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Transitions to further education: listening to voices of experience

Rhiannon Packer [iD][a] and Amanda Thomas[b]

[a]Cardiff School of Education and Social Policy, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cardiff, UK; [b]Faculty of Life Sciences and Education, University of South Wales, Newport, UK

ABSTRACT

Transition has an impact upon the emotional and social development of the individual as well as academically. This paper argues that transition is not a one-off event but is an ongoing process that is repeated over time. In entering further education (FE) the impact of transition in the move from formal schooling to post-compulsory education is no less daunting. Emerging independence and exploration of self-identity are fundamental in adulthood; however, individuals often need guidance and support during this process. Using an interpretive methodology, the voices of key stakeholders in the transition to FE were sought and recorded to explore and inform good practice. Data was collected using online and paper questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. Findings concluded the value of active and supportive relationships between learners and practitioners and between learners and their peers during the transition process. Nurturing effective practitioner–learner relationships, with opportunities to visit the setting promoted increased engagement by learners and facilitated learner identification with the learning environment, thus ensuring smooth transition.

Introduction

There is a need for transition to be considered from a holistic, lifelong perspective and not only in terms of a single, one-off event experienced by learners to the new setting (Downes, Nairz-Wirth, and Anderson 2018). Post-school transition can present a challenging time for young people with emerging expectations and conflict in terms of perceived independence both at home and in education. It is also a time of exploration in terms of 'identity formation, personal values and future aspirations for which many young people need support and guidance' (Morris and Atkinson 2018, 132). This paper explores the experiences of transition by listening to the voices of those involved in the transition process into further education (FE)

establishments, namely practitioners (lecturers) and learners. The context for the study is South Wales, where FE colleges deliver vocational education and training, both full time and part time, in addition to delivering general education for the local area's sixth form cohort. FE in this context refers to any study undertaken after the age of 16 that is not part of higher education with a focus upon further education colleges rather than bespoke sixth form colleges. The Welsh Government provides funding for all FE colleges in Wales in addition to colleges generating their own income. In 2015–16, there were 133,870 students enrolled on further education courses on all modes of study, a significant majority of whom were part-time (StatsWales 2016).

Drawing upon an interpretive methodology as framed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems theory enables an analysis of the key roles and experiences of those involved in transition and its impact upon the learner. Listening to the voices of those involved in the process as captured by our research contributes to an improved understanding of transition into FE and an opportunity to reflect on good practice.

Literature review

Research into transition in education has mainly focused upon the impact the experience has upon learners, concentrating upon experiences of formal schooling (Davis, Ravenscroft, and Bizas 2015; Ecclestone 2008; Galton and McLellan 2018; Packer et al. 2020; Perry and Dockett 2011; Sutherland et al. 2010; Symonds 2015; Topping 2011) or transition into higher education (Bradley 2012; Brooman and Darwent 2013; Gale and Parker 2012). Indeed, as Gale and Parker (2012) note, much of the research on transition concentrates on children and young people. There is a gap in the research both in considering the processes of transition from formal education to post 16 provision and in exploring the perspective of learners and practitioners in post 16 settings.

In their review of transition from primary to secondary schools across five decades, Galton and McLellan (2018) identify this process metaphorically as crossing a bridge, as learners transfer from A to B, supported in the process by administrative, social and emotional, curriculum, pedagogy and learner self-management concepts. This supports Van Gennep's (2019) 'rites of passage' theory in that an individual's life is a series of transitions which can be segmented into three stages. In terms of the transition into FE from a learner perspective, this can be seen as; preparing to move from secondary school, a liminal period between roles, and the assumption of the new role, as a learner in an FE environment. It can be argued that this concept is too linear in its approach, and that transition should be regarded as an ongoing, evolving process rather than a one-off event (Downes, Nairz-

Wirth, and Anderson 2018). While the bridge analogy is a valuable concept in visualising the transition process, it is important not to disregard the impact of human experiences, social and cultural contexts. The time between transitions, as recognised by Life Course theory (Hutchison 2011), and the factors that influence decisions made during key moments of transition (Bradley 2012) are as important as the transition process itself.

Ensuring successful transition enables better retention and engagement with study as learners are making informed choices (DfES, 2007; WG, 2018a). As other studies have shown, continued schooling and vocational and professional training remain of primary importance for a skilled work force, careers and social integration (The Northern Powerhouse Partnership 2018; Maurice-Takerei 2017; Ludwig-Mayerhofer et al. 2011).

