

Policy activism *with* and *for* youth in transition through public education

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This paper provides an analysis of international literature and focus group data arising from a three-year critical ethnographic study with 795 young people, educators and parents speaking about transitions through public education in Canada. It fills fissures in qualitative and process-based sociological work on youth transitions and redresses school transitions as critical, nested social ensembles. Moving from elementary to secondary school evokes emotional, social and academic paradoxes for young people. Policy and practice shifts are required and a policy activist stance begins to cut through embedded ideological and practical goings-on surrounding youth. The paper takes particular aim at that which continues to encourage individualised and pathologised treatment of this social transition, including the continued use and abuse of ‘at-risk’ labels, and the need to support transitions teams *with* and *for* youth living through complex resiliency.

Keywords: school transitions; public education; youth transitions; youth ‘in risk’; complex resiliency

Introduction

Transitions are not . . . a reified problem to be solved; instead, transitions are seen as complicated, as an ongoing tension to be understood and discussed. (Tilleczek 2011a, p. 12)

Over the last six years, I have worked on three ‘policy relevant’ government-funded research projects relating to youth and public education in Ontario, Canada. The most recent was a meta-synthesis of literatures which addressed the intersections of poverty, mental health, and schooling (Tilleczek *et al.* 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). This was one of a set of commissioned papers which fed directly into a provincial process towards a *Provincial Youth Policy Framework*.¹ A second project was the *Early School Leavers Study* (Ferguson *et al.*

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2005, Tilleczek 2008), which was a large-scale ethnographic conversation with 193 young people who had left school prior to graduation, their educators, and parents. This work informed the mandating of ‘Student Success’ teachers and ‘caring adults’ who were charged with knowing and responding to the life stories of students ‘at-risk’ in every secondary school in the province. The study helped us to make visible the problems with invoking the ‘at-risk’ label for these young people by providing narratives of dispossessed and dislocated lives in secondary school. We started a conversation in the media, schools, Boards of Education, and the Ministry of Education about the structural organisation and social processes of disengagement and early school leaving. Whilst the lessons were many, the take away messages for school-based policy and practice were tripartite: be more flexible in structure and programming; be more caring in practice; and be more proactive in both! (Tilleczek 2008).

The team took a policy activist stance in these projects from the outset by committing to this work as taking aim at both the ideological and practical work of schooling and connecting it to the wider structural issues that dominate public education. We invoked the sociological imagination of Mills (1959) to purposefully design projects that connect the everyday experiences and nuances of young lives to the social, political, and economic realities and constraints of modern schooling and to behave as public, intellectual, craftspeople. We did not ‘allow the public issues as they are officially formulated . . . to determine the problems we took up for study’ (Mills 1959, pp. 7–17) but rather took a critical and historical stance arising from our own scholarship in sociology, anthropology, and youth studies. This imagination, once invoked, led us to make the private troubles (and joys!) of young lives into public conversations and debates as suggested by Mills (1959, pp. 7–17):

Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues- and in terms of the problems of history-making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles- and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. Within that range the life of the individual and the making of societies occur; and within that range the sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time.

We committed to working *with* and *for* young people to collectively make fissures visible to those in policy and decision-making positions and to share the stories among young people. We built strategies to engage decision-makers from the beginning to the end of the research project through inclusion on advisory groups or in opening channels of constant conversation with them through short text-based communiqués, face-to-face meetings, on the phone,

on Skype, through video production of main messages for educators and youth and/or through numerous interim status reports. We also committed to making numerous presentations to educators at all levels of the system, engaged the media in our work, worked with young people and decision-makers on the translation and mobilisation of the findings, and spent time following up with policy people to track implementations into the school system.

The third project, *Transitions from Elementary to Secondary School Study*, utilised and built upon these earlier projects and approaches to policy activism. This project is the focus of this paper which outlines how our critical approach was furthered. It details conceptual and practical gaps arising from a three-year ethnographic study which included reviews of international literatures and focus groups/interviews with 795 young people, parents and educators. One important contribution that is central to this paper was to surface the ongoing use of and problems with the 'at-risk' label for young people as used in schools and Boards of Education.

