Transitions Through Self-Advocacy Curriculum

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Introduction

The first time we thought about teens in foster care was as lawyers in family court, when we were assigned to be their law guardians. Our job was to represent what they wanted regarding foster care placement to the judge. The focus in family court was on the youth's past and present crises. Had they been abused, abandoned, neglected? How many placements had they cycled through? Were there troubles in their current group home or foster home?

The teen's future was spoken about only in the most cursory way. The judge would ask: "What is the plan for this child?" The caseworker would often answer, as if in a secret language, "03, your honor," the city's code to mean that the plan for this child is independent living. The judge would note that and call the next case.

You didn't have to work long in the foster care system to see the outcomes for too many teens were predictable. Without an education or a place to live, many quickly went from child welfare to grown-up welfare, homelessness, and/or prison. The best advocacy on behalf of these kids in family court didn't seem to change this. The prevailing sense was there was simply too much stacked against the teens.

Fed up with the failure of the social services and legal systems to address the needs of these teens, we started Youth Advocacy Center (YAC). We believed that teens in foster care had the potential and skills and desire to become fully participating members of society. In our first years at YAC, we focused on teaching foster care teens to be advocates within the system. While they were effective at that, we still saw too many leave foster care without concrete plans for the future and without resources to negotiate the necessities of life, such as college, employment, finding a home, and learning to become responsible parents.

Over time we developed two parallel understandings. First, we saw that teens wanted a better future for themselves. We saw that they had the ability to develop and to execute realistic future plans. We saw that they could take on more responsibility for their future planning if they were given it. Second, the system seemed constitutionally opposed to giving them more responsibility in planning for their future. Instead it constantly re-focused young people on all the horrible things that had happened to them, and were still going on. The teens never had a chance to think about and explore their future options because they were always being told they were too damaged and hurt to do anything beyond think about their problems.

YAC developed a curriculum, YAC's *Getting Beyond the System*™ model, to teach these teens self-advocacy to set and reach their long-term goals, and introduce them to informational interviews as a first tangible step toward moving toward a positive and productive future. *Getting Beyond the System* is a highly intellectual and rigorous educational program based on legal reasoning that provides teens with the concepts and skills to navigate toward a successful future.

The curriculum teaches:

- Goal setting
- How organizations work
- Presenting strengths
- Finding allies and mentors
- Depersonalizing issues and understanding the needs of others
- Making oral and written presentations
- Strategies to cope with rejections and setbacks
- How to conduct informational interviews

To teach self-advocacy we use the Socratic method, which presumes that foster care teens have strong intellectual abilities. The Socratic method of teaching is based on Socrates' idea that knowledge must derive from the individual rather than be given to him broken up into individual discrete elements. The Socratic method is used in almost every law school in the United States and is also used successfully by some by some educators in different fields at the primary, secondary, and college levels.

The philosophy for the method is that it is more important to teach a learning process to students than to simply teach them factual knowledge. The Socratic method focuses on methods of analysis and finding understanding rather than on conclusions.

The text for the self-advocacy seminar is the *Getting Beyond the System Casebook,* a collection of more than 20 cases, or stories, of individuals (all with challenging beginnings in their lives, many veterans of the foster care experience) who are struggling to resolve a problem and reach a goal. The cases are carefully crafted to depict protagonists in challenging and ambiguous situations that are relevant to the student's own life. The cases promote understanding of the dynamics of self-advocacy, whereby teacher and student develop a wide range of creative solutions to each problem. The cases and questions are designed to unfold many layers of issues relevant to the student's preparation for independent living. At the same time as we teach theory and the technique of advocacy, we are also reinforcing organizational and interpersonal patterns the teen will encounter in independent living.

The final project of the seminar for each student is going on an informational interview. At the beginning of the semester all students are asked to select a career they are interested in. We take whatever they identify seriously and set up an individual informational interview for that student with an experienced professional in the chosen field. These interviews are important because they help the students understand the process of career planning regardless of whether the student sticks with the career field for this first informational interview. Preparing for and going to these meetings is a critical life skill students can then use in countless situations.

We learned that between doing the seminar class work and going on the informational interview, students began to understand that they can gain control of positive significant experiences in the world beyond foster care. Teens responded so well to the program -- adopting a new way of

thinking about themselves and their future and taking action to change the course of their lives. We felt confident that our commitment to focusing on the future was the way to go.

Encountering Transitions Theory

Like most not-for-profits, YAC is constantly seeking to develop new funding sources. Two years ago, we were excited to learn about the Andrus Family Fund (AFF.) Looking at their website, we read that they were focused on something called transition theory, but we paid more attention to the fact that they were applying it in our area of expertise -- foster care teens moving toward independence.

