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## Factors Leading to Worry and Helpful Supports During the Transition to Middle School

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**FACTORS LEADING TO WORRY AND HELPFUL SUPPORTS DURING THE  
TRANSITION TO MIDDLE SCHOOL**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Child Life Studies

By

Kearstin Sara Hofstetter

May 2022

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# **FACTORS LEADING TO WORRY AND HELPFUL SUPPORTS DURING THE TRANSITION TO MIDDLE SCHOOL**

Childhood Education and Family Studies

Missouri State University, May 2022

Master of Science

Kearstin Sara Hofstetter

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to determine the worries that students encounter and to explore students' perceptions of the helpfulness of specific supports when transitioning to middle school. It gives insight to schools, parents, future students, and administrators, which can help them create better resources, programs, and tools to support students during this transition. The research questions were: Which factors lead students to worry most during the transition to middle school? Which supports do students think would be most beneficial to assist with the middle school transition? This mixed methods study gathered data through surveys from seventy 6th grade students located in a rural, Midwestern middle school. This research study ultimately found that students were most worried about moving to a new building and an increased school workload. Along with this, many students claimed that LEAD class and a tour of the building were the most helpful, and that teachers were the most helpful support group during the transition.

**KEYWORDS:** middle school transition, worries, student's perception, orientation, transitional factors, relational supports, anxiety

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A Master's Thesis  
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May 2022

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to my friends and family.

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## INTRODUCTION

The transition to middle school can be challenging for many students because there is a lot that can make them worry. The transition begins within the last few months of the fifth-grade year and ends the first few months of the sixth-grade year. There is a great deal of stress that can come with this transition. Students' worries can come from different aspects of the transition, such as relationships, higher expectations, increased responsibilities, and more. This might include demanding workload, deadlines, and more complex topics (Duchesne et al., 2012; Fite et al., 2019; Sotardi, 2017). The worries experienced throughout the transition can cause problems such as increasing depression or anxiety (Fite et al., 2019; Goldstein et al., 2015). Students that experience depression or anxiety may have lower attendance rates, grade point averages, and self-confidence. Preparation for the transition to middle school can be beneficial for students (Fite et al., 2019). Schools that implement programs such as buddy systems, orientations, and information sent home can help students become more familiar and prepared, decreasing risk of worry (Akos, 2002). Support from peers, teachers, and parents can also help students with the transition. These supports can help students socially adjust, eliminate their anxiety, or decrease behavioral problems.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Without a clear understanding as to what specific factors can lead to students worrying and what supports are most useful for students during the middle school transition, students are at risk for a negative transition, which can lead to severe mental health issues.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research was to determine which factors lead to worrying in children when transitioning to middle school. The goal of this research was to determine students' levels of worry about several school-related factors in the transition to middle school and explore students' perceptions of the helpfulness of specific supports.

## **Research Questions**

The current study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Which factors lead students to worry most during the transition to middle school?
2. Which supports do students think would be most beneficial to assist with the middle school transition?

## **Significance of the Study**

Understanding student's worries and the resources they find most helpful during the middle school transition will give necessary insight to schools and parents allowing them to better create resources, programs, and tools to support students during this transition. The data collected will allow teachers and others to use the student's perspectives to make better changes for the future and implement programs that were deemed helpful. With better resources, students are less likely to experience worry due to being prepared for the higher expectations, switching buildings, peer acceptance, and mental health issues and thus have better outcomes throughout the transition. This study seeks to help students during the middle school transition by giving teachers and schools the insight they need to create effective supports and resources for students. This study also allowed the students to give their perspectives on what they find helpful and

stressful, and it can encourage parents to be more aware of their children's worries and thus more insight to support those worries.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to determine what factors lead to students worrying when moving from elementary school to middle school and what types of supports they find most helpful throughout the transition. The literature reviewed in this chapter will cover: (a) the factors contributed to stress, (b) the effects that the stress has on the students, (c) resources and supports utilized during the transition.

### **Factors That Contribute to Stress During Transitions**

Students transitioning to middle school are known to experience many avenues of worry during this time period (Akos, 2002; Fite et al., 2019; Grills-Taquechel et al., 2010). There are many factors related to the reasons that students worry. Students are going through developmental changes, making them worry. Some students' worries can lead to depression and anxiety. Also, students can experience the troubles of peer acceptance and bullying. While other students will worry about academic challenges. There are many different avenues that can cause worry, and some students experience all while other students may experience none.

**Developmental Changes.** Students that are transferring to middle school are usually going through puberty and dealing with self-confidence. Girls tend to go through puberty earlier than boys, and it is likely for them to go through puberty during the transition (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Kingery et al., 2011). Puberty can be a difficult time because hormones are starting to change the appearance of the students' bodies (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Since their appearances are physically changing, students might receive criticism from peers for how their bodies appear, causing their self-confidence to decrease (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) found that girls experience a significant self-esteem drop throughout middle school based on their body changes. Kingery et al. (2011) conducted a study examining peer relationships and friendships throughout the transition to middle school. Kingery et al. (2011) looked at the different levels of self-esteem throughout the transition, and the study determined that girls struggle more with self-esteem than boys. Kingery et al. (2011) noted that some previous studies found that students' self-esteem throughout the transition to middle school either increases or remains the same, while other studies indicate that girls struggle significantly with their self-esteem. Kingery et al. (2011) mentioned that girls go through puberty earlier and rely on friends for emotional support, which can cause self-esteem problems when friendships are not stable. Kingery et al. (2011) found that having close friendships that are reliable can help emotional support and help raise self-confidence levels.

