THIRD NATIONAL FORUM ON EDUCATION
Education and Life - Transitions

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TRANSITIONS WITHIN ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY LEVELS

Reference document coordinated by the Canadian Association of Principals
and prepared by Douglas McCall for the sub-theme on
Transitions Into and Through the School Systems.

The opinions expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Canadian Association of Principals nor of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada.

# I	Purposes

This paper has been prepared to facilitate discussions at the Third National Forum on Education; Education and Life: Transitions. The barriers to student transitions at the elementary and secondary level are discussed with a view to identifying consensus on the actions that can be taken by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada in cooperation with education ministries and national organizations.

The paper has been prepared by Douglas McCall, Director of Professional Services, Canadian Association of Principals (CAP) with input from the following individuals and organizations:

- David Mason		Canadian Association for the Deaf
- James Harron		Learning Disabilities Association of Canada
- Jean-Claude Tardif	Centrale de l'enseignement du Quebec
- Sue Borowski	Canadian Teachers Federation
- Diana Tomlinson		Canadian Teachers Federation
- Mary Johnston		Health Canada, Childhood & Youth Division
- Barbara J. Willis		Canadian Association of Principals
- Jeff Deane		Canadian Association of Principals

The analysis and suggestions contained in this paper do not necessarily reflect the views of these individuals nor the organizations they represent. The paper compiles information and ideas from a variety of sources but is not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of the issues. The purpose is to initiate discussion at the Forum and to briefly review the relevant research.

II   Summary

This paper presents and discusses several barriers for students in making transitions within the elementary and secondary levels in public schooling. The unifying concept among these issues is that school systems must be articulated as a seamless continuum, coordinated with other agencies and supported so that all students have an equitable opportunity to be successful in those transitions. To facilitate smooth transitions for students at the elementary and secondary level, consideration must be given to questions such as access, assessment (student evaluation), student placement, guidance and other support services, the appropriateness of educational curriculum, programs and practices, school organization and professional practices.

There are a number of specific barriers or problems that are impeding the successful transitions of students within the elementary and secondary levels. They include:

1. Students coming from or situated within special circumstances such as correctional facilities, home schooling, isolated schools, reserve schools or specialized institutions experience difficulties in transferring to regular schools. Adjustments are required to academic policies, student assessment programs and professional practices to ensure smooth transitions.

2. Students with special needs derived from their culture, abilities or disabilities require inclusive schooling, individualized attention and support services to ensure that they continue to progress through the various levels of education. As more students with disabilities are now included in regular classes, this is a growing challenge. Transitional planning and programs are required.

3. Student grouping practices and instructional program structures should not trap students in vocational programs and should seek to maximize the number of students able to make successful transitions to the next level of schooling or learning. Transfers between academic and vocational programs should be facilitated.

4. The transition from elementary to secondary school is a major challenge for many adolescents who face an increased number of pressures and health/social problems. Gender based influences complicate these adolescent problems with young women experiencing significant losses of self-confidence early in high school and young men falling behind in school achievement later in high school and in post secondary participation. School organizational models such as middle schools, schools within schools or other supportive structures should be available to all students.

5. Family and student mobility has increased dramatically in Canada. Students who must follow their parents and students who live in migrant or transient families need specialized support services. More affluent families are increasingly concerned about the portability of course credits and comparability of curricula and academic standards.

For each of these barriers in the transition process, this paper briefly describes some potential solutions based on a preliminary review of related research, various reports and studies and the opinions of professional educators. Possible actions for schools, school districts and education ministries as well as other ministries and agencies are identified. Suggestions for the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) are then made under these categories:

- encouraging cooperation among education ministries in policy/ program development;
- identifying, describing and disseminating best practices;
- undertaking studies or reports under the Pan-Canadian Research Agenda;
- collaborating with other ministries, sectors and federal departments;
- developing indicators in consultation with education groups to monitor the transitions being made by students at the elementary and secondary levels; and
- organizing initiatives or projects with national organizations.

These suggestions are based on a recognition that the provinces/territories have jurisdiction over education and that the CMEC should act only with the support of interested education ministries and in full consultation with national education organizations.

III   Defining some terms

The discussion of the transitions made by students at the elementary and secondary levels can be enhanced by briefly presenting the following definitions of terms used in this paper taken from the Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors (1995).

Articulation   "The systemic coordination of course and/or program content within and between educational institutions to facilitate the continuous and efficient progress of students from grade to grade, school to school and school to the working world."

This paper is essentially addressing articulation within the school system.

Access to Education "The accessibility of education to a student includes access to appropriate educational institutions, programs, materials, equipment and personnel."

This paper links transitions or articulation with this broad view of accessibility.

Student Placement   "The assignment of students to schools or classes or programs according to their background, readiness, abilities and goals."

The transition of students within elementary and secondary schools involves a discussion of student placement policies.

Student Evaluation (Assessment)   "The judging of student performance or behaviour as related to established criteria."

This paper also links student evaluation to transitions, with the key aspect being the use and appropriateness of standardized tests.

Transitional Programs   "Special classes, courses or other programs designed to prepare individuals to move from one grade, school, or activity to the next."

This paper suggests the use of such transitional programs and policies to alleviate some of the problems students are experiencing relative to transitions.

