivation and how aspects of middle grades school and classroom environments influence students' motivation (e.g., Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1989; Eccles et al., 1993; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). Thus we were very interested in compiling our own work and that of other researchers who have been studying early adolescent development and how different aspects of schooling influence that development. We approached Ellen Thornburg with the idea of doing a special issue of the *Journal of Early Adolescence* devoted to that topic, and she agreed to let us edit this special issue. For that privilege we thank her wholeheartedly. After sending out a wide call for papers and receiving many interesting manuscripts, it quickly

became apparent that we had too much material for just one issue. So we called Ellen again and asked whether we could fill two issues. Happily for us, she again agreed. Thus this special issue will consist of two parts. The authors of the articles in this first part deal broadly with different psychological characteristics of early adolescents and the relationships between early adolescents and their parents, teachers, and peers. In the second part, the articles focus on interventions to change middle grades schooling in different ways, teachers' beliefs about schooling and early adolescents, ability grouping, and how different developmental contexts influence early adolescents' development. We are excited about both the quality and breadth of coverage of the articles included in the special issue. Several of the authors present results of longitudinal studies, which are still all too rare in the fields of developmental psychology and educational psychology. Others describe large-scale intervention programs designed to restructure important aspects of middle grades schools. Still others summarize the results of their major research programs on different characteristics of early adolescent development.

In Part I of the special issue, the authors focus on different psychological characteristics of early adolescents, their relationships with others, and how those characteristics and relationships influence their school performance. One major emphasis is on early adolescents' self-beliefs and motivation regarding school. In the recent literature on motivation, children's competence and efficacy beliefs, achievement values, and achievement goals have been postulated to be the achievement-related constructs most strongly related to children's performance on different activities and choice of which activities to pursue (e.g., Eccles et al., 1983; Nicholls, 1990; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Schunk, 1991; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992). The studies on early adolescent motivation included in the special issue focus on these beliefs, values and goals. Wigfield and Eccles describe their longitudinal projects examining change in children's competence beliefs, achievement task values, and general self-esteem across the elementary and middle school years. Pintrich, Roeser, and De Groot present results of a longitudinal study looking at how early adolescents' efficacy beliefs and achievement goals influence their use of different learning strategies and regulation of their achievement behavior across a school year. Lord, Eccles, and McCarthy describe different factors that predict change in early adolescents' self-esteem and school adjustment after they make the transition from elementary school to junior high school. Guerin, Gottfried, Oliver, and Thomas look at a psychological characteristic of early adolescents, their temperament, that is not often studied in the literature on adolescent development. They present

results of their longitudinal study of how early adolescents' temperaments relate to their school performance, behavior ratings by teachers, and the adolescents' own self-concept and motivation.

The final three articles in this first part of the special issue focus on early adolescents' relationships, including parent-child relations, teacher-child relations, and peer relations. These relations all can change in important ways during the adolescent years (e.g., Brown, 1990; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Furstenberg, 1990). Because the quality of the individual's relations with others play such an important role in their development, it is crucial that we better understand the nature of the changes in these relations that occur during adolescence. Ryan, Stiller and Lynch present results of a study looking at how early adolescents' representations of their relations with teachers, parents, and friends relate to their motivation, self-esteem, and measures of school adjustment. Various researchers have discussed how parents' involvement in their children's education declines after elementary school. Paulsen presents the results of a study showing how parental involvement indeed does continue to relate to early adolescents' achievement outcomes. Wentzel reviews her program of research on how different aspects of family functioning (such as discipline strategies) relate to early adolescents' classroom behaviors and motivation to succeed in school. The wealth of information contained in these articles is exciting; we hope you enjoy the special issue.

REFERENCES

- Blos, P. (1979). *The adolescent passage*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Brooks-Gunn, J., & Reiter, E. O. (1990). The role of pubertal processes. In S. S. Feldman & G. R. Elliott (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent* (pp. 16-53). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brown, B. B. (1990). Peer groups and peer cultures. In S. S. Feldman & G. R. Elliott (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent* (pp. 171-196). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1989). *Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Dornbusch, S. M., Petersen, A. C., & Hetherington, E. M. (1991). Projecting the future of research on adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 1, 7-18.
- Eccles, J., Adler, T. F., Futterman, R., Goff, S. B., Kaczala, C. M., Meece, J., & Midgley, C. (1983). Expectancies, values and academic behaviors. In J. T. Spence (Ed.), *Achievement and achievement motives* (pp. 75-146). San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.
- Eccles, J. S., & Midgley, C. (1989). Stage-environment fit: Developmentally appropriate classrooms for young adolescents. In C. Ames & R. Ames (Eds.), *Research on motivation in education, Vol. 3: Goals and cognitions* (pp. 139-186). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

- Eccles, J., Midgley, C., & Adler, T. (1984). Grade-related changes in the school environment: Effects on achievement motivation. In J. G. Nicholls (Ed.), *The development of achievement motivation* (pp. 283-331). Greenwich, CT: JAI.
- Eccles, J. S., Wigfield, A., Flanagan, C., Miller, C., Reuman, D., & Yee, D. (1989). Self-concepts, domain values, and self-esteem: Relations and changes at early adolescence. *Journal of Personality, 57*, 283-310.
- Eccles, J. S., Wigfield, A., Midgley, C., Reuman, D., Mac Iver, D., & Feldlaufer, C. (1993). Negative effects of traditional middle grades schools on students' motivation. *Elementary School Journal, 93*, 553-574.
- Feldman, S. S., & Elliott, G. R. (Eds.). (1990). *At the threshold: The developing adolescent*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Furstenberg, F. F. (1990). Coming of age in a changing family system. In S. S. Feldman & G. R. Elliott (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent* (pp. 147-170). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hall, G. S. (1904). *Adolescence: Its psychology and its relations to anthropology, sex, crime, religion, and education*. New York: Appleton.
- Mergendoller, J. R. (1993). Introduction: The role of research in the reform of middle grades education. *The Elementary School Journal, 93*, 443-446.
- Nicholls, J. G. (1990). What is ability and why are we mindful of it? A developmental perspective. In R. J. Sternberg & J. Kolligian (Eds.), *Competence considered* (pp. 11-46). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Pintrich, P. R., & DeGroot, E. V. (1990). Motivational and self-regulated learning components of classroom academic performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 82*, 33-40.
- Schunk, D. H. (1991). Self-efficacy and academic motivation. *Educational Psychologist, 26*, 206-232.
- Silberman, C. E. (1970). *Crisis in the classroom*. New York: Random House.
- Urdan, T., Midgley, C., & Wood, S. (in press). Special issues in reforming middle level schools. *Journal of Early Adolescence*.
- Wigfield, A., & Eccles, J. S. (1992). The development of achievement task values: A theoretical analysis. *Developmental Review, 12*, 265-310.
- Wigfield, A., Eccles, J., Mac Iver, D., Reuman, D., & Midgley, C. (1991). Transitions at early adolescence: Changes in children's domain-specific self-perceptions and general self-esteem across the transition to junior high school. *Developmental Psychology, 27*, 552-565.