

# Developmental transitions

Exploring stability and change through the lifespan

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## **Dedication**

SC: to Jim, Maisie and Matilda, your enduring support and love mean the world to me. To you, I give all my support and love, through all of life's transitions

RM: to Si and Ben, you are my world, my family, my team, my security. We have lived through several major life transitions whilst I was writing this book and I'm sure there will be more to come. Much love always.

LS: to my family, and to Matiss, in particular, thank you for your love and endless support, and for making my life richer. To my darling Olivia, becoming your 'mamma' has been a wonderful adventure and I am profoundly changed.

## Chapter 6 Educational transitions

For most of us, the course of our educational journey is made up of a series of transitional stages that are usually associated with age boundaries and growing older. Equally though, attending formal schooling can be punctuated with unexpected turning points, such as changing schools part way through, which can create a break in the normative progression through education. In this chapter, we follow the series of transitional stages beginning with the experience of starting school, moving from primary to secondary and then potentially, on into higher education. We also focus on contextual factors that shape these transitions and which might also create other turning points.

Moving into and through the education system involves crossing many academic, social and cultural boundaries. Therefore, educational transitions are often presented as problematic 'risky' periods to overcome to avoid negative outcomes. Whilst we do not deny that educational transitions can be difficult, our aim for this chapter is to also explore some of the purposes served by educational transition, and how negotiating each turning point can provide valuable developmental opportunities for individuals.

### **Starting school**

Starting school, certainly in the West, is one of the biggest transitions in a child's life, almost as a rite of passage to growing up. It is also a family milestone, typically celebrated with rituals such as 'first day at school' photographs. Many of us will remember snapshots of when we started school, and how we felt about it at the time. It is likely to be a time of

excitement and anticipation, but also apprehension and uncertainty. We can see this reflected in the following extract showing Debbie, a mother, recounting the experience of her son starting school:

*“He was very excited about going and we had no trouble. We were amazed, not a tear or anything, he was quite happy to go. He did find it difficult at first, though, because he didn’t know anyone. Paul from playgroup had gone into another class. I think once he’d made a friend in Richard and discovered PE he was happier and now he loves it, absolutely loves it....I could tell he was okay because he was happy to leave me, never any crying. Not like Richard. His mum thought he’d settled in well at the beginning and then about 3 weeks in he didn’t want to go to school. In fact, it took him until half way into the second term before he really settled. He was certainly stressed by school and had quite a few wet beds, and sometimes had nightmares.” (Fabian, 2000, p149).*

Debbie’s discussion about her son starting school tells us a great deal about transition. Firstly, it is not an individualised process because both the person experiencing the transition and those around them (in this case, the parents), can be deeply affected by the change. The bed-wetting and nightmares must have been as distressing for Richard’s mum as they were for him. In addition, the same transition had a decidedly different level of impact on Debbie’s son than it did on Richard.

Transition to school normally refers to the time when children begin primary school, but there is a complex picture of when this transition occurs. The compulsory age for starting school varies between countries, and many countries have established pre-school provision and allow children to start school earlier than compulsory age. Debbie's son for example had been to playgroup, but pre-school education can take various forms including playgroups, public and private nursery schools, childminders, kindergarten, and reception classes in primary schools. Such complexity means that 'starting school' happens to children at different times and with a different set of experiences, depending on access to pre-school provision, where it is based, and when it is seen as appropriate for the child to start school. The timing and nature of transition is therefore socially and culturally constructed – affected by changing politics, educational policies and locally available provision.

Transition to school is seen as such a significant event is because the school environment is likely to be very different from what children have been used to. The 'classroom ecology' contrasts with the pre-school and home environment because early years settings are characterised by child-centred free play, whereas school is more adult-directed (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). In school, there are expected behaviours such as sitting and listening, concentrating for prolonged periods, and engaging in more formalised school work (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2010), which may be incompatible with children's previous experience (Lam & Pollard, 2006).

