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Settling In: Facilitating the transition to an inclusive middle school for students with mild disabilities

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The present qualitative study examined the experiences of nine students with mild disabilities during their first year in an inclusive middle school in a Midwestern state of the United States (US). Data were gathered through interviews with students, teachers, and parents; classroom observations; and document analysis. Following the data analysis, three themes were identified: how the demands of navigating a new environment increased students' anxiety; how students satisfied their need for belonging; and how students' perceptions of school influenced their attitude towards help. Suggestions for facilitating school transitions for early adolescents with mild disabilities are provided.

**Keywords:** inclusion; middle level; mild disability; transition

Introduction

Early adolescence is a time of adjustment for students. In many countries, young adolescents transition from one educational setting to another, moving between schools with considerable differences in culture and structure, at the same time as they are undergoing significant biological and social changes (Donohue, 1992). Their adjustment to these environmental and developmental changes may overwhelm young adolescents’ coping strategies (Mac Iver, 1990) and a “developmental mismatch” between students and their school may occur (Midgley & Urdan, 1992). The early adolescent years for students with disabilities can be an even greater struggle as they must deal with difficulties resulting from their disabilities (Gritzmacher & Larkin, 1993).

There have been few investigations of early adolescents’ school transitions, and these have primarily focused on general education students rather than students with disabilities (Arawosafe & Irvin, 1992; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Odegaard & Heath, 1992). The present study addresses these limitations. Through the use of qualitative case-study methods, the study sought to develop an increased understanding of the school/transition experiences of students with disabilities from the perspectives of students, teachers, and parents.

Middle-level Educational Settings

As more is understood about the developmental needs of early adolescents, their educational environment has received increased attention. Historically in the US, early adolescents were taught in primary school settings until moving to a high-school building in the ninth grade (Clark & Clark, 1993). At the beginning of the twentieth century, middle-level educational settings were introduced as a means of better transitioning students between the primary and high school.
experiences (Kasek, 2004). The first junior high schools were opened around 1909 in Ohio and California (Clark & Clark, 1993), with rapid growth occurring during the 1920s and 1930s. By the 1960s, most US students attended primary school for seven years, junior high for three years, and high school for three years (Cawelti, 1993).

Through the evolution of the junior high school as a separate educational setting, systematic differences developed between typical primary school settings and classrooms and typical junior high school settings and classrooms (Eccles et al., 1996, 1993). For example, typical junior high school settings were larger and less personal than typical primary school settings. Additionally, ability grouping and more impersonal teacher–student interactions were more common in junior high schools than primary schools (Eccles et al., 1996; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Junior high school settings generally had an increase in whole-class tasks, tracking (known as streaming in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia), and public evaluation of class work (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Furthermore, junior high school settings had an increased emphasis on teacher discipline and a decreased opportunity for self-management, choice, and decision-making by students.

In the 1960s concerns were raised that junior high schools were not meeting the developmental needs of early adolescents. To address these concerns, an alternative middle-level educational setting, the middle school, was introduced (Oakes, Hunter-Quartz, Gong, Guiton, & Lipton, 1993). Unlike junior high schools, middle schools were characterised by guidance services, transition support, classes scheduled in blocks of time, interdisciplinary teams, opportunities for career exploration, and age-appropriate curriculum and learning skills (Cawelti, 1993). In a 1988 survey of 672 principals in a variety of middle-level education settings, Cawelti found that those institutions with a middle school organisational format were more likely to provide programmes with features recommended for early adolescent learners.

In recent decades, increasing numbers of middle-level educational settings have established practices more developmentally responsive to the unique needs of early adolescents (Anfara, 2004). Interdisciplinary team teaching, flexible scheduling, exploratory learning opportunities, and teacher advisory periods (i.e., a consistent time that a group of students meets with an assigned teacher) are developmentally responsive approaches used in some middle-level education settings (Cawelti, 1993; Clark & Clark, 1994; Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990). Despite the increased attention, however, “widespread implementation of high quality middle grades practices has not been fully realised” (Kasek, 2004, p. 238), and additional research is necessary to determine how schools may best meet the diverse needs of early adolescents (Skilton-Sylvester & Slesaransky-Poe, 2002).

