

"IT STILL BUGS ME BUT I DON'T REALLY CARE"
AND OTHER ATTITUDES ABOUT SCHOOL
EXPRESSED BY GRADE SIX STUDENTS

by

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Title of Thesis/Project/Extended Essay

"It still bugs me but I don't really care" and other

attitudes about school expressed by grade six students

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ABSTRACT

After reviewing the literature on grade 6 students, the attitudes of 10 grade 6 students were investigated by interviewing them about their year in school: what they should be learning, how they should be learning, what they have learned, how they relate to others in school, what changes they would make, what is important in school, and what their reasons are for being in school. The interview data were used to construct a framework about their attitudes. Students' perceptions of what is important, what school is like, and what peers are like are bonded with overriding questions of who they are, where they fit in and who likes them, as well as an overall nonchalance. A case study was written on each participant to illustrate the framework. The findings were discussed and related to the literature on early adolescence. The implications of the findings as they relate to recommendations for middle school organization were discussed and suggestions offered. In essence, the attitudes and wishes of this small group of grade 6 students support the recommendations of a major document on middle schools, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development's (1989) Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: THE NATURE OF THE STUDY	1
Statement Of The Problem	2
Research Questions.	2
Significance Of The Study.	3
Research Design And Methodology.	6
Access To And Selection Of Participants	6
The Interview	8
Ethical Considerations.	9
Data Analysis	9
Trustworthiness.	12
CHAPTER II: THE GRADE SIX STUDENT:	
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.	15
Grade Six: A Transition Year.	15
Cognitive Development	15
Expectancy-Value Theory.	17
Developing Self-Esteem	19
Top-Dog Phenomenon	21
Important Resources.	22
Pubertal Development And Self-Esteem	23
Grade Point Average And Self-Esteem.	26
Athletic Ability And Self-Esteem	27
Relationships	27
Social Skills	27

Influence And Teachers	28
Peer Relationships	29
Parental Interest	30
Students At Risk.	32
School Transition From Grade 6 To Grade 7	36
A Developmental Mismatch	37
Educational Environment.	39
Comment	40
CHAPTER III: THE PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR ATTITUDES	43
Alan.	43
Ashley.	45
Cheryl.	48
Jeff.	51
Jenn.	54
Lance	55
Mike.	59
Pete.	61
Tami.	63
Tom	66
CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS.	69
Group Analysis Related To The Framework	69
Overall Essence: Keep A Stiff Upper Lip!	69
What Is Important To The Grade Six Students.	70
THEME: Who Grade The Six Students Are	73

What School Is Like For The Grade Six Students . . .	74
THEME: Where Grade The Six Students Fit In. . .	76
THEME: Who Likes The Grade Six Students . . .	79
What The Grade Six Students Think Of Their Peers . .	80
Connections To The Literature	82
Cognitive Development And Self-Esteem.	83
Academic Achievement	85
Pubertal Development	86
Relationships With Peers	90
Relationships With Staff	94
Parental Interest.	95
Possible At-Risk Students.	96
School Environment	97
Comment	100
CHAPTER V: REFLECTIONS, ISSUES, AND INSIGHTS.	101
Reflections	101
An Essay Of Grade Six Reflections	
By A Grade Six Student	101
Issues.	107
Motivation	107
The Organization Of Middle Schools	109
Insights	131
Summary.	135
REFERENCES	136

APPENDIX: PROMPT QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS. 150

FIGURE

A MODEL OF THE GRADE SIX PARTICIPANTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD
SCHOOL14

CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF THE STUDY

Young adolescents are beginning to consider seriously the ideas of friendships, teachers as role models, the purpose for being in school, and the importance of academic achievement. How they now look at these things and perceive themselves in the world of school may have a larger influence on them at this time than at any other time of their lives.

Do you remember your grade 6 year? A student interviewed during preliminary research in a research designs in education course declared, "It's different, but I don't know why." Chances are her teacher and her parents echoed this same thought when faced with a preadolescent nearing the end of her grade 6 year. Having taught grade 6 students recently, I heard this lamentation both from the parents of the students I taught as well as other grade 6 teachers.

To bring a different perspective to what is known about grade 6 students, I decided to interview several about their year in school and attempt to look at things through their eyes. After the interviews, I felt I had collected enough information to write a composite essay about a school year from the perspective of a grade 6 student. As I was thinking

about the material and transporting myself into a grade 6 student in preparation for writing, these questions kept recurring: "Who am I?" "Who likes me?" "Where do I fit in?" Although I tried to stick to the topic, which was school, these questions kept interrupting me.

When I read the transcribed interviews again in an attempt to discover common issues, I found the discourse behaved in a similar fashion. Being a grade 6 student is not without its painful side and I was moved by the attempted nonchalance of the students when they were telling me some of their experiences. The statement "It still bugs me but I don't really care" verbalizes an emotion that pervaded the interviews. Keeping this component in mind, let's move through the looking glass, into the world of grade 6 students to discover--what do they think about school?

Statement Of The Problem

The general purpose of the study was to investigate what a small group of grade 6 students from one school thought about their school year and try to identify any common attitudes. This research is an attempt to discover any unique qualities that this group of grade 6 students may have that can be expressed in their attitudes toward school.

Research Questions

What do a small group of grade 6 students from one

school think they should be learning? How do they see themselves learning most effectively? What would their most effective teacher be like? Are there aspects of school they like and dislike? What do they perceive to have accomplished during the school year? How do they relate to others in school--students and staff? Would they change anything about the school year? Do they feel anything is important about school? Do they have any goals for school achievement?

When the research began, I was uncertain about the ability of grade 6 students to conceptualize these ideas and did not know how well they would be able to verbalize the answers to the above questions during interviews. The dialogue resulting from these questions formed the basis of the interview data.

Significance Of The Study

Grade 6 students fall within or close to the age of students who are considered for middle school placement. Lounsbury and Johnson (1988), in a study of grade 6 students placed in various types of school structures, stated that the majority of grade 6 students in the United States were placed in middle schools.

Task forces have prescribed formulas for the operation of secondary schools (The Task Force on Secondary Schools in a Changing Society of Secondary School Principals, 1975) as

well as middle schools (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989), based on their beliefs of needs of young adolescents. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development viewed young adolescents from ages 10 to 15 as students at turning points in their lives. It felt this group had special problems and required attention if they were to progress through school effectively and efficiently. It expressed a concern about the education which youngsters in this age range now receive. Students in grade 6 are at the beginning of this turning point.

In line with the recommendations for middle schools, some researchers were concerned about the motivation of young adolescents. Epstein (1981) studied students in grades 6 to 12 over a two year period and concluded that earlier attitudes toward school life determined later attitudes toward school life. Eccles, Wigfield, et al. (1993) contended that declines in motivation during early adolescence were related more to negative changes in the school environment than to characteristics of adolescent development. They proposed that a mismatch developed in schools which was linked to negative age-related changes in young adolescents' motivation and self-perceptions. They called this a poor stage-environmental fit. In support of this, Buchanan, Eccles, and Becker (1992) extensively

reviewed the effects of hormones on adolescent behaviour. They focused on 9 to 14 year old children because they felt biological changes began with puberty and hormonal changes could best be studied before morphological changes became apparent. They concluded that "few relevant studies of moodiness exist" (p. 77) and that no studies of moodiness in children asked the children about moodiness. Simmons and Blyth (1987) also considered the concept of the tumultuous adolescent a myth. These findings seem to caution us not to blame all adolescent behaviour on puberty but to consider all aspects of adolescent life, including school life.

The organization of school environment is important because it can influence friendship. The need for friendship is strong when many changes are occurring in one's life (Karweit & Hansell, 1983a). If students form strong bonds in elementary school, they have less chance of dropping out in secondary school (Coleman, Collinge, & Seifert, 1993; Finn, 1989). How students feel about themselves and how they perceive others feel about them often determine their outlook on school.

During adolescence, young people begin to make decisions about their self-worth, the worthiness of others, and the value of education, health, work, and citizenship. For many youth, early adolescence is one of

the last real opportunities to affect their personal trajectory. (Jackson & Hornbeck, 1989, p. 831)

Research Design And Methodology

Access To And Selection Of Participants

I work as a learning assistance teacher in an elementary school with a student population of about 550 students. The school district has about 11,000 students and this is the second largest elementary school. Three classes in the school have grade 6 students. Only one has all grade 6 students. Another has grade 6 and 5 students and still another has grade 6 and 7 students. My choice of students from this school was one of convenience for the students and myself, as I was able to interview the students during my preparation time and they did not have to meet with me during their free time. The teachers arranged for them to catch up on any material that they missed while they were with me.

The principal of the school gave permission for me to interview students with the agreement that I followed the ethical considerations of Simon Fraser University.

I spoke to the grade 6 teachers individually, explaining that the purpose of my research was to collect data about grade 6 students' attitudes toward school. All agreed to my interviewing students from their classes. I was

not directly involved in the teaching, programming, or counselling of any of these students.

I requested that each teacher of grade 6 students choose a boy and a girl who were not at risk academically or socially. (I neglected to add "chatty" to the criteria, and had a difficult time eliciting information from the first student. I added this criterion after the first interview.) To plan for a variety of students with possible different attitudes, I used a variation of snowball or chain referral sampling (Krathwohl, 1993). After each interview, I asked the student for the name of another student in the class who would most likely have a very different attitude. My intentions were to proceed with the sequential sampling (Krathwohl, 1993) of students and their chain referrals until I could find evidence of similar attitudes evolving from the interviews. I interviewed a total of ten grade 6 students. Of these, six were males and four were females. Six were chosen by teachers--three boys and three girls. Four were chosen by students--three boys and one girl. Optimally, I would like to have interviewed one more female selected by a student. However, end of year time constraints prevented me from finding more participants when two who were originally selected did not return signed permission forms to me.

The Interview

Each of the interviews lasted from 40 minutes to an hour. I found this amount of time necessary for issues to appear. The interviews took place in the learning assistance classroom and were audiotaped. When a student entered the room, a "Do Not Disturb" sign was put on the door. I explained why I was interviewing grade 6 students and that no one would have access to the tapes or any of the information but me. I explained that I would be giving each student a fictitious name when I wrote up the material. (One student even gave me the name he wanted me to use.)

I attempted to look at the grade 6 year through the eyes of this group of grade 6 students by encouraging the participants to talk freely about their year in school and have them lead the interviews. However, realizing that grade 6 students might not be able to talk at length about school, I used a guideline of questions as prompts. I had a copy of my prompt questions (Appendix, p. 160) in front of me which I allowed participants to view if they wished, but cautioned them that I might not follow these questions in order as it was more important for me to listen to what they said and let them tell me what was important to them. I tried to stress the importance of just letting go and talking about opinions and not worrying about the tape recorder or if

there were any "right" answers. I encouraged participants to hold the microphone and use the on and off switch if they wished.

The same day of each interview I made notes about my impressions of the participant. The interviews were transcribed and reflected upon in extra notes.

Ethical Considerations

The parents of the selected students were called, the purpose of the research explained to them, and requests made to confidentially interview their children. On procuring agreement from the parents, the students were taken through the same procedure and told they could withdraw at any time. On agreeing, they were given consent forms to have their parents sign and return.

Data Analysis

My object was to do a qualitative data analysis by interviewing a number of grade 6 students and attempting to find common issues in the material which might lead to a framework. This type of research is classified as interpretivist/constructivist research where the researcher works more in depth with a small sample size. Any findings apply only to the group of participants and are not generalizable. The intention of this type of research is to raise issues, provide insights, and possibly challenge the

thinking about young adolescents.

After studying the transcriptions, I was able to pull out information on a set of common topics or categories which was the basis of a composite snapshot of a grade six student from this group:

- influences
- school subjects
- school environment
- adults in the school
- last year
- behaviour of peers
- friends
- male and female behaviour differences

I organized this information into three content issues:

- what is important to me
- what school is like
- what my peers are like

However, there were undertones throughout the interviews which seemed to be associated with these three issues. Part of what the participants told me appeared to be questioning-statements involving some emotion which connected one issue to another and I shall refer to them as themes:

- who I am
- where I fit in
- who likes me

Students appeared to be aware of who they were but also that they and their peers were undergoing changes. This resulted in some wondering about how they fit in now that they were maturing. A new consciousness about who liked them and why seemed to have developed in the grade 6 students.

The attitude represented by the title "It Still Bugs Me but I Don't Really Care" is a combination of the three underlying themes. I attempted to represent the overall essence of the my findings by describing the nonchalance of the participants in the introduction.

The final outline took this form:

Keep A Stiff Upper Lip

What Is Important to Me:

What Influences Me

My Thoughts on School Subjects

Who I Am Theme

What School Is Like:

The School Environment

Adults in the School

Last Year

Where I Fit In Theme

Who Likes Me Theme

What My Peers Are Like:

How My Peers Behave

Who My Friends Are

Boy/Girl Behaviour Differences

I am choosing to present the information in the form of a model which could be tested during future interviews (Figure, p. 14).

Trustworthiness

All interviews were initiated and concluded from February to June, 1995. I felt that I had developed relationships with the participants during the interviews and from then on chatted with them and observed them as we went about our business in the school. Thus, a multimeasure procedure was ensured by informally observing students in the hallways, playground and in their classrooms, and by having general conversations with them after the interviews.

Peer debriefing happened informally with the classroom teacher and district counsellor.

In order to ensure the collection of an eclectic range of attitudes, I had the participants chosen by the teacher choose other students whom they perceived as having opposite attitudes from them.

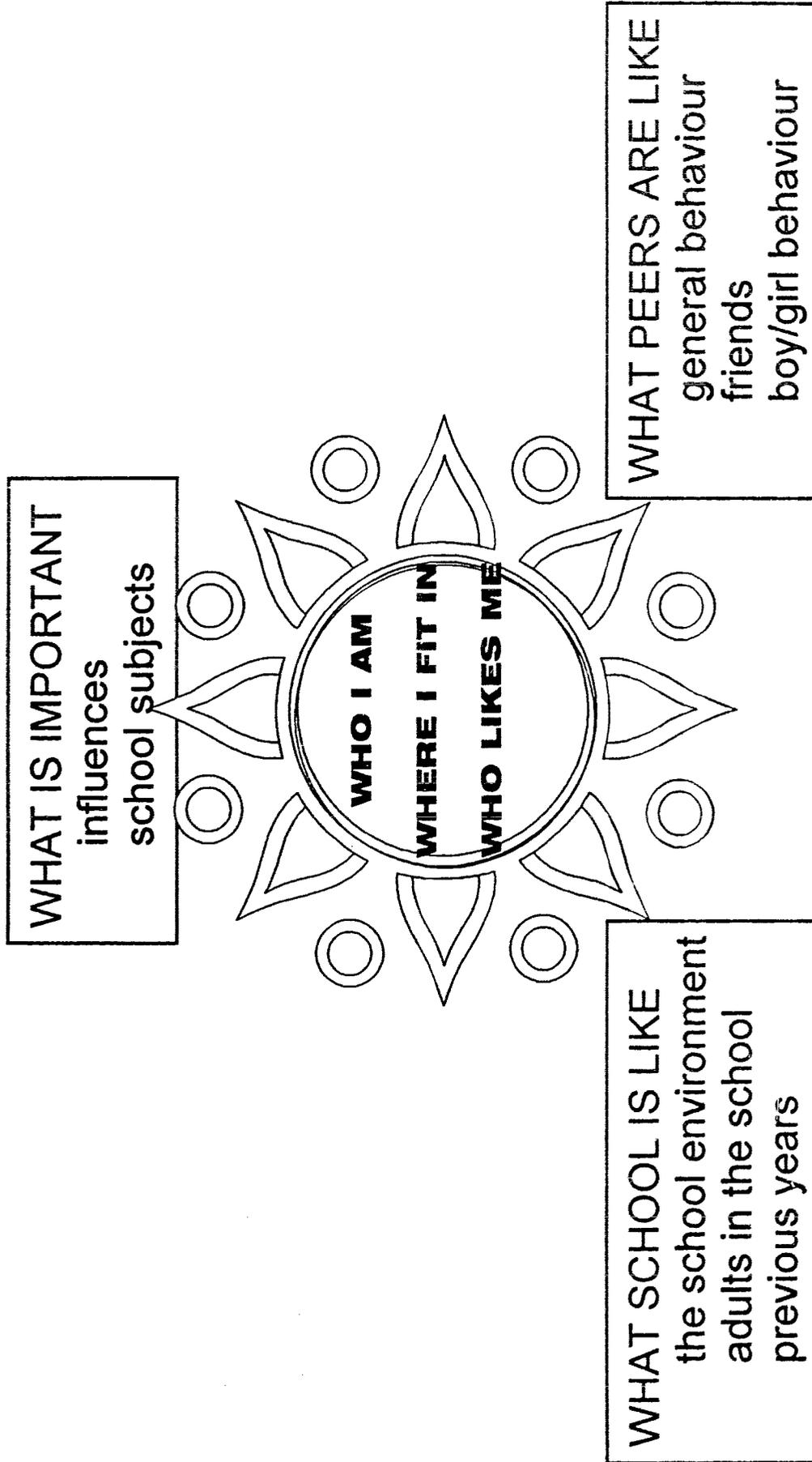
I also checked the trustworthiness of the answers by prompting the participants with several questions about the same topic in order to confirm consistency in their answers. As well, two mothers personally known to me who have children in grade 6 were told about my findings and asked if the composite child resembled their children. (There were similarities.) A more effective member check might have been to show a diagram of the framework to the students and ask them if they felt these items were discussed with me.