An interview study with children who had recently started primary school in Singapore showed that they recognised stark differences between pre-school and primary school (Ebbeck et al., 2013). Pre-school was seen as a place where play and free choice

predominated, whereas school was more formalised with new rules and restrictions.

Similarly, Einarsdottir (2013) conducted group interviews with children starting school in Iceland, and found children distinguished pre-school from 'real school' which they expected to be bigger, with more serious and harder work. Children clearly recognise the difference in culture between the two types of institution, and it is this discontinuity between the new context and familiar context which can cause discomfort and uncertainty during transition.

This transitional uncertainty opened up a field of work about 'school readiness' to ascertain whether a child has the necessary skills and abilities needed to adjust to school and be ready for learning (see Hughes et al, 2015). Readiness can be interpreted in various ways, and some discussions focus on individual characteristics of the child and whether they are mature enough or have the appropriate skills and knowledge to be deemed ready for school (Dockett & Perry, 2002). From a contextual viewpoint, school readiness centres on the way beliefs and expectations about 'what it means to be ready for school' are constructed by communities in a specific context. This means that school readiness will mean different things in different situations rather than being consistently applied across contexts and settings (Dockett & Perry, 2002; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006).

The meanings that parents develop about 'school readiness' impacts on the practices they undertake at home to help prepare their children for school and has been linked to factors such as social class, ethnicity, family relationships, norms and values (Barbarin et al, 2008; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006). Parental beliefs about the importance of school readiness is related to the amount of transition practices (such as reading, art, games) undertaken with their children to prepare them for starting school, and the more parents engaged in

transition practices, the higher achievement their children gained when they started school (Puccioni, 2015). Children's expectations about school are influenced by the people around them, and they use this to form their own ideas about what school will be like and how they should prepare (Chan, 2012). Therefore, to promote a positive start to school, the diversity of backgrounds and prior experiences that children come with needs to be taken into account (Dockett and Perry, 2013a).

Starting school involves a personal shift to 'becoming a pupil' (Lam & Pollard, 2006), suggestive of a change in identity processes. There is also a change in status for children as they become an 'older child' compared to their pre-school selves (Chan, 2012). In a focus group study with 105 Canadian children about starting school, they talked about it signalling growing up and getting bigger. This showed that they recognised their developing self and saw transition as representative of this shift (Di Santo & Berman, 2012). Changes in identity are also evident at home, where a child starting school assumes a new status in the family as a school child (Hedegaard & Flear, 2013). Parents too have reported identity shifts to becoming 'parents of a school child' who is growing up and becoming more independent (Miller, 2015). We saw in Debbie's account how she has lived through her son's transition to school and 'compared notes' with other parents. Her son's transition was an important experience for her too.

One of the immediate priorities for children when they start school is learning the way the school works, what is expected of them and understanding explicit and subtle social rules. Things such as the organisation of the school day, rituals surrounding putting your hand up, the ringing of the school bell, lining up for lunch, and taking the register are all examples of

the expected pupil behaviours that new children need to learn to 'do school' (Peters, 2010, p72). There are also subject-related terminology and practices that children encounter during formal lessons (for example, learning how to do sums, understanding different scientific terms and techniques, and conventions about writing). We suggest that school can be viewed as a community of practice (Crafter & Maunder, 2012; Wenger, 1998), with established rules, routines and practices to adjust to. In support of this, children say that to function well at school, they need to know what the rules are (Di Santo & Berman, 2012; Dockett & Perry, 2002). Dockett and Perry (2005) conducted a study with Australian children at the end of their first year of primary school where they were invited to talk about what was important to know when starting school and take photographs of meaningful things. The most common responses related to 'knowing the rules', expectations of behaviour such as what you are not allowed to do or where you cannot play, and the physical environment such as finding your way around.

To adjust, children need to regulate their own behaviour to align with what is expected at school. Through interaction with others, children can observe how to behave and what actions are commonplace and accepted - enabling them to learn the culture of the school, and their role within that. For example, buddies have been discussed as a useful resource to support transition because, as existing pupils in the school, buddies are more experienced members of the community, hence are positioned as 'more expert others' (Dockett & Perry, 2013b, p350). They help the new child to integrate and learn the ropes by providing a framework for expected behaviours and actions in the community, passing on shared knowledge and enabling the new child to observe and model their behaviour.