Student Grouping (Including Streaming) "The organization or classification of students according to specified criteria for instructional purposes.

Streaming, the practice of organizing students and course content according to academic ability, is discussed in this paper as to how students make the transitions among those streams."

Vocational Education   "The formal preparation of students for semi-skilled, skilled, technical, or paraprofessional occupations."

This term is often synonymous with Career Preparation, Professional, Applied or Technical Education programs. This paper discusses how and if students can make the transition between vocational education programs and regular academic programs.

Adolescents and Development   "Adolescence is defined as being approximately 12-18 years of age, includes preadolescence, early adolescence and late adolescence. Adolescence is a common division of the human developmental process, characterized by types of behaviour, biological processes and mental processes. Developmental tasks arise during different stages whose successful completion is necessary for subsequent development."

This paper connects adolescent development with transitions within elementary and secondary schools, documenting the increased risks and pressures on today's youth. Middle schools, junior high schools, and the intermediate grades are seen as particularly important in the adolescent's transition from elementary to high school. Gender differences are highlighted in this discussion because females and males face barriers to successful transitions at this age and grade level.

Transient and Migrant Children "Transient children move more frequently with their families from one semi-permanent location to another. They include children of military personnel, and construction workers. Migrant children travel from one temporary residence to another so that a family member might secure temporary or seasonal employment."

This paper notes that increased student and family mobility, as students move more often within school districts, between districts, and between provinces and territories requires that more attention be given to student transfer procedures, comparability of curricula and student evaluation standards and transition policies.

IV   Context, Conditions for Success, Concrete Actions

Context

The transitions of students within elementary and high schools should be seen in the context of society and current trends in schooling. The Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec (Tardif, 1998) identified some of these factors in a presentation to a CEA conference:

- governments have been disengaging from the delivery of public services and those services are being privatized, deregulated and budgets cutback
- a modest growth in the economy has not been matched by gains in employment
- vandalism, violence, drug abuse, poor nutrition and other problems are growing
- young children (O-5 yrs) and those entering the job market (17 +yrs.) have been identified as being particularly vulnerable but attention needs to be drawn also to the children and youth aged 6-17
- the social consensus on the role of the school as a provider of equal opportunity has diminished as advantaged parents seek to ensure their children's success in an increasingly competitive economy and society

Tardif describes the report of the recent Bisaillon-Demers Commission (Commission des États Généraux sur l'éducation, 1997) in Quebec, which is an example of other recent inquiries and commissions in education across Canada. The recommendations relevant to transitions within school systems include:

1. Re-affirm the school's role in promoting equal opportunity for all
2. Improve services for young children
3. Restructure curricula
4. Consolidate vocational education programs.
5. Implement a lifelong learning approach in practical ways.

Conditions for Success

The Canadian Association of School Administrators, (CASA,1996) has described the conditions in school systems and the community that are necessary for school and student success. These conditions can be applied to successful transitions at the elementary and secondary level. They include:

1. An understanding, of the purposes, goals, and realistic outcomes for schooling must be shared by parents, students, educators, governments, other involved agencies and the public.
2. All sectors of the community need to be involved in decisions.
3. Students must have the resources, services, and conditions in the school, home, from other agencies and the community to learn.

4. The physical and social environment of the school must support learning.
5. Realistic and age-appropriate outcomes for students must be set and curricula should be tied directly to those expected outcomes.
6. A variety of school organizational models and teaching methods should be used that are based on research and professional judgment.
7. Barriers to learning should be identified early and cooperative actions taken by teachers, parents, and other agencies to reduce those barriers for individual or groups of students.
8. Regular assessments, using a variety of instruments and measures should be done to report on student progress and results interpreted in the light of individual circumstances
9. The effectiveness of school programs should be assessed regularly.
10. Conditions that affect learning, such as economic status, social support and health status, should be monitored and reported.
11. The developmental needs of students should be met through appropriate school organization, activities and pedagogy.

<u>Concrete, Practical Actions</u>.

The analysis of the current social and economic context and a stable, long-term understanding of the conditions necessary for school success forms the basis for concrete, practical actions to facilitate successful transitions at the elementary and high school levels. The Canadian Association of Principals, (CAP,1998) has developed a position paper on how schools can support the development, and well-being of children and youth. Many of the practical actions in that paper apply to transitions within school systems:

- create partnerships with specialized agencies and institutions
- train teachers in early identification strategies and referral procedures
- provide release time for teachers to plan and support successful transitions for students experiencing difficulties
- create parent resource centers and student health centres in schools
- ensure teachers have time and resources to coordinate programs and course content
- create and maintain healthy school climates that set high expectations for all students
- communicate often and in a variety of ways with parents about school programs, and their children's progress

V   Monitoring Students Transitions within School Systems

In July 1997, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC, 1997) consulted a number of organizations on the development of national indicators to monitor school systems in Canada. The following data sources related to transitions are included in the latest version of that indicators program:

- international and inter-provincial migration of students
- student enrollments by gender, age, First Nation, minority group and economic status
- education participation of young children aged 3-6

- enrollment in specialized programs including French immersion and vocational education
- numbers, percentages of students with disabilities accessing specialized support services by age/grade
- participation in special purpose schools including First Nations schools, charter schools, etc.
- cohort retention and dropout rates
- number of students entering labour force without credentials from secondary schools
- proportion of population completing a post-secondary credential
- number of early school leavers by grade, gender, reasons for leaving
- proportion of students repeating grade by level/grade
- student teacher ratios including urban/rural/remote schools

Research is currently planned to determine reliable and relevant data sources for several related topics including family status, student health status, school readiness, entry rates and persistence rates.