Methodology and methods

In the light of the gap identified in the literature around transition into further education, the study sought to explore the processes of transition from formal education to post-16 provision. This was from both a learner and practitioner perspective to identify good practice. The methodology adopted for the research was an interpretive one as framed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems theory. Bronfenbrenner's theory cites the learner as not existing in isolation but being influenced by the environment, relationships with others, and culture. These influences and how they interact with each other is essential to understand transition and its effects upon a person. This in turn supports the development of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) in providing a framework for thinking about learning in its social dimensions and the empowerment of those involved to develop a cohesive approach (Packer et al. 2020).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological model helps explore the roles and influences of all stakeholders on the learner's journey. It illustrates the complexity and range of transitions a learner may encounter and the necessity of listening to different perspectives. There is a clear focus on the micro-system of the learner, the meso-system of the setting (hearing the voices of all stakeholders), the exo-system of government policy and the macrosystem of the wider context of global research into transitions in education. The focus of this paper is the micro- and meso-systems, exploring the voices of the learners and those stakeholders involved in the transitions from compulsory education to FE.

By adopting an interpretive methodology, the researchers have looked within the data to interpret what the participant is saying and how their perceived realities have shaped their transition experiences (Coe et al. 2017). As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) argue, in interpretive research meaning is

disclosed, discovered, and experienced. Therefore, the participant responses were explored, themes identified and interpreted. This approach was purposely designed reflecting the view of 'qualitative research as creative, reflexive and subjective, with researcher subjectivity understood as a resource' (Braun and Clarke 2019, 591). Our epistemological presuppositions were used to enhance understanding of the impact of educational transition in FE. In the context of our study data were interpreted, creating truths from individual accounts of experiences of transition and drawing from the perceptions of transition on others.

Data gathered from online and paper questionnaires, interviews and focus groups aimed to uncover the experiences of transition from learners moving into FE colleges. Practitioners involved in supporting learners during transition were also asked for their opinions. Participants were identified using purposive sampling, groups were selected according to ability to comment on experiences from different stakeholder perspectives and where there was trust with the researchers. Purposive sampling can be defined as a type of nonprobability or non-random sampling where the aim is to produce a sample that can logically be assumed to be representative of the population (Lavarakas 2008). It was important that the data analysis focused on listening to all the participant voices. Using participatory research enabled participants, as social agents, to voice their experiences of transition and for that to be analysed from a number of perspectives. Systematically discussing the question sets and the data as a research team ensured rigour, thus supporting triangulation of data collection.

The questionnaires, focus groups and interviews explored initial perceptions of induction activities, experiences on arriving at the new setting and opportunities for feedback with suggestions for examples of good practice. The participants were a mixture of age, gender and ability and were from four FE settings across South Wales. Interviews and focus group discussions with 48 students, seven practitioners and two parents were recorded and transcribed and completed questionnaires were analysed. A number of significant themes emerged from these discussions, as outlined below. Themes are analysed drawing upon quotes from participants along with a contextual discussion.

The following themes were identified as a way to structure our interpretation of the findings drawn from particular patterns of shared meaning across the data set:

- *Preparation- Managing expectations;*
- *Induction- first impressions;*
- *Establishing social circles*
- *Transition outcome- time to reflect*
- *Opportunities for feedback*

- *Suggestions for Improvement.*

Analysing the data and drawing upon themes that appeared as patterns from the data had the advantage of giving a holistic picture of the process of transition rather than a snapshot of individual responses (Tett, Cree, and Christie 2017). Ethical approval for the research was granted at both universities where the researchers worked. Consent was obtained from all participants and all data were stored in password protected software (BERA 2018). Emerging themes were checked against each other and linked back to the interview transcripts. As Morse and Field (1995) argue, thematic analysis involves the search for and identification of common threads or as Braun and Clarke (2006) contend, it is a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set. This enabled a thematic analysis of the data collated using a systematic approach which is valuable when considering the perspectives of different research participants (Nowell et al. 2017).

