

Scientific Review
Commissioned by the Language and Literacy Committee

Middle Schools: **Characteristics and Challenges^(*)**

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^(*) Commissioned by the Initiative for Applied Education Research's Language and Literacy Domain Committee .

- The findings are in the authors' own words and the conclusions reached are their own.
- This is an English translation of the review abstract, originally written in Hebrew.
- Any mention or quote from the review must be referenced in the following manner: Addi-Racah, A., Biran, H. & Freedman-Goldberg, S. (2011), Middle Schools: Characteristics and Challenges, Review Commissioned by the Language and Literacy Committee, The Initiative for Applied Education Research. <http://education.academy.ac.il/english/homepage.aspx>

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Abstract

Today, approximately 40 years after the recommendation that school reform be implemented in Israel, questions regarding the benefits of middle school still preoccupy researchers and education policy makers. This literature review presents the characteristics of middle school, as well as its impact on students' learning and academic achievements, with a special emphasis on literacy. The relevance of these issues to the Israeli context is comprehensively discussed.

A variety of sources were used in writing this review, including academic databases, UNESCO and OECD official websites, and the official ministry of education websites of select countries. Literature relating to Israel was found on the official websites of the Israeli Ministry of Education, the National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education (RAMA), the Central Bureau of Statistics, and colleges and universities in Israel. Additionally, a number of personal interviews were conducted in order to acquire additional knowledge regarding the state of affairs in Israeli middle schools. The literature discussing information from international sources on middle schools included publications from 2005-2010, whereas the literature focusing on middle schools in Israel included publications from 2000-2010.

The literature review indicates that middle schools are prevalent in many educational systems. In Israel, too, 75% of students study in middle schools during early adolescence. This stage of development is characterized by intense changes in physiological, cognitive, psychological, and social aspects of life. However, the literature indicates that middle schools do not necessarily meet the unique and complex needs of these students during this developmental stage.

The literature indicates that the transition from elementary school to middle school is intertwined with a significant change in the learning environment. It is a transition to a larger and more heterogeneous school, comprised of a more socially diverse group of children. Moreover, middle schools tend to be similar to high schools in their organizational characteristics, academic demands, and competitive culture. Middle schools are also characterized by little personal support and weak social relations between students and teachers, and between students and peers. These characteristics expose students to school experiences that do not meet their particular needs. Furthermore, the literature indicates that there is a limited capacity to meet the needs of adolescents because of the reduced resources available in middle schools (e.g., large class size, weaker relations between schools and parents). This incompatibility makes adjustment to middle school more difficult, and is

associated with declines in achievement and learning motivation, and increased behavior problems among students.

Various intervention programs have been suggested and implemented to deal with the challenges of middle school. These programs, which are aimed at addressing the difficulties that students face in middle schools, are primarily directed toward the whole school system or toward the students. The majority of these programs aim to promote academic achievement and improve student behavior. Accordingly, programs focus on strengthening social relations in schools, and between schools and their environments. Similarly, they encourage parental involvement in the educational process in order to improve learning and to promote students' personal wellbeing. In this sense, the intervention programs attempt to integrate elements that will provide a basis for a school environment that fits students' needs.

With regard to literacy, various programs were identified with the goal of raising student achievement. While some programs focused on developing learning strategies, with the aim of directly improving children's literacy skills, others were directed toward teacher training in literacy. All the programs required that teachers and students invest time and intensive efforts in different literacy tasks, along with systematic and continuous monitoring of student achievement.

Some of the principles which guide these intervention programs are also implemented in countries that have leading international literacy achievement scores. These countries are characterized by: clear and defined policy regarding literacy in schools, investment of resources for improving achievement, defined standards of success in literacy, an evaluation system implemented to assess the efficiency of different intervention programs, investment in teachers' professional training in literacy with an emphasis on promoting literacy in all fields of study in middle school and high school, and advancing literacy starting in elementary school.

In Israel, too, there is a gap between students' needs and middle school characteristics. The literature indicates that in middle schools there is a strong emphasis on academic achievement. Compared to elementary schools, in middle schools relations between the different partners in the school system (i.e., administrators, teachers, students, and parents) tend to be weaker and there is less support. Finally, teaching and learning occur under particularly difficult conditions, with few resources: large school size, large class size, or high teacher-student ratio. This is particularly so in the Arab sector (predominantly Bedouin education) as compared to the Jewish sector.

The literature also indicates that the curriculum in middle schools enables flexibility and compatibility with the students' needs. However, this flexibility is not necessarily channeled towards promoting students' learning. In this respect, there is evidence that middle schools have become an educational framework which has adopted the norms and modes of action that characterize high schools, and middle schools teachers have become more similar in their teaching methods to high school teachers than to elementary school teachers.

Review of the literature showed no consistent findings with respect to the academic achievements of middle school students in comparison with elementary school students. However, one can conclude that in both the Jewish and Arab sectors, middle school teachers have transferred academic responsibility to the students. Combined with the emphasis on academic achievement as the top priority in school, students experience the pressures typical of high schools. However, this occurs without the resources and conditions which high schools receive. It is doubtful that this is justifiable during adolescence. Hence, the potential for students to realize their academic potential during middle school may be limited.

This is also true in relation to the field of literacy. While literacy is important for students' academic success and is an issue which preoccupies policy makers, very few resources were found to be directed toward its promotion in terms of the number of intervention programs or teacher training at the middle school level.

While there is a trend by the Ministry of Education toward implementing intervention programs to promote literacy in the education system, and there are different initiatives to promote this topic in individual schools and local authorities, the literature on this topic is scant and does not discuss or address these developments and processes.

The literature review revealed that knowledge about middle schools in Israel is extremely limited, and that few studies have focused on this school level. Furthermore, the literature does not address the distinction between students studying in seventh and eighth grades in primary schools and those studying in middle schools. Moreover, there is no distinction between middle schools linked to high schools and independent middle schools. In this context, there is a lack of studies dealing with the influence of school structure on educational processes and outcomes within the school. Middle schools are rich and diverse educational environments. Nonetheless, there is a gap between the information from the research literature and what is implemented in practice.

There is a lack of scientific information on middle schools in Israel in the areas described in this review. As a result, the capacity to address questions relating to the efficacy of this educational framework, and its influence on learning and teaching processes, as well as

education outcomes is limited. Consequently, much caution must be practiced in making conclusions and formulating new educational policies.

The following recommendations are made based on the literature review:

The role and aims of middle school should be reexamined. Currently, it seems that middle schools have been "swallowed up" by high schools, and have adopted their principles; evidence-based policy should be promoted and developed. Connecting research and practice has the potential to improve the education system, as seen in other countries; literacy should be addressed at a young age, when children are in primary school. In order to advance students' literacy capabilities and achievements, intensive and ongoing activity is needed. In this sense, middle school should be seen as a continuation of the educational process which guides primary school, rather than as a preparatory educational framework for high school. Systematic and thorough investigation is needed to address the characteristics and influences of middle school. There is a large amount of available data on this topic which should be used and studied to answer questions regarding middle school.