

School transition as a status passage

Chapter overview

When 10- to 14-year-old children change schools, they *become* a secondary, middle or junior high school student. This requires them to master new skills – such as commuting to school alone and managing their own school equipment – which necessitate increased responsibility. In tandem with these personal experiences, teachers, family members and peers can expect children to behave more like adults. And, at the same time as they progress personally and socially, many children are going through puberty, which can mark the end of physical childhood. This sets up school transition as a status passage, akin to the adolescent initiation ceremonies of pre-industrial cultures. Many of its features are determined by the historic emergence of primary and secondary phases of education, while others are contrived by children and adults in a bid to increase children's independence. This chapter reviews these defining features of school transition, setting it in the social historical context of human and educational development.

How school transition acts as a status passage

Every year in England, around half a million children become secondary school students (DfE, 2013). Some might share Matthew's opinion, that at primary school 'you just feel like you're too old, there's thousands of young kids underneath you' and are ready to move on. Others may prefer the security of their primary school classroom teacher and classmates to a larger school with different teachers for each subject. Either way, the majority report settling in well to their new school after the first term (Gray, Galton, McLaughlan, Clarke & Symonds, 2011), despite having to adjust to different teachers, new peers, additional subjects and more complex timetables, buildings and grounds. Each of these changes in school environment marks a new area of experience that children utilise when constructing their identities. After transition, Ruby reflected that 'when I was in primary school, if I fell over they'd come running to me like they're my mum. But here I fell off my stool and the teacher just

shouted at me.’ She then described how the ‘tougher’ attitude of secondary school teachers made her feel more responsible for her own behaviour. Children can also feel more mature simply by leaving primary school, as Billy explained to me in his third term post-transition: ‘I was excited that I was moving and growing up and stuff ... cause it’s secondary school and there’s more older people. I think that as there’s older people, I’m more older as well.’

If we consider how same-aged children develop in non-Western cultures, we can see that many features of school transition are similar to those of adolescent initiation ceremonies that signal the end of childhood. These ceremonies or rituals are conducted in over two thirds of pre-industrial societies (Schlegel & Barry III, 1991) and usually require children to undertake a rite of passage in an area valued by that community such as sexuality, fertility, valour, wisdom or responsibility (Schlegel & Barry III, 1979). In order to complete the rite of passage, children must experience some type of physical or mental change. Ndembu boys in Africa are circumcised at puberty, which qualifies them to take part in hunting ceremonies (Turner, 1967), while Micronesian Butaritari girls have their skin oiled and stomachs bound at first menarche (Brewis, 1996). After the ceremony is complete, children are awarded a new role of being a responsible member of adult society.

In many ways, school transition serves the same purpose for children in our communities. Although it is not officially linked to puberty, transition occurs at or around the same time as the average child (age 11.5 years) experiences their first outward pubertal changes, such as growing pubic hair, breast buds and first menarche or ejaculation (Coleman & Coleman, 2002). When they think of secondary school, children and adults note that ‘school takes on the quality of a training centre for their future adult role’ and that it is time ‘to get down to business ... to take one’s education seriously’ (Higgins & Eccles, 1983, p. 35). Making new friends, being taught by subject specialist teachers, learning new subjects and being part of an older peer group all serve to convince children that they have acquired the characteristics of a secondary school student, and this is often followed by a change in their behaviour and expectations as I discuss later in this chapter.

The term ‘status passage’ was first applied to school transition by researchers Linda Measor and Peter Woods in their book *Changing Schools* (1984). Glaser and Strauss (1971) define it as an event where people change into a different social role that appears more or less responsible, mature or demanding. Besides school transition, there are many other status passages in Western culture, including learning to drive, getting married, and retiring from work. However, school transitions in state education systems are perhaps the most ingrained, as they occur for a majority of people in each developed country, at a set time in the lifespan. Although headteachers and teachers can control certain qualities of this status passage, such as whether children move into classrooms that are more or less demanding, many significant features of the passage are cemented in school structures. The change from a smaller to a

larger school, for example, is typical of middle and secondary school transition in the UK. Below, I explore how these characteristics have emerged historically, in a bid to better understand how a national status passage with wide-scale implications for children's psychological wellbeing has developed.

Why does school transition as a status passage exist in England?