Results and discussion

Preparation-managing expectations

Preparing learners for transition was seen to begin in the year before the transition for the most part. This involved a close partnership between the school and the FE setting. All participants felt that this was conducive to developing relationships with key practitioners in the setting and to become more familiar with the environment before formally starting at the setting. As one practitioner noted, 'For new students, we need to get to know the learners and they need to get to know us before they start'. The methods deployed by practitioners were adapted according to the level and need of the learners as another practitioner commented, ' . . . we have some contacts with the comprehensive schools with year 10s. We go in and see them, we keep in touch through tasters days so once they have applied, they can come in'. Developing relationships with the learners; providing opportunities for them to explore and become familiar with the new learning environment is important alongside managing expectations. This is supported by Evangelou et al. (2008) who reported that one of the factors for successful transitions was taster sessions and open evenings. Here new students are able to get to know practitioners, to ask questions about the course and setting facilities, and to become familiar to their new surroundings as indicated by a practitioner who stated, 'basically, we have open evenings for the new learners coming from the different schools in the area. We set up "walk abouts" so they can be introduced to the setting and go up and view all the different departments'. In drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979)

Ecological Systems theory, learners are gently eased into the new environment and have a more informal experience of the new setting. The varied ways different settings prepared learners for transition is also reflected in Life Course theory (Hutchison 2011). Here there is an acknowledgement that different approaches are needed for different learners. Support given prior to undertaking the transition process was also appreciated by the learners, as one noted, 'I would have struggled if I hadn't had the transition ... it really helped to see the classrooms as it was a very different environment'. Being able to visit the setting prior to starting a course enabled learners to visualise themselves as part of the setting. Learners with Additional Learning Needs (ALN)[1] were able to visit campus regularly, according to need, in order to familiarise themselves with the new environment. As the Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (ALNCo) in one FE college noted, 'Opportunities are also given for students to come and have a tour of the campus as many times as needed so that they know where facilities are before they enrol on a course and gain a familiarity with the new and often busy environment'. This is in addition to a six-stage process conducted by the FE transition and review officer who visits schools and attends meetings of pupils with statements and includes a visit to the college to discuss the course, to attend open evenings. This ensures that the learner has a point of contact who is known to the learner prior to starting at the setting. There is also an opportunity to register on the course early so that learners with ALN can be registered individually.

Opportunities to meet with staff were appreciated as well as learners being asked about their experiences as one learner noted, 'the College were amazing ... they asked me what I would like ... they try to learn from the students as well'. Listening to the narratives of learners is important when reflecting upon transition processes as they are at the heart of the experience and enable practitioners to reflect on the support that is given during that process (Karmelita 2018). As Lave and Wenger (1991) argued in their Community of Practice theory, building relationships and communication with learners is essential throughout the transition process. This was also used by some settings when meeting with prospective learners enabling them to hear about the new setting from the perspective of current learners. For example, one practitioner commented, 'Our current level 3 students have been working with prospective students and giving them a flavour of the courses we offer through practical activities'.

Practitioners working with each other between settings facilitate better understanding of learner's needs at the beginning of the transition process and also enable cohesion in terms of transition drawing upon a collaborative approach. One practitioner noted that their college 'has links with all the secondary schools (in the area) ... also work with learners who may be home educated, on Local Authority tuition or come from Special Schools'.

As described by the Communities of Practice theory (Lave and Wenger 1991) working with settings allows for the development of a comprehensive, personalised approach to change. This is particularly important for learners who have ALN in particular as they may require further support during the transition process, which can include multiagency collaboration when planning on an individual level (Estyn 2020). Neal et al. (2016, 33) state that 'a personalized approach seems particularly important given the evidence indicating that children with SEN often experience a number of specific difficulties (e.g. lower self-esteem, social skills deficits) that are likely to influence transition outcomes'. One learner commented that they 'did transition with *the FE transition officer*' and that this gave the learner confidence to visit the setting, meet with lecturers and to ask questions as the transition officer was there to provide support if necessary. Understanding and accommodating for individual learner need is critical in ensuring that they are prepared to begin at the new setting and practitioners need to be aware that some learners may require more support and guidance than others during the process (Downes, Nairz-Wirth, and Anderson 2018).

Demonstrating versatility in presenting learners with different opportunities to transition into new environments helps to manage expectations and enables them to begin visualising themselves as part of that environment. Parental involvement in this process can serve to facilitate the transition. Whilst transition arrangements are more focused upon the learner entering FE, there is a more nuanced engagement with parents. As one parent noted when discussing the transition procedures, 'It's been very helpful – we know everyone is just a phone call away if we need any help or advice or just an ear to listen'. Practitioners often accepted input from parents or guardians and were willing to encourage these connections, as one practitioner stated:

"Parents can come to the information events with the students. This makes them fully aware of the commitment needed as you need the backing of the parents. We discuss how the student, parent and placement all need to work together for it to be successful".

