

Transitions: A Teacher's Journey to Calm the Chaos

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Abstract

This study examines the role that academic games and activities play when used during transitions in a classroom. As a teacher I found transitions to be very challenging due to a disconnect in expectations between students' home and school lives, the amount of time they consumed throughout the day and the behavior problems that stemmed from them. My data collection was based off observational notes and videotapes, both taken before, during and after transitions in a first grade classroom. I found that the lack of time and structure due to outside interruptions made transitions difficult to plan. However, by incorporating elements of breathing and meditation into the transition activities, students appeared to become more relaxed and focused for the next task. I also found that students were capable of becoming aware of their mental states and needs and should be taught to manage those needs through exposure to various types of transition activities and exercises as well as opportunities to use them throughout the day.

Introduction

It's 5 o'clock, the TV is blaring, two toddlers are running down the hall, from somewhere in the back room a teenager's rap music is blaring, mom is cooking dinner, stirring a pot with one hand, juggling a crying baby in the other, answering homework questions coming from the living room as best she can, all while meeting with her child's first grade teacher who sits at the kitchen table amongst a stack of DVDs and a pile of folded laundry. A bizarre scenario for many people, but for me this is a typical afternoon during the first week of school.

As a second year teacher in a self-contained classroom with 24 first graders, home visits are a common practice at my school, performed for every student in the beginning of the school year and throughout the year as needed. A home visit entails visiting the home or living arrangements of the student and spending time talking with and getting to know the child's family. The goal of a home visit is to build a stronger relationship with the family and foster a deeper connection between the home and the school. It is not an academic conference and involves little discussion about academics and classroom performance.

Flash forward 15 hours, the bell rings, school starts, "please sit down and take out your homework" I announce with a smile, the same way I do everyday. One student takes a toy out of his backpack to show his friend, another walks across the room to see what was thrown into the trash can yesterday after school. Two girls whisper and giggle as they stand by the doorway, a little boy covers his face and lays his head down onto the table.

What initially appears to be a serious lack of classroom management is actually a challenge that occurs during many classroom transitions throughout the day. Transitions occur any time my students are expected to make a change to their current activity or location. A transition is the time that fills in between activities or lessons, when students are expected to end

one activity and prepare for another, whether it is by moving to a new location, getting out certain materials or simply putting something away. While there are many reasons that can be attributed to these particular challenges, in this case they stem from something rooted deeply beyond the classroom: the home life and prior experiences that my students bring with them everyday.

I have been doing home visits for two years now and have visited approximately 46 student homes. While reflecting upon these intimate visits where I am allowed to see a snapshot of my students' lives outside of the classroom, I have noticed that in a majority of the homes, there is very little structure or schedule set in place to guide students throughout their time at home. Given the low socio-economic status of my students' families, the logistics of their lives at home are often not conducive to such a schedule or routine. Many are living in crowded living spaces with many people under one roof, in one bedroom or even in one bed. There is little "extra" space to eat meals, do homework, read books, play games or even rest. Often there are two choices for children's activities, go outside or watch TV. Whether there will be enough food to serve everyone for dinner is the main concern, rather than what time it will be served. Older children are often responsible for taking care of many younger children at one time while parents are at work. Many parents' work schedules involve irregular hours at minimum wage jobs, with many parents holding several of these jobs at a time. Due to all of these circumstances and many more that I might not even be aware of, there is very little normalcy or routine in the day to day lives of my students when they are at home. As a white, middle class American, I was raised in a home where homework was done at the kitchen table after school, a half hour of TV was permitted afterwards, dinner was cooked and served at six, bath time was at eight, a bedtime story was read at 8:30, lights were out by nine. The taken for granted assumption that my

students' families operated in this same fashion was immediately demolished upon visiting my students' homes and witnessing their lives in a way that would not be possible if I remained within the confines of the classroom.

When examining the struggles with transitions inside the classroom, I realize that the largest struggle for these students might not be the transition between activities and locations throughout the school day. Perhaps the biggest challenge is the overwhelming transition they are forced to make from their often chaotic, unstructured lives at home to the frequently rigid, structured daily routines that they are expected to effortlessly perform throughout the day at school. As a result of this lack of connection between the home life and school life of my students, transitions have become an area of concern for me for several other reasons.

The first reason is that transitions seem to consume a substantial amount of instructional time throughout the day. Some research suggests that transitions in a primary classroom can consume from 20 to 30 percent of the school day (Davis, 2000). Many teachers would agree that one of the most frustrating challenges is the lack of time for instructional practices. There is not enough time to meet district mandated requirements, teach the whole child and meet the wide variety of individual needs of every student. I find myself at the end of every day with an assortment of lessons that went untaught, activities yet to be done, and wondering where the time went.

