

Growing Up: Psychologists Explore Adolescence

Can there be a parent who hasn't shaken his or her head in disbelief or frustration, wondering, "Why doesn't my teenager have a little more sense?" Adolescents probably wonder at times about their own actions and those of their peers—but how often do adults ask kids what they think without already deciding what their reply should be?

In this issue of *Research News*, we present four articles about the work of several University of Michigan psychologists who have spoken with and observed adolescents of all ages. The U-M social scientists responsible for the research tend to see adolescents and their problems as heavily influenced by their environment, be it their family, school, or other parts of the larger society.

Jacquelynne Eccles and her colleagues, for instance, have looked at the transition from elementary school to junior high. Their work uncovers evidence that adolescents may stumble in junior high because the school setting and students' needs are out of sync. "I've been very interested in 'environment' questions—whether there are systemic changes in the environment that we see reflected in the psychological development of adolescents," says Eccles.

Juvenile delinquency—the head-on collision between a teenager and society's rules of behavior—is a perennial subject of concern. Progress has been slow in discovering ways to prevent teens from getting into trouble, and in finding the best ways to rehabilitate delinquents.

U-M social psychologist Martin Gold reports some preliminary success at characterizing two personality types among delinquents. His work offers new insights about why adolescents turn to delinquency, and may improve the ability of juvenile officials to match the right treatment with the kids under their care.

Ever since the late 1960s, young people have gained a reputation for playing an ever more important role in American politics. U-M psychologist Joseph Adelson

isn't so sure the reputation is well-deserved, at least for most teenagers. He has studied the development between the ages of 11 and 18 of the ability to understand such abstract political concepts as individual rights, finding that understanding comes fairly late in adolescence.

The use of drugs in all parts of society recently has captured the spotlight of public attention, with perhaps the greatest attention being paid to on the problem among adolescents. The government and several public groups are mounting campaigns to convince adolescents that drugs are a "dead end," urging teens to "just say no."

For more than a decade, three social scientists at the Institute for Social Research—Lloyd Johnston, Jerald Bachman, and Patrick O'Malley—have been tracking patterns of drug use among high school seniors. The threesome's work is the most extensive study of the role of drugs in young peoples' lives. Their work also delves into various attitudes and values held by American youth, from views on marriage, work, and the future.

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Although *Research News* relied on University of Michigan faculty for the content of this issue's stories, we went to adolescents themselves for some of our photographs. Several students from Mike Mouradian's photography class at Ann Arbor's Community High School submitted pictures (including some staged illustrations of less-than-honorable teenage behavior, arranged with the help of schoolmates and photographed so as not to impugn anyone's reputation). *Research News* also took photographs in Rick Bednarz' sixth hour math class at Clague Junior High School, and from Jan Davis' sixth grade class at Angell School, both in Ann Arbor. Our thanks to them for their help. □



Photo by Tada Suda, Community HS

W H E N

SCHOOL DOESN'T FIT

Why adolescents and junior high sometimes seem at odds.

In some American school systems, students take part in "graduation" ceremonies at the end of the sixth grade. Such recognition is not necessarily out of place, either. The move from elementary school to junior high is one of the most obvious signs (other than the bodily changes of puberty) that a boy or girl has left childhood and is entering adolescence.

The two school settings are usually quite different, too. In elementary school, students spend most of the day in one classroom with one adult who is assigned to teach all the academic subjects.

On the other hand, junior high school acknowledges the growing brain power of the young adolescent. Students have the responsibility to move from classroom to classroom, spending an hour at a time with teachers who have expertise in specific subjects. And with bells and buzzers sounding off at the start and end of classes, the junior high pace is certainly more hectic.

"People have believed that early adolescents need and benefit from a specialized [school] environment. That's the reason for junior high in the first place," says U-M psychologist Jacquelynne Eccles. But she adds that parents, teachers, and researchers express "a lot of dissatisfaction" with today's junior high. It seems that this specialized environment, first adopted in the U.S. in the early twentieth century, isn't working as well as everyone had hoped.

Recent research by Eccles and a group of University of Michigan social scientists suggests that the junior high school environment may be one of the student's worst enemies. This research supports the notion that the junior high setting tends to ignore some important psychological needs of the young adolescent, such as a growing desire for some decision-making power.

"With the junior high school system, we accepted some wrong ideas about early adolescence as a turbulent time in the life span," says Eccles. Parents and teachers may feel that adolescents want more autonomy than they can handle, but Eccles suspects that denying teenagers these opportunities smothers their motivation to learn, and may lead to behavior problems in school.

Previous research shows that the desire for independence grows through the school years, beginning as early as the second grade, says Eccles. This desire "accelerates" in early adolescence. In addition, there is limited evidence that the chance to take part in decision-making fosters "smooth progress" through the first years of adolescence.

Autonomy in Junior High

In 1983 and 1984, Eccles joined with David Reuman, Allan Wigfield, and several other researchers at the U-M Institute for Social Research to survey about

3200 students from twelve Michigan school districts, before and after the students made the transition from elementary school to a junior high or middle school.

Questionnaires also went to 160 teachers from these schools, and to some of the students' parents. Because this project grew out of some work exploring why girls lose interest in math—Eccles says the biggest drop occurs during the junior high years—the study concentrated on mathematics classrooms.

The researchers wanted to know how much independence students exercised in the classroom or at home, and their opinions of how much independence they *should* be given. For example, students were asked: Do you help decide what math you work on during class? Should you have a say about this?

Other questions asked students if they had a say in deciding where to sit, making classroom rules, determining the amount of homework, and spending their time after finishing math assignments. Teachers were asked analogous questions about how they managed their classrooms.

U-M researchers Carol Midgley and Harriet Feldlaufer analyzed the students' and teachers' survey responses. The students' answers indicated that they have fewer decision-making opportunities in their junior high classes than in elementary ones, a fact which the teachers' responses backed up.

As for what should be, junior high students are more likely to prefer greater involvement in decisions about where they sit, homework, and class rule-making, for instance. Teachers show the opposite trend—junior high teachers think their students should have less say than what elementary teachers believe is appropriate.

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In light of their results, Midgley and Feldlaufer say that "as children move through elementary school into junior high school, they are becoming more knowledgeable, skilled, and competent . . . they express a desire for more control over their lives. [Then] these children move into a classroom environment in which they have fewer decision-making opportunities.



Photo by Lee Katterman

The team of U-M social scientists who have been studying the transition from elementary school to junior high. From left to right, front, Mary Anne Hayes, Jacquelynne Eccles, David Reuman, Harriet Feldlaufer, Carol Midgley; rear, Linda Lange, Allan Wigfield, Christy Miller, Ann Marie DeBritto, Bonnie Barber, Rena Goldsmith, Dave Klingel, Connie Flanagan. Not pictured are Elaine Carlson, Doug MacIver, and Doris Yee.

with a teacher who believes they should have fewer opportunities." Given this, the researchers ask whether such situations might not be "debilitating" for these students.

The Puberty Factor

U-M's Christy Miller has looked at how physical changes of puberty influenced students' attitudes about autonomy. She finds that girls who enter puberty very early are the most likely to be dissatisfied with the opportunities to take part in decisions at school. In the study, girls who reached puberty at close to the average age, those who matured late, and all the boys (who were too young to show as much progress toward puberty) tended to be more satisfied with the amount of autonomy in school.

The early maturing girls, suggests Miller, "see that they are growing up and deserving of autonomy" and therefore may believe that certain "unjustified" restraints exist. Adds Eccles, "The girls who

are the most advanced [in physical development] are the ones who suffer the most in the transition to junior high."

Of course, school is not the only setting where early adolescents might want, or be able, to exercise a growing need for self-determination. The U-M researchers also looked at what opportunities exist in the home. A sense of autonomy in family affairs, says Eccles, "may compensate for the rarity of such opportunities in school."

The chance to participate in decision-making at home has "consistent positive effects on student attitudes," the U-M researchers say, even for students who think teachers give them too little say in the classroom. Doris Yee and Constance Flanagan's work on this part of the project found that students whose parents give them some say in family decision-making expressed more confidence in their academic work than other students. Students from "participatory families" (as Yee and Flanagan call them) said "they expect to do well in math, that math is not difficult, and that math is useful and interesting."

All of these findings lead Eccles to conclude that a "misfit" is occurring between the developmental stage of the early adolescent and the junior high school environment: "Misfits may be okay, but there are good misfits and there are bad ones." Some propel students forward, she says, by being slightly more complex than the child can handle, but not so challenging as to frustrate.

Changing Seventh Grade

On the other hand, Eccles and her colleagues believe that the typical junior high math class is a "regressive misfit." Elementary teachers tend to individualize both math instruction and evaluation, while junior high teachers drill students in a fairly competitive atmosphere. "Seventh grade math relies on more rote learning, and is more abstract than what kids get in sixth grade," adds Eccles. She thinks that seventh grade teachers may not trust what students learned in sixth grade, which leads them to put their classes through too much review.



Photo by Lee Kallerman

U-M researchers find that the flexible environment found in the typical sixth-grade classroom (top) fits its students' psychological needs better than the more structured junior high setting meets seventh graders' needs.



Photo by Lee Kallerman

Not wanting to paint too black a picture, however, she says that many students go through junior high without major problems: "For kids who were doing well, the shift to junior high does not have an especially debilitating effect. But for kids who were having difficulty, either emotionally or academically, [junior high] is when real problems start."

In Eccles' mind, the best solution would be to eliminate junior high as the bridge between elementary and high school, returning to the kindergarten through eighth grade organization used in decades past. Awareness of their own maturation gives seventh- and eighth-graders in the K-8 structure some pride as school role models, she believes. And continuing in the more flexible atmosphere of elementary school might provide the opportunities for autonomy they want.

Barring this admittedly drastic change, U-M's Midgley and Feldlaufer suggest that junior high teachers might offer a less structured classroom setting than is now common. For instance, the teacher might decide what to cover, but the student

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—Jacquelynne Eccles

would decide the rate of learning and what exercises he or she would use to learn the material. Students should be allowed to handle increasingly complex tasks as they are able, not only when the teacher dictates an entire class to do so.

"I think you could design a developmentally appropriate junior high where students work more in teams, tackle more challenging cognitive tasks [than they are given now], and are more involved in setting their own agenda and in how they will demonstrate their learning," says Eccles.

Accomplishing this takes "exceptionally creative teachers who are good classroom managers and on top of the subject matter," she continues. This is admittedly a tall order, managing a classroom with each student doing something different, particularly as teachers are being asked to perform more administrative and non-teaching tasks. "It's unlikely that we'll go to as unstructured an environment [in junior high] as might be ideal," says Eccles. "But we should try to give kids more autonomy within the structure we have."