

Developing Emotional Literacy: Transition Planning For Youth At Risk

Leonard Fleischer

Traditional transition planning focuses on skills for independent living and self support. Research on social and emotional learning suggests the needs to build the capacity in youth for Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity.

“What is this all about?” a worried-looking student asks me.

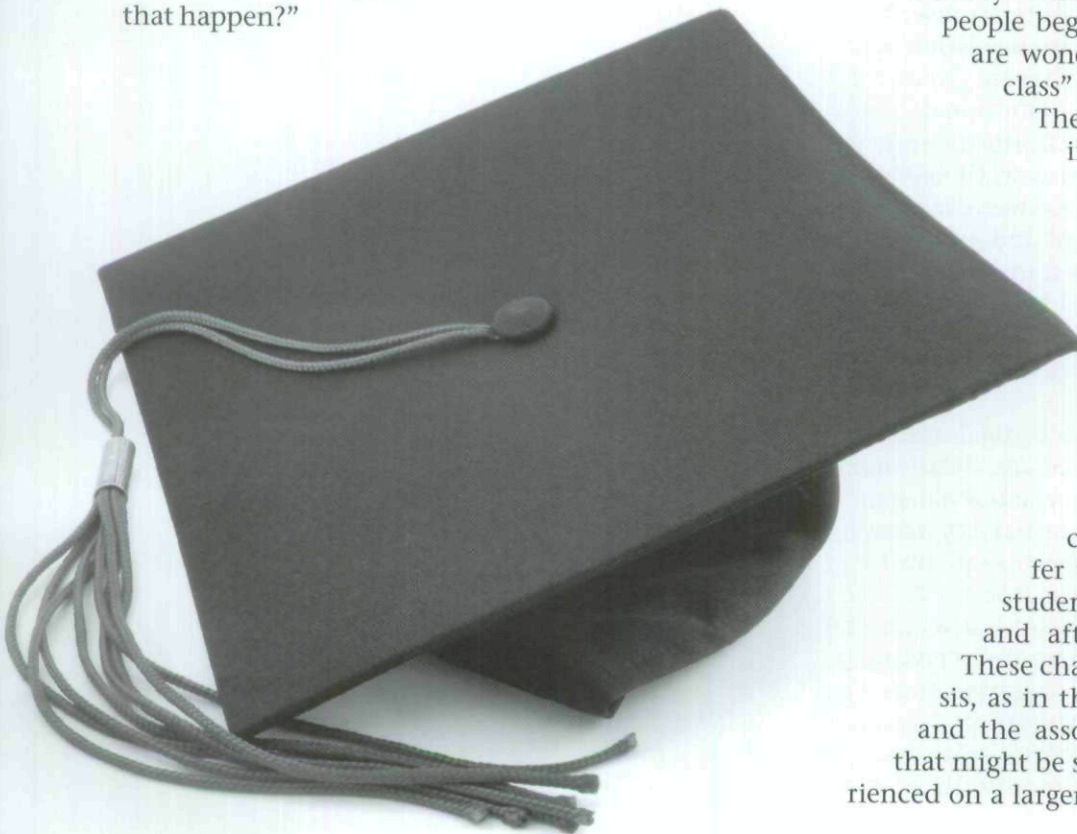
“How you will show up in the world when you leave this school,” I reply.

Looking even more nervous, she asks, “How does that happen?”

“Well, stay tuned,” I say. “It is different for everyone. But we hope that the circle we create this year will follow you and support you, long after you are gone from this place.”

As we gather for the first meeting of our new group at the alternative high school for “emotionally handicapped” students, young people beginning their graduation year are wondering about this “transition class” that they have signed up for. They are familiar with transition in terms of career exploration and life skills training, but the idea of focusing on the inner experience of the transition from high school is new and somewhat anxiety-provoking for them, and for their teachers.

Transition is a term typically used in education to refer to the significant shifts that students encounter before, during, and after their school experience. These changes can occur on a daily basis, as in the transition between classes and the associated behavioral outcomes that might be seen, or changes can be experienced on a larger scale when students change



grades or schools. Transition is particularly of note as children experience developmental shifts from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to young adulthood, especially in the realm of social-emotional learning.

This personal and interpersonal transition from the world of high school education has been the focus of increasing attention recently (Arnett, 2004; Blumenkrantz, 1992; Fleischer, 2005; Kessler, 2000). The traditional definition and practice of transition planning has tended to come from special education and generally refers to the process that helps students who are receiving special education services prepare for life after high school, whether to the world of work or to further education. Primarily, the typical areas of focus of transition planning with students have generally been on the nuts and bolts of the life skills deemed necessary to prepare for work, school, and independence.

While learning these important life skills is seen as necessary to a successful transition for students who are receiving special education services, it may not be sufficient. A growing body of literature and practice is suggesting the concomitant need for students to develop self-advocacy skills that are grounded in what is variously described as emotional literacy (Steiner, 2003), emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), or social-emotional learning (Weissberg & Durlak, in press). These perspectives describe the ability to negotiate the personal and interpersonal world based on being grounded in self-awareness, a maturing identity, a sense of belonging, and an emerging capacity for effective and successful management of one's emotional world.

The author has previously described (Fleischer, 2005) a course that was designed and implemented with transitioning high school seniors in general education, focusing on the internal experience of the passage to adulthood. Transition planning for these students is typically concerned with issues of college and career guidance, as is also the case with students in high school who are receiving special education services. It was asserted that what is known as the "social curriculum" or "character education" (Elbot & Fulton, 2008)—addressing social-emotional learning—is typically the province

of elementary and middle schools. Thus, questions remain: What if transition planning that focused on the development of emotional literacy, identity, and character were an intrinsic part of the high school curriculum? How might it impact students, faculty, families, schools, and the community?

A series of conversations addressing these questions ensued with colleagues who are leading a local transition planning program for students receiving special education services in local schools. The Monadnock Center for Successful Transitions (MCST), in Keene, New Hampshire, is a "training and technical assistance center providing support to individuals, especially individuals with disabilities, as they transition from high school to adulthood" (www.mcst-nh.org) The center is now supporting a program and strategy that will also address the personal and interpersonal aspects of transition for students who are literally in the process of that transition, the crossroads that is the post-high school world.

From its inception in the autumn of 2009, it has been the intention of the program, the Crossroads curriculum designed for a New Hampshire alternative high school, to provide an experiential academic forum for students and their adult mentors to engage with the myriad challenges and opportunities of the transition to young adulthood. The Crossroads curriculum can allow students and mentors to study, both academically and experientially, the very transition they are in as they prepare for the world after graduation, while providing markers, acknowledgement, and community support for achievement and completion of relevant tasks.

The model that was selected for the academic year of 2009-10 is a stand-alone, once-per-week credit-bearing course that is being piloted with a group of older students who are approaching graduation. This experience is being co-facilitated by the author/consultant and the school counselor. It is running weekly throughout the school year, and has a fixed membership (as opposed to a drop-in group).

The year-long course is grounded in a lifespan development theory (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002) that is circular rather than linear, focuses on connection and positive dependence as opposed

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to separation-individuation, and is a strength-based approach to reclaiming children and youth. Fundamentally, this approach is grounded in community, where a sense of belonging can elicit the mastery and independence essential to taking one's place as a generative member of the whole.

This approach is also found in other school-based social-emotional transition programs, most notably those of the PassageWorks Institute's (Kessler, 2000) Senior Passage course and the Center for the Advancement of Youth, Family and Community Services' (Blumenkrantz, 1992) Rite of Passage Experience (ROPE) program.

Additionally, this effort has been informed by a recent meta-analysis of over 700 school-based programs by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). This study is claimed to be the largest and most rigorous review to date of controlled outcome research on interventions that promote children's social and emotional development. The review includes school, family, and community interventions designed to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents between the ages of 5 and 18. The reviews looked at the impact of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs on students' social and emotional skills, attitudes toward self and others, positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance. According to the meta-analysis, SEL programs have been found to yield significant, multiple benefits (Weissberg & Durlak, in press).

According to CASEL, these programs were found to:

- Be effective in all school settings and for students with and without behavioral and emotional problems.
- Be effective for racially and ethnically diverse students from urban, rural, and suburban settings across school levels.
- Improve students' social-emotional skills, attitudes about self and others, connection to school, and positive social behavior; and reduce conduct problems and emotional distress.
- Improve students' achievement test scores significantly.

In addition, the study found that school-based programs are most effectively conducted by school staff, indicating that they can be incorporated into routine educational practice.

The magnitude and scope of these benefits suggests that SEL programs are among the most successful youth-development programs offered to school-age youth. Given these positive findings, CASEL recommends that federal, state, and local policies and practices encourage the broad implementation of well-designed, evidence-based SEL programs during and after school (Weissberg & Durlak, 2010).

Negotiating and managing the myriad of emotional and social changes that people experience is essential to a healthy adult life.

Thus, this program pilot at the alternative program is focusing on the intrapersonal and the interpersonal, on dispositions as well as skills, and on the psychological as well as the practical. Co-created with faculty, staff, and students, the intention is for students to individually experience what it might mean for them to transition to young adulthood and to develop an understanding of the potential of community as a place that can provide mentoring and assistance as well as a place that can benefit by their gifts.

We have envisioned following the quarterly demarcation of the academic year to develop and integrate the four themes of the course that were inspired by the Circle of Courage developmental model (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002): Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. The teaching, discussions, and activities around the curriculum initiatives in each of these units are allowing for individualized, flexible options.

For example, in the first quarterly unit on Belonging, we explored and experienced such topics as building the container of community, where individuals belong, authentic communication and the way of Council (Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996), and personal autobiography.

In the second unit on Mastery, we addressed many of the issues and themes that were suggested by the students, areas that they really wanted to look at, such as the mastery of the interpersonal world, romance and sex, healthy individuation, and emotional literacy.

Students are asked to do a significant, quarter-long project that involves reflection, research, and action.

Program assessment and evaluation is ongoing, and will focus on a number of the measures cited in the CASEL meta-analysis.

As graduation approaches, we are addressing vital issues related to living an engaged and vibrant young adult life, one where the authentic experience of individuation (Independence) is rooted in mutuality and community (Generosity). Each student is asked to give a "graduation address," telling the story of what they are learning about what it means for them to encounter adulthood, and sharing their hard-earned wisdom for the community.

Depending on the assessed outcomes of the pilot Crossroads course, subsequent years can build and extend upon the initial curriculum by incorporating other elements and stakeholders of the school community, including younger students, other school staff, college student mentors, parents and families, and members of the wider community. This would build upon the core experience, but not replace it.

Transition is a continuous school experience; indeed, it the stuff of life, and negotiating and managing the myriad of emotional and social changes that people experience is essential to a healthy adult life. Formerly anxious students are seen as responding with enthusiasm and commitment to in-depth academic and experiential investigation of relatively unexplored terrain. In the near future, it is our hope that schools, embraced by the wider community, will re-engage with the time-honored generational tradition of offering these newly energized youth their wisdom, support, and generosity.

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