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Implementing Music during Transition Time: The Impact on Instructional Time

by

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**Abstract**

Student transition periods (e.g., moving from one activity to the next, changing classrooms) can create opportunities for misbehavior and lead to wasted instructional time. Research has suggested that students tend to experience greater academic achievement when they spend more time directly involved in educational engagements rather than transitioning or waiting for teacher preparation (e.g., waiting on the teacher to locate or pass out materials) (Codding & Smyth, 2008). Not surprisingly, educators the world over have adopted transition strategies that promote positive student behavior while also preserving valuable academic instructional time. One such strategy is the inclusion of music to support effective and timely student transitions. This study sought to evaluate the effects of this strategy upon a fourth grade class of 26 children in the southeastern United States.

Introduction

This study was conducted at a Title I elementary school located in the southeastern United States. The elementary school consists of grades three through five with a school population totaling 511 students. Forty-nine percent of students are female and 51% male. At this school, 87% of students are White, 8% are African American, 3.5% are Hispanic, and 1% is Asian. Of the school’s 511 students, 18% qualify for free lunch. This elementary school is supported by 23 full time teachers, creating a 22.5 to one student to teacher ratio. The fourth grade class chosen for this particular study is composed of 26 students, 12 female and 14 male. Of these 26 students, 91% are White, 8% are African American, and 1% is Hispanic.

The departmentalized nature of this elementary school provides students with a well-rounded education equally focusing on math, science, English, and social studies. The 26 students observed in this study transitioned between two academic classrooms approximately two to three times a day. The specific classroom in which this study was conducted was known as the students’ “home” classroom where students began each day. Students also had math and science class in this classroom; however, the students transitioned to another classroom for English and social studies. Additionally, students were observed transitioning to the computer labs, library, art classroom, and physical education classroom. During these transitions, students were observed misbehaving, raising the volume of their voices, forgetting necessary materials, and wasting instructional time.

This study began with the premise that valuable instructional time would be increased if students were able to more quickly, quietly, and readily transition between activities and locations such as classrooms. Additionally, students would be held more responsible or their materials if the class was focused and quiet when the teacher provided instructions. To test this premise, this study sought to explore how the implementation of music during student transitions impacts the teacher’s ability to preserve instructional time.

**Review of Literature**

In this school, transitions occur throughout the day in every classroom and are a major factor in regards to wasted academic time and negative student behavior. Upon researching how to best support effective and timely transitions in the classroom, many researchers and experienced educators presented valuable information in terms of what specifically qualifies as a student transition, the major issues that arise from improper transitioning, the various potential strategies to support effective transitions, and the overall benefits of implementing procedures for organized student transitions. Transitions, in general, are defined as the time spent providing students with instructions or directions for an academic activity or physical relocation, distributing student materials, or waiting for teachers to get organized for the respective lessons (Codding & Smyth, 2008).

Education specialists ave reported a significant reduction in academic engagement due to excessive time spent organizing materials and preparing students for frequent transitions. While it is reported that “effective teachers can transition in 30 seconds,” similar reports claim unorganized and ineffective student transitions “can waste up to 21 full instructional days’ worth of instructional time in one academic year” (Geffers, 2007). In addition to the wasted valuable time students could be applying in academic engagement and teacher instruction, ineffective transitions are expressed to be one of the leading causes for student misbehavior. Issues arise when transitions occur in excess throughout the day, when transitions are too long, when students are not provided clear direction, and when the teacher has not devoted sufficient time to proper planning, organization, and lesson preparations (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, Artman, & Kinder, 2008; Parsonson, 2012). In expansion, Parsonson (2012) specifically reported that in the United Kingdom 80% of disruptive behavior was attributed to limited teacher organization and ineffective student transitioning. The respective research has prompted the notion that not only do ineffective transitions promote negative student behavior and wasted instructional time, but many educators’ lack of organization, preparation, and classroom structure result in “students spending up to one half of instructional time engaged in tasks not related to learning, such as classroom procedural matters and transitions” (Codding & Smyth, 2008).

To support effective transitions, increased time spent on valuable learning opportunities, and limited disruptive student behavior, several strategies and guidelines have been applied and analyzed by experienced educators. The most significant recommendations for effective transitions include 1) alerting students to upcoming transitions, 2) providing direct, clear, and concise expectations and procedures for transitions, and 3) establishing predictability in the classroom through practiced transition routines, consistent signaling cues, and the enforcement of consequences for negative and positive behavior (Codding & Smyth, 2008; Geffers, 2007; Hemmeter, et al., 2008; Parsonson, 2012).

In addition to verbal and non-verbal positive praise and consistent consequences for negative student behavior, the implementation of timer systems and music during transitions has been recorded by Perrin (2014) as having the largest decrease of transition time for students with a variety of academic and behavioral backgrounds. Using timers to record the length of student transitions can prompt students to take an active role in self-monitoring their own behavior and timeliness during transitions. Perrin notes transition timers can also serve as an effective visual reinforcement and motivator to transition successfully. Perrin and also Stacho (2013) found music can be used as a transition signal in the classroom encouraging a calm and quiet environment. In studies implemented across the country, Perrin reported the use of calming music partnered with the visual reinforcement and motivator of timers resulted in decreased transition time by over one minute per transition; increasing the amount of learning time.

