

Re-thinking Transitions: Innovation, Improvement, and Inquiry

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Abstract

This article explores the nature and importance of successful transitions for all learners (K-12 and beyond), and fundamental strategies, aptitudes, pedagogies, and programmes that nurture and support a wide variety of today's student transitions (Tilleczek et al., 2010; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Helling, 2013). Teacher education and ongoing professional learning is discussed as being central to establishing and sustaining innovative approaches to transitions, along with excerpts from the author's own current research and practice in this area. Increased understandings of the highly complex, varied, and cyclical nature of transitions in education, and the effective re-thinking of transitions, will also be enhanced by attending to contemporary voices from the field (Elliott-Johns & Jarvis, 2013).

Keywords: transitions in education; student success; leadership; teacher education; professional learning; inquiry

Context

When preparing to write this article, reflections on current reading around principles of professionalism (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012) connected very naturally to my perspectives on collective responsibility, ongoing research on transitions in education, and the vital role for innovative practices that sustain improvement and student success. The resulting piece explores aspects of my current research interests and practice, and suggests there is a case for increased understandings of transitions, particularly in terms of teacher education and professional learning.

For the purposes of this paper, the term 'transitions' is conceptualized broadly. For example, transitions may involve changes in activity, status, roles and relationships, as well as associated changes in use of physical and social space (Vogler, Crivello & Woodland, 2008). Furthermore, as the authors also point out, significant changes to cultural beliefs, discourses and practices may be implicated in transitions. I believe the following quotation (adapted for use here from Tilleczek et al (2010), who were actually writing about students transitioning from elementary to secondary school), may also be regarded as equally applicable to descriptions of *lifelong* transitions in education: "Transition is a "fresh start", something to work toward, to feel more mature in mastering, and to expand social, academic and personal horizons...." (p. 234).

A recent review of the literature resulted in the identification of two consistent themes: (i) the urgent need for increased understandings of the complexities involved in multi-faceted transitions and (ii) the central importance of successful transitions in the lives of both students and their teachers. While 'seamless' transitions are the stated goal of many educators and families, Hauser et al (2013) point out that the integrated nature of transitions occurring across grades, divisions, panels, disciplines, and co-curricular activities sometimes make it difficult to identify exactly *who* is responsible for *what*. Similarly,

Helling (2013) notes that adults in a child's life are often concerned about the student's transitions to a new learning environment, but may not be quite sure how to help. Furthermore, Elliott-Johns & Jarvis (2013) conclude:

Teachers, counselors, students, parents, school administrators, and government officials all have important roles to play in successful student transitions. However, in many jurisdictions, it appears that there is often no one particular individual or group specifically charged with the responsibility for overseeing these complex transition processes (p. 508).

Without doubt, many different stakeholders and situated contexts are involved in the processes of transitions in education, variables that all contribute to the complexity of managing successful transitions. The critical nature of understanding transitions, as part of initial teacher education and ongoing professional learning, was noticeably under-represented in the literature. In my view, the importance of knowledge and expertise for the support of transitions warrant increased time and attention in initial teacher education and research if we are to build the kinds of professional capacity (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) that result in best (and *next*) practices across this vital aspect of success for all students.

Explorations of Transitions: Moving Forward in Teacher Education

To clarify, the definition of 'teacher education' here encompasses both initial teacher education (pre-service) and the ongoing professional learning undertaken by teachers across the span of their career – including those in leadership roles and other positions of additional responsibility. This is a view, essentially, of a 'teacher education continuum', with initial teacher education offering, literally, the first step(s). This view also converges with Hargreaves & Shirley's (2009) thinking around principles of professionalism, specifically in terms of cultivating high quality teachers, professional status and development, and professional learning communities.

In my experience to date, the focal point for many educators is often the transitions students make when moving from the elementary to secondary panel (i.e., between elementary and high school). However, current research shows (Elliott-Johns & Jarvis, 2013) it is high time we broaden this perspective. While not disputing that moving from elementary to secondary school is *one* very important transition, it is evident we also need to pay closer attention to other transitions students (and their teachers) navigate in contemporary schooling.

An insightful ethnographic study (Tilleczek, Ferguson & Laflamme, 2010), conducted over a three-year period, examined educational practices and the characteristics that acted as barriers and/or enablers to transitions specifically in grades 8, 9, and 10. Perhaps not surprisingly, the findings of this longitudinal study clearly demonstrate that the process of transition into secondary school is 'nested' in many other developmental tasks and transitions and:

The message from the study is to celebrate and continue transition initiatives and programs that are successful and noted by students, teachers and parents. Young people need to be recognized for their strengths, hard efforts, insights, and hopes. (P.5).

