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**URBAN STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES  
ON MIDDLE SCHOOL:**

**The Sixth Grade Year in Five Philadelphia Middle Schools**

**H. DICKSON CORBETT AND BRUCE L. WILSON**

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Long an afterthought in the organization of American education, the middle school has recently become a more highly visible target of reform fervor. Much of the impetus for this attention was Lipsitz's *Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (1984) and the Carnegie Foundation's *Turning Points* (1989). Following these documents' publication, a host of empirical, philosophical, ideological, political, and practical arguments were advanced and/or recycled that supported a surprisingly consistent collection of ideas about a "good middle school," including interdisciplinary teaming, heterogeneous grouping, small learning communities, involved families, community service opportunities, flexible scheduling, and advisory periods, among others. However, an important population of people with a significant stake in how middle schools should operate has only been, at best, tangential participants in the debate — students. This study, commissioned by The Philadelphia Education Fund (PEF) with funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts, seeks to surface urban adolescents' ideas about their experiences in school with the hope that this information will play a substantial part in tempering, extending, and revising how reform at the middle level occurs.

And students had plenty to say. Open-ended interviews with 361 sixth and eighth grade, predominantly African-American, Philadelphia middle school students produced five major themes. First, against a backdrop of negative rumors about their prospective schools, students said that easy work and familiar faces smoothed the transition from elementary to middle school. Second, good teachers were incredibly adept at maintaining a delicate balance in their instructional relationships with students: willing to help individuals without showing favorites, being strict but nice, and being able to clearly explain students' work while avoiding becoming tediously repetitive. Third, students preferred learning experiences in which they were active, rather than passive, participants. Fourth, students identified compliant behavior and completing assigned work as the paths to school success. Fifth, individually students said that they highly valued education; collectively they acted the opposite.

The discussions of the above themes uncovered two "big picture" conditions of students' educational experiences that have significant implications for reforming schools. One, students described important instructional inconsistencies within individual schools, resulting in students' having widely different educational experiences from classroom to classroom. Two, there was a decided non-instructional tone to students' interactions with each other, which meant that the student cultures in the middle schools usually worked against, rather than for, achieving educational goals. We conclude that to obviate these conditions, a "school development" approach is needed wherein adults and students collaboratively learn, plan, and act — all in the interest of greater student success.

These issues serve as the foci of this paper. Additional background on the study is provided below, after which we turn to an in-depth discussion of what students had to say about school and the implications thereof.

## About the Study

This paper describes the results from the first year of a three-year effort that will follow a cohort of current sixth graders through middle school. The study's purposes and research questions, school sites and student sample, research methods, and data analysis strategies are described in more detail in this section. The section concludes with several tips for reading the paper.

### Study Purposes and Research Questions

The overall purposes of the study are to document the middle school students' perceptions of their educational experiences and to track how these perceptions evolve over a three-year period, which corresponds with the Philadelphia School District's implementation of its "Children Achieving" reform agenda. "Children Achieving," according to district pamphlets, seeks dramatic improvement in the education of urban children and youth, specifically attempting to set high expectations for all students, to establish standards by which to measure results, to let the schools make more decisions, to provide intensive and sustained training to staff, to ensure that all students come to school healthy and ready to learn, to provide students with community support and services, to provide up-to-date technology, books, and clean and safe schools, to engage the public in shaping the reform, to ensure adequate resources and their effective use, and to be prepared to address these priorities immediately and for the long term in a collaborative manner.

The proof of this reform effort will ultimately reside in increased student success in school — greater participation, higher achievement, and heightened ability to direct their own learning in the future. To attain these results, the quality of students' educational experiences and opportunities to learn will have to change as well. The assumption of this study is that these changes, if they are substantial, will be reflected in how students talk about school. We do not expect them to comment directly on the specifics of reform; but we do expect that the ways in which they discuss what they learn and how they work in school to have considerable relevance for debates about how the process of reform is going. For that reason, an additional purpose of the study is to provide feedback to the participating Philadelphia middle schools as they work to improve the conditions of schooling in their respective settings.

