

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Special Issue: Transitions for Students With Special Educational Needs

Chris Forlin

For learners with special educational needs (SEN) an area of particular challenge occurs frequently during transition times. There are a range of inter- and intra-school periods when major changeovers are required. Preparing to enter school, moving from primary to secondary schooling, and leaving school into postschool options are all very demanding times, especially for youngsters who have difficulty with changing routines. Moving between activities, subjects, teachers, classrooms, and year groups are also very demanding tasks for some students. This special issue of the *Australasian Journal of Special Education* includes a series of papers that consider aspects of school transitions for learners with SEN. The papers address transitions between primary and secondary schools and into postschool options focusing on research and innovations for providing positive learning outcomes for learners with disabilities, learning difficulties, or with autism spectrum disorder from across the Asia-Pacific region.

The inclusion of students with SEN in regular classrooms has been deemed an important strategy for ensuring the development of skills in academic achievement, social development, and general communication (Alquraini & Gut, 2012). Internationally, thus, inclusive education has tended to be promoted as a panacea of education for all learners. Yet there are many concerns and challenges raised by parents and stakeholders regarding the process of realising effective inclusion and ensuring that inclusion is not simply rhetoric (Forlin, 2010). A key aspect of enabling inclusion is the ability to successfully transition students with SEN between and within schools and the community, with the least amount of stress for students, their parents, and all stakeholders. This special issue responds to the question of how effectively transitions for inclusive education are being executed by reviewing six research articles that have investigated this from different perspectives.

In order to enable effective transitions, it seems essential that stakeholders are proactive and timely in preparing for major changes. For learners with SEN, giving them confidence and reducing anxiety during transitions requires the support of a range of stakeholders. This involvement with a number of different personnel necessitates a well-coordinated and structured strategic approach that is firmly established prior to transition periods. Not all schools appear to be currently prepared to provide this intensive approach to transitions; thus for many learners with SEN transitions may rely on misinformed decisions made by willing, yet unqualified, staff. As highlighted in the paper by Kim Poon-McBrayer, for many students with learning difficulties transition services are nonexistent, especially when reviewing transitions into postschool educational options. Similarly, transition support for students who experience twice exceptionality, as explored in the paper by Sue Prior, is minimal. Even when transition

support is provided, as illustrated in the research by Rose Dixon and Kath Tanner regarding transition into academically focused high schools for learners with Asperger syndrome, there is frequently a mismatch in the expectations of teachers and parents regarding all aspects of the process.

The engagement of parents in supporting their children with SEN during transition times has been well documented as critical for successful early years transitions (e.g., Byrnes, 2012). Although less well acknowledged at later stages of transition, the involvement of parents is clearly highlighted in these papers as being a major contributor to the success of pertinent changeover times for their children. As indicated in the paper by Chris Forlin, Kenneth Sin, and Rupert Maclean, without the intensive and ongoing work of a parent, Lenny would have been unable to enrol in a suitable high school. In particular, it would seem to be generally the mothers of learners with SEN who remain involved in transitions for their children as they move through school and adulthood. From the work of David Evans and Iva Strnadová, it is clear that this becomes a lifelong commitment for mothers who are heavily involved in the process of supporting their children, ranging from issues of school selection and engaging with professionals, to all other aspects of transitions throughout their child's life span.

The gap between policy and practices in transition services is reported in all papers to differing degrees. The movement toward deinstitutionalisation has resulted in many more children and adults with SEN being included in local schools and community-based facilities, yet the structures of support to enable these transitions have frequently lagged behind this process (Rasmussen, Haggith, & Roberts, 2012). Traditional services for students with SEN seem to rely heavily on providing additional specialist support by continuing to use a special education approach to inclusive education. With the rapidly increasing number of learners with SEN being included in regular schools and the fiscal constraints on a system's ability to provide additional staff to support them, schools are increasingly being asked to accept greater responsibility within their own structures to provide for a wide range of learners' needs. Of major concern is the lack of time reported by schools that they have to devote to planning and organising for learners with SEN (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011). Nonetheless, effective transitions into and within schools and the community cannot be realised without appropriate planning and the development of suitable collaborative structures and processes. The paper by Dianne Chambers and Anne Coffey is therefore timely as it discusses the development of a mobile-optimised website for supporting learners with SEN during transitions. The use of technology is often considered an important future direction for providing support, yet there is still a dearth of well-developed programs grounded in theory that provide this support. This new model addresses this issue by providing a support program for transition readily available via a range of electronic platforms, including a computer, smart phone, or tablet device.

Although the intention towards greater inclusion is discernibly acknowledged within these papers, the research is emphasising many areas of concern regarding the capacity of schools and other stakeholder groups to actually implement relevant transition practices. From this collection of papers about different aspects of transitions for learners with SEN, there undoubtedly seems to be a key theme emerging: transitions are poorly organised, lacking in accountability, subject to local determinants, and, in most instances, relying far too heavily on mothers to seek out support for their children during pertinent changeover times. It seems essential that with the strong inclusion movement and the apparent lack of structured approaches to transitions for children with SEN, educational systems should advocate urgently for the development of generic transition policies as a guideline for all

schools to follow. Such policies could ensure appropriate support is provided to all students with SEN during the various changeover times they experience in order to access inclusive education within schools and the community. Although the provision of common policies might be a positive move toward greater accountability by schools, it is important to ensure that these are adopted only as guidelines as it is critical to individualise these to confirm that they meet the diversity of needs of learners with SEN. Without a vital and much stronger focus on transitions for learners with SEN, supported by appropriate planning mechanisms and directions, the inclusion movement is likely to struggle as schools and communities seek to address the diverse needs of an increasing number of learners during a plethora of transition periods.

References

- Alquraini, T., & Gut, D. (2012). Critical components of successful inclusion of students with severe disabilities: Literature review. *International Journal of Special Education*, 27(1), 42–59.
- Byrnes, Z. (2012). Educational psychologists in the community: Supporting parents of children with Down syndrome through times of transition. *Educational & Child Psychology*, 29(3), 81–92.
- Forlin, C. (2010). Teacher education reform for enhancing teachers' preparedness for inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14, 649–653. doi:10.1080/13603111003778353
- Quintero, N., & McIntyre, L.L. (2011). Kindergarten transition preparation: A comparison of teacher and parent practices for children with autism and other developmental disabilities. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 38, 411–420. doi:10.1007/s10643-010-0427-8
- Rasmussen, L., Haggith, K., & Roberts, J. (2012). Transition to adulthood, moving needs into practice: A Canadian community partnership response to new adult service needs for individuals with disabilities. *Relational Child & Youth Care Practice*, 25(3), 29–38.