The dominant age of transfer at 11 or 12 years to secondary school is a relatively recent phenomenon in English educational history. During the late Victorian era, a series of Elementary Education Acts (1870, 1880, 1891) established the first national school leaving ages: 11 years in 1893 and 12 years in 1899.¹ However, most children lucky enough to complete elementary schooling transferred to the workforce, where they toiled as farmhands, in small workshops, as domestic servants and, in fewer cases, as factory labourers (Frost, 2009). These positions often involved long hours of work for little pay.

Over the next 40 years, a flurry of school types emerged for older working-class children, enabling children to avoid entering the workforce before age 14 years. An early version was the 'higher grade' schools, which offered two or three more years of education in elementary school buildings. Often the curriculum of these extra years geared children towards entering trade or industry (Howe, 2011). In the early 1900s, these schools were grouped together with junior technical schools and public grammar schools by the 1902 Education Act under the first national system of secondary education. This system was divided internally by the curricula of these schools, with some preparing children for entry to working-class jobs and others promoting entrance to liberal professions (Richardson & Wiborg, 2010). The latter type based their curriculum mainly on that of grammar schools, by teaching more academic and less technical subjects. As such, they were the archetype of the secondary school curriculum today (Chitty, 2002), and of many of its differences to primary schooling.

This confusion of secondary school types in the early 1900s resulted in the existence of a range of ages of transfer from elementary to secondary education in the first few decades of the 20th century. In a report on adolescent education (1926), Sir William Henry Hadow (1859–1937) recommended that children transfer from primary to secondary education, preferably in a different school, at age 11 years. This was so that 'at the age of 11 children are beginning a fresh phase in their education, which is different from the primary or preparatory phase, with methods, standards, objectives and traditions of its own' (p. 89). Hadow rationalised that a clean break in education would fit well with the transition to adolescence, which he described as 'a tide which begins to rise in the veins of youth at the age of eleven or twelve' (p. xix). Hadow's vision of transition at age 11 years was based on matching educational phases to children's developmental stage, following the popularisation of the notion of adolescence by G. Stanley Hall in the early 1900s.

It was another 18 years before Hadow's recommendation on the age of transfer was formally recognised by the 1944 Education Act. In the winter of 1940–41, the Educational Reconstruction Committee met in Bourmemouth to discuss how to further nationalise the education system, and as part of these discussions the committee debated whether children should transfer at the age of 11 or 13 years. The majority of board members supported the later transfer, based on the grounds that children were better equipped to choose a vocation at this age (Richardson & Wiborg, 2010). However, the Education Secretary went against the majority by setting the age of transfer for 11 years, in order to keep the standard grammar course for 11- to 16-year-olds intact. Essentially, this move cemented the view that children need a clean break in education as they enter adolescence.

Over the next 20 years, English secondary schools became more specialised – as either technical schools offering vocational education, modern schools with a mixed academic and vocational curriculum or academic grammar schools. Entrance to a specific type was decided by children's results on the 11+ examination sat at the end of elementary school. Because of this, school transition in early adolescence became a formal marker of whether children would go on to have an academic or vocational occupation in society. In this era, the concerns voiced by advocates of a later transition at age 13 years became a reality.

For years there was dissatisfaction with the social inequality imbued by the tripartite system. This spurred further reorganisation in the early 1960s to a comprehensive curriculum for all children, introduced by the 1964 Education Act. The backdrop to this Act included a review on the state of primary education (CACE, 1967), conducted by Central Advisory Council for England led by Lady Plowden, commissioned by the then Education Secretary, Sir Edward Boyle. Popularly referred to as the 'Plowden Report', this review recommended that children aged 8 to 12.5 years be educated separately from their younger and older peers, in order to allow them the benefits of specialist subject teaching without exposing them to the larger, adult-oriented environment of the secondary school. Referring to the child development research of the time, Plowden concluded that because most children would experience puberty after age 12 years, it was advisable to have a higher age of transfer to secondary education. This advice echoed Hadow's vision of educating children of pubertal age in different schools to their younger peers.

Around the same time, an independent review on the age of transfer was conducted by researchers John Nisbet and Noel Entwistle for the Scottish Council for Research in Education (Nisbet & Entwistle, 1966). These researchers disagreed with Plowden by concluding that the age of school transition should not be dependent on puberty, as puberty occurred over a number of years and was not consigned to any one event. However, neither recommendation had much bearing on the eventual common age of transition that emerged from the educational restructuring in the 1960s.