When we met with Steve Kelban and Sabena Leake at AFF we hoped they would be impressed with our work and successes, and might provide funding to reach more teens with out Getting Beyond the System self-advocacy seminar. They did seem interested, but they were more interested in talking about this new idea of transition theory, and asked us to consider how we might integrate it into our work. As they discussed the importance of the stages of endings, neutral zones, and new beginnings we realized they were taking this transition theory stuff very seriously.

While we nodded in agreement, inside we knew we weren't terribly interested in integrating a new theory into our program. We had spent years on developing and testing out *our* theory of self-advocacy. Kelly gently but pointedly said that he thought our curriculum seemed good, but it was missing something important by focusing so much on the future for teens.

Somewhat defensive, but still hoping to get a grant, we said "sure, we'll think about incorporating this theory" into the program. But of course we were not completely convinced. We didn't doubt that AFF's motivation to help the teens was sincere and that they had some useful ideas, but we wondered how a foundation with such a theoretical vantage point could know what was best for teens in foster care. We thought we had a successful program already, and we didn't want to give up our focus on the future by changing it.

Kelly gave us a video of William Bridges talking about transitions to borrow that he thought would help us understand the process more. Watching a homemade video of Bridges give a speech outdoors was not easy, but we saw that his analysis made sense. We then read two of William Bridges' books, *Managing Transitions* and *Making Sense of Life's Changes,* and were struck by the logic and the insight Bridges provided into the transitions process.

In addition to finding the concepts of transition compelling, we were drawn in by his use of philosophical, historical, and cultural evidence to support his theory. His method of helping the individual successfully navigate transitions was more an intellectual than psychological approach. We knew from our own work that this intellectual approach had resonance with the young people in our program.

Resisting Endings

Although we were beginning to warm up to the idea of transition theory as a useful tool for foster care teens, we still resisted incorporating the theory into our curriculum.

First, we thought already there was too much focus on the past for foster care teens. In our work we have seen that teens in foster care often develop too close an attachment to their identity as foster children and all the issues connected with that status. Unwittingly, the system teaches them that their status as problem kids who have many "issues" gets them attention while they are in foster care, which hinders their abilities to succeed outside of foster care in school, work, and the community. Our program tries to address that by asking teens to identify what they want to do in the future, and then builds upon that. Students like this future focus. They enjoy the oasis where their foster child status is either ignored or valued as a strength.

However, in our approach we were not providing them with understanding of how they could separate permanently from their present identity or explore ways that might be useful for making such endings. While we energized their motivation and hope about their future and showed them the common process to move toward their career goals, we were not helping them understand the critical importance of making endings in order to make successful transitions.

Second, if we were to incorporate the transitions theory into our curriculum we had to give up our belief that our curriculum was complete. Our identity as experts in developing a self-advocacy program was at stake. We also had to admit that our curriculum might not be as useful as we had believed. In order to include transitions, we would have to eliminate some part of our curriculum and that seemed impossible to consider. When we did consider cutting the curriculum the most likely candidate was a chapter on law that was fundamental to our identity as lawyers. These factors were unconsciously and sometimes consciously feeding our resistance.

Our resistance was the beginning of our fully comprehending the importance and dynamics of each stage of transitions.

By this point we decided that we would incorporate the transitions theory into the curriculum and present is as we did other concepts and theories, as something to be analyzed and discussed. Bridges identifies several elements that resonated with our intellectual approach to self-advocacy. If transitions analysis was to be useful it had to be through helping students gain an understanding and experience with how others have handled it. This supports YAC's Socratic case method approach that focuses on self-authorship for understanding and learning. In addition, transitions analysis understands that there are many acceptable patterns for moving through each zone thus complementing our program's respect for individual understanding and application knowledge.

There were other compelling reasons for adopting transitions into our curriculum. We liked that making transitions is a life long activity and is not something designed just for teens in foster care. Transitions is an important lens to help teens be more accepting of the fact that their experiences with change are not aberrant or a result of their foster care experience. We recognized that transitions issues are so pervasive that once we started looking, we found that

they were already embedded in almost all our cases even though we were not conscious of that when we designed them.

We integrated transitions into our self-advocacy curriculum.

As described above, our program is a classroom seminar, where students study cases and debate questions, guided by an instructor trained in the Socratic method. In our experience, this a successful method for helping students understand a dynamic and complex process. To integrate transitions theory into the curriculum we developed a new case and chapter for students and instructor to work on together.

We decided to make the transitions case about a teenager going on an informational interview, something that all students in our program complete. The informational interviews give students a chance to participate actively in the neutral zone. Anyone going on an informational interview is in some state of confusion about what they are going to do and how to get there. The informational interviews in our program are essential in helping students recognize that within the near future they will be making significant life transitions. From experience, we know that the informational interview evokes a wide range of emotions, anxieties, and confusion within the student that is not dissimilar to what Bridges described as the neutral zone. The informational interview also helps students recognize that they will soon need to make some endings in order to move toward their future goals.

