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BUILDING BRIDGES:
TRANSITIONS FROM ELEMENTARY TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

Most young people leave elementary school and move into some form of secondary school during early adolescence. At precisely the time that young people are navigating multiple developmental challenges (social, intellectual, academic, physical), we expect them to move between these intuitions of public education. The transition is commonly associated with dips in academic achievement, dips in self-esteem, and increased social anxiety,[1] and has long been recognized as a stumbling point for students, particularly those at risk.[2]

Dr. Bruce Ferguson and I, both members of the Community Health Systems Group at the Hospital for Sick Children (Toronto), conducted an international review of literature to inform our current, three-year, Ontario-based research project *Mapping the Pathways and Processes of Transition from Elementary to Secondary School*. This project is engaging a team of expert researchers and educators to examine the ways in which young people, parents, and educators experience and negotiate the transition by following twenty-six "families of schools" across the transition point from elementary to secondary school.

The literature review yielded over 100 articles, reports, and studies, including lengthy literature reviews from New Zealand, UK, Ontario, and the United States. A summary and discussion of our findings follow. The full report provides an annotated bibliography of the most significant sources.[3]

CONCEPTUALIZING TRANSITIONS
Transitions are best seen as temporal processes that cross social, academic, and procedural lines. The transition from elementary to secondary school entails changes in school cultures, increased academic demands, the introduction of rotary systems, and shifts in peer groups that can be difficult to negotiate.

Young people and those closest to them are inseparable from their cultures and contexts, and they confront transitions simultaneously at several levels. As they adapt to role and setting changes, "every transition is both a consequence and an instigator of developmental processes."[4] In other words, the transition from elementary to secondary school is part of a series of *nested transitions* including:

- Transition from childhood to adulthood over the life course;
- Transitions along pathways to success through schools, communities, and families;
- Transition from elementary to secondary school within these larger transitions.[5]

Rather than targeting individual student habits and academic practices as the sources of transition problems, this conceptual framework opens up discussion to wider issues of the fit between schools, communities and the lives of young people. It allows us to ask more difficult questions such as, why and how are these problematic patterns being produced and reproduced in schools and communities? For whom are transitions the most difficult?

I have found three useful organizing principles – *being*, *becoming*, and *belonging* – helpful in understanding the challenges of this transitional period. Young people are in constant motion and experience ongoing tension between being and becoming. They are in process of *being* themselves in their everyday lives, forging their identities through daily negotiations at school, home, community, work, and with friends. In doing so, they need to be valued for who they are today and to find places to *belong*. However, they are also in a state of *becoming* young adults; they are engaged in the nested transitions noted above. In support of this cause, teachers become human developers, both over the life course and in the everyday lives of youth. Both teachers and students need to belong to their schools and communities. Youth development literature is awash with evidence that a major developmental challenge for

young people is finding their place, their sense of belonging, as they negotiate multiple personal and social changes.

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. They 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. However, an emotional paradox occurs at this transition point, as it does at many life junctures. Many students also express anxiety about the transition. They 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. 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 both students and parents. Social concerns such as getting lost, bullying, and making friends are prevalent, perceived risks. Students also experience (or fear) structural problems. They express concern about the size and layout of secondary schools, the timetable, complicated schedules, having more homework, and having multiple teachers.[6] Poor and immigrant youth, in particular, find the transition more difficult than they expected it to be.[7]

WHAT WORKS IN FACILITATING TRANSITIONS?

Our literature review revealed that attention to *being*, *becoming* and *belonging* can enhance transitional practices. In spite of the tensions and complexities inherent in the lives of young people, researchers have found that students moving into schools that modify school cultures to increase a sense of belonging and care have more positive experiences than students moving into schools that do not.[8] A study of exemplary programs developed to facilitate the transition for immigrant adolescents found that, when schools function as communities, building bridges between students, parents, teachers and communities, students make the transition more smoothly.[9] Specific targeted transition programming, including tours, teacher visits to primary school, and induction days, as well as promoting dialogue between elementary and secondary teachers on content, assessment and pedagogy, are also critical to positive transitions.[10]

The factors facilitating transition can be organized at three levels: macro (cultural); meso (classes, friends, family); and micro (youth and teachers as individuals).

At the macro level, there must be a fit between what youth need and how schools treat them, so that a sense of belonging develops. This includes paying attention to inequities in social class, racism and gender; recognizing the continuities and discontinuities in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment and helping with adjustment to change; attending to social, academic and procedural issues; and developing strategies to connect school and community, such as letters home, hotlines, websites, visits, clear timetables, open house, handbooks, maps, meetings with teachers, ongoing meetings of personnel, internet chats, and teacher/student cross-visits.

