

Effective Transitions

Jacquelyn Scott, 5th Grade Intern
Boalsburg Elementary School
Jjs441@psu.edu

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Description of Teaching Context:

I am currently an intern in a fifth grade classroom at Boalsburg Elementary School. Boalsburg Elementary is part of the State College Area School District. It is located in the historic town of Boalsburg, Pennsylvania. This small school contains three fourth grade classrooms and three fifth grade classrooms.

My classroom includes a variety of learners with a range of needs and interests. The classroom consists of twelve girls and ten boys. There are three students who participate in our English as a Second Language classes, five students who participate in our Title 1 program for reading, and two of our students require learning support. My students are interested in a range of activities such as music, athletics, academics, arts (both dance and the visual arts), and their personalities range from extremely outgoing to extremely introverted. These students seem to get along quite well, and can be quite talkative and active on occasion.

Rationale:

As I began to full time teach in my classroom, I encountered some problems. I found that a great deal of time was being wasted during transitions. Because of this, my lessons weren't as successful as I had hoped. There were not clear expectations for the students as to how they were to transition. They haphazardly collected materials, transitioned from the carpet to their desks and lined up for specials. Many students took a long time to begin working after the directions were stated, and they asked many questions about directions that I had already gone over with the class. Because of the lack of effective transition techniques, the productivity level in the classroom was not as high as I thought it should be.

Because of this low productivity level, I implemented a plan to acquire and test transition strategies. I wanted to find the most effective strategies and attempt to determine their effects on transition times and overall productivity in the classroom. The success of this inquiry would have a great impact on my current teaching. If I could find effective ways for students to transition, I might have more time for instruction in the classroom. It would also make the classroom a less chaotic and stressful setting for me (and hopefully the students, also.)

This would not only impact my current teaching, but my future teaching as well. If I find transitions that are effective, I will be able to implement them at the beginning of the year. This will enhance the learning time available to students throughout the year, and hopefully have a positive impact on their learning.

Wonderings and Questions:

As I began my inquiry, my main question was, **“What are a few effective transition techniques, and what are the effects of these techniques on classroom productivity?”**

Some of my sub-questions included:

- What are the most effective age-appropriate ways to transition?
- What are effective ways to begin the day to set a tone for learning?
- What expectations can the teacher set in order to make transitions more time effective?

- How much extra time will be available for instruction once I've mastered transitions?

Inquiry vs. Project

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, the word inquiry means "close examination of a matter in a search for information or truth." I began my inquiry with a list of questions that I wanted answered. I was on a quest to find transition techniques (information) that would be effective in my classroom. I started by researching and testing a number of techniques. My main goal was to test a few of these transition techniques and determine the effects of their implementation on the productivity in the classroom. Had this been an improvement project, I would have stopped testing the techniques after I had found ones that were effective for my classroom. However, I continued to test different methods of transitioning after I had found ones that seemed to work quite well.

Inquiry Plan and Description:

My first step in my quest was to find a number of transition techniques and then test them in my classroom. In order to find transition techniques, I conducted a survey of the teachers in my building. I asked them a number of questions, and from their answers I compiled a list of transition techniques I would attempt to try in my classroom. I organized these techniques into a chart with four specific transition areas I would focus on. These areas were *Establishing Rules and Expectations*, *Transitions in the Morning Before School*, *Transitions in the Afternoon at the End of School*, and *Transitions Between and During Activities*. I implemented the following techniques:

Establishing Rules and Expectations:

"It is very important to establish rules and expectations." S. Graham (personal communication, February 23, 2006)

"It is important to establish rules so that your lessons do not have interruptions and flow smoothly. I implement four rules: 1) Raise your hand to speak, 2) Don't talk out, 3) When the teacher is talking, students are quiet, and 4) listen while others speak. It is important to be consistent when enforcing them." S. Keil (personal communication, February 23, 2006)

In order to establish my own rules that I would expect the students to follow, I gathered them for a morning meeting and asked them to brainstorm rules. We had a discussion about how these rules were important. I then began to enforce these rules right away. I made sure to be consistent. I continued to remind students of the rules periodically before we gathered for a discussion or an activity. We also discussed the importance of quick and quiet transitions and the students brainstormed ways that they could cut down on their own transition time.

Transitions in the Morning Before School

"We always have morning work on the children's desk when they come in the morning. Children are to do lunch count and the morning work." S. Keil (personal communication, February 23, 2006)

Another area I focused on finding effective transitions for was the morning. At the beginning of the year, the students were required to complete morning work (this was called a mug shot, and they were required to proofread and fix a sentence) and make a lunch choice. This sometimes took them twenty-five minutes to complete. Many of the students never finished either of these tasks. After getting some advice from other teachers, I tested a few different techniques in this area. The following is the order that I implemented the different techniques:

- I told the students that they must have their mug shot and lunch count done by 8:45.
- I started a contest with groups. Each student could score points for their group by having their lunch count and mug shot done by 8:45.
- I began to collect the mug shots and give the students grades for them.
- I began to observe and interact with the students during their morning work. I encouraged the students by thanking the ones that were working well, and asking ones that were not to get started.
- I began requiring that the students finish their mug shots by 8:45 so that I could collect them and begin a morning meeting.
- During morning meeting, I shared the daily schedule with the students so that they would be able to prepare for activities throughout the day.

Transitions in the Afternoon After School:

"The students must be in their seats until they're called." S. Graham (personal communication, February 23, 2006)

"At 2:45, first bus run gets their things to go home and sit up front. Other children then join them. I usually read until first bus run is called." S. Keil (personal communication, February 23, 2006)

There was no official routine for the end of the day, so I decided to attempt a few different techniques and see what effects they had on student productivity. I attempted the following techniques:

- I began ending lessons around 2:45. This was later than the normal ending time of about 2:35-2:40.
- I made a rule that the students must stay in their seats until they were called to line up at the door.
- I sometimes read to the students.
- I also played games such as Mad Libs, Brain Trivia, and Hangman.
- I used this time to go over the homework students were assigned.

Transitions Between and During Activities:

“I have materials ready so that I can concentrate on the kids.” S. Graham (personal communication, February 23, 2006)

“Before I dismiss them, I tell them exactly what they are to do and what the volume level should be.” S. Graham (personal communication, February 23, 2006)

“I call the students by different groups, for example, girls first and then boys.” S. Graham (personal communication, February 23, 2006)

“I have them clear off their desks before a special and get ready for the next activity.” S. Graham (personal communication, February 23, 2006)

“I use a timer in order to give students a set amount of time to transition to the next activity.” D. Rockower (personal communication, February 23, 2006)

I got a lot of examples of techniques that teachers used while transitioning between and during activities. I attempted the following techniques:

- I made sure I had my materials ready in the morning before I had to teach my activities.
- I made sure that students understood that when I was giving directions, they needed to listen so that they could begin with less questions.
- I practiced a few attention getters with them. Some of these included:
 - I clapped to get the students’ attention.
 - I started by saying, “If you can hear me clap once (students clap). If you can hear me clap twice (students clap twice). If you can hear me clap three times (students clap three times).” Students were expected to be quiet and looking at the teacher by the final clap.
 - I counted down from ten to one and students were expected to be quiet and looking at the teacher before one.
 - I made sure that students understood that they must look at the teacher and stop talking when he/she was giving directions.
- I explained what students would be doing when they returned from a special prior to going so that they could get their materials ready.
- I called students to move in groups. For example, I might have boys go first and then girls go.
- Before leaving a special, I told the students what they should do when they got back to the classroom.
- I timed the students during transitions so they would be ready for another activity by the time the timer went off.
- I gave positive comments to the students who were on task and reminders to those who weren’t.
- Before walking in the hall, I reviewed the hallway rules with them (no talking, no running, stay to right side).

- I required the students to clear off their desks before starting a new activity.
- Prior to allowing the children to start a lesson, I told the students what to do when they were finished and told them where they could turn their work in.

