

Middle Grades Schooling and Early Adolescent Development

Part II: Interventions, Practices, Beliefs, and Contexts

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As discussed in more detail in the introduction to the first part of this special issue of the *Journal of Early Adolescence* (Wigfield & Eccles, 1994), the focus of this special issue is the topic of schooling and early adolescence. The first part included articles that dealt with differing aspects of early adolescent development. Several authors of the articles in Part I described their studies of the association of different psychological characteristics to early adolescents' school performance. The other authors in Part I focused on the relationships among early adolescents and their parents, teachers, and peers. In this second part of the special issue, the focus shifts to a more direct consideration of the school experiences of early adolescents, and how these experiences might be changed to facilitate early adolescents' school achievement and overall development.

To deal with the special needs of early adolescents, many school districts have changed from a *traditional* junior high school organization to a variety of middle school organizations. The impetus for these changes comes from many different sources, including national reports such as the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) *Turning Points* report, efforts by different state boards of education, and from local districts themselves. In the first article in this part of the special issue, Urdan, Midgley, and Wood discuss a major collaborative project in which university researchers and the staff of a middle grades school attempted to reform

the school so that the instructional emphasis would focus more on task-involved learning rather than ability-based and competitive learning practices. The authors take an important motivational theory, known as a goal theory, and attempt to apply it to the restructuring of the curriculum and organization of a middle grades school. They discuss both the promises and the perils of middle school reform, which should inform others embarking on the process of school reform.

One important challenge for school reformers is how to provide more positive and productive educational experiences for students from differing minority groups. Because of the continuing difficulties some minority groups are experiencing in our schools, some educators have proposed that separate educational programs be developed for those students. Even though such proposals are often controversial, they are an important part of the educational reform movement. In her article, Cynthia Hudley describes an interesting separate school instructional program designed to improve the school attitudes, performance, and attendance of African American early adolescent males. Hudley compares the outcomes of students in the program to the outcomes of a similar group of students at the same middle school who did not participate in this program. She also emphasizes the continuing need to improve the educational experiences of African American students in our schools.

The practice of ability grouping has received intensive scrutiny by people concerned with reforming middle grades schools. Many reformers have argued strongly that ability grouping should be used less frequently or not at all in middle grades schools (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Oakes, 1985), particularly because of its stigmatizing effects on low achievers. But how does ability grouping affect children over the long term? Few studies have addressed this crucial question. Fuligni, Eccles, and Barber begin to answer this question in their longitudinal study of how mathematics ability grouping in seventh grade influences students' mathematics achievement, beliefs, and attitudes about mathematics, school-related deviancy, and peer associations in tenth grade. Their study is one of the very first to look at the long-term sequelae of ability grouping on students, and so it should have important implications for the continuing debate on ability grouping.

Teachers' beliefs and attitudes about their students can have a big influence on those students, and their beliefs likely have a major impact on efforts to reform middle grades schools. How do elementary and middle

grades school teachers view the students they teach? Does one group have a more positive view of their students than does the other group? Do they differ in beliefs about which instructional practices are most effective? Midgley, Anderman, and Hicks assessed these and other questions in their study of teachers' beliefs about their students and instructional practices. In particular, Midgley et al. focused on teachers' goals for students and how those goals influence their instructional practices. They found many differences between elementary and middle grade school teachers' beliefs both about their students and the kinds of instructional practices they use. Midgley et al. discuss the important implications of their results for school reform.

Another aspect of efforts to reform middle grades schools is the realization that continued parental involvement in education is crucial to early adolescents' success in school. Unfortunately, many parents become less involved in their children's education once children move into middle grades school. Epstein and Dauber present an evaluation of a program designed to increase parents' involvement in the education of their middle grades students. The program focused on parental involvement in social studies and art education, and was implemented in an urban middle school. Results of the evaluation study showed that parental involvement had positive effects on several student outcome measures. The authors discuss how this program can be used to increase parental involvement in middle grades schools and improve the education of middle grades students.

In the last article in the second part of this special issue, Shwalb, Shwalb, and Nakazana report the results of their longitudinal study of the attitudes of Japanese students toward cooperative and competitive school learning activities and other activities, and how the students' attitudes about cooperation change during the secondary school years. Given the current emphasis on cooperative learning in schools in the United States, and the continuing interest in the success of Japanese schools, results of their study are quite informative regarding how *students* view cooperative activities and how their views change over time.

With the Shwalbs' article, this special issue comes to a close. Through the process of editing these articles, we have learned much about early adolescents and middle school education, and hope the readers of the special issue do so as well. We again would like to give hearty thanks to E. Ellen Thornburg for the opportunity to edit this special issue.

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