Another reason that transitions became a frustrating part of my day was the increase in behavior problems that occur when switching from one activity to the next. It seems as if many of my students take this opportunity to tap the head of the person they walk past, take a few moments to play with a toy hidden in their desk or stop to talk with friends. Thus, it is not surprising that one study shows that teachers spend more time addressing inappropriate

behaviors and dealing with student issues during transitions than during instructional teaching time (Smith, 1985). This is definitely the case in my classroom as I often think the day might have been problem-free if it weren't for the transitions.

The last reason for my aversion for transitions is more personal. I would typically describe myself as organized, efficient and precise. However, these three qualities could never be used to describe the transitions in my classroom. Thus, transitions have become almost a pet peeve to me, something I dread for the way they occur in my own classroom grates against my own identity and personality. For example, when any part of my life feels unorganized, whether it is my schedule, my kitchen or a meeting I am attending, I become stressed and even slightly anxious. So my own unorganized transitions make me very uncomfortable and I began to wonder if my inability to structure transitions makes my students uncomfortable as well.

While it is difficult not to become consumed with the enormous task of finding a way to bridge this disconnect between life at home and expectations at school, I will begin with what I can immediately change and examine ways in which I can make the transitions in my own classroom more beneficial as well as accessible for my students. I realize that transitional periods are an inevitable part of any classroom and are possibly even more frequent in a primary classroom. Although transitions consume time, contribute to behavior problems and cause stress in my own day, they must transpire and will continue to exist. After taking these reasons into account, I have decided to explore what might happen when I use academic games during transitional times in my first grade classroom.

Literature Review

Transitions

It is crucial that, as educators, we prepare to deal with the inevitable occurrence of transitions within the classroom. Transitions can most commonly be defined as “teacher directed shifts in activities in which the students are expected to come to closure on one task and begin another” (Connell and Carta, 1993, p. 160). Transitions frequently involve putting away materials, taking out materials, moving to a different location and often the completion of all three tasks expected at the same time. There is an abundance of research that suggests these transitions occur constantly throughout the day in any classroom, at any grade level, no matter the type of instructional practices are used (Connell and Carta, 1993; Sainato and Lyon, 1993). In addition, transitions are invariably difficult for students, especially younger students, who struggle to promptly end one activity, put those materials away, get out new materials and begin the next activity all within a matter of minutes (Kartub, Taylor-Greene, March, and Horner, 2000; McIntosh, Herman, Sanford, McGraw, and Florence, 2004). Buck (1999) found the following:

Students are challenged by (a) the need to put closure to the activity at hand, (b) the need to focus upon and comprehend the teacher's directions, ... (c) the distractions created by the movements and behaviors of peers, and (d) the coordination of materials during cleanup or preparation of a work area. (p. 225)

While there are many problems associated with transitions, there are two main problems associated with transitions that continually surface in much of the literature and studies done on the topic: an increase in behavior problems and a large amount of instructional time lost during each transition.

Problems Associated with Transitions

No matter what the socio-economic status of a school, there is one commodity that is almost always lacking and that is time. While there may be various contributing factors to this frustrating truth, one large contributor is transitions (Lee, 2006). Campbell and Skinner (2004)

examined a variety of teachers who made a conscious effort to reduce transition time through various strategies. They found that when teachers decreased the amount of time spent on transitions they had up to an hour and a half more instructional time in the classroom every week. The time that can be lost during transitions not only comes from time used to put materials away and switch activities but is also lost as a result of teachers spending time dealing with an increase in behavior problems during transitions. When teachers must spend time during and after transitions to address issues such as excessive talking, running or students' lack of verbal control, even more instructional time is lost (Colvin, Sugai, Good, and Lee, 1997).

This leads to the second problem that research suggests prevails during transitions: an increase in behavioral problems and challenges among students (Smith, 1985; Colvin, Sugai, Good, and Lee, 1997). Transitions require a different set of rules and expectations where students are required to do a number of things quickly and on their own. Often a lack of clear expectations combined with increased freedom of movement can result in deviant or inappropriate behavior (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, Artman, and Kinder, 2008). Many students do not know how to handle themselves between lessons without the given parameters that occur within a lesson. Hemmeter et al. (2008) suggests that “challenging behavior is more likely to occur...when transitions are too long and children spend too much time waiting with nothing to do, and when there are not clear instructions” (p.18). For this reason there is much research that has explored various strategies and techniques to reduce common problems that occur during transitions.

Transition Strategies

There is a wide range of teacher-implemented strategies that have been studied in an attempt to reduce problems associated with transitions. One suggestion that occurs in much of

the research is for teachers to take the time and consideration to meticulously plan out each transition throughout the day. Many studies have shown positive results when teachers put more time and thought into planning their transitions (Mercer and Mercer, 1993; Buck, 1999). Buck (1999) suggests that many teachers do not allow enough time in their daily plans for transitions. He emphasizes the positive influence on transitions when teachers include detailed transitions between each activity throughout their daily lesson plans.

Setting up clear expectations, firm and consistent routines, and having a strong structure throughout transitions has also proved to create more successful use of transitions in some studies (Smith, 1985; McIntosh et al., 2004). It is important that teachers make sure students know exactly what is expected of them during a transition. Smith (1985) focused on the importance of firm expectations and insistence that students repeat the transition process until it is done properly. In a case study of three teachers, Smith (1985) found:

that effective transitions are characterized by several major features: a) The transitions are prepared for in advance, b) they are usually started and ended by the teacher's clear verbal statements and supported by unambiguous nonverbal signals, c) instructions during transitions are issued in logical order and in small discrete units, d) the teacher waits for the instructions to be carried out before continuing on to the next segment of work, e) the teacher remains task oriented and is not deflected by minor extraneous matters, and f) the teacher is keenly aware of ongoing student activities. (p. 61-62)

Smith claimed that when these key features were present in the classroom, transitions ran much more smoothly than in classrooms without these elements. All of these features of transitions include clear expectations as well as explicitly teaching and modeling these expectations.

Another transition strategy examined in several studies is a strategy referred to as a high probability request sequence. High probability request sequences are commonly used in case studies with specific students with special needs or behavior challenges during transitions (Davis, Reichle, and Southard, 2000; Lee, 2006). They involve requesting several things in a row

that the student is likely to comply with and then requesting the transition directions once the student has responded positively to the first several requests (Davis, Reichle, and Southard, 2000). An example of this would be to tell students to touch their elbows and once they responded, tell them to tap their knees and then fold their hands on their desk. After they successfully responded to the sequence of requests, prompt them to move from their desks to the floor, completing the transition. Lee (2006) claims that high probability request sequences can be a major factor in decreasing transition time. They are easy to implement in the classroom and therefore can be done numerous times in varying situations, increasing the validity of high probability request studies. Lee also attributes behavior momentum as a key factor in the success, as students are likely to respond to something after a series of successful tasks.

Also, some teachers resort to the use of a timer as a transition strategy with the goal of decreasing transition time. Campbell and Skinner (2004) studied 6th graders that participated in this strategy where the teacher timed the amount of time it took the entire class to transition from one room to another. If the students' time as a group was faster than a randomly selected time, they would receive a reward as a group. The study claims a drastic decrease in transition time between classes and calls the game Timed Transition Game (TTG). This strategy proved to be a success in terms of decreasing the amount of time it took to transition. However, time was still spent correcting behavior problems when students behaved inappropriately or teachers had to restart the transition in response to inappropriate behavior. While using a timer definitely gets students moving, there is little motivation other than to beat a clock and very little academic content learning is taking place during the transition (Skinner, Yarbrough, Lee, and Lemmons, 2004).

Games

While reviewing literature on transition strategies, there seemed to be a lack of research done connecting games to transitions. However, there is an abundance of research that connects games to motivation among students. Moen, Nilssen, and Weidemann (2007) studied an elementary school teacher who used games in various ways on a daily basis. In an interview, the teacher insisted that her students' success was based on the motivation they had to participate in games. When she infused academic content into the games, the learning became a secondary benefit to the excitement created by the games. Students are much more willing to engage in something that is interesting or exciting rather than simply being told what to do. As Doll's (1993) post-modern perspective claims, just like teachers, students "need to be trained in the art of creating and choosing, not just in ordering and following" (p. 8). In fact, Kliebard (1988) suggests that when planning curriculum it is crucial to start with student interests, rather than content. Games are one way to capture student interests. While it is important to focus on the academic content throughout the school day, "motivational factors may often exert as great an influence on children's achievement as do cognitive factors" (Lepper and Chabay, 1985, p. 217).

Games work well in the classroom because they often carry a motivational factor as well, aiming to increase student engagement (Gareau and Guo, 2009). Classroom games tend to have an intrinsically motivating factor to them as well. Intrinsic motivation is the idea that students are motivated to do something merely for the pleasure of doing it, not in order to receive a reward or avoid punishment (Gottfried, 1985). Research shows that students are more successful when they are intrinsically motivated; however there is little research that discusses the role of intrinsic motivation in games. While Gottfried (1985) reports that students with high academic intrinsic motivation also show higher academic performance in school, his research does not acknowledge the degree to which academic games contribute to performance. Thompson and Thornton (2002)

posit that “learners are most motivated when they see relevance to their learning, when they have ownership in the process, and when they feel it is tailored to meet their needs” (p. 786). These are crucial elements to consider when planning both daily lessons as well as when introducing transition strategies in the classroom.