The significant “message from the study” would also appear to be of relevance to transitions in education at all levels (K-12 and beyond), across many different contexts, and clearly highlights the importance of awareness and understandings of the need for “*fresh starts and false starts*” (Tilleczek et al., 2010).

In my work as a teacher in the U.K., consultant and former school principal here in Canada, support for successful transitions for students K-12 (as well as examining the role of motivation in these transitions), was always a priority. A small number of studies examining the effects of motivation in high school transitions are available, but Schunk et al (2013) observe that most studies of motivation related to transitions in schooling have focused on transitions in kindergarten and middle school grade levels. On further reflection, particularly in the role of school leader, the priority on successful transitions was consistently demonstrated in my efforts to maximize contacts with students themselves, as well as overt support for the dual work of classroom teachers in (a) assisting their students in achieving successful transitions and (b) teachers’ own transitions in instructional practice (Elliott-Johns, 2013). (Note: Further inquiry into the implications for transitions in schooling and instructional practice as a result of leaders who ‘model’ skills and strategies through overt demonstration of tangible support for these transitions, is an important aspect of my ongoing research).

The promotion of active support for students transitioning into intermediate grades in the elementary panel – and the requisite professional learning for teachers and administrators that enable understandings of both theory and practice relevant to transitions in the lives of adolescents - continues to be of particular interest. For example, when working to facilitate the challenges and opportunities inherent in transitions for students in grades six to eight, it is helpful to reconsider those characteristic changes in activity, status, roles and relationships, associated changes in use of physical and social space, as well as the (potentially) significant changes to cultural beliefs, discourses and practices, in the light of the relevance of each to better understandings of, and appreciation for, transitions from the intermediate learner’s perspective. By using these characteristics as a frame of reference, teachers, principals, parents and other stakeholders may explore working together collaboratively to foster and sustain supportive climates and relationships for student success in classroom settings and across schools, school systems, and communities.

As another practical resource, the transition events and initiatives developed by the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB), that build on the K-12 School Effectiveness Framework (2010), offer a number of excellent programmes and suggested templates (Helling, 2013). The TCDSB interventions focus on four specific areas: cross-panel teams and professional dialogue; programming and use of data; events

and initiatives; and student leadership. The dynamic approach describes innovative ideas and a number of proven, practical strategies. Establishing and maintaining strong relationships between elementary and secondary staff members who consistently engage in professional dialogue and actively support student agency, is seen as a cornerstone of the TCDSB approach. Helling writes, “Nurturing strong transition teams and professional dialogue are essential to students’ academic success, as are mentoring student leadership and supporting a focus on active student participation in school communities” (p. 289-290).

Seven key factors that have consistently informed my own work as a facilitator of transitions, particularly with intermediate level students and their families, are outlined in Figure 1. (It is important to remember that while sometimes representing somewhat subtle ‘underpinnings’ of successful transitions, these seven factors often have relevance to establishing and sustaining successful transitions across a wide range of age levels and very different educational, social, and cultural contexts).

Figure 1: 7 Key Factors for Successful Transitions in Education

Key Factors:	Perspectives of Stakeholders?	Implications?
responsive support for transitions (across age levels and different contexts)	students; families; teachers; administrators; school and community members...	e.g., development of understanding re. a wide range of ‘transitions’ needed; +considerations re. <i>home-based</i> transitions (e.g. support for students’ custody arrangements/consequences of family breakdown);
students’ own voices	students; families; teachers; administrators; school and community members...	e.g., active listening skills; students feel “heard”; ongoing development of self-regulation, confidence and ability to ask questions;
empathy	students; families; teachers; administrators; school and community members...	e.g., need to develop abilities to set aside ‘assumptions’ (i.e., we may <i>not</i> understand...?);
checking and attending to your ‘radar’	students; families; teachers; administrators; school and community members...	e.g., professional learning includes essential knowledge and abilities to recognize and respond appropriately to ‘red-flags’;
school-community resources	students; families; teachers; administrators; school and community members...	e.g., personnel, agencies, programs; problem-solving skills, decision-making processes;
highly effective communications	students; families; teachers; administrators; school and community members...	e.g., between all stakeholders, <i>including</i> students;
how do we know? (if/that we’re supporting successful transitions?)	students; families; teachers; administrators; school and community members...	e.g., indicators? monitoring of capacity, support, and student achievement over time;

Sharing variations of Figure 1 with my current classes in my work as a teacher educator and educational researcher at a faculty of education results in valuable discussion over time with pre-service teachers. These discussions raise critical issues, questions, promote understandings of transitions as central to the experiences of children and their families, and explore many different ways in which to demonstrate authentic support for student success in practice. For example, using a framework like Figure 1 guides deeper thinking and the construction of complex questions, potential solutions, and the framework serves to inform the development of their own practice. Teacher candidates are encouraged to explore and discuss the many aspects of transitions, and from a variety of stakeholders' perspectives, that they may be called upon to manage in future practice. As a result, they are supported in and enabled to begin gradually developing a repertoire of related skills and aptitudes - all part of being and becoming more responsive practitioners over time. Throughout these interactive discussions we examine why (and how) it is so important to continue developing as responsive practitioners, recognizing the theory and practice of transitions as important components of ongoing professional learning.

