

Alienation and values in educational transitions

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The purpose of this theoretical paper is to situate and so deepen our understandings of 'the problem(s) of student alienation in transition' within a sociology of schooling transitions. The empirical test of the value of this paper then will be to what extent it helps to explain why the alienation (referred to in the other symposium papers, for instance) occurs, what its sociological roots are, and perhaps even why this alienation proves so resistant to change.

One of the key features of transitions that can be alienating is the way the receiving institution 'changes the rules of the game' that learners have learnt to engage in hitherto: thus learners who say they were well adjusted to mathematics in Primary School say everything went wrong in secondary school when they had to learn algebra: ("Connolly, what is one-A plus one-B?" see YouTube...). Learners may arrive at sixth form College (or even university) with quite the wrong profile of courses/grades for the programmes they wish to study, and be shocked at what they find when they arrive.

To some extent, these inconsistencies and maladjustments might be explained as accidents that, with a bit of effort and work can be put right. But actually, what if after a decade or two one finds not much has changed in this regard, and what if one begins to see knowledge flows across the boundaries apparently deliberately cut off and enduring conflicts of interest between institutions and their learners (as we did)? Then one begins to look at the systemic features of transition across institutions: one begins to ask whose interests are served, and how these interests are mediated in the practices that have so long 'stayed the same'?"