



Transition to School for Children with Disabilities

A Review of the Literature
April 2010

scope

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

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A Review of the Literature**

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Contents

1. Executive Summary.....	1
<i>Background</i>	1
<i>Summary of findings</i>	1
<i>Conclusion</i>	2
2. Introduction.....	3
3. Conceptual Frameworks.....	5
4. Policy Context.....	8
<i>National policies</i>	8
<i>Victoria State Government policies</i>	8
5. Research Findings.....	11
<i>Key findings from the literature</i>	11
<i>Importance and impact of transition to school</i>	11
<i>Difficulties and barriers to successful transition to school</i>	12
<i>Strategies to promote a successful transition to school</i>	13
<i>Community-wide strategies</i>	14
<i>Strategies for child and family</i>	15
<i>Strategies for kindergarten, school and other service providers</i>	17
<i>Measuring outcomes of transition programs and practices</i>	18
6. Review of Practice Guides and Resources.....	20
<i>International</i>	20
<i>National</i>	20
<i>Victoria</i>	21
7. Key Themes and Trends.....	24
8. Identified gaps in the literature.....	25
9. Recommendations for Future Research and Practice.....	27
10. References.....	28

1. Executive Summary

Background

Scope carried out a review of the literature concerning the transition to school process for children with a disability or developmental delay and their families. This literature review will inform the next phase of the project, involving a pilot of service delivery that reflects best practice.

This literature review aimed to identify key issues to improve the transition to school for children with a disability or developmental delay, with a focus on how to best support this transition, including the children, their families, early childhood educators and intervention professionals and local communities. It aimed to identify gaps in knowledge and provide guidance for a future pilot project of service delivery to support the transition to school.

A targeted review of the literature included an examination of existing reviews, research papers identified through online databases and published and web based resources from key organizations that are leading research in the field.

Summary of findings

The research evidence revealed a number of key issues around the transition process for children with disability or developmental delay, their families, early childhood educators and intervention professionals and local communities. The literature highlights the following:

- The impact of the transition process for children with disability or developmental delay and their families
- The recognition of additional stressors that families of a child with a disability or developmental delay face during this transition period
- The difficulties and barriers confronted during this time include: difficulties with administrative support, such as differences in eligibility criteria between programs; and difficulty communicating between programs; a change in intervention philosophy and training between environments; family issues, such as difficulty establishing new networks and not feeling welcome; and issues around delays in the implementation of transition practices or lack of individual support for the process
- Many promising practices were identified in the literature; they include a range of community-wide strategies, family and child strategies, and strategies targeting educators and other service providers.
- There is no consensus in the literature on what constitutes a successful transition to school; this has implications for how the outcomes of this process may be measured.
- The identification of a number of frameworks which firmly establish the focus on an ecological approach to transition, with consideration of the

wide range of relationships that impact on the success of the transition, rather than a focus on child 'school readiness'.

Conclusion

This review found no robust evidence for an empirically tested transition program that was effective for supporting the transition to school for children with a disability or developmental delay. However, a significant understanding was evident in the literature of the perceived difficulties faced by families, educators and other service providers in supporting the transition process. Many promising transition practices were identified as were several potential ecological frameworks which could be used to guide the selection of transition practices and the evaluation of outcomes in future community-wide and individual focused transition research projects and practice.

2. Introduction

Significant interest exists amongst early childhood intervention professionals and educators regarding how to best support children during their transition to school. The Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) has outlined policy and practices to support this process in documents such as the Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2008) and Transition: A Positive Start to School (DEECD, 2009). In consultation with DEECD, Scope has identified a need to further investigate supporting the transition to school, particularly for children with disabilities.

Scope has developed a project which includes two parts. The first part is a literature review, that is, the present document, and the second part is a larger project, informed by this review, involving a pilot of service delivery that reflects best practice for the transition to school for children with disabilities and developmental delay.

This literature review aims to identify key issues to improve the transition to school for children with a disability or developmental delay, with a focus on how to best support this transition, including the children, their families, early childhood educators and intervention professionals and local communities. It aims to identify gaps in knowledge and provide guidance for a future pilot project of service delivery to support the transition to school. It is not intended to be an exhaustive examination of the research literature, but rather a targeted review which reflects current knowledge and best practice in the field.

The search strategy included an examination of:

- existing literature reviews (Centre for Equity & Innovation in Early Childhood [CEIEC], 2008; Rosenkoetter, et al., 2009)
- research papers identified through online databases, including PsychoINFO, Medline, Web of Science, JSTOR, ERIC, Education Research Complete and Cinahl
- published and web based resources from key organisations leading research in this field (e.g. National Early Childhood Transition Center, Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development)

The following search terms, and synonyms were used:

- transition (school readiness, starting school, beginning school)
- inclusion
- disabilities (developmental delay, special needs, special education)
- capacity building
- teacher
- mentoring
- models of service delivery (program, process, best practice)

- evaluation (measurement, tools, assessment)
- child

Abstracts were scanned for relevance, and potential papers were identified. Relevant papers were included if they were published in the last 10 years in English. Research literature was prioritised on the basis of whether it had undergone external peer review, and included detailed information about study population, sampling procedures and research methods. Due to the limited number of studies which met these criteria, additional research was considered and included when it added to discussion, particularly that regarding potential future research. Limitations in this research will be discussed in this review. Targeted reference scanning and citation tracking of key articles was used to minimize the chance of missing key studies.

3. Conceptual Frameworks

Transition has been defined as a “process of movement or change from one environment to another” (Rous & Hallam, 2006). In a similar vein, the Department of Education, Western Australia (2010, para 1) states, “transition is defined as the movement from one set of circumstances to another resulting in changes to environments, relationships, behaviours, routines, roles and expectations. It is a process of change that for some may require substantial preparation planning, adjustment and support”. It is recognized that early childhood transitions, such as moving from kindergarten to school, involve a change in both services and the personnel who provide the services, instructional philosophies and learning environments (Rice & O'Brien, 1990; Troup & Malone, 2002). These transition points are seen as significant events in a child and family's life, [SUGGEST: in the lives of children and their families] that involve considerable challenges and stress for children, families, sending and receiving staff (Rosenkoetter, Hains, & Fowler, 1994).

There are several theoretical frameworks that are useful for conceptualizing the transition process. These are the *Bioecological Model* (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), *McCubbin and McCubbin's Resiliency Model of Family Stress, Adjustment, and Adaptation* (DeMarco, Ford-Gilboe, Friedmann, McCubbin, & McCubbin, 2000) and the *Conceptual Model for Transition* (Rous & Hallam, 2006). Each of these is described below:

- *Bioecological Model* (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) – Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model focuses on the child's development within the context of family and immediate environments, as well as the larger, more distal influences of the broader community. Interactions and relationships are seen as influencing development and occur within the passage of time. Transition to school can be viewed in this way, with the child at the centre of the process and being influenced by interactions with the surrounding environment.
- *McCubbin and McCubbin's Resiliency Model of Family Stress, Adjustment, and Adaptation* (Bomar & Cooper, 1996; DeMarco, et al., 2000) – The resiliency model focuses on a family's strengths and vulnerabilities, including patterns of family functioning and how the family assess the situation, problem solve and utilize coping skills. The model combines these factors with consideration of the available resources to explore how a family initially adjusts to a change and adapts to recover from a crisis. Connelly (2007) applied the *Resiliency Model of Family Stress, Adjustment and Adaptation* to the transition process and emphasized the role of practitioners in helping each family explore what the transition means to them, supports available, stressors and how they cope with these, as well as the expectations of the family in relation to the transition outcome. By asking guided questions centered on these

themes, practitioners can develop a plan with the family to address their needs and concerns. She highlighted the importance of communication, active involvement and well-informed families and providers to ensure a smooth transition.