**Depression and Anxiety.** The transition to middle school comes with significant amounts of depression, anxiety, and stress. A study by Fite et al. (2019) determined what was difficult for the students based on the students' perspectives. The study used “The Short Mood and Feelings Questionnaire” to determine the students experiencing depressive symptoms (Fite et al., 2019). The study also used “The PROMIS Pediatric Anxiety Short Form” to determine the students experiencing anxiety symptoms (Fite et al., 2019). Fite et al. (2019) found that those students that struggled with the transition had significant depressive symptoms. Grills-Taquechel et al. (2010) surveyed 77 students examining how their anxiety changes throughout middle school from sixth to eighth grade. The study predicted the student's levels of anxiety at the end of middle school based on their answers in sixth grade (Grills-Taquechel et al., 2010). Grills-Taquechel et al. (2010) found that the student's anxiety symptoms are most likely to decrease over time. Students that struggle with mental health concerns, like anxiety, tend to avoid school,

have low self-esteem, depression, and struggle with peer rejection (Grills-Taquechel et al., 2010). These students tend to have academic, social, and emotional difficulties (Grills-Taquechel et al., 2010). Goldstein et al. (2015) study was conducted on seventh and eighth graders and the experiences they had throughout their transition to middle school. Goldstein et al. (2015) found that students who have high levels of stress throughout the transition do not perform well academically. Those students who experience more stress tend to have a more challenging time in school (Goldstein et al., 2015).

**Peer Acceptance.** Peer acceptance can be challenging when transferring to middle school. However, finding peer acceptance can support student's success (Kingery et al., 2011). Kingery et al. (2011) conducted a study examining 365 students, peer relationships before and after the students transitioned to middle school and predicted how they would adjust. The study found that peer acceptance declined significantly when getting to middle school (Kingery et al., 2011). Peer acceptance is important in a student's school performance and social adjustment (Goldstein et al., 2015). Goldstein et al. (2015) found that students that have stable friendships viewed school as important and were more willing to succeed. Bellmore (2011) researched how peers affect a student's grade point average throughout the transition to middle school. The researcher looked at the effects of peer rejection and popularity (Bellmore, 2011). Bellmore (2011) found that peer rejection and unpopularity led to high rates of stress and caused them to worry. Students that struggled with peer rejection and unpopularity had lower grade point averages (Bellmore, 2011). Bellmore (2011) found that the best way to help students succeed and keep their grade point averages up is to implement prevention and intervention programs.

**Bullying Impact.** Bullying is an issue that can be troublesome when transferring to middle school because new students are scared and want to fit in with the other students (Grills-

Taquechel et al., 2010). Grills-Taquechel et al. (2010) found that bullying rates are exceptionally high all over the country. Grills-Taquechel et al. (2010) found that girls tend to be more involved in bullying throughout middle school by spreading rumors or teasing, but girls tend to have more emotional investments in friendships. Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) found that students worry about bullies throughout the transition to middle school. Rudolph et al. (2014) conducted two studies on about 550 students in grades kindergarten through seventh. Both studies consisted of determining how peer victimization would predict a student's social alienation (Rudolph et al., 2014). Rudolph et al. (2014) found that there were plenty of students being victimized in schools, and they need to implement bullying interventions because the victims might start to think about getting revenge on their peers (Rudolph et al., 2014). The interventions should be put into place to help victims stay on track and help prevent them from experiencing social alienation (Rudolph et al., 2014). Students victimized in elementary school can transition to middle school while still being victimized by the same students, causing even more stress (Bellmore, 2011). Akos (2002) found that throughout the transition students were worried about bullies and students in the grades above them. Implementing bullying programs in school can eliminate the student's concerns about safety (Akos, 2002).

**Academic Challenges and Expectations.** Academics can cause significant stress on students transitioning to middle school because it is known that there is a more demanding workload, and the teachers expect better quality from the students at this new level (Fite et al., 2019). Fite et al. (2019) conducted surveys on 84 students two months after they transitioned to middle school. The researchers were looking for what the students found helpful and what was difficult. Students found schoolwork is more time-consuming and can become stressful when trying to meet deadlines (Fite et al., 2019). Middle school students must learn to use time

management in order to meet deadlines on all the assignments (Duchesne et al., 2012). Students are under pressure due to more work, less time, and more complex topics, which can be problematic for students (Sotardi, 2017). Children who do not learn how to deal with the academic changes and worries of middle school can have more trouble adjusting (Duchesne et al., 2012). Those students who experience more stress tend to have a more challenging time in school (Goldstein et al., 2015). Students who pass a challenging class can gain more confidence and feel accomplished (Duchesne et al., 2012). Akos (2002) conducted a research study based on the students' perceptions on the transition to middle school. Multiple questionnaires were distributed at five separate time points to determine how students portrayed middle school. Results indicated that students thought that expectations and responsibilities were most stressful and stated that fifth graders should know this before the transition. Students found that teaching homework techniques and studying skills allowed them to worry less and build confidence in the classroom (Akos, 2002). There are higher expectations for middle school students, and they can become frustrated due to the overwhelming amount of work (Fite et al., 2019). Students can become stressed when teachers push them out of their comfort zone. Nonetheless, many challenges come with an overwhelming amount of pressure.

### **Resources and Supports Utilized During Transitions**

There are many resources and programs that can be beneficial for students to have throughout their transition to middle school (Akos, 2002). Students can benefit from the support of parents and teachers as well. Teachers and parents can help students by encouraging them and listening (Grills-Taquechel et al., 2010; Waters et al., 2013). The transition to middle school can



be difficult and students can have a difficult time coping, which is the reason it is important to have a positive support system (Fite et al., 2019).

**School Programs.** Schools use a variety of programs to prepare students for the transition to middle school. Akos (2002) conducted a four-phase research study on 331 students; the study researched the student's perception of middle school. Akos (2002) found that orientation programs help the students address their questions and worries. These programs need to go over rules and procedures since students ask about these the most (Akos, 2002). These programs can also help students overcome the stressors, which might help encourage them to ask questions (Akos, 2002). Akos (2002) explained that having older students as tour guides and involved in orientation programs can help lessen their worries about bullies and older classmates. When having older classmates there, it is vital that they are enthusiastic and encouraging to help build the students up (Akos, 2002). Older students can express how much freedom there is in middle school, talk about having their own lockers, and explain that students get to change classes (Akos, 2002). Class schedule-based student orientation programs were deemed helpful because it shows students where to go for their classes (Akos, 2002). Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) developed different transition programs that could be helpful for students, parents, teachers, and counselors. The different programs were created for students, and those affected (parents and teachers) to help make the transition more positive. Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) found that transition programs that are successful can be helpful with attendance and achievement rates. Fite et al. (2019) conducted a study on 84 students and found that tours, orientation programs, locker time, having a buddy system, information sent home, and shadowing middle schoolers can be helpful during the transition. Fite et al. (2019) found that hands-on experiences and observation about the transition helped reduce the students' anxiety.

