

Developmental and Cultural Mismatch in the Middle School Transition:
Relationship to Student Engagement and Achievement

There exists a wide and persistent achievement gap in American schools that disadvantages children from low-income families and of ethnic minority backgrounds (especially, African American and Latinos). Negative adjustment to middle and high school transition is related to a further widening of the achievement gap and a lack of interest in, as well as preparedness for, college. Understanding factors that promote positive adjustment to secondary school is critical to our success in helping low-income minority youth adapt positively to secondary schools.

The transition from elementary school to middle school places all students at risk, because of a hypothesized mismatch between their developmental needs and the environment of the middle school, with multiple teachers, a more anonymous setting, and a more rigorous curriculum (Eccles, et al., 1993). Additionally, for low-income minority youth, there is often a cultural mismatch between home and school, which makes middle school adjustment especially difficult (Gonzales, Dumka, Deardorff, Carter, & McCray, 2004; Gutman & Midgley, 2000). Minority students, in particular African Americans and Latinos, are at greater risk for school failure during this transition and have a higher drop out rate once in high school (Seidman, Lambert, & Allen, 2003). In order to promote the positive adjustment of low-income minority to high-expectation secondary schools, understanding the nature and role of such a mismatch (both developmental and cultural) is imperative.

Study Aims

Researchers have studied mismatch in low-income ethnic minority youth, but little attention has been paid to the cultural mismatch that these youth deal with. The purpose of this study is to learn from students, parents/guardians, and teachers about perceptions of their real versus ideal home and school environments that would encourage student academic learning and promote academic success. This study will relate match and mismatch in perceptions to student engagement and academic gains. The domains of mismatched needs and environmental supports to be investigated include (a) developmental socialization (connection, behavioral regulation, and psychological autonomy), (b) academic support (expectations, aspirations, involvement, and motivation), and (c) ethnic-racial socialization. This study will take a strength-based approach and address methodological limitations in the literature by focusing on five questions: 1) from the perspective of the students, parents, and teachers, what is the nature and degree of match that they are experiencing in their home and school environments? 2) In what way are the students' perceptions of degree of match between their need and their home and school environments related to their demographic characteristics? 3) What is the nature and degree of match between the students' home and school environments? 4) What is the relationship between degree of match in perceptions and student interest in learning (motivation and engagement)? 5) What is the relationship between degree of match in perceptions and gains in student achievement?

Method

Overview

This research project is embedded in a partnership between a secondary public charter school and UC Berkeley where Berkeley faculty and graduate students are providing services to the school. Therefore, this research is an integral and integrated part of UC Berkeley's collaboration with Aspire Public Schools in running the California College Preparatory Academy (Cal Prep). This study is made more feasible and more ecologically valid because the graduate student researcher has provided research expertise and services to this school for over two years prior to this study. In addition, the questions and measures have been developed collaboratively with the school staff. The dissertation research is also of service to the school as well as, student, family, and teacher focused.

The primary caregivers chose to have their children attend this school with curriculum rigor and a climate of high academic expectations. This is a regional public charter school with students from the San Francisco Bay Area and it serves as an "early to college" model. The school serves predominantly underserved children from low-income families, the majority of who will be the first in their families to go to college. Thus, the school's culture is one of high academic expectations of all its students, provision of college readiness support, and an offering of college level courses for students.

This prospective, naturalistic study will utilize mixed-method design to obtain quantitative and qualitative data. Transition is a process over time, therefore, this study will include 6-8th graders, enabling an examination of subgroups of stayers, leavers, and newcomers to this charter school. In general, transition for the majority of 6th, 7th, and 8th grade low-income African American and Latino students into an academically rigorous and high expectation environment has been difficult.

Participants. The participants in this study will include all the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students, their parents/guardians, and teachers. There are potentially 169 students from 6th (57), 7th (58), and 8th (54) grades and their primary caregivers. The students currently attending this school are predominantly African American (62%), followed by

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Latino (35%), Asian American (3%), and European American (1%). There is a greater number of male students (54%) in comparison to female students (46%) attending this school. The majority of the students in this school is eligible for a free or reduced lunch price (64%), and is predominantly English-only speakers (65%). The majority of the primary caregivers have completed high school, and fewer parents reported completing college, or some college.

Students at this middle school have multiple teachers, one per subject. Therefore, each student has about six teachers. Each teacher, teaches a single subject (e.g., math, science, P.E., etc.). Data will be collected from all 10 teachers (English/humanities, math, science, and AVID) who teach the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students. The majority of the teachers at this school are female (70%) and 50% of the teachers are Caucasian. All the teachers are early in their careers, thus they have less than ten years of experience. The teachers live in the San Francisco Bay Area, but none resides in the neighborhood where the school is located in.

Procedures. Approval from the UC Berkeley Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) has been received for this dissertation study. The research packets containing a letter from the school principal endorsing the study and two copies of the parent/guardian consent form were sent home with the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students. (All written materials to parents are available in both English and Spanish). Follow-up phone calls will be made to all parents/guardians of the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students to inquire if they have received the research packet, and they are encouraged to contact the researcher with any questions, feedback, and/or concerns.

The student questionnaires will be administered in the AVID classroom in place of instruction. The participating students will complete the questionnaire in the classroom as a group. The lead investigator, will aid in the administration by reading the questionnaire items to the participating students ensuring that they understand each question. Each interested student will complete the survey and questionnaires (30 minutes to complete each part) in four parts: Part 1 survey questionnaire about students' perceptions of real and ideal home environment, part 2 survey questionnaire about students' perceptions of real and ideal teachers, part 3 about students' degree of school engagement, and part 4 an open-ended section.

Each participating parent/guardian will complete a questionnaire in either English or Spanish (45 minutes to complete). Thus, parents/guardians who are only Spanish speaking, bilingual interviewers will conduct the surveys. To alleviate issues related to participants misinterpreting questions, literacy issues, and educational level, the questionnaires will be verbally administered to the parent/guardian. Parents/guardians choose to complete the questionnaire in an empty classroom in the school or the questionnaire may be administered by telephone. Highly trained research assistants will administer the questionnaire to the parents/guardians. The survey questionnaire that the parents complete is similar to the students and teachers. Parents report on their current home environment and ideal school environment that will support students' adjustment to middle school, encourage their interest in learning, and promote student academic success.

The teachers of the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students will be given a questionnaire to complete (30 minutes to complete). Similar to the students and parents/guardians, teachers will provide information about their gender, ethnicity, and the number of years teaching. The demographic information from students, parents, and teachers will allow us to assess if there is any significant relationship between the demographics and perceptions of the home and school environment.

The student's academic records from the previous and current school years (quarters one to four) will be obtained from the school. Student academic records include grades, standardized test scores, attendance records, disciplinary records, and demographic information. Records will be obtained through the main office in the school by administration.

Implications of This Study

This study is imperative because understanding the nature and role of such a mismatch (both developmental and cultural) is critical to our success in helping low-income minority youth adapt positively to high-expectation secondary schools. This study has critical implications because the information will help us understand the kinds of support that promote student motivation, engagement, and academic achievement in predominantly disadvantaged African American and Latino middle school students. In addition, this study will help us understand how supports promote student motivation and engagement, and in turn, how student motivation and engagement promotes academic outcome. This study will also help us understand how to reduce the achievement gap during middle school. In addition, this study will also inform efforts to reduce the achievement gap during middle school by providing information about strategies for supporting parents and students during transition, encouraging academic engagement, and promoting academic success.