Inclusive School Practices

The middle-level educational reform movement coincided with special education reform movements advocating for the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings both in the US (Gritzmacher & Larkin, 1993) and globally (Leyser & Kirk, 2004). Inclusive programmes in schools have been defined as those in which “students, regardless of the severity of their disability, receive appropriate specialised instruction and related services within an age-appropriate general education classroom in the school that they would attend if they did not have a disability” (National Association of School Psychologists, 2002, p. 1720). In the US the initial inclusion movement focused on reducing the segregation of students with severe disabilities, but it has grown to include all students with disabilities. Thus, students with mild disabilities have become the most recent focus of the inclusion movement (McLeskey & Waldron, 1996).

Research has demonstrated social and academic benefits for students included in general education classrooms (Waldron & McLesKey, 1998). However, few studies have been conducted of students with disabilities in inclusive middle-level educational settings (Nitcavic & Aitken,
The needs, thoughts, and beliefs of early adolescents regarding their educational experiences may be gathered by listening to them describe their experiences. However, little research has focused on early adolescents’ perceptions of their experiences in middle-level educational settings (Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Kramer, 1992; Reid & Button, 1995). The middle grades are incorporated into descriptions of both primary programmes (Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993; Truesdell & Abramson, 1992) and secondary programmes (Edgar, 1987; Vaughn, Schumm, Klingner, & Saumell, 1995). Additionally, research on the experiences of students with disabilities in middle-level educational settings has been sparse, with the focus primarily on inclusive educational practices (Nitcavic & Aitken, 1988; Nolet & Tindal, 1994; Vaughn et al., 1995). Furthermore, even fewer studies of inclusive middle-level educational settings have examined issues from the perspective of students with mild disabilities, as well as students without disabilities (Vaughn et al., 1995). Early adolescents are developmentally ready to share their thoughts and beliefs on their educational experiences (Reid & Button, 1995). Listening to them may lead to a better understanding of their experiences and the schools they attend.

**Method**

To examine the experiences of students with mild disabilities in an inclusive middle school setting, this research focused on how students with identified disabilities made meaning of events over one academic year. It was guided by a qualitative paradigm that assumes perceptions form the basis of beliefs. Natural settings were used to generate a better understanding of the students in the context of their school (Merriam, 1998). As noted by Ghesquière, Maes, and Vandenberghe, “the combination of the participants’ perceptions of school reality and the observations by the researchers” (2004, p. 182) contribute to the value of using qualitative methods to research inclusive education. As an instrumental case study that sought to obtain a greater understanding of particular questions and issues (Stake, 1995), the study focused on purposefully selected students with mild disabilities whose teachers used inclusive instructional practices.

The study addressed the following questions: (a) What are the students’ general experiences, instructional practices, and the social interactions in these inclusive middle-level classrooms; (b) How do the experiences of these students influence their initial and ongoing attitudes toward middle school; and (c) How do teachers’ and parents’ perceptions of the experiences of the students compare with the students’ own perceptions of this inclusive middle-level educational setting?

**Setting**

Randolph Middle School (a pseudonym) is a middle-level educational setting with approximately 850 students, serving seventh-grade and eighth-grade students in the Midwest of the United States. To develop closer personal relationships between students and teachers, at each grade level students were organised into instructional teams around core academic classes and assigned to those classes taught by each team’s teachers. There were three teams at the seventh-grade and eighth-grade levels. Team teachers had a common planning time, often with lessons focusing on themes of study across subject areas. This interdisciplinary approach to instruction was supplemented with class time devoted to skills such as note-taking and the use of calendars to keep track of assignments.

At each grade level, two teams used inclusive instructional practices with the students with mild disabilities, while the third team sent students out of the general education classroom to
either a resource or a self-contained room for special education support. A student who receives services in a resource room “attends a regular class most of the day but goes to a special education class several hours per day or for blocks of time each week”, whereas a student receiving services in a self-contained room “attends a special class most of the school day” (Smith, 2001, p. 46). In addition to these services, all special education students in the school had access to a Student Support Centre, a classroom where students could get further assistance from a special education teacher or assistant when it was not available in their general education classroom. Students could ask to go to the Centre, be offered the opportunity to go, or be told they needed to go there for assistance during regular class time. The students’ sixth-grade teachers determined the students’ programme placement in June before the students started middle school in September.

Randolph Middle School had approximately 45 general education teachers, seven special education teachers, and eight special education assistants. A special education teacher was assigned to work with each of the seventh-grade and eighth-grade teams that used an inclusion model of service delivery. The other team at each grade level worked with special education teachers who provided services in the resource and self-contained rooms. The special education teachers and assistants assigned to the inclusion teams worked with all students in the classroom individually and in small groups, answering questions, providing guidance with difficult assignments, making modifications and accommodations to assignments, and providing behavioural supports such as teaching social skills and creating supportive environments. All student participants in this study were assigned to the inclusion teams. Because the school day was organised into 10 class periods and a lunch period, these students had to negotiate several routes among classrooms and learn the rules and expectations of multiple teachers.