Students that do not have parent support found information sent home with them through notes or brochures is the most helpful (Fite et al., 2019). Parent orientation programs to discuss the upcoming academic school year and parent information sessions have been deemed beneficial (Akos et al., 2004). All students experience the transition differently, but some students find things more helpful than others.

**Additional Opportunities for Students.** Many students want to participate in extracurricular activities or after-school programs. Picucci et al. (2004) conducted a study to help impoverished schools become high-performing schools. This study investigated what was needed the most in impoverished schools to help students succeed (Picucci et al., 2004). Picucci et al. (2004) found that students involved in sports or after-school programs were more likely to graduate from middle school and stay in school long-term. However, they found that students involved in sports or clubs tend to drop them if they are unable to meet the grade requirements that could affect their participation (Picucci et al., 2004). These programs allowed students to get academic support, build healthy relationships with adults that became mentors, and gave them a healthy, safe, and positive environment to go to when school was not in session (Picucci et al., 2004). Some students found extracurricular activities or after-school programs helpful during the transition (Fite et al., 2019). Fite et al. (2019) found that students relied on extracurricular activities to deal with stressors if they did not have a support system.

**Teacher Support.** Teacher support can be beneficial for student's success. Akos's (2002) study was based on students' perspectives and found that teacher relationships replace parent relationships during sixth grade. Students look more to teachers for support throughout middle school more than support from parents (Akos, 2002). Sotardi (2017) trailed the students' stress throughout school and how students cope with stress. Sotardi (2017) found that teachers

rarely cause students stress and that if students experience stress from teachers, it was usually due to discipline. The study found that students looked for teachers' support throughout their everyday life in school (Sotardi, 2017). Grills-Taquechel et al. (2010) examined students' anxiety changes and predicted how student's anxiety affects their transition to middle school. Grills-Taquechel et al. (2010) found that supportive and encouraging teachers could change the ways students view academics positively. When a teacher is supportive and expresses kindness to the students, it positively increases class performance (Grills-Taquechel et al., 2010). Bellmore (2011) trailed peer rejection and found that positive student-teacher relationships can help increase a student's grade point average. Goldstein et al. (2015) found that girls have less teacher support than boys, impacting their academic performance. However, Vanlede et al. (2006) found that middle school teachers look for fewer personal relationships and enforce more control and discipline.

**Parent Support.** Parents create the most stable influence on students, which is the reason parents need to support them during the transition period (Waters et al., 2013). Waters et al. (2013) conducted a study on 1,974 students before and after the transition to middle school to see how peer support and parent support affect students. This study found that family support is the most substantial support for a successful middle school transition and is more impactful than peer and teacher support. It also found that closely connected families, and the home environment plays has a large role in a child's emotional health and the families may experience fewer behavioral problems. Closely connected families in this study were supportive and had a stable home life. Tu et al. (2020) conducted a study on 86 students, approximately 11 years old, that lived in a two-parent household. The study researched how students cope with academic challenges and how parent involvement can help (Tu et al., 2020). Tu et al. (2020) found that

children whose parents are more involved in their academics have an easier time coping with the different challenges. Fite et al. (2019) found that it is essential for students to have a positive support system because those students tend to do better in school compared to students that do not have a positive support system. Parent involvement is important for a child's academics and could potentially help them succeed in their classes (Fite et al., 2019). Fite et al. (2019) found when a child has more emotional support from parents or caregivers; they tend to become more engaged in classes.

## **Conclusion**

Research has recognized that there are multiple stress factors and resources that can help students throughout the transition to middle school. Past research has identified that students struggle with feeling accepted, anxiety and depression levels, and more, but it does not study what causes students to worry the most. Research has also gone into detail on the effects that parents, teachers, and peers have on the students. Research has found that there were many aspects that were important in the transition to middle school and however, the current study will explore this in the Midwest with 6<sup>th</sup> graders and see what or who is most beneficial. The current study is being conducted to examine what students worry about the most and the supports that would be most beneficial during the transition to middle school.

## METHODS

This chapter will discuss the background information for collecting data concerning the worries and supports that students experienced throughout the transition to middle school. The goal of this research is to determine students' levels of worry about several school-related factors and explore students' perceptions of the helpfulness of specific supports. The research questions guiding this study are "Which of these factors (peer/teacher/parent relationships, extracurricular activities, academics, new building transfer, orientations) lead students to worry most during the transition to middle school?" and "Which supports do students think would be most beneficial to assist with the middle school transition?"

### **Research Design**

This mixed methods research design consisted of a survey. This research was in IRB compliance and IRB FY2021-600 received approval on May tenth of two thousand and twenty one, which can be seen in Appendix A. The researcher used the survey to identify student's worries and what supports students were identified as helpful. The survey was taken to assess the students' perspectives. The students completed the survey electronically from an anonymous Qualtrics link. The survey questions are based on factors previously identified in literature that cause students to worry and resources and supports found helpful to the students during the transition. The helpful questions were based off programs and resources that the school provided to the students. The survey also asked open ended questions to identify any additional factors or resources not identified previously.

## **Site of the Study**

The research was conducted in a rural public school in Central Missouri that consists of eight sixth-grade classrooms of approximately 20 to 25 students in each room. The United States Census Bureau (2019) stated that there are around 7,000 people in the town where this middle school is located. The town is identified as a low-income area with the median family income of approximately \$33,000, indicating that 18 percent of the town lives in poverty.

Public school review (2020) found that 49 percent of students in this middle school receive free or reduced lunches. According to The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2020), there are around 2,142 students enrolled in grades kindergarten through 12th grade for the 2020-2021 fiscal school year in the district. The public-school review (2020) states that there is a 14:1 student-to-teacher ratio.