Data Collection:

I collected data for my inquiry in four different ways. These ways included:

Surveys: I gave the students “Transition Surveys” at the beginning of my inquiry project. I had students rate themselves from one to ten on a few questions. I structured the survey so that there were four broad titles (the four transition areas I was working on) with questions pertaining to these areas underneath. An example of the questions in one area is:

When an Activity is Over:

1. When I am finished with an activity I always put my materials away in the appropriate box.
Score: _____
2. When I am finished, I always clean up any scraps under my desk.
Score _____
3. When I am finished, I always clear everything off of my desk.
Score _____
4. When I am finished I return to my seat as soon as possible and stop talking.
Score _____

I then had the students focus on practicing these transitions for a few weeks. When the few weeks were over, I gave them the same survey again.

Observation Checklists: I filled out observation checklists for a few selected activities. These checklists recorded the time it took for students to transition, the technique I used to get them to transition and the students that experienced difficulties transitioning and why. I used these for three of the four main areas of my focus (Transitions in the Morning Before School, Transitions in the Afternoon at the End of School, and Transitions Between and During Activities). I did this before I started implementing techniques and after, also.

Student Made Charts: After discussing transitions and setting goals for how long we thought they should take, I timed my students and had them record these times on charts. We hung these charts on the wall, and each day a different student was required to record on these charts. We recorded the time it took the students to line up at the door, the time it took them to clean up after an activity, and the time it took them to quiet down before listening to directions.

General Observations and Notes: In order to collect more data, my advisor and I both took notes on lessons. I also reflected on lessons using a journal. I also recorded notes during lessons. We recorded transition times throughout the lesson, students who were having trouble transitioning, and the techniques that were used. In my notes and journals, I also recorded what I was doing with the extra time that we had because of transitions. I also recorded general ideas about my stress during lessons because of faster transitions.

Data Analysis:

After I had collected my data, I systematically analyzed each type of data I had collected.

Surveys:

Method of Analysis: I used the surveys to gauge how much the students thought they had improved. I looked at each section of the survey separately, and I then recorded whether or not the students rated themselves lower, the same, or higher on each question.

Findings: I found that the majority of the students consistently gave themselves the same score or a higher one on the second survey. Very rarely did they give themselves a lower score. When analyzing the section of the survey where students rated themselves on their ability to transition in the mornings before school, two of them rated themselves the same. However, these students had given themselves tens on each question both times. In this section, twenty students gave themselves the same score or a higher score.

When analyzing the scores on the section concerning transitions between activities, I found that the same two people gave themselves the same score (all tens). Eighteen students gave themselves the same score or a better score. The remaining two students gave themselves a score that was either the same or lower than the original.

In the section where students rated themselves on transitions after school, the same two students kept the same score of ten. The remaining twenty students all gave themselves the same score or a better score.

Observation Checklists:

Methods of Analysis: I compared the observation checklists in order to determine improvement for the students. I also used these to gauge the effectiveness of a chosen technique. I separated them into my three areas of study (Transitions in the Morning Before School, Transitions in the Afternoon at the End of School, and Transitions Between and During Activities). I first compared the times before the transitions were in effect and the times after the students had been practicing transitions. I then recorded the techniques used and the difference in times according to the transitions.

Findings: In the earlier surveys I found that in the morning, most students were finished making their lunch choices and doing their morning work by 8:50. However, I recorded that many of the students (about five each time) took until 8:55 to finish with their morning work. There were two students that consistently didn't finish their morning work at all. After analyzing the later surveys, I recorded that everyday the majority of the students were finished with their morning work at or before 8:45. The students who did not finish before this time had sufficient reasons (eating breakfast, running to the office...etc). I recorded that the students were consistently finishing at this time when I required them to hand in their morning work to me and move to the carpet for a short morning meeting.

I also found that the transition times between activities lessened as my class worked on inquiry. At the beginning of the inquiry the students were taking around 2 or

three minutes to transition between activities. In the later observations, they were taking sometimes less than thirty seconds. In this area, I found that the students had shorter transition times when I told them exactly what to do before they began and what they should do when they were finished. I also found that they had shorter transition times when I counted down from ten to one.

When analyzing the transitions at the end of the day I focused on how long it took the students to get their bags and get back to their seats. I also focused on the tasks that they were involved in. Before we began working on transitions, the students would get their things at 2:40, and they could do anything they wanted until their bus run was called. Many of the students talked to each other. Some played on the computer or with the indoor recess toys. Other students drew on the chalkboard. During all of my observations, I never recorded someone doing work at their seat.

After I had implemented some techniques, the data was much different. I found that when I ended the class at 8:45, the students got their things packed more quickly. However, they were still running around the room. I found that when I ended class later, and required them to return to their seats, they packed their things more quickly. I also noticed that when I did this, many of the students continued to do their class work.

Student made Charts:

Methods of Analysis: I looked at these charts and compared the times as we focused on transitions.

Findings: I found that the time it took the students to quietly line up at the door drastically fell. The longest time was 1 minute and 32 seconds. At the beginning the times were all around a minute. At the end, the times were all under thirty seconds.

I did not find any consistency in the times between activities. However, I did not have the students record what kind of activity they were transitioning from. This might have made a difference because some activities require more clean up time than others.

General Observations and Notes:

Methods of Analysis: I looked through my advisors notes first. I highlighted areas where she recorded transition times. I compared the earlier dates to the later ones. I also noted techniques that she recorded being successful. I then looked through my own notes and recorded techniques that I found to be successful.

Findings: My advisor's notes showed a remarkable difference in the transition times earlier in the semester and the times later. The later times were much less. Most of the beginning times were around two minutes, and they showed that some students took up to four minutes to get started with an activity. This was only between activities, however because she never observed before and after school. In the earlier lessons, she continually wrote notes about a few students who seemed to have trouble transitioning. "*Bob and *Joe are sitting at their desks with nothing relevant out. They are just staring into space." E. Key (personal communication, April 4, 2006) Later, she recorded notes about not seeing this anymore. "I particularly notice that *Bob and *Joe are on task and got started right away." E. Key (personal communication, April 6, 2006)

My advisor recorded a few transition techniques that she thought were effective. “Wow! Students become silent for your directions (after your clapping and your pause waiting). You have such an organized procedure for having students pick up the paper/lapboard/get to the floor.” E. Key (personal communication, March 15, 2006) “I hear you give directions while students get things out. This seems to save time.” “I hear you thank students who are ready. Others then get out their things.”

I recorded a few methods that I thought worked. I continually found myself recording that it was effective when I told the students what we were going to do before we left a special. I also found that I recorded that it was effective to make sure that students knew the expectations before they started an activity.

Claims:

Claim #1: In order for my students to transition most effectively in the morning, I must monitor my students, hold them accountable for their morning work, and start a new activity once they are finished.

Evidence: When comparing my observation checklists, I found that when I did these three things, the majority of the students completed their morning work before 8:45. Like I stated before, the only students who did not finish were the ones who had a good reason such as going to the office or eating breakfast.

My notes to myself throughout the semester also mirrored these results. The following are a few quotes from my notes throughout the semester. “Before, I made the students check off their names when they were finished with the mug shot, and the majority of the students did. At least 4 kids didn’t check off their names. I noticed that today when I walked around the room and asked them how their mug shot was coming along, they would begin if they hadn’t already. I finally got all of the students to finish their mug shots.” (personal notes, February 28, 2006) “Everyone finished their mug shots before 8:45 today! I think it is because not only did I require that everyone finish them, but it might have also been because when they were done, we had a morning meeting. They had to hand in their mug shot before they could come back to the carpet for the meeting.” (personal notes, April 10, 2006)

This evidence showed me that the most effective technique of getting students to complete the morning work on time was to closely monitor them, hold them accountable for the work that they did, and have an activity that they could be ready to participate in once they were finished with their work.

Claim #2: The teacher can cut down on transition time by telling the students what they should prepare for in advance.

Evidence: When I examined my checklists, I recorded that the transition times were the shortest when I told the students in advance what they were supposed to do when they got to the room. My advisor wrote the following on an observation sheet. “I wonder if a small bit of time could be conserved by letting them know before they enter the classroom that they should sit in the back of the room?” E. Key (personal

communication, February 1, 2006) I decided to try this technique and recorded the following in my journal, “I talked to the students when they were in the library that when they got back to the room that they should get their books out and start to read. By the time I got back to the room (I was at the end of the line) they were all reading. This saved me time getting them to quiet down and then telling them what they should be doing.” (personal notes, March 13, 2006)

When I compared the checklists, I found significant data that showed that when I told the students what to do when they got back to the room, it took them less time to transition than when I waited until we got back to the room to tell them.

