Lost and found in transition: the implications of ‘identity’, ‘agency’ and ‘structure’ for educational goals and practices

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ABSTRACT

Managing educational transitions effectively has become a focus for policy, practice and research in the UK, leading to growing numbers of interventions throughout the education system. These tend to be rooted in assumptions that transitions are problematic for certain groups and individuals and therefore need to be managed more effectively.

In order to evaluate the implications of different meanings and assumptions about transitions for educational goals and practices, this paper draws on a seminar series ‘Transitions through the lifecourse’ in the ESRC’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). It explores how concepts of identity, agency and structure appear in political, academic and practical concerns about transitions. It asks whether current emphasis on identity and agency over structure leads to practices present transitions as inherently difficult and threatening, remove risk and challenge, formalise support and create the ‘self’ as a new subject with a curriculum, pedagogy and forms of assessment.

This paper reflects ideas in transition: feedback is very much welcome. Please do not cite or quote without discussion with the author.

INTRODUCTION

Supporting and managing transitions has become political, professional and research concern in the UK. From early years to widening participation initiatives in higher education, to continuing professional development and workplace learning, a dominant theme in policy texts, practical strategies and research reports is that transitions are problematic and need ‘support’, particularly for children, young people and adults deemed to be vulnerable, disaffected or ‘at risk’.

A plethora of initiatives and associated research activities have grown around this idea. The establishment of peer mentoring and buddy schemes run alongside calls for closer alignment between home, school and life knowledge and learning, and between different institutional and assessment systems, curriculum content,
pedagogy and between the norms and expectations of different learning cultures. Notions of 'bridging' and 'blurring' divisions and differences between these aspects of educational experience are now commonplace in debates around transitions. It is important to note at the outset that a great deal of concern and the subsequent calls for easing, smoothing and supporting transitions arise from the idea that they are inherently unsettling, daunting and risky.

This paper draws on the work of a seminar series on 'transitions through the lifecourse' as part of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme and papers presented at an international conference on transitions at the University of Stirling in June 2007 (see www.trlp.org/transitions; Ecclestone et al, forthcoming and www.stirling.ac.uk/CRL). It explores how policy texts and research studies of transitions employ, implicitly or explicitly, ideas about people's sense of self (identity), their capacity for autonomous, empowered action (agency) and the effects of structural factors (class, gender, race and economic and material conditions) on the processes and outcomes of transitions. It evaluates the ways in which considerations of identity, agency and structure in different types of transition lead to contrasting views about what a transition is, what challenges it presents to individuals or groups, and how it might best be managed.

First, the paper summarises the rise of political interest in transitions. Second, it discusses different meanings of transitions and shows that concepts of agency, identity and structure illuminate and challenge different aspects of transitions. Third, it highlights some examples of how studies discussed in section two show different views about the best way to manage transitions through assessment, support structures, curriculum and pedagogy. Finally, it challenges some of the normative assumptions that emerge in different meanings of transitions and evaluates their implications for educational goals and practices and for further work around the theme of transitions.

1. POLITICAL INTEREST IN TRANSITIONS

In some respects, political interest in transitions is not new. The 1959 Crowther Report, for example, analysed the nature of risk, change and opportunity for 15-18 year olds. Since 1997, a growing number of initiatives to deal with transitions across the education system reflect political concerns to ease transitions between educational sites, different phases and requirements, from education to other social sites, such as welfare, health and social work, and to minimise the difficulties that they cause for students. Particular concerns focus on the transition from nursery to primary school, the dip in achievement and motivation in the move to secondary school, a drop in retention in further/tertiary education at 17, and rising rates of drop-out in higher education.

Political attempts to manage transitions more effectively emerge, in part, from the de-standardisation and increasing non-linearity of youth transitions, together with the individualisation and complexity of many life course transitions for adults. Initiatives to deal with transitions also arise from other policies, such as targets for participation, achievement and engagement, proposals to raise the compulsory school leaving age to 18 and the creation of a new formal transition at 14. Policy therefore both stimulates concerns about success, failure and drop-out and the role of transitions in these outcomes and creates normative expectations about appropriate processes, outcomes and dispositions.

