

STUDENTS' TRANSITIONS TO FURTHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This case study focuses upon the transitional experiences of disaffected learners as they progress from secondary to tertiary education. It seeks to identify the both the positive factors and those that caused difficulties, and recommend ways of improving these for learners in order to encourage them in becoming agents within the process. Through analysis of focus group interviews, the study makes an attempt to scratch the 'surface structure of illusions' within further education which impinges upon the transition event as a whole and showcase why transitions can be less than smooth for learners.

Introduction

Bourdieu (1986, p.131) regards society as a 'surface structure of illusions'. His model suggests the cultural unconscious has an affinity with the dominant social interest of the time. This paper explores this notion with regard to students who make the transition to further education, for while students are volunteers in their own educational advancement, they have also become an intrinsic component of transition, creating a dilemma to those who manage educational establishments.

Developmental psychologists believe individuals pass through a sequence of stages throughout their lifetime but these transitions encompass a complex, multi-faceted, ongoing process which results in children becoming adults. Sixteen to nineteen-year-olds are in transition, standing on the threshold of adulthood, expected to accept responsibility for their decisions and actions, yet occupy a marginal position within adult society. Halpern (1994, p.117) defines the process of their transition as a change in their status from 'student to emerging adult roles in the community' and suggests that foundations for transfer commence by the age of fourteen years, with the learner assuming the maximum responsibility for such planning. Cowan and Hetherington (1991, p.117) concurs, citing Turiel's 'Fifth Stage' of child and adolescent transition, where 'systematic concepts of social structure emerge and adult-supported conventions are reaffirmed'.

Although transition involves movement and transfer, both vertically and horizontally, writers such as Bronfenbrenner (1979); Corbett (1990); Cowan and Hetherington (1991); Fabian (2002); Prout (2005) and agree that this process is not simply to do with educational progress, arguing it to be a complex phenomenon depicting change and a shift in identity as learners progress through the educational system, developing formal operations, autonomy and self identity; with Dacey and Travers (1999) noting how this raises questions for the individual. The above suggest this process must be supported by a co-ordinated set of activities based upon the individual student's needs and learning styles. It could be argued that, for those entering further education, the main questions are concerned with who is in control of the transition process, who decides how to achieve a smooth transition, and if the transition is the same for each individual.

Promoting a smooth transition to further education is a widely held contemporary goal for students, parents, educators and policymakers and considered a foundation for success; learners acknowledging that further education and vocational credentials provide important preparation for well-paid jobs and career advancement. However, attention has been focused on concerns about the inadequacy of preparation for tertiary education and the workplace, and

disconnections in the transfer between secondary and tertiary education systems, rather than on the transfer into further education. This research seeks to suggest that the time has come for the spotlight to focus upon Further Education, as without closer scrutiny, transition naivety could compound learner difficulties; regardless of 'compulsory educational conscription' and the offering of transitional 'easers'.

Transitions

Early theories on transition were based in psychology and focused on individual, personal characteristics. However the onset of the 1970s saw the emphasis shift to sociological factors, and more recently focus on the institutional context and students' integration.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) seminal text expounds his bio-ecological systems theory, focusing upon the quality and context of the development of the child within the context of 'system relationships' which form their environment; defined as Microsystems, Mesosystems, Exosystems and Chronosystems. He hypothesises how these complex environmental layers impact upon the developing child, transforming their development and affecting their behaviour. Bronfenbrenner suggests the interaction within these environments becomes more complex as physical and cognitive structures develop and mature. He alludes to the deficit created by society whereby parents are subjected to societal 'norms' and need to acknowledge their deficiencies as parents in order to secure support from microsystems within which their child is educated. This is an important factor in relation to an understanding of transition within further education which is likely to require a 'supportive function for interconnections between settings' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, pp.78-80) and highlights the necessity for good communication between settings, as well as participation and inclusion during the transition process.