- *Conceptual Model for Transition* (Rous & Hallam, 2006; Rous, Hallam, Harbin, McCormick, & Jung, 2007) – This model was developed to understand the complexity involved in the transition experience for children with disabilities and their families. It is based on a combination of two theoretical frameworks, bioecological theory and organizational systems theory. The model encompasses two distinct levels, the first reflecting the traditional ecological model and emphasizing the many environmental factors (including individual providers, programs, the local service system and the State system) that influence transition experiences for children and their families. The second level involves three specific program and community factors which influence the transition process. These are:
 - interagency variables (presented as a triangle of supportive infrastructure, communication and relationships, and alignment and continuity)
 - transition practices and activities, and
 - outcomes related to child and family preparation and adjustment.

Rous and colleagues (Rous, et al., 2007) present this model as a means of planning transition support activities as an outcomes measurement framework and also for designing future research studies to understand transition for children with disabilities and their families.

Similarities across these models include:

- The consideration of many environmental factors which influence a child and family's experience of the transition process
- The acknowledgement of transition being a process occurring in time as opposed to a single, one-off event
- The core concepts of the Conceptual Model for Transition is based on Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model

Differences across these models include:

- The Conceptual Model for Transition is the most specifically targeted to the particular issues related to early childhood transitions for children with a disability and their families.
- The family is the core consideration of the Resiliency Model, in contrast to the broad consideration of many potential influences on the child and family that are given by the other models.

These differences seem to be points of emphasis rather than a lack of consideration of influences on the process, given that the family is a key factor included in both the Bioecological Model and Conceptual Model for Transition and that broader community influences would affect all aspects of a family's functioning in the Resiliency Model.

While there are points of difference between the models, many presenting common variables are posited to influence a child and their family's transition experience. Key issues, such as the child's individual development; the relationships between children, families, and agencies; learning how agencies can best support the family; how this process occurs in time; and how this process occurs within the broader community, highlight factors to consider when reviewing both the research literature and ways forward to design intervention based on best practice in this field.

4. Policy Context

Key national and Victorian State Government policies outline the Government's commitment to early childhood development. There is a number of relevant overarching policies, as well as transition and disability specific documents, detailing policies and programs which affect children transitioning from kindergarten to 'prep' in Victoria. A number of relevant policies are presented below.

National policies:

- *Investing in the Early Years – A National Early Childhood Development Strategy* (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009a): An agreement between Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, focusing on all aspects of children's development from before birth to age eight. It presents a vision that by 2020, all children will have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation. This strategy outlines a number of reform initiatives aiming to drive early childhood outcomes by strengthening supports for children, parents, carers and communities, and by developing responsive early childhood development services.
- *National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care* (COAG, 2009b): This framework is one of the mechanisms identified for achieving the vision outlined in *Investing in the Early Years – A National Early Childhood Development Strategy*. It aims to raise quality and drive improvement in early childhood education and care, and school age care services by:
 - streamlining regulatory arrangements
 - introducing a National Quality Standard including the *Early Years Framework* and quality rating system
 - establishing a new national body jointly governed between the Commonwealth, the States and Territories.

Services will transition to the new standard by 1st January, 2012. The National Quality Standard and Early Years Framework will aim to ensure that the necessary environments, facilities, staffing, resources and management structures are in place to deliver high quality education and care nationally.

Victorian State Government policies:

These overarching policy statements support outcomes for children across the early years: *Growing, Learning and Thriving* (DEECD, 2009b), *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* (DEECD, 2008), *Improving Victoria's Early Childhood Workforce* (DEECD, 2009c), and *Victorian Early Years Learning Framework: For all Children from Birth to Eight Years* (DEECD, 2009e).