**Procedures**

To test the influence of music on the smoothness and effectiveness of transitions, I applied a music supports strategy during a ten day period in my fourth grade classroom. In order to understand if the implementation of music supports effective transitions, I first had to calculate baseline data to serve as a control group to which results could be compared. The first three days of data collection focused on gathering data that represented a running total of each day’s time spent transitioning. A three day period was used to help account for day to day discrepancies such as the number of times students are required to transition, the number of students present during transitions, and the overall behavior of the students for each particular day. During the three days of initial data collection, students were not informed that they were being monitored and timed during transitions. While student involvement was a critical component in this action research, the base line data was needed to provide authentic results properly reflecting the natural and regular behaviors of the students. Three days of baseline data were collected without the implementation of music, positive reinforcement, or a timing system, and the respective results served as the foundation in which the transition times for the following seven days were compared.

According to Codding and Smith (2008), one of the most crucial aspects of a successful transition involves providing students with transition warnings, signals, and specific instructions. Thus, day four focused on 1) informing students of the specific expectations and procedures for transitions, and 2) introducing the role of music during transitions. Students were informed that when a transition warning was provided by the teacher, they were expected to 1) wrap up their current work, 2) gather the materials listed on the board for the next activity, and 3) clean up their work space. Additionally, students were prompted to discuss appropriate behaviors expected of them during transition times. During the fourth day of research implementation, students were also instructed on the role of using music to signal transitions. Music served as the signal, following the preannounced warning, to prompt students to transition by clearing their work space, following the prior specific instructions on necessary materials or actions, and lining up appropriately at the door. The specific rules, expectations, procedures, and role of the music were thoroughly discussed with the students on day four. Following the in depth discussion and promotion of student involvement, students were informed that the transitions throughout the day would be timed and that their behavior would be closely monitored. The running total of each day’s time spent on transitions was recorded on the white board for all students to see and reflect upon. This also served as a competitive motivator in which students attempted to beat the prior days’ time.

Days four through seven of the implementation process were designed to monitor the influence of music on transitions as well as to motivate students to act appropriately. During the respective days, students were informed that for each day they spent less time transitioning than the prior day they would receive a reward at the end of the day. The inclusion of this positive reinforcement system served to spark student motivation, and provide data that reflected student transitions through use of extrinsic motivation compared to intrinsic motivation.

Expanding upon the impact of extrinsic motivation, days eight through ten of the research implementation were dedicated to recording the overall time spent transitioning while applying music as a transition signal and prompt for student behavior. Students were still actively involved and informed about transitions being timed and monitored during the final days, and results continued to be posted for all students to see. Extrinsic reinforcements, however, were not provided to students. The elimination of the extrinsic rewards served to provide data that reflected the students’ success during music filled transitions in a natural and organic setting as if music were to be used during transitions for the remaining days of the school year. Such results, additionally, were compared to the effectiveness of the transitions in which extrinsic motivators were applied. Comparing the influence of extrinsic rewards provides data clarifying if student transitions were improved through use of music or merely through the inclusion of extrinsic rewards. Three days of data were collected in which students had the opportunity to earn extrinsic rewards and were compared to three days of data in which students were not offered extrinsic positive reinforcement. Music was used during both periods. Results from each day were compared to the base line results from the first three days of research implementation in which the students’ authentic and pre-music transitions were analyzed. See Tabl1 for the timeline.

Table 1

*Timeline*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Day: | Plan of Action: |
| **Days 1-3** | Calculate base line data to serve as control group; students unaware that their transition times and behaviors are being monitored |
| **Day 4** | Students provided with the rules, procedures, expectations, role of music, and use of a timing system to monitor student transitions; students practice transitioning with the new system |
| **Days 5-7** | Students continue using the new system to transition; students receive extrinsic rewards if the class spent less time transitioning compared to the prior day |
| **Days 8-10** | Students continue using the new system to transition; students no longer receive extrinsic rewards if the class spent less time transitioning compared to the prior day |
| **End of Study** | Data from days 4-10 compared to the base line data to determine the effects of using music and the timing system on student transitions and the preservation of instructional timeData from days 5-7 compared to data from days 8-10 to determine the influence of extrinsic rewards on student participation in the new system |

This study used a regulated timing system to monitor the overall amount of time spent on whole group transitioning throughout each day. While transitions occur when students wait for directions, move locations in the school building, or even wait for classmates to finish using the restroom and drinking fountain, this study primarily focused on students subject-based transitions. As the school is departmentalized based on subject matter, students’ transitions between their math and science classes to their English language arts and social studies classes were closely monitored. Students’ transition timing began when the teacher played the transitional signal music, and students’ time did not end until students were quietly waiting in line ready to relocate. The quantitative results in Table 2 and Gigure 1 present a visual comparison of students’ transition time from the first three days of control group baseline data compared to the following seven days. The yellow columns represent the first three days during which students were unaware that they were being monitored and the green columns represent the days in which the music and timing system were implemented.