The project revealed that the transition through public school is a critical and complex set of social and academic negotiations for young people. It is most problematic for young people from socioeconomic, cultural or ethnic disadvantage (Lord *et al.* 1994, Seidman *et al.* 1994). Poor and immigrant youth state that they expected things to be easier than they actually turned out (Graham and Hill 2003) and many young people experience dips in academic achievement and/or increased social anxiety (Eccles *et al.* 1997, Alspaugh 1998, Galton *et al.* 2003). The transition is recognised as a stumbling point for students, particularly for those who are 'at-risk' (Lord *et al.* 1994, Seidman *et al.* 1994). These young people experienced 'daily hassles' in transition such as lowered expectations from teachers, classism from peers, and/or inability to take part in activities due to cost. They were set on a path of hindrance of their own goals, expectations, academic success, and pro-social behaviours (Seidman *et al.* 1994).

At the same time, however, the move into secondary school provided many students with anticipated *fresh starts* and making new friends for constructive academic and social purposes (Kirkpatrick 2004). Many students at this threshold are hopeful about the potential for new schools, friends, statuses, and education (Graham and Hill 2003). Some report coping better than expected, enjoying new freedoms, and involvement in extra-curricular activities (Akos and Galassi 2004). A contradiction exists, however, in that many students also express anxiety and concern about the transition. Students are both excited and anxious, both doubtful and hopeful such that an emotional paradox exists (Tilleczek *et al.* 2010). The most pervasive source of anxiety is the loss of status precisely when negotiating moves towards adulthood (Hargreaves and Earle 1990, Graham and Hill 2003, Tilleczek and Hine 2006, Tilleczek *et al.* 2010, Tilleczek 2011b). Dips in learner identities are also pervasive (Silverthorn *et al.* 2005). Given the importance of belonging to young people (Tilleczek 2011a), the social and academic implications of

transitioning through school are obvious. However, the policy and practice in this sphere of public education has rarely been critically examined.

The *Transitions from Elementary to Secondary School Study* examined transitions in the context of the Ontario Ministry of Education initiatives relating to the Student Success/Learning to 18 (SS/L18) Strategy. The provincial strategy was designed to meet five inter-related goals for the secondary school system: increase graduation rates and decrease drop-out rates; support a good outcome for all students; provide students with new and relevant learning opportunities; build on students' strengths and interests; and provide students with an effective elementary to secondary school transition. The research took place as the Ontario Ministry of Education launched their Grade 8 to 9 *Transition Planning Initiative* and an *Evaluation of the Ontario Ministry of Education's Student Success / Learning to 18 Strategy: Final Report* (Canadian Council on Learning 2008). This evaluation suggested, among other things, that 'schools should eliminate or minimise the difficulties that students face when they make a transition from one level to the next'. While no specific recommendations were made relating to transitions, relevant evidence pointed to structures and supports that could change to better assist students including: improved communications between secondary schools and their partner elementary schools, the development of student 'at-risk' profiles, individual timetabling for students 'at-risk' and a multitude of transition activities on which we followed up during school visits as my team launched the *Transition from Elementary to Secondary School Study*.

Research processes

Our *Transitions Project*, as it came to be known, was a qualitative process-oriented study of students', educators', and parents' experiences and descriptions of social, academic, and procedural aspects of transition. The largest gap in knowledge is in understanding the intersections between culture and individual and how/where we begin to appreciate the daily lives of young people. The experience and embodiment of youth culture, schooling, identity, and age are played out in this work. Our literature review (Tilleczek and Ferguson 2007) included over 100 international reports, academic papers, and policy documents pointing to a dearth in qualitative work from youth perspectives. Researchers addressed many important 'variables' impacting transitions in quantitative studies, but there was a need to *capture* meanings and experience of enactment of transitions.

Three phases of research took place with separate but related objectives. Phase I occurred in elementary schools in the 2007 academic year to focus on the grade 8 perspectives with an eye towards preparation and prospective views on high school. Phase II took place in secondary schools during the 2008 academic year with educators from both elementary and secondary schools taking part in 'cross-panel' conversations. The focus was on grade 9 perspectives, both

retrospective and prospective. Phase III took place in the secondary schools during the 2009 academic year with a focus on grade 10 perspectives. We sustained a three-year presence in 37 families of schools across the geographic spectrum of the province (rural/urban, north/south, large city/town).

The complete sample consisted of 795 people participating in 124 focus groups and an additional 130 interviews with young people drawn from these groups. The Phase I samples comprised 265 youth in 34 focus groups and 52 of these youth also participated in interviews. We also spoke with 33 educators and 23 parents in Phase I. In Phase II, we conducted 44 focus groups with 305 participants and carried out 78 additional youth interviews. Of these, 35 were follow-up interviews with young people with whom we also spoke in Phase I. Phase III included 174 participants who took part in 29 focus groups, consisting of 17 focus groups, with 125 young people, 8 focus groups with 25 parents, and 4 focus groups with 24 educators.

The research processes (group and individual interviews and 'face sheets' for socio-demographic data) were created for this study based on previous work with young people in schools and on the literature (Ferguson *et al.* 2005, Tilleczek and Ferguson 2007, Tilleczek 2008). The processes enacted conversations grounded in a complex cultural nesting framework (Tilleczek 2011a) which hooks local and extra-local concerns and examines the intersections of risk and protective situations identified in the literature (Tilleczek 2007, 2008)². All data were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

A detailed plan for transcription, coding and analysis was followed with bi-weekly meetings of the team. The Phase I codebook required only minor changes in Phases II and III – changes which reflected new grade levels and additional questions – and so indicated the validity of the original code book. Analysis proceeded in two ways. First, descriptive analysis was undertaken for the face sheet data for youth, parents and educators. The second step was preliminary qualitative analysis of focus groups and interviews with the help of the computer programs *NVIVO* and *Alceste*. The first analysis of the data was generated by computer to detail the implicit 'patterns' and provide an estimation of the proportion of data that can be read as belonging to these patterns. The transcripts were also read to demark, by eye and with the assistance of *NVIVO*, answers to the research questions. The research team performed and then shared a collaborative 'read' of the transcripts to decipher main messages and mark the codes as per the code book. We followed an adapted seven-step process for analysis (Diekelmann 1992) to progressively focus and refine our understanding of the research problematic and consider the text, which provided detailed descriptions (cf. Silverman 1993, Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Each transcription was read to obtain an overall understanding and then examined for themes derived first from the literature and based on the array of risk and protective situations (cf. Tilleczek 2007, 2008). Disagreements encountered were resolved by returning to the original text and through group discussion. In Phases I and II each transcript was read by at least two members of the research team and

indicated strong inter-coder trustworthiness in interpretation. The analytical patterns arising from the transcripts led to detailed descriptions as follows: emotions and experiences about transition; elementary and secondary school cultures (risk and protective situations); successful and problematic transitional structures and people (barriers and facilitators); and recommendations and strategies for transition. This paper focuses on focus group data that cuts across these descriptive themes for policy-relevant results.

Being nested ‘in risk situations’

Educator: I tend to think of at-risk as a student whose skills are not at the level that looks like they’re going to get through high school. And whether that’s an academic skill, or social skill, behaviour, etcetera, it’s just that this student doesn’t seem to be doing the things necessary to move forward.

Educator . . . one thing we have discovered is that the social, emotional challenges supersede all the other challenges they have. It’s the pressing – it’s the priority in their life. Whether it’s dealing with something at home or dealing with the developing because with the grade nines the developing is, I think, in their mind both romantic relationships and, peer relationships with the boys with each other, finding their place. And that encompasses all sorts of things, being bullied and being a victim, it all ties into that and we, basically it’s not, it’s not touched . . . that important life they have before class, during the quiet moments in class, at lunch when in this building they cycle through the hallways and outside.

The international literature synthesis set the context for interpretation of focus group data. The first step was to re-conceptualise transitions sociologically, as a set of complex, longer-term, temporal, and social/academic processes. Analysis of literature and focus group data demonstrated that we must enact more enduring, youth-attuned policy and practice. Most salient are the recommendations for conceptualising students living ‘in risk situations’ rather than characterising and labelling individual students to be the location of risk. Educators in this study continued to use and abuse the ‘at-risk’ concept. For example, in recruiting young participants we asked educators to provide names of students with a range of social and academic experiences. The concept of ‘at-risk’ was quickly landed upon by most for defining and identifying young people at one end of the range academically. However, the use of the term varied across schools and among educators within schools. In most cases it was, in the first instance, a statement of academic failure while in the second it might also include socioeconomic or familial struggles. Interrogation of the various usages of ‘at-risk’ was required in the data analysis since the Ministry of Education suggested its usefulness in assisting marginalised youth in transitions:

Educator . . . A girl who came to us last year in Grade 9, currently Grade 10, and she was one of those at-risk girls to watch for and . . . I felt I was completely unsuccessful last year when she was in Grade 9 to really get through to her.

This year . . . I am just so happy with the turnaround that she has made because she is passing all her classes for the first time . . . What's different this year? For her it was her peer group. She says she has this one friend who is very academically inclined and that's really been the turnaround for her . . . I think peer support and finding the right peers can truly make a difference.

Risk, however, is better understood along a continuum (Catterall 1998, Schonert-Reichl 2000) and 'in-risk' better depicts a situational rather than individual process as recommended by the phrase 'students *in* at-risk situations' (Smink and Schargel 2004). We further adapted the term through analysis based on data and recommended use of the term 'in risk situations'. This echoed messages from participants that young people in transition are much more than 'students' and that transitions are nested within risk or protective situations. Therefore, 'at-risk' labels need to be interrogated and replaced:

Educator: Sometimes the transitional stuff is also matched by transitions happening in the home life so if parents have recently separated or divorced, a lot of times, students are also not able to adjust because of the dual levels of adjustment that are occurring. The second piece that I find is that when parents are feeling helpless themselves because they are going through a transitional time, say marriage or jobs or otherwise, that their children often match that helplessness as well and feel that they can't do it or they can't succeed in school or whatnot, so I think just from that perspective, there is more than one transition happening at that juncture.

Transitions through public education can further create situations of risk vis-a-vis the need for personal, social and systemic restructuring (Rutter 1994, Schonert-Reichl 2000). Challenges at home, school, with friends and in the neighbourhood are multiplied rather than simply added together and they interact with and reinforce each other (Schorr and Schorr 1989, Werner and Smith 1992). If not offset by compensating protective situations, lives are compromised (Schorr and Schorr 1989, Werner and Smith 1992) through 'an ecological conspiracy' (Garbarino 1990) or 'rotten outcomes' (Schorr and Schorr 1989). The analytical work arising from the *Transitions Study* repositioned many young people in transition as living in situations of 'complex resilience', that is, living 'in risk situations' but also showing signs of support and protective situations. This further nuance in the data translated into policy and practice recommendations grounded in the experiences of educators and youth:

Educator: I think the OSR [Ontario Student Record] can be useful. There was one kid I remember from last semester that had a lot of absences, looked really really sick, was tired, you know, wasn't passing, you know, really upset and he actually came to me and said that he was going through some troubles at home and when we looked in the OSR, there was records of again, lots of missing classes and CAS had been involved, so in that way, it sort of helped to fulfil the picture, and then whenever he said you know, what was going on, etcetera, and how he lived out of area because he couldn't live with his Mom anymore who was in the government

housing nearby, but that was technically his home school, but he was living with his grandmother, but they, she didn't have custody so they couldn't send him to the school that was close by and so all this other stuff, so in that way, the OSR kind of backed it up and then referred it to Guidance and the VP of our school contacted his teachers and his principal from the elementary school just to get a fuller picture because I said, you know, he's a really good kid, he's trying, but everything is stacked against him. So together, we kind of worked with all the information that was available and got him transferred, even though it probably wouldn't have gone through otherwise.

