

## *Family matters: Single parent concerns about the middle school transition*

by Mack T. Hines, III

This study investigated the differences between single parent mothers' and fathers' concerns about the middle school transition. The sampling population was 149 single parents of students from middle schools in Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The findings showed that both groups of single parents had a higher number of academic transitional concerns than social transitional concerns. The mothers had higher concerns for the academic transition than the social transition. The fathers, however, had concerns for the social transition than academic transition. With these findings, schools may want to develop school and family centered strategies for addressing the gender based and single parent family concerns in the transition to the middle school.

### *Introduction*

The middle school transition is one of the most difficult experiences in children's academic careers (Hines, 2003). Many studies have examined the effects of race, gender, and other personal characteristics on students' ability to negotiate the transition from elementary to middle school (Koppang, 2004). However, one of the most overlooked variables is family structure. That is, little, if any, research has investigated the extent to which students' family configuration impact their middle school transitional experiences.

Research continues to document that family structure is one of the most influential variables of student achievement (McLanahan, & Sandefur, 2006; Mapp, 2003). Within this research development, theorists have argued that students from single parent families are more likely to be maladjusted in their school experiences than students from two parent families (Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, & Dufur, 1998). But research contains a gap in the focus on differences in single parents' concerns about student achievement—especially in middle school transition. Given the significance of the first year of middle school, research should initially consider different single parent fami-

lies concerns about the middle school transition. To put structure to strategy, this study examined the gender based differences between single parent fathers' and single parent mothers' concerns about the middle school transition. In particular, this research was guided by two research questions:

1. Do single parent mothers and single parent fathers have different concerns about the academic aspects of the middle school transition?
2. Do single parent mothers and single parent fathers have different concerns about the social aspects of the middle school transition?

The answers to these questions could:

1. Present new insight on recognizing parents' feelings and concerns about the middle school transition;
2. Show that the gender of single parent family structure can impact parental views and concerns about the middle school transition; and
3. Foster dialogue on best practices on maximizing single parent family participation in students' negotiation of the transition to middle school.

In other words, this study could serve as the baseline data for understanding the transitional concerns and needs from single parent family configurations.

### *Background for the study*

This significance of this study is threefold. First, research has documented the difficulties associated with the middle school transition (Arowasafe & Irvin, 1992, Crocket, Peterson, Grabo, Schulenberg, & Ebgate, 1993; Weldy, 1991). Studies have also shown that in addition to teachers, parents are very concerned about the middle school transition (Koppang, 2004; Lorain, 2004). But no research has investigated the relationship between these concerns and family structure. Yet research indicates that family structure affects adolescent development (Rumberger, 1995). When adoles-

cents grow up in single parent families, they are more likely to engage in sexual behavior (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993), develop low self esteem (Ooms, 1992), show poor behavior and academic performance in school (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993), and quit middle school (Rumberger, 1995). Rumberger (1995) also indicated that these and other antisocial behaviors usually begin during children's transition into middle school. These findings suggest that middle school educators should develop strategies for addressing the students' behavior. Given the correlation between family involvement and student success (Haynes & Comer, 1996; Mapp, 2003), middle level educators should also include single parents in the process. The researcher believes that the first step is to focus on single parents' concerns about the transition.

Second, theorists (Bandura, 1995; Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993; Ooms, 1992; Rumberger, 1995) have argued that children from single parent homes are more likely to experience failure than are children from intact families. Little research, however, has investigated single parents' views about factors that determine children's successes or failures. The middle school transition can be a huge determinant of student success or failure. (Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992, Hines, 2003). Thus, this study looks at the significance of investigating parents' views about this crucial transitional period.

Finally, most children will experience some form of single parent living arrangements before their 18th birthday (McLanahan & Sandefur, 2006). As such, middle school could experience an increase in the number of children from single parent homes. So while studies (Bandura, 1995; Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993; Ooms, 1992; Rumberger, 1995) have shown that this family structure influences adolescent development, no research has investigated the intersection of these variables across the middle school transition. Since parental involvement greatly influences children's academic and social behavior (Haynes & Comer, 1996; Mapp, 2003), middle school educators could use this and similar research to guide their approach to increasing parental involvement in the middle school.

### ***Related Literature***

The 2002 Census Bureau reported that 20 million children lived in single parent households (U.S.

Census Bureau, 2003). This report also revealed that 84 percent of this population lived in households headed by females. In spite of these statistics, research has produced mixed findings on the differences between living with single parent mothers or fathers.

Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, and Dufur (1998) posit that children who live only with their mothers are not different from children who only live with their fathers. They also indicate that adults who grow up in single parent mother households display the same intelligence and skills as adults who grow up in single parent father households. However, numerous researchers (Folk, 1996; Karst, 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 2006; Solomon, 1993) disagree with these assumptions.