- *Growing, Learning and Thriving*: This policy focuses on birth to eight years and includes five actions: the provision of high-quality and inclusive environments for learning, health and development; leading change and innovation; supporting parents and meeting the changing needs of children, families and communities; increasing participation in universal services; and strengthening the early childhood workforce.
- *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*: Outlines the Government's agenda for learning and development from birth to adulthood. Strategies identified in the Blueprint include system improvement, partnership with parents and communities and workforce reform. Under the strategy of system improvement, one of the actions listed is improved transitions.
- *Improving Victoria's Early Childhood Workforce*: This policy is an extension of the Blueprint's aims. Goals include attracting an adequate supply of qualified early childhood professionals; supporting a professional workforce that is committed to developing its knowledge and skills; supporting the workforce to collaborate across professionals and work with families to meet children's needs; and enabling early childhood professionals to create rewarding careers.
- *Victoria Early Years Learning Framework* identifies five early years learning and development outcomes for children from birth to eight years and links these to the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) Levels 1 and 2. It also identifies practice principles which underpin how early childhood professionals create respectful and caring relationships with children and their families. The third aspect of this framework encompasses transition processes and the support that is provided.

Transition: A Positive Start to School (DEECD, 2009) and the *Sharing Our Journey* (DEECD, 2009d) resource present specific guidelines for the transition to school process for children with a disability:

- *Transition: A Positive Start to School*: Provides guidelines for families, early childhood services, outside-of-school-hours care services and schools with the aim of helping children and families to become ready to start school, and schools to become ready for them. This guide introduces the Transition Learning and Development Statement and provides a resource kit which outlines time frames and suggests transition activities.
- *Sharing Our Journey*: This resource has been developed to guide the transition of children with a severe disability and their families. It includes a protocol for early childhood services and schools, support groups for families and early childhood professionals and an information kit for families. Information sheets for families, a planner outlining actions to support the transition and an additional section of the Transition Learning

and Development statement which a family can elect to complete are provided.

In addition to the Commonwealth and Victorian Government policies outlined above, the Centre for Community Child Health in Melbourne has produced a policy brief titled, *Rethinking the transition to school: Linking schools and early years services* (Centre for Community Child Health [CCCH], 2008). The policy brief targets all children making the transition to school (rather than focusing on children with disabilities) and discusses strategies for improving transitions, including:

- visits to home, early years setting and school
- family meetings with early childhood professionals
- family support groups
- the introduction of more play-based approaches in early stages of primary school to help align the early years services and school curricula
- strengthening links between schools, early years services and communities with funding enabling these linkages to occur

It emphasizes the much wider time frame needed and the importance of well-established relationships between all parties to ensure a smooth transition to school.

5. Research Findings

In keeping with findings from other related reviews (CEIEC, 2008; Malone & Gallagher, 2009; Rosenkoetter, et al., 2009), few empirical studies examining transition practices and outcomes for children with disabilities and their families transitioning to school were identified. None of the identified studies used a randomized design comparing an experimental transition program with a control group receiving standard practice or a comparison transition program. Most of the identified studies used survey, qualitative and mixed research methods to examine the transition process; therefore the findings reveal promising practices rather than empirically tested and validated programs and practices.

Key findings from the literature

Importance and impact of transition to school

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that transition to school for children with disabilities and their families is a complex transition which involves additional stressors (Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron, & Hughes, 2008; Janus, Lefort, Cameron, & Kopechanski, 2007; Kemp, 2003; Rous, Harbin, & McCormick, 2006). In a survey of 2,624 parents of children transitioning to school in Canada, 5% of the sample was identified by the school board as having special needs, and an additional 22.7% were accessing intervention services. Of the 5% identified as having special needs, one third of parents concerned were not satisfied with their child's transition to school, and almost half were not satisfied with the availability of services for their child at school (Janus, et al., 2007). A qualitative review of the transition to school experience of parents of 40 children with special needs also indicated that those who had already transitioned to school (n=20) reported lower perceptions of the quality of care and long waiting periods for school based support than did the parents of children yet to make the transition (Janus, et al., 2008).