This case was developed as a descriptive narrative that challenges students to identify evidence of specific transitions zones a character is in and to either recommend or identify methods the characters use to move through the transition zones. Through actions and internal and external dialogue, the reader sees evidence of this character moving through all three zones of transitions. To show the universality of the process, the other characters described in the case--a worker beginning his career and a manager at the height of her career--reveal that they have experienced their own transitions.

The case is atypically long and involved for our curriculum. At first we were unsure whether students would fully engage. Yet the subject of transitions is intriguing enough to motivate almost all students to read the case fully and to engage with a high degree of seriousness. Students understand at different levels, but the case always provides room for deeper and new analysis.

In bringing understanding to transitions analysis it is important to demonstrate that it has overarching relevance to many self-advocacy and transactional situations. We reviewed the other self-advocacy cases in our casebook and recognized that already embedded in the content was evidence of transition zones and evidence of the need to engage with the zones for the characters to move forward in a lasting manner. Therefore we added transition analysis questions to all the remaining cases after the class on transitions.

While the transitions case is the fundamental entry point for developing understanding of transitions we also include a very brief theoretical analysis to illustrate the issues. A chart provides the students with a means to identify the zones, a range of emotional responses

experienced by being in a particular zone, and some methods for facilitating movement through the zone.

The transitions curriculum has been integrated into the full self-advocacy curriculum for more than a year. It has been adjusted based on student response and has now been finalized. Student responses to transitions analysis have been useful in confirming the importance to their experience and relevance to future planning. Quantitatively, we have experienced almost universal engagement in the reading and discussion in class. We know from experience that students will neither read nor engage in discussion or do homework if they are not interested in the subject. Measured on a pre- and post- achievement test the understanding of some specific transitions issues increases by 28-61%. What is more impressive is that individual students naturally use transitions terminology when they describe a particular problem and plans for resolving the problem. While stating that they find the language strange they easily use it when engaged with the cases to describe transition issues.

Some typical comments we have recorded from graduates of the class are:

"I started to write things down and journal after we talked about what can help you get you through the different transition zones. That helps me find the positive in what I only thought was negative." *Angie, 17*

"I thought about the different zones we talked about in class when I had to move. I didn't want to move but I thought about some of the good things that might come out of making an ending with the people I was living with before and the positive things that may come out of it in the long run. I don't have to be around people that drag me down now." *Angie, 17*

"Confusion may be a good thing because a person can start a new beginning in their life by speaking to someone that can help them or by doing research on things that might help them such as college or a job." *Allison, 16*

"Confusion is good because it makes you sit down and write out how you feel, talk to someone, and let go of your past. It makes you think about your future." *Kenya, 17*

"Talking about the transition zones made me realize that feeling bad about things when they are changing all the time is normal. That it is not the end of the world and that I am not the only person who has these feelings." *Rachel, 17*

"I don't like to think about endings. I want things to stay the same. I realize they won't. This forced me to think about something I probably would ignore for as long as possible. But now that I have thought about my future and started to plan for it I am not as scared as I was. So even though it is still hard I feel hopeful." *Ebony, 17*

YAC's transition analysis is being replicated successfully.

Initially we were concerned that transitions analysis adopted as a core curriculum element might appear to the students and seminar leaders as poor fit with the flow of our self-advocacy

curriculum. We were surprised that both students and teachers approached the subject matter as integral to the objective of becoming a self-advocate and moving forward with future planning.

Some replicators, when providing feedback on our entire program, have highlighted the usefulness of transitions analysis. They report that the transitions analysis "makes sense to students," "students engage in the material despite its relative complexity," and "students feel comfortable making analysis and arguing about the meaning of the zones and identification of zones."

Transitions analysis is most effective when included in a broader context such as curricula that focus on self-advocacy and future planning. Our initial experience and belief is that this broader context adds relevancy and heightens understanding for the student. However, we also believe that using the case method alone can have significant impact in creating understanding of the transitions process that will help a student learn how to increase the likelihood of making changes that are successful and lasting.

Conclusion

Despite our initial resistance, we have been converted to believers. We see that transitions theory has the potential to be a significant factor in helping teens effectively make the transition to adulthood -- IF we can find ways to help teens incorporate the process into their lives. The experience of developing a transitions curriculum has been surprisingly challenging. William Bridges' analysis of transitions theory is elusive because it appears deceptively simple and instinctual yet requires that one engage in intensive objective and personal analysis.

For the transitions analysis to be appreciated fully by students, foster care settings must support them learning it, and to do that, they may have to give up something themselves--perhaps some of the control they exert (or try to) over the teens. At the heart of the process of transitions is recognizing the central role of resistance and confusion. The paradox is that trying to find ways to offer the method as a tool for others to use requires one to become entangled in the very same web of resistance and confusion that the theory describes.