Moving is an emotional experience, and how the transition is handled has an enormous impact on a child’s academic performance. It’s hard for children to concentrate and connect when they feel as if they are riding an emotional roller coaster.

Interaction International works regularly with missionary families as well as with those in the military, business, or diplomatic communities. These internationally mobile children have moved on average eight times by age 18. Rather than simply moving within a culture, these children regularly move in and out of cultures. Each transition means saying goodbye and hello to large groups of people as well as separations, cultural differences, change, grief, and loss. Even when these students aren’t moving, others around them are moving in and out of their lives.

While your students may not be returning from or going to Kenya, Taiwan, Russia, or Brazil, mobility may still be part of their experience. Students whose fathers are in ministry or the military may be especially mobile. Students from these families may be used to moving every two to four years. While they may not have experienced the cultural changes and stresses, they certainly are affected by the mobility of their lives.

Exiting well is the prerequisite to entering well.

**Unique Opportunities**

As teachers and school communities, you have unique opportunities to touch the lives of students and families at these crucial times. Sometimes parents are so stressed by the move, a new job, or other circumstances that they aren’t monitoring their children’s stress levels as closely as they would in other situations. Thus, teachers may need to be advocates to parents about the needs of their children during transition.

In the classroom it is easy to focus on students who are entering and overlook students who will be leaving or to focus on the students who are leaving and miss the needs of those who are left behind. Exiting well is the prerequisite to entering well. So how students leave your school will determine how well they enter their next setting.

If students don’t have opportunities for closure, they are robbed of the chance to grieve and say goodbye. Rather than being expressed, their feelings of grief and loss may be stuffed and buried. Sometimes students try to ignore or suppress these feelings and focus instead on what comes next.

If students don’t have opportunities to process these feelings or aren’t allowed to do so (by parents or teachers), these emotions may be expressed in unhealthy ways. When I taught in Taiwan, some of my students arrived late in the school year and hadn’t had closure opportunities before leaving the States. As they struggled to adjust, they got into fights, regressed in their behavior, and alienated their peers. I’ve also seen students go the other direction and become withdrawn or extremely isolated.

**A School Plan**

Teachers and schools must have concrete plans in place to help entering and leaving students. The process begins when parents apply or come to enroll their children. On the application or during the interview process, parents...
can respond to questions about how many times their children have moved or how many schools their children have attended. Knowing how frequently students have moved can be important in helping them settle in well. If a family has come back suddenly from overseas, it is important to find out if the student has been evacuated or gone through a crisis that led to the return. This information must go to the classroom teachers.

Schools can use their student government leadership or can create a big brother/big sister mentoring program to help new students adjust. Sometimes schools, especially those overseas, have special programs or courses to prepare students to leave. However, other students who move unexpectedly have no preparation for their moves. Encouraging teachers to periodically discuss transition issues with their students is an important first step. Rather than separating out some children, teachers and schools should focus on including all students in training on these issues. Helping students develop the skills needed to transition well not only gives them an important life skill but also fosters a caring, supportive learning environment in the classroom.

Mentors: Key People in the Transition Process

As students enter a new school, one of their greatest needs is to have a mentor who will help them build bridges to new friendships and introduce them to the school community. When answering questions about people, the school, and activities, this person may reflect a negative attitude, and this attitude may affect how the new student reacts and how he is seen by teachers and peers. As the mentor introduces the new student to others, the mentor’s reputation can rub off onto the student. Schools often expect students to find their own mentors and thus leave it to chance. However, sometimes the people who befriend the new student are on the fringe, having distanced themselves from their peers by their actions and attitudes.

Unless a school has a plan for mentoring, these students with negative attitudes may be the ones who reach out to new students. Schools and teachers must think through how to facilitate positive mentoring relationships for students. Even if these connections don’t last, they can be helpful during the first few days. In asking students to help their new classmate, teachers can’t assume the students automatically know what needs to be done. The students may not know that “showing the new kids around” means to show them facilities, answer questions, introduce them to others, and be a friend.

Transitioning in a Healthy Way: Building a RAFT

Whether you have students coming in or going out of your classroom, it is important for both teacher and students to understand the principles for making a healthy transition. As the late Dr. David Pollock, founder of Interaction International, worked with students making international transitions, he developed an acrostic known as RAFT to help people remember how to transition well. In order for children and adults to leave any setting well, it is important that they have proper closure.

The R stands for reconciliation. Sometimes it is easy for students to think that their move provides a solution to problems and broken relationships. Because students are leaving, they feel they won’t have to deal with the people and conflicts they’ve been facing. Thus, it is easy to leave without taking the time and doing the work necessary to repair broken relationships. The result is that people leave with unfinished business and unresolved conflicts.

The A stands for affirmation. Unfortunately, often we don’t express appreciation until after someone has passed away. However, as students prepare to leave a school, it is important for them to express appreciation to people who have played a significant role in their life. Whether it is by writing a note, sharing a meal, or doing something special together, students need to affirm key people in their lives in culturally appropriate ways.

The F stands for farewells to people, places, pets, and possessions. Certain transitions have built-in closure experiences. A graduation ceremony marks the end of high school and the beginning of college. A wedding ceremony marks the change from being single to being married. However, in geographic moves there are no built-in closure experiences, so it becomes important for students and their families to create some special activities to commemorate, celebrate, and bring closure.

Since saying goodbyes is painful and hard, some people want to take shortcuts or avoid it completely. It is important that teachers schedule time during the last
week or two of school to give students the opportunity to say goodbyes. It is important for all students to affirm significant relationships and to say goodbyes because over the summer a family could leave who had not planned to move when the school year ended.

The T stands for thinking about the destination and expectations. Sometimes in an effort to avoid disappointment, children claim they don’t really have any expectations or say, “It doesn’t matter.” However, when pushed on this, they often reveal that they really do have ideas about what events will happen or what the new setting will be like. Sometimes, students have expectations that are unrealistically positive or negative. Teachers can help them develop positive, realistic expectations.

Even if students have not built a RAFT before leaving their last school, teachers can help them build one to whatever extent possible by talking with them about people, places, pets, and possessions they appreciated and about their expectations as they enter the new school.

There are many practical steps that teachers can take to help students who are entering and leaving their classroom.

Tips and Resources for Classroom Teachers

There are many practical steps that teachers can take to help students who are entering and leaving their classroom. First, they can informally ask new students questions about such topics as where they’ve lived and what they miss. This interest on the part of the teacher builds a positive relationship, communicates care for the student, and places value on the student’s past experiences.

Second, teachers can create opportunities by using assignments to facilitate transition experiences for their students. For example, English teachers can give writing assignments on topics that help students get to know one another or share feelings related to transitioning. Older students can write autobiographies; younger students can write “All About Me” paragraphs. Social studies teachers can ask students to write a family history. Having students share their work with one another can help them get acquainted and build friendships.

Third, teachers can make an effort to include small-group work to help students get to know others especially in the early days of the school year. Fourth, teachers can look for transition-related themes—such as moving, transitioning, saying goodbyes, and dealing with grief and loss—in their content area and discuss them. Elementary teachers often have great opportunities to do this because of the books their students read and the oral reading that they regularly do with their students.

Lastly, teachers can help students prepare to leave by creating opportunities for the students to say goodbye and helping students build their RAFTs. Teachers can ensure that students have addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses for their classmates. Exchanging or taking pictures can also be an important part of this process.

Several resources may be helpful to schools and teachers as they help students process transitions. Interaction International has produced an excellent CD called Leave Right—Enter Right: Building a RAFT, featuring the late Dr. David Pollock. He walks students or families through the process of building a RAFT, and his presentation works well with individual students or in a small-group or classroom setting. The CD can be ordered through the Interaction website, www.interactionintl.org. Children’s literature books such as Ira Says Goodbye by Bernard Waber (Houghton Mifflin, 1988), Alexander, Who’s Not (Do You Hear Me? I Mean It!) Going to Move by Judith Viorst (Simon & Schuster, 1995), Grandfather’s Journey by Allen Say (Houghton Mifflin, 1993), and Goodbye House by Frank Asch (Aladdin, 1986) can be great tools for starting discussions with students about transitions. New Kid in School: Using Literature to Help Children in Transition by Debra Rader and Linda Harris Sittig (Teachers College Press, 2003) is an outstanding book that contains lesson plans for using children’s literature in the classroom to address transition issues.

The Chinese character for crisis contains symbols for both danger and opportunity. A transition can be a crisis experience for children. How teachers and schools help them in handling their transitions will play an important role in determining whether it is a harmful experience or an opportunity for growth.

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