TRANSITIONS THROUGH THE LIFECOURSE: POLITICAL, PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES

by

Kathryn Ecclestone, Theo Blackmore, Gert Biesta, Helen Colley and Martin Hughes

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Contact details:
Dr Kathryn Ecclestone
School of Education & Lifelong Learning
University of Exeter
Exeter, EX1 2LU
UK.

Email: k.ecclestone@ex.ac.uk
INTRODUCTION

Between the ages of 3 and 21, the traditional end of formal education after university, a person making her or his way through the UK’s complex mainstream education and training system will experience a minimum of five major, formal transitions. These include the move from nurseries or the Surestart scheme for under-5s to primary school, the change from primary to secondary school, making GCSE subject choices at the end of key stage 3 of the national curriculum, the move from compulsory schooling into education or training at 16 and progression into higher education and then into a professional role. A growing number of policy initiatives focus on formal transitions throughout the education system.

An impetus to political and professional concern about transitions comes from changes in traditional social patterns of marriage, family and work. As the Nuffield review of 14-19 education observes, such changes have reordered some life stages, merged others and left some out completely. The de-standardisation and increasing non-linearity of youth transitions and the individualisation of many life course transitions demands new political responses. Such changes also require new roles for research in “charting what individuals actually do and how this is changing” as a “first step to understanding what it means” (Bynner quoted by Hayward et al, 2005: 115).

A starting point for understanding the processes and outcomes of different transitions, whether these are chosen or imposed, is to see them as formal turning points or events which involve subtle, complex processes of ‘becoming somebody’ personally, educationally and occupationally. Children, young people and adults develop a learning and personal identity, workers evolve professional or occupational identities in a particular field, asylum seekers or migrants take up educational opportunities whilst adapting also to a different culture and women return to education after time at home: all these are examples of major turning points accompanied by changes in identity. In popular culture, interest in ‘lifestyle management’ and ‘life coaching’ resonates with debates about the need to identify and manage education and work transitions more effectively. Transitions as discernible events depicted and experienced as ‘turning points’ or ‘milestones’ therefore comprise more subtle evolutions of identity and agency and a ‘story to tell’.

If managing a diverse range of formal and informal transitions effectively is crucial for positive educational, personal and social outcomes, research in education and other areas needs to illuminate the many factors influencing the process and outcomes of transitions. A number of studies from the fields of education, youth studies, economics and cultural studies illuminate the complex ways in which structural conditions affect people’s decision-making, their capacity for agency and the shaping of personal and learning identities in different transitions. We also need to understand how the fields of policy, practice and research construct and depict transitions differently and the assumptions that emerge in these fields.

A better understanding of transitions therefore requires critical scrutiny of the key concepts surrounding them, normative assumptions about their nature and importance and interventions seen as necessary for dealing with them.
Concepts and assumptions are often implicit in policy texts and professional practices. For example, optimistic assertions about the need for flexible, self-managing, self-aware ‘portfolio workers who can deal with unpredictability and risk contrast with pessimistic assumptions about the negative effects of globalisation, risk and social upheaval on people’s ability to deal with transitions without professional help. Notions of risk, traumatic experiences and problems with transitions therefore contrast with the possibilities of creative risk, opportunity and change.

These tensions can lead to over-simplification of transitions as ‘good’ and effective (positive, productive, manageable and comfortable) and ‘bad’ (risky, difficult, isolated or emotionally disruptive). Yet, discomfort and risk might be crucial for a positive or effective transition, while assumptions that transitions require ‘settling in’ to be as comfortable and emotionally easy as possible belie the ways in which class and gendered expectations might produce resistance, or less optimistically, alienation. From this perspective, some transitions are never complete but have to be re-worked continually. In addition, most transitions, both socially and conceptually, tend to be constructed as individual events, despite the ways in which collective transitions require new forms of learning as someone makes the transition from isolated individual to a group or community in struggle. Finally, the view that transitions are problematic and must be managed more effectively both by individuals and state agencies creates its own normative assumptions that require critical scrutiny.

Assumptions about transitions also shape ideas about desirable interventions to manage them more effectively at the level of institutions or agencies and the individual. A growing number of initiatives aim to improve partnership between education and welfare agencies and to create better systems of ‘information flow’ about individuals between teachers, institutions and professionals in welfare and social work. Other initiatives, such as Connexions, have fundamentally changed traditional approaches to careers guidance in order to provide personal advisers for young people to ease transitions between school, work training and further education. There are also calls for pedagogy and assessment that help people ‘make rational choices about education and work opportunities’, ‘learn how to learn’, become the ‘right person for the job’, ‘enhance ‘employability’ or develop ‘emotional intelligence’. A new strand in the management of transitions through the education system is to promote ‘personalised learning’, alternative forms of assessment and more streamlined tracks and pathways to ease movement between different sectors of the system.