However, transition is not just about gaining the knowledge and skills needed to function effectively at school, but also about actively participating in and contributing to the community (Anderson et al, 2000; Højholt, 2012). By participation, we mean a child's engagement in school activities, and 'being' a school pupil. Participating in school life is a social experience involving mutual interactions and negotiation of meaning (Wenger, 1998). As Fabian (2000, p144) explains, through their participation in school activities children create their own meanings and adapt to and acquire the school's way of thinking, feeling and behaving. Højholt's (2012) observational and interview-based research with children over a 2-year period from kindergarten into school illustrated the way they continually sought to engage with each other and build and maintain communities. When children were unsure about something in their new school, they asked each other, discussed it and developed strategies together. As such, they used each other as social resources to support their transition.

Participation is both a form of action and a form of belonging (Wenger, 1998), and relationships with others through shared participation enables newcomers to become integrated into the community (Anderson et al, 2000). For children, making friends is a very important part of starting school and helps to instil their sense of belonging to the class (Dockett & Perry, 2002). In a focus group study with children in their first year of school, they were asked what other children needed to know before starting primary school. The most common responses were about peer relationships, the need to make friends, how to do this, and the skills you need to get on with others (Margetts, 2013). Faced with lots of unfamiliar peers, a child will seek to make sense of the social structure of the class, reflect on how they compare to others, assess the appropriateness of their behaviour and how to

fit in, and decide who they want to associate with (Symonds, 2015). The sense of belonging and membership established through this social comparison process shapes a child's identity about who they are and their capabilities. Children's 'identity work' during transition involves learning about themselves as pupils (Lamm & Pollard, 2006, p123), and is an active rather than passive process – learning how to adapt to and cope with the environment, making sense of how to function, and the roles to follow, negotiate or reject. Transition is a journey, where children are engaged in an ongoing process oscillating between negotiating where they belong and becoming a new version of themselves (Tilleczek, 2012).

For parents, connecting with other parents at school and feeling part of the 'community of parents' can be important, particularly in providing support and enabling each other to get used to the school systems (Griebel & Niesel, 2013). Parents want to form good relationships with the school and teachers to build trust and help them monitor their child's progress (Miller, 2015). However, parental engagement in their children's learning, and relationships with school, can take many forms and schools need to account for diverse family structures and circumstances (Rogers, 2018).

Continuity in relationships between pre-school and primary schools is also important and can be established through effective joined up working, such as teachers from both settings making reciprocal visits and sharing information about individual children's learning and progress (Fabian, 2013). By creating connections between pre-school and school environments, potential discontinuity between the two contexts are identified and reduced.

## **Moving to secondary school**

The move to secondary school represents another significant transition in a child's educational journey and, like starting school, the age at which children move to secondary school varies. In the UK, the transition usually occurs around age 11, but it can be as late as 14 if children attend middle school first. Data from the World Bank (2016) shows international starting age for secondary school ranging from 10 to 14 years depending on country, and there is still limited access to secondary level education in some developing countries. Terminology also varies - with some countries using terms such as high school, lyceum, or preparatory school to refer to the secondary stage (West et al, 1999). Despite this complex picture, research into children's experience of this educational transition presents a similar picture of the changes they experience, the concerns and worries they have, and the things they welcome about the new environment.

Starting secondary school (commonly referred to by children as 'big school') symbolises 'growing up' (Lucey & Reay, 2000), and is a status passage moving from being a child, to becoming a young adolescent (McLellan & Galton, 2015). It does therefore represent the kind of normative-social shift evidenced by Hendry and Kloep (2002) in their lifespan model (see chapter 1). The secondary school environment is much larger than primary school, and there is more personal responsibility given to students to manage their academic work and navigate their way around (Coffey, 2013). Students are typically taught by several different teachers each day, each with their own pedagogic style, and will learn new subjects with increased academic demands. The changes in physical environment, social contacts and academic expectations occur simultaneously during the transition to secondary school (Rice

et al, 2011). On their own, each of these changes may be easily managed, but when accumulated together they can become more traumatic (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008).