Practitioners valued opportunities to build good relationships with parents during and after transition as it ensured better support for the learner as parents were aware of the demands and requirements of the course. Parents were included in invitations to open evenings, information events and open days. Practitioners were also keen to keep the channels of communication open even after learners had started in the new settings as the following practitioner notes:

"Before coming to us they (students) usually do come with their parents so they do get the information. We also have the parents' contact numbers and I have spoken to numerous parents over the years if there are any

problems with the learners and I usually build up a rapport with that parent so they will come in or we will speak over the phone".

The inclusion of parents in the transition process supports Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems theory. He states that the first system to directly impact upon an individual is the micro-system. This consists of the groups and institutions that directly impact upon the person, in this context this would include the individual's close family group and fellow peers. Surrounding the micro-system is the meso-system where the individual is affected by the relationships fostered between practitioners and parents. Therefore, this ongoing collaboration between parents and settings support the meso-system in this model and enables the individual's establishment in the new setting and traversing the metaphorical bridge from one setting to another. Huser et al. (2016) conceptualise the transition process in this way, referring to the formation of a number of bridges that can be used to cross from one setting to another. The role of the practitioner in using this analogy explains some of the dynamics of the transition process. They allow or facilitate a number of 'bridges' to be constructed and provide opportunities for a variety of crossings during the transition process. This can be organised in a variety of ways as evidenced by the responses from practitioners, through initial contact with learners, to working with settings and parents. As Sutherland et al. (2010, 37) note, 'close liaison will ensure that joint planning can take place around transition and the transfer of both "hard" and "soft" data can easily be facilitated'. Whatever bridge is chosen to cross from one setting to another, it is important to direct, help and smooth the route taken and learners first impressions are really important here as they make a conscious choice to enter FE.

Induction – first impressions

For learners embarking upon further study in colleges there were a number of different approaches taken in their first days. Learners recalled specific events such as walk abouts, group activities and icebreaker activities. One learner commented, 'We did a treasure hunt round college to get to know the buildings and each other. It was much bigger than school'. This resonates with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems theory where in the micro-system, the learner is influenced not only by the environment but also in developing relationships with other learners in the same situation. Learners also noted what they recalled from the first days at college:

> "We had two days of induction. We did get to know you tasks and we had a homework task where we had to write about what we expected to get from the course and why we wanted to do it. Then the next day we read this out so we got to know each other. We also went on tours of the college in those two days of induction. We had a talk on health and safety; we had a talk from the library staff".

> "We had icebreaker activities in our first week. We went round in a circle and introduced ourselves. We asked each other questions and we feedback but it was really relaxed".

Practitioners recalled similar activities for induction and recognised the importance of building relationships within the cohorts. Time was spent by practitioners getting to know their new students in a more relaxed, informal environment. One practitioner commented:

"In the first week, we do 'getting to know each other' activities. They write their name in front of them and then they have to say something about themselves so it is like an icebreaker. We do that sort of thing for a couple of days. There is a lot that goes on in that first week like the library induction, we do the health and safety when we go round the college, showing the toilets, fire exits and where reception is and the canteen so we do quite a lot". All FE settings realised that students needed a period of adjustment and all tended to do some form of short-term icebreaker activities. Again, this supports Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems theory as learners have opportunities to explore their new environment and to become more familiar with it. However, there has been criticism of short-term induction activities by Brooman and Darwent (2013) and Tett, Cree, and Christie (2017). They contend that transition should not be seen as a one-off event. This is supported by Gale and Parker 2012, (737) who argue, it is more about 'whole-of-life fluctuations in lived reality or subjective experience'. The activities should be seen as a pre-cursor; in preparing learners in terms of expectations and demands as well as enabling them as active participants in the process.