The TLRP seminar series

In response both to the growing importance of transitions in the education and training system and lack of synthesis between policy, practice and research, the seminar series aims to:

- conceptualise transitions by identifying common and distinctive features and then relating these features to people’s ability to exercise agency, the formation of their educational, occupational and personal identities and to structural conditions
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- evaluate critically different conceptual models and methodologies in research on transitions, drawing on education, psychology, economics, sociology and cultural studies

- evaluate critically the ways in which empirical evidence from projects in the TLRP and other studies supports or disputes theoretical connections between identity, agency, structure and transitions

- identify practical, political and theoretical implications of research for different audiences

A seminar on March 4th 2005 explored studies by Andrew Pollard and Ann Filer on the transitions and identity formation of children and young people moving through primary and secondary school, and studies by Karen Evans and colleagues of young people’s transitions in different labour markets. Discussion focused on how concepts of identity, agency and structure help us understand different types of transition and the role of learning in them: we provide a summary of how these studies use such concepts later in this paper.

A seminar on October 13th at Birkbeck College in London brought together academic researchers and representatives from projects funded from policy initiatives for transitions in four areas:

- early years and primary school
- primary to secondary school
- secondary school to further education, work or training
- adults moving into literacy, numeracy and language programmes in prisons, workplaces and family learning projects

Please see Appendix 1 for list of participants.

Three presentations of this paper at the 2005 Annual TLRP conference also generated useful discussion amongst researchers from different TLRP projects around the questions outlined below.

In parallel, we are carrying out a literature review to address aims outlined above, to support discussion at different events and to draw out particularly important ideas and themes.

Discussion questions:

- what are the main characteristics of transitions depicted in policy, practice and research?
- how do ideas about transition, people’s agency, identity and the effects of structural conditions help us to understand transitions better in research, policy and practice?
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- why are transitions a problem for some individuals and groups and, conversely, for whom are transitions not a problem?
- what interventions, activities or practices are seen as useful in dealing with transitions?
- what are the contested or controversial aspects of debates and practices around transitions?

This paper takes the formal progression points of movement through the administrative and institutional structures of the education and training system as a starting point for discussing the complex field around the notion of ‘transitions’. Although we recognise that this is only one, limited representation of transition, we use it as a starting point because, for many practitioners, political targets for the successful management of people’s progression through the system are constructing a new field of policy and practice around transition with which academics need to engage. First, the paper summarises policy initiatives that deal with different transitions, the various agencies involved and research inside and outside the TLRP that offers insights about them. Second, it describes some ideas about ‘typical’ characteristics of transitions that emerge in policy initiatives and the normative assumptions that accompany these depictions. Third, it discusses how concepts of transition, decision-making, identity, agency and structure help us to understand and evaluate the field of transitions better. Fourth, it lists the main interventions in guidance and support and pedagogy that are seen as important in dealing effectively with transitions. Finally, it outlines further work for the seminar series. Ideas, comments and feedback on any aspect of the paper are welcome, particularly in relation to how insights from TLRP projects relate to ideas and themes in the series.

1. TRANSITIONS IN POLICY INITIATIVES

Since the Social Exclusion Unit published ‘Bridging the Gap’ in 1998, the UK government has focused on particular educational transitions as crucial for breaking cycles of social and economic disadvantage. This idea is reinforced through ‘Every Child Matters’ (ECM) which promotes outcomes for health and well-being, leisure, and economic and educational achievement and requires different agencies to work together to achieve them. ECM changes the role of schools, nursery education and youth work and aligns them much more closely with the goals of welfare and social work. Taken together, a series of specific initiatives for different groups and sectors bring guidance, support and teaching and learning together in a range of interventions and activities to manage transitions more effectively.

Policy initiatives such as the Surestart scheme for the under-5s have created a foundation stage for primary schooling, while programmes for family learning create closer links between home, school, health and welfare. These initiatives, together with new partnerships between education and welfare agencies, the White Paper for 14-19 education, the creation of the Connexions advice and guidance service and changes to youth work all create new roles for education professionals working alongside other mediators of learning, such as parents, employers, careers and personal
advisers, youth workers, mentors and peers, to support children, young people and adults at various points of change and progression.

