



### Indicator: Transitions between instructional modes are brief and orderly. (4442)

**Explanation:** The evidence review confirms that the most influential variable to affect learning is classroom management. Managing a classroom requires transition strategies to help students move their cognition and behavior to the next domain of learning. Such strategies include chunking the curriculum so to move through it in rapid small steps. Doing so heightens student engagement. Teachers must maintain a consistent and heightened awareness of all student behaviors and interactions. This teacher “withitness” allows the teacher to instill within students the norms and expectations within the classroom. Teacher “withitness” protects the optimum learning culture that teachers develop through the masterful organization and management of whole class, small group, and individual instruction.

**Questions:** How will the Leadership Team determine that all teachers employ transition strategies between lessons? How will the Leadership Team determine that all teachers chunk lesson material, skills and knowledge to support high student engagement? How will the Leadership Team ascertain teacher “withitness”? Do teachers actively circulate to all student work areas? Do teachers establish, teach, and adhere to expected norms and classroom behaviors? Are teachers consistently aware and cognizant of all student behaviors and interactions? Do teachers monitor and respond to disruptions immediately?

#### Research Brief:

##### *Why Transitions in the Classroom Can Be Challenging*

The structure of a typical school day requires a student to make frequent transitions – from one activity to another, from one group to another, from one class to another. Sometimes students spend up to 20 to 30 percent of their day shifting from one thing to the next (Davis, et al., 2000). What may seem like a basic request to adults is actually a complex task that can be quite challenging for many children. During a seemingly simple transition from one learning activity to another, students must “halt their current routine, perform a long chain of tasks, and initiate a new activity, all without breaking classroom rules” (McIntosh, et al., 2004, p. 32). Similarly, Buck (1999) writes:

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 (which presents a special challenge when directions are vague, too frequent/infrequent, too late, or too few), (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. 224).

As Davis, et al. (2000) write, students may have difficulty managing all of these demands, especially if they do not want to stop what they were doing, do not want to start what they are being asked to do, struggle to process verbal instructions, or have difficulty handling the increased noise, movement, and commotion that can come from an entire class moving at the same time. These difficulties are especially relevant for students with disabilities, as changes

in structure and increased activity around them may be a trigger for some of the challenges associated with their disability (Buck, 1999). McIntosh, et al. (2004) emphasize that students who are distractible and active may struggle to manage their own behavior enough to successfully navigate multi-step directions, and they may also fail to pick up on more subtle cues that the teacher gives.

The misunderstanding of instructions or cues and the difficulties that many students face in self-regulating their actions may lead to misbehavior that can be misunderstood by teachers. McIntosh, et al. (2004) writes that:

... One might construe misbehavior either as a skill deficit (“can’t do”) or performance deficit (“won’t do”); and both indicate a need for further instruction. Students with skill deficits may benefit from learning the behaviors, and students with performance deficits may benefit from practicing the behaviors to become fluent (p. 33).

#### *Why Smooth Transitions Are So Important*

Unfortunately, the combination of students not transitioning smoothly and a teacher thinking that the students are unable or refusing to comply results in much instructional time being wasted (Sainato, 1990; Ardoin, et al., 1999). When transitions happen quickly and efficiently, that previously lost time can be used for meaningful activities and instruction (Davis, et al., 2000).

In addition, efficient transitions can be a way to create small successes for students. Not only will they reduce potential negative interactions between teachers and students, but they can also become more independent and feel a sense of accomplishment if they are properly prepared for the shift (Ardoin, et al., 1999; Davis, et al., 2000; Mulrine, et al., 2008).

#### *Ways That Teachers Can Improve Student Transitions*

There are many different approaches recommended for how teachers can improve transitions, and many of them have conflicting evidence. However, it is clearly established that carefully planning out classroom transitions, like a teacher would plan out instruction, is critical for efficiency and student success (McIntosh, et al., 2004). Teachers must plan out the steps in each transition and clearly communicate instructions and expectations for each step to their students.

This planning and communication should include the following: a rationale for why the transition is happening, an explanation and demonstration of what the expected behavior looks like, opportunities for the students to practice the behavior, and feedback on how the students performed (McIntosh, et al., 2004). Buck (1999) suggests that teachers need to think through each step reflectively to: determine if expectations were communicated in a way that students would understand, compare how different students behaved in response to receiving those instructions, analyze those differing behaviors, and see if feedback and re-teaching, if necessary, was provided to the students.

Mulrine, et al. (2008) emphasize the need for establishing behavioral boundaries when giving instructions about a transition:

It is critical... to establish a structure and boundaries for the movement activities (such as limitations for range of movement, contact with others, and volume). Teachers can use age-appropriate signals indicating time to stop (“freeze” signals), nonverbal signals (classroom lights on/off), and hand clapping (teacher claps three times, students repeat) (p. 18–19).

Buck (1999) also suggests using visual imagery during the sharing of instructions to help students imagine what the classroom will look and sound like during the transition. This explicit teaching of each individual transition is important so that students learn to distinguish which rules and appropriate behaviors apply to particular activities or settings that require different expectations. Other structures that help students complete transitions efficiently include setting a time limit for the task and providing feedback on how the class did, reducing the size of the task given to students, or providing visual cues such as signs or tape on the floor to indicate where to line up (Sainato, 1990; Buck, et al., 1999; McIntosh, et al., 2004; Yarbrough, et al., 2004).

The teacher’s job does not end after instructions are given. Careful monitoring of the class during transitions is critical for their efficiency. McIntosh, et al. (2004) use the term “active supervision,” which requires the teacher to continually scan the room, move around the room to be closer to students who may need help or additional cues, and interact with students during the transition (p. 37). This three-pronged approach helps teachers respond

more effectively to student needs, missteps, or successes. All adults associated with a particular class should be familiar with and enforce the routines and expectations of that teacher and students, including aides or resource teachers, creating consistency throughout the school day (McIntosh, et al., 2004).

Other approaches to teaching transitions have been contested, such as reinforcement through incentives or holding the entire class accountable for the misbehavior of a few (McIntosh, et al., 2004; Yarbrough, et al., 2004). Another debated approach includes providing a peer buddy for students who may struggle with transitions, to provide a model and support for them (Sainato, 1990; Buck, 1999). However, all of these forms of reinforcement have been questioned for similar reasons – it is unclear whether they promote more efficient transitions because the students are independently learning appropriate behaviors or if their choices are tied to the actions of others or the draw of an incentive (Sainato, 1990; Connell, et al., 1993).

Sometimes, quite simple actions on the part of a teacher can make the biggest difference for students when they are learning routines. Teachers can use “pre-corrections,” or pre-emptive reminders of where students could go astray before the transition takes place, avoiding misbehavior and encouraging the students to think ahead about what they are going to do (McIntosh, et al., 2004). Similarly, simply giving attention to students for positive choices or actions during a transition has been shown to be very meaningful to those students and provides a cue to other students about what the teacher expects (Connell, et al., 1993; McIntosh, et al., 2004).

### References and Resources

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