Transitions: School-Home Communication and Planning Symposium

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Introduction

This report collates information given by 18 professionals who participated in a symposium hosted by UNSW’s School of Education Special and Inclusive Education Research Group on 6th December 2012. The participants in the “Transitions: School-Home Communication and Planning” symposium all have a lead role in planning or delivering transition support for young people and all expressed an interest in creating further dialogue between agencies and the need for further research to address a range of current challenges being faced in this area.

The aims of the event were to explore the current status of transition services for students with disabilities in NSW and answer the following questions:

1. What supports are available and what supports are still missing?

2. What needs to improve in NSW policies related to transitions?

3. How can school-home communication and collaboration during transitions be fostered and improved?

Symposium Participants

Symposium participants were drawn from a range of professional backgrounds and service and policy contexts relevant to the experiences of young people at different transitions in their schooling. They included: teachers, parents, school principals, NSW Department of Education and Communities employees, teacher educators and researchers.

Symposium Format

The symposium format combined keynote addresses by four leading experts undertaking innovative research in the field, followed by participant questions and comments and a round table discussion focused on the three key
questions. (see Appendix 1 for the Symposium Program).

All invited symposium participants also completed a short survey seeking their ratings in response to the program presented at the symposium (Appendix 2).

The findings reported below are collated from individual presentations, roundtable discussion and survey responses. This report aims to give a broad overview concerning the opportunities and challenges participants identified in effectively planning for and supporting the transitions of students with disabilities throughout their schooling and beyond. The information in this report provides only an outline of the challenges and opportunities faced by teachers, families, and service providers. More work is required to explore the issues in greater detail and define and agree upon solutions.

The event was supported by a grant from The University of New South Wales, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, School of Education. This report produced by the Special and Inclusive Education Research Group

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Background

Transition can be defined in relation to education as moving from one position, stage, school or environment to another. The most common transitions faced by school-age students are: from home to early schooling, from primary to secondary school, to and from specialist settings, from secondary school to work, and to post secondary school/training (Perry, et al., 2006). As stated by Barron, Violet and Hassiotis (2009): “transitions occur throughout life and are faced by all young people as they progress, from childhood through puberty and adolescence to adulthood; from immaturity to maturity and from dependence to independence” (p. 1) These transitions are very important for the success of students, in particular those with developmental disabilities. [For the purpose of this report, the term *developmental disabilities* refers to intellectual disability and/or autism (Ashman & Elkins, 2009)]. Investigating these transitions can better inform schooling practices and assist students, families and educators to plan post-school options (Strnadová & Evans, 2013). For each of the different transition stages collaboration between school and home is crucial to ensure the individual needs of students with disabilities are met. These needs include academic, social, vocational, community and family goals (Strnadová & Evans, 2013). Each new environment brings a new set of challenges for all involved, thereby requiring different types of school-home collaboration, and because no two families are alike, professionals must take an individualised approach to collaboration and transition planning. This includes empowering an active role for parents (and child with a disability) in the decision-making process during the different transition stages (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2005).
Conceptual Framework

The symposium was theoretically embedded within the Empowerment Model of partnership between a professional (teacher), a parent and a student (Appleton & Minchom, 1991), which acknowledges “the right of the parent as a consumer to choose to engage with the service at a level which suits them personally with a recognition on the professional side that the family is a system and social network” (Dale, 2004, p.13). The symposium used this framework to investigate the experiences and perceptions of school personnel, and families of students with developmental disabilities of school-home collaborations during diverse transitions in schooling years.

Current Practices-Home to School

Since 2001, school transitions in NSW have been guided by the Guidelines for Effective Transitions to School Programs (Dockett & Perry, 2001). These guidelines, along with the accompanying Indicators of Progress (Dockett & Perry, XXX) were developed with all school children in mind, without a focus on students with disabilities. The guidelines are also focused on the initial transition from home to school. The Guidelines consist of the following:

1. Establish positive relationships between children, parents, and educators
2. Facilitate each child’s development as a capable learner
3. Differentiate between ‘orientation to school’ and ‘transition to school’ programs
4. Draw upon dedicated funding and resources
5. Involve a range of stakeholders
6. Are well planned and effectively implemented
7. Are flexible and responsive
8. Are based on mutual trust and respect
9. Rely on reciprocal communication among participants
10. Take into account contextual aspects of community, and of individual families and children within that community

This symposium explored these issues and more, through research presentations and discussions, in regard to students with...
disabilities in NSW, in both public and private schools through all transitions.