The Ontario College of Teachers (2013) recently cited 'preparing for transitions' (i.e., student pathways such as: high school, college, university, apprenticeships, the workforce) as one of the "enhanced" areas of focus of the new initial teacher education programs due to rollout in Ontario in 2015. It is widely recognized that many of these "enhanced" focus areas are already embedded in teacher education programs (e.g., understanding curriculum design, teaching in the Ontario context, education law, professional relationships, pedagogy, learning and teaching with technology et al.). However, I wholeheartedly agree that increased attention to the topic of transitions is much needed in terms of preparing teachers for schools and classrooms of today and, more importantly, tomorrow. It will therefore be particularly interesting to see how the breadth and depth of the complex topic of transitions is integrated effectively into progressive initial teacher education programs in future.

Re-thinking Transitions: Attending to Contemporary Voices in the Field

My interests in the complex nature of transitions in education continue to resonate in my work today as a professor of education, researcher and author. For example, information about a collection of nineteen chapters by twenty-six international scholars and practitioners (Elliott-Johns & Jarvis, 2013), co-edited and recently published with the University of Toronto Press, can be found at the following link:

Perspectives on Transitions in Schooling and Instructional Practice (UTP, 2013)

A major catalyst in the design of this collaborative research project for my colleague, Dan Jarvis, and I was the perceived overlap in our respective interests regarding transitions in schooling and instructional practices, and specifically those related to literacy and mathematics education. Following a comprehensive review of the literature, we recognized some significant limitations in the available literature on the topic. The three questions that most interested us were:

- Where are the gaps in our knowledge?
- Who else is conducting research in this area?
- How can we mobilize high quality evidence?

Therefore, we set out to gather a broad range of contemporary voices from the field (including counselors, coordinators, consultants, administrators, and professors), to examine related theoretical and practical issues, and to make a significant contribution to the literature on transitions (one that we hoped would also encourage further research and discussion of this important topic). The resulting text is a rich spectrum of commentary that shares new insights into critical issues involved in transitions in both schooling and instructional practice, and the perspectives of the contributing authors bring together a wide range of recommendations for effective, responsive, and innovative transitional planning. The varied and cyclical nature of transitions is underscored throughout, and the text includes a Coda that presents a visual representation of the four main student transitions in formal schooling. Taken as a whole, the work of all twenty-six of our contributing authors offers expanded conceptions of transitions across more formalized boundaries and, as co-editors, we identify and discuss three prominent themes that recur across the nineteen chapters:

- academic achievement within social learning contexts
- the changing nature of teaching and learning in schools and classrooms in the twenty-first century
- effective structures and processes for facilitating transitions

In conclusion, we present a summary of recommendations related to four specific areas discerned as integral to effective transitions in schooling and instructional practice:

- professional learning and leadership
- more attention to the affective domain
- formalizing structures
- the need for further research in this area

Consistent with the discussion in this article for *Quest*, further research is strongly recommended in order to increase understandings of the many and complex factors involved in moving smoothly across transitional spaces. For example,

... it would be especially helpful to know more about the nature and availability of professional learning/support for personnel actively engaged in transitions at various levels...the inherent conditions that facilitate and support student transitions and the reasons why some students (and teachers) navigate transitions more successfully than others (Elliott-Johns & Jarvis, p. 493).

Final Thoughts

The purposes of the *Quest* conference and its related journal provide an exceptional venue to dialogue with colleagues from across the education sector in Canada and around the world: The promotion of

cultures of inquiry and reflection within the greater learning community, the informing and strengthening of inquiry, theory and practice, and building on effective pedagogy and leadership enable the sharing of innovative practice that can only enhance student achievement and success. Opportunities to learn from, and contribute to, these kinds of events are a rich source of inspiration and renewal for me as an educator. The programme this year is certainly no exception as we prepare to welcome speakers from York Region, Calgary, the U.K., the U.S., Finland and Singapore, and to explore and discuss our “re-imaginings of public education” provincially, nationally, and internationally.

I look forward to meeting with colleagues at the conference and especially to continuing the conversation around innovation, improvement, and inquiry related to research and practice for successful transitions in education. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you be interested in continuing this conversation. Should you have questions, or you are interested in discussing how this article relates to your own work, I can be reached at susanej@nipissingu.ca

May the conversation continue!

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