Randolph Middle School was chosen as the site for this research for several reasons. First, it provided inclusive programming for students with mild disabilities. Second, its students came from a variety of primary special education programmes, including inclusive and self-contained options. This provided an opportunity to explore the middle-level adjustment experiences of students with mild disabilities who had a variety of primary educational experiences. Third, the school practiced co-teaching approaches to instruction and had considered and implemented various other characteristics of middle-level reforms, such as learner-centred instruction and interdisciplinary teaming that seek to better meet the intellectual and emotional needs of young adolescents.

**Participants**

The research project was cleared by the university’s human subjects review board before data collection began. After access to the site was granted by the school’s administration, a meeting was held with the teachers and staff involved in the seventh-grade inclusive programme. During this meeting, the second author described the purpose of the research, what participation involved, and their rights as participants in the study. Teachers who agreed to participate in the study were given a description of the research goals and signed consent forms. Seventh-grade students with mild disabilities (learning disabilities and mild intellectual disabilities) were identified by the special education teacher, who was in contact with teachers from the feeder primary schools. The second author then spoke with these students and their parents before each of their annual review meetings, discussing the research purpose, confidentiality, and participant rights. When parents and their children indicated a desire to participate in the research, parents signed consent forms for their own participation and permission forms for their child’s participation. Students gave verbal assent to participation.

Nine students and their parents agreed to participate. Of the six boys and three girls, one was African-American, two were multiracial, and six were Caucasian. Eight students were
identified with learning disabilities and one with mild intellectual disabilities according to psycho-educational evaluations conducted by the school district. Students with learning disabilities and mild intellectual disabilities were chosen because they have similar school-related concerns (Friend, 2004)—difficulties with academic areas in school and with social skills. Although all of the students’ sixth-grade experiences were in inclusive school settings, several of them had had experiences with resource classrooms, during their primary years. A total of 10 teaching staff participated, comprising seven general education teachers from two teaching teams, one special education teacher, and two teacher assistants.

Data Gathering
The second author gathered data at three time points across an academic year (September–June) in order to gain an understanding of students’ experiences across this period. Interview, observation, and document review data were collected. Initial interviews with parents, teachers, and students took place during the second and fourth weeks of October. Classroom observations were conducted at the same time. During the third week of January, the students and special education teacher were interviewed again and observations were conducted again in the same classrooms as those visited in October. Finally, during the last week of March and the first week of April, students, parents, and teachers were interviewed for the last time and further classroom observations were conducted. In total, three interviews were conducted with the students and two interviews were conducted with the parents, general education teachers and teacher assistants. Three interviews were conducted with the special education teacher. On the basis of the researchers’ guiding questions, along with what was seen and heard during the process of data collection, decisions were made about whom to interview and where and when to observe. This approach “allows the researcher to adapt to unforeseen events and change direction in pursuit of meaning” during data collection (Merriam, 1988, p. 37).

Interviews
The interviews with students, parents, and teachers were the main data sources. Semi-structured interview formats were used because they provided flexibility in responding to the situations and topics that arose (Merriam, 1998). Student and parent interviews took 30 to 60 minutes. Student interviews asked participants to compare their primary and middle school experiences, describe how they felt about receiving special education services, talk about their relationships with teachers, and discuss their coursework expectations and the support they thought they would/did receive. The parent interviews asked participants to describe their child’s experience transitioning from the primary to the middle school and to discuss their concerns and satisfactions with their child’s experiences. The teacher interviews took 45 to 90 minutes. Teacher interviews asked participants to discuss the students’ strengths and weaknesses, describe their academic abilities and social interactions, and evaluate how well the school’s special education services met the students’ needs. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for later analysis. On several occasions, conversations with the participants occurred additionally to the interviews at times when taping was not possible, such as at the end of a classroom observation. When this happened, fieldnotes were written as soon as possible after the interaction.

Observations
The purpose of observational data is to provide “incontestable data” that “lets the occasion tell its story, the situation, the problems, resolution or irresolution of the problem” (Stake, 1995, p. 62). An observation schedule was not used. Initially, the second author conducted broadly focused
observations in all participating teachers’ classrooms, the cafeteria, and hallways. Following a preliminary analysis of the initial interviews and observation, the observations became more focused. Specific locations in the school and specific teachers were observed to gain a better understanding of students’ social interactions and specific classroom pedagogical practices. The researchers’ guiding questions, along with what was seen and heard during the process of data collection, informed decisions about where, when, and whom to observe. A total of 90 classroom observations were conducted, comprising 3–17 class-period observations per student in English, literature, mathematics, social studies, science, industrial technology, physical education, and art classes.

