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Grouping Students to Support Student Attachment to School at Marion M. Graham Collegiate

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The Purpose of the Study

At Marion M. Graham Collegiate (MMGC) in Saskatoon, it has long been the practice to group students in their grade 9 year into at least three classes together. The rationale for the groupings came from the belief that students would more easily become comfortable among a smaller group with one common teacher for at least two hours each day in the first semester of grade 9 and this would continue for one hour each day in the second semester of grade 9. The evidence to support this belief did not exist and, needless to say, grouping grade 9 classes with the same teacher and students was a scheduling nightmare. Students had to be grouped and manually timetabled to ensure they could stay together for these classes. This made the grade 9 schedule more difficult to assemble than if you were scheduling a school without the groupings. So the question was asked, “How valuable is it for students to spend three hours with the same students and the same teacher in their grade nine year?”

Measuring success could come in many ways. Do the students achieve higher marks in grade 9 because they are grouped? Do they have better attendance because they are grouped? Are they happier and do they feel more comfortable in high school because they are grouped? The measurement construct selected was ‘student attachment to school’ because it encompassed all of those things – achievement, belongingness, self esteem, friendships, and student-teacher relationships (Zwarych, 2004).

Student Attachment to School

Numerous researchers (e.g., Asher, 1987; Firestone, 1989; Goodenow, 1991; Gottfredson, 1986; Valverde, 1987) have identified attachment to school as a basis for providing students with confidence and, at the same time, promoting academic achievement and positive social behaviour. The variety of factors which contribute to attachment to school include feelings of importance, appreciation for the value and relevancy of education, and a feeling of belonging to the school community (Dworkin, 1987). Attachment to school is important for the academic and social health of our youth (Zwarych, 2004). The study of the social environments that contribute to student attachment to school is necessary if we are to foster student attachment to school and, as a result, ensure greater academic success.

There are a variety of structures in schools that build relationships and encourage student attachment to school, such as: mentorship programs, clubs and teams, supports for at-risk students, school counselors, and the practice of creating smaller communities within a large school (Arhar, 1992). DeWitt (1995) compiled a list of recommendations for increasing student attachment to school – one of which was to carry out regular assessment of the student population to determine which students are not attached to school and then to propose interventions for the students who were not attached. Interventions might include, encouraging the low-attached student to join a team or club, providing a mentor for that student, and connecting the student with a peer counselor or an adult counselor.

Mouton (1995) completed a study of students with low attachment to school and recommended the following: identifying and intervening early with unattached students; creating a positive school environment and emphasizing the value of education; setting high expectations for all students; selecting and developing educators with attachment in mind; providing a broad range of teaching strategies and courses which would allow low-attached students to become more involved in the school; and providing opportunities for students to build relationships with the school community. Factors in our quickly changing society are reducing student attachment to school and must be countered by positive socialization and the opportunities for relationship building within the school community.

The standard high school, which consists of non-integrated courses and discipline policies that require compliance, lacks the opportunities to build relationships (Knutson, 2002). Knutson suggested that the standard high school model we now follow was created using the factory metaphor which even factories no longer use. Lee and Burkam (2003) suggested that schools exemplifying a positive relationship between students and teachers are more likely to have a better retention rate than schools without that relationship. The question remains, does MMGCI's practice of grouping students at the grade 9 level support student attachment to school? Does this practice facilitate the student transition to high school, and if it does build attachment, is that attachment maintained throughout high school?

To answer these questions, we would have to design a longitudinal study of grade 9 through to grade 11. It is not adequate to measure student attachment at only the grade 9 level as students are usually highly attached to school and the new school experience at this age but that sometimes dwindles as they move through high school (Willms and Flanagan, 2007). More accurately, it would be valuable to measure student attachment at grade 11 and see how the results compare to other students at the same age in similar studies (Zwarych, 2004). Has the Marion M. Graham grouping experience increased student attachment to school? How do Marion M. Graham students compare to other schools at grade 11 for attachment to school?

