



# Montessori Middle School and the Transition to High School: Student Narratives

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**Abstract:** This narrative study investigated through storytelling the experiences of five students who attended a Montessori middle school and then transitioned to a public high school. The testimonies of the participants highlighted that, to help students make a successful transition to high school, it is useful to consider three elements: (a) developing academic and social-emotional skills, (b) fostering positive attitudes toward learning, and (c) creating opportunities to practice self-reliance, self-advocacy, and grit. The experience of these particular students accentuates the ability of a Montessori middle school to emphasize both academic rigor and the social-emotional skills that build the fortitude necessary for students to successfully transition to high school. This study suggests that Montessori middle school practices may foster the intellectual and emotional growth of students so that they can successfully transition to high school and are potentially buffered from many of the detrimental academic and emotional impacts of ninth grade.

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Middle school education is a critical time for supporting the developmental needs of adolescents. Supporting the development of the whole child is reflected in both the middle school concept and the educational philosophy of Maria Montessori. The emergence in the 1960s and 1970s of the middle school movement featured an emphasis on individualized instruction, team teaching, and interdisciplinary planning (Schaefer et al., 2016). Other essential components of middle school education include exploratory learning, recognizing the diverse needs of adolescents, promoting student engagement, moral education, and cooperative learning (Schaefer et al., 2016). By the 1980s, middle-level education was a national movement characterized

by a developmentally responsive curriculum that sought to engage students in considering their feelings and choices and the consequences of their actions on themselves and others (Schaefer et al., 2016). The middle school movement flourished in the 1990s, and research supported middle school values such as critical thinking, literacy, collaborative learning, character development, and a responsive curriculum (Schaefer et al., 2016).

The middle school concept, particularly its preferred teaching practices, has been unraveling, however, because of a focus on standardized test scores (STS; Robinson, 2017). In 2001, the middle school movement came under siege by pressures from No Child Left Behind (2002), which focused on measurable outcomes such

as STS (Schaefer et al., 2016), and later by the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). Middle school teaching practices have shifted away from meeting the cognitive and noncognitive needs of their students toward teaching practices that are primarily driven by test content. Middle schools tend to myopically focus on STS, dismissing the overall well-being of the adolescent child in favor of his or her ability to perform on a test.

This research study was conducted with students who attended a private Montessori middle school to better understand the impact that experiential learning, in stark contrast to a focus on STS, could have on the transition to high school (referred to in this study simply as the “Transition”). Students show a consistent decline in grades from middle school to high school (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Benner & Graham, 2009), as well as a decline on achievement test scores across core-content areas (Allensworth et al., 2014). Not only are freshmen contending with physical, emotional, and pubertal changes, there are additional factors: longstanding relationships with teachers and peers are disrupted; high schools tend to be larger, more impersonal, and competitive; and students typically experience greater autonomy from their parents (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). More students fail ninth grade than any other grade (National High School Center, 2007), and promotion rates between ninth and tenth grades are significantly lower than rates between any other grades (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). The Transition also poses challenges for the social-emotional well-being of students. Research indicates that during the Transition, adolescents experience greater anxiety, feelings of loneliness, and depression as they attempt to adapt to high school (De Wit et al., 2011). The developmental responsiveness of the school environment is a critical component in the relative level of support students receive as they make the Transition.

## Literature

Montessori middle schools seek to provide a learning culture that integrates cognitive development with the social-emotional well-being of the child—in short, a learning experience that embodies the middle school concept.

The middle school concept is a conceptual framework with the following characteristics:

interdisciplinary teams of teachers who share students and planning time, a focus on the needs of the whole child beyond the academic, an exploratory program with features that develop the health and wellness of the child, active learning instructional methodologies, and shared decision-making among parents and the community (Chen et al., 2012; Edwards et al., 2014; Manning, 2000; Watts et al., 2013).

The middle school concept promotes learner-centered education and has its roots in progressivism education philosophy, which holds that it is the educator’s responsibility to focus on the needs of adolescents, draw out their inherent capabilities, and inspire their growth by utilizing the best pedagogical methodology (Chen et al., 2012; Edwards et al., 2014). Active learning that is peer- and group-oriented and that involves gaining new knowledge through problem-solving, inquiry, experiential learning, interdisciplinary projects, and group process activities is favored (Chen et al., 2012; Edwards et al., 2014; Manning, 2000; Watts et al., 2013). Montessori middle school classrooms embrace and incorporate these practices.

### **Middle School Practices Meet Cognitive and Social-Emotional Needs**

Research demonstrates that cognitive and social-emotional skills develop together (Sibley et al., 2017). In both *The Exemplary Middle School* (George & Alexander, 2003), as cited in Watts et al. (2013), and *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association, 2003), also cited in Watts et al. (2013), the vision for the middle school concept is articulated, including the instructional teaching practices described in Table 1.

Table 1 identifies some of the essential teaching practices that the middle school concept promotes to meet cognitive and social-emotional needs. Educational teaching practices used in Montessori middle school classrooms, such as project-based learning, problem-based learning, and exploratory learning, align with the middle school concept. Research on project-based learning and problem-based learning has found that teachers who use interdisciplinary approaches to instruction tend to more fully engage their students, create more positive classroom environments, and develop closer relationships with their students (Netcoh & Bishop, 2017). Additionally, Doda and George (1999) discussed acquisition of knowledge that is enhanced

**Table 1**

*Characteristics and Teaching Practices Compared*

<p>Characteristics from <i>The Exemplary Middle School</i> (George &amp; Alexander, 2003), as cited in Watts et al. (2013)</p>	<p>Characteristics from <i>This We Believe</i> (National Middle School Association, 2003), as cited in Watts et al. (2013)</p>
<p><u>Curriculum</u>            Curricula that integrate multiple academic disciplines            Articulation of middle-level curricula with high school curricula and expectations            Exploratory/encore courses in the arts, athletics, or careers            Emphasis on students' social and emotional growth            Concern for students' health, wellness, and safety            Shared responsibility for students' literacy and numeracy skills</p> <p><u>Instructing and advising</u>            Teachers specifically interested/trained in working with young adolescents            Professional development explicitly focused on the middle school            Interdisciplinary teams of teachers having common planning time            One or more guidance counselors working intensively with students            Assessment that makes use of real-world tasks            Flexible scheduling that may span the school day, week, or year            Heterogeneous and/or multiage student-grouping arrangements</p> <p><u>Governance</u>            Participatory and inclusive decision-making processes            Parental involvement in student learning parental and community involvement in school governance</p>	<p><u>Curriculum, instruction, and assessment</u>            Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them.            Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.            Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.            Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches.            Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.</p> <p><u>Leadership and organization</u>            A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision.            Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices.            Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration.            Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices.            Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.</p> <p><u>Culture and community</u>            The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all.            Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.            Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents.            Health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies.            The school actively involves families in the education of their children.            The school includes community and business partners.</p>

by engaging learners in both kinesthetic activity and exploratory learning that includes problem-solving, brainstorming, and decision-making.

An emphasis on social-emotional learning (SEL) and respect for the whole child may be considered an extension of both the middle school concept generally and the Montessori approach, in that they both address the overall health and well-being of the adolescent. SEL is particularly important at the middle level because of the developmental needs of the whole adolescent child. SEL has been shown to improve academic learning, increase motivation and perseverance, decrease anxiety and stress, and improve student behavior (Aidman & Price, 2018). According to the American Montessori Society (n.d.), an authentic Montessori middle school classroom is characterized by a student-centered approach that encourages students to develop their independent self-management, exercise choice, and practice self-regulation. Table 2 shows the major components of a Montessori Secondary education environment, as described by the American Montessori Society (n.d.).

At their essence, Montessori middle school programs give adolescents opportunities to experience self-worth through important work that addresses their need for creativity, problem-solving, and independence (American Montessori Society, 2020).

### **Impact of Standardized Testing on Middle Schools**

Placing mastery of content on STS as the sole or predominant means of assessment detrimentally affects students and middle school teaching practices in the areas of instruction, curriculum, subject matter, and student groupings (Chen et al., 2012). In fact, STS is the most significant hurdle preventing the adoption of experiential learning pedagogies (Scogin et al., 2017). Research reveals a trend away from middle school best practices, and their attention to the needs of learners, toward meeting the demands of the test instead (Musoleno & White, 2010). Public Montessori schools also face the pressures of high-stakes testing; however, by nature and practice, Montessori philosophy is not well aligned with state achievement tests (Chattin-McNichols, 2016). The uneven profile of a child is expected and welcomed in Montessori classrooms, but it is problematic in an STS environment (Chattin-McNichols, 2016).

### **Middle School to High School Transition**

Research indicates that the Transition can significantly affect students' academic performance and social-emotional well-being. Neild (2009) suggested that the organization of the high school itself is a major source of students' difficulties in their ability to successfully complete the Transition. Each class brings a different teacher and different peer group, so that students are left feeling anonymous and alienated; no single teacher knows how the student is doing overall, either academically or socially (Neild, 2009). An additional structural challenge during the Transition is that students break social bonds with teachers and peers from middle school at the same time they need to negotiate new social relationships, adapt to new school practices, and learn new school routines (Neild, 2009). Felmlee et al. (2018) articulated that physically transitioning into a new building for high school affects adolescent friendship networks, which in turn affects their ability to make a successful Transition. Students who made this physical transition had fewer friends, were more likely to become isolated, and had significantly lower odds of obtaining high grades; these outcomes persisted throughout high school (Felmlee et al., 2018).

Ninth grade is a key educational year, and efforts to decrease the dropout rate ought to focus on the critical Transition (Neild et al., 2008). Students' lack of preparation may be caused in part by a lack of communication between eighth- and ninth-grade teachers concerning their students' academic, social, and organizational issues (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Middle school educators can help provide continuity during the Transition by sharing both insights about the developmental needs of incoming ninth graders and successful strategies to best support those students (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). Collaborating with ninth-grade teachers, much in the way that middle school teachers collaborate with each other, can immensely benefit students because they will start ninth grade with their teachers better understanding their needs.

### **Method**

The intention of this narrative study is to share the participants' Montessori middle school experiences so that others may understand how those experiences

**Table 2**

*Characteristics of Montessori Secondary Environment*

Multiage groupings	Uninterrupted work periods	Spiral curriculum	What adolescents learn	Additional components
<p>Students are commonly grouped in 2- or 3-year age cohorts. A middle school may offer grades 7 and 8.</p> <p>These communities allow opportunities for collaborative work and student leadership through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• regularly scheduled, student-led community meetings</li> <li>• activities, such as in inquiry-based problem-solving and applied scientific method, that encourage diversity of perspectives, thoughts, and learning styles</li> <li>• compassionate and respectful relationships and an appreciation of differences</li> </ul>	<p>The daily schedule allows for uninterrupted work periods of 2 hours or more in core curricular subjects.</p> <p>Uninterrupted work periods honor student choice, foster concentration, and support student engagement, while allowing for deep inquiry and a chance to work in collaborative project teams.</p>	<p>A <i>spiral curriculum</i> exposes students to many interrelated topics repeatedly over time, resulting in broad and deep knowledge.</p> <p>Students are academically challenged and given reasonable opportunities for pacing work to meet their needs, while also learning responsibility, meeting deadlines, and mastering skills and concepts with the support and guidance of master teachers.</p>	<p>Montessori Secondary programs are rooted in hands-on, experiential learning that includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• advanced courses in language arts, mathematics, sciences, and social studies that are academically challenging</li> <li>• specialized courses including world languages, visual and performing arts, health and fitness, and participate in field studies (such as apprenticeships) and service learning</li> </ul> <p>Montessori philosophy acknowledges the need of the adolescent to serve others, so service is taught as a way to care for the school community and the world outside the school.</p> <p>Secondary students complete complex projects—a culmination of learning—that include research and presentation and illustrate their mastery of concepts.</p>	<p>A community within the classroom that allows opportunities to participate in classroom government and other leadership experiences</p> <p>Experiences in nature that cultivate respect for the environment</p> <p>Microeconomic experiences, such as developing and running a business, to promote a genuine understanding of currency</p> <p>Responsible and ethical use of technology, with the majority of the school day spent in learning activities and practices that require peer-to-peer and student-teacher interaction</p> <p>Manageable homework load and absence of high-stakes testing</p>



affected their Transitions. This was accomplished by the students reflecting, sharing, and storytelling with me, the researcher. By using an interpretivist paradigm, my purpose as a researcher was to describe, understand, and interpret the experiences of the participants together (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015, p. 12). The meaning of the participants' respective middle school experience was varied, multiple, and complex (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). From the interviews with the participants, I inductively generated a theory or pattern of meaning formed through the participants' views of the situation and their interactions with me (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). Through broad interview questions that initiated discussion and reflection, I sought to thoroughly and accurately document the perspective and make sense of the experience of participants who made the Transition from a Montessori middle school.

## Participants

The site of the study was a private, pre-K–8 Montessori school in a suburb outside a large city in the northeastern United States, which will be referred to as Rose Hill School. The participants in the study were five former students of the middle school who transitioned to a public high school and are currently in either their senior year of high school or their freshman year of college. Because all participants came from the same private school in a predominantly White community, there was minimal diversity in terms of socioeconomic status and race; however, other identities, such as gender, sexuality, religion, and parents' marital status, may affect each participant's experience of the Transition. I knew all the participants before the study, as they were former students whom I taught for 2 years as their seventh- and eighth-grade English and history teacher. Each narrative was gathered in a one-on-one interview. Pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant and to the Montessori school itself to preserve anonymity and confidentiality.

## Data Analysis

Initially, I reviewed each interview to get an overall sense of the participants' experiences. Next, with the research questions in mind, I formulated codes to reveal patterns and themes from the interview itself. I was

cognizant to code in such a way that the participants' words, perceptions, and opinions were paramount in the analysis. As Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested, it was essential that my bias for Montessori education not prejudice my analysis of the interviews. I particularly needed to be mindful not to insert my opinions and make sure that the voices of my participants were upheld throughout the process. As I coded, I wrote analytic memos to reflect on the interviews and the themes that emerged. Engaging in reflexivity about perspectives by writing analytic memos throughout the analysis process was a helpful validation strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Miles et al. (2014) advised two cycles of coding to derive patterns and explain the meaning of the data collected by assembling it into analyzable units. A second code is useful to add detail, enrich the meaning of the first code, and identify particular qualities that may emerge (Miles et al., 2014). As suggested by Miles et al. (2014), I employed a mix-and-match method that used descriptive, in vivo, and process coding to help organize, classify, and categorize the information. Specifically, I looked for repetitions in phrasing or content, categories explicitly offered by the participants, analogies or metaphors used, similarities and differences in their responses, and their reactions to questions. When comparing within a single interview, a researcher must examine the consistency of the interview as a whole by analyzing multiple references to the same code, repetition about categories, new information about categories, comments that are similar or different, and the context of comments (Boeije, 2002).

## Limitations of the Study

Conducting a narrative study presents several limitations that are intrinsic to the nature of this research. First, because the study focused on the stories of five students from a predominantly White and wealthy socioeconomic class, no attempt can be made to generalize the results and project them onto larger populations. Although the participants collectively lacked racial and socioeconomic diversity, each of their stories was unique and shared a perspective not present in the current literature. Additionally, some participants had attended the Montessori school since first grade, while others entered in seventh grade, which could have influenced their experience in Transition. Their stories simply reflect their own experiences of attending a

Montessori middle school and transitioning to a public high school.

Another limitation of this study that may be both a liability and an enabling factor is that I conducted all the interviews with the participants. Because I taught each of the participants for 2 years, students opened up more fully about their experiences and perhaps more easily than with someone they did not know. However, students may have been hesitant to fully disclose everything, knowing that I have relationships with the people in their narratives. The few times this issue came up, students seemed comfortable sharing when I assured them that people whom they were discussing would also remain confidential. My unique relationship with the participants did not prevent them from addressing their negative experiences, painful memories, or unfavorable outcomes.

## Findings

Rose Hill School is a Montessori school that serves students from 18 months old through grade 8. The middle school comprises grades 7 and 8 and in many ways prepares students to transition from a traditional Montessori school to a traditional high school. According to authentic Montessori middle school practices, the students are expected to engage in exploratory learning, take risks, reach new levels of achievement, and become confident, self-motivated learners. Additionally, the middle school is founded on the belief that children are naturally curious and eager to learn. Its core values are respect for the development of the whole child; deep learning that happens within a collaborative community built upon mutual respect; and engaging students in purposeful work so that they become self-disciplined, self-assured learners. Rose Hill diverges from authentic Montessori middle school practices in that students do not have uninterrupted work periods of 2 hours or more in the core curricular subjects. Rose Hill core classes are primarily in 45-minute blocks, although occasionally there are opportunities for deeper exploration for longer periods. Additionally, advanced courses are offered only in math; however, opportunities for extension are integrated into each core subject. Rose Hill embraces Montessori middle school practices in that the curriculum emphasizes critical thinking; flexible problem-solving; peer-to-peer, project-based learning; and teamwork based in experiential learning opportunities. The cross-disciplinary curriculum nurtures essential skills for

academic success, including the ability to work both independently and collaboratively, organize one's work and time, craft research into meaningful projects, communicate effectively, and think globally. Teachers at Rose Hill are expected to develop meaningful, personal relationships with their students. Teachers reach out to graduating students' ninth-grade guidance counselors to share their insights about each student the spring before students enter ninth grade.

Each interview explored the respective participants' experiences, including their academic and social successes and challenges, at the Rose Hill School and then in high school. Participants included "Eva," "Ira," "Steve," "Dave," and "Eric." Although the student stories are not generalizable, they provide insight into how middle schools can help make the Transition more successful. Themes emerged from the participants that they developed during middle school, which helped them make the Transition: academic skills, relationships with peers and teachers, and their attitudes toward learning and personal characteristics. A potential academic weakness of the Rose Hill School—lack of test preparation—is also discussed in this section.

### Academic Skills

At Rose Hill School, students thrive when stress is minimized and curiosity is encouraged; thus, the academic culture is rigorous but in a relaxed environment. All participants reported feeling prepared for the academic rigors of high school and described themselves as succeeding academically in high school. Specifically, participants discussed their ability to get good grades, executive functioning skills, presenting and writing, and a love and appreciation for learning that is relevant.

Participants explained that although grades were a significant focus in high school, they were not emphasized in middle school. At the Rose Hill School, students do not even receive traditional grades until middle school. Although grades are presented on the middle school progress report, the progress report emphasizes in equal part the student's social-emotional aptitude. Eva explained, "In middle school we just didn't talk about grades. . . . In high school, people were, like, checking their grades all the time." Addressing grade-related pressure in high school, Eva said, "I think it's great to have a middle school experience where there's less of that. . . ." While Ira was proud of his success on the AP exams in physics and psychology, he similarly discussed frustration with

the focus in high school on test scores and grades. He preferred the middle school atmosphere: “I think the pressure at, like, Rose Hill is to learn.”

Executive functioning skills are the self-management tools that students need to manage their time, organize and plan their workload, focus their attention, follow directions, and develop mental skills such as working memory, flexible thinking, and self-control. Ira joyfully remembered building a catapult in physics class at Rose Hill:

*I remember we planned it all out, planned out what materials we needed and how it was going to work in term of the physics . . . and then it was just really satisfying to see it work in the end because it was just really cool.*

The time management, organization, planning, and focused attention skills for this long-term project were helpful when Ira later joined his high school robotics team.

Participants expressed that presentations and writing are both frequently used in high school assessments and that Rose Hill prepared them well in these specific areas. Rose Hill students regularly present on their learning to demonstrate their mastery of understanding. Writing is often taught workshop-style in collaboration with peers and teachers. Steve reflected that working through the discomfort of giving his graduation speech to the entire Rose Hill community (a rite of passage for each graduate) helped him to develop the ability to “perform or carry out whatever tasks you need to in front of people and under pressure.” Dave was very confident about his presenting skills and emphasized that he was more competent than his high school peers. “I had the ability to put the right information on the slide, create talking points, use a notecard effectively . . . not just remembering a fact but take that fact and apply it to 10 different things.” Dave said he came into middle school feeling that writing was his biggest challenge:

*Just by doing it a lot and reading other people’s essays and having other people edit your essay was a very effective tool for me because then I see how they’re looking at my writing. . . . To have another student who’s at your level and say what you did right and wrong and how you can go further with whatever ideas you have, I think, was a very effective tool.*

Dave said about writing, “Now I’m pretty stellar at it!”

Participants also left middle school with an appreciation for learning that is relevant. Rose Hill creates learning experiences that are personally relevant to students’ aspirations and interests or are connected to real-world issues, problems, and contexts. For example, a cornerstone of the middle school experience is that all students work at a nearby organic farm every Friday for half the day. This experience teaches students teamwork, knowing where their food comes from, the value in manual labor, the role of nonprofits in a community, and the ethics of hard work. It stood out to Steve because it was “something that was, like, more in the real world.” While at the farm each week, students frequently had to find ways to solve problems for themselves in the moment because things do not always go according to plan. Students are often left to come up with their own solutions. From practicing this at the farm, Steve said he was not rattled when, in the first week of his large high school of 2,000 students, he had to figure out how to find his classes.

Ira spoke about Rose Hill’s emphasis on learning for the sake of learning. Because of that, he preferred classes in high school that also focused on learning for what the subject had to offer: “instead of just trying to get numbers right on the test, it was more about just actually knowing the topic” and not just getting a good grade. He discussed a high school astronomy class he loved:

*The assignments took some time but were actually really fun—like there was one I distinctly remember where once a week you had to go outside and find the star, record a bunch of data like what star it is, its luminosity, and that was really fun to go outside at night and pick a star and look it up. That’s cool.*

A potential academic weakness of attending a Montessori middle school was the students’ relative lack of preparedness for a learning environment that uses tests as its primary form of assessment. Participants expressed that they had minimal experience with taking tests, test-taking strategies, and rote memorization. Dave had the feeling from middle school teachers that tests did not matter, so it was a huge adjustment to learn that the standardized tests administered in high school not only mattered, but passing them was needed for graduation. Also, Dave felt that he was never taught how to study for a test or memorize material: “I just never had the tools or got taught how to study for a test.” He was frustrated



because he did not have the ability to determine which material covered in a class would be on a test. More practice with test preparation in middle school would have benefited Dave.

### **Relationships With Peers and Teachers**

All participants discussed how their interpersonal relationships in middle school helped them learn essential social skills, including making friends, resolving conflict, and collaboration. Ira felt the small class sizes at Rose Hill helped develop social skills with people with whom one might not share common interests. Because there are not always options for making friends with people who are similar, it pushes students to learn how to engage and connect with different types of people. Eva said, “I had some people that I was more friends with than others . . . , but if we were, like, doing a group project or sitting at lunch or something, I could just sit with anyone or work with anyone.”

Participants felt that they learned how to resolve conflict with peers at Rose Hill. Because the school was so small, they could not simply avoid a student with whom they were having a problem. Students discovered that conflict is a normal, healthy part of a relationship and that, by being respectful and expressing emotions in a calm manner, they could work through it. In the process of working out problems, students learn active listening, forgiveness, communication, and the importance of maintaining relationships. For example, Eric described a situation with a fellow Rose Hill student who at recess was more physical and competitive, and he felt pushed around by him: “It was just something we had to work out, and sometimes you just have to learn how to speak up when you don’t feel something is right in that situation.” He discussed bringing the problem to a teacher, and the three of them “talked it out”; afterward, “it was definitely better and improved. . . .” Similarly, Dave spoke about learning empathy through an art project during middle school:

*We did the art thing with the canvases where we have to exemplify on [depict with images and words] the word “empathy,” and that word had the biggest impact on me on a social level because you know I can be a little rough at times. . . . I learned there’s a right way to communicate and a less effective way.*

At Rose Hill, middle school students have many opportunities to practice working with others to achieve a goal. Successful collaboration requires skills such as giving and receiving feedback on ideas, acknowledging other people’s contributions, listening to the concerns and opinions of others, sharing information and workload, and negotiating to solve problems and achieve goals. For example, several of the participants discussed their happy memories from attending Montessori Model United Nations (MMUN). Rose Hill requires all students to participate and dedicates one history class each week to prepare for the annual MMUN conference in New York City. Students deliver an opening speech, represent the interests of a specific country, and write and submit a position paper on a topic. At the conference, students collaborate with students from around the world to pass resolutions on their topics. Ira said,

*I remember MMUN very distinctly. . . . There was a lot of negotiation, actually, like, working together with people you don’t necessarily know trying to get something collective done. And it was interesting. . . . We had a common goal, and we learned how to rally around that and get something done. That’s a very good skill to have.*

Each of the participants discussed close relationships with their middle school teachers. Students said that they went into high school with the expectation that these were relationships they should have and described employing strong communication skills to cultivate these relationships. Eva reported that in middle school,

*there was a lot of emphasis on talking to the teachers if there was a problem, and I definitely felt comfortable doing that. . . . You [the interviewer] were right there so we could chat, go get help whenever we needed it, and stuff, which was really nice.*

Eva reported that when she struggled with a class in high school, she would always go to her teachers first. Dave also said he felt very comfortable going to his middle school teachers for academic help, so he “had no trouble doing that” in high school. Dave and Ira explained that it was possible to have great relationships with teachers in high school, but students had to initiate and push for it.

### Attitudes and Personal Characteristics

Participants expressed that attitudes toward learning in middle school emerged into two major themes: a love of learning and a perception that a school should be a community. Middle school was about encouraging their curiosity, creativity, and understanding of themselves. They describe engaging in learning because it was personally rewarding and worthwhile for its own sake, rather than to secure a grade.

Eva described a few projects in middle school in which she was able to integrate art into her assignments:

*I remember really liking a way to show my knowledge of the book by using art, which is something I enjoyed doing. . . . When we read the plays Macbeth and Romeo and Juliet, we made those CDs and album covers that represent something about the play, and I really liked doing that.*

Participants expressed the attitude that school should feel like a community. For example, Eric said that community bonding at Rose Hill “was really unique, [and] I hadn’t experienced that before in an educational setting.” Steve talked about how he really liked the spring and winter concerts in middle school because they brought the whole school community together. Dave mentioned the importance of the weekly community meetings at Rose Hill, at which everyone got together to discuss how the community was doing, celebrate successes, and resolve any concerns.

Through their stories, students described certain personal characteristics necessary to navigate their new educational setting, which included self-reliance, self-advocacy, and grit. Participants discussed the culture shock they experienced in the Transition: having to contend with a bigger school building, new systems, new schedules, a larger population of students, and new teachers. Rose Hill helped them be self-reliant to manage the discomfort associated with this new setting. For example, at the start of middle school each student determines a service project at the school to participate in weekly throughout the year. Students have to interact with adults at Rose Hill whom they do not know well to supervise their projects, pushing students to adjust to the expectations of different teachers, get to know a different population outside the middle school, and rely on themselves often to accomplish the goals of their project. For example, students have initiated beautification

projects, tutored upper elementary students, or worked with toddlers on practical life skills. In this way students experienced helping manage the discomfort of adjusting to a new high school setting. For example, Dave struggled with the larger school environment: “There’s so many aspects of it that were incredibly complex for someone who wasn’t used to that. . . . It was just something foreign to me that made it incredibly stressful for the first semester.” And yet, he was able to rely on himself and figure it out: “I stayed late a couple days to just walk circles around the school because I was like, let me just try and figure this out—you know, practice by exploring.”

Eric spoke about advocating for himself with his high school teachers to have his 504 plan implemented in his classes: “Most of the time I was the one to kind of bring it [the 504 plan] up to them. . . , advocate for myself for that.” Although Eric said he would always struggle with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), he had confidence that it would not prevent him from thriving academically. In middle school, Eric regularly met with his teachers to talk about his challenges in completing homework on time. He was very open with middle school teachers about his OCD and how it affected his learning experience. When the time came to explain his situation to high school teachers, Eric was able to draw upon this experience with self-advocacy.

*Grit* is having the courage, resolve, and strength of character to persevere despite being confronted by obstacles and challenges. Ira spoke about how he generally liked working at the farm, but some Fridays it was awful.

*I remember one time, it was early December, and they had just gotten rid of all the turkeys, and we had to shovel out all the turkey poop. It was frozen, and it was really cold that morning. It was just generally unpleasant.*

Ira was able to process the negative aspects of farmwork and persevere to appreciate the good aspects of the experience. Ira then spoke about an experience in his freshman year in which he struggled to figure out the online math homework:

*I didn’t know the system at all. And it was just really messing up. . . . I just kept trying to do it. Honestly, it was just [that] persistence paid off. I did all the systems, did all the homework, and just kept working at it, and eventually it just became, I know the system. I can do anything in it.*

Eva wrote her college essay about how she knew she would be able to overcome the obstacles of transitioning from high school to college because her middle school experience taught her she had the fortitude for the previous Transition.

*I think the best thing [Rose Hill] did for me is that I felt very comfortable. I knew what I was interested in because I had a lot of chances to figure out what I was interested in. I was confident in my academic abilities. . . . It was like I felt more confident in myself to deal with the transitions, even if it was a big transition.*

## Overview and Discussion of Findings

The findings of this research indicate that the Montessori middle school enriched these students' learning experience, made learning more personally meaningful, and fostered academic and emotional development. The students who attended Rose Hill School were intrinsically engaged in middle school, and that engagement persisted throughout high school and even into college, even after students were no longer in educational environments that embraced experiential learning. The benefits of developing close relationships with peers and teachers in middle school also persisted, in that the participants sought out high-quality peer and teacher relationships in high school. Personal characteristics that are essential in helping students make the Transition, such as self-reliance, self-advocacy, and grit, were developed during their Montessori middle school years.

Additionally, a lower-pressure learning environment that did not emphasize grades prepared students for the academic rigors of high school. Students developed an appreciation for learning that was relevant, and that appreciation persisted into high school and beyond. Participants felt validated in middle school for their interests, were encouraged to pursue what they cared about, and felt engaged in their learning process. Participants expressed that their middle school education fostered a love of learning and that their learning experiences were about encouraging their curiosity, creativity, and understanding of themselves.

Students discussed how their interpersonal relationships in middle school helped them learn essential social skills, such as making friends, resolving conflict, and collaboration, which were necessary for high school. Because classes were small, students engaged with

different types of people. They discovered that conflict is a normal, healthy part of relationship and that, by being respectful, they can work through their disagreements with others. Participants related different ways these skills were beneficial in the context of high school. Participants also learned collaboration because middle school offered the opportunity to practice working with others to achieve a common goal.

## Recommendations for Practice

For middle school administrators and teachers, the findings of this study suggest that it is useful to consider three elements for creating middle schools that prepare students for the Transition: (a) developing academic and social-emotional skills, (b) fostering positive attitudes toward learning, and (c) creating opportunities to practice self-reliance, self-advocacy, and grit.

The experience of these students accentuated the ability of a Montessori middle school to emphasize both academic rigor and the social-emotional skills that build the fortitude necessary for students to successfully transition to high school. This study suggests that Montessori middle school practices foster the intellectual and emotional growth of students so that they can successfully transition to high school and potentially be buffered from many of the detrimental academic and emotional impacts of ninth grade. Additionally, this study proposes that middle schools ought to solidify the foundations in writing, presenting, and test-taking that are necessary for future success.

The results of this narrative study suggest that middle-level educators ought to embrace the middle school concept and the Montessori philosophy. When students develop a love of learning and appreciation for learning that is relevant, they bring that attitude to their future learning settings, which is a significant factor in their ability to successfully transition to high school. Middle-level educators ought to recognize that how students feel about learning significantly affects their ability to learn.

Middle-level educators also should help students develop personality characteristics—self-reliance, self-advocacy, and grit—that are essential for students to navigate the interpersonal, instructional, and organizational changes in high school. This study suggests that Montessori middle schools excel at developing these qualities because students are active participants in their

learning. Exploratory learning pushes students to bring their whole selves to the learning experience and engage in a manner that builds their character.

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