There is one middle school in the town. According to The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2020), the school has around 474 students enrolled. There is not a wide range of diversity in the town where this study is being conducted. Public school review (2020) found that the student body is made up of 94% white, 4% Hispanic, and 1% African American.

## **Participants**

All participants were in sixth grade. This research was conducted towards the beginning of their sixth-grade year. There was approximately an even number of males and females. The goal was to enroll approximately 40 students however there were 70 students that participated in the study. There are eight classrooms that consist of sixth graders, and the participants in this

study were recruited from all eight classrooms. The survey was sent out to approximately 100 students, making the response rate 70 percent.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained (see Appendix A) prior to recruiting participants, the distribution of the anonymous survey or any data is collected. All the participants in the study volunteered to be part of this research. Once the IRB approval was received, the building principal received the Qualtrics link and distributed to the parents/guardians with the voluntary informed consent forms on the first page of the survey (see Appendix B). The student proceeded to take the survey and agreed to participate in the study by consenting to the assent statement, which was the second question on the survey (see Appendix C).

The researcher maintained the privacy of the participants throughout the study. The participants completed the survey online through an anonymous Qualtrics link and without names or any identifying information. The parent/guardians agreed to the consent form by clicking yes on the first question in the Qualtrics link. The data collected was protected in a locked folder that was password protected and, on a password protected computer.

Participation was completely voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Additionally, the parent/guardian of the participants had the right to withdraw their child from the study at any time without consequences. There were no known risks to the participants.

### **Data Collection Overview**

Before the data was collected, the researcher obtained IRB approval. After receiving IRB approval, the Qualtrics survey link was distributed to the principal of the school who then distributed the link to the parents/guardians via email. The survey had the informed consent form for the parents to agree to and then the assent form for the students to agree to. Then, the students filled out the survey at their homes on their own time. This mixed methods study utilized a web-based survey to determine what worries students felt during the transition and what supports they found helpful.

The researcher's web-based survey required approximately ten minutes for the students to complete. The participants completed the survey independently. The students had approximately 2 weeks to participate in the study. Once the completed surveys were collected, the researcher reviewed the survey questionnaires and analyzed the data.

## **Instrumentation**

For this mixed methods study, the researcher used a web-based survey (see Appendix D) titled the Middle School Transition Survey as the data collection device. The survey used in this study was created by the researcher. Using a survey allowed the students to rate what is most helpful and what creates worry during the transition. This study allowed them to complete the survey independently which helped them not feel pressured or influenced by classmates or teachers.

The demographic section of the survey consisted of questions requesting the students' gender and questions surrounding siblings. All questions on the survey required a response to move forward to the next question. The questionnaire section of the survey included a couple open-ended questions. It included a list of worries that students scaled from 0 to 3. There were a



couple other scaling questions, from 0 to 3 (with 0 being not helpful and 3 being very helpful), to determine which supports are the most helpful and how helpful different school programs are to the students during the transition. There was a scaling from 0 to 3, with a list of school programs that their particular school does not have, to see if these students could have benefited from these programs.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis of this mixed methods research study was collected by anonymous surveys completed by seventy, sixth graders. Data analysis for this study was completed by carefully analyzing participant responses and searching for additional themes that emerged. More specifically, participant responses to specific worries were weighted on a scale of 0(not worried) to 3(very worried) and then multiplied by the number of times participants indicated that level of worry, resulting in an overall worry score for that particular factor. Then, participants responded to specific helpful resources, the resources asked about were weighted on a scale of 0(not helpful) to 3(very helpful) and then multiplied by the number of times participants indicated that level of helpfulness, resulting in an overall helpful score for that particular factor. This was repeated again for the resources that students did not receive but could have been helpful, creating another helpful score. The researcher analyzed the helpfulness rating of all three helpful supporters based on a weighted scale of 0(not helpful) to 3(very helpful) and analyzed the percentages of the helpfulness of each supporter.

### **Role of the Researcher**

All researchers have a number of roles to fulfill. A primary role of the researcher is to develop the study, choose its design, and create the research questions and research hypothesis. It is then important to review the existing literature on the topic to provide background and context for this study. Completing the CITI training so that an application for Institutional Review Board approval can be submitted is also an obligation of the researcher.

This researcher obtained IRB approval (see Appendix A). The Qualtrics link was distributed to the principal which was then sent to the parents/guardians. The informed consent forms were distributed through a Qualtrics link with the survey after the parent/guardian consent form. Parents/guardians had two weeks to fill out the consent forms and allow their student to participate in the survey. The parent/guardian consent forms were forced response, which means that the students were not able to access the survey without the consent of the parent or guardian. The students consented by answering the first question in the survey stating that they agree to participate in the study (see Appendix C). Only the students whose parents/guardians have agreed to the consent form at the beginning of the Qualtrics link were able to participate in this study.

Creating the survey utilized in the study was also an important responsibility for the researcher. And finally, maintaining ethical guidelines was a significant responsibility of the researcher that included, among other things, maintaining the private information such as names of the participants as well as safeguarding all data collected by providing a secure storage location.

The researcher of this mixed methods research study assessed students' levels of worry about several school-related factors and their perceptions of the helpfulness of specific supports in a Midwest middle school. The researcher is a graduate student, who is conducting this

research study to complete the requirements for a master's degree in Child Life Studies. The researcher made sure steps were taken throughout the study to minimize the potential for researcher bias. The researcher did not have any contact with any of the participants while conducting this study. Everyone in the sixth grade at the middle school was offered the opportunity to participate in this study. Due to the researcher knowing some of the students based on previously working with them, the surveys given remained anonymous and IP addresses could not be tracked. All participants took the same survey, with approval from their guardians. Scaling, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions were designed in a way that students would not feel forced. The survey was pre-approved by the researcher's thesis committee and received IRB approval prior to conducting the research study. The researcher was the only person who analyzed the collected data. Remove the wording about the graduate advisor remaining in communication with the student as that is not needed.

The analysis of the data collected, and a discussion of the results are presented in the next chapter.