Anecdotal records were taken during all observations and fieldnotes written immediately following the observations. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) suggest that fieldnotes assist in data collection, raise the researcher’s consciousness of how they are influenced by the data, and provide a history of project development. The fieldnotes contained observational, theoretical, and methodological comments as well as questions about the study, descriptions of classroom events and activities, potential interview questions, and possible emerging themes.

Data Analysis
During data analysis, the authors used an inductive process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to identify where junctures did and did not occur in the gathered data; for example, experiences during the school year that were similar or different for the students or how the parents’ and the teachers’ descriptions coincided with what the students said about their school experiences. Initially, the second author identified individual instances of emerging themes in interviews and observations. These instances were re-read and continually compared with other instances in the interview and observation data until the second author was able to put specific instances into more general groups. Next, themes were identified from the groups of instances. Descriptions of these broad themes, including membership and non-membership rules, were written by the second author, in collaboration with the first and third authors. Together, the authors developed an understanding of students’ experiences from the identification of patterns, categories, and themes (Stake, 1995).

Trustworthiness of Data
Assuring the trustworthiness of the data was an ongoing process throughout data collection and analysis. First, trustworthiness occurred through the use of “triangulation” of the data (Ghesquière et al., 2004). Second, the maintenance of extensive fieldnotes, anecdotal records during observations, and interview transcripts provide a traceable audit trail of data collection, category determination, and decision-making (Ghesquière et al., 2004; Merriam, 1998). Third, prolonged engagement in the setting added credibility to the data and enhanced understanding (Merriam, 1998). Fourth, trustworthiness was increased through member checks that solicited participant feedback about the researchers’ perceptions and conclusions (Ghesquière et al., 2004). Finally, the second author’s use of the first and third authors as peer debriefers provided an opportunity to evaluate data analysis, explore possible biases and assumptions, and test interpretations (Merriam, 1998).

Results
There is a considerable amount to learn when students enter a new school for the first time, particularly a middle-level education setting. The staff at Randolph Middle School provided the students with opportunities to become familiar with the building, with other students, and with the staff. In addition to hosting an open house before the first day of classes, examples of school
staff assisting students included their flexibility with students being tardy in the initial weeks of school, oversight and checking of students’ assignment books, and regularly scheduled meetings between advisors and advisees. For some students, their teachers’ efforts seemed effective and they quickly learned what was expected of them. For other students, however, the transition took considerably longer.

**Adjustment: Learning the Routine**

One common feature of the students’ school lives was the extended length of time they needed to learn about and become comfortable with school routines that their peers without disabilities mastered more quickly. Some of the students struggled well into October with this adjustment. One student who had difficulty with opening her locker, finding her classes, and remembering the rules in each of her classes felt less secure with her surroundings and less successful at school. A teacher described how another student’s efforts with this adjustment affected his academic performance:

I think that he was so stressed out about the locker and about finding classes that he really got behind at the beginning. Couldn’t think about doing math because he had to think about where was his next class and how was he going to get there.

As their ability to navigate the school building, remember different rules for different teachers’ classrooms, and access their belongings from their lockers became easier and routine, the students felt more stable and secure in their surroundings. However, several students did not develop this level of comfort until the end of the semester.

Moving between classrooms in a timely fashion was a new routine for the students. They spoke of the excitement and freedom of being able to move between rooms and walk through the hallways without a teacher present. One student said, “[you have] got more freedom … you have more freedom to go by yourself instead of with the teacher.” Yet sometimes, uncertainty about how to navigate the new building tempered the excitement. Other students struggled to navigate their way through the new environment, and this increased their anxiety. One student discussed her confusion and fear with the maze of hallways: “They look the same, and it is very scary because you walk in the hall. It looks like you would be going upstairs or looks like you are walking in the same stairs that you went down.” One student talked about her approach to making walking the hallways more manageable:

Try to make a path. Like make a path where you know where you are going. Remember what room you go past to get to this other room or something like that. … It is hard to get through without …

As students moved from one class to another, they needed to become familiar with the expectations of each of their teachers about student behaviour, class participation, and homework. As this student explains, “It’s hard to know what you are supposed to do. Because you’re in one class, and the teacher wants you to do something different than the other teachers do.” The teachers also observed this confusion in students and noted that the students took time to adjust to the different expectations. This teacher’s comments capture the experience of one student:

Not tardy as much when he gets into class. It’s okay, what class am I in? Where’s my stuff? How do I get my book out for this? Instead of, “Take your book out of your desk. You’ve got to have the book bag. And where’s your folder? Where’s your homework?”