James and Prout (1997) refer to the growing body of work constructing children as capable 'agents' (p.142) and suggest that transition be characterised by a small series of events or 'points', rather than as a result of one leap forward into adulthood. Furthermore, these particular points have considerable significance to the child as they have 'intense meaning' (p.246). However, Gladwell's (2001) 'biography of an idea' (p.7) provides anecdotal evidence of human behaviour and examines the underlying principles of contagious behaviour, hypothesising 'how little changes have big effects' (p.8), with change occurring within a dramatic moment. He refers to this summation of forces as 'the tipping point' (p.9), categorising his various 'rules' as the Laws of the Few, Stickiness Factor and the Power of Context (p.29). Attempting to define why some ideas take off and others do not, he asks if it is possible to manufacture or artificially replicate this phenomenon, asserting that 'social epidemics . . . are driven by the efforts of a handful of exceptional people' (p.21) and that application of the 'stickiness factor' (p.25) makes things memorable. He encapsulates these ideas in the notion that simplistic changes seem to make the widest impact.

Prout (2005) chronicles the shift from traditional to contemporary childhood as a symptom of the rise of capitalism, setting out how both imagery and globalisation have played a part in the blurring of boundaries between childhood and adulthood. He outlines his doubts that social exclusion, as captured by adult outcomes 'is transmitted across the generations and through the life-course' (Hobcraft, 1998, p.100). In addition, Prout (2005) provides evidence of the way in which low parental interest in education produces low attainment at school and reproduces low income in adulthood, outlining how 'contemporary childhood is . . . shaped by changes in the family' (pp.22-23).

Cowan and Hetherington's (1991) sociological perspective also examines family transition mechanisms involved in adaptation and dysfunction and identifies the flux of coping

processes and perspectives which are used to understand these systems. They identify the differences between normative and non-normative transitions, asserting these are long term processes which result from 'qualitative reorganisations' which amalgamate internal loci and external behaviour. Consequently, they suggest one of the neglected issues during transition is what is 'acceptable' within the community culture, asserting that this is not always the same for those experiencing transition. They argue life event transitions should be rejected in favour of examining what is happening in individuals and their family; a concept particularly pertinent to students which enter further education.

Drawing upon the work of Dweck and Leggett (1988) who argue children develop self-mastery through self-improvement, valuing the 'process' rather than the 'product', Brooker (2008) returns to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original hypothesis that if such beliefs reflect those of their community this will highlight their transition into a new setting, and suggests learner-testing during transitions reinforces performance rather than learning goals. Supporting Bourdieu's concept of 'culture capital' Brooker believes that transitional junctures should not focus upon subject knowledge and study skills but instead on what learners are expected to do to prevent misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Consequently, Prout (2005) identifies a 'new child' who is self regulating, active and socially participative, individualising themselves by 'designing one's own life' (p.30); chronicling them as social participants no longer reliant on the system for guidance. He examines the institutional control of children, describing this as a process which has been extended both upwards as well as downwards, and advocates looking at locales of childhood not as 'containers' but as flows of 'heterogeneous material where 'hybrid actants' play a part in constructing 'childhood and adulthood' (p.82). He suggests their rights are a concept enshrined with cultural values. However, one could question whether there has been a shift from innocent victim to social deviant; his assumption of regulatory adolescence unaware of the regulatory parameters and not possessing the internal locus of control to be true architects of their own destiny which is shaped by extraneous factors and rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960).

Brooker (2008) suggests resilience, resourcefulness and reciprocity as attributes which adults should seek to foster in children to facilitate their transitions and prepare them for a future of change. She emphasises the importance of listening to children in order to provide the type of caring and educative environments which will best support their well-being. Offering an alternative definition of transition as that of 'key moments for assessing children' (p.120), she highlights the importance of 'learning dispositions' which shape their perceptions of themselves as learners and why they are expected to learn (p.123). Corbett (1990) raises the complexities of addressing disaffection within the Further Educational system, offering useful suggestions for challenge at local level for the transition phase ahead. She asserts it is the task of the institution to offer every student the maximum opportunity to 'own' their education.

Previous transitional studies have been directed towards primary, secondary and higher education sectors with little attention given to the Further Education sector; the latter seemingly becoming the last bastion of educational research. However, the transition from secondary school to further education is also a significant experience, where problems of transition can be the consequence of discontinuities between schooling systems. With this in mind, this case study seeks to explore the transition and transfer of students into Further Education, identify difficulties which have occurred and recommend possible solutions which could improve the process.