The 1964 Education Act sparked a period of experimentation, modelled on the efforts of Sir Alex Clegg, the then Chief Education Officer of the West

Riding of Yorkshire. In the period leading up to the Act, Clegg trialled schools for 9- to 13-year-olds based on the idea of middle schools in the United States, following requests for secondary reorganisation from local school governors and divisional executives (Hargreaves, 1986). Clegg's middle schools capitalised on the use of existing school buildings, which were designed for moderate populations of secondary modern and technical school students, and therefore were a good alternative to building new comprehensive schools for 11- to 18-year-olds. Clegg's efforts were successful, and his three-tier system became one of several options listed by Circular 10/65 (DES, 1965) for how Local Authorities could reorganise to comprehensive education.

On receiving the circular, many local authorities followed Clegg's lead and reorganised to a three-tier system of elementary, middle and high schools, with the early adolescent transition placed at the ages of 10, 11, 12 or 14. Within a period of five years, there were 1,690 middle schools in England (Hargreaves & Tickle, 1980). Many of these schools embraced the notion of middle years education that softens the transition from childhood to adolescence by offering increased social support, a more personalised curriculum and relationships and sex education specific to this age group (e.g. Brown & Saltman, 2005). Indeed, my recent study of adolescent development in a typical middle school versus a typical secondary school found that children did feel better supported and were more engaged personally and emotionally in the middle school because of this provision (Symonds, 2009).

However, despite middle schools being good for children's wellbeing, the majority of local authorities have reorganised back to a two-tier system, with the age of transfer firmly placed at 11 or 12 years of age. Although it has been argued that this is to improve test scores, as with each transition comes a dip in progress (Suffolk Local Authority, 2006), there is little evidence to support this, with the GCSE results of children in the three-tier system being similar to those of children in the two-tier system, once schools are matched by socio-economic status (Symonds, 2007). More probably, the driving force behind reorganisation and the decline of the middle school is to keep all schools in line with the national Key Stages of education that issue a change in curriculum between Years 6 and 7. The decisions made by the 1944 Education Act live on, despite there being little evidence that these support children's wellbeing. Importantly, they create a striking difference between one type of school and another, requiring a significant adjustment from children who are going through a vulnerable developmental period. I shall now explore these differences, so that we can see what children must adjust to.

What are the main features of school transition as a status passage?

Table 1.1 outlines these differences using data gathered from Department for Education statistics (DfE, 2011, 2014), a national survey of break and

Table 1.1 Key features of primary and secondary school environments

School characteristic	Primary schools	Secondary schools
Age range (1)	5 to 11 years	11 to 16 years
Roll size in per cent of schools nationally (1)	500 students or under in 94 per cent of schools	1,500 students or over in 91 per cent of schools
Average class size (1)	27 children in KS2	20 children in KS4/5
Average student–teacher ratio (1)	21 students per teacher	16 students per teacher
Main type of teaching	Single classroom teacher	Multiple subject specialists
Examinations	End of Year 6	End of Year 11
Typical calendar (3)	Three terms	Three terms
Typical weekly timetable (3)	Five days of five lessons	Five days of eight lessons
Typical lesson length	1 hour	35 minutes
Combined length of breaktimes (2)	77 minutes	69 minutes

Notes

1 DfE (2011)

2 Blatchford and Baines (2008)

3 Symonds and Hagell (2011)

lunchtimes (Blatchford & Baines, 2008) and a review of school time (Symonds & Hagell, 2011). Focusing on the differences, we can imagine children’s typical expectations of transition, as captured across studies (see Chapter 4; also Gray et al., 2011). Before they change schools, children may wonder how they will cope with a peer group roughly three times larger than what they are used to. Will they keep their friends from primary school? Will they make new friends? Will they encounter danger amongst these peers? And what about new teachers? Children fret about adjusting to multiple teaching styles and new classroom rules, after having had the same teacher for most subjects. Furthermore, their new timetables look confusing. Will they ever manage to get to all those lessons on time? Those concerned about maturity status fear becoming the youngest students, especially if they have heard rumours about the nasty things that older children do to new arrivals. Finally, there are many practical things to worry about. Will they be able to organise their own equipment? How about getting lost in the larger school grounds? And what will the commute to school be like, especially if this involves catching a school bus for the first time?

In mind of these changes, it is perhaps logical that many children expect their new schools to offer a radically new experience to primary school. However, they also encounter similarities between school tiers. School calendars look much the same, with the long summer holiday and breaks for Christmas and Easter. This design traces back to the Victorian era, with the break in July and August meant for children to help with the harvest at home (Sharp, 2000). The national curriculum has also created similarities between tiers, for on both sides of transition children learn a mixture of core (English, mathematics and

science) and enrichment subjects (i.e. music, fine art, drama, physical education), which echoes the curriculum of grammar schools (Chitty, 2002). Although there may be a public perception that primary schools offer more exploratory learning than secondary, this is more myth than fact, as teaching styles (Galton & Pell, 2002) and patterns of lesson activities (Galton, Simon & Croll, 1980) are relatively similar in both school types. In other words, the days of the primary school ‘wild men’² are long gone, if they were ever there to begin with (Galton et al., 1980).

What are the effects of the status passage?

For a moment, allow me to digress into my personal experience. A few years ago I stood in a jewellers’ shop waiting for my watch strap to be fitted. A mother and son came into the shop: he looked about 9 or 10 years old. Although the son was interested in obtaining a heavy-weight silver chain, his mother said no. She explained that ‘You can’t have one of them, you’re not old enough.’ Then she continued, ‘You’re still a boy, not a man. You don’t want to grow up too fast!’ This logic seemed to appeal to the boy, who appeared to quickly lose interest in the chains.

Just like the boy in the jewellers’ shop, children of all ages look around them for indications of how mature they are. Often these are signs and symbols, such as wearing particular jewellery or clothes, or a certain haircut (and we all know how long a 12-year-old boy can spend getting those spikes in his hair just right!). In previous work, I have described these symbols as maturity status markers (Symonds, 2009). Conceptually, these markers are similar to the ritual elements of adolescent initiation ceremonies discussed earlier. In both cases, children use the markers/ritual elements to symbolise their graduation to a more adult role. However, maturity status markers are not necessarily determined by adults, and can be scattered throughout the lifespan with no steady route to progression. Also, they act as markers only when they are conveyed as such by others, or interpreted as markers by children themselves. Essentially, anything can be a maturity status marker as long as it is connected by some person to growing up. This might lead you to think about how we can motivate children using this method, about what types of markers you can create in schools to make a difference to children’s lives.

When children perceive school transition as a status passage, they interpret many of its features as maturity status markers. Aspects of school organisation may stand out especially if they require more independent behaviour from children. After transition, Christine in Measor and Woods (1984, p. 97) reflected that, at primary school, ‘they used to ring a bell, and you had play-time, and they used to blow a whistle or ring a bell, you know a handbell, but they don’t have one here’. For Christine, the hand bell took on symbolic importance as a marker of immaturity, which was not needed at the more ‘grown-up’ school. In the same study, Ruth (1984, p. 97) noted that ‘at

dinners here you are responsible for your money', whereas lunch money at primary school was cared for by classroom teachers. By noting this difference, Ruth conveyed a sense of moving towards adult independence in her new school.

The more teenage behaviour of an older peer group can also be translated into specific maturity status markers, such as wearing jewellery, talking in cliques, and dating. Many children aspire to achieve this teenage standard once they change schools, which can involve sloughing off childish behaviours from primary school. In the first term post-transition, Ruby in Symonds (2009) criticised members of her year group for calling people silly derogatory names: 'They're in Y7 now, they shouldn't be acting like they're in reception, they should be acting like they're part of grownups and they're becoming younger when they do that.' She then explained that 'Cause in Y6 they are still young and when they come to Y7 it's like a big step. Growing up' (Ruby). In this statement, we can see how Ruby regulates her own sense of maturity and imposes her expectations onto her same-aged peers. Another issue of maturity status is that often, after transition, children stop playing games at lunchtime and instead stand around talking in cliques (Kvalsund, 2000; Measor & Woods, 1984; Symonds, 2009). Although this can stem from a lack of recreational equipment at secondary school (Symonds, 2009), it also relates to children's reluctance to engage in activities that become prescribed as childish, for example, playing 'stick in the mud' or 'tag' (Measor & Woods, 1984). Although it can be a good thing that younger children act more socially mature after changing schools, it can also mark the end of childhood and the developmental benefits of play (e.g. Whitebread & Basillo, 2013).

Indeed, by seeking to become more socially mature at transition, some children catapult themselves into a downward spiral of disengagement and antisocial behaviour. In an American study, girls perceived that others in their year group were more socially mature based on whether they smoked cigarettes and associated with boys (Merten, 2005). In the UK and US, children have developed anti-academic identities after transition (e.g. Hargreaves & Pell, 2002) to signal a break from their previous identities as compliant children (Merten, 2005) and to obtain social status by displaying deviant behaviour that is associated with strength (Measor & Woods, 1984). These changes in academic identity are discussed in detail in Chapter 9.

Children have also looked to teachers for signals that they are more mature, and have found these conveyed explicitly and through tacit expectations. As mentioned, Ruby noted that her secondary school teacher was less inclined to help her after falling over than her primary school teacher would have been (Symonds, 2009). This experience took on deep significance for Ruby, as she repeated the story in detail in each of three interviews held across Year 7. Twenty years prior, Carol told a similar story in Measor and Woods (1984): 'What I like about the senior school, they trust you, don't they? In the other

school they wouldn't hardly give you a pencil, because they said, oh you lose that, it's the end of you.' Unfortunately, although teachers often expect children to be more mature at secondary school, they can award very little responsibility or agency in learning. This lack of autonomy can be at odds with children's expectations for more independence after transition, and can be at the heart of children's ensuing dissatisfaction with school, as I discuss in Chapters 2 and 9.

Parents also play a part in creating the status passage, when they change home routines and rules in order to support children's autonomy at transition. For example, parents can encourage independence by tutoring their children on how to get to school safely when they take a new route or catch public transportation for the first time (O'Brien, 2005). Following this, some children use public transportation to socialise with new friends who live throughout the catchment area, which brings a host of new, unsupervised activities, such as going shopping or to the movies (Symonds, 2009). Other markers set by parents are the move to regular chores and the trade of chores for pocket money (Symonds, 2009). This plethora of maturity status markers in home, school and peer environments combines with the differences in school structures to create the basic qualities of the status passage, which, as I explore throughout this book, shapes children's psychological wellbeing.

Conclusions

In an ideal world, the status passage of school transition should encourage positive attitudes and behaviour. Some maturity status markers have this effect, when children become more socially responsible, learn to manage their own equipment, adapt to complex timetables and new teaching arrangements, commute more independently and help out at home. However, other markers have negative consequences. The change to socialising in cliques can encourage bullying and prejudice within a social pecking order, while copying older teenage behaviours can lead some children down a risky pathway. Furthermore, although school transition encourages children to 'grow up', many school practices do not support this. Year 7 children can feel at the bottom of the heap next to their older peers and have few opportunities to take on responsibility in their new schools. The answer for some children is to use what happens outside of classrooms as a blueprint for how to mature. This can lead to an overemphasis on appearances, social identities (such as being deviant or conformist) and teenage activities for children who are concerned with growing up quickly. In turn, children can begin to disengage from education.

So what can educators do to prevent children from dismissing school in their search for a more mature identity? My suggestion is that we provide clear maturity status markers for children's intellectual *and* social progression in everyday school practice. If these can tie in with children's expectations for

growing older (e.g. gaining independent from adults, having their own money and dating), then children will feel that education is giving them what they need to progress across the board. Examples are facilitating work experience, allowing children to develop their own projects, educating them to withstand peer pressure and providing opportunities for real responsibility in student and adult communities. However, we should do this in mind of children's need for social support and for a gradual entry to adolescence. Otherwise, school transition shoots itself in the foot as a status passage, by inadvertently creating a world where children feel alienated from adults and adult values and grow up too fast.

Notes

- 1 Full text of the Education Acts in this section can be found at www.legislation.gov.uk and as PDFs on the website of educational historian Derek Gillard, www.educationengland.org.uk
- 2 In reference to an article in *The Times* newspaper entitled 'Wild men of the classroom' (October 1976).

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