Transitions as the focus for policy include:

- the move from home to nursery/family centres (informal family learning to formal provision)
- the change from nursery to primary school, with nursery and early years provision as a ‘foundation’ for school
- the daily transition between home and school (everyday transitions in transferring knowledge and experience between the two contexts)
- the move from primary to secondary school (this is widely regarded as a particularly problematic transition that requires much more attention)
- subject choices between key stage 3 to new choices at key stage 4, with proposals in the 14-19 White Paper to create a new formal transition at 14
- the move from key stage 4 to training or further education
- informal transitions between school and non-school activities
- the move from family, social and work life into formal literacy and numeracy programmes
- the change from training or FE to work, training or higher education
- transitions into and out of prison

Appendix 2 summarises policy initiatives, the agencies involved and research studies that relate to different transitions.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF TRANSITIONS

Policy initiatives and the texts that accompany them show assumptions about the ‘typical’ characteristics of various transitions. These characteristics are outlined here and, as discussion later in the paper shows, a number of assumptions implicit in them are challenged by research or ideas from practice. Nevertheless, it is important to be wary of presenting policy initiatives as monolithic accounts of what policy makers think: narratives change and targets can be contradictory, both between different initiatives or within one

Policy initiatives present transitions as discernible events, experienced in a linear sequence of progression through funding, institutional and achievement structures. They also present outcomes of successful transitions as measurable through enrolment on more courses, retention on existing ones, successful achievement of qualifications, credentials or certificates. A corresponding view that ‘learning’ is formal certification and attainment of targets creates a particular view of successful transitions, based on progression and, in turn, an associated problem for institutions of ‘managing throughput’ to targets. Funders therefore see progression as clear ladder of opportunity and this affects what they regard as successful or unsuccessful transitions. One effect of policy targets for progression is that they cut across
people’s personal targets for progress and what they see as ‘success’ in a transition, such as progress in learning a subject or personal changes in their attitude or identity. From this perspective, ‘drop out’ might count as positive progress but this militates against progression as a politically-initiated measure.

Professionals and policy makers argue that transitions involve social, emotional and cognitive change at points of transfer and also involve stress, fear and threats to self-confidence and self-esteem. One implication is that interventions should help people be less fearful and more confident. Nevertheless, there was a view at the policy seminar that although institutions pay some attention to emotional dimensions of children’s transitions, they focus less than they should on the cognitive demands of the curriculum at different stages.

Certain groups, especially those defined by policy makers and professionals as socially and economically disadvantaged, or ‘excluded’ are seen as being ‘at risk’ of further disadvantage if they do not manage transitions more effectively. Transitions as the successful navigation of key events or turning points are seen as stressful and risky for many people but more so for those deemed to be socially and educationally ‘at risk’ who need to be supported through professional interventions. Yet, there is a danger that defining groups and individuals as being ‘at risk’ ghettoises people from similar backgrounds in projects such as Surestart or family learning. In addition, difficulties created by having to manage the transitions demanded by policy and administrative structures can be re-presented as the problems of certain groups, so that young people, parents and children from particular groups become a problem to be managed. If a key element in managing transitions effectively is the ability to deal with emotions and feelings of identity, then these too become problems that need managing.

‘Readiness’ is an important characteristic but there is a difference between rational, linear decision making as the basis for readiness and the more serendipitous, pragmatic informal ways that people make decisions. Many policy initiatives present people’s readiness for transitions as being manifested by choices for opportunities that will maximise their human capital and employability. The notion of ‘readiness’ therefore implies that institutions, individuals and other people and agencies in the system need to know when to make specific interventions for transitions. Yet, this raises questions about what people are seen as being ‘ready’ for and who decides what constitutes readiness? In addition, studies summarised in the next section challenge strongly these political images of decision-making.

A number of initiatives emphasise the need for better ‘information flow’ about individuals between institutions and agencies in order to make transitions more effective personally and educationally. Yet, this raises ethical questions about what information, held by whom and about whether some transitions, particularly for adults and young people as ‘second chance learners’ require a clean slate and a new start and therefore no information flow.

Finally, there is a danger that policy presents successful transitions merely as achievement of imposed assessment: in this process, there may be
progression with very little education or sense of change and so from the perspectives discussed below, is not a transition. This point is reinforced by European work on youth transitions, where young people ‘yo-yo’ in and out of projects for work and training as part of initiatives for social inclusion. In this respect, not only is the notion of transition questionable but induces a rhetoric of blame when particular groups fall back out of the formal system into social exclusion.

