Middle School Research 1968-1974: A Review of Substantial Studies

Findings indicate little evidence by which to evaluate middle school education. A systematic approach emphasizing qualities distinctive to middle school education is greatly needed.

AFTER nearly a decade of existence, the middle school has firmly established itself as a legitimate and acceptable model of intermediate education in America. While exact figures are unavailable due to the rapid growth of middle schools, somewhere between one-third and one-half of all intermediate schools in the United States now bear this label.

During the past six years, research studies have sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the middle school according to a variety of criteria. Most such research has been comparative in nature, as it should be, assessing the merits of the middle school in relation to other forms of intermediate education.

The purpose of the present review of middle school research was to identify and summarize studies of substance which sought to evaluate middle schools in a systematic way. Particular emphasis was given to comparative studies, and the search was restricted to sources readily available in the literature. A total of 27 studies were reviewed, of which 13 were found to be substantial in terms of research design, number of subjects assessed, and usable findings.

Research Limitations

Existing research on middle school education is of remarkably low quality. Most of the studies to date have been either the result of dissertation work or studies by junior high and middle school advocates. For this reason alone, the objectivity of such studies is questionable. This review utilizes seven dissertation studies and six school-sponsored research studies.

Another problem with existing research is that it comes from a limited number of states and regions of the country. Most of the existing middle school research has been done in Florida, New York, Pennsylvania, and Michigan, although this review utilizes studies from a total of seven states.

Finally, most existing research on the middle school has been concerned with only four areas: academic achievement, attitudes, self-concepts, and facilities. While these areas of concern will serve as organizers for providing a summary, it appears that other equally important questions have been ignored by researchers.
In particular, the studies reviewed were limited in value because they did not precisely define middle schools, because they did not consider how long such schools had been in existence, because they did not indicate how long pupils in such schools had experienced the middle school program, and because they did not indicate the reason for the establishment of such schools. All of these factors, we believe, would significantly affect the findings.

**Research Findings**

The findings of the studies below are limited to the category in which they are listed. Nearly all of the studies cited looked at other categories and had other findings as well as those mentioned.

**Achievement**—Six studies were found which looked at academic achievement in middle schools and compared such achievement to other forms of intermediate education. Most of the studies were based on national standardized tests. Three studies (Eholich and Murray, 1969; Glissmeyer, 1969; and Mooney, 1970) found no significant differences in achievement for middle schoolers when compared to equivalent students in other forms of intermediate education. One study (Trauschke, 1970) indicated more achievement for middle school students, but only after at least two years of treatment in middle schools. Two studies (Howell, 1969; and Case, 1970) found middle school pupils achieving higher in some academic areas than their counterparts in other forms of intermediate education.

**Attitudes**—Two kinds of attitudes were addressed by the studies reviewed: attitudes of students toward school and attitudes of parents and teachers toward the middle school program. Two studies (Eholich and Murray, 1969, and Wood, 1973) found no significant differences in student attitudes toward school. Three studies (Elie, 1970; Schoo, 1970, and Bryan and Erickson, 1970) found a significant difference in the positive attitudes middle schoolers had toward school. The Elie study also revealed a greater concern of middle school students with social and emotional questions.

Three studies (Howell, 1969; Trauschke, 1970; and Bryan and Erickson, 1970) found a significant difference in the positive attitudes of classroom teachers toward school in middle schools. The Bryan and Erickson study also found an increase in favorable attitude among parents toward the middle school program.

**Self-Concept**—In the area of self-concept and self-perception among students, four studies (Case, 1970; Eholich and Murray, 1969; Elie, 1970; and Trauschke, 1970) found no significant difference between middle school students and control students studied, while two studies (Schoo, 1970; and Soares, Soares, and Pumerantz, 1973) found middle school students having significantly lowered self-concepts when compared to students in other forms of intermediate education.

**Facilities**—Two studies (Davis, 1970; and Gatewood, 1970) looked at facilities in middle schools and other forms of intermediate education and found no significant differences.

**Other Findings**

The review of other studies on the middle school revealed some findings worthy of mention. A study by Krinsky and Pumerantz details that little is being done at present to prepare middle school teachers in colleges and universities. A study by Bough, McClure, and Sinks documents that less than one-fourth of middle schools in the midwest are including the fifth grade in middle schools despite the human growth and development rationale of the middle school. Other studies (Howell, 1969; and Mooney, 1970) indicate that middle schools have increased attendance and (Howell) lowered discipline problems.

After nearly ten years of existence, there is little evidence available by which to evaluate the merits of middle school education. This condition, however, is not unique to middle schools. Poor research procedures,
a narrow and biased focus, and the failure to clearly define the subject of study have contributed to this condition.

There is need for a systematic study of middle school education, emphasizing those qualities which are distinctive to middle school education. Particularly needed, at this time, is a method of identifying middle schools which, in their practices, follow the guidelines of the middle school literature.

References


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