The transition also coincides with puberty, which is often described as a turbulent time for young people as they deal with the physical, social and emotional changes associated with emerging adulthood (Erikson's 'identity vs role confusion' stage). Whereas most children handle this very successfully, it can be a potential threat for some if they are unable to cope (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Hendry and Kloep's (2002) lifespan model proposes that being 'bombarded' with challenges at any one time can put pressure on a person's resources. Secondary transition can therefore be a sensitive period for children, and how they respond to it can impact on their management of subsequent life challenges.

Whilst transition to secondary school can be stressful, most children navigate this period successfully. Gillison et al (2008) studied a sample of Year 7 students who had recently started secondary school at three time points during the first term. Improvements were reported in their quality of life, and satisfaction of psychological needs over this period. It is not clear to what extent the children's scores had changed from primary school, as data was only collected when they started their new school, but it does suggest that adjustment to the new environment happened quite quickly, and without a negative impact on overall wellbeing. This is supported by research in England and Australia which found that most of children's worries about transition disappeared during the first term (Coffey, 2013; Evangelou et al, 2008).

When we look at the things that children are typically worried about when they start secondary school; concerns about relationships with other children, being bullied, finding their way around, getting lost, homework and workload are the most frequently reported in studies carried out in different countries (Rice et al, 2011; Zeedyk et al, 2003). In their desire to know what to expect, children piece together fragmented ideas about secondary school based on things others have told them (Pratt & George, 2005). Often, the worries children have about secondary school are based on rumours or horror stories they have heard from others, which can cause anxiety and create inaccurate expectations (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008). Whilst many children hear these stories and cite them as a source of worry, they quickly realise when they get to their new school that these rumours were just hearsay desired to scare them (Hodgkin et al, 2013). Feeling anxious is inevitable when faced with uncertainty, but this anxiety means children need to develop ways to cope. Coping with challenges like this involves drawing on a range of resources varying by disposition, social and cultural factors, and over time (Hendry & Kloep, 2002), and it is how individuals learn to manage and overcome this struggle that is important. As such, anxious feelings can serve a developmental purpose and facilitate personal growth (Lucey & Reay, 2000).

Friendships are as important in the transition to secondary school as they are in starting school. Nervous feelings that children have can be relieved by having friends, and friends can instil their sense of belonging in the new environment (Darragh, 2013). As a result, children often express desire to stay in the same class as the peers they know at primary school when they move to secondary school (Hodgkin et al, 2013). Existing social networks can provide a safety net – a valuable resource that can be drawn on to help them settle in. However, the move from primary to secondary often means that existing friendships are

ruptured - particularly when children are going to separate schools (Weller, 2007). Losing their existing support network will make children feel unsure about where they stand in relation to others. When faced with uncertainty, they will seek to establish new connections to help them navigate the new situation and provide support. For example, studies have shown that children will start to build relationships and strategic bonds with acquaintances at primary school if they discover that they are going to the same secondary school (Pratt & George, 2005; Weller, 2007). These shifts in peer networks in advance of starting the new school highlight the prolonged process of transition.

When they start secondary school, the formation of new social groups can also be an elongated process as children establish where they fit in. In this psychologically sensitive time, feelings of acceptance by others can impact on how children feel about themselves. Poorthuis et al (2014) studied nearly 500 Dutch schoolchildren at 3 time points (end of primary school, just after starting secondary school, and three months later) to assess their self-esteem, and expected and perceived levels of social acceptance based on how much they thought their classmates liked them. Whether children's self-esteem reduced, increased or remained stable depended on the extent to which their level of social acceptance in secondary school met with their prior expectations. Unfortunately, we only have self-reported data on peer acceptance here, not how peers rated them. However, the authors argue that perception of acceptance is the important aspect of self-esteem, and that self-esteem acts as a social gauge which can be dented when high expectations are not met.