**Current Practices - Primary to Secondary School**

There are many changes faced by students and their families during this transition, such as: (a) school size, (b) structure, (c) number of people students interact with on a daily basis, (d) curricular changes, and (e) changes brought on by adolescence. Many of these issues are compounded by the existence of a disability (Sitlington, Neubert, & Clark, 2010). While most of the research on this particular transition comes from the U.S. and the U.K., there is agreement that the educational transitions for students with disabilities that occur during adolescence are complex and require planning, collaboration, and support.

**Current Practices - Secondary School to Post School Life**

One of the challenges faced by high school teachers is keeping the balance of curriculum requirements and teaching life skills to students with disabilities. Furthermore, as highlighted by Winn & Hay (2009, 107), ‘school-based vocational preparation and orientation is often just an add on.’ Another challenge is a commonly referred to lack of post-schooling options for students with disabilities (Hay & Winn 2005, Strnadová & Evans 2013). In order to make the transition from secondary school to post-schooling options successful, a number of issues need to be considered, such as: (a) students need to be taught not only academic subjects, but also functional academics, daily living skills, social skills and vocational skills, and (b) students and their parents need to be fully involved in the transition process.
Summary of Findings

The discussions after the presentations delivered by the panel of experts and the subsequent roundtable discussion offered the opportunity for participants to present their specific issues and concerns that are most pressing regarding transition from their particular perspectives as teachers, principals, researchers, and parents.

Participants discussed the following in regard to the current supports that are available:

1. *Parents:* Parents are generally the strongest advocates for their children. There was a focus on honest family discussions, including the child. Communication between school and parents is considered to be key, especially when it comes to schools sharing information that parents provide with the appropriate teachers and staff members, so parent does not have to repeatedly provide the information. The parent participant felt that the provision of gifted and talented courses as well as the flexibility for her child to attend class in different levels of subject areas according to her ability was well executed. The most helpful supports for parents mentioned were transition forums, communication, and accessible information.

2. *Teachers and Schools:*

   *Policies:* Currently there are transitions teams for each region; however, the regions will no longer exist as of next year. The individual principals will be the site managers, and therefore responsible for the transition services at their schools. Each of these regions holds forums about transitions each year. Schools have money allocated to them to provide transition services. Annual reviews are held for students who are transitioning. Students with intellectual disabilities have extensive interventions and a high level of support available to them. Overall, the consensus was that policies for good transition for students with disabilities from high school to post-school life are
being implemented in different schools and different areas, but is not standard throughout NSW, and that the transitions between years 6-7 still need attention.

Practices: Participants discussed practices that, to their knowledge, were currently being implemented in different schools. Some said that for the transition from primary to high school, discussions about placements begin in term two of year six. Others commented that it is important to start looking at high school placements even earlier, in year 5. Everyone agreed that the practice of rotating classes for students in years 5 and 6 (a practice adopted by many primary schools) went a long way to ease the transition process for students with disabilities.

Core thing is keeping students engaged in both the curriculum and the transition process. Life skills is an alternative option for students with a bit more flexibility to suit their needs and support them. Other practices mentioned as valuable included the following:

- Local management groups consisting of up to three high schools and their feeder primary schools. Because each is different, this kind of regular individualised contact and collaboration works well.
- Year 6 teachers swap classes with Year 7 teachers so that students get to know teachers in their own environment.
- Students from all feeder schools do the same units in year 6 so there is cohesion in year 7.
- Scholarships into high school create good opportunities and a feeling of community for students. This also creates a good image and perception of the school with the community.
- Transitions teacher at high school (or SLSO, or special educator) who goes to assemblies, parent teacher nights etc.
- Creating welcome packages for students with photos of their teachers and peers and social stories.
- Some schools provide an opportunity for students to undertake part-time work. This is beneficial for students transitioning to employment, especially when transitions include practice interviews etc.
- Social and emotional learning focusing on resilience – there are programs for this, but it is unclear how many schools are implementing these.
- VIA strengths test is a positive for students because it gives them an idea of jobs that they might be good at and enjoy.