At the meso level, we need to attend to the everyday

EN BREF La transition du primaire au secondaire se caractérise par le bouleversement des cultures scolaires, des exigences accrues, l'instauration d'horaires par élève individuels et des changements de groupes qui peuvent être difficiles à négocier. On sait depuis longtemps qu'il s'agit d'une pierre d'achoppement, en particulier pour les élèves à risque, qui survient au moment précis où les jeunes doivent composer avec de multiples défis développementaux (sociaux, intellectuels, scolaires, physiques). Les facteurs facilitant la transition sont de trois ordres : macro (culturels), méso (classes, amis, famille) et micro (élèves et enseignants individuels). L'analyse documentaire portant sur ces transitions révèle que les élèves arrivant dans une école qui modifie les trois volets des cultures sociales de façon à rehausser le sentiment d'appartenance et l'empathie vivent des expériences plus positives que les autres.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT LITERATURE IS AWASH WITH EVIDENCE THAT A MAJOR DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IS FINDING THEIR PLACE, THEIR SENSE OF BELONGING, AS THEY NEGOTIATE MULTIPLE PERSONAL AND SOCIAL CHANGES.

practices in schools, homes and communities. How are we treating young people? How are they responding to new societal demands? How much continuity do we need between elementary and secondary school? What do these young people find relevant? Can we teach this? Should we? How? This is a time when friends are necessary, parents' roles are changing, and teachers are judged on a new level. This whole community of helpers needs to be engaged so that care and belonging form a foundation for learning.

At the micro level, both students and teachers have much to tell us. We should build on young people's excitement about the transition by focussing on the positive. We should help them commit to their identities as learners and make a fresh start in a new place. While we know the social implications of friends to young people, we need to learn more about how friends can also be a source of academic engagement and support. We need to think about young people who live in risk situations and examine how these risks play out in the classroom. And educators need to be supported and celebrated as long-term developers of human potential.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

While there is no shortage of good practices that can be used in transition programming, we need to maintain coherence with transition initiatives that are already in place. We need to derive a compendium of practices that work, and share our knowledge widely across the country. We also need to recognize students' increasing social maturity by increasing responsibilities that allow for the development of status, belonging, and confidence. By remaining aware of the nested transitions that young people are making, we can take a longer conceptual view and ensure that our practices address the students' complex transition into adulthood before, during, and after the transition period. Clearly, we are not simply concerned about Grade 8 to 9 transitions, but all that passes in the lives of young people, teachers and schools during the movement toward adulthood. Since we currently mark social passage through this important transition, it has much to tell us about how we are doing in supporting our young people.
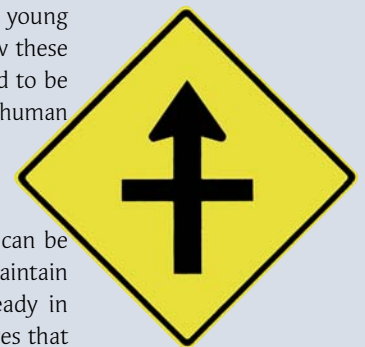
Student-teacher relationships are a critical part of this learning experience. The shifts that occur in this relationship during the transition can create risks for students. In general, the principles of care and control are seen as the core of elementary school culture while *academics*, *student polarization*, and *fragmented individualism* have been found to pervade secondary school cultures.[11]

Our study of the research shows both that more needs to be done to understand and facilitate transitions in this larger sense and that educators can make a difference. In particular, the beliefs held by secondary teachers about friendships, academic interests and youth as motivated learners need to be improved. Teacher expectations and beliefs are an integral part of this relationship, and during the transition teachers often report stereotyped and negative images of young people. For example, one study found that elementary school math teachers have a more positive image of students than secondary school math teachers and that elementary teachers trusted students more and used less control in their discipline than did secondary teachers.[12] The rotary system contributes to this shift in relationships since students and teachers now have many more relationships to navigate in less time, resulting in potentially weaker ties. Students say that this makes it easier to skip classes, for grades to drop, and for homework to be neglected.[13]

GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Seventeen years ago, Hargreaves & Earle conducted a literature review on research about schooling in the transition years in Ontario.[14] They concluded 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 realties...can restrict achievement, and depress motivation (especially among the less academic) sowing the seeds for dropout in later years."

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 suggests that the tragedy has not been fully appreciated. The transition from elementary to secondary school, as a potential tipping point for young people, requires further attention at administrative, academic, and social levels.

I suggest that the largest gap in knowledge is in understanding fully the *meso* level, 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 of social organization 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 ways in which they work for students, in schools. This calls for research that can ask and answer more difficult questions, like: How are the problems of transition organized socially? What meanings do young people, parents, and educators make of the transi-

tion 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 realities of young people at the centre of transition and classroom practices?

Since transitions are nested, temporal, and process-based, we need to address issues and mechanisms before, during, and after the shift to secondary school. We need to understand which barriers and facilitators are shorter term, which are longer term, and why. Long-term qualitative research will be an asset as we begin to more adequately map out processes, experiences, narratives, and meanings of transition over time. Such is the nature of our three year project, which has already begun to yield needed insights into this important rite of passage for contemporary Canadian young people.

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Notes

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3 For the complete report, consult Dr. Kate Tilleczek at ktilleczek@laurentian.ca

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