The long-term research questions for the study concern changes in students' perceptions and performance over the three-year period. For example, does the introduction of changes such as new standards and assessment practices shape school actions in ways that reach down to students? That is, do students talk about learning in new ways? In what ways do

students perceive and react to changes that alter their own roles in the classroom? And, to what degree have the reform efforts in the schools contributed to the growth among school staff of a collegial professional culture focused on student learning and greater outreach to parents/community partners, and how do students make sense of and respond to this culture in light of their own view of what "school" means?

For this paper, the primary research objective was to document students' views about themselves as learners, about school experiences and teachers' actions that helped and did not help them learn, and about how students related to one another. In other words, what did students think about school and their place in it? Using their answers as baselines for future comparisons once reforms have been in place for awhile and exploring why students' espouse particular perspectives will be future study tasks; for now, our emphasis is on what students had to say and how their views would likely affect and be affected by reform initiatives. While this current study task is mostly descriptive in nature, we feel it does have educational significance in its own right.

### School Site and Student Sample Selection

Five middle schools were identified to participate in the study by PEF. The schools served some of the poorest neighborhoods in the city with 83 to 94 percent of the students qualifying for free lunch and had almost entirely minority student populations (98 to 100 percent) — predominantly African American with some Hispanic/Latino youth. All drew students from surrounding neighborhoods, with average daily attendance figures ranging from 80 to 85 percent. Staff members in each were predominantly female (65 to 82 percent); ethnically, staff members were more diverse but not in proportion to the student populations. The schools were all organized into smaller "houses" or "learning communities" and made use of deans and/or house directors to coordinate discipline and instruction in these subunits. Student/teacher ratios ranged from a low of 15.5 students per teacher to a high of 20.8. Performance-wise, only about 15 percent of the students in the five schools scored above the nationally-normed median in math on the CTBS, although the figures ranged from six percent to 22 percent across the schools. Likewise the schools collectively had a suspension-to-total student population ratio of around 29 percent, but the schools varied from 13 to 44 percent.

Thus, despite some similarities, the schools were not identical. This ensured that the total population of students from which we drew our sample would speak from some variety of experience, without violating the study's overall focus on highly urbanized settings. In this paper, we have elected not to display data by schools in order to (1) live up to a promise of anonymity to the sites and (2) to discourage school by school comparisons which would detract from the power of students' collective observations on schooling.

The PEF project director introduced us to each principal and in an initial meeting we provided an overview of the project and described how the study might affect the school's daily routines. The principals agreed to proceed with the study, provided that we meet with representative group(s) of staff and secure their consent as well. One school even had a research committee consisting of volunteer teachers who had had experience in previous collaborative research efforts.

As noted above, the study will track a cohort of students over three years, and thus, most of the interviews (247) were with sixth graders. However, to check for maturation effects, we also talked with 114 eighth grade students. We asked each school to select the students for us. Our selection guidelines to the schools included the following criteria:

- balance by gender
- proportional balance by race, if appropriate, which meant that the resulting sample was predominantly African-American
- diversity in instructional experience, with several students coming from each teacher team
- diversity in academic ability/performance
- diversity in behavior and intellectual motivation

The latter two criteria were particularly important to us since we wanted to hear from the full range of students, and generally speaking we felt that we did. In those cases where individual teachers thought that their particular classroom sample was biased, we replaced absent students with ones that provided greater diversity.

The schools varied somewhat in how they selected the students. In one school, the principal used the computer to randomly select students; in two others, the roster person hand-selected students; and, in the other two, the house directors selected a subsample. Schools handled notification of selected students according to their customs. The total sample of students interviewed was 361 — 182 males and 179 females.

## Research Methods

The bulk of the data collection for the first year was a round of interviews with the students. An open-ended written survey was distributed to sixth graders at the end of the school year to supplement the interviews and to obtain information from students who may have to serve as replacements for those originally interviewed. Those surveys are not a part of this paper.

Based on our previous experience in interviewing middle school students, we drafted an

initial set of broad questions that had proven useful in stimulating students to talk about their perspectives on school. Examples included: Are you getting a good education here and why? What do you consider a good teacher to be? What activities help you learn best? What is your favorite subject and why? How do students treat one another here? Do you feel the adults here treat you fairly and why? How often do you do your homework and why? What do you want to do in the future and how do you expect to get to do that?