Attempts to manage transitions are reinforced by pressures across Europe to deal with the ways in which globalisation is bringing about: the deregulation of labour markets; privatisation; technological advances; changing employment patterns; changing organisational forms and structures; demographic and labour market changes; new tensions between work and non-work life; lack of job security; changes in educational goals and systems for assessing them (see, for example,
OECD, date). Concerns about social exclusion and disadvantage caused by the inability to move easily through education and labour markets are also evident in OECD analysis.

Similar concerns and responses also feature in the UK, embellished by a view that better management of specific social, educational and career transitions is crucial for breaking cycles of social and economic disadvantage. This view, first presented in ‘Bridging the Gap’ by the Social Exclusion Unit in 1998 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 (DFES, 2004; SEU, 1998; SEU, 2005). It also features in policies to raise achievement and increase participation for ‘non-traditional’ groups where better management of transitions into higher education for working-class young people is supposed to realise benefits of social cohesion and the creation of ‘engaged citizens’ (see DFES, 2006; HEFC, 2005; Quinn, 2006).

2. MEANINGS OF TRANSITION.

Navigating pathways, structures and systems

Researchers agree that transition is not the same as ‘movement’ or ‘transfer’, although it involves both. Instead, transition depicts change and shifts in identity and agency as people progress through the education system. For example, Lam and Pollard analyse the transition of children from home to nursery school and differentiate between transition as the movement from one institutional setting or from one activity to another, namely as a change of context. They differentiate further between horizontal transitions as ‘movement between various settings, that a child and his/her family may encounter within the same time frame’ while vertical transitions refer to ‘movement among education/care programmes, health and social services across time’ (2006, 124). From this perspective, transition is a change process but also a shift from one identity to another: “[transition is] the process of change that is experienced when children (and their families) move from one setting to another...to when the child is more fully established as a member of the new setting. It is usually a time of intense and accelerated development demands that are socially regulated” (Lam and Pollard, 2006, 125).

This depiction means that managing transitions requires more than facilitating changes in context or easing transfer between them: effective transitions require a better understanding of how people progress cognitively, emotionally and socially between different subjects at different stages of their learning, and how they navigate the complex demands of different contexts. A number of studies examine the psychological and socio-cultural factors that affect how children manage, influence and adapt to, the transition from home to nursery, home to primary school, primary school to secondary or from national settings for compulsory schooling to institutions in other countries (Lam and Pollard, 2006; Pollard, 1985; Pollard and Filer, 1996; Hughes, 2006; Fabian and Dunlop, 2002; Fabian, 2006).

Strands of life-course research reinforce an institutional or context-specific image of transitions, suggesting that "individuals generally work out their own life course in relation to institutionalized pathways and normative patterns" (Elder et al, 2003: 8). This meaning presents transitions both as the product of social institutions and the outcomes produced by social expectations. It also differentiates between institutionalised pathways which are about transitions as “changes in state or role” which "often involve changes in status and identity, both personally and socially, and thus open up opportunities for behavioural change” (ibid, 8) and normative patterns.
The notion of transitions as the navigation of institutionalised pathways or systems is supported by research on career by Pallas who describes transitions as attributes of social systems rather than as attributes of an individual’s life course: “Pathways are well-travelled sequences of transitions that are shaped by cultural and structural forces... A trajectory is an attribute of an individual, whereas a pathway is an attribute of a social system.” (1992: 168). From this perspective, educational attainment is determined by movement through “an ordered sequence of educational transitions” (1992: 172-173).

'Becoming somebody'

Some research from the fields of careers, guidance and life transitions challenges the depiction of transition as change brought about through navigating institutional norms and procedures, focusing instead on processes of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’. A number of studies illuminate the ways in which people make social and cultural transitions, individually and collectively, in response to a broader context of structural change, such as opportunities in the labour market or changes in work structures and organisation. Gallacher and Cleary define transition as “personal transition between two states of 'being' – the before and after of specified learning experiences” (2007). Blair defines it as a “discontinuity in a person’s life-space” (2007). One influential strand of thinking on transitions as a process of becoming has been the work on pupil and learning ‘career’ (see Pollard, 1995; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997.