## RESULTS

The purpose of this research study was to examine the factors that lead to worry and helpful supports during the transition to middle school. This chapter will detail the results obtained from seventy participants. Of the data collected, thirty-six participants were female, thirty-three were male, and one identified as other. Forty-six had older siblings, fourteen had only younger siblings, and ten students did not have siblings. Seventeen participants had a sibling in middle school with them.

Through analysis of the data, common themes and descriptive statistics related to the following two research questions emerged:

1. Which factors lead students to worry most during the transition to middle school?
2. Which supports do students think would be most beneficial to assist with the middle school transition?

### **Factors that Lead Students to Worry**

Students were asked specifically about relational factors that contributed to the transition. As presented in table 1 below, the students answered that they were worried about teacher relationships the most with a worry score of 66; the highest possible score being 210 and the lowest score being zero. Peer relationships followed behind teacher relationships with a score of 59. Students were least worried about parent relationships with a worry score of 46. When asked about transitional factors, the researcher found that students worried the most about moving to a new building with a worry score of 99. School workload was second with a worry score of 90 and extracurricular activities followed with a score of 50. Looking at relational factors and

transitional factors, students were more worried about transitional factors than relational factors. Overall, both moving to a new building and school workload were substantially higher and the other factors followed behind.

Table 1. Possible Worries

	0 Not worried	1 A little worried	2 Moderately worried	3 Very worried	Worry Score Total
Moving to a New Building	16	22	19	13	99
School Workload	17	27	15	11	90
Teacher Relationships	29	23	11	7	66
Peer/Friend Relationships	30	26	9	5	59
Extracurricular Activities	37	21	7	5	50
Parent Relationships	46	11	4	9	46

Students were asked openly about the worries that they may experience and there were a few themes that emerged: being late, academic success concerns, transitions/physical logistics, and bullies.

**Being Late.** Being late was the most prominent theme that emerged as a total of 22 students referred to this phenomenon. Students described being worried because of “being late to my classes”, “the most thing that made me worried is moving classes and not to be late”, and “getting tardy.”

**Academic Success Concerns.** A total of 17 students mentioned that academics such as failing classes and homework were a concern. Students stated “grades”, “yes and that I will fail my classes”, and “I was scared that I was going to have bad grades.” Along with “homework”, “getting homework done in time”, and “having to be responsible with my work.”

**Physical Logistics.** Physical logistics were mentioned a total of 16 times. The logistics mentioned consisted of switching classes, opening their lockers, and being in a new building. Students describe that they were worried due to, “switching classes”, “finding my classes”, “not knowing how to open my locker”, “yes, it is ok I was worried to not be able to open my locker, but I can now” and coming to a new school.”

**Bullies.** Bullies were the least prominent theme that emerged a total of 6 times. Students described being worried about, “being bullied”, “people making fun of me” and “bullies.”

### **Supports Beneficial to Students**

In the public school that this study was conducted, students were given four transitional aids to help prepare them for the transition to middle school, as presented in table 2 below. The four transitional aids that the students received were a tour of the school, WEB orientation, information sent home, and LEAD class at the beginning of each school day. Of the 70 students that did find these resources helpful, students found LEAD class before school to be the most helpful with a score of 139. A tour of the school followed behind with an helpful score total of 133. Of the 70 students, a tour of the school and LEAD class both had an equal number of students answer it to be very helpful. However, the LEAD class before school had more students that found it moderately helpful than the tour of the school. WEB orientation had an overall score of 105; the same number of students answered it as very helpful and not helpful. A packet of information sent home had more students rate it at little helpful than any other factor. Along with having the lowest helpful score with a total of 87.

Table 2. Helpful Resources Given

	Not helpful	A little helpful	Moderately helpful	Very helpful	Helpful Score Total
	% (# of students)				
LEAD class before school (this is a class where students can get their work done for the day and get caught up on homework.)	10.00% (7)	18.57% (13)	34.29% (24)	37.14% (26)	139
A tour of the school (this is offered during their 5 <sup>th</sup> grade year.)	10.00% (7)	27.14% (19)	25.72% (18)	37.14% (26)	133
WEB Orientation (this gives students information on their classes and how middle school works.)	22.86% (16)	27.14% (19)	27.14% (19)	22.86% (16)	105
Packet full of information sent home (This has information about the school, lunches, and a map.)	28.57% (20)	35.71% (25)	18.57% (13)	17.15% (12)	87

The participants were asked an open-ended question to find out the most helpful thing throughout their transition and there were a few themes that emerged: specific people that were helpful, web/orientation, and tangible resources.

**Helpful People.** A specific person/people were the most prominent theme that emerged as a total of 24 students mentioned it. Students mentioned the most helpful thing was: “friends”, “my friends”, and “having friends.” 11 students mentioned teachers: “teachers help for finding classes”, “finally getting here and knowing that all my teachers are nice”, and “the teachers that helped me.” Family members were mentioned by seven students: “my cousin”, “my sister and cousin”, and “my brother answering my questions about middle school.” Three students

mentioned people in general: “have people help me around the school.” Parents were the least mentioned by two students: “parents talking to me.”

**Tangible Resources.** Thirteen students mentioned that tangible resources was a factor that was helpful to them. Examples of tangible resources provided were: “the most helpful thing was my schedule”, “My planner”, “bring your things from you next class to the class you’re in now” and “map.”

**Preparation Program.** The preparation programs that students received through the transition were mentioned by 12 students. Students mentioned the most helpful things were “web”, “web leaders”, “web day”, “open house”, and “LEAD.”

### **Additional Resources**

Students were given additional resources that could have been helpful for them during the transition. As presented in table 3 below, the three options that students could scale on helpfulness were locker time before school, shadowing a middle schooler, and having a buddy system. Out of the three options, locker time before school surpassed shadowing a middle schooler and having a buddy system. Locker time before school had a helpful score of 142 and 50.00% of the participants answered that it would be very helpful. The buddy system had a helpful score of 106 with 37.14% of students answering that it would be a little helpful. Shadowing a middle schooler had the lowest helpful score at 85 and 32.86% of the participants answered that it would not be helpful.