There was a consensus made that there are examples of good practice, however these are not consistent across all schools. The most prevalent successes are when schools pull services together and make sure the students themselves are part of the process.
Resources: Positive Partnerships, an organisation that supports students with autism and their families throughout their schooling, was touted as a great resource, with information days, books, and a website. School Link is an organisation concerned with the mental health of children and can assist with transition in the areas of: preventing mental health issues, providing training and education, and assisting with pathways to care. Youth Source has a website and a mobile app to provide students with disabilities and their families in Northern Sydney information on available services in education, health, and recreation. There are also monies available from organisations such as SAP, Link, and VET, but many teachers are not aware of this. Youth Connections through various NGOs exist, and are particularly helpful to students coming out of juvenile justice settings. There are resources available for many different support needs, however the issue is that access to these resources and available information is not centralised. Thus parents and schools do not know these resources exist or know how to access them.

There were several issues that emerged when the group discussed supports that are still missing.

1. Lack of support after students move on to the next setting. Participants raised concerns that not all students would continue to receive the level of transition support that they received in year 6, when they reached year 7.

2. A lack of professional development for teachers on disabilities and managing student behaviour. Participants felt that this would be especially helpful when students with specific disabilities were transitioning into a new school.

3. Concerns were also raised about the lack of follow-up when a student transitions out of a juvenile justice setting. Although the JJ school sets up a transition program while the student is there, there is no way to monitor a student’s success or whether or not the program is effective. This is exacerbated by the difficult living situations that many of these students face when re-integrating.

4. There is a problem with placing students back into mainstream settings when they leave specialised settings such as behaviour schools or JJ. Many mainstream schools are unwilling to enrol or re-enrol students that
carry a label of being a ‘troublemaker.’

5. A lack of financial resources to support schools in providing appropriate transition services, especially to fund longer transition periods and programs. Staffing comes into play here. Participants believed that schools should have a dedicated transition officer/teacher. Many schools currently don’t have the funding for such a position.

6. In NSW caseworkers from Social Services only get involved in emergency situations. There is a high turnover of caseworkers with a large number of new people constantly learning the ropes.

7. Lack of support for students with certain disabilities, such as challenging behaviour and hearing and vision impairments.

8. Systems need to be in place for continuity when students move from one state to another. Currently there is little follow-up and the lack of congruence in labelling and funding may leave students with less support than they were receiving previously.

9. Participants called for more flexibility in regard to compulsory schooling and what that means exactly. Policy needs be flexible in order to focus on the needs of the student. Students with challenging behaviour need other options rather than just staying in school. If students are forced to attend school, some drop out than there are no services for them. This is particularly true for students between the ages of 15-17. Policy also came into play in other areas, such as: (a) students in special settings don’t always have a home school, therefore accessing services can be difficult or impossible, (b) Students who have never accessed services find it nearly impossible to do so when they are transitioning out of school, (c) lack of support, policy and connection across government organisations and NGOS, and (d) housing for students who do not have a stable family environment.

10. Individual Education Plans, although not mandated, need to be written for each child, reviewed annually and shared with the appropriate stakeholders. Teachers need to read and follow the IEP. Accommodations and modifications should be developed as part of the IEP and Transition Planning.
Plan. These plans should also encompass wraparound services, so that the services are pulled together to best serve students.

11. Communication needs to be improved, especially with parents. IEP meetings need to be held in a language parents can understand. Sometimes parents and schools are not in agreement about the level of support students need when transitioning. Students should also have a voice when planning for transitions.

12. Many times, NGOs get grants from the government to run transition programs, and then they expire and are not renewed or re-applied for. This results in a gap in services for students who are transitioning.

13. If students do not have cases with ADHC early on, it can be very difficult to access services later on.

Conversation also focused on school-home communication and collaboration during transitions and how they can be fostered and improved.

The discussion initially centred around problems with communication and collaboration. From a parent perspective, communication with the schools can be disappointing. For example, despite trying to provide each and every teacher with information about her child, one parent found that the teachers failed to read the letter she sent explaining everything in detail. This meant she had to explain everything repeatedly throughout the year.

Parents also feel that transition is an issue that the schools need to organise and provide support for.

Teachers and school executives on the other hand, had the following concerns and comments related to school-home communication and collaboration:

- Parents can be in denial about the level of support their child needs when transitioning through the different stages of schooling.
- Schools often feel that the plans the parents have for the transition of their child is not going to provide adequate support.
- There are questions about who in the school community/parent is responsible for the transitioning of students.
- Schools need to determine the best way to liaise effectively with parents so that parents can understand the issues.
- Often families don’t/won’t discuss the issue of transitions with their children.
Children should have some autonomy over transition, particularly when discussing post school transitions.