During induction activities, emphasis was placed on learner voice and understanding what they expected from their chosen course. This resonates with research from Hutchison (2011) and is underpinned by Life Course theory, where the significance of the voice of the learner in facilitating positive transition experiences is recognised. Research by Trotter (2004) and Schoon and Bynner (2003) has identified that activities promoting student interaction and getting to know each other during induction led to a more positive transition experience. This was a feature evident in responses given by all participants. Both learners and practitioners spoke of needing time to get acquainted with the new environments and to get to know each other:

> "Lots of different activities, the usual team building activities, getting to know each other such as finding out as much as you can about somebody or find someone with something like a Fiesta car. Also, we have kind of a meeting, I suppose you could call it quite formal; they have the badges I make and we have refreshments with a seminar feel about it. This raises the level of expectation about the course" (response by practitioner).

Providing these opportunities effects good professional working relationships between both parties, enabling better communication and understanding of curricula demands, support systems as well as providing space to question.

Establishing new social circles

While developing familiarity with the new environment is crucial in transition, another critical element is to retain and grow new social circles (Neal et al. 2016). A frequent concern mentioned by all learners, including those with ALN, was a fear of being separated from current friends and difficulty in making new friends on their course. These concerns were connected with other fears such as 'bullying, getting lost, an increased workload, peer relationships and new environments, with fears of bullying by far the most commonly reported concern' (Rice, Frederickson, and Seymour 2011, 245). Person centred preparation, particularly for ALN learners who can experience significant anxiety during the transition phase, is an important component of the transition process (Neal et al. 2016). Failure to make a smooth transition into the new setting may have an effect on wellbeing and academic performance. In minimising this risk, it is important to ensure that the learner starts to feel a part of the new setting as soon as possible, not only from an academic perspective but from a social one. This can be done in a variety of ways such as meeting lecturers in small groups, engaging in question and answer sessions, and scheduling occasions in less structured situations to get to know the learners, such as residential visits and transition evenings. While this can be extended to all students, it is known that ALN learners may require differentiated, adapted approaches to meet their specific needs (WG, 2018b; DfE, 2014). All settings noted that they appreciated the importance of getting to know the learner, and activities around this are useful for the learner, parent or caregiver as well as practitioner. One setting organised 'Keeping in Touch' or KIT days for new students to visit the college during the quieter summer period and to meet informally with current students and to explore the building.

In addressing needs, practitioners' awareness of these issues is important as poor transition experiences can have a long-term impact on the individual. This was commented upon by learners:

> "We had activities to help us settle. We planned out scenarios so that if something happened, I would know what to do".

> 'I definitely would have struggled if I hadn't had the transition'. "It's lot better than school. I have changed a lot since coming to college. It's a new start here . . . college has helped me a lot more than school".

> "If I was to be bullied here, I would feel really supported. Before I didn't trust any teachers . . . but here I trust them . . . anyone would help. I feel very supported"

Comments made by learners resonate with the work of Smith (2020) who states that adolescence is a 'sensitive period of development' where social acceptance and growing independence from parents are important factors in the transition to adulthood. Ensuring an effective transition process taking on board the learner voice can serve to minimise any environmental or organisation issues (Rice, Frederickson, and Seymour 2011). Learners with ALN are supported more intensely while at the new setting, often via informal systems, such as being able to access designated areas appropriate to their needs (for example, a specialist base or well-being room) in addition to a more formal process which monitors the learners on a regular basis as one practitioner identified:

> "When students who have a Statement of SEN[2] attend (*college*), over the last two years they have been part of the trial individual development plan (IDP) process . . . Every week the learners are reviewed by the ALN team. They look at attendance and progression and track their progress throughout the academic year. This gives the team opportunities to identify if a learner is struggling and intervention is needed to be put in place to get them back on track".

Transition outcome – time to reflect

Providing opportunities to reflect on the transition processes implemented allows practitioners to adapt practices following learner feedback. Learners were asked for their opinions on the transition processes that they had experienced and to offer suggestions on what could be done differently, if anything. The answers reflect on what they considered was successful during the transition process:

> "Well it is a step up . . . but it seemed a natural step. I was working in setting for seven years so for me it was a lot different so I wasn't as prepared as someone already in college. I think that has shown in some of the work on this course. However, the transition was still really smooth".

> "After the initial transition we still felt we could go and speak to people. We are a really tight group too. We have been lucky to have (*names practitioner*) too, she has always been there for all of us".

> "Yeah, school left us to just get on with it, here they were more supportive, here you can ask the tutors and they help".

Comments made by learners reflect that their transition experiences were positive where relationships are responsive to learner need, developed and nurtured. This is critical as adolescents begin to have increasing autonomy and socio-environmental factors impact upon their development (Smith 2020). Vygotsky (1978) asserted the importance of supporting learners

and that social interactions and building strong relationships played a fundamental role in this.

