

Teacher Perceptions of Social Skills in Sixth-Graders in Elementary School versus Sixth-Graders in Middle School

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### Abstract

Sixth grade is a very exciting and interesting time for children where multiple life changes occur, including the type of school setting that 11 and 12 year olds attend. Each school district has the choice of placing sixth graders in either an elementary school or a middle school setting. When comparing the two different sixth grade groups, does the level of school influence their social skills level? In the present study, social skill levels between sixth graders in an elementary school setting and sixth graders in a middle school setting were examined. Seventy-six sixth grade teachers completed an online survey regarding the social skills of students in their class. Results showed there was no significant difference in social skill levels between sixth graders in an elementary school setting and sixth graders in a middle school setting.

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in Middle School

Sixth grade is a very exciting, interesting time for children. It is a time where life changes occur. This can include the type of school setting that 11 and 12 year olds attend. Each individual school district has the choice of placing sixth graders in an elementary school or a middle school setting. As sixth graders begin to enter this significant time of physical and emotional change, how do social skill levels differ in these students? As sixth graders begin this time of physical and emotional, cognitive, and social changes, how does the level of school influence their social skills level? Does school setting matter?

Sixth graders are entering into a great life change – the change from childhood to adolescence. Individuals begin to grow taller, change physically, and also change emotionally. One developing area is how an individual's social skills develop. Behaviors that a student displays in interpersonal situations where there is a good chance of reinforcement are known as a student's social skills (Elliott, Sheridan, & Gresham, 1989).

Schools are a vital resource to help students learn about themselves and grow as an individual. Grubrium and Buckholdt (1977) see schools as a place for socialization and a place to prepare students for life. Classes help students broaden their academic horizons while friends and peer groups help students develop important social skills. The development of a student's social skills transpires through interactions with parents, sibling, relatives, and peers (Powless & Elliot, 1993). A Carnegie Foundation study found that substantial emotional and social support structures are vital to prevent destructive behaviors and promote good health among early adolescents (Carnegie Corporation, 1996). Harter (1996) has shown that levels of emotional well-being are believed to contribute to adaptive functioning in social as well as academic

domains. Furthermore, strengthening the development of social decision-making and problem-solving abilities is a valuable strategy for promoting coping skills and preventing mental health problems in children (Elias & Branden, 1988).

School districts have the option to place sixth graders in an elementary or a middle school. Bukowski & Hoza (1989) found that individuals may adopt or develop specific behavioral styles or interests because they are considered to be desirable characteristics of their close friends. In an elementary school, sixth graders are the oldest students. They are generally surrounded by younger, more immature students daily. With no older students to model and observe how to act more maturely in the school setting, these sixth graders may lack mature social skills in comparison to their sixth grade middle school counterparts. In contrast, Nottelmann (1987) found that sixth grade teachers in middle school rated students lower on cognitive and social competence than sixth grade teachers in elementary school. This may be because teachers in middle school have more expectations in performance and behavior than teachers in elementary school. Sixth grade students attending middle school are much more likely to be cited for discipline problems than those in elementary schools (Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2008). These authors believe that sixth graders are at an especially impressionable age where being around older students and less strict supervision may have negative consequences. They have a strong argument for separating sixth graders from older peers. Barber & Olsen (2004) found sixth grade students reported a decreased quality of the school environment and decreased personal and interpersonal functioning during the transition to middle school. An analysis revealed that transition school environment (having the sixth graders in a middle school) did significantly explain changes in levels of student personal and interpersonal functioning.

Teachers spend a large amount of time with students. They primarily see the students in the structured classroom setting (Bell-Dolan & Allan, 1998). Some teachers believe that the timing of the transition from elementary to secondary school is key (Simmons, Blyth, Van Cleave, & Bush, 1973). Teachers view social skill level and competence in relation to the overall school environment. They see sixth graders in elementary school who are in the highest grade in school at the top of the competence hierarchy. They then see sixth graders in middle school who are in the lowest grade in the school at the bottom of the competence hierarchy. Therefore, teachers may see sixth graders in middle school as less socially mature than their elementary school counterparts.

As discussed, past research has suggested that school is an optimal learning environment for social skills. The present study will investigate if there is a difference in the social skill levels of sixth graders. The following specific research question was analyzed: Is there a statistically significant difference in social skill levels of 6<sup>th</sup> graders, depending on the structure of the school of those students (elementary vs. middle school)? The null hypothesis is going to be tested. It is expected there will be no significant difference in social skill levels between sixth graders in an elementary school setting and sixth graders in a middle school setting.