VI   Addressing The Barriers to Transitions

This section of this paper addresses five general barriers to smooth transitions at the elementary and high school levels. They are:

1. <u>Access for all students and for those coming from special circumstances needs to be enhanced to ensure their successful transitions</u>.

   Access to schooling is discussed from the perspective of offering students an appropriate education that leads to equality of opportunity for all. Standardized testing and academic guidance programs are discussed. The particular circumstances of students in correctional facilities, in home schooling and on Indian reserves are reviewed.

2. <u>Students with special needs derived from their culture, abilities, or disabilities need specific transitional programs and support.</u>

   This barrier should be addressed early with the continuation of early childhood services. The transition needs of students who have recently arrived from other countries varies considerably. Some students arrive with extensive capability while others need support. Students with disabilities or exceptional abilities need transitional programs and support services related to their particular needs.

3. <u>Student grouping (streaming) policies and practices as well as vocational education programs must ensure that student transitions in and out of these programs are easy and effective.</u>

   Ability grouping (streaming) is not supported by research, except for specific applications related to literacy and numeracy skills. Vocational education programs run the risk of

becoming, " dead ends " for students unless they emphasize basic and technology skills, are connected actively to the current labour market and are offered in a variety of settings.

4. <u>The elementary-high school transition, coinciding with increased risks and challenges for today's adolescents, needs to be supported by middle school structures, curricula and support services.</u>

   Young women and young men are struggling with particular barriers created by gender-related attitudes and practices.

5. <u>Increasing student and family mobility in Canada requires that school systems coordinate more effectively with respect to student transfers, learning outcomes and standards. Specialized support for transient and migrant children is needed.</u>

   Families are moving more often than ever before. Disadvantaged families often move from school to school because of changes to their housing or job situation. Today's economy has forced many workers to seek contracts and short-term jobs that require students to change schools or districts or provinces.

1. **Access for All Students**

Potential Solutions

The Commission des États-Généraux sur l'éducation (1997) in Quebec noted that, despite the progress schools have made in general participation levels, the progression of some social groups within the school system is not equal. Little by little, the stratification occurs through different schools, and through selection practices that lead to many students being excluded from some opportunities. This Commission went on to recommend specific actions to alleviate these disparities relative to progression through the school system. They include:

- re-affirming that a basic purpose of schooling is to provide equal opportunity to all
- ensuring that geographical barriers are overcome, including better uses of technology and distance education
- more pedagogical and financial support to disadvantaged communities and students
- strengthening of the role of the education ministry for the education of immigrant children and for intercultural education
- more support and better programs for aboriginal students
- changes to regular schools to welcome students with disabilities
- research into regular schools to welcome students with disabilities
- decreased use of grade repetition as a remedial strategy
- affirmation that public schooling, including all student services, will be free
- revitalization of public schooling

These recommendations can form an overview of potential solutions relating to equal access and transitions at the elementary and high school levels.

A second aspect of this general overview of potential solutions is related to student evaluation and assessment. Harrington (1995) suggests that school-based student evaluations should assess all of a student's abilities, not just those related to academic pursuits. These include interpersonal, leadership, musical/dramatic, clerical, organizational, technical/mechanical, physical, spatial, social, manual, and artistic skills as well as reading, math, and scientific capabilities. Fair evaluations of prior or practical learning should be used in making judgments about student promotion.

Further, the actual assessment instrument used can create bias if it is not used or interpreted correctly (Lam, 1995). This can be true for performance assessment (in which judgments are made about students knowledge and skills based on observation of student behaviours or inspection of student products) as well as for selection response tests (multiple choice tests). The use of standardized tests has also been widely criticized (Perrone, 1991) because of the ensuing pressure on teachers to "teach to the test" as well as the narrowness of what they evaluate. Finally, testing students with disabilities requires particular attention and adaptations (Geisinger & Carlson, 1995). Roeber (1995) has reviewed the literature and suggests that a combination of student evaluation techniques needs to be used. These include short answer, open-ended, extended response, individual interviews, performance events, performance tasks over time, projects, portfolios, observations, anecdotal records, multiple choice exercises and other assessments need to be used. Bringing equity and fairness to student assessment policies, and practices would help to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to make the necessary transitions within the school systems. The interaction between student and teacher, so essential to learning, must also be at the heart of assessment and evaluation.

The third aspect of our general list of potential solutions to promoting equal access to school system transitions is the availability and quality of student guidance and academic advisement services. Magnusson (1995) of the Canadian Guidance & Counselling Foundation has described five processes necessary to effective career planning. These processes can be combined with Gysbers (1995) review of school guidance programs to set standards related to service delivery. Frost (1991) has described some of the parameters for academic advising in university settings that could be adapted to elementary and high schools. In order to determine if students are being supported by guidance and advising services as they make the transitions within elementary and high schools, a set of criteria would have be developed. For example, what information and advice should be available to junior high students when selecting courses for senior grades? Having such criteria, we can then determine if all students have an equitable opportunity to make those transitions successfully.

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Suggestions to CMEC and Education Ministries

1. **That the CMEC and interested education ministries undertake a benchmark study in consultation with national education organizations to determine if school systems in Canada are continuing to offer equitable educational opportunity to all students. This study should examine the progress of various categories of students through the school system and into post-secondary education and training. This report should be made public and should become part of the CMEC National report on Education.**

2. **That CMEC should review its current set of Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program with national education organizations and relevant experts to ensure that adequate information is being collected to monitor the progress of students through the education systems.**

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Access Regardless of Circumstances

For students in isolated communities.

The Saskatchewan School Trustees Association (1997) has listed several strategies for enhancing and extending the program offerings in small rural schools. These suggestions include practical advice and examples for:

- itinerant teaching assignments
- provincial distance education courses
- local distance education courses delivered by one school in district to others
- multi-campus centres
- interschool student exchanges
- short term residency courses
- community-based instruction
- probationary certification of local instructors
- community based vocational programs
- applied technology programs with colleges
- community-based arts & recreation programs
- alternative high schools with First Nations Bands

Roelke (1996) suggests that small high schools can offer adequate learning opportunities and curriculum coverage through integration of curricula, innovative scheduling, cooperation with higher education institutions, interdistrict sharing and use of instructional technologies. Romiszoski, (1993) provides a summary of the evaluation of distance education and related technologies. Audio conferencing, audiographic and now video conferencing systems are increasingly available and the

use of ISDN or cable lines will extend the use of multimedia availability programs. However, caution must also be exercised. Technology can still promote inequities (Neuman 1991) depending on their nature, use or misuse and availability.

For Students in Correctional Facilities

Students coming from, or who are placed in, correctional facilities have particular needs as they try to complete various transitions within elementary and high schools. Leone et al (1991) have described the settings in which such students are educated. The continuity of their education is often at risk.

High levels of mobility mean loss of student records, difficulties in assessment of skills and poor linkages between school systems and correctional facilities all cause transition problems for these students. As well, very often, these students have disabilities or learning difficulties. Leone et al recommend a functional approach to the education of such students. A particularly important transition for these students, from the correctional facilities to the community, requires the cooperation of staff, schools, families, probation officers, aftercare professionals, and others. Juvenile court judges need to take the student's educational needs into account. Educational records need to be transferred expeditiously. Parole requirements need to be coordinated with special education services.

For Students from Home Schooling

Students who are being or were schooled at home will often need to return to the public school system at one point in their academic career. Limes (1995) has listed several ways in which school districts and schools can cooperate with such parents. This cooperation would facilitate the home schooled students transitions within elementary and high schools. They include:

- having teachers available for consultations with parents or students
- staying in touch by mail, telephone, and occasional home visits
- offering independent study programs, as an option
- organizing resource centres
- offering "shared schooling", dual enrollment and part-time school attendance

For Students from Indian Reserves

Students living on Reserves often find it difficult to succeed in the transition related to public school systems. Schools can alleviate these difficulties by trying to understand their community context, improving mainstream schooling, and offering appropriate counselling services.

Peavy (1995) of the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Foundation suggests that public educators must strive to understand the community context for aboriginal students. The development of native youth is impeded by two characteristics of dominant society schools; lack of respect for native cultural identity and a lack of structural support for students seeking to retain their culture. He suggests:

- financial and conceptual support for educating natives as counsellors
- including native studies courses in Counsellor education programs
- tailoring counselling programs to include native role models
- more use of storytelling as a counselling strategy.

Butterfield (1994) has described the experience of American Indians in US schools. Many of his observations apply to Canada. They include; treating native students frequently as remedial students, being subject to racial taunts, resistance to native customs in the curriculum and continued use of native people as mascots for school teams. He suggests changes to school climate and school organization as well as adaptation of curricula and student assessment practices that emphasize native student strengths in areas such as visual, perceptual or spatial skills, verbal rather than written communications, use of images instead of words to convey meaning, simultaneous (big picture) processing and hands- on learning. Peavy (1995b) extends this understanding into career counselling. He suggests attention to transitional issues and less attention on linear career paths. He also lists the characteristics of counsellors seen as desirable by native parents and students. With these changes to cultural understanding, academic programs and counselling services students from reserves have a better chance at successful transitions in elementary and high schools.

Suggestions to CMEC and Education Ministries

1. **That the CMEC and interested education ministries undertake a study in consultation with national organizations on the transitions and transfers of aboriginal students in and out of public schools systems and post-secondary institutions.**

2. **That the CMEC review its Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program with representatives of educational and other organizations and relevant experts to ensure that high quality guidance and counselling services are available and accessible to students in Canada.**

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2. <u>**Respond to Special Needs with Transitional Programs**</u>

Potential Solutions

Special classes, courses, services, or other programs can prepare students to make the transition from one grade, school or activity to the next. This section of this paper discusses how this strategy can address the needs of at risk students, immigrant students, and students with disabilities. The need for strong linkages with social and health services in order to assist students through the transitions at the elementary and high school levels is also noted.

Continuity of services from Early Childhood Programs

With more children participating in early childhood programs and with recent, long-term research that demonstrate the importance of the child's development in those early years, considerable attention is being given by educators to ensuring a successful transition from home to school.

However, research on Headstart or compensatory education programs suggests that the program adaptations and support services for these at risk children need to be continued or the long term cognitive gains may dissipate (Rasell & Applebaum,1992, Schweinhart, 1994, Hertzman, 1995). While the gains in social development and employment outcomes appear to last, most studies suggest that intellectual gains disappear if schools do not continue to support such children with remedial instruction, with changes to the school's social climate, by reinforcement of the child's social support network and by the delivery of preventive health /social services.

Consequently, the students who have benefited from early transition support programs need to have some support continued if they are to be successful in making transitions later in their schooling. Lombardi (1992) suggests that the three key elements to providing continuity for such children are developmentally appropriate practices, parental involvement and supportive services to children and families.

Indeed, there is a body of research supporting the coordination of school-based student services and programs with health, social, recreational and other services from community agencies (Liontos, 1991). It is sufficient for the purposes of this paper to note simply that coordination with such services, as well as their accessibility and quality, is a factor for at risk children in making the transitions at the elementary and high school levels.

Transitions of New Canadian Students

Students from families who are newly arrived to Canada from other countries face particular problems in making the transition to a totally new school system. The transition needs of such students should be situated within an approach and within school systems that value cultural diversity. There is no need to summarize the research and practical experience that many Canadian schools have developed in this regard.

Also, the assessment and placement of new Canadian students into regular schools and/or special ESL, FSL, or other programs requires specific actions to ensure a smooth transition. Burnett et al (1993) have summarized some of those actions:

- implementing identification procedures to describe language needs and target language services
- using a combination of assessment and appraisal procedures including information from parents, evaluation of student records, assessment of academic and language skills
- doing teacher assessments and home language surveys
- establishing "Welcome Centers" designed to ensure equitable treatment and support

-   employing multiple assessments of students from immigrant families

They also suggest:

-   concentrating on empirical and operational definitions, not labels
-   identifying assessment measures designed for multicultural groups
-   considering cultural factors in the earliest steps of instrument development
-   increasing exchanges between experts in quantitative methods and multiculturalism.

Cohen (1990) points out that minority language students are underrepresented in programs for gifted and talented students in the United States. It is likely that a similar situation exists in Canada. She describes how gifted programs, including enrichment programs, resource rooms, parent involvement in activities, accelerated or "honours" programs and mentor programs can be adapted for greater diversity.

The transition-related problems of immigrant students during the adolescent years have been highlighted by Lucas (1996). Their inability to communicate ideas and feelings during this central time in their development can result in confusion, frustration, anger and alienation. She suggests these strategies;

·   providing access to information through parent information centers, parent workshops, translations of school documents, orientation materials and structured relationships with staff in teams, clusters and buddy programs
·   supporting English [or French] language development in programs such as "newcomer" schools, ESL [or French] programs, "sheltered" English content programs, bilingual education programs and alternative schools
·   promoting access to post-secondary education through orientation activities, tutoring, summer schools, weekend programs and remedial academics

Henrikson (1995) has explained the transition difficulties faced by immigrant students in moving to post-secondary education programs. Transition hurdles include family pressure to seek employment, bias in student assessment, the absence of role models, lack of cultural understanding among professors and conflicts with academic standards.

The transition from ESL or FSL classes to regular classes can also be problematic. Rance-Rooney (1995) has described the problems that adults face in making this switch. The problems she identifies can be applicable to younger students:

·   conflict in the general purposes and nature of the programs
·   the focus on oral and personal expression in ESL [or FSL] programs contrasts with the written and objective tone of regular academic programs
·   attention to the context of learners in ESL [or FSL] classes is different from the learning in regular programs that is often devoid of contextual meaning.

She suggests these strategies to overcome these problems in the transition:

- · emphasis on motivating and reinforcing the student's belief in their self-worth
- · providing students with pre-knowledge of the nature of academic programs through mentoring programs, class and instructor exchanges and review of academic materials
- · providing ESL [or FSL] students with critical thinking skills
- · a focus on language accuracy or careful language in ESL [or FSL] instruction
- · extensive practice in reading and writing
- · development of a vocabulary in ESL [or FSL] classes directly related to academic terminology
- · integration/transference of first language skills and use of first language in learning strategies.

Transition Planning for Students With Physical/Mental Disabilities, Learning Difficulties & Disorders

Transition planning is used to help students with difficulties progress in the school system and into the working world (Transitions Project, 1997). Transition planning should begin as early as kindergarten and continue to the end of high school. A holistic approach to the child's needs is used to map out the child's progress and to develop an Individual Education Plan (IEP). This plan and process is updated throughout the school experience.

Transition planning, programs and policies for students with disabilities is a significant topic. Matilsky (1991) annotated a bibliography of 467 references seven years ago and there is certain to be many more published works since then.

The transition needs of students with disabilities can be categorized under these headings:

- · the initial transition between special or segregated classes and regular classes
- · the examination and promotion of inclusive educational practices that enable all students to develop to their full potential
- · the elimination of barriers to continuous progress and success for students with disabilities, difficulties or disorders later in their schooling

Inclusive educational practices must not always be based on able-bodied professionals' perspectives and designs. For example, deaf adults who sign must be involved in defining and developing the framework of inclusive educational practices, at least for young children with various types of hearing losses. Inclusive practices are not always appropriate if these are based on how "normal" persons think persons with differences should learn.

Understand the Student's Condition

A primary consideration in facilitating transitions within elementary and high schools for students with disabilities and learning difficulties is ensuring that educators understand the nature of the disability.

Learning difficulties (disabilities) have been summarized by Lokerson (1992) who defines them as "a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written". Severe disabilities include more serious mental conditions such as; "severe handicaps, profound impairments, multiple disabilities or mental retardation" (Council for Exceptional Children, 1990). Other children suffer from specific disorders such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (Pinkerton, 1991). For each of these conditions, learning difficulties (disabilities), students with disabilities and students with specific disorders adaptations to educational programs, assessment and teaching practices are required to ensure smooth transitions within elementary and high schools. The values that underlie these policies, programs and practices also need to be examined.

For some students, specialized schools or classes may be the most appropriate educational strategy. For example, deaf children in schools for the deaf interact with their peers and teachers who sign experience learning just like hearing students do with hearing peers and teachers in their schools.

The Transition Between Special and Regular Classes

The transition between segregated classes and regular classes must be supported by transition planning and the involvement of adults with personal experiences with disabilities. Once again, there is a significant amount of research documenting the supports needed. We will only use one summary here. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education (1993) lists these conditions as being necessary for a successful transition:

- · supportive attitudes and beliefs from teachers, about responsibility for learning outcomes, among school staff and students, from parents and from special education staff
- · services and physical accommodations need to be available, including health, physical, occupational and speech therapy, sign language programs and changes to equipment and facilities
- · school support from the principal, teacher aides and support personnel, adequate staff development and appropriate policies and procedures
- · a collaborative approach with special education and regular teachers working together
- · instructional methods need to be varied, adapted to the students' needs and foster cooperative learning and socialization.

Transitions from regular classes to specialized classes or schools should be supported by hiring staff with those disabilities whenever possible. The staff selection must be relevant to the students' experience and provide role models for the students. Students should be encouraged to express themselves freely through adapted means such as sign language. The social environments of the school should accept the "normalcy" of the students' disability. The school should create a critical mass of students with similar disabilities that learn together for at least part of the day.

For example, for students who are deaf, inclusive education means that they and their parents have the right to decide on the nature of their schooling. Too often, the approach to the education of the deaf has been within the paradigm developed by hearing professionals who see only the hearing deficit and consequently work from a remediation model only.

Enabling All Students to Reach Their Potential

School reform efforts that go beyond the university-bound students to include all students are not as plentiful, sustained, nor as detailed as the changes aimed at improving the transition from high school to university. Non-university bound students complete fewer credits, take courses that produce lower levels of knowledge or skill and often do not take courses with upgraded science, technology or mathematics content.

Coyle-Williams (1990) has suggested that school systems need to redefine the path to educational excellence. These pathways need to have clearly identified and supported transition points and processes. She suggests that academic and vocational education programs be integrated better by:

- ensuring that students come to vocational programs with basic academic skills
- providing an applied school context that motivates students to excel in both academic and vocational programs
- improved vocational instruction through greater use of academic material
- improved academic instruction through problem-oriented approaches to teaching
- more rigorous applied academic courses
- improved coherence in the sequencing of programs and courses
- more collaboration between academic and vocational teachers
- elimination of the divisions between academic and vocational subjects.

Anticipating and Lowering Future Barriers

Students with difficulties, disabilities and disorders can be better supported in their transitions at the elementary and high school levels through enhanced career/academic counseling and more parental involvement. Hutchinson (1995) of the Canadian Guidance and Counseling Foundation has outlined the kinds of counseling support that students with learning difficulties need. She suggests that career counseling group interventions using cognitive instruction, an approach that teaches students to make sense of what they are taught and to construct meaning. This approach has been demonstrated to be successful in preparing students with learning disabilities for transitions within schools and to the workplace.

Lankard (1993) has described how extensive parental involvement can assist students with special needs to make successful transitions. She suggests that parents must be part of multidisciplinary teams that work together on transition planning. Parents can help because:
- they are the experts on their child
- they can maintain continuity of purpose
- they can act as system advocates
- they can act as service coordinators
- they can provide emotional support to complement professional efforts.

Transitions of Gifted Students

In closing this discussion of the transition needs of students with special needs, we cannot exclude consideration of the transitions of gifted learners. There has always been a tension between equity and excellence in public schooling, particularly at the middle school level (Tomlinson, 1995). She suggests that certain "promising directions" be pursued so that gifted students are not lost in heterogeneous classes or programs. They are:

- · abandoning practices that encourage one-size-fits-all instruction
- · replacing exclusive services with inclusive ones
- · offering appropriately differentiated instruction in heterogeneous classes
- · grouping and regrouping students for instruction
- · offering a variety of classes
- · using resource specialists as part of interdisciplinary teams.

Lynch (1994) answers several questions about allowing gifted students to be grade-advanced if they are ready to be challenged. She reports that skipping grades is appropriate if they are intellectually, academically and emotionally ready.

The transition needs of gifted students is a controversial and value-laden issue. The author and contributors to this paper wish to reiterate that this paper is an attempt to present various views without necessarily endorsing them.