We see from this how children's perception of their social relationships with peers during transition contributes to their sense of self. In fact, there is a lot of 'identity work' going on for children when they start secondary school. They move from being the oldest and biggest at primary school, to being the youngest and smallest at secondary school, and they also change from being well-known at primary school to being relatively unknown. The move signals growing up, but also means starting at the bottom again and feeling like 'little fish in a big pond' (Topping, 2011). This change in status is likely to prompt reflection about who they are and where they stand in relation to others. Darragh (2013) conducted a qualitative interview study with children during their first six months at secondary school. Reflecting on their first mathematics lesson, several children talked about making comparisons between themselves and others to ascertain whether they belonged or not. Feelings of intimidation in the first class were exacerbated by worries that the other children in class looked smarter and would learn quicker than them. Here, children were negotiating their new environment and establishing a learner identity in relation to others based on their apparent confidence and mathematical competence. Becoming familiar with their peers and finding others who were 'like them' enabled them to feel a sense of belonging in the new class.

To help prepare children for starting secondary school, Maher (2010) facilitated communication between secondary school and primary school students by building an online community of peers. There was evidence of primary school pupils learning the practices of secondary school and modelling the interaction styles displayed by secondary school students. This approach overlaps with Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the expert and novice learner. The expert gradually guides the novice, adjusting the amount of input provided until they can function independently in the community (Maher, 2010).

As in primary school, parental support is important in facilitating successful transition, and family and teachers help children prepare by giving advice, reassurance, encouragement and guidance about what secondary school will be like (Coffey, 2013; Evangelou et al, 2008). This is nicely demonstrated by a study conducted by Waters et al (2014) on secondary transition in Australia. Support from peers was shown to be the strongest predictor of children's positive *expectations* of transition, but presence of parents (in terms of being around before and after school, and in the evenings) was the most powerful predictor of positive transition *experiences*. We might question the fact that transition expectations and transition experiences were each measured in this study by children's responses to only one question, which is a rather crude measure, but it does suggest that the interaction of peer and parental influences are significant players in transition and may contribute valuable social resources to help children during this time of change. Of course, parental presence in this way is not always possible, and interesting research by Benner et al (2017) found that support from friends and school belonging were most significant in 'buffering' well-being during transition to high school. Therefore, relationships within the school itself with peers and teachers are the most important.

There are overlaps here with our discussion of starting school, where relationships were key in transition. We also highlighted how the context around the child and their personal circumstances impacts on their transition. In this respect, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System is a useful framework to draw on because it accounts for influences at school, family, and community level, as well as the relationships between them (Chan, 2012). Attention to the interactions within and between settings is reflected in the activities

undertaken by some schools to help ease children's transition to secondary school. Evangelou et al's (2008) study of primary-secondary transition in England explored the range of transition practices undertaken by schools and found that taster events and school visits to help children become familiar with the physical layout, organisation and academic expectations of secondary school were quite commonplace. However, the educational landscape does not remain static, and there are wider influences that also account for differences in how transition is supported. For example, government policy changes and the turbulent economic climate has led to a decline in some transition activity in schools (McLellan & Galton, 2015). This illustrates how we need to take a holistic approach to primary-secondary transition which accounts for the interplay between individual characteristics, family, school and the wider context individuals are situated within (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008).

### **Movement within and between schools**

We have looked so far at major transition points centred around age-bound stages – or normative-social developments (Hendry & Kloep, 2002). However, children face many other ongoing transitions which form part of their education journey. Firstly, the complex tiered school system means that some children move between infant and junior schools, or between primary and middle school before the transition to secondary school (Galton et al, 2000). Children will also encounter transitions within a school. These transitions can be felt at the start of each school year, where children move to a different educational level, and can be felt at key curriculum stages where children take important assessments, begin studying new subjects, or make decisions about their future learning path. Each of these

transitions means changes to normalised routines and established patterns of behaviour, alongside shifts in identities and relationships.