By the middle of the school year, some of the students were comfortable with their different teachers and the teachers’ expectations. Students and their parents were aware of the change. One student said “… it is all so normal now. I am so used to it”, and a parent said “It’s become easier for him. I think he has figured it out.”
Importance of Peer Relationships and a Sense of Belonging

At the beginning of the school year, the students varied greatly in the extent to which they developed peer relationships. Some of the students maintained friendships they had begun in elementary school and some developed peer relationships with new friends quickly at the beginning of the year. Others took longer developing new friendships, and for these students, teachers often provided an important personal connection and a sense of belonging to middle school until peer relationships were more firmly established. A teacher described one student as “Very needy. Not academically, but he wants acceptance and sometimes he goes a little too far with getting that. He is one that will ask you questions that he doesn’t need to ask just to be asking a question.” Another teacher’s comment about a student highlights the important role of teachers in assisting students to feel connected. “He wants to be accepted and wants to be successful. … You can tell that he wants that … probably more with teachers than peers.” For some of the students, relationships with teachers seemed to provide a sense of security that facilitated the development of relationships with peers. A teacher explained how a student was “Outgoing, more, probably more with adults. At the beginning of the year, she was always wanting to chit chat before my class. Now, she will go in and hang out with the kids.” Another teacher shared how a student “doesn’t need me anymore because she has made friends among her own peers and things, and found her niche and is comfortable.”

When asked if they preferred to only be in resource room classes with other students with disabilities or in general education classes with classmates with and without disabilities, these students stated a preference for the general education setting. One student said this was because “I can get help from them and the teacher because it is just easier because if they are my friends, I know them.” Another said that “I get to go around and talk to people I don’t know … I like being in groups with them.” One teacher commented that the integration of the students with the general education students meant that the students were less likely to be labelled or stigmatised:

A strength is that I am sure that in her mind and in the class mind, she carries no label or stigma whatsoever. … If you interviewed any student in the class that didn’t know the student or didn’t know her history, he would not know that she was in any type of inclusion programme.

Attitude Towards Help

The inclusion practices at Randolph Middle School required the students to seek out assistance when they needed help. Special education teachers provided direct services in some general education classes, while in other classes students could choose to go to the Student Support Centre for assistance from a special education teacher. This approach depended largely on the motivation of students, as teachers’ expected the students to self-monitor their learning and areas of difficulties and determine if, and when, they needed help.

The students who were comfortable receiving special education support outside the general education classroom recognised that it helped them learn and complete their work. One student said that, “it just helps me a lot because they read questions and stuff for me that I can’t read because I am not a very good reader.” Another shared that, “My work is … pretty the same as everybody else’s. It is just that it is hard for me to do it. … So, they will help me, and then I’ll be done.” One parent reflected on her son’s experiences receiving special education assistance: “He enjoys the extra help that he gets, and he knows that he needs the extra help. It doesn’t embarrass him or nothing.” Students who did not utilise special education support often cited embarrassment as an explanation for not seeking help. “Embarrassing … kids or your friends seeing you go in there to do work … it would be embarrassing getting called out of the class.” Another student’s disdain was clear: “Nobody should like it. I don’t know who would like it. They just sit there and
help you and humiliate you kind of. Because if your friends find out, they don’t like you because you are different, stupid.”

The students who viewed special education support as necessary help tended to describe relationships with teachers and peers as important to their sense of belonging at school. In contrast, the students who found special education support embarrassing tended to be those whose sense of belonging primarily focused on peer relationships.

The location where teachers provided additional support was another influence in students’ help-seeking behaviour. Not surprisingly, the students did not want to stand out from their peers. They were more likely to access special education help available in the general education classroom, in contrast to using supports available outside the general education setting. Some students did not seek help when needed. Others would accept help offered in the general education classroom, but would not seek it out themselves. For many students this ability to choose was another freedom of middle school that they had not experienced in primary school. While students liked the freedom that the choice provided, for a few of the students it became problematic when they needed assistance but chose not to seek it.