Empowering learners in this way by enabling them to reflect and affect change is important in increasing engagement and a feeling of belonging. Responding to learner voice facilitates growth in learner self-confidence, the ability to appreciate and understand the voice of others and to take responsibility (Hunt, Rasor, and Patterson 2019). This must be fostered in an environment of trust and respect by all participants.

Opportunities for feedback

Practitioners and learners were asked to focus on what feedback opportunities were available to explore the effectiveness of the transition process and implementation. Settings had different ways of capturing these data via both formal and informal means. In one FE setting more formal recorded information was collected from learners via a questionnaire. However, it was not clear whether information gathered had any impact upon transition practices at the setting and practitioners were concerned that this was not conducted in a timely manner:

> "We have learner voice and a questionnaire they fill in asking them how induction went etc. However, by the time they have this it is late on in the term and they have forgotten it. So, it needs to be earlier in the term. I also try to stagger induction activities so we don't bombard students with everything all at once. I do things in the second and third week".

In comparison, in a different FE setting, the opportunity for a focus group to meet with the 'quality department' of the college was given, as the learner noted:

> "We did do a focus group with 'quality' here at the college, about the course and transition. Feedback went to the course leader and she has fed back some of it as it is important, we know we are being listened to".

Another setting utilised student representatives to collate feedback from the learner cohort:

> "Yeah, we have done a learner voice survey. We also get opportunities to feedback as a group. We have course reps that also feedback to the module leaders if we have any concerns."

In tutorial sessions, one FE setting asked students to fill in an online questionnaire and another setting asked students to complete an individual learning profile, to say what went well and what they would change. The voices of learners explaining the way in which they gave opinion on their transition experiences are noted below:

"We did through our tutorial sessions so that was verbal feedback. Also, we did feedback online too via a questionnaire. We have course reps too but they have not had to feedback on transition".

"We had to do our first ILP (individual learning profile) about transition. We had to say if it went well or if I would change it. I said we needed more activities in the first few days to settle us in".

Opportunities to voice experiences and opinion encourage students in the transition process to demonstrate how the process impacted upon them as individuals and it can be further refined and improved. Trodd (2013, 164) stated the need for practitioners to hear learners' concerns and to allow them to retain 'their agency'. While her emphasis has been on early years, this may extend to older learners equally. Asking learners their views on transition supports the rights of young people 'to participate in decisions affecting their lives and communicate their own views' (Einarsdóttir 2007, 75). By giving the learners a voice, they were able to feel empowered and that their opinions mattered. Research has indicated that learners' concerns around transition are not necessarily the same as those of practitioners (Fisher 2009). As a consequence of feedback given to settings, practices can be changed or amended. One practitioner noted how this is done in practice:

"We work well together as a team and we sit down and reflect on what certain people have done during induction week and we think oh that's a good idea and we share best practice".

This demonstrates that the transition process is not a static but rather is fluid, continually responding to the changing needs of new learners.

Suggestions for improvement

Whereas learners do not return to their feeder setting in an educational context, thoughts could be given by practitioners to the significance of learners being able to either return or revisit their previous setting to speak with prospective learners. This may be by coordinated visits to schools or to the FE setting where former pupils can speak with prospective learners about their experiences. This feeds into the meso-system of the learner where peers affect the learner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Vygotsky's more knowledgeable other (1978). Being able to reconnect with former settings offers individual reflection opportunities and encourages learners to draw upon their own experiences to help peers as they embark on their own transition journeys. However, as Cuconato, Du Bois-Reymond, and Lunabba (2015, 314) state, this is often not a concern considered by practitioners who if 'not provided with knowledge of the life course aspects of education and qualified to assist students through transitions are unlikely to

feel responsible for the task'. This is especially true for older learners who move from secondary school to colleges for further education.

Other suggestions for improvement given by learners included increased opportunities to explore the new environment in more detail, as one learner noted, 'I would have given more time for us to get to know the layout as I still get lost'. Another learner commented that more time to meet fellow learners before beginning at the college would have been beneficial, 'I would have more time for us to get to know each other before we started lessons'. Learners also expressed that a necessary focus of transition activities should be with regard to developing relationships, equally about the practitioner getting to know them as well as them getting to know the learners. This supports Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory (1978) in that every function appears twice in a person's cultural development, first between people and then inside the person.