Table 3. Potential Helpful Resources Not Given

	Not helpful	A little helpful	Moderately helpful	Very helpful	Helpful Score Total
	% (# of students)				
Locker time before school (Example: this is a time for you to get your stuff ready for the day and allows you to take some time to get to know the school.)	11.43% (8)	24.28% (17)	14.29% (10)	50.00% (35)	142
Buddy system (Example: Having a 7th or 8th grader help you out during the first couple of weeks when you get to middle school. )	18.57% (13)	37.14% (26)	18.57% (13)	25.72% (18)	106
Shadowing a middle schooler (Example: Coming over to the middle school and following around a student there for the day.)	32.86% (23)	30.00% (21)	20.00% (14)	17.14% (12)	85

Students were asked openly about the resources or programs that they did not receive that could have been helpful for them. Forty-two out of 70 students did not come up with an answer for what resources and programs could have been helpful for them. Out of the 28 students that did provide an answer on which additional resources could have been helpful to them, these are the themes that arose out of the resources mentioned: Web, Open House, knowing my teachers better, map, and a clock.

### Parent Helpfulness

As presented in table 4 below, of the 70 students that participated in the study, 34(48.57%) students found that parents were very helpful, and 19(27.14%) students found that their parents were moderately helpful. Of the 70 students, 13(18.57%) found that their parents

were a little helpful during their transition to middle school and 4(5.72%) found that their parents were not helpful. Students mentioned how parents were helpful in how they supported their studies. A total of 37(52%) participants stated, “help me study”, “they called me after school and asked how it was”, “They helped me go around the school to know where everything is”, and “they bought school supplies.”

Table 4. Parents Helpfulness Rating

	%	# of Participants
Not Helpful	5.72%	4
A little Helpful	18.57%	13
Moderately helpful	27.14%	19
Very helpful	48.57%	34
Total	100%	70

**Homework Help.** Parents helping with homework was the most prominent theme that emerged as a total of 12 students referred to this theme. Students described parents as being supportive because of, “help me study”, “they helped me do work”, and “they help me with my homework.”

**Supplies and Organization.** Parents that helped students get organized and bought them supplies were mentioned by 11 students. Seven students mentioned, “buy school supplies”, “they bought school supplies”, and “they got the things that I need.” Four students mentioned, “They helped me get organized for school”, “my mom helped me by helping me get organized for school.”

**Navigating the Building.** Navigating the school was a theme that was mentioned by nine students. Nine students mentioned, “she was showing me where to go on the map”, “They helped

me go around the school to know where everything is”, and “My parents helped me figure out how to navigate through the school with my schedule.”

**Supportive Talk.** Parents supported students by answering their questions and asking about their days. The least prominent theme mentioned by nine students was, “Answered all my questions”, “they asked how my first few days were, when I got off school”, and “they called me after school and asked how it was.”

### Teacher Helpfulness

As presented in table 5 below, of the 70 participants, 34(48.57%) found that teachers were very helpful and 25(35.71%) found that teachers were moderately helpful throughout the transition. Only and 9(12.86%) answered that teachers were a little helpful and (2.86%) of the students noted that teachers were not helpful. When students were asked what teachers did or didn’t do that was helpful a few themes emerged: Everyday transitional help and classwork help.

Table 5. Teachers Helpfulness Rating

	%	# of Participants
Not helpful	2.86%	2
A little helpful	12.86%	9
Moderately Helpful	35.71%	25
Very Helpful	48.57%	34
Total	100%	70

**Everyday Transitions.** Everyday transitional help was the most prominent theme that emerged as a total of 28 students referred to this phenomenon. Twenty students mentioned, “the helped me learn the halls”, “Telling me where rooms are at”, “they told me not to stress out and

just try to get there on time”, they showed me where the classes were on the first day so I got to know what classes I'm in”, and “they helped us around the school the first week or 2. and they told us how our classes work.” While eight students mentioned, “Helped me open my locker”, “lockers”, and “they helped me with lockers.”

**Class Work Help.** A factor that was not mentioned much was “helped me understand my work”, “help with my work”, “helped me take tests”, and “most of my teachers will let you turn in an assignment like a day late, so it helps you get ready for when you have to do it for real.”

### Friend/Peer Helpfulness

As presented in table 6 below, when asked to scale the helpfulness of friends, 6(8.57%) of the participants found that friends were not helpful and 18(25.17%) found that friends were a little helpful throughout the transition. Eight students mentioned ways that their friends and peers were not helpful. “Talking to me in class and getting me unfocused, “have not talked to them very much since school started”, and “I dropped a lot because they tried to start drama”, were a couple of ways that friends were not helpful. Ten students mentioned, “nothing”, and “I don’t know” as things that their friend did or did not do.

Table 6. Peers/Friends Helpfulness Rating

	%	# of Participants
Not helpful	8.57%	6
A little helpful	25.71%	18
Moderately Helpful	28.58%	20
Very Helpful	37.14%	26
Total	100%	70

Of the 70 students, 26(37.14%) found that friends were very helpful and 20(28.58%) found that friends were moderately helpful. From the open-ended answers, there were a few recurring themes. A total of 37(52%) participants stated, “They helped me open my locker”, “they help me with my classes”, “They help me with homework”, and “they supported me though everything.”

**Everyday Transitions.** Everyday transitional factors were mentioned by many students and it was the most prominent theme that emerged as a total of 18 students mentioned some. Students mentioned friends helping them find their classes and opening their lockers. Friends helping navigate classes was a factor that emerged as a total of ten students mentioned, “they remembered my classes when forgot”, “they told me where the classes where”, and “They were helped me by being there and we helped each other every day as we learned our way around school.” Another factor mentioned was friends helping them with their locker as a total of eight students stated, “the helped me open my locker”, “because if I can’t open my locker, they will help my”, and “They helped me open my locker.”

**Additional Factors.** Additional factors that weren’t mentioned much were, “They help me with homework”, “we play games together”, “they helped me”, “showing me how to do stuff”, and “they helped me go through the first few weeks.”