The impact of an inadequate transition process to school has not been thoroughly examined for children with disabilities and their families. However, in relation to child skills, a study from the US of 24 children with a diagnosis of intellectual disability (ID) and 43 without a diagnosis showed that children with ID had fewer positive early school experiences and that social skills predicted adaptation to school (McIntyre, Blacher, & Baker, 2006). A large longitudinal study of 3,000 children who showed low cognitive attainment and were considered 'at risk' of developing special educational needs was conducted in England. After participation in a preschool program, the number of children considered 'at risk' had significantly reduced (Taggart et al., 2006). Myers & Pianta (2008) discussed student relationships with teachers and the greater risk of school failure for children who have difficulty forming supportive relationships. These studies highlight the potential for inadequate support of child skill

development to result in long term difficulties adjusting to the school environment and achieving success.

Difficulties and barriers to successful transition to school

Janus et al. (2007) conducted a literature review which presented common barriers to a successful transition to school for children with disabilities. These were grouped in four themes: administrative issues; intervention philosophy and training; family issues; and transition practices. The barriers are presented below:

Administrative Issues

- Special education team members experienced difficulty identifying their roles and responsibilities as well as communicating between programs
- Difficulties accessing all relevant information due to multiple agency involvement
- Differences in diagnostic and eligibility criteria between preschool and school services
- Bureaucracy around duplicate assessments and paperwork for funding

Intervention Philosophy and Training

- Change in intervention philosophy from preschool setting to school setting

Family Issues

- Difficulty establishing new support networks
- Lack of communication with school
- Lack of participation in decisions about the child's education
- Not feeling welcome
- Lack of knowledge about the child's progress at school
- Responsibility of advocacy for the child in the absence of input from an agency that is responsible for facilitating transition

Transition practices

- Transition activities happen after the beginning of the school experience
- Individual transition practices used less than group efforts

In a qualitative study of parents' and service providers' perceptions of transitions in the US (which included transition from early intervention to preschool, preschool to kindergarten, kindergarten to first grade and moving between classes), Dogaru, Rosenkoetter and Rous (2009) acknowledged the many additional stressors that families of children with a disability face. These included meeting and developing relationships with new service providers; the availability

of services and technologies in the new environment; how the child would fit in and be treated by new teachers; and the timeliness of the transition process and the new services that commence.

Rous, Schroeder, Stricklin, Hains and Cox (2008) highlighted family fears about:

- the availability of respite services over the transition period
- a reduction of services in school and home visiting services
- scheduling evaluations related to medical conditions and diagnoses participating in many evaluations and meetings related to the transition, on top of already busy day-to-day work and family commitments.

These researchers also discuss other barriers to a successful transition, including:

- a lack of training for staff in high quality practices supporting transition
- a lack of communication and often unavailability of critical information, such as which classroom the child will attend and the name of their teacher.

Myers (2008) and Prigg (2002) each studied the experiences of occupational therapists when supporting transitions of children with a disability. The therapists in these studies identified the lack of time, difficulty relating with school personnel, and having limited involvement as barriers to supporting transition processes.

In the Victorian context, when a child with a disability and their family begin school, they often experience the change in intervention philosophy described by Janus et al. (2007). Most commonly, children who have been receiving Early Childhood Intervention Services (ECIS) will experience a shift from a family-centred practice model to a child-centred model focused on achieving a school curriculum. When using a family-centred practice model to guide intervention, practitioners focus on identifying and supporting family needs and strengths in their community (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1994). Services generally occur in natural learning environments, such as at the family home and in the local community (DEECD, 2009a). In contrast, when a child begins school, services are typically centre-based and contact with families will often be less direct and intense (Kaczmarek, Goldstein, Florey, Carter, & Cannon, 2004; Rous, et al., 2008). Rather than providing families with support for themselves, schools often look to parents to support educational efforts with their child (Dogaru, et al., 2009).

Strategies to promote a successful transition to school

Given the paucity of the experimental studies that were identified, there is a lack of clear evidence for a particular set of transition practices which will ensure a successful transition to school for children with disabilities. Nor is there consensus on what defines a successful transition. Many studies have examined

parental and teacher perception of success in the transition, and some have measured children's behaviour in class, such as on-task behaviour; however, there are arguably many more factors involved in measuring the outcome of a transition process, including child perception of success (Kemp, 2003; McIntyre, et al., 2006; Rosenkoetter, et al., 2009). