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# The 8<sup>th</sup> Grade School

Stanlee Brimberg, *Upper School Coordinator,*

*Bank Street School for Children*

Back in the days of the *Little House on the Prairie*, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education was the industry standard, the measured dose of formal learning that American children swallowed before getting on with their lives. That made sense, in a way: there was the recognition that on an individual level as well as for the good of society, people should read and write and know how to do sums so that they could pray, use the almanac, compose letters, count the chickens and, later, file their tax returns. It was well and good to get some schooling, but the cow needed milking and the field needed tending. I have a strong hunch that the reason it was an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education rather than a 7<sup>th</sup> or a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education is that someone observed that most kids stop looking like kids just about the time they are fourteen.

The last four years of that eight-year journey, from around ten years old to around fourteen, were and are complex and profound. After the period of birth through age five, that span is probably the most significant in human development. It's then that there are both gradual and rather sudden and radical changes in physical, emotional, social and cognitive growth. When reformers were looking at education at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a pivotal time in the history of education in America, they recognized that early adolescence didn't quite fit into childhood or adulthood. But in their attempt to make things better for everyone, they took something away from the children in those important years.

## The Introduction of Middle School

America had industrialized in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and European immigration, especially to the big cities, had put millions of people, many of them children, into the labor force. The reform movement took children out of factories and put them into schools; new compulsory education laws kept them there. These events provided educational reformers with both pressure and opportunity to think about what education might look like from that time forward. Lucy Sprague Mitchell (at Bank Street),

Caroline Pratt (at City and Country), and Hazel Hyde (at the Town School) were designing independent schools as laboratories for effective learning by focusing on what children needed as they grew; reformers debated about what public schools were for and how they could be used to advance society. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade school neither prepared citizens to participate actively in a democracy, as John Dewey urged, nor did it prepare workers as efficiently as promoters of the factory model would have liked.

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So, the reformers first proposed to shorten the number of years children spent in aptly named “grammar” schools and to extend secondary education downward. The 8-4 configuration, that is, eight years of elementary education followed by four of secondary, would give way to a 6-6 configuration. Then, with the recognition that early adolescents are like amphibians, with a flipper in the ocean of childhood and a foot on the dry land of adulthood, that was modified to the 6-3-3 or 6-2-4 model. The concept of the junior high/intermediate/middle school was born, and while a few schools across the city and country continued as they had, the era of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade school effectively came to an end.

Most children probably had had enough of the 3 Rs and diagramming sentences by the end of 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and there was a need for change. But a number of benefits to the development of the individual as a learner and as a person that were part and parcel of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade model are entirely absent from the middle school model. So while the curricular reform might have been warranted, its cost has been enormous.

## Moving Back to the Small Village

If the middle school experiment hasn't been an abject failure, neither has it been a rousing success. Few people look back at their junior high days as the best in their educational lives; they were surely the worst in mine. But while the configuration still persists, states and municipalities are being awakened from this century of slumber by research which demonstrates that children who attend smaller 8<sup>th</sup> grade schools around the country get higher standardized test scores than their counterparts in middle schools.

Why?

One obvious advantage is that in an N or K-8 school, curriculum can be more easily sequenced and coordinated from early childhood through 8th grade. Information about individual students—how each learns, a record of achievement across many curricula—may be kept and shared over a period of years. A more cohesive and coordinated approach to education is easier to accomplish in one school than in two.

But there may be a more fundamental reason why 8<sup>th</sup> grade schools work: what the 8<sup>th</sup> grade school always had done in the past, maybe as a function of convenience, or just because of human nature, was to place a virtual tent around childhood. It provided the essential qualities of that village you always hear about that is required to raise a child, even an older one. For those older children in particular, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade school was as much just exactly what they needed as the middle school is not.

In an 8<sup>th</sup> grade school, children and the adults around them know each other well, and for a long time. While small town familiarity can be disconcerting for some people, especially city people who value a certain amount of anonymity, the beneficial consequences far outweigh the sacrifice of some privacy. Parents who have been involved with the school in a child's earlier years are much more likely to remain involved. Since long-term relationships among parents, teachers and students are inevitable, people notice when something is different about a child: if she or he is worried, for example, a teacher or other adult at the school will reach out to the child and to a parent. The members of this extended family are also there to encourage children they know, to root for them, and to celebrate with them. There is more often than not a tremendous sense of connection to the school. Supports for academic, emotional and community matters are natural outgrowths of the long relationships that evolve.

Students feel safe with their teachers and their classmates. When learners feel safe, they raise their hands to ask questions, they try out new tools and challenge ideas, and they even risk being wrong. They grow from those leaps beyond the familiar and comfortable.

Most children begin to learn about the world at school through play. The nature of that play changes as children proceed through the grades but,



## 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Students: Prepared to Enter the World

Early adolescents have so much to gain from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade school model: the acquisition of content knowledge; the building-up of not only academic but social skills that emerge from evolving relationships with other chil-

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In choosing a high school, the student goes from practicing classroom activities that simulate making decisions of consequence, to participating in a real decision of great consequence.

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dren; and the accumulation of self-knowledge that comes from a feeling of safety and strong relationships with trusted adult teachers. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade student is well positioned to ask the questions that inform the important life

choice of where to attend high school: Who am I as a learner? As a person? What do I need in a school? Which schools would be a good fit for me? In this year-long process, the student is transformed from a person who is engaged in classroom activities that simulate making decisions of consequence, to one who is making a real decision of great consequence. In addition to being a most appropriate senior project at the end of an elementary school career, it is also the most empowering. Graduates of 8<sup>th</sup> grade schools make confident, competent, successful high school students.

Schools today need to motivate students to use their intellect and their humanity to acquire skills, concepts and information that will enable them to communicate clearly and effectively with each other, to solve problems on the personal and community levels, to enter into positive relationships, and to make others and themselves happy. Because of its inherent configuration as a small village in the big world, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade school model—with its built-in supports for students as they grow and develop—naturally provides a setting in which students can work toward these goals.

*Stanlee Brimberg is the Upper School Coordinator for the Bank Street School for Children in New York City.*