Background to the study

The focus setting is a College of Further Education in a small rural border county in the North East region of Wales. The typical student is aged between sixteen and twenty years, with most students receiving an Educational Maintenance Award or Assembly Learning Grant. Although payments provide an incentive for transition, this does not necessarily bring about regular attendance, acceptable behaviour or assignment completion.

There is a high 'drop out' rate related to personal and social circumstances rather than course content, which is substantiated by exit interviews and student services. The academic year 2008-9 saw a withdrawal of 22% of the students on the focus course. Students left to gain unskilled employment or those who had lengthy periods of absence, despite close monitoring, became daunted by the amount of work missed and preferred to leave rather than seek assistance.

Historically many learners applying for Level One Health & Social Care courses at the college are disaffected. Although conventionally meaning discontented, alienated and dissatisfied, the term 'disaffected' has become more frequently applied to young people in Britain, particularly those experiencing or most at risk of social exclusion and from disadvantaged backgrounds or areas as a result of 'rejecting the values and cultures of dominant institutions' Ferguson (2004, p.292). In this sense, learners have previously demonstrated a rejection of mainstream values, demonstrating an oppositional orientation towards education or are socially disengaged. This 'disaffection' manifests in attitudes of mind and dispositions rather than behaviour demonstrable in observable social conditions. Cowan and Hetherington's (1991, p.116) definition of a syndrome of not being motivated is apt here as it reflects the pattern of student withdrawal of interest and energy as the year progresses and an inability in meeting long term goals, rather than the suggestion that there is something intrinsically wrong with the learner. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner (1979, p.229), highlights that 'the problem of the underachiever is frequently one of inadequate environmental support or motivation' improved by 'links and trans-contextual dyads' which facilitate primary relationships. Level One Health & Social Care learners require greater support, guidance and nurturing than the 'average' student and can be extremely disruptive during lessons, with some requiring one-to-one supervision with a full time classroom support worker in attendance to assist the student.

Methodology

Forty-one disaffected students participated in this study and all but two had a learning disorder.

Participant learner progress files were consulted to ascertain their educational abilities and expectations. Particular attention was paid to their 'pen profile' and their skill-builder outcomes to ascertain whether this corroborated with their previous experiences and to ascertain any structured or disordered thoughts. A further consideration was current 'organisational' provision which was made to establish current transition operations and to ascertain how learners identified activities for their own smoothing and assisting processes. As a majority of the students had difficulties in writing things down, were unable to express themselves eloquently, and did not like to write things down for fear of the process becoming too formalised, informal focus groups were used to explore students' views and experiences around College. Discussions were recorded digitally, with some contemporaneous written notes also recorded.

Mindful of Potter's (1996; 2002) research which roundly criticises researchers for depending too much on interview data and the argument for a greater use of naturally occurring data, the small focus groups were invited to gather 'naturally' to facilitate collection of qualitative data through the use of unstructured and one-to-one interviews. Potter suggests the default data source for qualitative researchers should be those contexts which societal members ordinarily assemble for themselves; hence learners were interviewed during lunchtime in their regular setting. Sacks (1992, p.420) suggests that using what ordinarily happens in the world around us enables us to: 'start with things that are not currently imaginable, by showing that they happened'. Informal collection methods ensured there were no pre-conceived categories, did not place people in the position of disinterested experts and did not leave a range of problematic inferences from the data collection. Instead the data opened up a wide variety of novel issues which were outside the expectations embedded in the interview questions and generated a rich record of people who lived their lives and pursued goals in a manner which was not necessarily consistent with any anticipated template.

Findings

Bailey, Hughes and Karp (2003) suggest that improvement in the transition from secondary to further education could create a continuum of education which links disparate segments and levels of education seamlessly. They suggest better preparation of students for college-level work being necessary to address postsecondary access and success issues. However, many of the focus group learners reported facing difficulties in gaining access to, and being successful in, postsecondary studies.