## Method

### *Participants*

The researchers emailed a survey to teachers by locating email addresses publicly displayed on school district's websites from surrounding areas. The responding population consisted of 76 sixth grade teachers from public schools in a large Midwestern metropolitan area. Table 1 consists of the respondent's demographic information. The sample was comprised of 26 sixth grade elementary school teachers and 50 sixth grade middle school teachers. The school

Table 1

## Demographics of Participants

Variable	Category	<i>N</i>	%
Gender ( <i>N</i> = 76)	Female	63	82.9
	Male	13	17.1
School Type ( <i>N</i> = 76)	Elementary School	25	32.9
	Middle School	51	67.1
School Setting ( <i>N</i> = 76)	Urban	13	17.1
	Suburban	42	55.3
	Rural	21	27.6

Table 2

## Crosstabulation of School Setting and Teacher Gender

School Setting	Gender		$\chi^2$
	Females	Males	
Elementary School	42	9	.032 <sup>a</sup>
Middle School	21	4	

<sup>a</sup> 1 cell (25.0%) has expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.28

Table 3

## Crosstabulation of Demographic Area and Teacher Gender

Demographic Area	Gender		$\chi^2$
	Females	Males	
Urban	11	2	.089 <sup>a</sup>
Suburban	35	7	
Rural	17	4	

<sup>a</sup> 2 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.22

Table 4

Crosstabulation of School Setting and Demographic Area

School Setting	Demographic Area			$\chi^2$
	Urban	Suburban	Rural	
Elementary School	10	28	13	.829 <sup>a</sup>
Middle School	3	14	8	

<sup>a</sup> 1 cell (16.7%) has expected count less than 5. the minimum expected count is 4.28

demographics consisted of 13 teachers from urban schools, 42 teachers from suburban schools, and 21 teachers from rural schools. Sixty three female teachers and 13 male teachers participated.

#### Method

##### *Participants*

The researchers emailed a survey to teachers by locating email addresses publicly displayed on school district's websites from surrounding areas. The responding population consisted of 76 sixth grade teachers from public schools in a large Midwestern metropolitan area. Table 1 consists of the respondent's demographic information. The sample was comprised of 26 sixth grade elementary school teachers and 50 sixth grade middle school teachers. The school demographics consisted of 13 teachers from urban schools, 42 teachers from suburban schools, and 21 teachers from rural schools. Sixty three female teachers and 13 male teachers participated.

A Pearson Chi-square test for gender and school setting was not significant [ $\chi^2(N = 76) = .032, p > .05$ .] indicating similar gender variation of teachers in elementary schools and teachers in middle schools. Similarly, a Pearson Chi-square test for gender and demographic area

Table 5

## Survey Items

Item Number	Statement
1	Listen to an informational talk for at least 15 minutes
2	Give complex directions to others
3	Get to class on time
4	Choose not to say embarrassing or mean things
5	Place reasonable demands on friendships
6	Use caution when talking about personal things
7	Cooperate with others to plan to be a part of an activity
8	Demonstrate understanding of hints or indirect cues in conversation
9	Follow rules in the classroom
10	Take turns without being asked
11	Show good sportsmanship
12	Say “please” when asking for something
13	Respond appropriately to reasonable changes in routine
14	Choose not to taunt tease or bully
15	Say when they are sorry after hurting another’s feelings
16	Talk with others without interrupting or being rude
17	Accept helpful suggestions or solutions from others
18	Control anger or hurt feelings when they do not get their way
19	Think about what could happen before making decisions
20	Avoid behaving inappropriate at the urging of others

was not significant [ $\chi^2(N = 76) = .089, p > .05$ ] indicating comparable gender variation across teachers in urban, suburban, and rural locations. Furthermore, a Pearson Chi-square test for demographic area and school setting was not significant [ $\chi^2(N = 76) = .829, p > .05$ ]. (See Tables 1-4).