A body of work aims to show how transitions combine turning points, milestones or life events with subtle, complex processes of ‘becoming somebody’ personally, educationally and occupationally. Such processes are sometimes a response to particular events, and sometimes events arise out of shifts and developments in identity and agency. For example, the evolution of a professional or occupational identity in a particular field, navigating uncertain labour and educational systems, changes in cultural identity for asylum seekers or migrants taking up educational opportunities in a new culture or for women returning to education after time at home might trigger a turning point or life event, or arise from one.

Such transitions also involve set-backs or processes of ‘unbecoming’ over time, are located and enacted within specific fields rather than emerging from a fixed series of rational decisions and they emerge through periods of routine and stability, as well as from change. They are influenced by elements of a person’s whole life, rather than merely through their involvement with education systems. Transitions are therefore not always discernible events or processes and a transition may happen long after subtle, sub-conscious changes in feelings and attitudes (see, for example, Banks et al, 1992; Ball et al, 2000; Reay et al, 2005; Hodkinson et al, 1996; Evans, 2002; Hughes, 2002; Fuller, 2006; Colley, 2006; Hodkinson et al, 2007)

Life-as-transition

Post-modern and some feminist perspectives challenge transition depicted as rites of passage, movement through life stages, bridges that connect old and new, ‘crisis events’ or ‘critical incidents’ and life change rooted in theories of discernible processes of ‘typical’ adult maturation. In contrast to movements from one lifestage to another, bounded by periods of stability, many women argue that they have been psychologically in transit almost all their adolescent and adult lives (Hughes, op cit).

From this perspective, many depictions of transition ignore the particular distinctiveness of women’s transitional experiences and use, instead, androcentric lenses that overlook how certain transitions create emotional conflict that is crucial to their outcomes and management, whilst also reproducing inequalities of class and gender (see Hughes, 2002; Skeggs, 1997; Colley, 2006). Such
perspectives illuminate transition as something much more ephemeral and fluid, where the whole of life is a form of transition, a permanent state of ‘becoming’ and ‘unbecoming’, much of which is unconscious, contradictory and iterative.

This work not only challenges notions of linearity, chronology, time and change (see Colley, 2006b). It also questions the assumption that people can generate a coherent narrative about themselves. According to Quinn’s study of working class students leaving higher education early, individuals construct multiple identities that draw on “many interlocking cultural narratives and these are often classed and gendered”. She shows how working class young men combined narratives of masculinity, nostalgia for extinct employment opportunities and hedonism as reasons to leave university (2006, 3). A feminist perspective therefore undermines assumptions that ‘becoming somebody’ involves a unified subject capable of being transformed: “a subject is not an ‘entity’ or thing, or a relation between mind (interior) and body (exterior). Instead, it must be understood as a series of flows, energies and movements and capacities, a series of fragments or segments capable of being linked together in ways other than those that congeal it into an identity” (Grosz, quoted by Quinn, 2006, 4). From this standpoint, “we are always lost in transition, not just in the sense of moving from one task or context to another, but as a condition of out subjectivity” (Quinn, 2006, 4).

The lenses of identity, agency and structure

Perspectives on transition, summarised above, show that political, academic and practical interests in transition are underpinned both explicitly and implicitly by different views about the extent to which people’s identity and agency and the effects of structure affect assumptions about the processes and outcomes of different types of transition in the education system, and the best ways to deal with them. While the three concepts are inextricably connected, researchers explore transitions in different ways, depending on the emphasis they place on each or all of the concepts.

Identity

Broadly, identity can be defined as the ways in which the self is represented and understood in dynamic, multi-dimensional and evolving ways. Stuart Hall defines identity as “the unstable point at which the unspeakable stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history and of a culture” (Hall quoted by Wetherall, 2005). Contemporary studies of identity explore the ways in which the social, personal and cultural meet, the subsequent ways in which people are ‘stitched into’ social relations, how identities are made within this psycho-social nexus and the possible actions that flow from understanding one’s place in a system of social relations (Wetherall, op cit; also 2006). Identity is therefore constructed through complex interactions between different forms of capital (cultural, social, economic and emotional), broader social and economic conditions, interactions and relationships in various contexts, and cognitive and psychological strategies.