Evidence of thick description can be found in the transcribed interviews and in the field notes.

An audit trail remains in that all interviews have been transcribed and are held in confidence. The consent forms have been signed and are available for inspection.

FIGURE

A MODEL OF THE GRADE SIX PARTICIPANTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD SCHOOL



CHAPTER II

THE GRADE SIX STUDENT: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Grade Six: A Transition Year

Grade 6 is a transition year in many ways. At this time, most students begin to move into adulthood, both cognitively and physically. Often in school systems, grade 6 is the year when students have either moved to middle schools or are moving to junior high schools at the end of the year. Epstein (1983b), in her studies on friends in school, said, "There is a critical link between students' cognitive development, school organization, instructional techniques, and students' social behaviour" (p. 13). The interaction of these factors contributes to grade 6 students being a special group of students to study and there is no lack of data on them from previous studies.

I have organized the literature on grade 6 students into these sections: cognitive development, self-esteem development, relationships, parental interest in students, students at risk, and transition from grade 6 to grade 7.

Cognitive Development

Because I was attempting to understand what was happening to students at a particular stage of life centring around the grade 6 year, the Piagetian view of cognitive development appealed to me as it helped me to view my

research in the light of other modern theories like Wigfield's (1994). This view of cognitive development alluded to most 6 to 12 year old students being at the stage of concrete operational thought. At ages 10 to 11, cognitive development expands to the formal operations stage--dealing with abstract ideas (Muth & Alvermann, 1992; Steinberg, 1993). The increasing conceptualization of abstract ideas may open up a whole new world to students who begin to change how they view things.

For example, in late elementary school, children's cognitive aptitudes have reached the stage where they have developed a concept of ability as a stable trait (Stipek & Mac Iver, 1989). As well, they begin to form perceptions about how people achieve or become successful and they have new abstractions for ability and effort (Covington, 1984). Some students believe that ability determines their achievement. If they have difficulty with school work, they doubt their ability and may use failure-avoiding strategies such as not attempting a task in order to maintain their self-worth. Therefore, if these students fail because they have not attempted the work, they will not be able to belittle their ability because ability was not used or considered. This leaves their self-esteem intact. In this case, ability is perceived in the context of a competitive

situation where attempting a task and losing is failure with negative consequences for self-esteem (Ames & Ames, 1984). Thus, students who make an effort and "lose" may perceive that their achievement is too low and blame it on lack of ability. On the other hand, students who believe that effort is the determining factor in reaching success may increase their self-worth by completing a task and feeling they have improved themselves. Completing a task is the desired outcome and is not regarded as a competitive situation where one compares one's outcomes to those of others.

The importance of Vygotskian psycho-social cognitive development theory is implied in this research. Belief systems as well as all levels of psychological processes are due to cultural construction, with mental growth a consequence of social intervention, specifically speech. This cultural line is crucial to the construction of higher psychological processes.

How ability and effort are perceived by youth led Wigfield (1994) to develop his expectancy-value theory.

Expectancy-Value Theory

After reviewing the literature related to competency beliefs, meaning the degree to which one believes one can achieve, Wigfield (1994) surmised that young adolescents' beliefs about their ability to achieve became increasingly

more negative. Having differentiated the concepts of ability and effort between the ages of 10 and 13, students understand that ability affects the amount of effort needed for an outcome and if an outcome needs a lot of effort, ability may be perceived to be lacking. Based on this, Wigfield's expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation postulated that students who hold the competency belief that more effort produces more ability have efficacy expectations toward skill-achievement goals. They believe that the more they try, the better they get and they will eventually be able to complete the task. Those who believe their behaviour, not themselves, produces outcomes, are oriented toward ego goals. They believe that if they attempt a task (their behaviour) and fail (the outcome) that they have lower ability and that this is unalterable. Once again, the importance of the socio-cultural environment on the development of belief systems cannot be discounted.

However, when Piagetian theory of cognitive development is considered, Wigfield's (1994) expectancy-value theory seems reasonable. If young adolescents' concepts of ability and achievement are expanding rapidly at this stage of development, expectancy-value theory could explain changing attitudes toward school.

Hoge, Smit and Hanson's (1990) work indicated that

grade 6's commitment to school work and grade point average (GPA) influenced their academic self-esteem. Relating this to Wigfield's (1994) expectancy-value theory, commitment to school work could be considered a skill-achievement goal. Students who work hard in school enjoy learning new skills and having positive feelings related to the success of acquiring these skills. This is motivation from within or what is known as a high internal locus of control. On the other hand, motivation for the acquisition of a high GPA might be considered an ego-oriented goal. Students motivated to achieve only high grades feel success when they receive external rewards and are considered to have low internal loci of control. One's goal orientation depends upon how one has conceptualized ability. This developmental theory of belief systems is an important consideration as grade 6 students are forming new values about learning as well as beliefs about their competencies. What one values and believes about oneself is paramount in developing one's self-esteem.

Developing Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is only one of a number of "self" words to sort out in this section. Others are: self-concept, self-worth, self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-image.

What one believes about oneself is one's self-concept.

The "expectation or belief that one is capable of performing a specific task, organizing and carrying out required behaviours in a situation" (Ames, 1990, p. 412) is one's self-efficacy. The overall pervasive feelings one has about oneself is self-esteem. These feelings, as self-esteem, influence one's self-worth or how one values oneself as a person. However, I suggest that self-confidence (a show of behaviour which may be looked upon as a display of self-esteem) be used cautiously as a measure of self-esteem. Perceiving someone as self-confident based on a display of behaviour is not a guarantee of self-esteem.

Self-image is how one sees oneself when one compares oneself to others. Among other things, efficacy, understandably, is related to academic performance (Pintrich & de Groot, 1990). However, gender, physical characteristics and type of school seem to be influential factors in developing self-esteem.

Simmons and Blyth (1987) compared the global self-esteem of grade 6 and 7 students and found that "school type affects girls' global self-image, in general, and self-esteem in particular" (p. 218). Grade 6 girls in elementary schools had higher self-esteem. There was no significant difference for boys. In grade 6, students were already showing negativity in self-confidence. Simmons and Blyth

also found that girls from both kindergarten (K) to grade 6 schools and K to grade 8 schools showed a negative drop in self-esteem when assessed from fall to spring. This suggested that negative changes in girls' self-esteem persisted all year and were not solely related to school transition. These ideas are worth considering as much of the literature on grade 6 students related to school transition and involved comparing students from schools with different grade spreads.

Other self-esteem studies showed students to be more positive when they were in their last year in a school. This was referred to as top-dog phenomenon.

Top-Dog Phenomenon

Along with adjusting the importance they give their competencies, students also consider the position of their class within a school when rating themselves. Simmons and Blyth (1987), in their comparisons of grade 6 students in a K to 6 school with those in a K to 8 school, found those in the K to 6 school perceived themselves as smarter, better at school work, better at sports, and for the boys, better looking. (Data about girls' perceptions about their looks were inconsistent, possibly meaning that looks were of such value to girls in perceiving how they are judged by others that it shows little change from school type to school

type.) They called this a "top dog" phenomenon, concluding that "students older than oneself are more likely than younger ones to assume significance" (p. 210). In this case, grade 6's, as the oldest students in the school, were the "top dogs." Some "bottom dog" data from Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman and Midgley (1991) seemed to agree with this. They found grade 6's who were first year students in junior high schools had declines in self-esteem, perceptions of their sports abilities, and liking of English and social activities. This was attributed to the change in school and classroom environment. Educators might want to consider what could be done to cushion the transition from school to school and protect the self-esteem of students in transition.

Important Resources

Eccles et al. (1989) theorized that, since grade 6's were aware of their competencies and how much they are valued, they would re-evaluate their competencies after a transition to a junior high school and form new identities. They felt the new knowledge after the transition would build self-esteem. However, they found that in grade 6 the self-concepts of ability and social activity increased, but after the transition they declined and did not significantly rebound. Previous to this, Simmons and Blyth (1987) had

concluded that grade 6 self-esteem was the most powerful predictor of grade 7 self-esteem. Overall, significantly positive resources to carry to grade 7 seemed to be athletic skills for boys and good looks for both boys and girls. These, then, must be the resources perceived to be valued by the grade 7's, and their self-esteem will be affected by their ratings of themselves, mainly in these areas.

Athletic skills and looks are each affected by pubertal development. How one perceives one's looks--body image--and one's physical maturity, which determines one's athletic skills, are important at this age of early adolescence. Although it may seem strange that athletic skills in girls did not stand out in the literature as a significant influence of self-esteem, this may be a reflection of perceived North American sex roles.

Pubertal Development And Self-Esteem

Simmons and Blyth (1987) found that pubertal timing influenced "rather more specific aspects of body image such as evaluation of one's weight and body build" (p. 356). They explained that girls, though more physically mature at this age, were not equally mature socially and emotionally. Buchanan (1991) paralleled this by stating that "girls may still be adjusting to a changing body and what that means for their own identity within the family and peer group" (p.

197).

Looks influence one's self-esteem during puberty. However, pubertal status has less effect on young adolescents than gender does. For example, grade 6 girls place high values on looks, body image, and popularity with the opposite sex. In general, girls care more about opposite sex relationships in grades 6 and 7. Simmons and Blyth (1987) found that "early developing girls and girls who have attained menarche indicate greater popularity and more active relationships with boys. This pattern begins in the sixth grade" (p. 145). But they also discovered that if girls had early pubertal development, they also tended to have increased problem behaviour, and hence, lower self-esteem. It appears that students with problem behaviour are victimized by other students, and this results in lower self-esteem. The possible increase in self-esteem from being popular with the opposite sex appears to be more than neutralized by the loss of self-esteem resulting from the problem behaviour. As well, in grade 6, early development is a disadvantage for positive body image in that these girls are bigger than others. If grade 6 girls perceive that others in their class regard them well, they have better self-esteem in grade 7. If they perceive that they are popular with grade 6 boys, they consider themselves better

looking in grade 7 and have more self-esteem. Could it be that grade 6 girls' concept of self-esteem is based on physical appearances?

From Simmons and Blyth (1987), both grade 6 boys and girls in schools with older students did not perceive that others expected them to be interested in the opposite sex, so interest in the opposite sex did not appear to be a criterion for popularity. However, those who were the oldest in their schools saw themselves as more popular with their own sex. They also rated themselves higher on intelligence, school work, sports, and looks which would contribute to high self-efficacy. Their perception of their looks and how they value their looks seemed to be based on how much significant others attend to them. The attention leads them to feel good, and gain in self-esteem, which they believe is due to their looks and not their attitudes about themselves. This could be considered as a false sense of self-esteem. After all, perceived opposite sex popularity correlates with problem behaviour and problem behaviour leads to lower self-esteem in grade 7. As far as pubertal development is concerned, girls seem to be in no-win situations for developing positive self-esteem. If self-esteem, rather than physical appearance, is the overriding attractive quality for building relationships, girls lose out.

Grade Point Average And Self-Esteem

For educators dealing with young adolescents, it may or may not come as a shock that a high GPA (grade point average) in grade 6 was not a resource for either sex as far as self-esteem was concerned after a school transition to grade 7, even though there was a negative correlation for both boys and girls in these two grades between GPA and problem behaviour (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). In fact, for boys, it seems a high GPA could be a detriment, possibly leading to victimization. Simmons and Blyth explained that boys are more likely than girls to be both the victims and the perpetrators of acts of victimization like threatening, hurting, beating behaviour, and robbery. With boys, having a high GPA in grade 7 seems to be tied to an absence of success in their peer relations with other boys. Thus, even the boys who participated in school activities in grade 6 and tended to have higher GPA's in grade 6 and 7 showed a decline in self-esteem by perceiving that other boys did not hold them in high regard. This was not true for girls.

For grade 6 girls, Simmons and Blyth (1987) found a correlation between low GPA's and higher popularity with the opposite sex. However, girls who perceived high regard for themselves from their grade 6 peers also perceived high regard for themselves from grade 7's. They earned higher

GPA's and displayed less problem behaviour. One might conclude that having the support of same-sex friends leads to higher self-esteem and higher grade point averages, whereas attention from the opposite sex has the opposite effect.

Athletic Ability And Self-Esteem

On the whole, school achievement did not appear to contribute to the building of self-esteem but neither did participation in school activities. In fact, girls who participated in extracurricular activities in grade 6 participated in grade 7 but were victimized for doing so and therefore, not popular (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). This reduced their self-esteem. Athletic ability, then, if displayed in school, had a negative effect on grade 6 girls in the long run. If they participated in extra-curricular activities, they were not popular, and their self-esteem was at risk.

As young adolescents develop a sense of who they are they are also beginning to examine their relationships with others.

Relationships

Social Skills

Inappropriate behaviour and low self-esteem appeared to be of great concern to young adolescents. Eccles et al. (1989) found that grade 6 students rated social skills as

the most important subject, ahead of math and then English. (Sports competition was the least important.) Even after a transition to junior high, the importance of social skills decreased, but it still remained the most important subject. Since social skills were very important to young adolescents, examining relationships and influential others is in order.

The organization of school environment is important because it can influence friendship. The need for friendship is strong when many changes are occurring (Karweit & Hansell, 1983a) as there are in the lives of young adolescents. Teachers, by organizing the school environment, and peers, by being friends, play important roles.

Influence And Teachers

There may be a lack of interpretable data to clarify the extent to which students perceive that teachers influence their lives (Galbo, 1989). However, Joly (1992) discussed high school students' perceptions of the classroom climate created by female teachers and concluded that they thought effective teachers acted supportive and warm, personal and congenial, and built community among the students. One could conclude that relationships with teachers are important for students to feel that they are welcome and belong in a school, regardless of grade level.

Just because there appears to be a lack of information on adolescents' relationships with teachers, this does not mean that teacher-student relationships are not important to this age group. Perhaps this area of research will be explored in the future.

Peer Relationships

Simmons and Blyth's (1987) data on grade 6 and 7 students in transition indicated that a number of factors were involved in adolescents' relationships with one another and each gender was affected differently. There seemed to be a relationship between self-esteem and popularity. Grade 6's who perceived that grade 7's regarded them highly rated themselves as better looking and liked by their peers which enhanced their self-esteem. One could conclude from this that how one feels about oneself determines one's attractiveness to others.

Boys, not girls, appeared to value high socioeconomic status (SES) in others and it was found that those with high SES had higher self-esteem. Also, Karweit and Hansell (1983b) indicated that boys choose unreciprocated friendships with other boys of higher SES. Peer relationship information is helpful because it can be used to structure learning groups and environmental climates in order to enhance self-esteem and increase motivation.

Parental Interest

Although one might assume that parental interest in their children plays a major role in adolescent development, an examination of the literature verifies this. Some of the literature refers to "internal locus of control." This means that control over one's actions and the choices one makes comes from within, and one is motivated by internal feelings and an increase in self-esteem.

The idea that the same at-risk students who have low internal loci of control also view their parents as less demanding seems contradictory but Epstein (1981) discovered that negative attitudes toward school were held by students with few rules at home and who did not participate in home-school decisions. Downie's (1994) study of at-risk high school students indicated that they perceived their independence at home as a lack of interest on the part of their parents and that this contributed to their increasing difficulties in school.

Emerging are some interesting attitudes toward school which are not related to school achievement. There appears to be a connection between successful students having high internal loci of control and being responsibly involved with their families in school decision making. Coleman, Collinge and Seifert (1993) suggested that school success increases

as parents and students increase the number of positive interactions involving school matters. Eccles and Harold (1993) discussed the importance of continued parent involvement in students' education during the early adolescent years. The point appears not to be how much control parents have over their children, but how much they positively interact with them about their education. In fact, grade 6 and 7 students who believed their parents were strict and controlling sought the advice of their peers and even rejected parental contact (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993). Eccles, Midgley, et al. (1993) found young adolescents had an increased desire for more family decision making and that the more adolescents participated in family decisions, the higher their intrinsic school motivation and positive self-esteem. They also found the converse to be true:

Although adolescents desire more freedom from adult control than children do, they do not want to be emotionally detached from their parents. Instead, they desire a gradual increase in the opportunity for self-determination and participation in decision making and rule making. (p. 99)

The amount and type of parental contact with students played a part in determining how they feel about themselves. For example, girls who were involved in extracurricular

activities and had less independent time away from their parents (fewer unchaperoned activities) had higher GPA's and less problem behaviour (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). However, being an early developer might not be an advantage. Because a child looks physically mature, parents may allow more unchaperoned independence and expect their child to act more maturely.

The literature confirmed that parental interest was vital in developing students who were not at risk for poor academic achievement, dropping out of school, or exhibiting problem behaviour.

Students At Risk

Even when school environment is not considered as a variable, it appears that at the grade 6 level, a greater number of students can be identified with negative attitudes toward school which may place them at risk for academic achievement.

Okun, Braver and Weir (1988), evaluating school satisfaction throughout 12 grade levels, found significant effects of linear trends in the decline of school satisfaction in grades 1 to 8. These relationships between school satisfaction and grade levels are important as they provide information which is related to dropping out of school. Is it possible that a surge in abstract

conceptualization might lead to new classifications in young adolescents' thinking, resulting in some possible negative changes in attitude? Browne and Rife (1991) found that at-risk grade 6 students had fewer positive attitudes toward school, lower self-concepts, more external control orientations, and viewed their parents as less demanding and more casual.

Referring back to students with ego-oriented goals whose effort to maintain self-worth was by avoiding tasks perceived as too difficult, most of their control orientations were external and they behaved to procure things they wanted from the outside world instead of adjusting their behaviour to increase their internal feelings of self-worth. People who are motivated in such a way are described as having a low internal locus of control.

At this stage of personality development, students are forming their own opinions and have a high need to make their own choices. These needs for freedom to make choices are often satisfied in friendships which are maintained by sacrificing parental values and school achievement. This is reiterated by Simmons and Blyth (1987) who summarize their findings by stating,

In general, the one realm in which there is a definite negative trend in adolescence involves conformity to

adult standards: that is, there are increases in probations and suspensions; drops in GPA; and for boys, a negative turn in parental and teacher evaluation. (p. 355)

Buchanan, Eccles and Becker (1992) concluded that any outbursts of behaviour were not suddenly manifested during adolescence and that

adolescence can be a time of increased delinquency and behaviour problems but predominantly for disturbed or troubled adolescents and perhaps for boys. Aggression, behaviour problems, and delinquency, like depression, seem to increase with age among youths who exhibited behaviour problems as children. (p. 92)

Early school disrupters were unhappy students with below average achievement who operated on the more basic needs of a need hierarchy. Furthermore, they thought outside causes led to their unhappy situations (Gnagey, 1981). Having generalized their negative reactions to school, they did not like school and they were left with low loci of control. Here, again, one can see how a low internal locus of control seems to be related to low self-esteem.

Simmons and Blyth (1987) implied that students perceived significant others in their lives as expecting more mature behaviour from them at school transition. At the

same time, when parents allowed too much independence, problem behaviour often resulted which in turn lead to lower self-esteem through victimization. Thus, allowing early independence in grade 6 before transition to junior high did not lead to an easier transition, but to lower self-esteem in grade 7. With both boys and girls, independence lead to problem behaviour in grade 7, victimization, and lower self-esteem. It appears that students who exhibited problem behaviour were not popular with the majority of their peers and were victimized for not conforming to standard norms of behaviour.

Simmons and Blyth (1987) wondered why victimization tended to lead to lower self-esteem. They questioned if it reduced self-efficacy and thus global self-esteem and if early independence put the students in situations they couldn't manage. They speculated that cumulative changes where one might doubt one's ability to perform in a number of new situations might cause one to perceive oneself as ineffective and may generalize to lower self-esteem and eventually be reflected in lower GPA's. They concluded that the students most likely to be at risk were girls, students with many simultaneous life changes, students with early unchaperoned independence, students victimized by peers, students with low self-esteem about looks and popularity,

students with problem behaviour, boys from low SES homes, and less athletic boys.

If being at risk means poor school achievement or dropping out of school, self-esteem and relationships with others must be considered. Downie's (1994) statement, "Developing positive relationships with peers, or striving for social success, appeared to be a major enterprise for these students" (p. 152), when discussing his ethnographic study of at-risk high school students, indicates that his research would agree with the data of Simmons and Blyth.

Relationships and self-esteem appear to be key concerns in the lives of young adolescents. These young people are often vulnerable during the transition from grade 6 to grade 7.

School Transition From Grade 6 To Grade 7

Where the grade 6 class should be placed in relation to other classes within schools has been a question educators have been trying to answer for some time. Lounsbury and Johnson (1988) found that most grade 6 classes in the United States were located in middle schools in 1988. They studied grade 6 placements using a large sample from the whole country (USA) and felt that overall, grade 6 students were victims of bureaucratic decisions where their unjust placements did not consider programs for them.

The work of Simmons and Blyth in 1987 provided a lot of data about the differences between grade 6 and 7 students. They carried out extensive studies of changes in students' attitudes during the transition from one school to another. Their research indicated that many attitudes deteriorated after a transition, especially from grade 6 in elementary school to grade 7 in a high school.

Eccles, Wigfield, et al. (1993) looked at placement from a different angle and were concerned about the changes in environments when young adolescents moved from school to school. They believed that a mismatch occurred at the transition which was linked to age-related changes in young adolescents' motivation and self-perceptions.

A Developmental Mismatch

Feldlaufer, Midgley, and Eccles (1988) concluded that there was a developmental mismatch after the grade 7 transition. After the transition, they found that there was less input and interaction, an increase in social comparison, a decline in student/teacher relationships, and a decrease in competition. At the same time, Midgley and Feldlaufer (1988) thought teachers might have stereotyped beliefs about students needing to be controlled if they were to make academic progress.

Making further investigations about school transition,

Eccles et al. (1989) examined changes in adolescents' self-esteem and self-concept of ability over the transition. They found that self-esteem did not decline over the transition and tended to stabilize as students aged, especially for girls. Regarding social ability, they felt any moderate changes were better interpreted as showing an increase in stability of individual differences. Perhaps school transition was not so damaging after all. Self-concepts of ability in math and English were disrupted, however, during the transition, but not that of sports.

When comparing classroom environments between the two types of school structures, Eccles, Wigfield, et al. (1993) found negative changes in students' self-concepts of their math ability from elementary grade 6 to junior high grade 7. This confirmed the previous study by Feldlaufer, Midgley and Eccles (1988) and a more recent study by Wigfield and Eccles (1994) who found that self-esteem did not change in elementary school but decreased after the transition to grade 7. Wigfield and Eccles also found that competency beliefs and attitudes about what was important and useful in school decreased. Students were still interested in sports, however, although their sports competency beliefs declined. Math interest had already declined in grade 6.

All totalled, there seemed to be more cons for

transition than pros. Eccles, Wigfield, et al. (1993) saw six patterns of change from elementary to junior high school. There was more teacher control and discipline and there were fewer opportunities for student choice. Student-teacher relationships were less personal and positive. There was more whole-class task organization, between-classroom ability grouping and public evaluation. Teachers had less self-efficacy, especially with lower ability students. It was assumed that formal departmentalized teaching led to higher order cognitive processes and that the students would be performing tasks which would lead to higher order learning in departmental courses. Higher standards were used to judge students' competence and in grading. These conclusions make a case for the poor stage environment-fit proposed by Eccles, Midgley, et al. (1993). Now, let us look more closely at the school environment.

Educational Environment

Information about the nature of the grade 6 students and about their adjustments to new school environments leads one to consider which environment might be the most beneficial for young adolescents. It appeared that what adolescents thought was best for them was not necessarily what teachers judged as the best for them. Teachers perceived that there was less difference between real and

ideal class environments than did students (Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1987; Raviv, Raviv & Reisel, 1990). Perhaps this was because as students matured, their beliefs about themselves influenced their choice of activities (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991; Wigfield, 1994).

Educational environment affected the motivation of students and had to fit their psychological needs if students were to be motivated. Many middle schools operated like traditional junior high schools and did not consider these psychological needs. It was the nature of the environment, not the grade span that was important (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991). Teachers may have stereotyped beliefs about students needing to be controlled if they are to make academic progress (Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1988), but how students responded in school depended on their personal abilities and many caring relationships. School environments with caring relationships enhanced adolescent development (Jackson & Hornbeck, 1989) and appeared to be more of a motivating factor than biological maturity.

Comment

Grade 6 is a year of change. Piagetian theory of the stages of cognitive development indicates grade 6 students are increasing their abstract concepts. This may influence the way they view themselves and consequently, their self-

esteem. It may change the way they view others and affect their relationships. I am not discounting Vygotskian cognitive development theory which emphasizes the importance of social interaction, particularly speech, and I realize that it was social interaction that allowed me to carry out this ethnographic study. However, since this study is concerned with a specific stage of development, I chose to center my thinking around the theory of formal operational thought as it seemed to explain some of the newer theories discussed in the literature review. The importance of communication as it relates to cognitive development is understood.

At this time of pubertal change, parents' interest and involvement with their adolescent children may influence the choices made by their children. Students at risk, if they have not been previously identified, are likely to stand out at this time.

As well as these changes, grade 6 is often a school transition year.

I have cited Simmons and Blyth (1987) considerably more often than other sources throughout this document. Their lengthy volume was a quantitative longitudinal study of children making a transition from childhood to early and then middle adolescence. Focusing on self-image and self-

esteem, they studied the effects of age, gender, pubertal timing, and school transition timing on self-image and social-psychological adjustment of white youth. This volume contributed much to my understanding of motivation of early adolescents and was often contemplated when I was considering the models of other researchers, such as Wigfield's (1994) expectancy-value theory.

With few exceptions, most of the research I have referred to used questionnaires with quantitative analysis. None involved qualitative analysis by studying interviews with grade 6 students. For this reason, I was interested in looking at things from a different perspective and decided to listen intently to a few grade 6 students talking about their attitudes toward school. I found that much of what they were saying certainly verified the information gleaned from the quantitative research reviewed in the literature.

The population of the school from which my sample was drawn was mostly white. Therefore, I found Simmons and Blyth's (1987) data a good basis for comparison.

CHAPTER III

THE PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR ATTITUDES

I have chosen to include a chapter of portraits of the participants in this document as interviews with them comprised the core of my research data. I hope that these accounts engage the reader but also point out the uniqueness of each student so that their individuality can be appreciated. I used my field notes and referred to each interview in order to extract information about the students and develop the sketches. Some of these portraits are lengthier than others because some of the students spoke at length during the interviews and others gave much less information about themselves.

All names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the students. These sketches are based primarily on what the students said augmented by my observations.

Alan

Alan is in a grade 6/7 class and considered a good student and a well-behaved person. He is a serious boy who does not laugh or smile readily and shows little facial expression. He is not an avid conversationalist. Alan's views of the world are quite conservative and he presents himself as a person who can be quite judgemental of those

who do not conform to the conventional views of society. Although Alan could be considered a traditionalist because of his views, he tints his normally sandy coloured hair mauve.

Alan values top marks and sees them as important to get a job as an optometrist, a field in which his father works. He realizes he has to go to university and has chosen one in Ontario where a brother attends. He wants to be seen as having a good attitude and to him this means getting top grades and not getting into trouble.

Alan likes his teacher to structure the assignments and give lots of feedback so he has more chances to get all his work correct. He wants to know how to get good marks--how to study and what exactly is expected of him. He enjoys cooperative learning groups and thinks students in groups all get along well. He perceives himself and his friends as "smart" and having similar goals. He considers himself to be in an elite group whose members are better than the other boys.

This year, Alan's interest in sports has declined. Instead of playing sports in his free time, he prefers to walk around the school ground. He has also been interested in playing pogs and spends his money on them. Alan does not have many close friends and could be considered a loner. His

brother, a senior high student, picks him up after school in his hot rod as both parents work.

Alan sees that boys talk more this year. He does not think of himself as a shy person, but does not feel comfortable talking to girls who call him at home. He is confused about the behaviour of the girls this year. They chase him and catch him and then let him go when he screams. Alan's mother makes excuses for him not answering the phone when girls call him at home. He is overwhelmed by the sudden attention from girls and not sure what it means or how to respond. Near the end of the school year, Alan is tempted more and more to be part of the naughty guys group and engages in activities that shock his teacher, like swearing and being in areas of the school where he is not permitted to be. As he approaches grade seven, he may be experimenting to find out who he really is as an individual and trying to find ways to fit in with other groups of students. It may have become more important to him to feel he is accepted by a larger peer group at this time.

Ashley

Ashley is in a grade 6 class. She is a slight, very energetic girl with long blond hair and glasses. She is always smiling and enthusiastic. She likes having new experiences and adventures. She is very verbal and

articulate and willing to share her ideas.

She understands a relationship between education and the amount of money she thinks she will make in a future job. Her parents are not wealthy and she wants to make her own money to support herself. She began to think about good grades and jobs last year when she did well in school for the first time. She is very concerned about getting good marks.

Ashley loves horses and wants to work with animals. She expects to go to college to train for a career with animals. She likes educational challenges.

She is preparing herself for high school where she feels she must be very organized as the teachers do not give students numerable chances. She is proud of her organizational skills and that these skills have carried over to her home life. She gets most of her homework done in school, and takes the rest home to finish. She reads a lot.

Ashley likes sports very much. One time this year, she and a friend made up a gymnastics display and performed it for the class. She is proud of her track and field ability. Sometimes she likes to be a tomboy and play tackle football with the boys.

Ashley wants to be respected for being herself. She sees herself as an independent person. Her greatest

challenge this school year is not getting upset when others are cruel to her. She is taunted by the majority of the students in her class. Groups of girls bully her and taunt her, even throwing rocks at her. This has gone on since grade four. She is teased about liking horses, her clothes, and that she likes school. She is quite hurt by the rejection of the other girls and does not understand why this is happening. However, she keeps smiling and being who she is to the best of her ability. She thinks the girls who taunt her are snobs. She sees her teachers as caring about her and feels this is why she is able to go on in the midst of so much hatred. In spite of it all, she still expresses her ideas and appreciates that teachers give everyone in the class a chance to do so. She thinks favourably about her teachers.

Ashley only has two friends in school. She and her two friends all like horses and play on the playground at recess and lunch pretending that they are horses. Ashley plays with one of them after school. A boy who is rejected by the class also hangs out with these three girls. Ashley's only other friend lives in Oregon.

Ashley does not appreciate the showing off behaviour of the boys and considers it immature. She blames some of the immature behaviour on the fact that her French teacher

changed three times this year. She thinks teachers should let students know their limits and put their "feet" down.

Ashley is aware that some of her classmates date but feels that the courtship routines are silly. She thinks boys and girls should be more direct with each other and not gossip so much.

She regularly sees a district counsellor. Her older brother died of cancer two years ago (about the time the girls began taunting her). She has a younger brother in grade three whom she cares about.

She is moving to Ontario and is a bit nervous about this.

Cheryl

Cheryl is in a grade 5/6 class. She is physically mature and tall with short brown curly hair and glasses. She is very sociable and has a strong personality and presence.

Cheryl has a lot of fun with her many friends. She admits that she gets into fights and this is not something that she really wants to do. At the beginning of the school year, she was hanging out with girls from the 6/7 class who had been her friends from last year. She became aware that they were very much into the drug scene and became concerned that these associations might have damaged her reputation. She is trying to be very straight and get good marks so that

teachers in the future will think highly of her. Cheryl thinks she does not have much in common with these old friends now. The most important thing that happened to her this year was learning how to make choices about friends. She has certain standards and ideals that are very strong and she can see where she is going and how she is going to get there.

Cheryl likes to have socializing time in school and would put in extra hours to have the extra time to be able to walk around and talk to her friends. She would be willing to put in longer school days to have more recess breaks during the school day. Presently, she goes home after school, has a snack and plays with her friends until supper. She gets along with most students and her special friends stick up for her. She is usually with a group of girls. Cheryl does not like students who are unfair and untrustworthy and talks to her friends about fairness in school as well as things that annoy her about school. Cheryl thinks that boys are "dumb."

Cheryl is trying to get "A" honours and keep up with her older sister who is an honours student in high school. She is a hard worker and wants more educational challenge.

Cheryl does not enjoy physical education, particularly anything to do with running. She would like to have a female

physical education teacher and participate in female-oriented activities.

Cheryl is bored with the school work this year as she had much of it when she was in grade 5 last year in another grade 5/6 split class. She gets good marks, finds the work too easy and thinks the French is a total repeat of the last year's grade 5 work.

Cheryl likes to have choices in her school work--the subjects she studies and the type of evaluation used. She wants to do more writing on subjects of her choice instead of so many work sheets and glossaries which she finds boring. Cheryl is a creative person. She wants harder science and "thinking" activities in science. She does not want regular written tests on what other students bring in for current events although she is willing to listen to these events. She learns best by herself when doing reading activities, and best in cooperative groups when solving problems. She wants the choice to decide on these.

Cheryl loves computers and wants more time in the computer room. In fact, she wants to use all the school's facilities more of the time--the gym, the computer room, even the bathrooms. She wants students her height to be considered when fountains are put in. She does not want to be in a school with primary students and does not like the

constant comparisons of primaries to intermediates. She thinks intermediate students need to be trusted more and given a few compliments.

Cheryl thinks that teachers should be stricter with students and that some students get too many chances before they receive any consequences.

Cheryl wants to be a paleontologist and knows a lot about this subject from reading books. Her parents provide opportunities for her to go to museums. Cheryl is a determined student who has goals and knows where she is going.

Jeff

Jeff is in a grade 6 class and is very good friends with Lance. Jeff is a handsome young rebel with a mischievous look who can often be found banished to the hall near the principal's office. He likes to have control over situations in his life.

Jeff likes adults who listen to him. He wants to have a chance to be the teacher for a day and have the teacher as his assistant. He would handle the discipline the same way it is done now. He feels that if students had a chance to do this, they would be more understanding of teachers and not be discipline problems. He thinks his classmates get out of control and act silly when the teacher is out of the room.

Jeff balks at authoritative decisions and believes in the democratic process. He likes to have plans carried out to his expectations and believes in students voting to resolve problems, including the class timetable questions.

Jeff is very impatient. When the teacher goes over directions, he does not want to listen. He likes to be an active participant and is very intolerant about waiting his turn.

He wants more physical education, which is his favourite subject. He is stronger and faster this year and plays more rigorous sports such as hockey.

Jeff is good at language arts, except for punctuation which he feels should be taught in a structured manner. Jeff is failing French and wants to be able to choose another language. He likes computers and wants more time in the lab.

Jeff has a great imagination and is very creative. He wants a school that would offer all the facilities a private school would offer, including residence life. His dream school would have every sports facility available as well as art, cooking and any extracurricular subject imaginable. Jeff wants to pick his own courses. He wants instruction in art and to study history. He would like an extensive library with more mature books, as he is an avid reader. He would stay after school for interesting courses like cooking and

art. He likes to learn by doing research with a partner and by getting his own information.

Jeff thinks students not completing necessary homework should be dealt with by having their "fun" subjects taken away. He realizes that in grade 4 he was a brat but he does not think time should be spent teaching social skills to students. He feels that students need to be told directly when they are doing something wrong. However, he wants everything to be handled fairly.

Jeff hangs out with a mixed sex group and although he is not dating, he says many of his friends are. He wants "fun" time interspersed with instruction time.

Jeff has definite ideas about which students are losers and is openly critical of Pete and Ashley. He puts students into two categories--winners and losers.

Jeff's father is a local businessman and he knows he can run his father's store someday. He is also considering becoming a policeman or a pilot, ideas which came from television.

Jeff recognizes his nonchalance about school. Although he says he has learned "nothing," he knows he still needs to learn in order to get a job. However, he would rather put off the pain for a while longer.

Jenn

Jenn is a very quiet girl in the grade 6 class. She is tall, Oriental-looking, with long, dark hair and classic good looks. She is shy and does not talk very much to others.

Jenn does not understand why some girls do not like her. She felt students did not like her when she arrived last year, as they made comments about her being a foreigner. She has friends now. She likes to work and learn in groups. She wants to be perceived as a person who is nice and holds no negative thoughts. She prides herself in getting along with everyone.

Jenn enjoys attention from boys. She and her friends talk about music and the performers they like. She likes active learning and "doing" things. She appreciates teachers who walk around and help.

Jenn is proud that she can handle distractions in the classroom. She is enthusiastic about learning about the environment and the fact that her family is environmentally conscious now. She does not like physical education and wants less. She does her homework and tries to pass assignments in on time.

Jenn would like to see separate primary and intermediate section in the school.

Jenn's parents want her to try harder and get A's. She would like to have A's, but settles for passing.

Lance

Lance is in a grade 6 class. He is a friendly, mature boy with a great sense of humour. He is popular with the teachers and administration and has a winning, friendly personality. He has a lot of confidence and is an able and willing conversationalist. He is also a top, all-round student. He is aware of having a good reputation and that he leads a "clean" life.

Lance likes physical education, his favourite subject, and field trips. He likes his teacher because he encourages sports. Lance is noticing that he is more physically fit and stronger this year. He enjoys skating, and hockey and baseball are favourite sports.

Lance is careful about whom he chooses for friends. He makes sure they have similar values because he doesn't want to hang around with other satellite friends that he may not like. Most of his friends like sports and are pretty good students. He enjoys walking around the school and telling jokes with them and playing baseball. Although he knows a lot of his classmates from previous years, he would like to be able to exchange some of the students in his class for others he likes better.

Lance has trouble with one boy that has been bullying him since grade two. This person picks fights and throws things at him. Lance is sad that friends have turned against him because of things this boy has said. He wonders what may happen in the future when he is in grades 7 and 8.

School work comes easily to Lance and he usually does not have to study a lot. He completes most of his work in class. However, now that he is involved in baseball, he is forgetting some of the assignments. He is finding that leaving things to the last minute does not always result in having enough time to complete them. Lance is beginning to feel the pressure from all his involvements and is wondering if he will have time to get all his projects completed. He forgets to use his student planner to get his work organized and forgets to get his parents to sign it. This results in his getting what he calls demerit points equal to a late assignment and consequently he finds that having a student planner can be a stressful experience. This is just one more thing to remember to do in his already too busy schedule.

Lance thinks grade 6 girls' behaviour has deteriorated more than boys', as he sees some of them smoking and believes they also smoke pot. He sees girls ganging together and trying to kick boys in the legs, cheering one another on, and he thinks boys being pitted against girls is weird.

Lance sees the boys as being more cruel to one another this year in that if one boy accidentally errs, others gang together to put him down and hate him, swearing at him and talking behind his back. He feels this is wrong, but is concerned about being noticed befriending an outcast he knows for fear of reprisal from the rest of the boys. He sees that if a boy likes a girl who is not approved of by his friends, that boy is also treated as an outcast. Lance realizes that students are not really free to choose who they like as friends and that dating has decreased from the beginning of the year because of the teasing.

Lance sees that students are more excitable this year and that both boys and girls are showing more interest in one another. He realizes that he is becoming an adolescent.

Lance expects his teachers to be fair and give appropriate consequences. He is critical of teachers past union behaviour--a strike. He thinks that teachers should expect to deal with students who get into trouble as part of their job, and that teachers should care enough about students to celebrate special occasions with them like Christmas activities. Lance does not see that teachers have changed much over the years and feels they do a good job of making school a safe place. However, he thinks that duty aides expect too much from grade 6 students and don't

understand the relationships between primaries and intermediates.

Lance enjoys writing stories and prefers true or false tests. He is proud of what he has learned in French and his marks are good in this subject. He thinks that French is an important subject. However, he does not enjoy talking in front of the class.

Lance would like his learning activities to be more challenging and is willing to do a lot more work in school. He would like to study more social subjects, especially history. He is finding learning very easy in grade 6. He enjoys science experiments, but has noticed that some students act inappropriately at these times, like dumping water on others. He likes to pick his own groups when doing activities. Lance often prefers to work on his own when learning as he finds that students talking around him are distracting. He prefers a low noise level for the same reason. He feels that there are three students that he could work with in groups and they all like getting good marks. He also does best on his assignments if he looks things up instead of guessing.

Lance wants to be someone who is important like a lawyer or a fireman. He collects his information about these jobs from television and personal experience like watching

people do these jobs. He values good grades and relates this to his career aspirations. Lance also listens to his family talking about the values of education. He appreciates the interest his parents take in his school work and the reminders they give him.

Lance is learning to become more mature and responsible in school. He thinks this is important because of going into junior high. However, he feels "fun" is an important component of school life and would like little breaks of free time throughout the school day.

Mike

Mike is in a grade 5/6 class. He is a smiling, pleasant boy who laughs a lot. He is not a great talker, but he does his best to keep a conversation going and likes to joke. He loves to have fun and make people laugh. In fact, when Mike acts up, it is to get students laughing. He does this by running around the room and dancing. However, good marks are also important to him and he makes sure his homework is done and studies for tests.

Mike has a very close relationship with Ted and talks about him all the time. He realizes that Ted is quite different from him and is not inclined to achieve as well in school. Mike realizes that he may be judged as more like Ted as he portrays his happy-go-lucky personality, but

underneath, he has high expectations for himself. He is aware of how his behaviour is judged by people because of how he acts. Mike is glad to have Ted as a friend as he had problems getting along last year and this year Ted is always by his side sticking up for him. He also has friends in grade 5 and feels all the students in his class are his friends and would stick up for him.

Mike talks sports with his male friends and music with the girls. He would play more sports with girls, but thinks the girls might get hurt playing with him. He watches and makes them laugh while they play with Ted. He sees that one of his classmates is "going steady" but he himself only looks at girls as friends.

Mike wants to become a marine biologist and plans to complete grade 12 and 2 years of college. He thinks this will make it easier to get a job.

Mike enjoys all the class field trips. He likes the freedom to leave the class without having to ask permission but realizes that it is stricter than last year when he could leave the room and play for extended periods of time. He would like a special physical education teacher in the school. This is his favourite subject and he feels he is getting good at the games. Mike does not like getting infractions, which are notes about his behaviour that he has

to take home and get signed, because his parents get angry.

Mike does not like a lot of homework. However, he is getting all A's on his report cards and attributes this to the fact that a lot of the work is a repeat of last year when he was in grade 5. He sees that he is doing harder math, though, and thinks that he is studying harder this year.

Mike likes a quiet work environment and feels there is too much noise in his class most of the time. He would put all the talkers on one side of the room. He does not like sitting in rows and would like to be in groups which he would look at as teams.

He likes the shorter school days in this school compared to one he attended before, as he has time to go home and have a nap before meeting his friends.

Pete

Pete is a slim, feisty, wiry boy who is growing rapidly in height. He enjoys talking with all people and describes himself as "a talker."

Pete is regularly suspended from school and sees the district counsellor on a regular basis. He is showing many signs of sadness and depression, but puts on a happy face and says he has lots of friends and everything is going very well.

Pete daydreams in class and does not listen to the teacher. He is disorganized and forgets his materials. He takes his time coming into the school and is usually late. He believes he should have time to finish his socializing and game playing.

Pete likes school for the socializing. He wants to get A's and complete assignments but has trouble doing so. He is not pleased with his last report card. He wants to complete his work and stop poking fun at others.

Pete is good in social studies. He wants to learn to write well as he finds writing takes a lot out of him. However, he is proud that he can express himself orally. Overall, he thinks this year is much harder.

Pete is trying to adapt to a female teacher, who he feels is not as direct as his former male teachers in expressing how she wants him to behave. He blames the other students for pushing him and "getting on the teacher's nerves." He is aware that he is going through adolescence and that he is changing. He notices that he is getting bigger, more talkative, more irritated and more fidgety. Some of his friends have girlfriends and don't talk to him any more.

Pete says he has lots of friends, but gets into lots of fights with them. Overall, he has difficulty getting along

with the other students. His behaviour is often inappropriate and he ends up being isolated from them in class. He is aware that the "good" people get to work in groups. He sits between groups but can still talk to those in the groups.

Pete wants to finish grade 12, work at a "little" job and then either go to college and become a doctor or dentist or else play national hockey.

Tami

Tami is in a grade 6/7 class. She is a tall, sturdy girl with a pretty face and long, light brown hair. She is a year younger than most of her classmates as she skipped a grade. Regardless, she is verbally adept, has a sense of humour and is quite intelligent.

Tami has friends now in her class which she didn't have at the beginning of the school year. She is in a class of two-thirds boys and is connecting with boys as friends. Her close friends are boys this year and she has only a couple of casual girl friends. Last year, she was in trouble for acting out when she was treated poorly by a best girl friend. She is wary about making close friends with girls now.

Tami accepts the fact that a male friend treats her one way in school and another way outside of school. She

realizes that he will be teased if he treats her as a friend in school.

She is noticing that kids are nicer to her this year and that school does not feel like a "war" as it did last year. She sees students working together and a closeness in students this year that she previously thought was missing. She sees the boys as being less rambunctious this year but still with their humorous side which she enjoys. She thinks they are nicer to the girls. However, she sees boys sometimes getting into fights and talking out of turn.

Tami is teased by boys about being "fat" and went to the doctor about it. She laughs this off and doesn't let it bother her. She is also taunted by girls about being a tomboy. To her annoyance, one even teases her about her male friend being a boyfriend. She likes her friendship with this boy and enjoys talking with him but is not "going out" with him. To Tami, "going out" would mean that they had both decided to be a girlfriend and boyfriend couple and she does not want to be viewed as being in that kind of a relationship. She thinks the grade 6 girls' courtship routines toward the boys are silly.

Tami likes teachers to be happy and fair. She thinks that they are sometimes overly fair and allow too many choices. She considers teachers her friends and sees them as

caring people. She does not care for substitute duty aides as she thinks they do not know what to do on the job.

Tami finds school an enjoyable challenge and quite easy although bits of the work are difficult this year. She studies and works very hard, but Tami thinks that there should be fun times incorporated into the class routines. She likes math which she completes in class, and enjoys learning about chemistry and animals. She likes to read fiction based on true stories and study about different countries. Tami gets help at home if she needs it and is pleased with her marks and her progress this year.

Tami's wish list would include students being allowed to wear hats in school. She wants to continue to earn points for positive reinforcement trips. Tami likes having time to work on projects in class and wants to be ensured of a quiet environment in which to work.

Tami spends a lot of time with her brother playing hockey, something she loves. She has a lot of respect for her hockey coach who taught her how to skate. Tami is encouraged by her mother to play hockey and enjoys the attention of the local hockey players who know her.

Tami wants to complete grade 12 and take two years off to play junior hockey before going on with her schooling. She is considering art as a career and her grandmother is an

artist. Tami believes school is important in order to feel that she has accomplished something in her life.

Tom

Tom is in a grade 5/6 class. He is a tall, slender boy with glasses. He is a quiet, confident person who is conscious about the inappropriate behaviour of his classmates. He disapproves of them chasing one another around the class and being sarcastic to the teacher. He sees that most of this behaviour comes from boys. Tom has seen female behaviour that he did not like also, like the vandalizing of the washrooms and fires set in them. He believes that students do these things to be popular. He notices that the vandals always have lots of friends. Tom is frustrated with one group of boys who constantly bother him in unmannerly ways for the answers to assignments. He handles this by leaving the room and going out in the hall. He thinks his friends have more manners and respect for him than these people. His friends are mostly boys, but there are about three girls as well.

Tom likes joking around in class, but realizes that this prevents him from finishing his work. However, he likes to have fun. In his free time, he walks around the grounds and talks to his friends about the up-and-coming field trips. He sees that grade 6's are helpers to the grade 5's.

Tom is getting good grades this year in all subjects, which is different from last year. He finds the work very easy as he had much of it last year like the work sheets and French. He likes this because it gives him the opportunity to get high grades. He also likes the "creative working things" that he makes in this class. Tom is pleased that his teacher reads the stories to him and helps him get the answers to questions this year. He likes getting up in front of the class to talk about the current events that he has chosen and thinks that current events are important. He is also pleased that he learned to graph and chart and to do story graphs, which he found quite difficult. Tom even learned some new games in physical education.

Tom believes that grade 6's should be learning about responsibility, getting homework completed and keeping on task. He is more independent this year. If he needs help, he asks and if he does not need help, he does the work on his own.

Tom likes his teacher and all the field trips his class has, like the camping trip. He learns best by paying attention and listening to the teacher. He likes the adults in the school and believes that they like him. Tom would like to have a different teacher for every subject as he did at his old school. He would also like to have a cafeteria.

Tom likes working in groups with his friends when he has a big project to do, and during math. He wants to be a car designer and thinks he will become an artist and move to California. He came up with this idea from reading books. Overall, Tom wants an education so he can get a job.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Group Analysis Related To The Framework

Overall Essence: Keep A Stiff Upper Lip!

The nonchalance of this group of grade 6 students was felt somewhere in all the interviews. It seemed that the students were all experiencing some level of emotional pain but trying to act very brave. There appeared to be a lot of energy going into pain prevention and showing the world that this pain really didn't matter. I discovered that two of the ten students were regular clients of the district counsellor. One of them, Ashley, was not even considered at risk by her teacher. The other, Pete, and I became friends after the interview when he stayed in my room to serve a three day in-school suspension. The seriousness of his depression could not be detected through casual conversation.

The themes--Who am I? Where do I fit in? Who likes me?--permeated the interviews and were essential questions for the development of the students' self-concepts. I wondered if nonchalance was perhaps a survival mechanism used to combat peer victimization. In spite of the disrespect some of these students suffered, they had decided that they were going to succeed anyway and kept trying.

Only one participant, Jeff, thought nothing of being openly negative about specific students. He classified Ashley and Pete as losers. I thought the connection was noteworthy as they had extensive counsellor involvement. Jeff was the only student who outwardly did not disclose anything about problematic peer relationships. Since all the others had indicated some form of peer bullying had taken place in their lives, I was curious as to why I had not identified a bully, as I had interviewed about 17% of the grade 6 population. I wondered about Jeff.

What Is Important To The Grade Six Students

These grade 6 students were still mostly influenced by the adults in their lives. The values taught to them by their parents were those which they claimed to believe. Lance, for example, expressed attitudes about teachers and education which appeared to come from his involvement in adult conversations at home. Students also mentioned that their teachers had told them about the value of education. However, another influence in the lives of these students seemed to be television. Most of them said their career ideas came from television shows and, indeed, their descriptions of themselves doing these jobs looked exciting and glamorous. They were aware that they needed some form of postsecondary education and this knowledge ranged from

Pete's very vague understanding of what he needed to reach his goals to Alan's choice of his university and program. Leaders of after school activities were also influential in building confidence, as in the case of Tami. Some of the students were influenced by reading books, though, like Cheryl and Tom, and imagined themselves in careers as a result of their reading. Peers influenced students as well. They chose friends based on common interests or values and probably reinforced each others' aspirations. Even peers with opposite values were an influence as some of the students made choices not to associate with them for fear of damaging their reputations. These students all wanted good grades and expected to complete at least grade 12. Most expected to go on for additional training. Having good jobs in terms of financial rewards, and even high status jobs, was important to them. They felt good about themselves when they received high grades and this in itself was a motivating factor to challenge them to hold up their grades.

Having taught grade 6, it was not a surprise to me that these students wanted to have fun in school. This was so important that several wanted to extend the school day so that they could have more scheduled socializing time. Teachers who laughed and made sure there were playful activities were appreciated. Students expressed a desire to

have fun even at the expense of their assignments. Having fun was a main motivator to attend school, even for students who were relative outcasts.

Being liked by teachers and other students was, not surprisingly, important too. Some participants spoke lovingly of past teachers whom they considered friends, whereas the trauma experienced by many of these students was related to sour relationships with peers. Lack of caring by other students caused a lot of worrying and I expect was distracting as well.

Having choices and input into how they would learn, with whom they would learn, when they would learn, what they would learn, when they would learn, and how they would be evaluated were all mentioned in the interviews. They all wanted to learn, one even willing to come back after school for extra courses. But they wanted some say.

Most of these students felt competent with language arts skills. They enjoyed writing and were readers of materials beyond the curriculum. They participated in public speaking. They were involved with computer learning and wanted more time in the lab. Physical education was a favourite subject. (I'm not sure if this was for the love of learning new skills or for the socializing aspect.) They enjoyed math and were proud of their new skills in fractions

and geometry. Some were worried that they would not have enough French for grade seven and saw French as useful for the job market. Science experiments and social studies projects where the students worked in groups were favoured. Art and cooking were subjects one student wanted added to the curriculum. On the whole, what was being taught was considered quite satisfactory, but some wanted more material and more challenging subjects. Other skills they found useful were those of graphing and writing. They liked learning things that were practical and realistic. There was no doubt about it--grade 6 students still liked to learn.

THEME: Who The Grade Six Students Are

The participants had clear ideas of their identities and could point out special things about themselves like their changing looks and feelings. They described themselves as growing and getting stronger, and could recognize mood changes. They could talk about their personalities. Pete saw himself as a talker and Mike saw himself as a comedienne. Tami and Ashley saw themselves as tomboys.

The students were also aware of who they were in relation to the rest of the grade 6 world. Lance, Alan and Cheryl were concerned about their reputations and with whom they were seen. The students were aware of their sexuality and of their degree of comfort as far as dating was

concerned. Interestingly, none of them admitted to being in relationships, but all knew of friends who were, and it had crossed their minds. This was similar for smoking and taking illicit drugs.

What School Is Like For The Grade Six Students

These students were basically satisfied with their school environment. They liked the structure of knowing the academic and social expectations in their classroom. They did not like change, especially in expectations of different staff members. They enjoyed cooperative learning groups and expressed that they felt they learned best in this structure. They enjoyed being able to look forward to things that they considered fun in school. Two students mentioned that they wished the primary students were separated from the intermediates. Their rationale was that they should be treated differently and given more independence. They felt they were trustworthy and should be given access to the school facilities on their honour. They wanted to be able to enter and exit the school without having to ask a duty aide for a pass and they wanted access to the gym, computer room, library and classrooms during times when classes were not in session. Having access to physical education equipment was also on their wish list.

In addition to more cooperative learning groups in the

classrooms, they wanted the freedom to chose their partners. They preferred separate desks and chairs to the one-unit desks most of them used.

On the whole, though, students were satisfied with the school organization and would not make major changes.

These students seemed content with staff members in general and appreciated a kind but firm approach. They did not expect to get away with any nonsense but also wanted their teachers to be friendly and caring toward them. They liked their teachers and felt close to them. Their relationship with the duty aides was more of a policing one. If they were not in trouble, they did not know the aides. If they had been in trouble, they felt that the duty aides would be watching them. They did not like getting infractions which were slips of paper they received for time-outs in other classrooms or for signing by their parents. They preferred consequences like missing gym or staying after school. Some of them thought that teachers gave too many chances or too many choices to students. Fairness was a big concern and they resented it when all students were not caught and punished for a misdemeanour. Some students knew parent helpers and teacher assistants and liked having these people in the school.

Two students spoke fondly of special teachers they had

last year and missed. A few had attended schools outside this district and had been in larger schools which operated like high schools. They used these experiences as a means of comparison. They preferred the larger organization and wanted teacher specialists, particularly a physical education specialist. They liked the idea of a cafeteria and desired a band and a large library with more mature books. Many knew what they wanted for an ideal school.

THEME: Where The Grade Six Students Fit In

When these grade 6 students looked around, they saw that their peers, as well as they themselves, were changing and growing up. Some of this information was confusing and they had to establish new ways of looking at their world to find out how they fit in. They were aware that sooner or later they would be going through all the changes that would transform them into adults. They were also wondering how they would adapt to fit into a changing social world and a world of new expectations.

Where they fit in seemed to be one of the most prevalent questions with which these grade 6 students grappled as it involved relationships and who you chose or do not choose as friends and who chose or did not choose you. On what basis do you choose others and on what criteria is one judged? Is it looks? Clothes? Interests? Wealth?

Behaviour? Morals? Social Class? Is there anything else? Although these students were aware of where they fit on all the above scales and how those scales determined social groups, they were also aware that others' perceptions about where they fit in on these scales could change without warning.

They were aware of conformity and if they did not conform, to beware. Just "appearing" to conform, even when it meant compromising values, was done to avoid conflict with the "code." A child like Ashley had a lot of courage to be true to herself but at perhaps a devastating emotional expense. And yet, few people were as privileged as I to find out what was behind the confident exterior. Will Ashley the "loser" end up a "winner?" Can her nonchalance carry her through?

Jeff appeared to have been granted a fair amount of independence by his family and had original ideas about how school should be. He exuded a self-assurance that indicated that he was not concerned about conformity. Will he be able to conform to the expectations of secondary schools or will he value his originality so much that he will leave school to pursue independent ventures?

Tami seemed to have stopped trying to fit in with girls and chose boys now for relationships. It seemed to be the

broken trust from a past friendship that led to this. Will Tami trust girls again?

Jenn appeared to want to fit in with everyone. It seemed she was trying so hard she was forgetting about developing herself. Will her parents' encouragement to use her full potential win out in the end?

What would happen to Mike if he lost his best friend? Would he find another as willing to be part of a mutual protection team?

Even Lance, the all-round boy who was very popular, had not won all the students over and he wondered why a certain boy still held a grudge. He was beginning to wonder if similar situations would lie ahead for him in the next few years of school. Only Tom seemed to be so at ease with himself that he accepted the behaviour of others without concern.

Cheryl was unique in that she had chosen where she wanted to fit in and made a clean break from the girls with the divergent agenda. She was advantaged in having a strong personality and excellent ability to express her opinions. I thought she could instantly wilt most pressure groups who attempted to coerce her into conforming.

Alan was trying out costumes and roles and was wavering to and fro. He seems to find the girls who pursued him

intriguing but he had not figured out how to behave with them.

Pete wanted so much to fit in but he had not found out that showing others that he was a caring person and was interested in them was a way to reach his goal. He thought that showing off was the answer, but it backfired on him.

THEME: Who Likes The Grade Six Students

These grade 6 students were aware that their peers were looking at them in a more social way this year and were more desirous of their friendships. They were trying to determine how to choose their own friends and wondering if the old rules applied. For example, if an old friend's values or interests changed, could they still be friends? Having the adults in the school like them and give them attention was also important to these students.

As previously discussed, being liked was very important to this group of grade 6 students. Whereas having close relationships with teachers was always important, and still was, these students were very concerned about peer approval. Who liked them was strongly connected to where they fitted in, as fitting in was often a criterion for being liked. Students were choosing for friends others with similar attitudes, and shunning those who they perceived as different. Some were empathetic about students who were not

liked and could explain why this was happening. However, in most cases, they would not befriend a shunned person because it might interfere with their own acceptance.

All the students had at least one friend they could talk to at some time. I found the relationship Mike had with his friend Ted special. Mike was the only student who outwardly expressed a genuine appreciation for a special friend and seemed very happy this year. Ted meant a lot to him even though they were very different.

What The Grade Six Students Think Of Their Peers

These students saw their peers as being friendly and caring this year and they saw themselves getting along better in the whole group. One noticed an increase in phone calls from peers. They appeared to enjoy cooperating with one another. Interestingly, however, it seems that close friendships continuing outside of school were not common. These students appeared to be more involved with their family and home lives after school than with school friends. I found this surprising because the school was not a bus school and students could walk from one home to another easily, especially those living on the military base. I wondered if this might have been due to the high transience of the school population. Also, this school seemed to have a high number of parents who walked their children to and from

school and spent a lot of time on the school playground.

Students wanted to interact with others while they learned and they liked having opportunities not only to get help from peers, but to help peers with their work.

Having one or two good friends was the usual situation. Any spare time was spent with friends. Friends were those who were nice to them, cared about them, and stuck up for them. Friends were usually people who thought like them and had similar interests.

The participants noticed that the boys were more talkative and funny--meaning attention-seeking but in a funny way. They noticed that the girls were paying more attention to boys by calling them on the phone and chasing them on the playground. Although none of those interviewed admitted to being in boy--girl relationships, they saw that some of their peers were. They were aware of being teased about involvements with the opposite sex. They found that they enjoyed working in groups with opposite sex members, even though they were aware that the differences between the two sexes were more pronounced this year.

These students reported that some girls had formed gangs and preyed on individual girls or boys. These girls were experimenting with cigarettes, alcohol, soft and hard drugs and vandalizing the washrooms. They were into kicking

and throwing things at others and cheering each other on. They noticed that some strange female courtship behaviour had developed and thought it was silly. I personally saw that the females appeared to be the aggressors, even at a dance. Students only danced to slow songs at which time the girls ran to the boys, grabbed them and pulled them to the dance floor and then bear hugged them while shuffling around in the dark. Most of the girls towered over the boys but the boys were not objecting to the treatment. The students seemed to be trying to find out how to act with the opposite sex and get attention from them. Boys were quite willing to have girls in their groups on the playground and made sure that I knew that there were girls involved platonically with them. I got the impression that a group of males alone was not the accepted norm here. I was surprised that more boys than girls were shocked at the "daring" behaviour of the deviant girls and they felt boys would not do things like that.

I wondered if teachers, trying to accomplish what they set out to do in a days work, ever had time to contemplate this world of grade 6 students.

Connections To The Literature

I found it worthwhile to contemplate the information about adolescents that I found in the literature and use it

to help me understand the information I gathered from my own research. In this section, I shall discuss what I found about these grade 6 students and relate it to various theories of adolescent development, behaviour and motivation. The reader will notice many references to Simmons and Blyth (1987). This was because they have accumulated a large body of research and information about grade 6 and 7 students in one comprehensive volume and discussed many general factors which affect this grade range of students.

The literature on adolescent cognitive and self-esteem development shed light on what I have identified as the theme questions: Who am I? Where do I fit in? Who likes me? Dealing with these questions might be of heightened importance to the participants who were now increasing their abstract conceptualizations of themselves in relation to others. As adolescents reach greater heights of cognitive maturity, their self-awareness changes and there may be shifts in self-esteem (Muth & Alvermann, 1992). Students' beliefs about themselves as well as their perceptions of the world around them may affect their motivation as exemplified by their attitudes toward school.

Cognitive Development And Self-Esteem

Muth and Alvermann (1992) discussed the personality

development of adolescents as a search for identity influenced by "experiences with parents, peers and schools" (p. 40). Personality development includes sex-role identity. As the grade 6 students thought about the answers to "Who I am", "Where I fit in", and "Who likes me", their personalities were developing. Young adolescents are thinking and analyzing their own thoughts and realizing that their peers may think differently from them. Muth and Alvermann indicated that formal operational thought about social situations may develop before formal operational thought about academic school subjects. The participants were aware of the social and social-sexual situations around them and were able to verbalize their thoughts, an indication of their growing ability to conceptualize abstract ideas as well as their psycho-social development.

Wigfield's (1994) expectancy-value theory classified goals as being motivated by task--students valued interest, effort, and cooperation; or as being motivated by ego--students valued superior ability and outstanding competitive performances. Ames (1990) referred to this as motivation due to mastery where owning the outcome and valuing the process of learning is important--being task-motivated; and motivation due to performance--being ego-motivated. Based on the interview information, I would classify Tami, Cheryl,

Ashley, Jeff, and Lance as being motivated by mastery or task, and Alan, Jenn, Pete, Mile, and Tom as being motivated by performance or ego. If this is true, half of the participants was mastery-motivated and half was ego-motivated.

Ames (1990) suggested that classroom goal orientation may train some students to focus on their ability, value it negatively, and blame poor performance on lack of ability. Other students with mastery goals would use more effective strategies, prefer more challenging tasks, and have positive attitudes toward class. Mastery-oriented students believed that success followed effort (Ames & Archer, 1988). Ames (1992) suggested that mastery goals may influence students' overall self-perceptions--where they fit in. Then, one's goal orientation might be related to one's partners when doing the task. Relationships with others were paramount for these participants who wanted to work in groups with friends, and understandably so, as reciprocated friendships should enhance ones' self-perception.

Academic Achievement

All six boys in the study desired good academic achievement and were performing well except Pete. It is disconcerting to realize that they might be victimized for this after a school transition (Simmons & Blyth, 1987).

Ashley and Cheryl were motivated to do very well academically. For Tami, there were many social reinforcements because of her brightness.

Physical education was mentioned by 8 of the 10 participants. Half of the participants enjoyed it, designated it as their favourite subject, or participated in extra-curricular activities because of their love of physical activity. Two of them, Jenn and Cheryl, indicated they could do without this subject being included in the curriculum. Two boys did not mention physical activities as being important one way or another. One of them, Alan, had substituted physical recreation with playing pogs as a social activity. This was not surprising in light of Simmons and Blyth's (1987) data which indicated that participation in organized school activities does not lead to the formation of relationships.

If girls' participation in extra-curricular school activities makes victimization more probable after transition to junior high school in grade 7 (Simmons & Blyth, 1987), Ashley's choice of activities may cause her to have continued social difficulties in her new school.

Pubertal Development

The theme questions and how they affected self-esteem are also related to how much physical development had taken

place in early adolescence. Girls typically showed signs of physical maturity two years ahead of boys. Physical changes affected body image which was connected to self-concept, one's perception of oneself. The participants were aware of their bodies growing and that they were going through adolescence.

Ashley showed no outward signs of pubertal development and chose social activities that matched her size and appearance. Her attitudes toward peers who were interested in the opposite sex demonstrated a different perception about what is important in relationships.

Intellectually, Alan knew something had changed with his peers, but he seemed at a loss to figure out how to react. He also did not show any physical signs of pubertal development. It seemed Alan did not know if he should be flattered or insulted by the behaviour of the girls toward him. He was beginning to form concepts of who he was in relation to the opposite sex.

Cheryl was physically mature and was often approached on the playground by grade 7's for chats. From the literature (Simmons & Blyth, 1987), this attention from older peers may have helped elevate her already positive self-esteem and ensured that she would feel good about herself next year. She did not express an interest in the

opposite sex at this time, but was able to easily carry on a conversation with older peers who did not judge her on her lack of dating interest.

Tami underwent a drastic body change this year. From being a short, slightly stocky 10 year old, she shot up to be the tallest in her class and slimmed down. She was still concerned about the weight comments from the boys, though, and this may have affected her self-esteem. She was not ready to admit to an interest in boys, but as she associated with older boys, she was probably aware of their interest in girls.

Jeff was beginning pubertal changes, and was confident about his looks. He was aware that it was important to have girls in one's social group and knew he should be expressing an interest in girls at this age.

Jenn was tall for her age and was interested in attention from the opposite sex. Her academic achievement was not what it could be, and she was aware of this. Simmons and Blyth (1987) described the physically mature girl, interested in boys, as possibly having lower self-esteem, lower grades, and potential problem behaviour.

Lance was noticing the changes in his body and felt good about this. He appeared to have high self-esteem and this physical maturity could be a resource to take with him

next year, according to Simmons and Blyth (1987).

Mike was physically strong and was aware of his strength when playing games with girls. He was careful not to hurt them. Mike had learned how to use his developing body to gain attention by his dancing.

Pete was aware of mood changes as well as physical growth. He was beginning to show body changes and voice changes this year. However, he had no interest in the opposite sex yet, and was socially unaware of others and how to interact. Others expected him to act more mature than he knew how and he wished that he had clear directions about what to do.

Tom was tall, but not showing any other signs of pubertal development at this time. He presented as a confident person who was not concerned about any physical changes.

No student indicated an interest in the opposite sex as being necessary for popularity, something noted by Simmons and Blyth (1987). And no boys seemed unduly concerned about their appearance. This group seemed quite typical of what one would expect of grade 6 students and their attitudes toward puberty. There is quite a spread of physical and emotional maturity as well as awareness of the changes that adolescents will sooner or later undertake.

Relationships With Peers

Steinberg (1993) discussed interpersonal transitions and suggested that some children have difficulty forming new types of relationships because they are frightened about losing the sense of security of their old roles. He used as an example a girl who still wanted to play games instead of talking, as her peers did. She will likely be rejected by them. Steinberg explains that there is a need for intimacy in same-sex relationships during this time in order for opposite-sex intimacy to emerge. Security is necessary for close, intimate friendships to happen.

Steinberg describes the shift from the same-sex group to the mixed group as being somewhat trying for adolescents. This may partially explain the prevailing tone of the interviews--keep a stiff upper lip.

"Who likes me" was explained by Steinberg's conclusion that intimacy with mothers decreases as the intimacy with fathers and friends increases. Looking at Steinberg's theory as a continuum, the participants appeared to be approaching the early stages of same-sex intimacy.

Epstein (1983a) felt these young people were beginning to use cognitive skills to predict outcomes with people, and were using more information about themselves to make choices and test choices. Thus, as children got older, this resulted

in the selection of fewer but more similar friends.

Hallinan (1983) gave some insight as to how friends were influential in one's attitude formation. She stated that "[influence] can be defined as any factor that affects the formation of a person's attitudes and opinions by acting directly on his or her beliefs" (p. 224). Students were most apt to behave in ways that would gain approval from their peers and one way was by asking them for information. If students chose to believe the information to which they were exposed, they would be influenced. A choice to trust the source of information, the peer, depended of the student's knowledge of the source. It is encouraging to know that students trust in the normative system which would be what teachers and adults in the school believe, and therefore, peers who support the school norms are more apt to be trusted.

With the exception of Jeff, all of the students had some concern about their relationships with others. This seemed to preoccupy a lot of their thinking. The theme questions have to do with the participants' quest for identity. Relationship concerns appeared to be at the root of the students' nonchalance.

There was some evidence that Tami was not quite ready to continue close relationships with other girls. This might

be an example of Epstein's (1983a) exchange theory where her past negative friendship with a girl had generalized and now she appeared to have exchanged any attempts to make new female friends for attempting to make new male friends. This was likely to be difficult, though, as because of social norms, the boys seemed to be outwardly rejecting her-- Epstein's status theory. The boys did not want to deal with potential victimization if they were accused of "getting close" to a tomboy. Tami might also have been feeling some rejection from girls because of her choice of friends and her interests--further support of the status theory.

Ashley had close relationships with two girls, but might be rejected by the others because she was not ready to participate in their type of activities or conversations (Steinberg, 1993). Her relationships would be considered healthier than Tami's by Steinberg because she had chosen some same sex friends. Ashley exemplified Epstein's (1983a) balance theory in her friendship selection because she and her friends had reciprocal friendships based on common interests.

The most touching relationship was described by Mike, who really appreciated his best friend. This was another example of balance theory.

Lance had many friends but his disclosure of avoiding

friendship with a social misfit fit Epstein's (1983a) status theory of friendship. Lance was aware of how his peers had classified the misfit as undesirable and he was not taking any chance of being victimized for interacting with this boy.

Alan was aware of a hierarchy of acceptable behaviours that approached the acceptable norms of the school and those students with whom he associated were closest to the norm. Since Alan did not appear to have close friends and possibly did not trust readily, this fit Hallinan's (1983) theory of friendship choice, as well as Epstein's (1983a) status theory.

Cheryl, as well, now avoided the counter-culture crowd and was concerned about her status with teachers, once again exemplifying the status theory.

Jeff was quite outspoken about whom he felt were "losers" and why. Friends of the "losers" who perceived him as having status might feel victimized by his remarks.

It is noteworthy that three of the participants, when asked what they were most proud of accomplishing this year, told about satisfactory social situations. Cheryl was proud that she learned how to choose appropriate friends. Ashley was pleased that she could better handle her emotions about rejection. Jenn was proud that she got along with everyone,

which appeared to be her main goal for being in school. Even Pete, who had social difficulties, thought that learning social skills was the most important subject, a reminder of Simmons and Blyth's (1987) research.

Relationships With Staff

Hoge, Smit, and Hanson (1990) did a longitudinal study of grade 6 and 7's and found self-esteem was related to specific teachers and specific experiences. Their original hypothesis of self-esteem being related to teachers' evaluation of students was not proven. They concluded that special recognition programs had little direct effect on students' self-esteem. School climate and direct feedback from teachers were more important. This information agreed with the findings of Coleman, Collinge and Seifert (1993) who indicated that students' perceptions of considerable collaboration with teachers led to positive school attitudes.

All but two of the participants made statements showing how relationships with teachers were important to them: Jenn and Mike. As Hoge, Smit, and Hanson found, the chance to earn individual recognition was not mentioned. Six of the students--Lance, Tom, Tami, Ashley, Pete, and Cheryl--liked some kind of involvement with their teachers like approval, friendship, caring or encouragement. To Cheryl and Jeff,

fairness was important. Jeff also had a strong need for independence. Pete was the only one who felt he needed a task master. Tom and Alan were the only ones who mentioned the importance of actual structuring and helping with the school work. From this, one could verify the importance of the student-teacher relationships and perhaps conclude that they were a motivating factor for this group. George, Stevenson, Thomason, and Beane (1992) described middle school students as wanting very similar qualities in teachers as those discussed by the participants.

Parental Interest

Overall, family relationships were still the most important relationships to this age group and took precedence over friends. Participants' educational and career goals were influenced mainly by input from family members. Lance appeared to have had lots of discussions about school with his parents and even had attitudes about the teachers' union. Ashley's parents were encouraging her to be self-sufficient and she took this very seriously. Tami had considered her grandmother when thinking about a career. From talks with Jenn and Pete, it appeared that the main thrust of their conversations with parents about school revolved around marks, a characteristic of ego-motivation.

Isherwood and Ahola (1981) suggested that family members influenced students' school attitudes and adolescent siblings also played an important role when they discuss things with the students not normally discussed with parents. This was evident in Cheryl's relationship with her sister who was most likely quite influential in Cheryl's decision to change her friends. Alan also was modelling the educational and career goals of his older brother.

Possible At-Risk Students

When considering Browne and Rife's (1991) findings of at-risk grade 6 students, Jeff, Pete, and Jenn might be candidates.

Pete appeared to be ego-goal oriented and had a low internal locus of control. Although he tried to maintain his self-worth by avoiding tasks, his overall self-esteem was suffering.

Being of a nonconforming nature, some of Jeff's unflattering verbal comments about school could be perceived as a negative attitude. He spends a fair amount of time in the school hallway for problem behaviour. One could infer from the work of Simmons and Blyth (1987) that not conforming to the standard norms in the school might cause a student to be victimized by his peers and thus a possible decline in his self-esteem. Jeff appears to have high self-

esteem at this point in his life and there is no indication that he is victimized.

Jenn was concerned about her popularity and was also undergoing many changes in her life like changing schools, early puberty and attention from boys. At this stage of her life, academic achievement did not appear to be her priority.

Ashley, as one who is victimized greatly by her peers, might be considered to be at-risk. However, her good achievement and her motivation to succeed, backed up by her family, makes it more unlikely. Once she reaches puberty and attends a larger school where she would have a larger base from which to choose friends, she may be quite successful.

All the participants had positive attitudes about education and its importance, even those who may be at risk. Tidwell (1988) found that dropouts from various ethnic backgrounds felt positively about school, too, so a positive attitude is no guarantee that one will stay in school. This is also confirmed by Downie (1994). However, negative attitudes are indicators that students are at risk (Simmons & Blyth, 1987).

School Environment

Class structure and school environment contribute to

the motivation of students. From the perspective of Ames and Ames (1984) on goal structures and motivation, the participants chose cooperative environments instead of competitive ones in which to work. Ames and Ames felt that students in cooperatively-structured classrooms tended to perceive each other as similar and thus had more opportunities to perceive themselves as successful. This also led to positive relationships within the groups. Perhaps the exchange of ideas resulting from a cooperatively-structured classroom leads to students finding "common ground" and feeling that they belong. Tami noticed that she and her peers worked well in groups even if they tended not to associate at other times. Mastery goals, as described by Ames and Archer (1988), were related to cooperative learning situations. Students with mastery goals reported "using more learning strategies, preferred tasks that offered challenge, and had a more positive attitude toward their class" (p. 263). The participants alluded to the motivational effects of cooperative learning groups. Mastery learning is not unlike Wigfield's (1994) concept of efficacy expectations which originates from a developmental formula. Both have to do with students' perceptions of themselves as successful or not. All participants believed that they could be successful and all preferred to work in

groups.

A positive school environment that enhances self-esteem was referred to by Hoge, Smit, and Hanson (1990), who felt school climate and teacher feed-back were very important for both global and academic self-esteem. Participants on the whole perceived that teachers set the school climate and the participants knew what they liked about and desired in teachers. Likely most of them would agree with Steinberg (1993) that "students and teachers are more satisfied in innovative than in control-oriented classes and in the classes that combine a moderate degree of structure with high student involvement and high teacher support" (p. 209). Steinberg also reported that students enjoy having opportunities to help peers. In the interviews, several students mentioned that they would have the opportunity to help others if they learned in groups.

Eccles, Midgley et al. (1993) felt that adolescents entered mismatch situations both at home and at school which led to negative psychological changes and further to negative motivation and self-perception. If teachers stereotype and try to control students, there will be a mismatch (Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1988). Developmental mismatch was explained in Chapter II under School Transition from Grade 6 to Grade 7. It seems that this may occur in any

school transition, regardless of the grade composition. The youth in this study did not appear to be experiencing a developmental mismatch in this elementary school.

Epstein (1981) felt that early attitudes toward school life determined later attitudes toward school life, and this was shown in the work of Downie (1994). The participants seemed to use a lot of energy wondering who they were, where they fit in and who liked them. Their answers to these questions helped form their present attitudes toward school.

Comment

A study of this small sample of grade 6 students' attitudes presented information about how they perceived their school world and how they were motivated in school. Since schools exist to educate children, specifically in the academic areas, what is important to students is critical in the organization of schools. It appears that academic achievement by itself was not a very good motivator for this group of students. Neither did these students seem too concerned with teaching styles. What appeared to matter the most were relationships--relationships with peers and with teachers within the school, and with family outside of the school. The next chapter will look at motivation and also at prevailing recommendations for the organization of middle schools.

CHAPTER V

REFLECTIONS, ISSUES, AND INSIGHTS

Reflections

I have chosen to sum up the data from this study in the form of an essay which I wrote from what I perceived to be the vantage point of a composite grade 6 student. In writing this essay, I had to consider all the ideas that were presented to me by the participants and reflect on the meaning of this information.

An Essay of Grade Six Reflections by a Grade Six Student

This year, I started to wonder about a lot of things that I never thought about before. Sometimes, I can't stop thinking about these things. I'm not really used to talking about them and I'm not sure just what to say. Most of the time, I don't say anything and people don't know what I'm thinking. I don't think I'd want to talk about this to many other kids because I see what they can do to you. I see other kids getting teased a lot and I don't want to be teased. So I just act happy most of the time, even though some things happen that I don't think are right. After all, you can't really do much about it. We are going through adolescence and maybe that's why things are different this year. I spend a lot of time thinking about how kids are acting and why they treat me the way they do. A lot of kids

act differently this year and I can't figure it out.

Getting a good education is important to me but sometimes I'm bored if I have to do the same work over. I like to come to school to see my friends, though, and be with the other kids. I have fun with my friends. School is just one of those things that you have to do because if you want to have a good job, you have to go to college. My parents tell me that, and they wouldn't lie to me. I hear my teachers say that, too. I don't want to be a bum and have to live on the streets. I like getting good marks and want an "A" average. I think I work hard and I always try to get my work finished on time. Most of my marks are good.

I want to have an important job when I finish school. I have a couple of ideas that I got mainly from television. I think being a lawyer would be cool, or a marine biologist. I also had this book out from the library about designing cars. My brother is in college and gets good marks, so I want to do that, too.

I think most of the subjects we take in school are OK. You even need French and I did well on my quizzes. I'm pretty good at writing stories and I like to write. My spelling is sloppy, though, and I hope next year's teacher helps me. I liked learning the new math things this year, like fractions and graphing. I am good at that. Phys ed is

my favourite subject and I liked learning new games this year. Some of the girls in my class don't like phys ed and tried everything to get out of it. I don't think they should have to do it if they don't want to. I like doing science experiments and projects in socials. I don't mind talking in front of the class when I have to bring in information.

Sometimes we went on field trips about what we studied and that was cool. Our teacher does positive reinforcement field trips, too, and we went skiing and to the water slides. We don't do much art and I would like to learn how to draw. I would also like to take cooking and I'd stay after school to learn these things.

I wish we had more computer time. I think computer time is very important and I want to learn how to do more things on the scanner. I think we could be learning a lot more challenging things in grade 6.

This year I grew a lot and got taller and stronger. I can run faster, too, and that makes me good in phys ed. Sometimes I get fidgety and restless and have a hard time paying attention to the teacher. I usually have a snack when I get home from school and maybe even a nap before I go out with my friend.

This school is OK, but I would put the primaries in another section. There are all these rules we have to follow

because of the primaries and I think intermediates need to be trusted more and should not be treated like babies. We should be able to come into the school at any time and use the library and the computer room and the gym and come into the building early.

I would like to have a longer school day so that we could have more little breaks to talk to our friends. One school I went to before had an afternoon recess and we need that, but more breaks, too. We need time to talk to our friends and have fun in school. That's why I liked the field trips. One teacher took his class on a field trip each month and I would like to be in his class.

I think we should get lots of choices about how to do our school work. I'd like to be able to choose who I work with and what type of assignments I like to do. I don't like doing work sheets, but I like to do projects and write about things.

Most of the time we sat in rows this year because the teacher thought we were too noisy. I like it when it's quiet because I can get more work done then. There are not as many distractions. Sometimes I like to work in groups with my friends. We can get things done faster then because we all help each other. I liked groups when we had to do projects or solve problems. Our teacher gives us time to do most of

the work in class and I like that. I still have to do homework, though, and the work is getting a bit harder. Sometimes when I get busy with things after school, I forget to finish my work. My parents try to remind me and I like that better than trying to keep a planner.

Teachers are OK. I think they care about me and some of them are my friends. I see the counsellor and she is a friend of mine. Some teachers give kids too many chances. I don't like infractions. I don't think they do any good. Teachers should give consequences. Most teachers use positive reinforcement trips and we get points for being good and doing our work. I like that because I think that teachers should do fun things with the kids. I'd like to be "teacher for a day" and have the teacher for my assistant. I think if kids saw what teachers had to do, they wouldn't be as mean to the teachers. If kids could vote on more things in school, they'd do things because it was their decision. I like teachers to be nice and to be fair to kids. Sometimes kids who are in trouble don't get caught and others have to take the blame. Also, teachers should let kids know just what they expect and how they want them to act. They should use their voices to let us know right away. I am used to men teachers who tell us to stop in loud voices. I like my teacher because he gives me a chance to say what I think in

class. He lets everybody say what they have to say. But I wish we had different teachers for all subjects like in my last school. It's not as boring if you can switch around.

My friends are a lot like me. We like to do the same things, like play the same games on the playground. We like to get good grades in school. I don't want to hang around with kids who get in trouble so I keep with the same friends. I have two main friends, but I get along with most everyone. We walk around the grounds a lot and talk about what we are going to do after school or about the field trips. We played more games last year and did less talking. I have boys and girls as friends but I do not "go out" with anybody. We are just friends. My two best friends stick up for me when other kids are mean to me. They are always there by my side.

Generally, kids are nicer to each other this year and are more interested in each other. We do things more together as a group and most everyone is included.

But lots of kids get tormented this year and some of it is mean. If they are just a little bit different, other kids swear and call them names and throw stuff at them, and say bad things about them. They call them losers and treat them like kids in grade two would act--"Don't get near me. You have germs"--except they call them "coogies." I don't want

to be treated like that and I try to keep with my own friends. Some kids give me a hard time and are always trying to bum stuff off of me. They don't have any manners.

Boys and girls are doing more things together and are friends with one another, mostly. There are some girls, though, who gang up on boys and chase them or kick them. Other girls are really foolish around boys and ask them if they like them all the time. I think that's dumb. I don't know why they are mean and I don't know why they don't just come out and say what they have to say.

Some of the girls are smoking on the school grounds and I think they smoke up, too. One of them has boys and girls into her bedroom and they drink her father's beer. And I know another who sneaks out of her window at night. These girls even lit a fire in the school bathroom. The boys vandalized their bathroom, too, and now there's no hot water any more, or soap.

Grade 6 was pretty good. I had a good year except for some of the teasing. I liked my teachers and the subjects. I really wouldn't make too many changes. I wonder what grade 7 and 8 will be like!

Issues

Motivation

A study of a small group of grade 6 students' attitudes

can be a way of looking at how their motivation is changing. Examining attitudes could lead to a better understanding of how students are motivated. Ames (1990) began a summary of what she felt teachers needed to know about motivation by stating that "[many] children enter school with mastery or learning goals but many become socialized into a performance goal orientation" (p. 414). A performance goal orientation means one performs for marks and not for the sake of learning. To help reinforce mastery goals, Ames recommends encouraging students to try harder, providing opportunities for successful outcomes, giving choices, using praise, and using rewards. These ideas were all mentioned by the participants in this study as factors which made a difference to them. They are also mentioned in documents which discuss middle school organization (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; George, Stevenson, Thomason, & Beane, 1992; Muth & Alvermann, 1992). How schools for young adolescents are organized will, after all, affect their motivation to learn and stay in school.

It was not the purpose of this research to study students at risk for withdrawing from school, but even with this small sample of ten participants, a few attitudes could be flagged for attention when considered in light of the literature on young adolescents. The differences between

at-risk students and the others seems to be their self-worth and motivation. Teachers of young adolescents might want to evaluate their students on these qualities and consider alternate motivational strategies.

Students are motivated to fulfil the five basic needs of survival, belonging, power, freedom, and fun (Glasser, 1986). I shall refer to these needs in the next section. Finn (1989) recommends that schools find ways for students to see that schooling is important for survival because "reading, studying and completing assignments or tests do not present themselves inherently as means for satisfying these needs!" (p. 137).

The Organization Of Middle Schools

At least two well known documents about middle schools have begun with an outline of the recommendations from the Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). George, Stevenson, Thomason and Beane (1992) wrote to an audience of people concerned with implementation, whereas Muth and Alvermann (1992) wrote to an audience of teachers who will be working directly with the adolescents in the schools. Although I, too, shall use the recommendations of the Task Force on Education as an outline, it is not my intention to summarize or offer any reactions to these documents which have done

excellent work in communicating with their audiences. My purpose is to use the recommendations of the Task Force as an outline to discuss my own findings as well as other documentation I encountered while pursuing my graduate degree. The eight headings of this section are the eight recommendations of the Task Force.

1. Create Small Communities for Learning

"[Stable], close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are considered fundamental for intellectual development and personal growth" (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 9). Schools-within-schools, house teams, and advisory groups were recommended by the Task Force. Other interventions for cooperative behaviour and social interaction are peer tutoring, learning centres, student organized activities (Hallinan, 1983), and special topic seminars (Seldin, 1989). Since the importance of teacher collaboration with students is known (Coleman, Collinge & Seifert, 1993; Epstein, 1981), frequent meetings of groups small enough so that at least one teacher can get to know each student in the group well could be beneficial.

Relationships are important to students. Often in junior schools, students have separate and controlled lives from teachers, but they still have a social life in school

(Ahola & Isherwood, 1981). Peer interaction is real. It happens regardless of the school structure. Peer and friendship groups can be positive forces and can be used as a resource to other educational goals (Epstein, 1983c). One way to accomplish this is to organize students into groups and teams. Also, settings based on the desirability of activities and participants could lead to more positive peer relationships (Cohen, 1983).

Classroom environments in traditional middle schools appear to contribute to the decline of students' motivation because they tend to control students more and allow less student input, which eventually decreases student efficacy. Motivation depends on students' self-concepts of ability and self-efficacy, and therefore should be facilitated by a good stage-environment fit (Eccles, Midgley, et al., 1993). This means that the school environment will meet the needs of developing adolescents. Students seem to want emotional support and more control over their school experiences as they move through early adolescence, but usually get less. A more favourable environment where adult control decreases as the students' wishes for autonomy increase is preferred (Eccles, Buchanan et al., 1991).

Research suggested that current friends are more influential than past friends and SES on affective and

academic outcomes (Epstein, 1983e). This information might be useful when looking at new patterns of peer interaction. It is important to have on hand solutions to solve student social relation problems or to organize students relations to solve academic problems (Epstein, 1983c). If students who may be wavering are placed in groups with school leaders, changes may come about as the leaders express information congruent with school norms. This information, if it is congruent with school norms, may be trusted by the deviant students and may lead to attitude change and decrease the risk that they may withdraw from school (Hallinan, 1983). "The sense of not belonging to a social unit, whether that unit is the family, school, or other social organization is called alienation" (Calabrese, 1989, p. 72). By encouraging bonding and understanding the relationship between academic and social issues, it might be possible to raise students' achievement and responsibility.

Participants in the study expressed a choice for working in group situations with friends. This possibly satisfies their needs for belonging to a group and enjoying themselves, as well as well as their need to have freedom to chose their group. It seems advisory groups have the potential to increase the satisfaction of belonging as there would ideally be a supportive, caring adult who would take

special interest in each student in the small group.

On the surface, it might seem quite easy to implement this recommendation, as providing teachers with the time necessary to hold small team groupings may be all that appears to be necessary. However, when looking at this more closely, there might be a need to educate teaching staff about the rationale behind this recommendation. It seems that teachers sometimes unintentionally forget about the affective dimension of their students as they are caught up in the daily routines of teaching courses and "getting through" the curriculum.

At first, I expect there would be quite a bit of fidgeting in advisory groups from both students and teachers about the purpose of the groups, because the ultimate goals are not easily measured. Teachers might want to share with each other information about what is happening in their groups and the effect it is having on them and their students. Perhaps enthusiasm is the key. What a pleasant thought to imagine those at the top of a school system showing caring and interest in the teachers and a willingness to interact with them about their lives in school.

2. Teach a Core Academic Program

Students will be literate, including in the sciences,

be critical thinkers, lead healthy lives, be responsible citizens (The Task Force suggests youth service in the community), and behave ethically.

This is a tall order. Could this be done like Muth and Alvermann (1992) suggest by considering the cognitive development and motivational aspects of young adolescents who are beginning to take perspectives and testing hypotheses of how they relate to the world? More highly developed cognition leads to the organization of one's thoughts and the realization that others think differently. This is a crucial time in the lives of students to use strategies to enhance critical thinking, ethical behaviour and even responsibility.

Covington (1984) suggests that we need to change students' perceptions of ability and effort. This is also worth considering if we are to promote literacy. The social behaviours that are valued by the school and teacher (the school environment) influence the perceptions of students (Epstein, 1981). If the emphasis is on competition and high GPA's, we are likely to promote ego-oriented individuals who are not concerned about being life long learners. If the focus changes to task completion and students are helped to change their concepts of ability and effort, we are likely to promote more skill and achievement-oriented individuals.

The current trend toward continuous progress in schools is an example of a social behaviour valued in the school environment which can lead to all students having success.

Ames (1992) suggested that "rather than qualitative changes in the ways students view themselves in relation to the task [achievement], engage in the process of learning and then respond to the learning activities and situation" (p. 268). To me, this means focusing on the effort of the student, not the ability. Building self-esteem in students by helping them to be successful might be one way to implement the second recommendation.

This recommendation cannot be viewed without considering the first recommendation because cooperative learning groups and peer tutors are related to cognitive development and can be used to help learners develop and achieve.

I would not want to see the "behave ethically" part of this recommendation skimmed over. My interviews with grade 6 students gave a clear message that they were disturbed by the behaviour of others, did not understand victimizing behaviour, and often did not know how to handle it. Muth and Alvermann (1992) describe two explanations of moral development. One explanation is that young adolescents are still quite egocentric, seeing everything from the terms of

their own needs. Their actions are determined by their own desires, and good and bad are determined by the consequences of their own desires. Many are beginning to view good and bad as what pleases others, and the more mature look at good and bad as a sense of duty. The other explanation explains that moral behaviour is learned by modelling the behaviour of significant others, and makes the distinction of moral reasoning--knowing what should be done, and moral behaviour--what is actually done. I think that both of these views need to be considered when working with students. Their cognitive developmental level should be considered to assess whether they are able to grasp the concepts of what should be done, and they need lots of time to interact while considering what is actually done and why it is done. Moving toward higher order thinking seems to be crucial for moral and ethical development, and there is a lot more to this than "behaving" ethically. In order to lead healthy lives and become a responsible citizen, perhaps students need to establish sets of values by which they live and on which their behaviour is based. It is interesting that Carnine (1991), in an informative article about the necessity of teaching at-risk students higher order thinking, has only discussed his interventions in the context of standard curriculum material and building students' confidence to

keep them in school, and not alluded to the value of cognition development in helping students conceptualize their own values.

In this study, the participants had no quarrel with the existing curriculum and seemed to assume that this was what one learned in school. They did have an interest in learning new subjects, and the idea of exploratory subjects at this level is something to consider. The other point is that there was an indication that they wanted curriculum material to be realistic. There was no doubt that these students still enjoyed learning and that they felt good about themselves when they learned new skills and ideas. This, of course, meets their need for power as it relates to a feeling of competence, of self-efficacy.

As well as their recommendations for a thematic approach to curriculum for adolescents, I like the curriculum implications proposed by George, Stevenson, Thomason, and Beane (1992) and agree with them that there would be both a political and pedagogical struggle to implement the changes in the area of curriculum. However, conversations at all levels--teacher with students, schools with parents, and school districts with communities--appear to be necessary to change the accustomed structures. I suggest that this will be even more difficult in this time

of the "back to the traditional school" movement. But, as George, Stevenson, Thomason, and Beane say,

it is hard to believe that we would not support what these new curriculum visions offer to early adolescents. Here is the opportunity to help these students make closer connections with the world in which they live, to construct powerful meanings around their own concerns and those of the larger world, to integrate self and social efficacy, to experience learning as a whole and unified activity, to bring knowledge and skill to life in meaningful ways, and to have richer and fuller lives as early adolescents. (p. 103)

3. Ensure Success for All Students

Eliminate tracking by achievement level and promote cooperative learning, flexibility in arranging instructional time, and adequate resources for teachers.

Oakes (1992) said that tracking results in the low-end students getting the worse deal from schools and making choices based on how they see themselves placed. She discussed the thinking shifts needed to detrack, and the potential difficulties of change. Resnick and Resnick (1985) realized that "the harder but preferable path is a nontracked curriculum that sets strong intellectual

standards in a core program for all students, even those who up to now effectively have been denied the stimulus of challenging programs" (p. 18). Further to that, Willis (1994) described the successful integration of disabled children in a middle school where co-teaching was the norm. Clearly, the verdict is in on the disadvantages of tracking and the advantages of integration.

A school climate that decreases social and normative comparisons will focus on effort and strategies and have realistic but challenging goals (Ames & Archer, 1988). Traditionally, students may have been socialized by the predominant motivational system of competition which leads to failure and is detrimental to keeping students in school. Instructional behaviour may only change when teachers restructure their goals, perceptions, and their evaluation of students (Ames & Ames, 1984). Ames (1992), an authority on motivation, says,

A sense of self-worth that is tied to one's effort rather than performance is fostered by evaluation that focuses on personal progress and individual mastery and is private and informative....[Recommended classroom structures] relate to students' focusing on effort versus ability, to intrinsic interest in learning, and to use of effective learning strategies, in particular.

(p. 266)

This is the rationale for the third recommendation.

Cooperative learning is related to giving students more choice in their learning and leads to responsibility as well as increases in self-worth. When young adolescents are allowed more opportunity to participate in classroom decision making, their decline in motivation decreases (Eccles, Midgley, et al., 1993). If classrooms are organized so students participate, they will have more positive attitudes. The feeling of belonging to a group is a great motivator to stay in school. Believing that one has something to contribute enhances one's self-esteem.

Students' success in school and the way the students perceive the teacher making decisions can influence their attitudes (Gnagey, 1981). Main and Rowe (1993) found that a group of grade 6 students had more accurate results on tasks when they were unstructured, an indication that students like to design solution methods to their problems. In high school, higher achievement motivated students did better with less supportive teachers (Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1989).

Literature on friendship and achievement (Epstein, 1983d) indicated that if low achieving students have opportunities to make friends with high achieving students, there might be a chance that they will feel the support and

increase their achievement, as high participatory settings have more reciprocated friendships from a wider selection of individuals and more cross-sex choice. Epstein (1981) recommended using a mastery system of progress, including social changes, in order to reduce failure and help students make connections about "what you do is what you get."

Shepard and Smith (1990), in a synthesis of research on grade retention, discussed the futility of failing. Schools still fail children and children are concerned about it. Recently a grade 3 student came up to me on the playground in tears and asked if I would read his report card because he could not figure out if he had passed or not. Many of the participants were concerned about getting "A" averages. Schools still socialize students to compete for A's, as the students in my sample show. Only half of them were learning for the sake of learning. The others were there to get marks, or avoided handing in work at all. The need to succeed is the need for power, but perhaps we must help students realize that real power is not being better than someone, or winning, but a sense of feeling good about themselves internally. The participants looked at chances to learn cooperatively as a treat and did not take it for granted.

I am sure that in order to implement this

recommendation of the Task Force, one would be presented with the same difficulties as in the second recommendation. I expect that a tradition of competition will be difficult to change in all areas of the school organization. Even some of those who may pay lip-service to the recommendation may have doubts because of never having experienced any other way of learning. Our school systems are culturally based and this is another recommendation that flies in the face of the culture.

4. Empower Teachers and Administrators to Make Decisions About the Experiences of Middle Grade Students

Teachers should have creative control over the instructional program linked to more responsibility for students' performance. They should act on committees to assist the principal in designing and coordinating school-wide programs, and have autonomy and leadership in the "sub-schools" (like house teams) to enhance the intellectual and emotional development of students.

Information from the participants indicated that in this particular school, which is not a middle school, teachers have creative autonomy over what happens in their classrooms. The data from the students does not indicate how much responsibility teachers take for students' performance or how much they are empowered to plan for school

activities. As a co-worker in the school, I would judge the amount of potential empowerment to be fairly high. In this school, the classrooms themselves act as sub-schools as there is one teacher to a classroom of students.

Empowering teachers and administrators to make decisions is a "loaded" recommendation. It can be passed over lightly by assessing the situation and arriving at the conclusion that teachers have a say at staff meetings and are invited to be on committees, or it can be looked at from the angle of how much actual involvement teachers as an enlightened group have or choose to have in the overall programming for the school, which would involve considerable collaboration.

Little (1993) was concerned about the lack of teacher communication and encouraged deep discussion, debate and ideas for action among teachers in order to have a strong work force. Little's (1982) research indicated that in successful schools teachers interact with teachers and administration professionally and share planning and preparation. Selden (1989), with his concern about adolescent alienation, recommended regularly scheduled seminars with sharing climates for teachers and administrators. Marrett (1990) even suggested schools interacting with schools in other communities. But as to the

implementation of these recommendations, as LaRocque and Downie (1994) said, "some people think that they merely have to bring people together without considering how to help them learn how to work collaboratively, how to address differences" (p. 29). Clift, Johnson, Holland, and Veal (1992) discussed the emotional difficulty of role negotiation involved in shared leadership and felt lots of time was needed to reach a comfort level in change. Collaboration needs more than time to happen. It needs time built into school organizations so that teachers have opportunities to interact (Little, 1990; Louis, 1994), as well as time to happen (Coleman & LaRocque, 1987). If actual changes are going to take place by mutual adaptation, they will only occur in baby steps. Yes, there are pretend changes, and there is contrived collegiality (Hargreaves, 1994), the two being somewhat related. Contriving collegiality and trying to rush change does not appear to work. Individuals, small groups, and informal behaviour must change first and be reinforced from top management if actual change is going to occur (Fullan, 1993). Teacher empowerment and collaboration in school government is not as simple as it appears.

5. Staff Middle Grade Schools with Teachers who are Expert at Teaching Young Adolescents

Teachers will be specially prepared for middle grade assignments.

The data from this study does not indicate what training or orientation the teachers might have. The participants were satisfied with their teachers, and their needs for belonging to the class were satisfied. Some teachers provided more opportunities for fun and freedom, but all taught in ways that enabled the students to gain power by feeling competent. The qualities that the participants appreciated in their teachers have been discussed in a previous section. Although they are not specific to middle schools, they are summarized by George, Stevenson, Thomason, and Beane (1992) as fairness, safety, humour, trustworthiness, listening and talking, optimism and positivism, enjoying students, and democratic control. Perhaps even more than specialized training to teach in a middle school, staff selection should first consider these qualities.

Expert teachers are accountable teachers. McLaughlin and Yee (1988) said that teachers who are most accountable have careers, not jobs, working in schools. Just as important as having training in adolescent development and compatible teaching strategies, if not more so, is an internalized motivation to continue to learn and grow and

share ideas with other professionals. The schools, as organizations where professionals work, must be investment-centred, problem-solving, integrated, resource-adequate, and collegial. These traits are necessary for teachers to have careers. Pfeifer (1988) felt that in ineffective classrooms, teachers blamed the students for their failure. Good teachers want feedback from evaluations so they can keep improving.

From the literature, skilled teachers of young adolescents accepted that students have negative age-related changes in motivation and self-perception and tried to develop appropriate social environments for them (Eccles, Midgley, et al., 1993). They provided clear expectations, predictable consequences for undesirable behaviour, and frequent rewards for positive activities (Steele, 1985). Skilled teachers also accepted the challenge of providing "an optimal mix of freedom (for individual growth) and conformity (for social integration)" (Epstein, 1983c, p. 241).

6. Improve Academic Performance by Fostering Health and Fitness

In every school, provide a health coordinator, access to health care and counselling services, and a health

promoting environment.

Participants in this study did not mention personal physical health concerns. Health was not taught as a specific subject, either. They did mention their love of physical education and the two who saw the counsellor regularly were aware of the benefits of talking about their social difficulties. The data presented no evidence of liaisons with outside health agencies. A knowledge of overall wellness and how to access information and community resources seems to be important in meeting the basic physiological need of survival. This need overarches all psychological needs and must be taken care of first, before people can perform in any way.

Lawson (1994) discussed school-linked services, bringing agencies and personnel to school sites for one-stop shopping. He believed all human service professionals were educators and that they should be teaching their skills in homes and neighbourhoods. Mawhinney (1994, May) would agree, but referred to the same dilemma teachers have communicating with other teachers--the professionals do not know how to collaborate.

7. Reengage Families in the Education of Young Adolescents

Give families meaningful roles in school governance, communicate with them about school programs and students'

progress, and offer them opportunities to support learning at home and at school.

Although no specific information was given during the interviews about family involvement in the education of the participants, from "reading between the lines" it was not difficult to speculate whose parents were the most and least involved with them at home. How much the families of the participants actually interacted with the school is unknown from the data, though. Parental interaction with student regarding their educational activities meets the needs of love and belonging to the family as well as the school unit. The need for power (competence, feeling one has control over one's life and can meet one's own needs without harming others) can be met as the student's self-worth is enhanced. As well, parental interactions about school are usually not without an element of fun.

Parent involvement is not just about increasing participation, but about true involvement in the education of youth. Renihan and Renihan (1994) supported the idea of meaningful roles for parents. Woods (1989) thought it was important to establish two way communication with parents if parents were to be truly utilized as school resources. Weisner and Garnier (1992) believed family stability and commitment to family life style were more important factors

than nonconventionality or single parent families.

Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons (1992) concluded that students strive to reach goals and eventually set their own goals. Meaningful values taught in the home are among the greatest resources families can offer their children because these values carry over to the school. Parents are also influential by setting goals for students.

School SES and teacher efficacy were both found to be related to the amount of parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987). Although SES is not factor which can be controlled, investigating ways to increase teacher efficacy is worth considering. Woods (1989) believed that respect, openness, and equality were necessary for expanding partnerships, but he also acknowledged that changing is very difficult for teachers. This appears to be more of the same communicating and role changing difficulty that teachers have when attempting to collaborate with each other and administration. Bastiani (1989) made it clear that it is necessary for teachers to communicate a sense of equality to parents. Empathetic listening, acknowledging, and sharing with parents as equal partners can only take place when teachers pay attention to how parents perceive themselves in communication situations with teachers.

I agree with the philosophy of Woods (1994, May) who

realized that partnerships with parents must address both the empowerment of students and parents, and the responsiveness and willingness to change of schools.

8. Connect Schools With Communities

Identify community service opportunities. Use community resources to enrich the students' instructional programs and provide for after school activities. Collaborate with agencies for health and social service for students.

Data from this study did not identify any instances where students were involved in community liaisons, with the exceptions of using recreational facilities as class positive reinforcers.

Dedmond (1991, April) felt that school counsellors are well suited to facilitate community relations because of their career education and counselling services. Selden (1989) recommended the adoption of a major community project of real value to bring school and community together. Fertman (1992) and Guthrie and Guthrie (1991) gave guidelines for developing collaboration among agencies. Somehow, considering these ideas by themselves, it seems like putting the cart before the horse. Mawhinney (1994, May), on the other hand, stated a rationale for interagency collaboration and brought up many other questions about collaborative initiatives. Not only did she stress that

effective communication is imperative and give her own guidelines for collaboration, she made the point that interagency collaboration was not itself an end or a quick fix for social problems, but a means to an end. Like trying to increase parental involvement, caution must be exercised to ensure that collaboration is meaningful and occurs for a reason, not just to produce statistics on the volume of collaborative interactions.

Insights

Popular documents on the middle school (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1989; George, Stevenson, Thomason & Beane, 1992; Muth & Alvermann, 1992) seem to be based on insights gleaned from studies of young adolescents. However, as a result of studying the 10 young people for this research, I personally will pay more attention to a number of factors. I believe that educators will have more success if they treat students as individuals and maintain close personal contact with them. I welcome advisory groups but realize that one must be aware of the changes adolescents are experiencing and understand their personal concerns.

I realize that students need to hear the varied opinions of their peers. Time for social development is necessary to develop personality and self-concept.

Cooperative learning groups are a way to provide for both academic and social needs. I would like to see students take various roles and learn about the ideas of others. This is important to develop a self-identity and decrease egocentrism which young adolescents are beginning to outgrow in grade 6. A curriculum based on facts from the past and present to which adolescents can relate rather than fantasy and fairy tales might further promote this growth. Muth and Alvermann (1992) suggested that cooperative learning groups enhance cognitive development because what children can do with the help of others is more indicative of intelligence than what they can do on their own.

Students know what is special about them and scheduling times for them to display special talents and achievements is worthwhile considering. The literature indicates that students seem to value personal communication from teachers about their accomplishments more than special recognition in front of a group. But they enjoy opportunities to "show off" and need feedback from peers.

The matter of victimization is not to be taken lightly. It is certainly related to the overall essence of this study and is at the root of the nonchalance. It appears that only during the last seven years has any serious attention been paid to bullying in schools by American researchers (Batsche

& Knoff, 1994). Batsche and Knoff believed that the level of bullying is both an indicator of the level of respect for others and the level of positive social behaviour in a school and recommend interventions for both bully and victim.

The onset of physical development suggests that the curriculum include components of sex education, health education and moral education. The participants in this study indicated that most exploratory programs would be enjoyed. These are aspects that can also use community resources as means of information and liaison.

Discussions of educational and career goals can help students plan their lives. Creativity in involving family and community in the development of these goals could make school more enjoyable for students. Finn (1989) has an interesting outlook on this. He states that there are many suggestions in the literature to promote student participation, while effective school research advocates mastery of basic math and reading skills. He considers the views divergent and recommends a reconciliation. These divergent views are clearly visible within the middle school recommendations.

On the whole, this study indicates that the attitudes of these grade 6 students support the current

recommendations for the structuring of middle schools.

This paragraph is not meant to be a sudden shift in thought from the thesis presented so far. However, studying the attitudes of the participants certainly increased my awareness of two great dimensions in education: motivation and morality. I find it difficult to consider these dimensions and the notion of ethics without considering spirituality. Spirituality is inexpressible through words, and therefore possibly a difficult concept for school governance. Perhaps that is why it is mentioned infrequently in North American literature on education. Also, there is no way a curriculum can be developed to "measure" it. To delve more deeply into the ideas of motivation and morality, I feel spirituality needs to be explored as a quest of what it is to be human (Woods & Woods, 1994, April). The pain, the nonchalance, the humanness of the participants in this study leave me contemplating a statement made by former admired professor and his wife, "[We] have to have the courage to imagine what may presently seem unthinkable--namely a schooling environment and curriculum that is led by the spiritual--and rise to the challenge that this poses" (Woods & Woods, 1994, April, p. 13).

Summary

The attitudes toward school of ten grade 6 students have been explored through qualitative analysis. A model was constructed from three main issues that were found along with three themes which pervaded the issues. After a literature review on grade 6 students, the interview data was presented in the form of case studies of the participants as they related to the model. As well, information gleaned from the participants was related to the literature on young adolescents. To summarize the interview data a composite essay from the point of view of a grade 6 student was written. A discussion on motivation of grade 6 students as well as a discussion of prevailing trends in middle school organization with recommendations were made regarding educational implications of the study.

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APPENDIX

PROMPT QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEW

- ▶ How is your school year going?
- ▶ How are you feeling about this year at school?
- ▶ What do you think about your school year--what are your opinions?
- ▶ Are there things about school you especially like or dislike?
- ▶ Do you notice any differences between this year and last year--about school, about students, about teachers?
- ▶ What are you learning this year? What do you think of this?
- ▶ Have you learned anything this year that is important to you, that you are proud of?
- ▶ What do you think you should be learning?
- ▶ Would you change anything about what you are learning or the amount of time spent learning certain subjects?
- ▶ Are you learning to the best of your ability?
- ▶ How do you learn best? Is this happening now?
- ▶ What are you doing to learn to the best of your ability?
- ▶ How do you relate to the staff in the school, that is, any adults who are here in the school?

- ▶ What do you think they think they think of you?
- ▶ What staff changes would you like to see, if any?
- ▶ What do you think of the set-up of the school and the way that your class is set up--for example, how your teacher runs the class?
- ▶ Would you make any changes in the in the set-up? What would you change?
- ▶ How do you relate to other students in your class and in the school?
- ▶ Tell about your friends in school--why are they friends? What things do you do in class with them? What things do you do around the school with them?
- ▶ Would you change anything about this school year?
- ▶ Do you have any goals for being in school? Where did you get these ideas?
- ▶ How long do you plan to be going to school? How far do you plan to go in school?
- ▶ Do you see that there is anything that may be useful about school?