Parents need to provide as little or as much support as the child needs but recognise that it may involve allowing their child to be more independent than parents may be comfortable with.

At some specialised sites, such as JJ and behaviour schools, contact with parents can be almost non-existent.

Other concerns in the area were related to communication and collaboration between schools, particularly primary and high schools, post-school placements and service providers, and special settings with general education settings.

The disconnect between schools and families was very apparent, as school personnel reported issues surrounding how much responsibility parents are willing to take for the transitioning of their children, especially when it comes to accessing services, information, and support. Unwillingness on the part of the parents to discuss transitions with their children was also cited. It was suggested that parents need to be transitioned also, as change is never easy and can cause large amounts of anxiety and stress. Many see change as a threatening or challenging thing to deal with. Schools need to make transitions relevant, as many families are understandably focused on survival and one day at a time thinking. If transitions are made more relevant to families, then parents will be more motivated to collaborate and participate in transition activities. Schools can help families to see their children’s full potential by supporting them in visits to other schools, career fairs, and post-school sites.

Lastly, a lack of accessible information for schools and families in regards to transition options is a major issue. Services tend to be regional and fragmented. There are no “clearinghouses” of information for schools and families to access. There are some websites, but as funding decreases for some NGOs they cease to exist and the sites are updated infrequently. Many schools and families get information about services informally, through word of mouth. This translates to students getting services based on the amount of research parents and teachers are willing to do to discover what is out there.

Overall, the changes to transition and support services that will be coming with
the implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme and the end of ADHC remain to be seen. Both schools and families are unsure of what the future holds in this area.
Next Steps

To summarise the priorities regarding areas of need in transition services, symposium participants believed the following issues were of the greatest importance and need to be addressed by the NSW DEC:

• The development of a clear policy for transition programming for students with disabilities, so that the different stakeholders have a clear understanding of what transition planning and services are and who is responsible for the planning and implementation of these services.

• There needs to be more effective means of dissemination of information. Many of the participants had not heard of some of the available services and funding opportunities before the symposium. The suggestion from the symposium is that centralised information about transitions on different levels (from primary to secondary schools; to and from specialised settings; and from secondary schools to post-schooling options) needs to be accessible to schools and parents. This information is integral to successful transition planning and service implementation.

• Funding needs to be better utilised. A number of participants felt that creating positions for transition coordinators would be the best way to improve communication, information dissemination, and services in general.

• Transition plans and their implementation need to be evaluated on a regular basis. This includes follow-up with students in the new placement at all transition stages. The transition plan should explicitly state when and how this will happen and who is responsible.

• Students need to become more self-determined and engage in the transition process. For this to happen, students need to be active partners in the transition process and be allowed to have their voice heard, both by schools and families.

• Ways to improve communication among all stakeholders need to be improved, particularly in the engagement and support of families.
• The dissemination of information and the coordination of services would be greatly improved by the provision of a wraparound model, which is an accepted evidence-based practice.

The authors of this report will continue their research in this area to support the changes that need to happen to improve the processes involved in making transitions successful for students with disabilities. They have been conducting a series of inter-related research projects and will continue to report the results and their recommendations to all relevant stakeholders, including the NSW DEC. It is hoped that these activities are a step towards strengthening the connection between research and practice and fostering collaboration between universities and the educational sector in order to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and their families.
Appendix 1: Symposium Program

Symposium title: Transitions: School-Home Communication and Planning

Dates: 21st November 2013

Hosted by: Special and Inclusive Education Research Group

9.00 – 9.30 Registration


10.05 – 10.15 Discussion

10.15-10:40 Transitions for Students with Challenging Behaviours. Dr. Sue O’Neill

10.40-10.50 Discussion

10.50 – 11.10 Morning tea

11.10 – 11.35 Transitions for students with Dual Exceptionalities: An Australian perspective. Dr. Susen Smith

11.35 – 11.45 Discussion

11.45 – 12.10 Current Situation in New South Wales. Transitions of students with developmental disabilities: Fostering School-Home Partnerships – research project results. Doc. Iva Strnadová

12.10-12.20 Discussion

12.20 – 1.15 Lunch

1.15 – 3.00 Round table

3.00 – 3.30 Next steps, Concluding remarks.