Successful creation of a viable identity in navigating transitions into school and between home and school is a central theme in the Home/School Knowledge Transfer Project in the TLRP. This develops insights from longitudinal, ethnographic studies of children and young people’s learning/schooling careers through primary and secondary education and post-education careers (Pollard, 1995; Pollard and Filer, 1996). This work depicts identity as having a narrative structure that enables children to tell viable, coherent stories about themselves and their lives in order to achieve a viable way of ‘being’ in a particular context. Brookes argues that:
Individual learners are active agents constructing understanding and ‘making sense’ of new experiences and challenges by drawing on various cultural resources at their disposal. In the case of transition, pupils’ relationships with their parents, siblings, teachers and peers will affect the types of support received as new learning challenges are encountered (2006, 5).

From this perspective, transitions become problematic if a viable identity in one context does not transfer to another. Having to reconstruct an identity narrative can disrupt a viable way of being in a context, making transitions de-motivating and stressful (see Pollard and Filer, 1999; Lam and Pollard, 2006; Hughes et al, 2007; Hughes, 2006).

The TLRP’s ‘Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education’ project also explored identity but linked it to questions about agency and structure as part of Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’. The project showed that transition by students and their teachers through the demands of a learning programme and the evolution of an acceptable occupational identity was a gradual process of orientation, navigated between the tensions of idealised and realised identities in different vocational cultures (see Colley et al, 2003). Identity and habitus that embody and enact past and current dispositions and horizons for action interact in complex and subtle ways with the practices, expectations, norms and relationships of specific learning cultures. The unpredictable and idiosyncratic features of this interaction in different learning cultures shape identity and habitus and create new practices (see James and Biesta, 2007).

Some researchers argue that the socially constructed components of identity should be of special interest:

Such constructions [of identity] 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, 2005, 116).

Agency

People’s capacity to interact with others and with material conditions in order to shape their own destinies, both individually and collectively, requires self-direction, self-efficacy, opportunities to exercise autonomy and perhaps a desire to shape a specific field or context. The idea that education can, and should, help people develop their capacities for agentic and autonomous action has been a longstanding tradition in western societies since the Enlightenment. Yet, the rhetoric of agency often elides ‘choice’, ‘action’ and ‘autonomy’ in confusing ways.

Lifecourse research presents agency as the ways in which “individuals construct their own lifecourse through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance” (Elder, 2003: 11). In a paper from the TLRP project ‘Learning Lives’, Biesta and Tedder explore the relationship between the development and enactment of agency and different types of learning through the lifecourse. They define agency as “the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive responses to the problems caused by changing historical situations (Embhrbayer and Mische, quoted in Biesta and Tedder, 2007, p3).

From this perspective, understanding agency in different contexts and times requires a focus on “the dynamic interplay” between influences from the past, engagement with the present and orientations towards the future. Agency builds
on past achievements, understandings and patterns of action and is not something that people possess as an attribute but something they do in different contexts (Biesta and Tedder, 2007).

In contrast to Biesta and Tedder, other researchers see agency inextricably linked to the effects of structural factors of class, race and gender, economic and occupational conditions. For example, studies of working class participation and ‘drop out’ from higher education show the extent to which agency is affected by the ways in which working class and middle class young people and adults are attracted to, and have access to, very different courses and ‘types’ of institution. In addition, the apparent exercise of agency in deciding to drop out is often presented by careers and other agencies as confirming ‘helpless failure’: “drop out [becomes] a self perpetuating narrative and this discourse [is] more important than individual choice or even structure” (Quinn, 2006, 4; Ball et al, 2005). From this perspective, agency cannot be divorced from structural factors since different access to economic, social and symbolic forms of capital arises from key social divisions, framing possibilities and restricting social mobility (see, for example, Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 2005; Ball et al, 2005).

Structure

Many researchers argue that it is not possible to understand agency and identity without an account of how they are shaped, constrained and sometimes determined by the material conditions and normative expectations of different structural factors (see also Collin and Young, 2000; Watts et al, 1996). Considerations of structure also reveal the day to day interactions between habitus, adaptation and progression through specific transitions which shape identity and agency in both exploitative and transforming ways. In her analysis of vocational habitus of young women learning to become nursery nurses, Colley explores how gendered notions of caring for others and the deployment of emotional labour are crucial to the development of that habitus:

as students talked about what they have learned as they participated in their work placements, their narratives centred on coping with the emotional demands of the job, and revealed a vocational culture of detachment in the workplace which contrasts somewhat with the nurturing ideal that is officially promoted (Colley, 2006, 15; see also Bates, 1994).

Conflict between the ‘nurturing ideal’ formalised in the childcare curriculum and the ‘vocational detachment of the job’ produces coping strategies, but also frictions as students move between the two contexts, particularly in relation to the cultivation of ‘acceptable’ forms of emotional labour as part of becoming ‘respectable’ young women. This emotional element of the transitional process, as students move into and out of different settings is not only problematic emotionally for some students but it reinforces class and gendered exploitation. Yet, it is also a means of escape from what young people and their tutors see as the ‘mass of the non-respectable’ (Colley, 2006).

Combining identity, agency and structure

While some researchers do not separate the effects of structural conditions from the construction and shaping of identities and agency, the seminar series revealed very different views about the respective emphasis that should be given to identity, agency or structure in understanding transitions. And, although it is commonplace to acknowledge the importance of ‘context’ (history, socio-economic conditions, institutional ethos, subject discipline etc), many studies do not engage closely with the effect of structural conditions on the forced or chosen nature of transitions, or their negative and positive effects. ‘Structural environment’ (‘temporal-relational contexts of action’), ‘resources’, ‘context’ and ‘social circumstance’ are not therefore synonymous with structure.
Instead, Evans argues that combining insights about identity, agency and structure illuminates the lived social reality within policy discourses relating to transitions. In particular: “If policies and interventions are to be made effective, we need to sharpen our awareness of the interplay of structural forces and individual's attempts to control their lives.” (2002, p 265). In a similar vein, the authors of the Nuffield Review of 14-19 education advocate combining structure, agency and identity:

**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 Review is the latest in a series of studies exploring how young people in different local and transnational labour and education markets approach adulthood, the kinds of adult they become, the influences that mould their choices and the dilemmas they have to resolve. An earlier study illuminated normative and structural influences on transitions, including puberty, school and peer influences, parental and teacher influences, other structural factors (gender, class and race), background, self and identity and people’s capacity for agency within structural constraints (Banks et al, 1992).

Building on this earlier work, a study of 900 18-25 year olds in Derby, Hannover and Leipzig investigated transitions in higher education, employment and unemployment and analysed the relationships between structure and agency. As “social actors in a social landscape”, young people showed little evidence of fatalism, trying actively to gain control of their lives, and therefore were struggling and frustrated rather than passively alienated. This suggested the notion of ‘bounded agency’ as an alternative to a more deterministic view of the ways in which young people manage transitions in an interplay between cultural context, institutional systems, their own attitudes and actions in labour and education markets and associated ‘transition systems’ (Evans, 2002).

A four year study of the choices, pathways and transitions of young people leaving school in London shows the inequalities and different outcomes of different groups of young people, and the individuals within those groups, within the habitus of families with access to very different cultural capital. Choices were 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 and peer and family expectations. Transition was therefore a slow, subtle process of ‘becoming somebody’ within imagined and realised identities in specific contexts (Ball et al, 2000).

### 3. MANAGING TRANSITIONS

The respective emphasis given to the role of identity, agency and structure in transitions is a matter of disagreement and conceptual fragmentation. Depictions about what transitions are, why they are problematic and the links between agency, identity and structure lead to different perspectives on the best way to manage transitions.

**Easing and supporting the navigation of transitions**

Transitions presented in policy are discernible events, experienced in a linear sequence of progression through funding, institutional and achievement structures and designed to raise levels of participation, retention and achievement of formal qualifications. In turn, this creates normative expectations
that people must be motivated to make successful transitions through the pathways, structures and expectations framed by policy and achieve measurable outcomes: eliminating the dip in achievement between primary and secondary school; enrolling on further courses; reducing drop-out levels; gaining higher levels of achievement through qualifications and certificates. Linked to funding and quality assurance, the attainment of targets narrows what it means to make a successful transition.