If the practitioner can develop an initial relationship with the learner and then has regular opportunities to connect with the learner, the learner is able to internalise this and to feel more comfortable and at ease in the classroom environment.

What is evident from the responses from learners is that they felt that more time was required to become familiar with their new environments and to know their fellow students and practitioners. Harper (2016) is in agreement, arguing for settings to allow time for learners to become familiar with the new setting's floor plan, key areas and facilities and to spend time getting to know practitioners and other learners. Orientation events planned by practitioners would allow for a relationship to develop with the learners and vice versa, as well as serving to support learners in becoming more comfortable with the environment and expectations. O'Toole, Hayes and Mhic Mhathúna's (2014) findings suggest that there may be an expectation by practitioners for increased levels of independence by older learners as they transition into new environments. However, the learner responses from our study seem to indicate that despite an increasing independence they still sought reassurance and support from practitioners and other key stakeholders during the transition process.

Conclusion

Analysing the voices of stakeholders involved in the process of transition into FE settings have identified the value of active and supportive relationships between learners and practitioners and between learners and their peers. In effect the socialisation of learners within the new environment is critical as Tobbell and O'Donnell. (2013, 11) assert, 'interpersonal relationships are a pre-requisite to learning relationships'. As learners begin their educational journey at the new setting, time should be given to create opportunities for the development of interpersonal relationships in addition

to the focus on academic teaching. This supports both Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model and Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural theory, in that the quality of these relationships specifically and the learner's wider relationship circle is essential for successful learning and socialisation to take place. The success of this process will influence the formation and sustainability of future relationships.

Identified from the research is the significance of learner expectation in terms of support and guidance from practitioners in improving both academic performance by learners and increased social functioning (Lizzo, Dempster, and Neuman 2011). Effective practitioner–learner relationships promote increased engagement by learners and facilitates the learner identification with the learning environment, thus ensuring a smooth transition to the new setting. This is enabled by constructive contact and formative dialogue between practitioner and learner in identifying key expectations and requirements of the setting (Tobbell and O'Donnell 2013).

The research has identified the value of listening to stakeholder voices in offering informed dialogue about what enables, supports and facilitates a successful transition process from formal education into post-16 settings. Discussions with both practitioners and learners have confirmed that the movement from one setting to another is not a one-off process but that both stakeholders need to prepare and be prepared for transition. The experience is a holistic one and so must be viewed from that perspective, taking into account the social and emotional ramifications of the transition as well as academic implications. Employing an interpretive methodology to collect and share stakeholders' lived experiences of transition has been a valuable opportunity for practitioners and learners alike to reflect upon the process and how they have been affected by it, allowing for change to be made where appropriate. From the narratives, there is a recognition that transition must be appreciated from both an individual as well as from a collective perspective and that generic practices might not be appropriate for all learners. Some learners may benefit from a more personalised approach in supporting them through the process of change. What is apparent is that practitioners are aware of this and understand how to plan for transition effectively, and co-ordinate activities sensitively to cultivate positive learner relationships. Harnessing the voices of others has enabled a reflection of current practices and developed a keen understanding of the necessary value of transition within the post-16 sector.

Notes

1. Additional Learning Needs (ALN) is the legal term used in Wales to refer to children and young people with learning, physical or sensory needs that make it harder to learn than most children of the same age.

2. A statement of SEN will be replaced by an Individual Development Plan (IDP) during the phased implementation of the ALN Code for Wales from September 2021.

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Notes on contributors

Rhiannon Packer is a senior lecturer in Additional Learning Needs and teaches on both undergraduate and postgraduate courses at Cardiff Metropolitan University. She worked for nine years as a secondary school teacher and was a Head of Year for five years before moving into Higher Education. Her research interests include transition for learners with Special Educational Needs, the learner journey for quiet, shy and anxious children, supporting learners with Specific Learning Difficulties and bilingualism.

Amanda Thomas is currently a senior lecturer in Early Years Education at the University of South Wales delivering on a range of education modules. In 1997, she began teaching in a Primary school and successfully led the Early Years provision for over 10 years. Amanda also taught in FE for four years training childcare practitioners. Amanda was awarded her PhD in researching schemas in the Foundation Phase in 2018.

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ORCID

Rhiannon Packer http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1976-8410

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