These questions were revised through a round of visits with teachers in each of the schools. Generally, we received input with respect to additional questions pertaining to issues the schools were concerned about (e.g., why students hung out in the halls instead of going to class, why students did not eat the free lunches, etc.) and the phrasing of the original questions; no one wanted to delete any. The final interview protocol is duplicated in Appendix A. The interviews took from 25 to 45 minutes, depending on the student, and included opportunities to probe more deeply into many of the questions. Students occasionally chose to not answer a particular question so that the N's in our data displays vary from question to question.

In the first school we visited, we had arranged appointments for the students, but we quickly found that such scheduling did not work well. They forgot, they had a test, they did not want to miss a particular class or lesson, they were absent, etc. Instead, we simply went directly to the classes of the selected students and asked them and the teachers if the present time was acceptable for the interview. This strategy was actually very useful, for a number of reasons: (1) when walking the corridors and entering the classrooms for short periods of time, we were able to observe firsthand some of the activities and patterns of behavior that students described to us; (2) we became familiar to the teachers which should help in future study work; and (3) we were able to accommodate the study to the teachers' instructional considerations and therefore minimize the disruptions to class.

All of the interviews were conducted by the two authors. With a few exceptions in which a laptop was used, the interviews were recorded verbatim by hand and then entered into the computer. Rather than being a burdensome clerical task, entering the interviews served as a valuable opportunity to review field notes and to develop initial ideas on themes. Since both of us spent equal amounts of time in the schools and typically were there at the same time, we took advantage of free moments to compare notes about what we were hearing from students, a spontaneous analytical step that presaged the more formal analysis.

## Data Analysis

After all the interviews were conducted and the field notes were entered, we each read our respective halves of the data another time. We then had several brainstorming sessions

during which we discussed key themes we saw and the questions which we thought had elicited most of the responses relevant to each theme. Once we agreed on a preliminary set of themes, we systematically went through all of the interviews again, categorizing each students' responses according to the phrases that they used. Thus, we lumped students together descriptively rather than conceptually because we were trying to capture students' ways of talking about school, not adults'.

To facilitate analyses, we recorded individual identification codes assigned to each student within each category of response so that we could identify students by school, grade, race, and gender and keep track of particular students' responses across the three years. School differences, if any, will be important for feedback to the sites but the schools were extremely worried about such issues becoming public. These differences were not expected to be great because the schools were selected more for their similarities in serving a minority and economically disadvantaged population than for their differences. But future analyses for the feedback sessions will test this assumption. The small number of Hispanic students that appeared in the sample rendered racial comparisons meaningless. However, we do report gender comparisons in most of the analyses related to the five themes and we provide grade comparisons in tables where the numbers are large enough to make these at least somewhat meaningful. In the data displays, observable gender differences outnumbered grade differences.

The next analytical step was to draft text that summarized each of the preliminary themes. These summaries included a brief description of why the theme was important, how the students defined the issue, and what they had to say about it. Frequency counts as well as illustrative quotes were used to convey the students' meanings. Once we reviewed all of these results, we then began to collapse some of our initial organizing themes — with the final five themes described below being the result. These were shared with several staff in a couple of the schools before the end of the 1995-96 year. They expressed a belief that the findings were valid and were pleasantly surprised by how thoughtful students had been. This paper will serve as the basis for a round of meetings in all of the schools during the 1996-97 school year.

### Other Considerations in Reading This Paper

The main text will provide both quantitative data, primarily counts of students and the frequencies of their responses within categories, and qualitative data — mostly illustrative comments from the students. In the interest of readability, the counts and response distributions have been placed in Appendix B, with a display of pertinent data for each of the five themes. Not every question was asked of every student, generally because students took longer in answering some questions and because some questions were designated for a

random subset of the student sample so that more issues could be addressed; and students sometimes chose not to respond. Thus, the N's for particular analyses vary. Also, the reader should keep in mind that students could have given more than one response within a particular topic category. This means that some lists of response categories will add up to greater than 100 percent. The displays occasionally list a wider range of responses than are discussed in the text so that the reader can get a sense of the variety of student perceptions of school.