In various guises, assessment dominates transitions into, through and out of, the formal system. Successful transitions require formal procedures for initial diagnostic assessment and guidance, the setting, reviewing and tracking of goals and targets through Individual Learning Plans, informal and formal mentoring schemes, and the increasing use of detailed coaching and feedback on tasks broken into manageable parts. These assessments aim to ease students’ transition through the requirements of summative assessments as painlessly as possible (see Torrance et al, 2005; Ecclestone, 2006). In turn, artefacts and procedures of assessment create normative expectations and associated rituals and ‘rites of passage’ (see, for example, Hamilton, 2006).

Each meaning of transition suggests a desire on the part of researchers and sometimes practitioners to ease transitions, either through formal systems for doing so or by helping people understand their own transitions better, and sometimes by doing both. The insertion of interest in identity, agency and structure affects perceptions of how that should be done and subsequent activities. Nevertheless, easing transitions creates new roles for education professionals working alongside other people working informally and formally as ‘mediators of learning’ or, perhaps more accurately, as ‘transition workers’. These include parents, siblings and also a large and growing number of children, young people and adults who are being trained in counselling to act as ‘buddies’ to peers, new or younger students in order to manage both the emotional aspects of formal transitions as well as simplifying the logistics of new structures and systems. ‘Support’ for transitions is being increasingly formalised and expected at all levels of the education system, leading to a growth industry in coaching and mentoring (see, for example, Colley, 2003; Cullingford, 2006).

Although there are differences in perspective between policy imperatives to formalise transitions and to set up systems of support, and calls for a better understanding of changes in identity and the strategies and narratives that people use to navigate them, both notions lead to ‘support’. For example, studies discussed in Section Two of the ways in which children navigate the different demands of home and school suggest that paying more attention to the artefacts, activities and knowledge that children use at school and home can help children, parents and carers and peers evolve a constructive learning identity that is congruent between the two contexts. Crucially, this has to be in the children’s own terms (see Hughes et al, in press; Hughes, 2006). Lam and Pollard argue that understanding what children encounter during the transition from home to kindergarten, and knowing what makes a positive experience for them can be achieved by ‘transition policies’ and ‘transition practices’ for a ‘smooth’ transition (2006). In a similar vein, some researchers argue that ‘non-traditional’ entrants to higher education need ‘functional’ capabilities in order to construct and manage a viable ‘learning identity’ (see, for example, Walker, 2006).

Interest in how learners construct a learning identity and engage with the relationships, norms and expectations of a particular learning community of practice leads other researchers to advocate support through closer alignment between the learning cultures of different educational contexts. For example, a study of adults in community-based further education illuminates how adults who have had negative experiences of formal education, and who experience profound emotional and practical difficulties caused by class and gender, need and then
come to expect particular types of relationships and approaches to teaching. Drawing on Bourdieu’s notions of habitus, the study argues that adults bring particular dispositions that both create and reinforce expectations and activities in a new habitus. This is a barrier in the transition to mainstream further education. Yet, the study also acknowledges that reinforcing the learning cultures of community education can create comfort zones, expectations of ‘acceptable’ behaviour on the part of both teachers and students and exclusion for those who do not fit (Gallacher et al, 2007).

Such ideas resonate with current practice. In an article about primary to secondary school transition, the focus was entirely on the risks, threats, fears and anxieties of children. One response is to make secondary schools more like primary ones. A school in Manchester has the same teacher for 11-14 year olds “for every lesson, every day, just as they are at primary...the teacher will have a shepherding role...they (sic) will have intimate knowledge of their class from their circumstances at home to what their special needs are...Specialists will join the regular teacher for certain subjects” (Frankel, 2007, 18). Some researchers argue that such strategies may be appropriate for other major transitions in the education system (see, for example, Dixon and Alcock, 2007).

**Developing self-awareness about transitions**

Researchers interested in identity and agency go further in what they regard as support. Instead of general technical support, they advocate a deeper understanding of ‘typical’ learning identities or ‘typical’ problems that particular learners face. One perspective is to argue for research to help people both to understand and then change their own responses to problematic situations: according to Biesta and Tedder, for example, this “requires learning about the composition of one’s agentic orientations and how they ‘play out’ in one’s life. On the other hand, it requires learning about how one might change the composition of one’s responsiveness” (2007, 4). Research methods of life history and biography elevate the validity and authenticity of self-reports and are seen to enable people to learn about their ‘agentic orientations’, where telling stories about our lives and sharing these stories with others is a particular kind of learning that helps people to be agentic (op cit). In a similar vein, but with different a pedagogy, other researchers argue that formal modules in personal development, reflection and developing skills for lifelong learning offer learners a “means of exploring and connecting learning identities, working identities and personal identities” (Buckley and Fielding, 2007).