In addition to increasing motivation, games are also commonly used as a teaching tool in the classroom as a means to help students access academic content. Their desire to participate is what makes academic games a powerful teaching tool (Lepper and Chabay, 1985; Cruickshank and Telfer, 1980). Vygotsky (1978) believes that play is a crucial element in the learning process of children. Games can be used to allow students to operate within their zone of proximal development. This zone is

The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

By using games as a method of academic instruction, students are able to more comfortably and more willingly access their zone of proximal development in which the result of their participation is an increase in knowledge (Barab et al., 2005). By playing academic games students are able to actively engage in the learning, supporting John Dewey’s (1902) claim that “learning is active” (p. 9).

Rationale for Current Study

The present study will explore the use of academic games during transitional times in a first grade classroom. “The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children emphasizes that transitions should be structured to promote interaction, communication, and learning” (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, Artman, and Kinder, 2008, p. 18). John Dewey (1938) would agree, claiming that in order for an experience to be educative it must contain continuity,

interaction and an end-in-view. An educative experience is one that provides students with continuity, interaction and an end-in-view (Dewey, 1938). Continuity is when students make a connection between what they already know and what they are learning. With academic games this connection can be made when the game reviews content previous learned or frontloads content that will be the foundation for the next lesson. Interaction includes both interacting with one another as well as with the content. Academic games always allow students to interact directly with the content by embedding the content in the game. Depending on the nature of the game, students may be interacting with one another and the teacher as well. An end-in-view involves ensuring that students are aware of why they are participating in a lesson and how the learning involved is worthwhile in their present and future lives. This step takes place before the games are introduced and entails a conversation or mini lesson about the reason behind the academic games and their value in the classroom. The games also provide an alternative way to access content for many students, possibly allowing them to make a better connection to the content and thus a better connection to their own lives. Dewey (1938) claims that not only is experience tightly intertwined with the process of education itself, but that “everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had” (p. 27). By using academic games the quality of the experience, the transition itself, will embrace the three components of an educative experience: continuity, interaction and an end-in-view. I am interested in examining how academic games might transform transitions into a more educative experience for all students.

Methodology

Context

This qualitative observational research study was conducted in a self-contained first grade classroom with 24 students. Students ranged from six to seven years old. There were eight

females and sixteen males who were all from a Hispanic background and spoke English as a second language. Approximately 95% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch based on household income. The classroom was in Seascape, a small Title I school in San Jose, CA. The school consists of self-contained classrooms from grades Kindergarten through sixth grade. After receiving voluntary consent from participant's parents, I explained to the participants about the investigation I would be conducting and gave them the opportunity to elect to participate. I chose to conduct my research in this classroom because I was the teacher and witnessed the way in which transitions created a daily struggle in the classroom for both myself as the teacher as well as for the students.

Data Collection

In order to support the needs of both the students and the teacher during transitional periods within the classroom I adapted an already existing transition tool called Recessitate to meet those needs. Recessitate is an engagement tool designed to “support the physical and social-emotional well-being of students and teachers, giving student and teacher brains a rest to recharge and refocus; and provide playful breaks equal to stress management for all” (Oranda, 2011). There were three different categories of cards included: Gear up, Calm Down and Wake Up. Each was designed to meet student and teacher needs at any given moment throughout the day. Each card has a brief, one to five minute simple physical activity that varies based on its goal of either getting students' brains engaged and motivated, calming them down or waking them up and making them more alert for the next activity. Many of the cards incorporate breathing exercises and coordinating movements that engage body limbs by crossing them across the left and right hemispheres of the body.

Based upon findings in my literature review and what I knew about my students' needs as their primary teacher, I selected several transition activities from each category and added an academic element that would meet first grade California language arts or math state standards as well as the learning needs of my students. I also selected academic focuses that would create continuity between current experiences and lessons in the classroom to further support the educative experience of the students (Dewey, 1938). For example, one Recessitate card has students open their mouths as wide as possible while saying various phrases and taking deep breaths between sets. I adapted the activity to create curriculum continuity by having them say key phrases and vocabulary words that were related to either the lesson or activity we just finished or the activity we were about to begin. Originally, over the course of two weeks I implemented one academic game from a card every time students were expected to transition from one activity or location to another. With anywhere from 12-18 transitions in any given day, approximately 150 transitions involving the use of academic games would be implemented over the two week period. However, with this enormous amount of transitions that occur during an average day in my classroom, it quickly became obvious that I would not be able provide my students the instruction they were used to, implement a transition game at each transition, as well as accurately and effectively collect adequate data for each transition. I then decided to pick three times in the day when I thought there would be a consistent transition from one activity to the next in order to make data collection more manageable while teaching at the same time. For example everyday I attempted to do a transition game after morning meeting before we began our daily phonics lesson or after morning recess before beginning math.

