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Dropped into Battle: Transitioning to Middle School

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Abstract

Early adolescence is the beginning of huge changes that eventually move humans from children to adults. One important transition during this time is moving from elementary into middle school. This paper explores my own memories of transitioning from a two-room elementary to a large three-story middle school and the difficulties I encountered. Through the use of the autoethnographical process, I explore my complex relationship as both a middle school student and a middle school principal to this phase of development. Writing the autoethnography allowed for an assessment of my own transition, while also affording the opportunity to reflect these memories against my current professional beliefs. Through this exploration, I found a number of clear connections such as understanding the importance of building relationships with students, making sure the school has a strong monitoring system for student movement, and the creation of a purposeful transition program for incoming 6th grade students. Before this project, I understood the importance of these features, but now I grasp why I have a strong drive and passion to ensure these elements for students.

Keywords

Middle School, Autoethnography, Middle School Concept, Secondary Administration

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Dropped into Battle: Transitioning to Middle School

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Early adolescence is the beginning of huge changes that eventually move humans from children to adults. One important transition during this time is moving from elementary into middle school. This paper explores my own memories of transitioning from a two-room elementary to a large three-story middle school and the difficulties I encountered. Through the use of the autoethnographical process, I explore my complex relationship as both a middle school student and a middle school principal to this phase of development. Writing the autoethnography allowed for an assessment of my own transition, while also affording the opportunity to reflect these memories against my current professional beliefs. Through this exploration, I found a number of clear connections such as understanding the importance of building relationships with students, making sure the school has a strong monitoring system for student movement, and the creation of a purposeful transition program for incoming 6th grade students. Before this project, I understood the importance of these features, but now I grasp why I have a strong drive and passion to ensure these elements for students. Keywords: Middle School, Autoethnography, Middle School Concept, Secondary Administration

Dropped into Battle: Transitioning to Middle School

“No, no, no,” I said shaking my head. “I can’t be late again!” My heart pounding, I hurried down the hallway that suddenly went on forever. As a new middle school student, I felt panicked in that hallway. Now many years later, as a middle school principal, I find myself still standing metaphorically in the same hallway. In my current role, I contemplate the transition anxieties of the new sixth grade students, then I was struggling to successfully move from elementary to middle school. Examining these two hallway experiences through an autoethnography, allows the juxtaposition of experiential and research data to study middle school students’ transitional needs. Autoethnography is defined as an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Exploring thoughts about middle school practice while examining my own middle school experiences may unveil previously unrecognized connections between that experience and my focus as a middle school administrator.

Jean-Luc Godard stated, “A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order” (Jean-Luc Godard Quotes, n.d.). My story picks back up at the panic in the hallway. The bright fluorescent lights bounced off the beige cinder block walls and glinted off the linoleum-tiled floor, all details fading to a blank institutional desert. “Oh, no, oh, no, the halls are empty! I *am* going to be late again!” Tears sprang to my eyes. “Don’t cry, you can’t cry. Not after seeing what happened to Henry, crying is too dangerous.” Squeezing my eyes shut tightly, I paused. “Which floor am I on? Which floor is my class on?” I could feel the panic rising, the tears pressing to be released. “Why, oh why, can’t I figure this building out?!” The thudding of my heart grew louder, I looked around. “Take a deep breath,” I told myself. “Think.” “O.K., I think the room numbers have something to do with the floors.” I stopped by a classroom door. “This is room 213. So I think that means second floor. Where is

my class?” Taking a deep breath, “My locker is on the second floor and I am going to English 6. I think?” I remember taking the stairs last time, so it must be on the third floor. Panicky, I look around for the stairs. “They’re around the corner.” I race off to find them. Anxiety is common in early adolescence as it is a transitional time in life.

Early adolescence is the beginning of huge changes that eventually move humans from children to adults. Elias (2002) states, “[e]ach transition during adolescence represents a rite of passage. One that does not get the attention it deserves is the transition from elementary to middle school” (p. 41). This transition from elementary to middle school adds to the confusion and anxiety children are already experiencing due to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional changes they are undergoing (Bailey, Giles, & Rogers, 2015, p. 1; Elias, 2002, p. 42). Students moving from elementary schools into middle schools that are larger in size and more academically rigorous with tougher behavioral standards are concerned about getting lost, managing a locker, changing clothes in the locker room, and facing peer pressure (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 2). These concerns “tend to destabilize many students, requiring they re-establish a sense of their identity in a more mature and demanding environment” (Elias, 2002, p. 41).

This was certainly a destabilizing moment for my young adolescent self. Through the heavy door, feet pounding up the stairwell, I burst out onto the third floor and race down the hall. I come to a skidding halt outside the classroom. “There is no one in the hall, I am definitely late, again.” I thought. I pause to catch my breath, bracing my shoulders, I enter. The teacher looks up, as do all of the students. They are conveniently seated in orderly ranks facing the front of the classroom and the door, of course. The teacher frowns, some of the students smirk, others look relieved that I have drawn her attention, leaving them out of the line of fire. Lips pursed, she says, “Late, again?!” “Sorry,” I say, “I . . .” What to say? Lost again? Nobody else gets lost the third week of school, just me.

The teachers don’t get it; actually, I don’t either. Why can’t I make sense of this building? The fact that I am a very capable student only adds to everyone’s mystification, increasing the teacher’s mistrust of my excuses. It doesn’t occur to me until years later that the issue is the building. Before entering middle school, I attended a two-room elementary school. Never in my life had I entered, much less even navigated a large three-story brick building. The middle school, originally built as a high school now housed sixth through eighth grades, was immense and intimidating. Throughout most of my sixth-grade year, I was in a near constant panic about finding my way from one place to another, always feeling out of step with my peers, who I believed had it all handled. I had no difficulties with the actual academic work, just with every other aspect. Research has shown that girls who are academically strong may struggle with transitioning from elementary to middle school more than other girls (Pepperell & Rubel, 2009). In elementary school, they were accepted for their scholastic abilities, but upon entering middle school may feel pressure to fit in with their peers, this shifting identity may cause them to have more difficulties in transitioning (Pepperell & Rubel, 2009). I clearly recall, even all these years later, the struggles I experienced in navigating the building, managing my locker, figuring out my peers, and handling the heightened expectation of independence from the adults. Understanding my experiences and reflecting upon the literature regarding the transition to middle school provides insight that can be applied as a middle level educator.

Paolo Freire (1970) argues the importance of people engaging in reflexive thought. He explains how through the “exploration of their thematics, the more they deepen their critical awareness of reality and in spelling out those thematics, take possession of that reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 87). He believes that through breaking down an experience into its parts by moving from the abstract to the concrete and back again, an understanding of the whole is constructed. Through taking an external view of the world and how humans are situated within that world, one can understand their own thinking and actions. Freire also believes that this generation of

themes can only occur if the investigator and the object of the investigation act as co-investigators. Though some may believe this would destroy objectivity, he disagrees, because these themes do not exist outside of people as objects. These themes exist in people in their relation to the world. For the investigator, it is important to determine the starting perception and track any transformation in how reality is perceived during the investigation. It is through engaging in this work that humans can truly understand reality and attain true freedom (Freire, 1970). Engaging in an autoethnography combines the investigator and the object of investigation. This duality of self examines and reflects upon an experience in order to gain a stronger understanding of reality. Understanding how my middle school experiences affect my work as a middle level educator is valuable work for understanding this transitional phase and how to ease the confusion and anxiety students may experience.

While Paulo Freire does not mention autoethnography by name, his ideas certainly support it as a research technique. There is also support for these ideas within the literature. Seidman (2006) in discussing interviewing as a research method states, "At the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language" (p. 8). This retelling of stories has been a way for humans throughout history to make sense of their experiences (Seidman, 2006, p. 8). Autoethnography serves as a method for researchers to pull forth their own life experiences and symbolize them through the use of language (Anderson, 2006). In qualitative research, the "role of the researcher [is] a filter through which data are collected, organized, and interpreted" (Lichtman, 2013, p. 159) making qualitative research a subjective process. Through this reflexive process the researcher not only shapes the research but is also shaped by it (Lichtman, 2013, pp. 164-165). Hoppes (2014) explains autoethnography as "placing the writer in dual roles of researcher and research participant . . . a meaning-making tool that facilitates the exploration of identity" (p. 64).