Suggestions for CMEC and Education Ministries

1. **That the CMEC and interested education ministries undertake a study as part of the Pan-Canadian Education Research Agenda in consultation with national education organizations that examines the transitions of selected categories of students through the school systems of Canada. The students selected should include aboriginal students, immigrant students and students with disabilities, difficulties and disorders.**

2. **That the CMEC and education ministries issue a statement recognizing that for some students, such as those who are deaf, specialized schools are the most appropriate way to facilitate successful transitions for such students and that the CMEC encourage public and professional support for sign language as a language for work and daily living.**

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3. **Streaming and Transitions Between Vocational and Academic Programs**

The Saskatchewan School Trustees Association (1993) has reviewed the research on student grouping. That report states that ability grouping (streaming) does not offer benefits to students except in very specific circumstances. Such streaming of classes reduces the potential for

advancement for students in lower levels. Other research cited in that report states that ability grouping for some classes (reading or math) can be effective if the level and pace of instruction is modified and if students are regrouped by ability for only one or two classes.

Winebrenner (1996) suggests that "clustering" gifted students in one heterogeneous class (rather than dispersing these students throughout all classes) is an effective way to meet the needs of such students. This allows the teacher to devote some time to their needs rather than leaving them on their own. This strategy would not be the same as "streaming" or "tracking" gifted students.

If this research evidence continues to be valid, then it would be appropriate for elementary and high schools to eliminate ability group and streaming. This would facilitate the smooth transitions of more students within the education system.

In calling for a major review of the primary and secondary curricula in Quebec, the Commission des États Généraux sur l'Éducation (1996) called for a major overhaul of vocational education programs. Many of these reforms were addressing the issue of transitions for students in those programs and can be considered by other jurisdictions in Canada. The Commission called for the creation of vocational education programs for youth that would parallel those being offered for adults.

The Commission suggestions included:

- · a course/program option beginning in Level IV (Grade 10)
- · the development of a school-industry alternative apprenticeship system for vocational education
- · close coordination with vocational programs offered in CEGEPS (colleges)
- · diversification of the academic routes offered to vocational education students.

Berryman et al (1992) has described the strategy of offering an integrated academic and vocational program for students with middle-level abilities. Other jurisdictions have called this type of program "open". This type of program consists of sequential courses allowing students to achieve vocational competencies as well as foster abstract learning under applied conditions. Lankard (1992) has outlined how such integrated academic and vocational education programs can be implemented. Various models are presented and discussed. Lankard (1993), in a different summary, discusses how science and math can be better integrated within vocational education programs.

Kerka (1994) discusses how ill-prepared American students enrolled in middle schools are in planning their transitions. They have difficulty connecting their learning to future careers, they lack guidance in selecting courses, they have not developed career awareness and they have unrealistic expectations about university. She suggests that vocational education should be an integral part of every student's middle school experience, thereby easing their transition into later vocational programs. Borgen and Amundson (1995) of the Canadian Guidance and Counseling Foundation found similar situations in their work.

The option of offering vocational education programs in separate high schools has been examined through national studies in the United States (Rivera-Batiz, 1995). Using data from the National Adult Literacy Survey and the Workplace Literacy Assessment Survey, Rivera-Batiz found that African-Americans who attended high schools offering only vocational education earned 17% less than comparable students attending regular high schools that offered vocational programs.

The preceding brief reviews of ways to organize vocational education programs to maximize successful transitions for students suggests that revitalization of vocational education, integration with academic programs and close connections to the labour market are the strategies to be pursued. However, the difficulties do not always end there.

There is pressure on community colleges to emulate universities (Ignesh, 1992), particularly when university credit courses are offered on campus. The changes imposed on community colleges include adopting an academic calendar, using credit systems, creating associate degree programs and introducing other changes that do not necessarily respond to the needs of vocational students. These are all concessions to gain stature rather than to offer students interested in applied programs a coherent and convenient continuation of their studies after their transition from high school.

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Suggestions to CMEC and Education Ministries

1. **That the CMEC and interested education ministries should collect and disseminate the research, case studies and international comparisons illustrating best practices in student grouping with a view to identifying alternatives to streaming and tracking of students.**

2. **That the CMEC should collect and disseminate the research and best practices on strategies to coordinate and integrate vocational education programs with academic programs so that students are not forced to choose between these programs too early in their schooling and so that students can move freely back and forth between these programs.**

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4. <u>**The Key Transition from Elementary to High School**</u>

The transition from elementary to high school coincides with a difficult time in almost everyone's life; adolescence. Borgen and Amundson (1995) have described some of the transition needs of students at this age. They include:

·   a need to develop multiple, flexible life and career plans
·   an ability to advocate for self
·   managing changing relationships
·   meeting basic needs
·   coping with stress

- · coping with loss of grandparents and parents (often through divorce)
- · bridging gaps between programs
- · access to academic and career information

Yet today, young people face even greater pressures (Steinhauer, nd) from higher levels of stress, less social support from parents, higher rates of unhealthy behaviours such as smoking, poor eating habits and a lack of physical activity and economic pressures to seek part-time employment. (King et al 1996; Hanvey, 1994; CCSD, 1996).

Brammer (1992) has underlined the importance of connecting life transitions to educational success. He notes that researchers have emphasized that social interactions and coping skills/attitudes will determine the success of transitions. Consequently, when students move from the protected environment of the elementary school to the unfamiliar environment of the high school, severe disruptions in learning and behaviour can occur.

Schools have always tried to offer curricula and school organization patterns that respond to the adolescents' transition needs. School structural options have included middle schools, junior high schools, "cycles" within high schools and "foundation" programs for grades 9-10. However, all of these options to facilitate successful transitions need to have many of these characteristics (Lounsbury, 1996) if they are to overcome the heightened barriers to the elementary to high school transition:

- · teaching of a core curriculum
- · ensuring success for all students and having high expectations for all
- · empowering teachers and school-based administrators to make curriculum decisions
- · staffing of schools with teachers trained and committed to work with adolescents
- · fostering of health and fitness of students
- · re-engaging families in the education of their adolescents
- · connecting schools directly to their communities
- · a shared vision of education
- · ensuring an adult advocate for every student
- · a challenging, integrative and exploratory curriculum
- · varied teaching and learning styles
- · flexible organizational structures

Young women and young men face specific barriers during the transition into secondary school. The Canadian Teachers' Federation (Robertson, 1991) led the documentation of the significant barriers faced by young women as they enter high school. These include significant losses of self-esteem, resistance to certain courses and other problems.

More recently, researchers are noticing that young men are experiencing greater difficulties as they prepare to leave high school (Commission des États Généraux sur l'éducation, 1996; Laframboise, 1997). Boys are being alienated by the school's climate and teaching methods and this is showing up

in unequal rates of achievement in Honours Programs and participation rates in post-secondary institutions.

Suggestions to CMEC and Education Ministries

1. **That as part of the CMEC Pan-Canadian Education Research Agenda, the CMEC initiate and cooperate in a multisectorial, federal-provincial study on the condition of adolescents in Canada with particular attention to the increased risks to their well-being and secure development, their economic, academic and life chances as well as examining the negative influences that continue to restrict the vocational opportunities for young women and that are rapidly creating academic inequalities for young men.**

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5. <u>Responding to Increased Student Mobility</u>

The economy has forced families, rich and poor, to move more often. This means schools in Canada are experiencing far greater levels of student mobility. This puts greater pressure on schools to help those students through transitions at the elementary and high school levels. Moves by families from temporary or low-quality/low-rent housing cause students to transfer from school to school within cities. Other moves occur when migrant families follow seasonal employment. Also, affluent families move from province to province or country to country for contracts and good jobs.

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education (1991) has presented several strategies for schools to use in easing these transitions for students that are based on effective schooling research. These include:

- · parent education programs and handbooks
- · reception committees and tour guides
- · classroom buddies
- · inservice training for teachers
- · more attention and resources to record keeping
- · participation in the U.S. Migrant Student Transfer System
- · investigation of electronic file/record transfer systems

Cahope (1993), Menchca & Ruiz-Escalante (1995) and Morse (1997) all provide suggestions on how schools can transfer migrant student records, teach effectively to migrant students and serve such students more effectively.

In Canada, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC 1998) hopes to have the Student Transfer Guide on Secondary Education available online in the Spring of 1998. As well, the CMEC has established an inter-provincial protocol to share learning outcomes and curriculum developments

across the country. An example of this is the <u>Common Framework of Science Learning Outcomes</u> (CMEC, 1997). The Western and Atlantic provinces and territories are actively cooperating in the development of curricula.

Suggestions for CMEC and Education Ministries

1. **That the CMEC, through the Canadian Education Statistics Council, reactivate the previous work on establishing an electronic student records transfer system in Canada to respond to increased levels of student mobility while respecting privacy and confidentiality. Interested school districts should be invited to participate in this work.**

2. **That the CMEC involve national education organizations, parent organizations and the public (as represented by relevant agencies or professions) in any further development of initiatives under the Pan-Canadian Protocol on Curriculum (such as the Pan-Canadian Science Project) so that there is adequate representation in such projects.**

Conclusion

This paper has identified and discussed five barriers to students as they make transitions at the elementary and secondary levels. These barriers are derived from the students' circumstances, from their special needs, from student grouping practices or vocational education program structures, from risks associated with adolescence and from increased levels of student mobility in Canada.

Potential strategies to facilitate easier transitions have been drawn from a brief review of selected general research literature and are presented briefly here. Limited space and time prevent elaboration on these strategies. Suggestions for the CMEC and education ministries have been listed here as well. The purpose of this paper is to facilitate discussions at the 1998 CMEC National Consultations. The analysis and suggestions presented in this paper do not necessarily represent the views of the author, the Canadian Association of Principals, nor the representatives of the organizations who were consulted during its preparation. Questions to initiate discussions at the CMEC National Consultation follow.

<u>Questions for Discussion</u>

1. Did this paper identify and describe adequately the barriers that some students face in making successful transitions within elementary and high schools? Are there other barriers?

2. Did this paper identify and describe adequately the potential solutions or ways to alleviate some of the barriers to successful transitions within elementary and high schools? Are there other potential strategies and solutions?

3. Did this paper identify appropriate actions that the CMEC and education ministries can take to support school systems in reducing or eliminating barriers to smooth transitions at the elementary and high school levels? Are there others?

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