Caring and support, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation are protective factors for young people (Keating and Hertzman 1999), as is the availability of consistent adults who provide a base for the development of trust, autonomy, and initiative (Werner and Smith 1992). Analysis of our focus groups echoed this work and that of Catterall (1998), suggesting practical understanding of risk and resilience be grounded in actual performance and life story rather than in abstract categories relating to various group-level probabilities of failure. Therefore, we see and act *with* and *for* marginalised youth in transitions in locations of 'complex resilience' in which care and support are seen as a necessity that should/could be required:

Educator A: I guess one of the things that I have become aware of is . . . the lives of quiet desperation that more of them lead, that we're completely oblivious to. The single parent, no food, the abuse, the rape, the sexual assault, the issues with the justice system, the significant drug abuse that we're, we miss as teachers. But even last year [they were] in all the regular classes. And so most of them were written as you know, they didn't do the work and they didn't attend. Not, why were they disengaged? Educator B: And we never asked that . . . But now there's still many of those kids within the school – Educator B: And they survive and they – Educator A: or they hide. Educator B: Or they hide and they're, they're marginalised and they exist and they're the ones I think who've had a negative . . . experience in grade school. Their home life is less than positive and then we put them into this huge melting pot or cauldron [in high school].

Educator: Like for Student Success, one of the kids I'm dealing with the other day he says, and the home life for the majority of them, I can tell, the majority of them it's tough and it's rough and there is no support. There's lack of maybe the male figure in their household, things like that, and you can see it when you come in and how they are doing. They are the parents that never come to the parent teacher interviews and stuff like that. And how do you get to them? I don't know. We try our best. We just try and support them and do whatever we can but you know, is that enough?

Indeed, we proposed the animation of visual narrative 'in risk situations portfolios' should educators and others require a 'profile' of young lives in transition. This visual, narrative and nuanced representation of youth in transitions was a well received policy and practice recommendation.³ We further recommended that educators could be supported to develop and discuss such a

tool across their family of schools to ground a transformative understanding of transitions and young lives as a complex social ensemble:

Educator: It is a sad commentary that we've lost the connection between elementary and secondary schools . . . It is lamentable for a system that professes to be different and professes that it has that intimacy.

A further related policy recommendation arising from the study was to build and support 'extended transitions teams'. Many schools had designated one or two educators to the role of transition team members within the secondary schools with the purpose of attending to the movement of young people into high schools. Some educators were beginning to spend more time working 'across panels' but the vast majority had never been given that opportunity. It was shockingly rare for elementary and secondary educators to meet or converse about the lives and goals of young people who move across families of schools. Indeed, the dearth in conversation and collaboration across elementary and secondary schools (families of schools) was so obvious to us in our Phase I field work that we decided in Phase II to build our focus groups into 'cross-panel' conversations whenever feasible. We therefore used the research process as a means to address a critical concern of educators. They wanted more time to work with their colleagues, to understand the ethos of the other and plan for better transitions for their students. Many elementary educators spoke about a desire to know 'how my kids were doing' in secondary school and to invoke the true sense of 'family' in their family of schools. However, schools had yet to support or emphasise the core role of such cross-panel communication work (elementary and secondary teachers working together), an important and recurrent theme arising in educator focus groups. Therefore, school administrators need to continue to build supports to extend transition planning and practice teams to include the whole range of people that were seen to be of value in supporting young people (parents, young people, friends, community agencies, educators across panels, and administrators):

Educator: I think that one of the things that the Ministry is going to put money into, it would be really effective if some of those PA [professional activity] days that we're getting, instead of focusing on assessment and evaluation until it's dead . . . [participants laughing, talking at the same time] If the high school, and the grade eight teachers, grade nine teachers, could spend a day, could have math groups, have LA [language arts] groups, you could have subject groups, and talk about and plan, what do the grade nine teachers want the grade eight teachers to do to help the kids make that transition better and so on.

Educator: I discuss, I go to all my feeder schools usually earlier on in the year just to meet with the teachers to get a better idea of you know the students and then definitely again this time of year we're meeting again and we are going through a physical profile just so we are more aware of how we can support that child once they're under our umbrella so we profile just you know the

appropriate pathway, academically speaking, we talk about their strengths you know, their weaknesses you know, how can we even look at time-tabling them going into first semester so it's a timetable to at least some of their strengths so they have the positive experience . . . Sometimes that's difficult to do but we do take a look at, once we have the profiles I sit down and guidance is always you know part of that discussion also with the feeder schools and so the more we know about the students, the better off we are to prepare and try and meet their needs, you know especially that first semester.

It was also clear from the data that the Ministry of Education should review the extent of transition programming across Boards, schools and regions to determine whether differences in context (rural/urban, north/south) require adaptation in program and planning. In addition, schools need to connect with communities and agencies that support students and educators through complex modern 'super charged' lives and assist in supporting students 'in risk situations'. They must acknowledge, maintain and build on any positive integration that is currently happening in either elementary or secondary school and ensure that it is augmented across all families of school and across time:

Educator A: Teachers are getting burned out and disillusioned because there are a million expectations put on them. And like . . . if you're an engaged teacher . . . there's a thousand things I want to do. And you, you can so easily just take on too much and then say I don't care anymore. Educator B: Because we care so much as, as a profession. We care so much and we feel so deeply because these children come and it's, I always say to them, I, I care for you when your parents can't. You're here so I care for you. I'm your caregiver. It's, you feel beaten by the time you've, you've served a hundred and sixty students in a year. Do you know how many children that, that's a hundred and sixty children. And nobody seems to understand that, that it's not my responsibility for everything that happens in their life. But as a caring teacher we do take all of that on. And you can't.

Discussion

Over two decades ago a literature review on schooling in the transition years concluded that:

the tragedy of the transition years is not that students experience anxiety on transfer to secondary school. The tragedy is that this anxiety passes so quickly, and that the students adjust so smoothly to the many uncomfortable realities of secondary school life. These realities . . . can restrict achievement, and depress motivation (especially among the less academic) sowing the seeds for dropout in later years. (Hargreaves and Earle 1990, p. 214)

This paper has demonstrated that the intervening years have seen some attention to addressing this 'tragedy' through the invocation of a policy activist stance towards youth transitions through public education.

Whilst there are emerging signs of understanding the social complexities and failing structures that young people are up against, we must continue to

exact and activate research and policy activism *with and for* youth in transition through public education. We were fortunate in our *Transitions Study* to work with a team of researchers, young people, educators and policy decision-makers who were open to a critical, sociological imagination to assist in uncovering and mobilising the private troubles and joys of young lives into areas for public debate and discussion. For example, we were assisted in the mobilisation of findings by the production of a video recording of main messages for use with educators and youth. This video and a short version of the literature review have now been made part of a TV Ontario high school course curriculum⁴ for young people in transition.

Additionally, our recommendation for reimagining the transition as academic, social and procedural negotiations of continuities and discontinuities over time has been considered. The mapping of these processes at the level of schools, families of schools, boards and Ministry of Education offers a unique chance to capture, over time, the abundance of experience that encompasses contemporary youth in school and the social and political structures of schooling. Indeed, the Ontario Ministry of Education has now pluralised references to elementary to secondary school transitions to evoke the multiple, nested and complex character of the processes. This project has opened up discussion to wider issues of the fit between schools, communities, and the lives of young people rather than simply targeting student habits and academics through ‘at-risk’ labels:

One potential response of group labelling is that individual children may be considered at risk who are in fact not at risk; after all, roughly half the students will exceed any group average . . . In addition, a key proposition supported in the resilience research is that individuals react differently to their surroundings . . . in a way, risk may be a positive spark for some children, and a central quest of resilience research has been to discover who really is (or is not) at risk in an adversely predicted group. Another effect . . . is that through stereotyping, expectations for entire groups may be suppressed with unfortunate educational consequence (Oakes 1985). Finally . . . risk by association can translate into guilt by association. In one such view, shortfalls of educational achievement and attainment . . . are interpreted as deficits of individual effort or will . . . These general characterizations ignore differences within groups; moreover, they fail to apprehend the qualities of individual lives . . . and assign responsibilities for risk in broad measure to the affected groups themselves ignoring oppressive and discriminatory conditions . . . (Catterall 1998, p. 305, cited in Tilleczek and Ferguson 2007, p. 12)

To this end, we have continued to work with educators and policy makers in a number of provincial and transitional contexts (elementary, secondary, and early childhood/kindergarten) to discuss our ‘in risk situations portfolios’ as a way forward in addressing the complex resiliencies of youth and the value of collectively constructing narrative portfolios for use in record-keeping and sharing across transitions (see Tilleczek 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2011b, Tilleczek *et al.* 2011b). This work is beginning to be implemented in Ontario as the provincial Ministry of Education moves towards the use of the term ‘in risk’ in all

policy and practice correspondence. They are also in the process of developing team supports ‘for students in risk situations’ that cross transitional divides (Ontario Ministry of Education communiqué 2012). This conversation continues as we offer practical possibilities to overturn a deeply embedded pathological, ideological construct of youth in schools. The *Youth Transitions Study* (or *Fresh Starts/False Starts*, FSFS as it is now known by the Ontario Ministry of Education) has demonstrated how policy can be debated and potentially released from setting individualistic, simplistic, one-size directions through the animation of young lives that clearly require richer understanding within social, economic, and political contexts. And, our work does not stand alone in this critical policy stance.

Especially in addressing a complex social phenomenon such as youth transitions through school, policy activism must work at the *intersections* of prevention, intervention, and innovation by way of financial support, information sharing, and legislation/documentation about societal ideals for young people (Willms 2009). Policy activism *with* and *for* youth in transition through public education must reduce vulnerabilities which compromise young people through the delivery of good services especially for those needing support, the monitoring and reporting of trends, the drafting and enacting of protective legislation, the supporting of research and practice innovations in these areas, and overseeing capacity building in families, schools, and communities (Willms 2009). This move towards responsible integration of preventative action is gaining resonance with commentators (cf. Santor *et al.* 2009) concerned about equity and social justice in educational and social policy activism *with* and *for* young people. Our work highlights the social ensemble that is transitions through public education. These transitions require a sociological imagination, larger teams to wrap around young lives, the integration of policy and practice and a final overturning of individualistic, pathological, essentialised and fractured constructs and practices:

The health and social problems which we have found to be related to inequality tend to be treated by policy makers as if they were quite separate from one another, each needing separate services and remedies. We pay doctors and nurses to treat ill-health, police and prisons to deal with crime, remedial teachers and educational psychologists to tackle educational problems and social workers, drug rehabilitation units, psychiatric services and health promotion experts to deal with a host of other problems. These services are all expensive and none of them is more than partially effective. For instance, differences in the quality of medical care have less effect on people’s life expectancy than social differences in their risks of getting some life-threatening disease in the first place. And even when the various services are successful in stopping someone re-offending, in curing cancer, getting someone off drugs, or dealing with educational failure, we know that our societies are endlessly recreating these problems in each new generation. Meanwhile, all these problems are most common in the most deprived areas of our society and many times more common in more unequal societies. (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, p. 26)

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Notes

1. *Stepping Stones: An Ontario Youth Policy Framework* from the Ontario Ministry of Child and Youth Services to be released in 2012. This project included an activist stance in that we responded to an invitation to have a group of provincial young people read, critique and dissect our written work and then worked collaboratively with them and other decision-makers and academics on setting the parameters of a youth policy framework.
2. For the complete set of research processes, tools, ethical protocols, contact the author.
3. For an example of these portfolios, see Tilleczek *et al.* (2010).
4. A course on Learning Strategies for Grade 11 students has been written discussing transition strategies and the challenges students face as they transition to post-secondary pathways. The lesson asks students to listen to the presentation/lecture on video given by Dr. Tilleczek in which she summarizes her research into the transition made by students as they move from middle school into secondary school. The students are asked to watch all or part of the 15-min presentation and take notes and read the written report on the same topic and take notes (Tilleczek 2007). The teachers felt this would be useful to see that transitions are a part of life, that students have been through transitions before, and that there are strategies that can be used to make such transitions more effective. In short, the teacher/writer requested to use Dr. Tilleczek's presentation/lecture and report because they will be useful to these students as content about transition strategies and as the basis for practice in note-taking.

Notes on contributor

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