### *Instrument*

A survey was created using questions adapted from the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale – Second Edition (Sparrow, Cicchetti, & Balla, 2005). This was a teacher survey that

Table 6  
Intercorrelation Between Survey Items

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Total
1	1																				
2	.471**	1																			
3	.250*	.029	1																		
4	.231*	.258*	.245*	1																	
5	.202	.163	.164	.376**	1																
6	.276*	.240*	.156	.279*	.350**	1															
7	.142	-.175	.139	.182	.084	.400**	1														
8	.200*	.227*	.096	.172	.323**	.250*	.089	1													
9	.323**	.127	.408**	.431**	.026	.194	.290*	.187	1												
10	.344**	.255*	.147	.431**	.205	.190	.182	.226	.449**	1											
11	.310**	.108	.076	.326*	.291**	.505**	.355**	.268*	.256*	.500**	1										
12	.118	-.032	.255*	.269**	.114	.215	.264*	.088	.388**	.237*	.171	1									
13	.338**	.152	.066	.209*	.192	.302**	.172	.277*	.290**	.382**	.250*	.230*	1								
14	.150	-.017	.090	.350**	.237*	.374**	.149	.055	.156	.065	.366**	.047	.205	1							
15	-.048	-.092	.163	.130	-.011	.332**	.288**	.166	.273*	.220	.436**	.317**	.177	.331**	1						
16	.134	.096	.218	.537**	.271*	.325**	.210*	.155	.383**	.441**	.239*	.195	.242*	.332**	.320**	1					
17	.295**	.102	.092	.331**	.202	.123	.193	.289*	.325**	.181	.191	.293*	.163	.069	.145	.336**	1				
18	.140	.000	.190	.446**	.255*	.029	.167	.349**	.379**	.329**	.182	.202	.449**	.325**	.227	.320**	.414**	1			
19	.264*	.124	-.104	.315**	.107	.165	.234*	.395**	.167	.237*	.236*	.225*	.417**	.266*	.301**	.256*	.283*	.478**	1		
20	.110	.139	.130	.442**	.218	.042	.112	.186	.388**	.190	.115	.323**	.126	.261*	.231*	.342**	.217	.451**	.456**	1	
<b>Total</b>	<b>.526**</b>	<b>.346**</b>	<b>.356**</b>	<b>.678**</b>	<b>.465**</b>	<b>.562**</b>	<b>.402**</b>	<b>.476**</b>	<b>.604**</b>	<b>.598**</b>	<b>.572**</b>	<b>.477**</b>	<b>.553**</b>	<b>.461**</b>	<b>.457**</b>	<b>.620**</b>	<b>.484**</b>	<b>.592**</b>	<b>.571**</b>	<b>.538**</b>	<b>1</b>

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)  
\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

consisted of 20 questions regarding the social skills of students in their class. These items are presented in Table 5. Participants answered the questions by rating their class on a scale of one to five, with one being strongly disagree and five being strongly agree. In addition to the social skills statements, teachers were asked if they were male or female, whether they taught in an elementary school or in a middle school, and if teachers considered their schools to be in urban, suburban, or rural locations. The social skills survey was posted on Survey Monkey, an online survey site. Once responses were received, scores were totaled. Higher totals indicated a higher level of social skills. Table 6 shows Pearson correlations between each of the survey items.

Internal reliability of the scale was also tested. A Cronbach's  $\alpha$  calculated to be .85 indicates that the scale created has good internal reliability.

### *Procedure*

Communication with sixth grade teachers began at the beginning of the fall 2007 school year. The teachers' email addresses were accessed on the school districts' websites. The schools were chosen by being located in the large Midwestern metropolitan area where the study was taking place, and having access to teachers' emails on their district website. A preliminary email was sent to the teachers to introduce the examiners of the study and communicate the contents and scope of the study. The preliminary email made the sixth grade teachers aware that within the next week they were going to receive a link to Survey Monkey for the social skills survey. The email message indicated that the study was approved by the University of Wisconsin – River Falls Institutional Review Board and that risks of participation were few and of low magnitude and that participation was voluntary. The link for the survey was then distributed via email a week later, with a reminder email the following week. The survey was distributed a few months into the school year so the teachers knew their students better and could complete a survey about them more accurately.

### Results

Analysis was performed to identify any differences between the total social skills scores of sixth graders attending an elementary school and sixth graders attending a middle school as perceived by teachers. An independent t-test revealed that teachers in elementary and middle schools perceived students in their class to have similar levels of social skills as measured by the social skills survey ( $M = 72.99$ ,  $SD = 6.09$  and  $M = 70.82$ ,  $SD = 8.66$  respectively). There was no significant difference in the total social skills score between sixth graders attending an

Table 7

Mean Social Skills Scores of Sixth Grade Students in Elementary and Middle School

