

Fresh Starts/False Starts:
A Review of Literature on the Transition from Elementary to Secondary School

Kate Tilleczek, PhD

Associate Professor
Department of Sociology, Laurentian University
&
Research Scientist
Community Health Systems Group
Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto

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Introduction

In an effort to retain more youth in school and to provide opportunities for student success, the Ontario Ministry of Education has implemented Phase III of the Student Success Strategy. One goal of this effort is attending to the pathways and transitions of students from elementary to secondary school in the Grade 8 to Grade 9 Transition Planning Initiative.

As a follow-up to this initiative, the Ministry is funding a research project to facilitate the transition process. Led by Dr. Bruce Ferguson and Dr. Kate Tilleczek, this research project will engage a team of expert researchers to examine the ways in which young people, parents, and educators experience and negotiate the transition. The first phase of the project is a review of the literature.¹ This paper provides an abbreviated and selected overview of that review to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are elementary to secondary school transitions and how are they best conceptualized?
- 2) What works in facilitating transitions?
- 3) What are the practical implications of what we know?
- 4) What are the gaps in knowledge and directions for future research?

Conceptualizing Transitions

Although variations occur, most students leave elementary school and move into some form of secondary school during early adolescence. This transition has been recognized as a stumbling point for students, particularly for those who are at-risk (Lord et al, 1994; Seidman et al, 1994). The movement is commonly associated with dips in academic achievement, dips in self-esteem, and increased social anxiety (Alspaugh, 1998; Eccles et al, 1997; Galton, et al, 2003). As identified in the Early School Leavers Study (2005)², an at-risk youth is one who is unlikely to graduate on schedule with the skills and self-confidence necessary to have meaningful options in work, culture, civic affairs, and relationships. Being poor has long been understood to be the most critical risk condition for youth across many outcomes and the pervasiveness of the socioeconomic gradient effect has been documented in detail (Keating and Hertzman, 1999).

Transitions are best seen as temporal processes which cross social, academic, and procedural issues. Transitions entail changes in school cultures, increased academic demands, rotary systems, and shifts in peer groups which can be difficult to negotiate (Hargreaves, 1990). Progressive researchers and policy makers locate their work in the lives of young people and their educators. In so doing, research focuses on the ways in which risk and protective factors fluctuate over time and intersect individual and cultural factors. Literature on adolescent development suggests the presence of *nested transitions* (Tilleczek, forthcoming) as follows:

- Transition from childhood to adulthood over the life course
- Transitions along pathways to success through schools, communities, and families
- Transitions from elementary to secondary school within these larger transitions
- Transitions are both growth inducing and potential tipping points; both false/fresh starts

This framework opens up discussion to wider issues of the fit between schools, communities, and the lives of young people rather than simply targeting student habits and academics. Many such strategies have been suggested in the literature and are selectively reviewed here.

¹ For the complete literature review report, see Tilleczek & Ferguson (forthcoming)

² For complete report see Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, & Rummens (2005)

Three useful organizing principles - *being, becoming, and belonging* - have emerged as ways to categorize transitions strategies (Tilleczek, forthcoming; Tilleczek, 2004). Young people are in constant motion and tension between being and becoming. They are in process of *being* themselves in their everyday lives. This includes issues of forging identities through daily negotiations at school, home, community, work, and with friends. As such, they need to be valued for who they are today and to find places to belong. However, young people are also in a state of *becoming* young adults. They are engaged in the *nested transitions*. In this cause, teachers become human developers both over the life course and in the everyday lives of youth.

Researchers have found that many young people at the threshold of secondary school are hopeful about the potential of their new status, school, friends, and education (Graham & Hill, 2003). Kirkpatrick (2004) has reported that students look forward to this *fresh start* and are adept at making new friends for positive academic and social purposes. Some students report coping better than expected, enjoying new freedoms, and involvement in extra-curricular activities (Akos, 2004).

A contradiction exists, however, in that many students also express anxiety about the transition. Poor and immigrant youth state that they expected things to be easier than they actually turned out (Graham and Hill, 2003). An emotional paradox exists at this transition point, as it does at many life junctures. Students are both excited and anxious, both doubtful and hopeful. The most pervasive source of anxiety is the loss of status at precisely the time when they are moving toward adulthood (Tilleczek, 2006; Graham and Hill, 2003; Hargreaves, 1990). Dips in self-perception and learner identities are pervasive (Silverthorn et al, 2005). Given the importance of status to adolescents, the social and academic implications are obvious.