Beginning the Study

A group of grade 9 teachers and one administrator decided to apply for a McDowell grant to support the research necessary to provide evidence of student attachment to school and to determine the value of grouping grade 9 classes. The grade 9 teachers, Rick Clark, Lexi Kroeker, Rachelle Hounjet, Tracy Laverty, Chad Chicilo, Greg Harrison, Jeff Soucy and Rose May LiPiShan, along with the researchers, Suzanne Zwarych, Myra Comrie, Rick Clark, and Murray Guest were involved in the study. Our research question was:

Does grouping grade 9 classes increase student attachment to school improving the transition to high school?

This question was delineated into four supporting questions:

1. Do students in grade 9 and their parents and teachers feel that the school is meeting student needs by grouping two grade 9 classes to provide fewer contact teachers in the first semester?
2. Do students who have participated in grouped classes have strong attachment to school early in their high school program?
3. Does student attachment to school continue at the same level throughout high school?
4. Are there indicators that student achievement throughout high school is increased by participating in grouped classes during grade 9?

The group of grade 9 teachers at Marion M. Graham Collegiate met several times during the first year of the project. Teachers met early in September during the first year of the study to outline their objectives as grouping teachers. Objective one was to ease the transition for grade 9 students into high school and objective two was to explore and provide opportunities to increase grade 9 student attachment to school.

These objectives were to be achieved by the following goals:

- Goal one was to foster student attachment to school by scheduling grade 9's into three grouped classes. Examples of grouped classes were math and science (150 hours for math and 100 hours for science so it fell slightly short of the desired 300 hours), English and social studies, drama and English. This grouping was done in the spring prior to the grade 9 students entering school at MMGCI. Nine sections of grade 9's were grouped, including two sections of French immersion, for a combined total of 257 grade 9 students.
- Goal two was to provide grade 9 students with a basic high school skill set to encourage academic success: citizenship, organizational skills, study skills, appropriate group behaviour, and listening skills.
- Goal three was to achieve increased communication between parents and teachers of the grouped classes and goal four was to make intervention plans for students who were not successful.

It was decided that the following would become indicators of success: student promotion to grade 10, high scores on student attachment to school on the same survey instrument at two times in high school – grade 9 and grade 11, observations of student behaviours throughout grade 9 and comments about the high school experience made by students, teachers, and parents. Several meetings were held during the year to make sure all teachers were still on track and working toward these common objectives. Nearing the end of the school year, all students in grade 9 completed the Student Attachment to School Questionnaire (SAQ, Mouton & DeWitt, 1995).

The Attachment to School Survey

Researchers (Ahlgren, 1983; DeWitt, 1995, Mouton, 1995, Zwarych, 2004) have approached the challenge of measuring student attachment to school using a variety of instruments, but the School Attachment Questionnaire (SAQ) was selected for use in this study because it measures general relationships, belongingness, and specific attachments to teachers and peers. Also, there are comparative data available on similar schools with similar populations, making discussions more relevant.

Using the SAQ instrument, having regular meetings with grade 9 teachers, and soliciting feedback from parents during the grade 9 year, the following data were collected in response to the foundational questions.

1. Do students in grade 9 and their parents and teachers feel that the school is meeting student needs by grouping two grade 9 classes to provide fewer contact teachers in the first semester?

GRADE 9 STUDENT RESPONSES

- I liked how at the beginning of grade 9, we had the same class for period 1 and 2. That helped me adjust a lot more easily.
- I like the fact that we have a lot more freedom than elementary. I like how the teachers really like to get to know the students and build relationships within them. When you have a good relationship with your teachers, it makes school seem a lot more 'fun' because you feel like you are wanted in that school. I do not like it when some teachers favor other students because it makes the rest of the class feel like they are not good enough to receive their teacher's approval.

GRADE 9 PARENT RESPONSES

Parents – 21 responses

Do you think this format eased student transition?

Strongly Agree	Agree	No Comment	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
14	4	1	2	
Comments:				

My child developed a positive relationship with his/her grouping teacher?

Strongly Agree	Agree	No Comment	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6	13	1		1
Comments:				

My child was able to participate in and become a part of the school culture?

Strongly Agree	Agree	No Comment	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6	13	2		
Comments:				

I was able to communicate regularly with the school?

Strongly Agree	Agree	No Comment	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4	15	2		
Comments:				

Plans were in place to help my child succeed in school?

Strongly Agree	Agree	No Comment	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6	12	2	1	
<p>Comments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • was still too long before I found out that my child was stressed and in tears several times a week for weeks. I feel that her more attentive teachers were there for her and should be commended. • Peer tutor was not always available • My child has always done well in math in elementary school, but he received a very poor mark on his mid-term evaluation (less than 40 percent). Although we place the responsibility to succeed firmly on his shoulders, no contact was made with us concerning his lack of success prior to the mid-term evaluation. This contact should have been made. • My daughter experienced a very positive first semester. She has done well academically, was involved in the musical and is playing basketball. When I asked her what she thinks of having the same teacher for period one and two, her response was "I think it is really good because I got to know my teacher well, I like her and if I had a problem, I would go to her." 				

General Comments

- Parents should be made aware early in the school year that it is up to them not the teachers, to contact the school to discuss strategies, if their child is having problems. The use of top quality tutors should be promoted.
- My son did not connect with his grouping teacher, and consequently, it was not a good or beneficial experience; perhaps with another teacher, it might have been.

GRADE 9 TEACHER RESPONSES

Advantages to groupings:

- get to know the students better and quicker than in non-grouped classes
- helped with parent communication because there were less parents to contact and for parents there were fewer teachers
- allowed flexibility for field trips, class lessons could go more than one hour, more like middle years classrooms
- having all grouping classes at the same time allowed for more grade 9 activities, gymblast, crimestoppers presentations, etc.
- consistent expectations for part of the day helps teachers and students
- constant of one teacher helps develop good habits and reduce initial stress
- become more connected to the grouping classes than other students
- students enjoyed the flexibility of the two hour blocks
- allowed teachers and students to develop partnerships with elementary schools and gave grade 9 students leadership opportunities with their grade 8 buddies
- allowed grade 9 students opportunities to 'give back' to their elementary schools
- students became a bigger part of teachers responsibility because they came to me with their concerns and I could help them because I worked with them the entire year and it wasn't a bigger workload because they were "my kids"
- large group activities fostered more school spirit and team building with each other and with elementary schools
- less parents to meet with during parent-teacher interviews
- teachers met together and were 'on the same page'
- it was easier for teacher to make observations about how the students were 'fitting in' at school
- it allowed me to better communicate concerns with parents especially in math because it reduced problems in science
- it was good for me to be able to recognize and deal with students' problem behaviours. Since I felt more comfortable with the kids, I had a larger impact on their behaviour
- students were more comfortable asking questions in class because they got to know their peers sooner

Disadvantages to groupings:

- both students and teachers were sick of each other by the end of the semester
- if connection between parent/teacher was a difficult one, it accentuated the difficulty (personality issues)
- activities always seemed to be scheduled during 'busy' times

Recommendations:

- have more grade 9 total group activities during the first part of the semester
- allow students in school without the older grades at the beginning of the first semester to get to know the school, lockers, do a scavenger hunt, etc.
- keep grouping classes during the same two hour block for all classes

- match skills you are teaching with Ethical Living Course skills
- grade 10 students who are repeating grade 9 classes cannot become part of the grouping classes as it destroys the atmosphere you are trying to create
- Ethical Living/Health should be built into the grouped classes
- the calendar of events for grade 9 should be planned well ahead of time
- try to schedule activities during ‘quieter’ times
- be consistent with all teachers for skills/markings/consistency for all grouping classes
- create a checklist to be sent home with first semester mid-term marks for skills: 1–Never, 2–Rarely, 3–Sometimes, 4–Often, 5–Always for things like “completes homework” and “participates in class discussions” but the list of skills is decided on ahead of time by ALL of the teachers

SAQ GRADE 9 STUDENT SCORES

Students in grade 9 (N = 257) completed the Attachment to School Survey late in their grade 9 year (2005). The minimum score was 55 and the maximum score 98. The Mean Attachment Score was 81.19 with a standard deviation of 8.64. Each of the scores was separated by grouping class (81.86, 77.10, 80.00, 82.39, 82.44, 82.3, 81.84) and all scores for classes ranged from 77.10 to a high of 82.44. The difference in attachment scores between classes may mean that some teachers/students did not develop as strong an attachment relationship during the grade 9 year.

In the spring of 2007, when the students in this study neared the end of grade 11, the SAQ was repeated. On the demographic portion of the SAQ, students were asked if they attended Marion M. Graham Collegiate during their grade 9 year. Only responses for students responding ‘yes’ to this question were included in the results below. It is important to note that any students who had not attached to school may no longer be in attendance to complete the SAQ.

SAQ GRADE 11 STUDENT SCORES

Two years later 159 grade 11 students were surveyed in the spring of 2008 and 25 of the surveys were removed because the students had not attended grade 9 at MMGCI. The students completing the survey had attended grade 9 and grade 11 at MMGCI (N = 134).

Comments:

- 38 students describe themselves as “attached to school”
- 75 students describe themselves as “moderately attached to school”
- 17 students describe themselves as “unattached to school”
- the remainder did not respond to this question

The mean score for student attachment was 81.05 with a minimum score of 28 (one student) and a maximum score of 100. The student who responded with responses totaling a score of 28 may not have been answering the questions honestly, but two more students scored 54, which is a more realistic minimum.

SCORES ON THE SAQ INSTRUMENT

What does a score of 81.19 in grade 9 and of 81.05 in grade 11 mean? In a similar study of grade 11 students, 373 students were surveyed from three schools (Zwarych 2004). The highest Attachment score was 79.43, followed by 76.85 and 75.69. The mean for the three sites combined was 77.82 and scores ranged from a low score of 46.00 to a high score of 98.00 in that study. The score at MMGCI for student attachment to school was much higher, indicating strong attachment to school and illustrating a potential benefit to grouping at the grade 9 level.

SELF DESCRIBED ACHIEVEMENT

- 19 students stated their marks were best described as above 90 per cent.
- 51 students stated their marks were best described as above 80 per cent.
- 29 students stated their marks were best described as above 70 per cent.
- 21 students stated their marks were best described as above 60 per cent.
- 11 students stated their marks were best described as above 50 per cent.
- 2 students stated their marks were best described as below 50 per cent.

Only one student did not respond to this question.

STUDENT ATTACHMENT TO SCHOOL

Finally, grade 11 students were asked if they would describe themselves as more or less attached than they were earlier in their school life. All of the students responded to this question resulting in the following statistics.

- 12 students responded they had increased their attachment to school with the majority (8 students) moving from moderately attached to school to attached to school.
- 5 students responded they had decreased in their attachment to school moving from mostly attached to school to moderately attached or from moderately attached to unattached to school.
- 117 students responded their attachment to school remained the same.

Of the 117 students responding that their attachment to school had remained the same, 63 students said they were moderately attached to school, 25 students stated they were attached to school, and 46 students stated they were unattached to school.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At the end of the day, it is the role of the researchers to report general conclusions or recommendations from this information. Based on the relatively high student attachment results and the students' declarations of attachment to school, which remained consistent for two years, an obvious conclusion would seem to be that the groupings may have helped with student attachment to school. There is not yet a great deal known about which school structures and social environments facilitate student attachment to school, but by studying the student attachment scores at Marion M. Graham Collegiate, then comparing the scores to previous studies, we know that students at this school scored higher than average. This may mean that the specific structure of Marion M. Graham Collegiate, which supported student interaction by providing a variety of

team building activities for grade 9 students and their teachers, facilitated a strong student attachment to school.

From this analysis, an obvious recommendation should be to maintain the grouped classes at the grade 9 level at Marion M. Graham Collegiate. Further study is necessary to determine the link between student attachment to school and student achievement. We know that students learn better in a positive, safe, emotionally caring environment and that environment is not created by accident. The structure created for grade 9's at Marion M. Graham Collegiate has influenced student attachment and the attachment remained even into grade 11 as apparent by the high attachment scores received by students completing the survey.

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