

6. Successfully Managing Student Transitions

Utilizing effective transitions in the classroom helps teachers to minimize disruptions and behavior problems, maximize instructional time, and maintain optimal learning conditions (Arlin, 1979; Cangelosi, 2000; Sainato, 1990; Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, 2001; Vartuli & Phelps, 1980). They also serve to provide students with indirect feedback on the pace at which they are each working (Arlin, 1979). The key to successful transitions is for teachers to use a variety of structured approaches (Smith, 1985).

Simply put, transitions are periods of time when teachers direct students to end one task or activity and begin another (Arlin, 1979). Because they are periods when students can be disruptive (Burden, 2003; Rosenberg, Wilson, Maheady, & Sindelar, 1997; Sainato, 1990, Vartuli & Phelps, 1980), carefully managed transitions involve both time management and behavioral management (Stainback & Stainback, 1996). The most successful transitions between lessons or activities are rapid ones that have clear ends and beginnings (Arlin, 1979; Burden, 2003; Cangelosi, 2000; Rosenberg et al., 1997) and that reduce the amount of “down time” between the activities (Sainato, 1990, Vartuli, & Phelps, 1980). A number of strategies help to facilitate quick transitions, including preventive measures teachers can take ahead of time, and situational behaviors that will make each transition go more smoothly.

Teachers can plan ahead to organize their management strategies, schedules, lesson plans and classrooms for successful transitions. First, teachers will want to have clear routines for accomplishing every-day tasks and activities, such as entering the classroom, taking attendance, or handing in homework (Arlin, 1979; Burden, 2003; Cangelosi, 2000; Reis, 1988; Smith et al., 2001). The more tasks that can be streamlined and standardized, the less disruption and confusion they cause students (Cangelosi, 2000; Charles, 1996). Similarly, clearly established

and enforced class rules/expectations make behavioral expectations clear and help to minimize the likelihood of inappropriate behaviors during periods of transition (Arlin, 1979; Rosenberg, et al., 1997; Stainback & Stainback, 1996). Sometimes chaotic transitions occur because students do not have a sense of what to expect during the school day. Teachers can limit this source of disruption by prominently posting and adhering to a daily or weekly schedule and making certain students know of any changes to it ahead of time (Ayers & Hedeon, 1996; Burden, 2003; Olson & Platt, 2000; Reis, 1988; Vartuli & Phelps, 1980). It is helpful if the schedule incorporates transitional times, as well, particularly those that occur between active and quiet student activity levels or between more and less preferred activities (Sainato, 1990). Both teachers and students should be prepared for each new lesson (or activity) to minimize disruptions between them (Burden, 2003; Stainback & Stainback, 1996; Vartuli & Phelps, 1980). Materials should be accessible so that students can get to them rapidly and easily (Fromberg & Driscoll, 1985; Olson & Platt, 2000). Finally, when students are required to move around the room (or school) between activities or lessons, transitions can be made smoother if the setting is arranged to facilitate the flow of students with a minimum of disruption (Burden, 2003; Cangelosi, 2000; Rosenberg et al., 1997; Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

During instruction or at the time of transitions, there are a number of strategies teachers can use to encourage rapid and smooth progress from one lesson or activity to another. As with teaching students any new skill or behavior, teachers may want to model the appropriate way for students to make a transition between activities (Olson & Platt, 2000; Rosenkoetter & Fowler, 1986; Smith et al., 2001) and then have students practice it (Olson & Platt, 2000; Reis, 1988; Smith et al., 2001), giving them feedback as they do so. Once students know what to do, it is important to let them know when to do it (Tompkins & Tompkins-McGill, 1993). A highly

effective strategy is to give consistent visual or auditory signals and verbal cues to alert students that a period of transition is coming (Arlin, 1979; Burden, 2003; Cangelosi, 2000; Reis, 1988; Rosenberg, et al, 1997; Rosenkoetter & Fowler, 1986; Sainato, 1990; Smith, 1985; Smith et al., 2001). This should be done in advance so that students have enough notice to finish up what they are working on and prepare for the next activity (Ayers & Hedeon, 1996; Tompkins & Tompkins-McGill, 1993). For example, a teacher might signal students five minutes ahead of time and then again as the end of the activity draws closer, particularly for students that have trouble monitoring themselves and the pace of their work or who tend to exhibit behavior problems when they feel rushed or “caught off guard” (Ayers & Hedeon, 1996).

Once students have been given the cue or signal that it is time to make a transition, teachers should provide enough “wait time” for students to follow through so that they are ready for the next activity or set of instructions (Arlen, 1979; Smith, 1985). Researchers also recommend that teachers circulate among students during transition times, to attend to individual students’ needs and questions, help them prepare for the next task, and quell any minor disruptions before they escalate (Burden, 2003; Fromberg & Driscoll, 1985; Olson & Platt, 2000). Finally, though less effective than the preventive strategies discussed above, teachers may find it useful to provide incentives, or other reinforcers to students for making successful transitions from one activity or setting to another (Olson & Platt, 2000; Sainato, 1990). These might include a snack, the ability to exchange tokens or points for a toy or game, or permission to participate in a desirable activity.

Particularly for students with learning or behavior problems, these measures help support appropriate classroom behaviors by setting clear expectations, limiting opportunities for disruptive behaviors, and limiting the sources of frustration that can sometimes lead to

inappropriate/unacceptable behavior. In addition, teaching students how to make effective transitions between activities helps promote independence in coping with changes in their environments (Sainato, 1990).

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