## **Summary**

After analyzing the data, the researcher found that the participants worried substantially more about transitional factors than relational factors during the transition to middle school. While analyzing what students found helpful, the data collected showed that LEAD class before school was most helpful and locker time before school could have been very helpful. The

researcher also determined that parents were very helpful compared to teachers and friends. The findings from the data analysis will be discussed in the next chapter.

## DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to determine students' levels of worry about several school-related factors in the transition to middle school and explore students' perceptions of the helpfulness of specific supports. The purpose of this research study was to give parents, teachers, future students, and administrators an outlook on what children worry about along with resources and supports that can be helpful for the students. This study can help create better resources, programs, and tools to support students during the transition to middle school.

One of the main findings of this research was the worry felt by the incoming students about moving to a new building. Students moving from one building to another worry about navigating their way through a building with which they are not familiar. This particular finding is to be expected given what has been found in previous research on the transition to middle school. Akos (2002) found that 19% of the students surveyed were worried about getting lost in the building. This particular worry was the second-most common response by students in that study. The worries associated with moving to a new building appear - from this and previous research - to be of high importance to the students making the transition to middle school. Since this was such a high concern for students, providing effective support will be essential to ease the anxieties of transitioning students.

An emphasis placed by teachers and administrators on allowing and encouraging incoming students to tour the building before they begin classes could prove to be a helpful form of support for students of which the worries of moving to a new building are a large concern. Over 60 percent of the students surveyed claimed that a tour of the building would be at least moderately helpful in their transition process. Students believe it would be beneficial to them to

find out where specific places are in the new building that they will be transitioning to because they want to be prepared. A useful part of that preparation would be for them to know where places such as their classes, lockers, and bathrooms are before they are thrown into their seemingly chaotic early days of middle school. Building off this need for preparation, among the choices about resources not offered, locker time before school scored the highest with a total helpful score of 142. Many students would like to have more time to get acquainted with where things are and how long it takes to get there. If students had more locker time during the early days of their transition, they would be in a far better position to learn how to go to their locker, gather their things, and arrive at class in a timely manner. In the future, schools may want to give students a thorough tour of the building and more locker time before school.

Another key finding from this research indicated that students were also highly concerned with an increased workload. This finding is consistent with previous research. Fite et al. (2019) mentioned that students found schoolwork more time-consuming and stressful when trying to meet deadlines. Among the many changes, students encounter with the transitions to middle school are the changing standards under which they are assessed. This means more homework, harder tests, and longer hours spent studying. They are aware that they will face these increased standards, and this is a common concern among transitioning students. Knowing this, it is not surprising that, among the resources currently provided, the LEAD class before school was rated the most helpful support in the transition to middle school.

The LEAD class before school is a place for students to go to complete homework, study, and seek help with schoolwork. The primary purpose of the LEAD class is to help reduce the anxieties felt among the students with regards to their increased workload. According to the students, this is a helpful support put in place by the school. Students are aware that the time



management skills that allowed them to get through the fifth grade may not suffice for the increased demands of middle school. As indicated by the results, the LEAD class before school is an effective way of planning and prioritizing how students can effectively and efficiently manage their increased school workload. Administrators and teachers can act upon this information by expanding this resource in their schools. Increasing the time of LEAD class in the morning may allow the teachers to spend more time with each individual student to make sure that they feel confident in confronting their increased workload. Making sure that students feel confident in managing their increased workload would reduce a primary concern of the students and make their early days in middle school a less stressful experience.

As far as who can help the students, it appears that teachers are in the best position. According to the students, over 84% found that teachers were at least moderately helpful in the transition process. Interestingly, students found teachers to be more helpful than parents. This finding goes against a previous study by Fite et al. (2019) which found parents to be the most supportive followed by peers, and then teachers. A possible explanation for the discrepancy between this study and Fite et al. (2019) could be that more of the students in this study were considering the more practical problems of everyday school life. Who is more helpful depends on the specific issue with which the students need help. Forty percent of students claimed that teachers helped them with everyday transition problems. It seems that a large proportion of the students were concerned with the everyday problems of transitioning to middle school. When considering it from this point of view, it makes sense that teachers would be more helpful. The students are most concerned with not knowing the building and their increased workload. Teachers are in the best position to help with these everyday problems simply because parents are not at the school on a day-to-day basis. Parents seem to be more helpful in areas other than

everyday transition problems such as getting the students organized or buying the necessary school supplies. While some students claimed that their parents helped with a tour of the building and with homework, this was a small percentage of the students surveyed. Teachers and parents both appear to be helpful but in different ways.

Peers scored the lowest helpfulness rating in this study. A possible reason students claim their peers are not as helpful as teachers could be that many of their peers are just as clueless as they are. Peers of the same age are usually just as new to the middle school as any other student in that grade, which puts them in a poor position to help. Teachers, however, know the building, what is expected of students, and how to help with most of the common problems confronted by students transitioning to middle school.

### **Data Limitations**

In this research study, there were limitations present. One limitation was that the research was only conducted at the end of the transition rather than gathered throughout multiple stages during the transition. The collected responses of the students are based on having to recall information and feelings from the past to answer the survey presented to them rather than completing the survey with those feelings fresh in their minds. The stages in the process can eliminate those past feelings and make the recent feelings interfere with their original feelings about the transition to middle school. In addition, the area where the study was conducted was not diverse in regards to ethnicity or socioeconomic status. The problems and anxieties that are felt by these students may not be the same as others who face different backgrounds and experiences.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Research on the transition to middle school should continue to take place. Future studies could take place in private schools, public schools, reservations, or in different areas of the world. Most of the current research has been completed in the public-school setting. Research could benefit from studying multiple schools with a wider range of diversity. Future studies should focus on conducting research at different time periods throughout the middle school transition.. This study was limited to getting the participant's perspectives after the transition than before and during. Also, this study had a wide range of data when looking into peers, teachers, and parents. Further research could be done to pinpoint more specifics with supporters.