Academic concerns such as homework, pressure to do well, and potential drops in achievement are paramount for students and parents (Akos, 2004). Social concerns such as getting lost, bullying, and making friends (Schumacher, 1998) are prevalent, perceived risks. Beyond the negotiation of the transition, structural problems are imagined and/or experienced by students. Of concern are the size and layout of secondary schools, the time table, complicated schedules, being bullied, not knowing anyone, getting lost, and having multiple teachers (Graham & Hill, 2001; Schumacher, 1998). The aspect most troubling in relation to school work was the increase in homework (Graham and Hill, 2001). Kirkpatrick (2004) has reported that students often feel that the *honeymoon is over* after the initial adjustment phase to secondary school. At later phases, academic issues take precedence over social and procedural issues, leading students to express dissatisfaction and disappointment.

What works in facilitating transitions?

Given this contradiction and its inherent risks, how have educators worked to facilitate the transition? Researchers have found that students have more positive transitions into schools that modify social cultures to increase a sense of belonging and care than did students in schools that did not (Eccles & Midgley et al, 1996; Keating, 1996). In an effort to facilitate transitions for immigrant adolescents, Lucas (1996) studied exemplary programs. He concludes that these programs generally make schools function as communities which build bridges between students, parents, teachers and communities. The application of a “family of schools” model to bridge school cultures looks promising.

Transition programming was also helpful when including tours, teacher visits to primary school, and induction days (Graham and Hill, 2003). Galton et al (2003) found that promoting

dialogue between elementary and secondary teachers on content, assessment, and pedagogy was critical to positive transitions. Elementary schools which introduce rotation systems were found to better prepare students (Schumacher, 1998).

A host of specific and practical strategies which enhance transitions is emerging from the Literature Review. Table 1 provides my conceptual synopsis as organized at three levels: macro (cultural); meso (classes, friends, family); and micro (youth and teachers as individuals).³

Table 1: Synopsis of Factors Which Facilitate the Transition

<p>Macro Level (Culture and School Structure)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend to social class, gender, and ethnicity, anti-racism, anti-classism, and bullying awareness • Attend to school-development fit, belonging, friends, teacher training on youth culture and development • Attend to continuities and discontinuities in elementary and secondary school cultures (structures, practices, pedagogy, assessment, curriculum, teaching, etc) • Create well coordinated transitions, decrease adjustment time, keep what works, document, describe, communicate, evaluate, adequate information for students and families, focus on long-term adjustment not just immediate movement • Get administrative work out of the way so that students can focus on school and social events in first weeks • Engage across panels (parents, students, and teachers) with multiple strategies (letters, hotline, websites, visits, clear timetables, open house, handbooks, maps, meet teachers, ongoing meetings of personnel, internet chats, teacher/student cross-visits) • Make time lines and transition plans for each student and parent (attend to at-risk early in elementary school) • Redirect efforts and funds, assess human and financial supports, identify adult leaders in schools • Note complexity of “families of schools” model, multiple feeder school possibilities and issues, fewer transitions the better for students
<p>Meso Level (Classes, Friends, Families)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on teaching style/care, similarities across schools, student input in seating plans, work partners, class activities, sense of belonging, teachers as human developers • Focus on pedagogical issues/similarities across panels, less competitive pedagogy in grade 9, use friends, make friends, task-focused strategies • Focus on friendships, peer groups and influence, continuity in peer groups, connect students to friends/peers/classmates (seating plans, working groups) • Focus on shifts in parental/peer relations which occur at the time of transition; parents require more information at precisely the time youth distance from parents

³ Table 1 has been compiled from multiple studies which use various methodologies. For a complete list of references and comments on methodological rigor, see Tilleczek & Ferguson (forthcoming)

- Focus on counselling & outreach, Student Success Teachers, community and parental input
- Focus on core/bridging curriculum across schools, language across the curriculum, post-induction programs for study and organizational skills, elementary booster classes
- Focus on student success/fresh starts front load success, courses known to inspire success
- Focus on issues of assessment and its practice and meaning across panels, focus on dips in achievement per subject
- Focus on all four pillars of numeracy, literacy, pathways and care/culture/community

Micro (Youth and Teachers)