Discussion

Middle school is a difficult time for students regardless of whether or not they have a disability (Arawosafe & Irvin, 1992; Mac Iver, 1990). The academic curriculum continues to increase in difficulty, and the students are changing in dramatic ways—physically, socially, and emotionally (Mertens, Anfara, & Caskey, 2007). While early adolescents experience these changes as part of typical development, students with mild disabilities frequently struggle more and longer with skill development and adjustment than students without disabilities (Masters, Mori, & Mori, 1999). The challenges, such as adjusting to a number of different teachers, are amplified for students with mild disabilities who may have entered middle school with difficulties in areas such as organisational skills or social skills.

The experiences, feelings, and thoughts of the students in this study were impacted by the lens through which they viewed the world around them. Their prior experiences with special education services, their perspectives on these experiences, and their desire for peer acceptance mediated the choices and preferences that the students exhibited. These in turn influenced their adjustment, sense of belonging, and attitudes toward help at school.

Understanding the world-views of middle school students with mild disabilities is helpful to teachers in planning and implementing students’ programmes. Making decisions about how to approach students, how much choice to allow them, and how to build peer connections is enhanced by this awareness. The use of such knowledge might then influence how students adjust to middle school, how their sense of belonging develops, and how their attitude toward help is shaped. The following suggestions for teachers to facilitate the transition of students with mild disabilities are based on the observations of the participating students, along with the interviews with the students, their parents, and their teachers.

Providing Support and Guidance

The students with mild disabilities in this study took an extended length of time to master the skills of navigation and class schedules. The findings suggest that students with mild disabilities may need support and guidance for longer periods of time than, and in different ways to, their typically developing peers. Specifically, it is important that there is flexibility for these students. Celebrations by parents and school staff of the hard-won accomplishments of the students with disabilities may be different than for other students, yet pride in opening a locker after months of
trying or successfully following a class schedule by the end of the first school quarter or term are nonetheless significant successes for some of these students.

**Building Peer Connections**

This research demonstrated that the sooner peer connections can be made for students with mild disabilities, the more likely their sense of belonging and adjustment to middle school will fall into place. While their methods and levels of success varied, all these students with disabilities wanted to make connections with peers in their general education classrooms. It is important that opportunities for peer connections be provided for students who have difficulties making friends. Teachers can create opportunities for peer connections in the classroom through various groupings for class activities. For students who seem to be taking longer to develop friendships, structured activities provide important opportunities for developing connections.

**Developing Choice-Making Skills**

The students in this study liked having the ability to choose whether or not they would receive special education services, and, if so, how these services would be delivered. Many of them sought different amounts of support as the year progressed. Teaching the students self-determination skills would have enhanced the choice-making process (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006).

Allowing middle school students opportunities to make choices in their day is consistent with what is known about early adolescence being a time of increasing independence (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Choice-making can be empowering for individuals with disabilities when they are allowed to be active participants and informed decisions-makers (Grigal, Neubert, Moon, & Graham, 2003). Developing students’ choice-making and self-determination skills could be an aspect of middle school transition planning and students’ individual educational programmes (Grigal et al., 2003).

**Acknowledging Student Preferences**

Although the students in this study wanted the independence to decide whether they needed assistance, they also wanted to be in a learning situation with typical peers and receiving special education services in the general education setting. This was the service delivery model that the students had experienced in their primary school. The teachers at this school also subtly delivered accommodations and modifications that fitted into the flow of the classrooms and did not bring attention to the students. Including students in the planning for changes in service delivery models may expand the ways in which student needs are best met in inclusive classrooms.

**Limitations**

The primary limitation of this study is that it was conducted in a single school and included only nine students. Other school contexts could result in quite different findings for students with mild disabilities. Yet, it is important to note that the ability to generalise the results of qualitative research lies both with the researcher and the reader (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The researcher is responsible for providing a clear, in-depth description of the context, data collection and analysis, and themes that emerged from the investigation. To determine whether results transfer to a given setting, the reader must review this information, compare the context with his or her own, and make a determination about whether or not the results transfer.
Conclusion

Early adolescents go through significant developmental changes at the same time as their educational environment alters from primary to middle school. For students with mild disabilities this transition can be especially problematic. Yet very few studies have examined the transition experiences of students with mild disabilities from their own perspective. Even fewer studies have considered their experiences in inclusive middle-level educational settings. The students in this study articulated their experiences as they settled into the middle school and described their preferences for special education services delivery in the regular classroom. Their stories provide insight into their experiences and highlight the importance of incorporating early adolescents into the programme planning process.

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