Wine and cheese reception

Presentation Abstracts

New trends in School-Home Communication and Planning within

15 | Transitions: School-Home Communication and Planning
Transitions in Lives of Students with Disabilities. Dr Terry Cumming
This presentation described the critical role that school-home communication has in the transition planning process for students with disabilities. Current research on different kinds of transitions, including home to school, primary to secondary school, transitions between settings (special schools, mainstream schools, hospital schools and juvenile justice settings), secondary school to post-school life was discussed. Best practices for each of those phases were detailed. The presentation had a focus on planning, facilitation, and family needs & involvement.

Transitions for Students with Challenging Behaviours. Dr. Sue O’Neill
This presentation explored encouraging practices in the transition of youth displaying challenging behaviours, with a focus on students with a diagnosis of an emotional or behavioural disorder. Educating this student population about self-determination has emerged as an important practice in the recent research literature. The essential elements of self-determination were discussed as an empowering practice and further resources highlighted to the symposium participants.

Transitions for students with Dual Exceptionalities: An Australian perspective. Dr. Susen Smith
Accurate identification underlies appropriate transitions and effective provisions for students with Dual Exceptionalities (DE), as both the giftedness and the disability need to be identified. This would provide the foundation of an education that enhances the abilities of students with DE and uses their strengths to develop their potential. Provision that considers their asynchronous needs through flexible, effective provision and transitions is needed. This presentation addressed these needs for students with DE and provided recommendations for transitions processes from early childhood to tertiary contexts.

Current Situation in New South Wales.
Transitions of students with developmental disabilities: Fostering School-Home Partnerships – research project results. Doc. Iva Strnadová
The presented study investigates parents’ and teachers’ experiences with school-home collaboration during transitions from
primary to secondary school, and from secondary to post-school life for students with these disabilities. A survey was conducted in all public mainstream and special schools in NSW. The major issues experienced during these transitions were: (1) students themselves were only rarely involved in the transition process; (2) transition programs from the primary to secondary level consisted mostly of only 1-3 high school visits; and (3) transition planning tends to start very late.
Information on the value of the symposium was gathered using a feedback form that was issued to delegates at the start of the event and completed at the end.

1. Was the program well organised?

2. Were the topics relevant to you?

3. Was most of the information presented new to you?

4. Was the discussion in the afternoon useful for you?

5. Overall, were the speakers informative, prepared and understandable?
6. Were the questions and discussion handled to your satisfaction?

Seven out of ten strongly agree on a need for research about young offenders with mental health disorders in NSW.

The participants were also asked to supply their overall comments, feedback, and suggestions. Here is a compilation of the responses:

- “Very useful. Learned a little more about transitions and other services available.”
- “Great opportunities to see things from different perspectives. Good to know more about what the future holds in the DEC and how that might impact things for the future.”
- “Great day! Great to hear others’ perspectives- sooo different to ours!”
- “Thank you! Long overdue and happy that I had a voice and was able to advocate for students.”
- “Great discussions and a leap frog to see what is out there and then came back and see what we can do from there.”
- “Very good idea and relevant to transition. I need specific help due to my unique situation.”
- “Provide more case studies of successful or not too successful transition programs. Simplify the information (content) on the powerpoint presentation.”
- “It is a large and complex range of issues. Of course, more time is required. More input/representation from non-DEC schools, more principals!”

![Question 5](image1.png)

![Question 6](image2.png)
• “Good idea to include parking tickets. Great to provide food. Helped day to run smoothly and retain attention to discuss issues.”

• “Great start. A lot of work needs to be done in this area. For transitions to be successful, you need more mainstream schools, especially high schools, involved. Good luck engaging them!”

• “Presentations were good to confirm evidence-based practices we are currently using. Feeling inspired!”

• “I enjoyed listening to the information presented in the morning, very engaging. In the afternoon, I found the discussion did not lead to solutions and rather brought up issues that were outside our control, like policy, creating apps, parents’ motivation. Would have liked information/advice more relevant.”

Although the majority of the participants were happy with the symposium, it was obvious that many were looking for answers to the questions and challenges that arose during the course of the presentations and roundtable discussion. The authors of this report aim to have recommendations in this area at the conclusion of a current study they are conducting and will distribute them to all involved at the conclusion of the current transitions study.
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