Through the use of autoethnography, I make meaning from my own experience transitioning from a rural two-room elementary school to a large suburban middle school. The purpose was to set the understanding I gained within the body of literature regarding transitions. This reflective exercise deepened my understanding of the transitioning experience, while avoiding self-absorption. This was a benefit in using autoethnography (Anderson, 2006, p. 390). As a middle school principal, gaining in-depth understanding of what the students experience will assist me in addressing their needs and concerns more fully (Anderson, 2006, p. 387). Middle school students are susceptible to high-risk behaviors, especially if they do not adapt well to their new environment (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Williamson & Johnston, 1999). For a middle school leader to be effective, they must not only understand the developmental needs of their students but also be able to educate teachers and parents about them as well (Williamson & Johnston, 2013). Through the reflexivity inherent in an autoethnography, I have come to realize that I have gained a higher level of transcendence regarding these middle school experiences. By examining the connections between then and now, I feel more settled with those memories as I see the strength they add to my professional practice. The ability to examine my school's current reality with a deeper understanding of adolescent needs will increase my ability to provide a better supportive school culture. The data for this research is the literature on best middle school practices, young adolescence, and transitional experiences all examined through the memories of my own first year in middle school. Comparing and contrasting these two sets of data, the literature and the experiences, brings forth a melded understanding that is both cognitive and emotional.

Survival Training

I entered 6th grade in 1976. At this time, middle level theory was under discussion in the United States. William Alexander proposed the title of "middle school" at the Conference

for School Administrators in 1963 (Schaefer, Malu, & Yoon, 2016). Following that start, the middle school movement emerged in the 1970s, with educators working to define what it specifically meant to be a middle school (Schaefer et al., 2016). At that point in time, the middle school was defined, as “a phase and program of schooling bridging but differing from the childhood and adolescent phases and programs” (Alexander et al., 1968, p. 5). The mission was to provide an education appropriate for these in-between children through a more individualized curriculum, exploratory opportunities, and supporting the students’ personal development needs (Alexander et al., 1968, p. 19). This new concept was based on research that increased the understanding of adolescent development and their needs (Alexander et al., 1968, p. 25). Schools and the educators within them were digesting, assessing, and learning these new concepts about their practice.

Certainly by 1976, many schools had not implemented these ideas, and I would venture to guess that not all teachers had even heard of them. By then, there were over 4,000 operational middle schools, but teacher preparation and professional development regarding middle level was a concern (Schaefer et al., 2016, p. 5). My perspective as a 6th grader was that not one person in the building seemed aware of how overwhelmed I was with the transition. The other seven kids from my fifth-grade class (yes, there were only eight of us total, and we were the largest class the school had produced in years!) attended a different middle school due to district lines. I was the sole student who moved to this building. I have no idea if my fifth-grade classmates struggled too. I lost touch with them as that same year my parents divorced, our house sold, and I grew six inches; my world and my body were in turmoil.

Through a greater understanding of the transition process and its impact on children, parents and teachers can develop programs that provide appropriate and adequate support during this basic training phase. This would allow the students to learn the rules and regulations of their new environment, rather than just tossing them into the situation and hoping they figure it out. With the idea of middle level education still fairly new, my school was not quite ready to fully equip us for the battles we would engage in emotionally, socially, or physically.

Reporting to the New Unit

Unfortunately, though the name had changed from a Junior High to a Middle School, the needed support implied by this change was not in place for my peers and me as we strove to navigate our way through the confusion that is labeled adolescence. One common stressor for students entering middle school is the locker (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 2). I remember a number of panicky moments at my locker, fumbling with the combination, jostled by the other students, embarrassed when I realized the locker that would not open was not even mine, but rather my neighbor’s. I felt like I could hear the laughter of others ringing in my ears over my minor error. Another stressor may be new worries about peer relations as adolescents are increasingly concerned about peer acceptance, have a strong need for approval, and may even overreact to what adults would consider minor embarrassments (Association for Middle Level Education [AMLE], 2010).

One time standing at my locker, I committed one of many cultural *faux pas* that I would experience that year. Growing up in the country and attending a small school with multi-aged classrooms, we were more interested in discussing the upcoming county fair and our 4H entries than the latest fashion trends. One day in middle school, a boy paused to talk at my locker. Already this made me nervous, but at the time I didn’t know why. Early adolescence is a time of rapid growth as puberty begins, bringing many physical and psychological changes. Young teens experiences sexual feelings, which may cause them to feel self-conscious as their awareness of their own differences from others develops (Alexander et al., 1968, p. 39; AMLE,

2010). This could explain my awkwardness as I realized a boy was showing an interest in me, and this made me feel different than when I had talked with one previously.

The boy asked, "What's your favorite band?" Immediately, I knew I was out of my depth and instinct told me not to answer truthfully, because the music I listened to was my father's. Somehow, I knew that Moody Blues, Jelly Roll Morton, and Dylan were not correct answers. I strove for nonchalance and shrugged. He stood there looking at me. So, I followed up with, "So many to pick from, hard to choose just one. What's yours?" Feeling brilliant that I had out flanked him, I cheered inside that I would escape this skirmish unscathed! Alas, it was not to be. He replied, "Kiss." Feeling bombarded, my mind reeled . . . I froze and then I felt the blush as it raced up my neck and across my face. The boy looked at me strangely and there was an awkward pause in which I was sure he could hear my heart beating rapidly. A girl nearby said, "Oh, my favorite song of theirs is . . ." and they turned and walked off together discussing the band called Kiss. I slumped against the locker. Relieved, I had survived a near fatal misstep, but I was also anxious because I now understood there was a gulf in knowledge between my peers and me that had nothing to do with academics. This anxiety over peer acceptance is common for young adolescents moving into a middle school (Bailey et al., 2015; Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 7). But where was I going to learn what I needed to know? There was no one to explain the changes occurring; my parents were preoccupied with the divorce. The teachers focused on our lessons and seemed unaware of anything else.

Adolescence is often thought of as one of the most difficult and awkward stages of life. Ask any adult if they would willingly return to being a teenager, and most likely the answer is a resounding and emphatic "no." Follow up that question with asking them about their middle school years, and they will often tell you it was the worst, most embattled of their years in school. My own experiences during middle school years were similarly difficult. Considering this fact, I often contemplate why I not only became a middle school educator but also why I find so much satisfaction in the work.

Arriving at the Front

Middle schools often have the reputation as being fraught with bullying. This association happens because there is not a defined hierarchy and, as the students vie for dominance, bullying behaviors are more prevalent. Schools with strong transition programs have less bullying than schools lacking one (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 3). As a middle school educator, I am constantly reassuring parents that we, the school staff, take bullying very seriously and address it in every instance. This is one of the biggest fears for students and parents alike. This fear seems to be due to a combination of the large size of my current middle school, over 1000 students, and the age of the students, 12-15, which means they are impulsive, often acting first and thinking later. Such is the strength of societal belief that bullying occurs and is damaging enough that State law requires policies and programs to address the issue of bullying in school. I wholeheartedly agree about the potential for damage caused by bullying, especially when I remember a series of incidents that I witnessed during my 6th grade year.

I was late again, once more struggling to find my way from the lunchroom to my locker. I followed the wrong crowd of kids and became turned around. By the time, I reached the bank of lockers, many of the other kids were already dispersing in groups to slowly make their way to class. Everyone was still in the hallway when the screaming began. It was emanating from the boys' bathroom situated between two banks of sixth grade lockers on the second floor. Every head swiveled in the direction of the screaming. Three boys came tumbling out of the bathroom doorway, hooting, hollering, and sniggering into their hands. Henry (names have been changed) came plodding out of the doorway, head bowed, hair, dripping wet. When he looked up and saw the boys laughing and everyone else staring at him, he flushed bright red.

Already red-haired and fair skinned, his flush was very pronounced, visible on all exposed skin including his arms and legs. There was a pause as if time was briefly suspended, and every student held his or her breath waiting for his reaction. I found myself thinking, "Don't cry, just don't cry." I did not know why I thought that, I just knew that if he cried, it would be surrender. Henry began to cry.

Everyone let out the breath they had been holding and found somewhere else to look. One of the three boys said, "Look, he's a big crybaby. Crybabies get swirlies!" Henry began to sob, big racking sobs as he stood there dripping all over the hallway. The only one who moved towards him was the boy who called him a crybaby: "Come on crybaby, you ready for another?" The students in the hall, all visibly shrunk into themselves and away from the situation. I did not think it was possible, but Henry managed to cry harder. One of the other of the three said, "Come on, let's go before a teacher comes." The three sprinted down the hallway, their laughter bouncing off the walls. As if broken from a spell, all the other kids retreated towards their destination, their conversation more subdued. Henry was left defeated in front of the bathroom dripping and crying more softly now. No one passed near or approached. In shock, I looked around to see the hallway emptying out; I tried to ask someone what had occurred, but all they did was shake their heads and say he got a swirly. I had no idea what that was, but it seemed terrible. Finally, a teacher appeared, going over to Henry. At her glare all talking stopped and the students fled. For once, despite the shaking in my hands, the locker opened smoothly, and I went to class in a daze.

The class was abuzz, as the students whispered about what they had seen and filled in others who had missed it. I asked someone what a swirly was and they explained it was when they dunked your head in the toilet and flushed. I was horrified. My naiveté showed when I asked, "Why would anyone allow their head to be in a toilet?" A student cut her eyes in my direction and said, "Nobody would allow it." "But, but," I sputtered, "Who would do a thing like that? Why?" As the teacher marched into the classroom, the other student shrugged and turned to face forward. Everyone came to attention, waiting to see what would happen next. My mind was spinning as I tried to grasp what had occurred and come up with some logical explanation. I could not figure it out. The teacher stood for a moment looking at us sternly, and stated, "No talking, absolutely no talking." She turned and began the lesson. I doubt any one of us, learned a thing that day, except that school was more dangerous than any of us had known.

The next day was like a *déjà vu* horror show, it happened again, same time, same victim, same tormentors. This occurred for several days in a row, the only difference seemed to be the resignation in Henry's shoulders grew and the crying became softer, less about shock and more about defeat. The boys began alternating actual swirlies with just the threat of a swirly. They would jerk towards Henry as if going to grab him and laugh uproariously when he flinched. They called him Swirly Henry. I even heard some of the other students refer to him that way too. The other students spent less time at their lockers, scuttled quicker along the hallway, heads bowed making no eye contact. The tormentors, all puffed up with power, stood commandingly in the hallway daring anyone to challenge their authority. There was no one to challenge it, we were all too intimidated, and I realized as I looked around, there was not a single adult posted anywhere in sight.

The last event with Henry was the worst. It was the day he must have had enough and decided to go on the offensive. This time, when they grabbed him to escort him into the bathroom, he resisted. He pulled out of their grasp and fought to push them away. A chubby non-athletic kid, his attempts proved fruitless and they dragged him in anyway. That is when he began to beg. His pleas echoed loudly out of the bathroom and then he cried, and every single one of us felt completely powerless just like him. As the gang of three exited the bathroom, Henry came flying out screaming that it was the last time. He swung at one of them

smacking him lightly in the chest. It was the only hit he would land, all his other attempts just swatting at air. The one tormentor descended on him punching, pushing, and threatening. The boy's fists connecting with Henry's flesh over and over with sickening thuds. Someone must have found a teacher nearby, because one arrived to break it up and took the boys away. We were all shocked to learn that both boys had been suspended for fighting. It seemed so completely unfair. We even dared to ask a teacher about it, and she just shook her head, stating, "Not your business, don't ask about it."

Mr. R began standing grumpily near the boys' bathroom. Henry returned to school, but seemed to be a ghost, just moving from class to class. No one talked to him. No one harassed him. He was like an untouchable, existing in all the empty spaces. The gang of three moved on to other intimidating tactics with other kids. Any time I remember what occurred, I wonder, why did no one interfere with what happened to him? How could we all remain aware and take no action to stop the torment? Did kids tell? Did Henry have friends that tried to help him? We were all unsure how to react and assist. My peers and I had not received any guidance or training on choices, procedures, or options for the various situations we might encounter in our new environment. A successful transition to middle school has been linked to future academic success. Furthermore, schools that address transition concerns reduced anxiety and "transition trauma" for young adolescents (Bailey et al., 2015). Henry could have used a good program, as his transition to middle school was certainly traumatic.

When I remember what happened to Henry, I understand the parents' fears as they prepare to send their children to middle school. Did they witness something similar when they were in middle school? Is this why I am so firm with my staff about maintaining supervision of students? Certainly, Henry was affected by his experiences, but those of us who watched helplessly also intimately felt the trauma. It made our fears concrete. It was an afterschool special come to life, but we went without the happy ending with a nice little moral to tie it all up neatly. Students with stronger emotional intelligence skills will fare better when transitioning to the middle school than others (Bailey et al., 2015, pp. 2-3). Emotional intelligence can be nurtured by teaching coping strategies, how to use information, collaboration strategies, and how to handle physical growth (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 3). Most likely, we all processed what occurred differently depending upon the emotional intelligence skills we had developed up to that point.

Entering the Fray

One characteristic of middle level education is the existence of an exploratory program. Young adolescents need opportunities to explore at this time in their development (AMLE, 2010). They are working to figure out who they are as they leave childhood and begin to look towards becoming an adult. This idea was in existence at the middle school I attended in 6th grade. Every 6th grade student had short classes in wood shop, cooking, sewing, choir, band, and physical education (PE). Physical education is seen as particularly important for adolescents' health and well-being (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 184). This PE class was no different than any other PE class I have ever experienced in my secondary education. There was a locker room where girls tried to change quickly, some even lining up to use the toilet stalls as changing rooms. It contained rows of lockers with a wood bench running between them to be shared and a shower room that no one would ever consider using. The class itself was a combination of team and individual sports and even included gymnastics with a balance beam and a vault. Some students easily excelled at all the activities and others struggled to learn. It was the first "real" PE class for me as previously physical education meant learning to square dance during our twice a month visit from the physical education teacher who traveled to my elementary school.

Only one aspect made this class stand out from other PE classes: we were separated by gender. Some middle schools have found creative ways to address the fact that young teen girls worried about their body image shy away from participation in PE class (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 185). There were no boys dominating the activities with girls forced to spend their time watching or asking to be included. It was after the class ended that the trouble began. Once we changed out of our gym clothes and exited the gym, we had to walk down a long hallway crowded with other students waiting. Now that I think about it, I don't know what they were waiting for; perhaps it was their lunch period and they were waiting for dismissal? Maybe they were waiting to enter gym class? I remember them all being boys. Regardless of why they were there, every day after gym, the girls had to walk the gauntlet through a crowd of middle school boys.

When the girls walked down the hallway, the boys would crowd in on both sides, many of them reaching out to snap the bra strap that ran across our backs. At this age, peer pressure can encourage behavior unthought-of before and boys' developing sexual identity make them more negative towards girls (Alexander et al., 1968). The boys would run their finger down your back until they felt the strap, slip it underneath, give it a tug and let it snap back. The girls tried any number of defensive maneuvers. Walking quickly just meant it snapped harder when they got ahold of it. Pushing them away only made you a more specific target. Some girls tried laughing, others ignored it; all hoped they would tire and stop. A few tried putting their backs together as they went, but that only directed their attention and comments to the front, noting the size, shape, or lack of the various girls' breasts. This was particularly troubling as body image is one of the most significant stressors for young adolescent girls (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 8; Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 185). Young teens are especially aware of their differences in physical development (Alexander et al., 1968, p. 26). Yelling just made the boys more combative both verbally and physically. We already knew that crying was not an option.

After trying all the various options and feeling terribly harassed, I decided I had to try and do something else to get it to stop. I sought adult assistance, and once I figured out where the office was located, I went there. At first, I was told there was nobody available. The next day, I tried again and was allowed to leave my name with a secretary. Finally, I was called down to the office and met with a woman. I explained to her the problem. She frowned, her questions giving me the impression that she did not see it as a serious issue. I tried to explain it to her again, emphasizing the problem. By now it was clear, she wanted me out of the office and did not see this as a worthy concern. She suggested that since no one else had complained, and I could not name any of the boys, that there was nothing she could do. Scared that she was going to do nothing to make them stop, I suggested the girls would start punching the boys. My statement did not go over very well, and she became angry. The gender roles of that era saw physical aggression by boys as a fact, but the same behavior by girls was intolerable (Alexander et al., 1968, p. 37). I had never had an adult angry with me except my mom or dad. I left scared that I was going to be in trouble. At some point, the boys were no longer there when the girls exited the locker room. To this day, I do not know if our schedules simply changed due to the rotation of our exploratory classes or if she actually did take action in our defense. What I do vividly remember is the overwhelming sense of frustration with an adult that was not willing to protect us. It marks a point where I began to consciously reflect on my actions and those of the adults around me. The time of adolescence is marked by a change in self-perception as the teen explores the question of who they are. It is also a time of examining right and wrong (Alexander et al., 1968, p. 42). This was the beginning of finding myself within the middle school structure. It can be seen in my budding confidence of my status as someone who takes action.

Healing Old Wounds

Death, divorce, job changes, becoming a parent, and moving away from home are major transitions that people may experience in life. Transitioning to middle school is a huge change for young adolescents already undergoing biological shifts (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 2). During such changes “the existentials come to the fore and actively contribute to how things unfold” (Adams, 2017, p. 323). Our understanding of these experiences is guided by an understanding of how the existential concepts of finitude, transcendence, and equilibrium (developed by Kant, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger) play out during life transitions (Adams, 2017). The existential concepts frame the personal experiences and provide the stages of change journeyed during life’s upheavals.

Adams (2017) drew the concept of finitude from Heidegger and describes it as when we “knock up against the bounded nature of our bodies” (Adams, 2017, p. 324). People can be bound physically, by a particular outlook, or even within space and time (Adams, 2017, p. 324). As a young adolescent, I was bound by my physical changes and the shifted reality of a new school. None of these changes were of my own choosing, but I was left to manage them. Getting lost, feeling new emotions, and losing a sense of safety all sabotaged my concept of the world. Transcendence provides a counterpoint to finitude as “it refers to those opportunities where human experience appears to move beyond its bounded, finite nature and connects with something that lies outside its own limitations” (Adams, 2017, p. 325). In looking back, I am not sure when I finally found transcendence with everything that occurred during my transition to middle school, but I am sure that it took a long time. Humans strive for equilibrium as they work to balance their lives between the push and pull of finitude and transcendence (Adams, 2017, p. 326). During major transitions the balance between these two can be disrupted, leaving people in turmoil until the balance is restored (Adams, 2017). Attending a small two-room elementary kept the bounds of my existence narrow and well known. As a capable student in a multi-age setting, much of my academics were done independently without rigid time frames. The middle school was a completely different experience; my skill set did not transfer to bells, defined class periods, multiple classrooms, and the sheer enormity of the building and the student population. Finding my equilibrium would take time, it would happen little by little over many years as I gained maturity and the skills to process what occurred. My fight against the bra-snapping boys was a refusal to be yet another victim. Taking action to neutralize the issue was an initial step to finding equilibrium through transcendence. Delving back into my memories of my 6th grade year has reconnected me with the thoughts, feelings, and perspective of a young teen trying to handle a big transition. Examining these memories in light of the literature on transitions connects those memories to my current work as a middle level administrator. Digging deeper, I discovered how those 6th grade experiences impact my beliefs as an administrator. This sheds light on how our experiences accumulate to create who we are, what we believe, and how we act upon those beliefs.

Though a Battle Was Lost, the War Continued

As people make sense of their experiences within the larger concepts of human experience, they transcend their bounded finitude (Adams, 2017). The contemplation of the distance traveled from their lives before and after these excursions brings transcendence to their stories. Over time, I moved from overwhelmed middle school student to passionate middle level educator. As an adolescent, I attended four different middle schools, all with their transition difficulties. Yet, each transition also brought new skill building opportunities. These experiences allowed for me to transcend the day-to-day obstacles and eventually find equilibrium. The lessons learned plus the many years as an educator honing my craft, has

impacted my core beliefs about best middle level practices. As an administrator, I strongly support transition programs, student supervision, socio-emotional guidance, listening to students, and trying to presume positive intentions, working regularly to embed these within the school culture. The roots of these beliefs can be found in my own middle school experiences.

Transitions can feel like combat, especially when the change is forced upon someone. The difficulty of change can be bridged through rites. A formal rite of passage can “carry a person and community across a path of continuous relationship to a radically different circumstance” (Smith, 2012, p. 7). This is the purpose of a formalized transition program for students moving to middle school; it helps them gain the necessary skills thus building a bridge from elementary to middle school (Elias, 2002, p. 42). By attending an orientation program, both students and parents have less anxiety. This helps students acclimate to a new building and changing routines (Bailey et al., 2015). As principal, I have worked with staff to make a good transition program stronger by providing multiple experiences for incoming 6th graders both with and without their parents before the first day of school. This includes a mentoring program with 8th grade leaders and an opportunity to work their locker with parental support. Perhaps with the assistance of a transition program, I would have acclimated to the larger building and bell schedule easier.

In my leadership role, I always joke with staff that my goal is to have our school run like Disney World. If you have ever been to Disney, you probably had a lot of fun, but were you aware of how well they subtly controlled your choices? I noticed how the park is designed to move large crowds with the proper flow; they know when people need directions, water, or a rest and they have placed signs, vendors, and benches appropriately. I have adopted this concept in controlling the movement of students. This is done through the careful placement of adults and a well-orchestrated schedule of class changes. Henry would not have been repeatedly assaulted nor would the girls have endured the harassment if there had been better monitoring of students when I was in 6th grade. I adore middle school children, but they need to be monitored. Their impulsive, exploratory natures can sometimes lead them astray (Williamson & Johnston, 1999, p. 14). A middle level administrator should understand adolescent developmental needs, and this should guide their practice (Williamson & Johnston, 2013).

In one study, middle school girls expressed the need for balance in their lives in order to feel normal. They also spoke to the importance of feeling connected to others (Pepperell & Rubel, 2009, p. 357). It is recommended that middle level practitioners focus on understanding adolescents, building socio-emotional skills, developing relationships, and give students opportunities for voice (Bailey et al., 2015; Williamson & Johnston, 1999). If the school had incorporated these elements, the changes occurring would have felt less troubling. I would have felt my concerns were heard, and perhaps I could have confessed how disorienting I found the building. It is important to find ways to ease the transition and help students develop adult connections.

Helen Keller said, “Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved” (Helen Keller Quotes, n.d.). My experiences as a middle school student set my feet on a path that led me to be an advocate for students. It also influenced my beliefs regarding the importance of establishing a safe and supportive school culture. This student-focused attitude has been very beneficial in my work as a middle school principal. The critical examination afforded by my autoethnography has re-affirmed this as a central concept in my work. It has in essence brought it all full circle, by connecting my memories and my professional beliefs, I have found a higher transcendence with both.

I would strongly encourage other middle school educators to take the same journey through the battlefield of their youth, to reconnect with their young teenage experiences in order to bring forth a deeper understanding of the turmoil and tumult of this developmental phase. Through this lens, educators can develop a greater understanding of students' needs and a larger capacity for compassion within us. The human aspect of our work should never be set aside or forgotten. The potential impact of middle school experiences on the developing adolescent is powerful and needs to be a central concern of educators.

Afterword

Exploring some of my difficulties with transitioning to the middle school has been a fascinating experience. Comparing and contrasting these memories to the literature on middle level theory and life transition concepts has helped to draw these memories out from my own inner world and placed them within the context of human experience. It has shown me how some of my strong beliefs as an educator have their beginnings in these experiences.

While writing these memories, it amazed me the amount of detail I could recall though it was a long time ago. One memory was not as clear as the others. This story was the encounter with the female staff member when I complained about the boys' harassment. While writing, I found myself creatively adding in details that seemed logical. When I realized what I had done, I went back and carefully removed those parts, leaving the memory without the same degree of clarity. I have considered my actions and believe I simply wanted to maintain the same level of detail for consistency. This is a risk in autoethnography that an author should carefully and honestly monitor.

Next, I wondered why that memory was murkier than the others? Considering how focused young teens are on their peers' opinions, I think the memories that involved peers imprinted more strongly on my memories due to their heightened emotional content. While the interaction with that staff member was emotional, the intensity was dialed down. It reminds me of the Peanuts cartoons, where the adults exist, but only as indistinguishable murmurs off screen.

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