4. CONCEPTUALISING TRANSITIONS

A review of ideas and outcomes from different fields of research on transitions shows that there is not a commonly agreed definition of transition, nor a set of associated concepts to help us understand processes and outcomes. The seminar series aims to evaluate how far different concepts improve our understanding of different types of transitions, and whether such notions resonate with policy makers and professionals’ ideas and practices.

Transitions

From one perspective, every event, whether moving between different events in a working day or between different contexts such as home to school or family to work, is a transition. In this respect, the ways in which people transfer knowledge and skills between different contexts and roles constitute a transition, enabling researchers to show how students progress cognitively, emotionally and socially between different subjects at different stages of their learning. More broadly, transitions encompass the navigation of life events, rituals and rites of passage. There are also hidden transitions, such as those made by people in long-term, apparently stable situations who have to adjust to changing work or social cultures. Transitions are therefore not always discernible events or processes and the point at which a transition happens may be long after subtle, sub-conscious changes in feelings and attitudes. Finally, a different notion of transition is offered by the idea of navigating different spatial and geographical landscapes. We need a definition of transition from the life transition and lifecourse literature here, and some refs for these ideas above eg Ball et al, Brown.

Policy initiatives tend to depict transitions as the successful navigation of the formal requirements of particular events or turning points within the norms and behaviours of social and institutional expectations surrounding these events. The number and range of these events is increasing as formal education and training extends past compulsory schooling into post-compulsory provision and lifelong learning. Moves to formalise other provision, such as adult and community education, youth work and voluntary work, or the early career progression of groups such as teachers, through systems for assessment and certification aim to improve transitions as formal progression but they also create new processes and events that then need managing. General feelings of progress and change conflict with transitions as ‘successful progression’ through formal systems and structures, particularly when funding and inspection bodies measure these through accreditation and throughput.
Combining formal and informal notions of transition enables us to encompass both the demands of discernible events with more subtle and complex processes of creating a story or narrative about ourselves in particular situations that help us either to deal better with events or situations or to reject or challenge them. A transition in identity and our capacity for agency may or may not be related to formal events or turning points, making it important to note that change and transition are not the same thing.

The seminar series starts with the idea that transitions can be understood initially as institutional and administrative events that reflect social expectations. In these transitions, the lived experience of individuals and groups needs to be understood in relation to broader structural conditions and contexts. This enables us to show through case studies how this lived experience relates to the contemporary political management of transitions and how it contrasts with past conditions and other types of lifecourse transition. Four related concepts are useful in understanding the processes, outcomes and features of transitions: decision-making, identity, agency and structure. The paper summarises the key themes for each of these and the challenges that research using one or more of these concepts presents to assumptions in policy initiatives outlined above.

We need a picture here, with the policy version of transition in the middle and the other subtle aspects around it, going outwards – a little map in which we can put some case studies in

Decision-making

A review of the literature on young people’s decision-making for the Nuffield report on 14-19 education shows that factors and questions about how young people make choices and decisions are also highly relevant in transitions for other groups. The authors argue that:

Young people interpret the incentives and disincentives to participate and progress in the 14-19 phase differently, depending on a variety of historical, social and cultural factors. They actively construct the decision 'field' and their position within it using a variety of locally, historically and culturally situated resources to imagine their futures, interpret the opportunities available to them and develop their aspirations and motivations. Some young people are able to make choices and to succeed against the odds (Hayward et al, 2005: 112).

The authors point out that researchers and policy makers need to understand much more about the sorts of resources that young people who do succeed are able to mobilise. In addition, we need to understand the processes through which young people define and express their identities in the process of becoming adults, through or against the education and training system, the labour market structures and incentives (ibid.)

In parallel to challenges to the rhetoric of policy makers about decision-making as a rational process of information gathering, weighing up costs and
benefits of different courses of action in order to maximise educational and employment capital, evident in our seminar series, the Nuffield report also challenges the dominance of such ideas. The authors argue that while young people staying on in education or training after 16 appear to be acting in this rational, self-interested way, other actors such as teachers, parents, peers and colleagues mediate their actions in subtle, unpredictable and sometimes irrational ways (ibid.)

A number of studies challenge the image of rational decision-making to maximise human capital. A study of the Conservative government’s Training Credits policy, where young people were encouraged to purchase opportunities for training and/or formal education which would then lead to work in their chosen area, using vouchers given to them by government. The study showed how young people, their families and key professionals managing the scheme, created a pragmatically rational approach to career decision-making as part of a dynamic, fluid and ever-changing process rather than as a fixed series of rational decisions made pre-career. It also showed the ways in which turning points emerge between periods of routine. In this way, transition becomes part of routine as a gradual process of orientation to a situation or context and is navigated between people’s idealised identities. These identities are then realised or enacted within specific cultures, such as a vocational sector or education course. The nature of a particular turning point cannot therefore be understood without also understanding the nature of the routines that precede and succeed it. The study argues that the supposedly ‘stable’ periods of routine between transitions are also transitions (Hodkinson et al, 1996).