- Primary students are positive and excited about the transition (build on this!); youth should know that some anxiety is expected and appropriate
- Help youth commit to learner identities and belonging, acknowledge strengths, prior achievements, create fresh starts, avoid old labels, students can “unlearn” math, language and reading, change “shirkers” to “workers”, friends important, self-perception dips are lasting, set clear goals
- Support at-risk students, look beyond regular assessment data when tracking risk, look to how risk factors play out in class (e.g. boys who are meeting targets but not challenged)
- Engage youth and friends in the transition process at all levels and stages
- Students/parent focus on school, academics, administration, and social issues
- Teachers are human developers, teachers are also in transition, teachers need support

Practical Implications

Practically speaking, Table 1 provides a host of evidence-based practices that can be used in transition programming. We should attend to the coherence of transition initiatives that are already in place. We should also balance our pre/during/post transition activities and funds (time, resources, etc), and begin to mark student social maturity by increasing responsibilities which allow for status, belonging, and confidence (Galton, 1993). In remaining aware of the *nested transitions* which young people are making, a longer conceptual view and more enduring practices can be enacted (Tilleczek, forthcoming).

Research shows that more needs to be done to facilitate transitions and that educators have the ability to do so. In secondary school, teacher beliefs about friendships, academic interests and youth as motivated learners need to be improved. Procedural strategies allowing more interaction with teachers are helpful, as are transitional approaches to assessment, curriculum, and pedagogy. Students advise their fellow students to a) be aware that secondary school is not that frightening, b) make friends, c) talk to people about emotions, and d) do not listen to rumours (Kirkpatrick, 2004). We are in a position to facilitate these and other goals.

Gaps in knowledge and future directions

Seventeen years ago, Hargreaves (1990) conducted a literature review on research about schooling in the transition years in Ontario. He concluded then that “the tragedy of the transition years is not that students experience anxiety on transfer to secondary school. The tragedy is that

this anxiety passes so quickly, and that the students adjust so smoothly to the many uncomfortable realities of secondary school life. These realities...can restrict achievement, and depress motivation (especially among the less academic) sowing the seeds for dropout in later years” (p. 214)

Since that time, a good deal of research has been conducted on the risk and protective factors surrounding the transition from elementary to secondary school. Unfortunately, this research has suggested that the tragedy outlined by Hargreaves (1990) has not been fully appreciated. The Early School Leavers Study (2005) has since demonstrated that educators and schools have room to become more proactive, caring, and understanding in order to encourage student success and engagement. Similarly, the transition from elementary to secondary school, as a potential tipping point for young people, requires further attention at administrative, academic, and social levels. The current Grade 8 to Grade 9 Transition Planning Initiative of the Ontario Ministry of Education is taking a considerable step in this direction. As yet, there has been little research conducted in the Canadian or Ontario context. It is time to take stock of what is already in place and what/how it is working for whom.

After presenting this abbreviated synopsis of the research, I suggest that the largest gap in knowledge remains in understanding fully the *meso* level. The *meso* level is where intersections between culture and individual meet and where we can best begin to appreciate and describe the intersections of daily lives of young people with teachers, friends, peers, and parents. It is at this level where the experience and embodiment of social class, poverty, ethnicity, identity and age are played out. While researchers have addressed such issues as important “variables” in quantitative studies, we still need to capture the meaning and experience of the ways in which they work in school. This allows for research which can ask and answer more difficult questions. For instance: How are the problems of transition organized socially? What meanings do young people, parents, and educators make of the transition and why? How do students experience poverty, racism, and bullying in school? How do these experiences organize their learning? What roles do friends and peers play in academic and social support? Is the dip in academic achievement and self-esteem at transition an artefact of assessment and curricular shift? What would it look like if we placed the social, cognitive and physical needs of youth at the centre of transition and class room practices? What place does the body and puberty have in making nested transitions? What does it mean to be at-risk? Are labels useful or harmful and why?

A focus on the *meso* level invites a complementarity of multiple-method research strategies which are lacking in this field of study (Tilleczek, 2004). Since transitions are nested, temporal, and process based, we need to address issues and mechanisms before, during, and after the shift to secondary school. Long-term qualitative research will be an asset in this field as we begin to more adequately map out processes, experiences, narratives, and meanings of transition over time. We need to understand which barriers and facilitators are shorter term, and which are longer term and why. Such momentum will help us to capitalize on *fresh starts* and avoid *false starts* which have long-term detrimental effects for students.

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