I collected data through observational notes of student dialogue and behavior before, during and after a transition took place. Observational notes were taken every day for 10 days.

Notes were recorded as soon as possible after implementing the academic game sometimes it was possible to do this during the transition and immediately after observing the class, other times, due to my role as the classroom teacher, I had to wait up to an hour before I was able to record observations.

To make up for this limitation in not consistently being able to record observations immediately, three times a week over the two week period I videotaped students and myself as the teacher in the moments leading up to, during and after the academic game had been implemented within the transition. I viewed the tapes each day they were filmed, at the end of the school day. This allowed me to make more clear, accurate and in depth observational notes. It also allowed me to observe my actions and dialogue as the teacher from a third party perspective.

I also kept a self-reflection journal as the teacher to keep track of my own understandings of transitions and observations as the teacher. I used this journal to record pre-existing characteristics that occurred during transitions as well as any other insights I had into my own teaching practice as well as my students' behaviors.

Data Analysis

The largest source of data came from observational notes taken throughout the day. The first time I read through the data I noticed that my biases about what I thought would happen narrowed my focus as I simply looked for challenges and improvements in student behavior and information relating to the time or length of the transitions. After revisiting the data through a more hermeneutical lens I quickly realized there was much more going on underneath the layers of student behaviors and classroom interactions. Smith (1991) explains a hermeneutical lens in the sense of a circle of understanding that creates more insight with each cycle of interpretation.

By using this lens to critically examine and re-examine data I was able to make a deeper interpretation.

Using this lens I began to see a wide range of reoccurring themes in the data and devised a coding system to further analyze these themes. Ellis (2007) states, “The interpreter - the one hearing or perceiving - actively constructs meaning of what someone else says, and does so by drawing upon everything else he or she has heard or observed” (p. 5). It was important when deriving these themes to use my previous knowledge of and experiences with the students to make meaning of their words and actions. The six most frequently reoccurring themes that emerged from the data were student dialogue, changes in daily routine, student behavior, student awareness of their mental state, student participation in academic games and role of mediation on classroom climate. I then broke student behavior into two sub-categories: positive behaviors and inappropriate behaviors. The category ‘changes in daily routine’ was also broken into two categories narrowing the cause of the change in daily routine to unplanned interruptions and lack of time. I used the same coding system to analyze transcribed notes from the video-tapes as similar themes emerged in that data as well. Through coding these various themes I was able to make more sense of the data available and make the most meaning of my observations.

As the classroom teacher in this study I also became an active participant in the study. Ellis (2007) explains “it is the researcher’s work to make sense of what the participant says or shows in the light of everything else the participant has said or done” (p.5). I kept this in mind as I analyzed the data recorded in my own self-reflection journal. I coded this data by two themes that emerged in previous data as well, unplanned interruptions and lack of time, as they were prevalent throughout the reflection journal. I also coded the data by my reaction to student dialogue. Consulting Gallagher (1992) as a reminder that, “Reflection has the power to create a

positive perspective from which to evaluate the constraints of situation interpretation,” my personal reflection journal became a valuable source of data to help with interpreting anecdotal notes when I used it in conjunction with the observational notes (p. 245).

Findings

Problems with Transitions

Transitions are often a common struggle in many classrooms for both students and teachers (Kartub, Taylor-Greene, March and Horner, 2000; Buck, 1999). When analyzing the data, especially data in my own reflection journal, there were two constant challenges that often surfaced repeatedly throughout the day making organized and efficient transitions even more of a challenge. The first challenge was an overall lack of time. The second challenge was the large number of uncontrollable interruptions throughout the day.

Time Constraint

With transitions occurring up to every 20 minutes in an average day they frequently impede instructional time (Davis, 2000). Even with the adjustments made to the number of times in a day I used the academic games during transitions, I still found it difficult at times to stop teaching in order to leave enough time for the game before transitioning to the next activity. Even though each game was designed to last one to three minutes, I recorded in my reflection journal how difficult it was to dedicate those few minutes to something other than content curriculum, or the specific academic lesson at the moment. Some of my journal reflections include: “No time for card! Too busy trying to re-teach small groups in math in time for benchmark test next week.” “No time for card, only 5 minutes time to switch for ELD and still need to pass out homework.” “No time for card, reading buddies at 9:00 and needed to finish math activity.” Reviewing both notes in my reflection journal and observational field notes it

was clear that the biggest frustration for myself as a teacher was not having the time to implement the transition cards in the manner that I had hoped for. While putting more time and thought into specifically planning transitions may lead to positive changes in the classroom, without the time to carryout these plans all benefit is lost (Mercer and Mercer, 1993; Buck 1999).

At one point I expressed my frustrations writing: “how am I supposed to be researching how to use time more efficiently when I can’t even find the time to implement the research ideas?” It was at this point in the research study that I embarked on a hermeneutical spiral and began to ask not how to use academic games to make more time but how to use academic games to teach life skills that I recognized my students were lacking when I initially embarked on this research study. The goal became not to create more time but to create more skills, to help students develop transition skills that they were not developing in their home environments.

Lack of Routine

The second challenge, or theme, that underlined much of the data was the lack of routine or consistency within an average day in the classroom. When I began this research I had the notion that students were having a hard time following a consistent schedule at school because many of them were lacking this at home. Throughout the implementation of the research study I realized how difficult it was to try to implement even three transition cards at the same time every day during times that I assumed would be consistent every day. I found that the reason for this lack of a consistent routine was largely due to factors beyond my control. In many cases I was not able to implement a transition card at a time that I had planned as a result of uncontrollable interruptions. I recorded in my reflection journal feeling like I was rarely able to apply a transition card at a specific time. Comparing these entries to anecdotal notes taken from both the transcribed videotape and field notes, it became obvious that this inability to use the

card often stemmed from circumstances that were beyond my control. For example, the instructional aide, who pulls students out of the classroom at specific times throughout the week, sometimes made changes to her schedule. I normally schedule science observations during a time when all students are in the classroom. When the aide had a change in her schedule resulting in my students being out of the classroom during this time I would do the lesson before recess in a time that was normally spent working on writing. As a result there were only 20 minutes to work on a writing activity and for the sake of maximizing time I would pass out the papers at the door as they came back from recess rather than have them sit down, implement a transition card and then begin writing with minimal time left in the day. Some other interruptions involved events such as a substitute teacher in another class not showing up and changing my schedule to accommodate many of her students in the classroom, an emergency lockdown due to a possible threat on campus, an assembly, a change in the picture day schedule and a last minute visitor requesting to observe a math lesson at a time not normally allotted for math. Without having advanced notice about these interruptions it was difficult to maintain a consistent routine, which is so crucial for students, especially at such a young age (Wood, 2007).

However, other times there were interruptions that were scheduled ahead of time and accommodated for, but nevertheless they contributed to a deviation from what I used to consider a daily routine. One morning there was a parent volunteer presenting a literacy lesson to the students. Although I knew she would be coming in for an hour, naturally this had to change the routine for the day in order to be able to adjust the schedule to allow time for her. Other times I had to make a last minute decision as a teacher to accommodate the needs of my students. On the morning after an earthquake and tsunami had struck in Japan, my students came to school scared, worried and upset over images they had seen on the news that morning or conversations that they

had overheard between adults. It was more important in that moment to change what I had in my lesson plans and have a class discussion, answer their questions, find Japan on the map and attempt to calm their fears. While I did have the control to carry on the daily schedule as planned rather than spend time subsiding their worries, I knew changing the daily routine was what my students needed most in order to meet their emotional needs that morning. Regardless of the reason, I realize now just how inconsistent the daily schedule in my own classroom can be for my students. This lack of structure may be a contributor to some of the problems that occur with transitions in the classroom since the literature suggests that firm and consistent routines along with structure play a significant factor in decreasing problems associated with transitions (Smith 1985; McIntosh et al., 2004).

Meditation

It was important for me to examine in this research the role that the academic game, the Recessitate cards, played during transitions. In examining the data two common themes surfaced during the use of the game. One of these themes was students' awareness of their own mental state. The other theme was the role of meditation on classroom climate.

Nearly every card that was used throughout the investigation ended each game or activity with the instructions "breathe slowly in and out, pause and take a quiet moment" (Recessitate card). For the sake of this study, I use the word meditate to describe this action throughout the rest of the paper. When I first introduced the activities on each card and explained the purpose of using these cards I focused on breathing techniques. I explained that "it is important to breathe in and out of your nose... you should feel air come through your nose and back out your nose. Your mouth should always be closed." As students experimented with this concept of meditation

through breathing and changed the way they were breathing, the climate in the classroom changed.

Several studies claim that breath control and deep relaxation have a positive effect on students' mental states (Peck, Kehle, Bray, & Theodore, 2005; Zipkin, 1985). One study of a yoga program that included meditation drastically decreased students' inattention, anxiety and hyperactivity (Harrison, Manocha and Rubia, 2004). Similarly, in my own classroom, no matter what was going on prior to the meditation portion of the game, once students were able to properly perform the meditation breathing it became a routine that instantly brought calmness, stillness and quietness among the students. When watching the videotape during one of the transition activities on day two of the research, instead of performing the action on the card which involved slowly marching feet while simultaneously bringing opposite arms to touch each knee there were many other actions being performed as well. John was swinging his arms so fast he hit the student next to him, Paul was laughing and tapping Lisa to watch him as he moved his feet and arms in a fashion similar to running in place, James was laughing as he talked to the student behind him and Laura was completely turned around facing the back of the classroom looking at something on the wall. However, when I read and modeled the meditation part at the end of the activity every student became quiet and still as they began breathing in and out through their noses. The quietness and calmness carried over to the following lesson as all but one student was able to walk to their desks and begin their assignment without running, bumping into another student or engaging in any other activity besides the current assignment. Several studies show that these behavior problems are a common occurrence during transitions (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, Artman and Kinder, 2008; Smith, 1985; Colvin, Sugai, Good and Lee,

1997). Through the use of breathing meditation and creating moments of calmness, these behaviors decreased.

Over time students improved at this mediation and needed less and less instruction or corrections. In the beginning I would need to remind them “this is a quiet activity” or “if you’re breathing through your nose, your mouth should be closed.” By the beginning of the second week all I needed to do at the end of the transition activity was sit down, put my hands in my lap and begin modeling the breathing meditation and all students would immediately do the same. Jose raised his hand during one meditation activity to ask “Ms. Becker, through our nose or our mouth?” leading me to believe he was becoming more aware of the various ways one can breath. I also noticed when observing the videotapes that on the days when the transition activity was used, ending with breathing meditation before beginning the lesson, our daily calendar lesson had fewer student interruptions and less time was spent correcting student behaviors.

Awareness of Mental State

In addition to helping students become more calm and focused throughout the transitions, using the transition activity allowed me to witness how aware many students already were of their own mental state. When I began the research I assumed that I would be the one that would have to decide when to use which type of card: calm down, wake up or gear up. It became apparent even by day four that many of the students seemed to be aware of the differences between each type of card, as demonstrated by Miguel, who sat down after lunch, announcing that “we really need a calm down card” much to the verbal responses and non-verbal agreement of his peers who were shaking their heads yes. The three categories of cards (gear up, calm down and wake up) were conducive to language that first graders were able to use to evaluate their own mental needs, although this type of language was never explicitly taught before in my

classroom. One morning I pulled out the box of transition cards and Breanna immediately shouted out “Miss Becker I need to wake up today.” One might interpret this as students simply guessing a card or activity they preferred. However comparing these responses with my own self reflection journal and videotape observations, the majority of the time student-initiated requests seemed to match my interpretation of what they needed at the time, as well as other indicators, such as being abnormally quiet or lackadaisical before requesting a wake up card.

Once I became aware of my own taken for granted assumptions, and I realized that students were capable of acknowledging their own mental needs, I began to provide them with more choices about which activity would be the most appropriate at a given time. When choice is involved students are more empowered to own the process and internalize it as one of their own (Freire, 1970). Choice can also contribute to motivation, causing students to be more motivated to participate in an activity since they had a valued opinion in the decision (Moen, Nilssen, and Weidemann, 2007; Doll, 1993). In week two, once students were even more familiar with the language of the cards and the activities that correlated with each category, this choice was most often given in the form of a vote. “Close your eyes and think about which type of card you need right now. Put your hands on your head if you need to gear up, hands on your elbows if you need to calm down, hands on your hips if you need to wake up.” Most often the results of the vote would correspond with behavior indicators presented by students. For example, after students came in from recess extra talkative, loud, restless and at times even verbally fighting with one another, the vote almost always resulted in the request for a calm down card. Once I realized the capability of my students’ to assess their own mental needs I was able to provide them with more opportunities to do so (Kliebard, 1988).

Perceptions of Student Dialogue

In analyzing the data I also made an interesting discovery about my own perceptions of talking in the classroom. When I initially coded the data I made the assumption that students' talking would be coded as a demonstrator of inappropriate behavior. Growing up in a modernistic education system, I was socialized to believe that the teacher should be the one talking in the classroom. As a student I was only allowed to talk when I raised my hand and was called on, and even then the dialogue had to be about the correct topic or it would be disregarded. Although through the completion of a post-modern credential program I thought that I had converted my own schema and classroom pedagogy to a more child centered approach, as recommended by Dewey (1902). However, my original coding of the data contradicted my opinion of myself as a teacher. As I worked hard to empower my students throughout the research project I was in fact oppressing them by temporarily adopting a banking concept of education, simply providing them with these new ideas about transitions, enforcing the new activities and not giving them enough time or opportunities to discuss, question and process the concept (Freire, 1970). When teachers employ a banking concept of education, in which they simply give or tell knowledge to students so that they can accept it as the truth and quickly absorb the information, they are oppressing their students' ability and desire as humans to think, discover and act on their own (Freire, 1970). Through reflection on my own internalizations as I coded the data I embarked on a hermeneutical spiral, realizing that the notion of student dialogue as "inappropriate" was still ingrained in my perception of classroom behaviors.

Upon re-examining the data through this new perspective I realized that much of the talking was positive and in many cases, quite purposeful. During one transition activity Eric was helping Emmanuel by telling him to "put your other foot in front." As students were working at their desks after completing a transition activity Joanna was talking with Evelyn about how to

fold the paper to make six squares. Through dialogue, teacher and student learn from one another equally and simultaneously, leading way to a situation that can empower students and their ideas, rather than oppress them, as Freire (1970) claims often happens in the teacher-student dichotomy. Reflecting on the data and instances of dialogue, I see now that when dialogue is used in a pedagogical sense it assists the learning process through open-ended discussion and inquiry. “Dialogue is an activity directed toward discovery and new understanding, which stands to improve the knowledge, insight, or sensitivity of its participants” (Burbules, 1993, p. 8). This notion of dialogue is also fostered in Dewey’s (1938) idea of an educative experience as it involves interaction and often continuity. Without taking the time to re-code the data as well as reflect on the way I coded it the first time I may never have made this discovery about my previous perceptions of dialogue. Freire states that “liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (1970, p. 79). Having completed the reflection component, my next step must be one of action, to allow students to explore transitions with the opportunity to question, challenge and discuss all aspects of classroom transitions.

Limitations

The biggest limitations to this study were the lack of time available in the classroom combined with the dichotomy of playing the role of both teacher and researcher at the same time. As previously noted, it was difficult to set aside enough time to fully explore each transition game while still having enough time to meet the instructional demands required by the curriculum. It was also challenging to record thorough and accurate observational notes at the same time as teaching. Often I had to wait a few minutes until students were settled down and working before I could record notes or sometimes not until the next recess. This made it difficult

to record every detail and observation that I had intended to record. Video taping was a way to counter this limitation but was not nearly as effective as field observations taken in the exact moment that they occurred.

If I were to do this study again I would incorporate student interviews to get a more complete understanding about their feelings and reactions to the transition games. By asking students questions about the activities I would be able to better triangulate the data and create a more accurate interpretation of their responses and changes. I would also use the transitions games over a longer period of time since the time constraint limited the amount of times I was able to implement the activity in a day.

Conclusions and Implications

After analyzing the data I realized how capable my students were of developing an awareness of their own mental state and mental needs. I have found that if I provided them with choices regarding how to accommodate these needs they were able to appropriately use these tools to satisfy those needs (Freire, 1970). It is important that teachers provide students with age-appropriate language to express these needs. Teachers should also foster this awareness of needs by teaching students the skills to satisfy them. As adults when we feel like we need to wake up we can go for walk, get a cup of coffee, turn on music or talk to a friend. When a student identifies that they need to wake up their options are limited and often restricted to sitting in one spot, not talking unless called on. While the first step is providing students with tools for meeting their mental needs, it is crucial that educators also provide students with opportunities to use these tools.

I also found that using breathing meditation and creating moments of relaxation among students helped students settle down and become more focused on the next lesson. While it is

difficult due to an overwhelming lack of time, it is crucial that teachers provide students with the opportunity to slow down, breath and relax before racing off to the next activity or lesson (Lee, 2006). When this lack of time coincides with a lack of routine it becomes even more crucial that teachers incorporate both quiet moments as well as transition activities. I have learned that no matter what happens to the daily schedule or routine, the one thing that should remain constant is the routine of transitioning (Buck, 1999).

Lastly, this research has taught me the importance of reflection on my own teaching practice, which has allowed me to unearth some of my own internalized perceptions about students talking in the classroom. While it is easy to say that my teaching philosophy agrees with Burbules (1993) and the central role that dialogue plays in the learning process, it is another thing to make sure that all elements of my teaching practice in action reflect this belief. It is important that teachers not only incorporate dialogue and student-teacher interaction into their instruction of academic content but also that dialogue is valued in all realms of the classroom. Teachers must allow students to discuss why they are doing what they are doing not only during math or language arts but during recess procedures, transition routines, homework expectations and other classroom elements that do not fall under academic instruction. Freire (1970) would agree that in order to liberate our students we must allow them the chance to question, challenge and critically examine the reasons behind classroom requirements and expectations.

Future Research

I would like to continue to research transitions in my own classroom as well as compare transition challenges and strategies across other grade levels. I would also like to interview students to gain a better understanding of their responses to the transition games and opinions about transitions in general. More research should be conducted to examine the ways in which

other transition strategies help manage both transitions and students' mental needs. One example of this would be to examine the role that music plays as a transition tool. When I began this research project one of the biggest underlying personal questions for me at the time was how can I continue to grow and excel as a teacher? I have found the answer to be in the process of self-reflection and will continue to thrive within this process for as long as I am thriving within the classroom.

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