Middle School Transition: Will Emotional Intelligence Help the Way?  
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Abstract

Stressful life events are ever-present for early adolescents, but the list of challenges grows longer when students transfer from elementary school to middle school. The current study sought to determine if aspects of emotional intelligence (EI) can lessen the issues faced by students during their preparation for this transition. A measure of EI was used to predict student reports of readiness and confidence for middle school transition. Results indicated that several of the measured dimensions of EI appeared to be significant predictors of student confidence for middle school success. From those results, specific recommendations can be made for teacher and administrator training and development to prepare students for the transition from elementary to middle school.

Introduction

Although some students are able to complete the transition into middle school successfully, many students struggle to adapt to a school schedule with multiple teachers who provide new behavioral and classroom rules, expectations, and requirements (Grills-Taquechel, Norton, & Ollendick, 2010). Academically, students moving into middle school have to adapt to a school schedule with multiple teachers who provide a less personal and nurturing atmosphere, which is different from what most students experienced in elementary school (Barber & Olsen, 2004). Those types of middle school characteristics can lead transitioning students to have declines in grades, motivation, academic interests, and self-perceived academic readiness and confidence (Grills-Taquechel, et al., 2010). Middle school presents challenges for students behaviorally transitioning into the new environment. This often means learning multiple sets of new behavioral and classroom rules, expectations, and consequences (Akos, 2002). Students need to transition to be socially ready to make new friends, sustain old friendships, and adapt from being the oldest in the school to the youngest. In addition, negative peer influence is prevalent in early adolescence, which can lead to undesired consequences (Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2008). It was recognized that EI training can help young people become more effective learners. EI interventions have the potential to improve a range of student outcomes (Goleman, 1995). Teaching emotional intelligence creates benefits for students in the areas of emotional self-awareness, managing emotions, empathy, handling relationships, and how to harness emotions productively (Goleman, 1995). EI has been linked in prior research to strengths in academic achievement (Parker, Britt, & Kowalchek, 2003) and self-management (Quilter, et al., 2007), and more effective avoidance of behavioral risk factors (Trinidad & Johnson, 2003) by the time students reach high school.

Participants

116 students in the 6th grade from a Midwestern middle school participated in the study over the early phases of the school year. However, only 69 completed data sets were collected/analyzed.

Instrumentation

BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory: Youth Version (BarOn EQ-I: YV) is designed to measure emotional intelligence in youth ages 7 to 18 using a five-dimensional trait model that includes emotional perception, adaptability, general mood, and interpersonal skills. This measure contained 60 Likert-scale items. An additional set of Likert-scale items were designed for the purpose of this study that gauged students’ reported activities related to transition readiness and confidence:

9 questions were asked about readiness:
• EI: Before this school year, my family and I worked together to get ready for the amount of homework that I now have in middle school.

3 questions were asked about confidence:
• EI: I am confident that I can succeed in doing middle school work.

Procedure

Parent notification was disseminated to all 6th graders one week before data collection occurred. All students who had their parents’ permission participated in the study. Data was collected via survey from 6th graders in two social studies classrooms on one designated school day.

Results

INDEPENDENT AND DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Out of the 69 fully completed data sets used for statistical analysis, 35 of the participants were male and 34 were female. When considering the values, the response variables shown below, there were significant differences between the two genders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral Readiness</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>.317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Readiness</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>.317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Readiness</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>.317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Impression</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>.317</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When examining sets of these significant predictors upon single indicators of transition, only the levels of behavioral, social, and general confidence were significantly predicted by combinations of two variables:
• Together, two predictors (Stress Management and Interpersonal Skills) explained 41% of the variance in Behavioral Confidence scores (F12,62 = 6.87, p = .002).
• Together, three predictors (General Mood, Adaptation, and Interpersonal Skills) explained 43% of the variance in Social Confidence achievements (F12,62 = 7.54, p = .003).
• Together, two predictors (General Mood and Interpersonal Skills) explained 41% of the variance in General Confidence scores (F12,62 = 4.93, p = .014).

Discussion and Conclusions

Students who exaggerate their emotional intelligence skills (PI) were also likely to rate highly the extent to which they prepared for the middle school transition, even if they are actually not indicative of the true nature of the relationship between emotional intelligence and transition preparations. When students have a high ability to stay calm in stressful situations and well-developed empathic skills, emotional regulation and self-awareness, they appear to make behavioral confidence more likely, therefore easing the burden of transition. Students who generally have a positive outlook, a flexibility with change, and social-emotional relationships tend to be the most confident to handle the new social demands of middle school because these are the students who are more able to establish meaningful relationships, sustain old friendships, and adapt easily to a new role in middle school.

Students who are optimistic and positive, as well as those who have the skills to form satisfying relationships, and understand the feelings of others demonstrate global confidence. This appears to be effective in reducing the transition requirements of self-efficacy, or students’ understanding of their own responsibilities and capabilities.

STUDY LIMITATIONS:
• Data was retrospective in nature, but should have represented real time student perceptions.
• Sample size was limited by incomplete data sets.
• This study is representative of 6th grade students at one midwest middle school, thereby limiting generalizability.
• These variables do not predict what actually happened, but predict what students report themselves to have done in preparation for transition.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
The results of this study have implications for educators in being able to use their knowledge of students’ transitions to provide support for students, activities including stress management, adaptability, and interpersonal skills could help to increase the confidence and preparedness of students transitioning to middle school. In addition, we could provide opportunities for transition readiness and confidence related to stress management, interpersonal, and adaptability issues identified here.

References

• Grills-Taquechel, A. E., Norton, P., & Ollendick, T. H. (2010). A longitudinal examination of Stressful life events are ever-present for early adolescents, but the list of challenges grows longer when students transfer from elementary school to middle school. The current study sought to determine if aspects of emotional intelligence (EI) can lessen the issues faced by students during their preparation for this transition. A measure of EI was used to predict student reports of readiness and confidence for middle school transition. Results indicated that several of the measured dimensions of EI appeared to be significant predictors of student confidence for middle school success. From those results, specific recommendations can be made for teacher and administrator training and development to prepare students for the transition from elementary to middle school.