Another study of the choices, pathways and transitions of young people leaving school in London, over a period of four years, illuminated the inequalities and different outcomes of different groups of young people, and the individuals within those groups, within the habitus of families and their very different cultural capital. Young people’s choices were therefore classed, raced and gendered but also affected strongly by institutional cultures and expectations, differential access to ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ information about opportunities within a local area as well as peer and family expectations. Sociological studies of choice and transitions require exploration of views and actions around individual young people, including those of school tutors, family members and friends. The study also challenged rational decision-making and reinforced the idea of transition as being as much about a slow, subtle process of ‘becoming somebody’ within imagined and realised identities in specific contexts (Ball et al, 2000).

These studies also counter influential ideas about matching individual dispositions and orientations to occupation and career, through guidance and careers education. Managing transitions in relation to the lifecourse is not simply a matter of identifying individual dispositions, aspirations and opportunities to cope with different milestones or events. Instead, transitions are systemic and related to institutions and expectations that, in turn, arise from and create institutionalised pathways and normative patterns. All the studies cited here illuminate the different ways in which young people
navigate transitions through institutionalised pathways and normative patterns and the influences of the wider cultural and socio-political context and its systems for managing transitions and expectations.

From their review of research in this field, the authors of the Nuffield review summarise four key factors at work in young people’s decisions: delayed transitions and restructuring of the lifecourse; de-standardisation and individualisation of transitions; individualised perceptions of risks and opportunities and multi-dimensional, dynamic identities (Hayward et al, op cit.) As our review shows, these factors are also important for children and adults.

Identity

Broadly, identity can be defined as the ways in which the self is represented and understood in dynamic, multidimensional and evolving ways. Transitions require the navigation of old and new identities (what some researchers call ‘identity work’), together with strategies to negotiate and manage the norms and expectations of particular transitions. However, it may not be merely a case of helping people adapt to such expectations: identity work might mean developing a capacity for agency that subverts or challenges those expectations. The notion of identity suggests that if someone cannot account for changes in identity, an event is not a transition.

In their review of research on identity, the authors of the Nuffield report argue that the socially constructed components of identity are of special interest:

Such constructions happen in relation to horizons of interpretation opened by the society and by interaction with significant others. They involve configurations of the past, perceptions of the present and imagined futures. ‘Ideal identity’ is part of such projections of the individual in the future and their might be a mismatch between the ideal identity as harboured by an individual and the externally imposed models received as pressures from school, family or peers (Hayward et al, op cit: 116).

Such ideas are illuminated by research on children and young people’s learning/schooling careers by Andrew Pollard and Ann Filer through a seven year ethnographic study (starting in 1987) which followed 20 children through primary and secondary education and post-education careers. The research showed that identity which has a narrative structure and enables children to tell viable and coherent stories about themselves and their lives. Children (and people generally) aim to achieve a viable way of ‘being’ in a particular context and an identity narrative is an important element in achieving this. Transitions, such as the transition from primary to secondary school, or the transition from one phase of life to the next, can become problematic if an identity that was viable in one context does not transfer to another. Children then need to reconstruct their identity narrative and this can make transitions difficult. Transitions can, in other words, disturb identity and if identity is important for someone to find a viable way of being in a context, this can be unsettling.

Several examples from Pollard and Filer’s work illustrate successful and less successful cases of transition and identity reconstruction. The research has produced a theoretical framework for understanding the ways in which
individual children cope with demands from the broader social and learning environment. The model depicts three 'extreme' strategies: non-conforming, conforming, negotiations/redefining. Most children can be placed somewhere in this triangle. The strategies children use have an impact on (formal) learning, because engagement with learning is part of the identity narrative (see, for example, Pollard and Filer, 1999).

Insights about identity as part of a process of becoming also emerged strongly in the TLRP’s ‘Transforming Learning Cultures’ project where learning was a process of ‘becoming’ as part of vocational habitus. Drawing on Lave and Wenger’s situated learning theory and ideas from Bourdieu, the project showed that transition by young people in colleges and their teachers was a gradual process of orientation, again navigated between the tensions of idealised and realised identities in different vocational cultures. In vocational cultures with strong identities and norms, such as child care, people have to manage and reconcile these tensions in order to fit in and succeed. The ways in which they do this are affected profoundly by factors associated with gender and class (Colley et al, 2003).