I also found that by keeping a daily routine and writing the schedule on the board, the students began to get things ready for the next activities without me even telling them. I wrote the following about a spelling lesson. “Every day the kids keep asking me what we are going to do next. I get really overwhelmed by this. I have been putting the schedule on the board all week to avoid this, but I found that this technique helped the kids to transition. Today when they were finished with math, they immediately looked at the board and took out their spelling composition books.” (personal notes, April 3, 2006)

I found that when students know what is going to happen next, they can better prepare for it. By telling the students what to expect in advance, the transition time can be cut down drastically.

Claim #3: Using one method of transitioning students between activities is not always effective. It is effective to have a number of techniques and use them in appropriate situations.

Evidence: I found that one method of transitioning students was not effective in all situations. For example, I recorded the following observation in my journal. “I had my students record their times for lining up at the door. I called them to the door by tables to go to music. They recorded that it took them thirteen seconds. When I called them the same way to go to lunch, it took them much longer. It took them three minutes. I think this is because when they line up for lunch, they have to be in a certain order. Because I didn’t call them to the door by that order, they took longer to line up.” (personal notes, April 12, 2006)

My transitioning checklists showed that in one day, I used the clapping technique to gain the attention of the students. At the beginning of the day, the students were quiet almost immediately. By the end of the day, the students were not even responding to the clap. I heard one student say, “I am sick of clapping.” I found that on the day that I used clapping, counting down from ten, and saying “if you can hear me clap once, if you can hear me clap twice...” the students responded quickly each time. I noticed that when I recorded that we were doing an activity that the students were writing, the clap procedure worked, where as when the students were working on an activity that involved more hands on (making inventions), counting down from ten gave them a chance to put their materials away and focus their attention on me. Therefore, it is effective to have a number of techniques to choose from and apply them to the situation depending on how much time the students need to get organized.

Claim #4: By implementing effective transitions, much time can be saved in a classroom. This time can be used productively during lessons, before school, and after classes are over.

Evidence: At the beginning of my inquiry, I timed the time it took the students to finish their morning work. Most of the students did not finish their work before it was time to leave for math at 8:55. After transitions were implemented in the morning, the students consistently finished their morning before 8:45. We were able to have morning meetings during this ten minutes that we did not have before the transitions were in effect. We now have class meetings everyday where we get to know our classmates by doing a daily check in. We also get a chance to talk about any concerns that we have. We would not have had this time before.

I had also recorded how I felt less stressed out during my lessons, and that I didn't feel that I had to rush because the students didn't transition fast enough. I stated that "The kids were ready when I wanted to start spelling. I didn't have to keep waiting for them to be quiet. The lesson went a lot more smoothly." (personal notes, April 3, 2006)

I observed the transitions that I put in place at the end of the day (making the students come back to their seats after they got their backpacks and ending the lessons at 2:45 instead of 2:40) and compared those checklists to the ones I had completed earlier in the semester. I looked at the activities that the students were engaged in, and made notes of them. At the beginning, I recorded that some of the students were on the computers, some were running around the room and playing with the indoor recess games, but none were doing work. I recorded in the more recent checklists that some students were reading, some were working on homework, and only a few were talking. I consider these activities more productive than the previous ones that I had mentioned.

New Wonderings:

I have learned a lot from this inquiry project, but I have also formed many new wonderings and possible inquiries.

- Will these techniques be effective for students of all grades?
- Will these techniques be effective for other classes of fifth graders?
- Would the students find it easier to learn to transition if these techniques were introduced at the beginning of the year?
- If I did introduce these techniques at the beginning of the year, would more of them have been effective?
- Did the students' previous routine of these smooth transitions have an effect of the type of transitions that seemed to work?

Conclusions:

By conducting my inquiry project in my classroom, I have found a number of techniques that are effective for my students. I continue to use them everyday, and they are having a positive effect on the productivity level in my classroom. Things seem more organized, I do not have to repeat directions, and I don't find myself pushing for time during lessons.

I plan to implement these techniques in my future classrooms and make them routines at the beginning of the year. Hopefully, this will enhance the amount of time I have for lessons.