Survey Item #	School Setting		<i>t</i>
	Elementary	Middle School	
1	4.08	3.51	2.628*
2	3.16	2.90	1.138
3	4.34	4.35	-.701
4	3.56	3.63	-.317
5	3.56	3.59	-.153
6	3.48	3.14	1.555
7	4.04	3.92	.841
8	3.80	3.51	1.643
9	4.00	4.04	-.283
10	3.84	3.61	1.240
11	4.00	3.76	2.867*
12	3.50	3.47	.128
13	3.67	3.25	2.030
14	3.54	3.59	-.253
15	3.58	3.51	.380
16	3.00	3.14	-.614
17	3.84	3.80	.275
18	3.60	3.62	-.120
19	3.24	3.02	1.103
20	3.28	3.45	-.807
<b>Total</b>	<b>72.99</b>	<b>70.82</b>	<b>1.126</b>

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

elementary school and sixth graders attending a middle school ( $t(74) = 1.126, p > .05$ ) in this particular convenience sample where teacher perceptions were used. The null hypothesis cannot be rejected at this time. *T*-test results are provided in Table 7.

Further analysis of the entire sample population revealed that male teachers rated their sixth grade students higher ( $M = 75.85, SD = 9.20$ ) than female teachers rated their students ( $M = 70.64, SD = 7.41$ ). An independent *t*-test indicated that there was a significant difference between total social skills scores of raters who were male and raters who were female ( $t = 2.209, p < .05$ ).

The researchers of this study continued analysis by exploring differences between total social skills scores among teacher from different demographic areas. A one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that total social skills scores were not influenced by urban ( $M = 70.05$ ,  $SD = 9.86$ ), suburban ( $M = 72.00$ ,  $SD = 8.55$ ), and rural ( $M = 71.52$ ,  $SD = 71.52$ ) demographic areas ( $F = .294$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

Finally, in consideration of specific survey items utilized, independent t-test analysis revealed significant differences between mean scores of the survey item, “listen to an informational talk for 15 minutes” as rated by teachers employed by elementary schools versus teachers employed by middle schools ( $t = 2.628$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The mean score as rated by elementary school teachers for this item was 4.08 with a standard deviation of .81 The mean score as rated by middle school teachers was 3.51 with a standard deviation of 1.03. Additionally, the mean score on the item “shows good sportsmanship” was higher as rated by elementary school teachers than by middle school teachers ( $M = 4.0$ ,  $SD = .00$ ) and ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = .586$ ). This difference was significant as indicated by an independent t-test analysis ( $t = 2.867$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

### Discussion

The results of the analysis suggest that sixth graders in elementary school and middle school settings do not differ in their social skills levels as perceived by their teachers and measured by this current study. This data suggests that even though sixth graders in elementary schools are the oldest in the school and do not have older role model peers, they did not differ significantly from their same aged peers attending middle school who have many older peers to serve as social skills role models. According to the present study, school setting does not have an impact on social skills in sixth graders as perceived by their teachers.

Further analysis revealed significant differences between total social skill scores depending on whether the teacher rating their students was male or female with male teachers perceiving their students to have more social skills than female teachers perceived their students. Possible explanations for this difference may include that the male teachers who participated in the study had more positive perceptions of their sixth grade students. The male teachers may have also had a higher tolerance for more immature social behaviors, therefore not seeing them as being socially immature for that age level.

Elementary sixth graders were rated to have higher mean scores for the items, “listen to an informational talk for 15 minutes” and “show good sportsmanship” as perceived by their teachers. This coincides with the previously mentioned Nottelman (1987) study in which sixth grade teacher in middle schools rated students lower on cognitive and social competence measures than sixth grade teachers in elementary schools. Perhaps the middle school teachers who completed the survey as part of this research study had higher expectations of their students regarding how long their students should be able to sit and attend to a discussion and the degree of sportsmanship students should demonstrate.

Limitations of this study include lack of broad geographical representation, the use a relatively small sample size. Another limitation was the fact that teachers were asked to answer questions about their sixth grade classrooms as a whole. Individual students in a single classroom will display a wide range of social competence. The uniqueness of each student would potentially make answering questions about an entire classroom difficult. More accurate scores may have been obtained if the researchers asked parents to complete the same survey about their sixth grade students on an individual basis.

In the future a similar study could be done with a more comprehensive survey of social skill competence in order to compare scores with a normed sample. Future research may include longitudinal studies of students placed in elementary schools versus middle schools in sixth grade. It is possible school setting placement has an effect on later social skills development. An additional idea for future studies would be the social skills levels of ninth graders in a junior high versus high school settings.

Overall, this present study did not support the idea that social skills differ between sixth graders in an elementary school and sixth graders in a middle school as measured by teacher's perceptions of their whole classroom.

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