In the weeks after commencement, learners identified factors they felt had helped or hindered their transition. Positive factors included supportive family and friends, making money, enrichment activities which were satisfying, personal achievements and educational success. Negative factors included relationship problems, career confusion, financial difficulties, unemployment, lack of satisfying work, lack of post-secondary educational opportunities, and difficulty in adjusting to post-secondary educational demands.

All the focus group students reported detrimental transitional experiences and frequently suffered from a lack of self-esteem, leading to behavioural problems and generating difficulties during their transfer which caused them to become 'disaffected'. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) notions of *habitus*, these learners brought particular dispositions which both created and reinforced expectations in the new habitus. For older students in the group these dispositions were often compounded by pregnancy, child rearing and lengthy periods away from the educational setting. These students were often more anxious than their younger peers as they felt they were unable to 'keep up' with their studies, worried about their attendance and their focus was further affected by their own family circumstances such as childcare, illness or partner relationships. It was not uncommon for the home life stressors and experiences of these students to spill over into the educational environment, affecting their work, concentration and dedication and consideration.

Such stratification of factors suggests that transition congruence was not as simple as it appears to those who plan for the smooth organisational transition of learners; institutional systems being superseded by extraneous factors over which they or the learner has little or no control.

Focus group students exhibited both internal and external locus of control in relation to their own transitions which, during the ensuing weeks, had been highlighted in their performance, withdrawal or transference, and those with few identified goals who found their transition too challenging. This was a trend replicated throughout the whole group, with students who felt

able to seek help fostering a good tutor rapport and those with stronger personalities persisting to work more effectively, thus improving their performance.

All of the students who participated in the study (using GCSE results as a measure of achievement) had under-performed at school for a variety of reasons such as poor self-esteem, lack of parental support for the value of education, little or no realistic choice of career, unhappy with teacher pupil relationships, or their educational needs seemingly not met (for example, if they had dyslexia and so on). This concurred with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theories of the effects of mesosystems on the individual. For the majority of these students, the negative academic orientation and motivation accrued through past experience operated as the greatest predictor of their transition success.

If learners are, as Cowan and Hetherington (1991), and Munro (1981) suggest, influenced by parental attitudes and family commitment and support during the transition process, at least two of those examined in the study were not encouraged to engage actively in education as their parents suggested they were 'too thick', 'wasting time', or they 'should just get a job at the factory'. Such negative influences provided little foundation for learner self-esteem or in promoting educational worth and value towards moving onto a career path (Cowan & Hetherington, 1991). Focus group discussions suggested that many of the difficulties resulted from acculturation in which students have adopted the beliefs and behaviours of another group or their parents, often to their detriment.

It was evident that students experienced an uneasy shift as they settled into their new identities and roles; no longer a 'pupil' but a student in a transitional shift from what they consider an 'authoritarian' to a 'democratic' environment. Learners highlighted that they had little choice in their curricula activities at their respective secondary schools but have now 'chosen' their course pathway, demonstrating engagement yet remaining unsure of how to behave. This was showcased in their preference to put their hands up, call their tutor 'miss' or 'sir' and feel uncomfortable in addressing tutors by their first name.

Van Gennep's (1960) research outlines how learners experienced rites of liminality and rites of re-aggregation during their transition and transfer as part of the course of self-identification. One learner qualified this evolutionary process by suggesting the transition allowed her to create a new identity, enabling her to become the person projected in her mindset. However, in assuming this persona and experiencing the difficulties which would arise in maintaining this 'individual complex', this might create a mismatch of expectations, thus setting herself up to fail and fulfilling her parents' summation of her poor abilities.

In spite of their assertion of individuality and the 'growing up' process projected by the college, a learner request to wear a 'uniform' posed intriguing questions, raising the idea their transition had created too sudden a detachment. For example, one learner wistfully made reference to the homogenised tunic worn by students of the hair and beauty departments as part of projecting a 'professional and smart' look to internal students and external visitors. Although they all stated that they had disliked wearing school uniform, we were left wondering if the transition process deigned to identify the formality of a uniform as a security blanket; favouring corporate identity and eliminating the fear of individuality. Following a brief discussion, learner participants realised that they had created their own uniform by wearing similar clothes. They had, through their collective decision to wear their own version of a uniform, generated the 'stickiness factor' (Gladwell, 2000, p.89), and the 'power of context' (p.167) had created a 'tipping point' where others in the group adopted the same non-compulsory uniform without instruction or question. Gladwell's other notions can also be clearly seen in the case study students, some pulling the group together, others having knowledge and knowing others, some persuading their peers, and others eloquently expressing their ideas. Indeed the ones who willingly participated are the precise chosen few

who seem to embody the 'Tipping Point', with whatever they do becoming immediately popular and emulated by their peers.