For example, a child moving from the first year at primary school into the second year is likely to experience numerous changes including a new teacher, new classroom rules and expectations, shifting social dynamics in the peer group, and an upward trend in academic expectations. However, these within-school transitions receive far less attention. We find this differential attention interesting because it highlights the cultural significance attached to certain transition points as opposed to others. The way that transition is generally framed within educational research focusing on key age-based transition points can mean that other kinds of transitions are underestimated. When transition is seen as an ongoing process rather than a point in time, these other points in the educational journey become equally worthy of consideration.

Some school years appear to have a 'low profile' (Galton et al, 1999) and a potential consequence is missing the impact of more ongoing transitional issues being experienced. For example, moving to secondary school in the UK typically occurs in Year 7 (age 11-12) and is associated with excitement, Year 8 (age 12-13) with mundane routine and a dip in motivation (Galton et al, 1999, Doddington et al, 1999), with subsequent years focused largely on working towards formal examinations. Primary schools also place much emphasis on entrance and exit years. The cultural significance and school attention attached to particular educational periods can give the unintended message that other transitional stages are unimportant (Demetriou et al 2000). Children are quick to respond to messages about 'what counts' and 'when it counts' (Galton et al, 1999) so Galton et al (2003)

recommend that schools redistribute their efforts, avoid putting so much attention on some years over others, and maintain continuity in learning (Doddington et al, 1999).

When thinking about movement between or within schools we often assume that these transitions occur for many children at the same time as they move through the school system. However, for some children, changing school happens outside of the normal window where transition usually occurs. Pupil mobility refers to children leaving or joining a school at a non-standard time. There are all sorts of reasons why pupil mobility occurs, including families moving house or area, change in parental job, traveller children, children from armed forces families, migrant children (including refugees or asylum seekers), family break up or separation, and previous school exclusions (Dobson et al, 2000). Children can be negatively affected by school mobility, with switching schools increasing their chance of poor educational outcomes (Gasper et al, 2012). Whilst we need to recognise that children switching schools may already be at risk for educational difficulties because of their life circumstances rather than the move itself (Gasper et al, 2012), this kind of transition does seem to be risky for some, suggesting it may have characteristics that distinguish it from other educational transitions.

One reason could be that children are likely to be facing multiple transitions at the same time due to extraneous events in their lives. Family separation, moving house or area, or migration are all notable transitions in their own right, so if children are also changing school because of these circumstances it can add additional pressure, and shape the way the particular school transition is experienced. These examples might be described as 'fateful moments' (Giddens, 1991) and illustrate how relationships and systems around a

child impact on their lives. For example, increasing internationalisation and professional global mobility means that many families move abroad with parents' work. For some children this can involve a national movement alongside a school move, and may mean entering a school with a different first language to their own (Dixon & Hayden, 2008). Experiencing unfamiliarity at multiple levels like this can be extremely unsettling. Research with children who had recently joined a primary school in Thailand having come from other countries reported intense fear of the unknown, culture shock, and sense of loss for people they left behind (Dixon & Hayden, 2008). The circumstances surrounding each child varied, as did the time taken to settle – highlighting the individual and prolonged process of transition.

A further reason why pupil mobility may have particular characteristics could be the challenge of entering an already established class group. Children will initially enter the school as strangers and need to make friends with other pupils who have already established their own community (Brown, 2012). In Messiou and Jones' (2015) study of children's experience of mobility between schools, gaining peer acceptance and making friends was the main concern expressed by children, along with adapting to new ways of working in the classroom. Whilst we see overlaps here to our earlier discussions about starting school and moving to secondary school, children in this study felt that their experience was distinct and would have been different had they joined the school at the expected time along with other pupils.

Difficulties with social integration for new pupils were highlighted in Langenkamp's (2014) study, drawn from a large-scale survey of over 5000 children who had moved schools in the

United States. Whilst there were mixed results about how children got on when they joined the new school, they were less likely to have a friend in the new school and were at greater risk for academic difficulty. It seems that social relationships and instilling a sense of belonging are one of the key challenges children face during school mobility. Dobson et al (2000) argues that schools need to be active in planning strategies for managing pupil mobility, ensuring there are good induction procedures, appropriate resources to support pupils, and regular monitoring.