Table 2

*Transition Times Chart*

*Figure 1:* Student transition times in minutes

**Data Analysis**

Upon reviewing the collected data during the ten days of action research monitoring student transitions, the results demonstrate a clear improvement in regards to limiting transition times to preserve academic instruction. As previously expressed, the first three days of baseline data collection monitored students’ natural transition routines without music transition cues and involvement in the timing process. Thus, the first three days of transition times, illustrated in yellow in Table 2, reflected drastically more time spent on student transitions rather than meaningful academic instruction. Students’ natural transitions averaged at approximately seven and a half minutes throughout the school day’s subject rotations. However, once music was implemented as a transition cue and a motivator for a calm transition tone, in addition to the promotion of active student involvement in the timing process, the following seven days averaged approximately three and a half minutes of transition time daily.

The corresponding data averages communicate the notion that the implementation of music and timing procedures can preserve approximately 20 minutes of academic instructional time each week; totaling approximately 12 hours of meaningful learning each academic year. As reflected in the data, the longest transition took three minutes and 36 seconds. The most efficient transition, in which music was implemented, only took 49 seconds. This near three minute difference indicates how the role of student involvement and guiding music can support effective, smooth, quiet, and time efficient transitions that provide the students with more meaningful academic support.

While the overall results demonstrate how organized and consistent transitions can support the preservation of meaningful academic instruction, there are multiple factors that cannot be reported in quantitative measures but may influence the final results. One of the most pressing factors regards the times of day in which the transitions are measured. This specific study monitored the students’ transitions during classroom changes in their departmentalized subjects. Transitions to and from physical education or lunch may reflect more student energy and distractive behavior. Consequently, if the teacher were to adopt the music and timing transition system long term, transitions may alter depending on the students’ next activity, excitement level, and overall behavior tendencies.

Moreover, as the transition timer does not cease until all students are quietly and calmly waiting in line, the amount of students in class and the presence of more behaviorally challenged students can alter the transition times. Every classroom has a few students who are likely to oppose authority, to act out for attention, or who cannot focus their full attention to wait quietly. These students may negatively influence other students or become a source of blame. While there are various factors that can alter the overall results of the success of students’ transitions, classrooms can become effective at transitioning using the strategy described in this paper if the strategy is consistently implemented. Teachers thus play a major role in the success of this strategy. The data suggest students benefited from receiving explicit instructions and regular encouragement in regards to the new transition system. Actively involving and discussing the outcomes prompted students to self-monitor their own behavior and take responsibility for their own actions during class transitions. Self-reflection and self-monitoring are lifelong skills supportive of students’ behavior, academic success, and social and emotional development throughout their life.

**Conclusion**

This study focused on investigating the role of two main factors to support effective transitions in order to preserve overall academic instructional time: 1) the implementation of calming music as a transitional cue and 2) the teacher’s involvement and discussions with students in terms of their timeliness and expected behaviors. The 10 days of research began by monitoring students’ natural transition behaviors and confirmed the notion that negative student behavior and attention during transitions resulted in wasted academic time. With the implementation of music and the encouragement of active student self-monitoring, time spent on student transition while switching between departmentalized classes was drastically reduced. The average amount of time spent on the respective transitions decreased by approximately 53%; benefitting the students’ overall exposure and engagement in meaningful academic instruction.

This method of supporting student transitions is particularly important in departmentalized elementary schools when young students are not experienced in gathering all their necessary materials to continuously relocate to various classrooms. With the high frequency of student transitions in a departmentalized setting, it is imperative that students apply self-monitoring skills and organizational skills to ensure their primary efforts and focus are devoted to academics rather than transitions. In conclusion, despite possible varying factors including student attendance or irregular transition needs, the implementation of calming transition music and a monitoring timing system has resulted in a significant decrease in negative student behavior during transitions and a substantial increase in time spent on meaningful learning engagements. The results reflect the successful implementation of transitional music to support organized and time-effective student transitions, and promote the increased time and overall focus on the students’ engagement with meaningful learning opportunities.

Due to the success of the respective 10 days of action research data collection, I recommend the students continue to respond to the music as a signal for transition preparation and calmness, and the timing system be continued as means to motivate students and prompt for appropriate transition behavior. This research also suggests transitions of all forms, not solely between departmentalized classes, can benefit from similar processes. Thus, to support future preserved instructional time and limit time spent on transitions, teachers should consider including music and transition timings for all student transitions and wait times. By expanding the various circumstances in which the teacher implements the music and timing for transitions, the students will develop consistency and fluency in the procedures and will continue to reduce the amount of valuable instructional time wasted during transitions. Overall, the teacher’s continued implementation of music will communicate the priority of focusing school time on academic opportunities.

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