These researchers contend that mother-only households are more likely to live in poverty than father-only households. Folk (1996) explained that these differences are due to the low salary wages and lack of financial child support for women. In spite of experiencing financial hardship, single parent mothers are better communicators than single parent fathers (Pong, 1998). Pong suggests that single parent fathers struggle to form relationships with their children.

However, Zinsmeister (1992) theorized that children from single mother households are twice as likely to display antisocial behavior as are children from single father households. He also indicated these children are at greater risk for repeating grades and quitting school. Zinsmeister specified that when boys grow up in single mother households, they become confused about their masculinity. The girls from these households are more likely to experience teenage pregnancy and divorce than are girls from single father households. These assertions reiterate claims of the need for fathers to validate the psychological and sexual development and identity of adolescents (Phares & Compas, 1992).

Barnett (2003) indicated that more single parent mothers than fathers emphasize education. She also argued that more single parent mothers than fathers worry about raising their families and finding role models for children. In addition, fewer single parent mothers than fathers rely on extended family for support in raising their children. Yet most single parent

fathers often feel the need to prove that they can raise children (Richards & Schmiede, 1993). They usually measure their competency in accordance to financial and career-oriented stability. This research measured single parent mother and father similarities and differences in the context of concerns about the middle school transition.

### *Methods*

This study consisted of 149 single parents from four middle schools in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Eighty four (56%) participants were mothers, and 65 (44%) participants were fathers. I sampled this population because they form the majority family structure of the participating middle school. The principals also indicated that these and other single parents were not very involved in the schools. Higgins' (1993) middle school transition survey was used to prompt the participants to reflect on their concerns about the middle school. Higgins created the survey to measure middle school students' views of adjustment to middle school schedules as well as other transitional issues.

The principals randomly issued the surveys to the single parent mother and father populations of their schools. One half of the parents returned the surveys to the principals, achieving a 49% return rate of 149 surveys.

### *Reflection*

The single parent mothers and fathers had twice as many concerns about the academic middle school transition than the social middle school transition. But the single parent mothers had more concerns for the academic characteristics than the social characteristics. Their higher academic concerns could be attributed to single parent mothers' high emphasis on academic achievement (Barnett, 2003). Another theory could be that mothers naturally worry about their children's ability to adjust to life experience (Caron, 1994). Their levels of concern are also raised when children enter adolescence (Caissy, 2002). Because the mothers' children simultaneously entered adolescence and the middle school transition, these transitions doubled their concerns about the academic aspects of middle school.

The single parent fathers, however, were not as concerned about the transition as single parent moth-

ers. But they were more concerned about the social aspects of the transition than academic aspects of the transition. The researcher believes that these levels of concerns are related to their gender and positions in the family. Like single parent mothers, the single parent fathers of this study assume responsibility in taking care of their children. But unlike the single parent mothers, they may feel the need to prove that they can raise their children. The findings from this study imply that they view their self-worth as parents in reference to the social development of their children.

Although research indicates that these fathers focus on financially supporting their children (Richards & Schmiede, 2000), this study implicates that they could balance this duty with raising their children. That is, they presumably assumed some of the roles needed to sustain the psychological development of their children (Phares & Compas, 1992). However, the researcher believes they may have asked female friends and family members to provide their children with some maternal guidance and leadership (Barnett, 2003).

### *Implications*

This study highlights the need to create a middle school transition program that is inclusive of single parent mothers and fathers. The program should include meetings and symposiums that allow single parents to share their concerns and feelings about the transition. Parents should then be allowed to provide each other with tips and strategies for addressing concerns and issues.

The program should also involve parents in the transitional experiences that concern them. For example, this study showed that single parent mothers were very concerned about their children's abilities to learn math. Therefore, sessions should involve parents, as well as students and teachers, to discuss math activities and curriculum. The teacher could then help the parents to develop ideas and strategies to assist students in completing math homework. These sessions can form a bond between single parents. They also address parental concerns that could prevent them from supporting their children's transition to middle school.

### *Limitations*

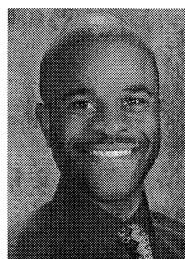
This study is limited by the small number of single

parent participants. The findings can justifiably be generalized only to similar single parent populations. In addition, the students' gender was not included in this study. Research does indicate that gender impacts student performance in and adjustment to middle school (Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998). Thus, the gender of the students could have contributed to the participants' concerns about the middle school.

Finally, this research did not measure results in accordance to the age, race, level of income, and educational level of the single parents. Paulin (2002) stated that these factors affect single parents' childrearing practices and management of household expenditures. Notwithstanding, this study can still make a significant contribution to middle level education. The findings show that single parent mothers and fathers have significant concerns about the middle school. A key component of the middle school transition is to help address the concerns of all parents. Teachers and administrators who are aware of the particular concerns of single parents will better help students make the transition by including single parents in the process.

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