## **Summary**

The researcher began this study knowing that the transition to middle school is a stressful time for children. However, understanding the specific causes of those worries that children face in the transition to middle school was unclear. Once students express the specific reasons that they are worried and possible ways to help, teachers and parents can begin making the necessary adjustments to accommodate and possibly help with these new worries. This research study brings many of these specific worries to light and follows them up with possibly effective ways of helping the students. While this study has various limitations, it could indicate a general idea of what middle schoolers experience throughout the country and how they can be supported in their transition to middle school. Understanding the reasons for the worries and ways to help could make all the difference in ensuring that new coming middle schoolers receive the help they need. It is for this reason that this topic should be further explored and researched while implementing this research study into all existing and future research.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A. Human Subjects IRB Approval



**Missouri State.**  
U N I V E R S I T Y

**To:**

Lindsey Murphy  
Childhood Ed & Fam Studies

**RE:** Notice of IRB Approval

**Submission Type:** Initial

**Study #:** IRB-FY2021-600

**Study Title:** FACTORS LEADING TO WORRY AND HELPFUL SUPPORTS DURING THE TRANSITION TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

**Decision:** Approved

**Approval Date:** May 10, 2021

This submission has been approved by the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented. Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB.

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This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

## Appendix B. Informed Consent for Parent/Guardian

Your child is being invited to participate in a master's research project concerning factors leading to worry and helpful supports during the transition to middle school. This study is being conducted by Kearstin Hofstetter in the Master of Science, Child Life Studies Program at Missouri State University.

There are no known risks if you decide to allow your child to participate in this study. There are no costs for your child's participation in this study. The information gathered will form the basis for future research, improvements in the classrooms, and may be used in scholarly publications. The information collected may or may not benefit you and your child directly. The information gathered in this study should provide more general benefits to educators.

The information gathered from the research instrument is anonymous. No one will know whether or not your child participated in the study. Individuals from the Institutional Review Board may inspect these records. Should the data be published, it will be used in aggregate; individual participants cannot be identified.

Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary. No additional time will be required of you or your child in order to participate. All data collection or observations will be conducted within ten minutes. If you are willing to allow your child to participate in the study, it would be greatly appreciated. By clicking yes in this form, you and your child are voluntarily agreeing to participate.

If you have questions regarding the research, you may contact the researcher: Kearstin Hofstetter or research advisor, Dr. Lindsey Murphy, or the Office of Research Administration whose contact information is provided below. If you are willing to have your child participate in the research, both you and your child will agree to participate by clicking yes. Thank you for your consideration, it is greatly appreciated.

My child can participate in this study:

Yes  No

Contact Information:

Kearstin Hofstetter  
6365820147  
Ksh0147@live.missouristate.edu

Dr. Lindsey Murphy  
417-836-4873  
LindseyMurphy@MissouriState.edu

Office of Research Administration  
417-836-5972  
researchadministration@missouristate.edu

## Appendix C. Assent Statement for Student

You're invited to participate in a master's research project concerning factors leading to worry and helpful supports during the transition to middle school. This study is being conducted by Kearstin Hofstetter in the Master of Science, Child Life Studies Program at Missouri State University.

This survey that you are agreeing to take will take around 10 minutes and you may stop it at any time. There are no risks or benefits for you if you participate in this study. Please do not put your name anywhere on the survey.

If you agree to be in this study, you are saying these things:

- You have read the text above.
- Your parent(s)/guardian is allowing you to be in the study and you want to be in it.
- You know that you can quit the survey at any time, and you won't get in trouble.

I agree to be in the study, and I know that I can stop being in the study if I want to.  
Please click yes or no to take the survey.

Yes

No



## Appendix D. Middle School Transition Survey

1. By checking the box you have consented to participate in the study, factors leading to worry and helpful supports during the transition to middle school.

I allow the researcher to use my answers in their study

2. What gender do you identify as?

Male

Female

Other

3. Do you have any siblings? \_\_\_\_\_

If you answered yes above, how many older siblings do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Are any of your siblings in middle school with you? \_\_\_\_\_

5. It is normal for students to worry about many things throughout the transition to middle school. What is the number one thing that made you the most worried throughout this transition?

\_\_\_\_\_

6. On a scale of 0 to 3 (3 being most worried), rank how much or little you were worried about with each of these factors during your transition to middle school?

	0 Not worried	1 A little worried	2 Moderately worried	3 Very worried	TOTAL
Peer/Friend Relationships					
Teacher Relationships					
Parent Relationships					
School Workload					
Moving to a New Building					

Extracurricular Activities					
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7. What is the number one thing that was the most helpful for you throughout this transition to middle school? \_\_\_\_\_

8. On a scale of 0 to 3 (3 being most helpful), how helpful were each of the following throughout the transition?

	0 Not helpful	1 A little helpful	2 Moderately helpful	3 Very helpful	<b>TOTAL</b>
A tour of the school					
WEB Orientation					
Packet full of information sent home					
LEAD class before school					

9. What programs or resources didn't you get throughout this transition that would have been helpful for you?

\_\_\_\_\_

10. If your school offered these programs, how helpful do you think it could have been for you?

	0 Not helpful	1 A little helpful	2 Moderately helpful	3 Very helpful	<b>TOTAL</b>
Buddy system (Example: Having a 7 <sup>th</sup> or 8 <sup>th</sup> grader help you out during the first couple of weeks when you get to middle school.)					
Shadowing a middle schooler (Example: Coming over to the middle school and					

following around a student there for the day.)					
Locker time before school (Example: this is a time for you to get your stuff ready for the day and allows you to take some time to get to know the school. )					

11. Rate how helpful your parents/guardians have been during this transition?

	0 Not helpful	1 A little helpful	2 Moderately helpful	3 Very helpful
Parents/Guardians				

12. What did, or didn't your parents do that was helpful for you?

13. Rate how helpful your teachers have been during this transition?

	0 Not helpful	1 A little helpful	2 Moderately helpful	3 Very helpful
Teachers				

14. What did, or didn't your teacher(s) do that was helpful for you?

15. Rate how helpful your friends have been during this transition?

	0 Not helpful	1 A little helpful	2 Moderately helpful	3 Very helpful
Friends				

16. What did, or didn't your friends do that was helpful for you?