In all of the following excerpts from interviews, "I" stands for the interviewer and "S" is the student; the six-digit numbers identify the student, with the first three numbers being the student's unique "ID," the fourth being grade level (either six or eight), the fifth being the student's race (1=African-American; 2=Hispanic; and 3=Other), and the sixth being gender (1=male; 2=female). While inserting these identification codes in the text may be distracting for some readers, their inclusion provides others a means of seeing whether we relied too heavily on a few students for quotes.

## MAJOR THEMES

The analyses of the interviews suggested five themes. We begin with students' views of entering middle school, and then turn to what they think about teachers, learning, success, and their interactions with each other.

### Easy Work and Familiar Faces Smoothed the Transition from Elementary to Middle School

The folklore in American education is that young adolescents in middle schools are the most difficult age group to teach. This is often reinforced by the personal experiences of many families who have trouble guessing which of the physical, emotional, and social changes common to this critical stage of development will take precedence on any given day. Couple these changes with moving to a new school setting — especially one that is larger and more complex — and you have a potential recipe for turmoil and conflict.

With that volatile mix in mind, we asked students how difficult it was for them to go from elementary to middle school. It was surprising to us that they said it was easy, in a two to one ratio (see Display 1 in Appendix B). Approximately one in four students noted difficulties in making the move to middle school, and one out of ten talked about its being both. The two primary reasons students offered as determining the difficulty of the transition were (1) how familiar they already were, or quickly came to be, with the other students

and (2) how hard students found the work to be.

Two hundred and eight students (out of the 323 who responded to the question) described the transition as “easy” and were equally divided between males and females. Approximately 30 percent of these students explained that going to middle school was easy because they had **friends or family** in the school, which made entering a new setting a less scary proposition; familiar people provided good information about what the school was like and ready affiliation (N=65).

*I knew a lot of people and they introduced me [to others]. Everyone in the class get along with each other from the first day. While we disagree, that doesn't make us not be friends. (205612)*

I: Was the switch to middle school easy?

S: Yeah, pretty much.

I: Why?

S: Cause I knew some of my friends was there and I knew I would make new ones. (369612)

More disconcerting was having lots of strangers or new faces in the crowd, especially for 30 percent of the students (N=25) who reported difficulty in switching from elementary school to middle school:

*I was young and didn't know anybody. (200812)*

*I didn't know my way around. I didn't know anyone from my elementary school. (202611)*

*I didn't know nobody. I should have gone to [another school] but I moved. (519811)*

Facilitating the transition, 43 of the “easy” respondents indicated, was that they found that the work was not too difficult:

*It was pretty easy. I get problems that I already know. (204611)*

*It was easy. I already knew the work. (179812)*

S: It was easy because it wasn't a big change; it was the same thing as elementary.

I: What do you mean?

S: Sixth grade was a review of fifth grade.

I: It wasn't different?

S: We were going over the same material as in fifth grade.

I: Could you give me some examples?

S: Multiplication and division in math, Indians in social studies, and how the earth orbit. (455621)

The other side of the coin was described by 24 of the students for whom the move was more difficult:

*At elementary school it was an easy A. It is harder here because they expect you to do more work, projects, and tests. (104612)*

*It is difficult. We be doing lots of stuff we don't know about, like fractions. (226612)*

*It was kinda hard because I didn't get good grades. I started working harder because my parents said it would get harder. (422822)*

*It was kind of hard, cause we working on a different level. Like if you're in fifth grade, you had the same kind of work as fourth but harder. (568811)*

Only a small number of students said that the switch from elementary to middle school was both easy and hard. Still, for almost two-thirds of this group of 33 (N=20), their reasons were related to the nature of the work they were asked to do, thereby underscoring its importance in the adolescents' minds.

An additional note on this idea of “easy” work is worth putting in here because it subtly seeped into students' answers throughout the interviews. For example, we asked most students to identify their favorite subjects (the results of which are in Display 1) and with a subset of these we explored why they picked a subject as a favorite. Tied for third as the most frequent explanation was “because it's easy.” As an important aside, the male students disproportionately identified math and science as their favorites while the female students disproportionately indicated their favorites as reading and English/spelling.