Teachers working in an international school where there was high pupil turnover talked about the process of transition as a 'journey' where new pupils moved from an initial state of vulnerability and disorientation to resilience and openness, and new experience and learning (Hacocheu, 2012). This journey needed to be supported and guided carefully by teachers creating a nurturing atmosphere and using collaborative methods that were responsive to individual pupil needs. The journey metaphor is encouraging because it highlights the positive outcomes that can be achieved through transition, and the new opportunities it can bring. For example, in Messiou and Jones' (2015) research on pupil mobility, some children saw it as a fresh start, and a chance to approach their learning and behaviour in school differently.

It is difficult to disentangle to what extent the problems children may experience when they start a new school are to do with the transition itself or the context in which they are making the transfer (Gasper et al, 2012). For example, a child who has failed to integrate well at their previous school may be the precursor for the move and may also impact on how well they fare socially in the new school. Similarly, a child who is moving due to difficult

family circumstances is likely to be affected by those when they are making the transition. Gasper et al (2012) claim that school mobility affects children differently depending on their characteristics and life circumstances. We also see evidence that pupil mobility affects schools differently, with varied mobility figures, diverse pupil needs and community profiles (Dobson et al, 2000). There are therefore likely to be varied strategies adopted by schools to accommodate this. Again, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System is useful in this respect because it accounts for the various settings in which children are situated within and considers the interrelationships between these to shape individual experience.

### **Transition to higher education**

A final example of educational transition characterised by notable personal, social and academic changes is the transition to university study. Unlike the previous transitions discussed, this experience is not necessarily shared by all learners given that progression to higher education only chosen by a proportion of people. For those who go, starting university is generally regarded as an exciting time, furnished with new opportunities and personal growth, but the scale of change involved explains why transition to university is often articulated as a 'gap' that needs to be bridged (Leese, 2010).

Many students go to university shortly after finishing school, meaning that this transition occurs at a time when they are also entering adulthood. They are likely to be making important decisions about specialised courses and possible careers for themselves and exploring intimate relationships. In Erikson's model of psychosocial development, young people at this point are situated between 'identity vs role confusion', and 'intimacy vs

isolation' crisis stages. Often young people move away from home to attend university, meaning that they are adjusting to living independently for the first time. As a result, students relocating to attend university encounter multiple transitions simultaneously as they get used to living somewhere new, adapt to looking after themselves physically and financially, and build new relationships. For those students who continue to live locally and commute to university, this period in their lives still signals growing independence and changing lifestyles.

There will be a different picture for students starting university later in life, who may be employed, have family commitments, and be at a different developmental period in their lives. Additionally, in the UK the government agenda on widening participation (which aims to increase university participation in underrepresented groups) has increased access to higher education for a broader range of students than would have traditionally gone to university, meaning a greater diversity of backgrounds and prior educational experiences. The magnitude of change associated with starting university will therefore vary between students and some may find it easier to adapt than others (Hussey & Smith, 2010). Whilst most students adapt to university life successfully, a minority of students encounter ongoing struggles with the new social and academic demands (Lowe & Cook, 2003).

When viewed through the lens of communities of practice, universities are characterised by numerous norms and practices which newcomers are expected to adapt to (O'Donnell & Tobell, 2007). These ways of working may be different from what individuals are familiar with, resulting in a sense of discontinuity. For example, higher education requires independence, increased learner responsibility, the ability to interpret, analyse and critique

information, adoption of new academic skills, advanced self-awareness and problem-solving skills and academic self-management (Conley, 2008; Wingate, 2007). There is new discourse to learn, both in relation to their subject area and the administrative procedures (Harvey et al, 2006). Successful transition depends on the speed with which students can adapt to the new learning context and take on the greater independence and personal responsibility that is required (Brinkwoth et al, 2009).