Learners who demonstrated Dweck's child mastery (Brooker, 2008) appeared more determined to make their transition work; their responses of 'wanting to do well', not just for themselves but 'to make their tutor proud', proved interesting, yet needed to be tempered with a need to 'please' a figure of authority, that 'you picked me and told me that I was able to do this'. Though such flattery of educational 'idols' shifts the possibility of failure away from themselves onto someone else, this generated the mental suggestion that failure to reach a set standard would be the fault of the lecturer, not the shortcomings of the student. One learner has since withdrawn and enlisted in the army, whilst the learner who wanted to return to her home town has transferred to another course more fitting of her goals and capabilities, not those of her parents. Other learners, though requiring intense reassurance and support, have managed to remain on the programme of study as they have been provided with a range of facilities and levels of individual support to assist them, as well as receiving regular one to one individualised programmes of study skills support.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This case study has enabled us to concur with Bourdieu (1986) that there are indeed 'surface structure of illusions' within further education which counter organisational preparatory factors and which in turn impinge upon the transition process as a whole. These create a Buckminsterfullerene situation (Locke, 1996) necessitating tensions which, whilst analogous to the learner and maintaining a sense of stability, are not wholly 'non-reactive' and require all elements to be in place to ensure cohesion. To the disaffected learner, such factors included their disposition on entry and their agency.

These are supplemented by a combination of external and institutional factors such as peer pressure, liminality, expectation and family support as well as previous educational experiences. Consequently it becomes clear why transitions can be less than smooth.

With the proposal to extend education through until the age of eighteen years in England and Wales, more students will make the transition to further education. It is therefore vital that those co-ordinating these processes demonstrate an awareness which relates to the individual's perception, knowledge and recognition of the transition process, not simply enforcing an educational model.

Secondly, it is imperative that learners are engaged in the process and encouraged to find information or use role models, thereby becoming agents of their transition. Learners need to understand and identify that both change and difference will occur in the process as transitions result in difference, irrespective of their implementation (Dacey & Travers, 1999). Students need to be facilitated towards an acceptance that they will feel different and see the world and others differently.

Finally, those delivering education and working with learners need to be aware of critical points and events which might inhibit the transition. Awareness of personal factors and environmental conditions which might hinder learners, such as ascertaining self-definition of 'belief', 'attitude', 'parental support', 'internal locus of control' and their disconnectedness through patterns of change, will generate different expectations and performances which need to be mediated with the college; identification of suitable coping behaviours and the undertaking of unfamiliar tasks in a logical manner enabling tutors to guide the learner in a definitive manner, facilitating better execution of the learning process.

While the retention of students has become a major issue, with organisational and educational targets set to satisfy political and economic resources, the current mechanisms are more about satisfying the organisation rather than ensuring learners are supported and helped to remain in the educational process. The transition model needs to be tailored to the individual and to take account for personal circumstance, levels of family support and individual financial situations. It could be countered that greater attention should be paid to looking at a level of risk which assesses how likely the learner is to withdraw, and supporting this decision, rather than what can be done to help them stay.

Learners need to believe they are empowered throughout their transition into further education from beginning to end; seemingly architects or 'agents' of their own destiny. This necessitates a greater requirement for self-determination advocacy skills for students and their involvement in the decision-making processes during transition. In addition, parent and family involvement is vital to their motivational and self-disciplinary abilities, owing to their need to be encouraged at every transition and assured that the changes they experience are normal and in their best interests. Yet this runs counter to the individual complexities that learners often seek in the educational environment. Reconciling these opposite forces represents the next frontier for transitioners to pursue.

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