**Agency**

People’s capacity to interact with each other and their material circumstances to shape their own destinies, both individually and collectively, agency requires self-direction, the pursuit of one’s goals and a desire to master the environment. Yet, the notion of empowering people to respond to the emerging social contexts of contemporary life by setting goals and making choices is challenged by questions about how far goals can be self-generated or are merely reflections of social structures and contexts. In addition, the interplay between social, institutional and individual processes, goals for career and work, subjective experiences and the multiple social contexts of life is affected by rapidly changing contexts (see Collin and Young, 2000; Watts et al, 1996).

People’s capacity for autonomy and the ability to make free choices might therefore be seen on a continuum from collective and individual skills that comprise agency to a notion of contextual match, where someone’s identity, aspirations and opportunities correlate to what is possible in a particular transition. If agency is seen as comprising certain individual skills, effective transitions ‘empower’ people to use those skills in navigating change to achieve contextual match.

Analysis of policy texts for different initiatives shows how they seem implicitly to redefine agency by promoting it as a match between the demands of a particular context and individual needs in, for example, a family learning project or a programme for basic skills in the workplace. Even in these terms, however, an initiative might not give people what they want or distorts their needs through official targets, outcomes and timeframes. This raises questions about who decides what forms of agency and identity are acceptable and about differences between an individual’s aspirations and those expected from a policy initiative. There are further questions about how far initiatives such as Surestart erode a community’s own capacity to exercise agency for its own needs or goals.
In a similar vein, the Nuffield review challenges the current policy discourse of ‘providing opportunities’, pointing out that in the 14-19 White Paper, the word opportunity or opportunities’ occurs 82 times and, in 43 of these, opportunities are ‘offered’, ‘provided’, ‘made available’, ‘given’, ‘created’ or ‘widened’. In what seems to be a judgemental tone, the Paper describes these opportunities as ‘made the most of’, ‘taken up’ or ‘benefited from’ a mere eight times! (Hayward et al, op cit: 115). Again in a similar vein to discussion at the policy seminar, this raises questions about the individualising of risk and opportunity and whether opportunity is imposed or chosen. It also raises questions about the ways in which policy initiatives pathologise particular groups as failing to take advantage of ‘opportunities’, thereby requiring professional intervention.

In addition to these challenges, feminist thinkers question ideas about choice, opportunity and processes of becoming by arguing that women’s lifecourses and transitions are not at all similar to men’s. For them, dominant ways of conceptualising such transitions are problematic precisely because they are viewed through an androcentric lens. This work also challenges ideas about identity and agency and their role in transitions. For example, research on parenthood, women returning to education as ‘nomads’ and working class people who come into the academy and live middle class lives, shows how certain transitions create emotional conflict that is crucial to their process and management, while many transitions reproduce inequalities in class and gender (see, for example, Hughes, 2002).

Structure

Sociological and political notions of structure also challenge questions about the importance of agency and identity in transitions because they challenge the ways in which some groups are seen as able to manage life, work and educational transitions whilst others are not, thereby raising questions about inequality. The notion of structure also challenges the nature of political and professional interventions, such as in careers guidance where ideas that guidance should intervene in and challenge the labour market have given way to interventions at the level of individual identity as part of helping people adapt to the demands of particular contexts. The policy seminar showed that meanings of structure have changed in initiatives such as Surestart towards institutional structures and interventions rather than signifying more ambitious interventions in housing and labour market conditions.

Considerations of structure also challenge the processes of socialisation, adaptation and progression through transitions. For example, taking on emotional labour in the service of public and private enterprise or becoming ‘the right person for the job’, require an understanding of the ways in which structural conditions affect people’s capacity for agency and shape their personal and learning identities (for example, Colley et al, 2003).

Some studies have explored the interplay between structure and agency by focusing on the ways in which young people approach adulthood, the kinds of adult they become, together with the influences that mould the choices they make and the dilemmas they have to resolve. A longitudinal study of 5,000 young people growing up in 4 labour markets (Swindon, Sheffield, Liverpool
and Kirkcaldy) followed two groups aged 15-16 and 17-18 respectively over a two year period, with data collected in 1987, 1988 and 1989 (Banks et al, 1992). The study illuminates normative and structural influences on the transitions of young people growing up in the four towns, including puberty, school and peer influences, parental and teacher influences, other structural factors (gender, class and race), background, self and identity. This research isolates three key elements relating to young peoples’ choices to stay on, or leave, full-time education after 16: opportunity structure (options available to the individual); credentials (both educational as well as structural); and agency (the element of free, personal choice within structural constraints).

Another study developed the notion of ‘bounded agency’ by exploring the relationships between structure and agency and presenting young people as “social actors in a social landscape” (Evans 2002: 265). A mixed methods analysis of 900 18-25 year olds in Derby, Hannover and Leipzig investigated transitions for young people in higher education, employment and unemployment settings. The study identified three dimensions of structure-agency:

- social determinism vs. individualisation and the ability to be reflexive about one’s own biography
- internal vs. external control processes
- social reproduction vs. conversion - the degree to which social mobility and transformation can be attributed to individual and collective scope for action.

The study found very little evidence of fatalism, indicating that young people were actively trying to gain control of their lives, and were therefore struggling and frustrated rather than passively alienated in the most disadvantaged groups. This suggested the notion of ‘bounded agency’ as an alternative to a more deterministic view of the ways in which young people manage transitions.

Cultural context and formal systems affected the attitudes of young people: young people in England were more pro-active and saw it as their responsibility to find work while young people in Germany were less pro-active and more inclined to wait for and ultimately blame the system. The patterns were different again in East Germany. The study explains these differences in relation to the different ‘transition systems’ in the two countries and to internalised expectations about who is/should be responsible. England has a long tradition of a more casual labour market for young people and young people are apparently more familiar with the idea that it is their responsibility to ‘navigate’ the labour market. In Germany the labour market is much more regulated (for example, in terms of access), which makes it less obvious for individuals to see it as their responsibility.

The research therefore made clear that broader social structures, together with institutional structures create transitions: young people’s expectations about who should be responsible for ‘managing’ transitions are at least partly formed by their experience of these institutions. Agency in navigating
transitions is clearly contextual, based on opportunities for action and perceptions of where action is possible.

The interplay between identity, agency and structure in different transitions suggests that researchers, practitioners and policy makers need to know more about how identity and agency interact in a particular context. For example, Pollard and Filer’s work shows a complex interaction between children’s transitions and identity, where identity is an action narrative that people need and construct in order to have a viable ‘story’ or rationale for their actions. The viability of this narrative depends heavily on context, which explains why transitions can become problematic and why dealing effectively with transitions requires better understanding about the shaping and enactment of identity in different contexts.

Combing the concepts of identity, agency and structure in an analysis of transition enables us to show, for example, why and how some people take on vocational habitus and the effects this has on identity and agency in particular fields of action.

Learning

An important dimension in managing transitions, whether as turning points or a process of becoming, is the relationship between learning, agency and lifecourse transitions. Questions about the role of change in relation to understanding suggest that learning will more often flow from transitions and life events than be the cause of them. From this perspective, learning can be seen as a response, as one of the ways in which people respond to events in order to gain more control over their lives. These responses can be adaptive, creative or generative and the learning itself can be tacit, delayed, reflective or critical: we therefore need to know more about the impact of lifecourse events on learning, both for individuals and groups, and the impact of learning on life events including systemic transitions and more general, gradual changes.

5. INTERVENTIONS

Discussion at the policy seminar about whether the concepts of identity, agency and structure help professionals understand and manage transitions better focused on the ways in which external expectations, one’s own expectations and one’s emotions in a particular transition affect a sense of identity. From this perspective, a number of participants felt that understanding more about the range of expectations at play in a specific context, and their effect on identity and emotion, are more important and useful in policy and practice than concepts of structure and agency. This view is supported by many psychologists interested in transitions and countered by researchers from sociological, political or cultural perspectives.

Whatever the differences in opinion about the most salient concepts, the policy seminar and a mapping of different initiatives dealing with transitions show that identity, agency and structure are being depicted, created or represented in subtle and implicit ways. Such depictions have implications for subsequent interventions to manage transitions and for professional beliefs about different groups and their capacity for agency. For example, a strong emphasis on risk and disadvantage, and the ‘fragile’ or ‘vulnerable’ identities
that are often presumed to accompany these, reinforce an emphasis on managing the emotional aspects of transitions rather than questioning the balance between the identities that people are presumed to choose from the ones that are imposed on them by structural conditions.

Tension over the priority given to agency, identity or structure raises questions about the nature of professional interventions and their underlying assumptions. For example, some initiatives, such as changes to the role of youth workers shift traditional interventions in this field towards more formal interventions on the grounds of changing risky or anti-social behaviour for some groups but not others. In addition, an emphasis on personalised intervention floats away the structural realities of the labour market and social conditions and prioritise questions of identity: from this perspective, identity is recast by policy as 'attention to emotion'. Depictions of transitions and interventions that flow from them therefore contain normative assumptions and ethical dimensions that need critical evaluation.