Given the challenges associated with transitioning to university, there have been discussions about 'readiness' for higher education, dependent on how well students' previous personal and educational experiences have prepared them for the demands of university study and enabled them to form realistic expectations (Conley, 2008). Many students enter higher education with unrealistic expectations about what it will be like, which can partly be explained by the different pedagogical approach at secondary school requiring different study habits (Cook & Leckey, 1999; Lowe & Cook, 2003). However, preparedness also comes from the perceived accuracy of prior impressions formed by prospective students about what going to university is like, and what 'being a student' involves (Palmer et al, 2009; Maunder et al, 2013). Knowledge about higher education, and choices about whether to attend, what to study, and where to study are shaped by a variety of background characteristics, such as class, previous schooling, peers, family attitudes, parental expectations and aspirations, and teacher guidance (Brooks, 2003; Briggs et al, 2012). This means that the information available to students about university life which they use to construct their expectations, and the resources they draw on to make decisions about their university experience, will vary depending on their social and cultural contexts. For example, students who are the first to attend university in their families (referred to as 'first

generation students') or coming from communities where participation in higher education is less commonplace, may not have the same resource bank to draw on to create realistic impressions of university (Leese, 2010).

Warin and Denpster (2007) discuss how identity functions as a form of coping with unfamiliar situations such as those encountered during the transition to university. One way in which university students manage this uncertainty is through engaging in social comparison to position themselves in relation to others and drawing on cultural images of university life and typical students to make sense of what to expect and where they fit (Maunder et al, 2013). Negotiating the transition to higher education therefore involves a lot of identity work as students interpret and reflect on their developing academic identity, social identity, and sense of self (Azmitia et al, 2013).

Tinto (1993) suggests that we need to consider the interaction between the person and their environment, the multiple factors contributing to individual experiences, and the extent to which they establish a sense belonging to the university community. Relationships within and between the settings that students inhabit are key to their university experience, and the extent to which they feel integrated and committed to their course of study. In support of Tinto's claims, Harvey et al (2006) conducted a literature review of research on the first-year experience at university, and an emerging theme was student integration in academic and social domains. Students adjusted better if they had a friendship group and had supportive interactions with staff. There was also an important role for family and friends outside of the university (Harvey et al, 2006). Similarly, students have commented that forming friendships was paramount in fostering a good experience at university

(Brooks, 2007) and that social integration is vital for successful transition and subsequent retention (Thomas & Hanson, 2014; Wilcox et al, 2005).

One of the recurrent themes in research on university transition is the need for students to develop a sense of belonging. Having a sense of sense of belonging is important for the identity changes characterised by transition to university to take place (O'Donnell & Tobell, 2007), and belonging to the university and quality of relationships with friends have been shown to contribute to students' adjustment to university (Pittman & Redmond, 2008). We can see this 'need to belong' reflected in some of the initiatives universities put in place to facilitate transition. Examples include building a sense of community (through social activities and opportunities for peer interaction), increasing interaction between staff and students (through tutorials, learning centres, scheduled meet and greet sessions) and encouraging more active student involvement in university (through group projects and activities, competitions etc) (Palmer et al, 2009). All these examples build nicely on the communities of practice approach, where fostering relationships between members and active participation can help facilitate belonging.

### **In Summary**

In this chapter we have considered several educational transitions, each occurring at different stages of the educational journey. We have seen some overarching patterns in the findings reported between contexts (international) and across educational stages (such as school, university). One theme is continuity – and how feelings of discontinuity between environments can make transition more difficult to manage. Secondly, being prepared for

the new context is important - with individuals wanting to know what to expect and having realistic information to draw on in the face of uncertainty. The vital role of relationships with others during transition both as a source of support but also to instil feelings of belonging has surfaced many times. In addition, the role of identity during transition and how the process of negotiating educational transition promotes shifts in perceptions of self has been discussed. Transition in this sense is an ongoing developmental process rather than a brief period of disruption. Therefore, we should avoid viewing transitions as inherently negative, and recognise that whilst they may be challenging and unsettling, they can be rewarding and beneficial.

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