These notions resonate powerfully with therapeutic approaches advocated by some adult educators as a pedagogy that helps people understand patterns of action and reasons for them (see, for example, Hunt and West and 2006). An important question here is whether research interest in biographical approaches, reflection on the self or in more overtly therapeutic applications of psychoanalysis or counselling as pedagogy leads to calls for learners and various transition workers around them to draw out individuals’ agentic orientations, or perceptions of identity in order to develop better strategies. An alternative view is that the outcomes of such research offer important insights and practical strategies for policy makers, institutions and teachers rather than direct interventions in people’s feelings about identity and agency.

The question becomes more salient because research interest in raising awareness about identities and/or agency in transition resonates with contemporary cultural expectations that we should be self-aware, able to disclose and to be coherent in our accounts of ourselves. For example, there is a growing alignment between educational policy and practice and cultural narratives around emotional well-being. This, in turn, relates to interest in the reflexive self, where, according to Giddens, ‘reflexive self-awareness’ on the part of the public and
policy makers alike is a positive trend. He argues that psychoanalysis and therapy flowing from a quest for self-awareness provides a setting and a “rich fund of theoretical and conceptual resources for the creation of a reflexively ordered narrative of self. In a therapeutic situation, whether of the classical psychoanalytical type or not, individuals are able (in principle) to bring their past into line with the exigencies of the present, consolidating a story-line with which they feel relatively content (Giddens, 1995, p31; see also Ecclestone, 2007). Broader cultural interest in self-awareness therefore makes it important to consider the links between biographical learning and lifehistory approaches in relation to identity and agency in research and a strong therapeutic turn in policy and pedagogy across the system (see Ecclestone and Hayes, forthcoming).

Critical pedagogy

A different, more radical notion of ‘support’ for transitions comes from a long-standing tradition in post-compulsory education that aims to help people to understand how structural factors of class, race and gender shape agency and identity in particular ways. This requires incorporating questions about structure in discussions about identity and agency. For example, in relation to young women learning emotional labour, Colley argues that curriculum content and teaching should enable students to see how “structure and agency combine to produce and reproduce social inequalities” (2006, 25). In relation to the creation and exploitation of emotional labour, she draws on Reay to argue “the concept of gendered habitus holds powerful structural influences within its frame. Gendered habitus includes a set of complex, diverse predispositions. It involves understandings of identity based on familial legacy and early childhood socialisation. As such, it is primarily a dynamic concept, a rich interfacing of past and present, interiorized and permeating both body and psyche” (ibid, 26).

This argument leads to two different interpretations of critical pedagogy rooted in the notion that ‘the personal is political’: one is a psycho-social analysis of how gendered habitus has evolved in individuals and groups: a form of critical therapy, advocated by well-known feminist psychotherapists such as Susie Orbach, for example. The other is a less overtly therapeutic goal that challenges students to “ask critical questions about what [those] destinies both offer and demand; and to ask why their education contributes so often to the reproduction of social inequality” (ibid, 27). Following this argument, Colley argues that curriculum designers, awarding bodies and employers also need to support better the emotional skills demanded of young women in caring occupations and to consider the content of the care curriculum.

CHALLENGES AND CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Despite different meanings of transition summarised in the paper, the navigation of the processes, outcomes and normative expectations of social institutions, and associated shifts in identity and agency, dominate policy images of transition and much research, both inside and outside the TLRP. Transition as processes of ‘becoming somebody’ with turning points, rites of passage, periods of routine are also evident in the TLRP and other areas of research. More fluid, ephemeral notions of life-as-transition remain at the margins of research on transitions in the TLRP, as do those which see structure as central to the shaping of identity and agency (see Colley, 2006b).

Yet, I would argue that, albeit in different ways, the three perspectives on transitions summarised in this paper not only risk pathologising transitions by depicting them as unsettling, disruptive, daunting, anxiety inducing and risky but also create normative assumptions about how best to manage them. Political creation and management of transitions undoubtedly narrows what transition means, depicts those refusing or unable to make them as ‘demotivated’, ‘disaffected’ or ‘vulnerable’ and overlooks structure and agency. Policy also turns
agency into choice and decision-making where individuals are seen as maximising use and calculating costs and benefits. Not only, as numerous studies cited here have shown, does this not reflect choice, action and outcomes, it enables policy makers to recast agency as responding ‘appropriately’ to opportunities ‘offered’ by policy. In turn, there is a danger that policy makers and practitioners inadvertently infantilise ‘non-traditional’ or ‘disaffected’ young people and adults by creating more and more forms of emotional and practical ‘support’.

In different ways, all three meanings of transition reinforce concerns about risk and suggest that everyone needs to have the emotional difficulty of transitions eased and soothed. Whether navigating norms created by institutions, creating a viable identity narrative, or understanding the effects of transitions on identity and agency, the idea that people cannot deal with transitions without formalised help sits uneasily with the possibilities of creative risk, opportunity and change that transitions can create. It also erases the positive effects of difficulty, challenge and overcoming problems and risks attributing ‘problems’ to particular groups so that people become a problem to be supported and managed more effectively: the combination of ‘supporting and managing’ only serves to mask the management.

Although there is a danger that policy discourses reduce transitions to the successful navigation by individuals through institutional arrangements and the expectations that accompany them, other perspectives offer different normative images. It might be argued, for example, that those who reject the growing compulsion, forced choice and instrumental outcomes of participation in formal education after 16 promote other normative benefits of lifelong learning, such as mental and physical health, social capital and cohesion, citizenship and inclusion. There is a danger that this leads to a different set of moral imperatives about participation, achievement and the need to be ‘reflexive’ about identity, whether about identity or agency.

Preoccupation with identity shifts, threats to identity, the need to create identity narratives, or narratives about agency as part of ‘reflexive modernisation’ not only presents transitions as risky, difficult and threatening to one’s very sense of self. It also encourages the extension of ‘support’ through counselling and mentoring, the elicitation of biographical narratives, the smoothing of learning cultures and relationships and the insertion of requirements to develop ‘learning to learn’ skills or self-awareness.

In different ways, then, an emphasis on identity and agency, especially when considerations of structure are removed, creates the self and learning about the self as a ‘subject’ in both senses of the word: it constructs a new subjectivity but it also creates curriculum content and therapeutic forms of pedagogy and assessment around the self. This is perhaps illuminated by an invisible strand in research on transitions both at the CRLL conference and in the TLRP, namely that of transition or progression in ideas, thinking and learning in relation to specific subjects, skills or crafts. The depiction and management of transitions therefore raise new questions about how education helps people think and act for themselves, but, crucially, what they think and act about. This involves a struggle for the nature and realisation of subjectivity and for ways of shaping the conditions that shape us.

The concerns raised in this paper also suggest that the research field around transitions is fragmented, full of small-scale studies and lacks conceptual clarity. There is a need to take stock of key work and its insights, and to build on that: the theorising and findings about transition, and debates they raise, could therefore be reviewed systematically for key implications before going further.

Finally, this paper suggests the following questions:
1. To what extent is deep self-awareness (and a ‘coherent’ narrative) of agency and identity, with or without awareness of structural factors, necessary for successful life and institutional transitions? To what extent is such a narrative possible?

2. How far is awareness amongst policy makers and practitioners about identity, agency and structure necessary to make transitions more successful?

3. What is a successful transition?

4. How far do contemporary studies of identity and agency, with or without structure, add new knowledge to what we know already about the roles of identity, agency and structure for different individuals and ‘types’ of learners making different types of transition? How can we build on what we already know?

5. What should, and can, teachers, ‘transition workers’ and institutions do with our existing knowledge about transitions in order to evaluate structures and support systems, curriculum content, and teaching and assessment?

6. What new theoretical and empirical studies do we need on the topic of transitions?

But perhaps most crucially, we need to ask whether a curriculum and pedagogy of the self erodes educational goals and practices in favour of being supported and managed through a seamless, endless set of comfortable transitions.
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