The policy seminar showed that different ways of conceptualising transitions lead to different strategies, interventions and practices for managing them. Some practices are seen to apply for all major formal transitions, while others are seen as specific to particular groups or events. Nevertheless, the seminar highlighted a number of interventions in policy initiatives that are seen to aid transitions. They are listed here as the basis for further exploration:

- family learning initiatives
- basic skills programmes
- better information flow/diagnostic assessment for individuals, supported by formal requirements and templates for doing this
- aligning pedagogy and curriculum design at key points, such as between the national curriculum stages
- personalised learning and assessment
- careers guidance
- learning about career
- personal counselling
- engagement mentoring
- personal advisers for 'at risk' or 'vulnerable young people'
- lifecoaching
- developing self-awareness/identity work' (in some cases, this is being re-presented as developing emotional literacy)
- developing learning to learn 'skills'
- developing 'vocational habitus'

6. NEXT STEPS

Further work in the seminar series will focus on interventions in different sectors and initiatives, as well as developing better insights about concepts
and ideas discussed in the paper. The next two seminars, in January and May 2006, will explore concepts of identity, agency and structure in the transitions of different groups, drawing on research inside and outside the TLRP. The final two, in October and December 2006 will offer an account of key transitions in the education and training system and present ideas to a wider audience of policy and practice-based professionals involved in different transitions.

Four outcomes are envisaged:

- an edited book about theory, policy and practice in educational transitions
- accounts of transitions in different contexts, drawing on TLRP and other studies, to show the key initiatives, ideas and interventions
- a special edition of *Studies in the Education of Adults* for October 2007 on identity and agency in adult learning
- a summary of the main texts and studies dealing with transitions covered in our literature review

If you would like to be on the mailing list for the series, please send contact details to Kirsten Wilmer-Becker (k.wilmer-becker@exeter.ac.uk).

REFERENCES


APPENDIX 1

Participants at the policy seminar on October 13th 2005:

- Janet Aboosada, family learning project worker, London Borough of Barnet
- Musseret Anwar, family learning co-ordinator for the London Borough of Croydon
- Gert Biesta, professor of education, University of Exeter, and co-director of the TLRP’s ‘Learning Lives’ project and the ‘Transitions’ seminar series
- Theo Blackmore, ESRC-funded PhD student, University of Exeter, and founder of the Cornwall Disability Forum
- Helen Colley, senior research fellow, Manchester Metropolitan University and co-director of the ‘Transitions’ seminar series
- David Collier, adult learning inspector and consultant for the DfES Post-16 Standards Unit
- Kathryn Ecclestone, senior lecturer in post-compulsory education, University of Exeter and convenor of the ‘Transitions’ seminar series
- Karen Evans, professor of education, Institute of Education, and co-director of the TLRP’s ‘Enhancing Skills for Life: adult basic skills in the workplace’ project
- Leon Feinstein, Institute of Education, director of the research centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning
- Alison Fuller, reader in education, University of Southampton and co-director of TLRP’s ‘Learning as work: teaching and learning processes in the contemporary work organisation’ project
- Wendy Hirsh, independent researcher and chair of the National Guidance Research Forum and member of the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling
- Martin Hughes, professor of education, University of Bristol and director of the TLRP’s ‘Home/school knowledge exchange in primary education’ project
- Jenny Kidd, professor of occupational psychology, University of London and editor of British Journal for Guidance and Counselling
- Sharon Lee, family learning co-ordinator, London Borough of Barnet
- David Moseley, reader in education, University of Newcastle and director of Learning and Skills Development Agency research project on ‘Thinking skills in prison education’
- Stephen Peters, research fellow in the research centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning
• Andrew Pollard, professor of education, Institute of Education and director of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme
• Michael Tedder, research fellow for TLRP ‘Learning Lives’ project, University of Exeter and convenor of the South-west Learning and Skills Research Network
• John Vorhaus, Institute of Education, director of research, National Research Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy
• (Patrick Turner, youth worker, Wandsworth Youth Service could not attend the seminar but sent comments on questions raised in discussion)

Other participants who could not intend but wish to come to a future event are:

• David Bartlett, Key stage 2 adviser, Birmingham LEA
• David Glover, senior practitioner for young people leaving care, Oxfordshire Social Services
• Patrick Grattan, head of the Third Age Research Network
• Charles Taylor, chair of the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling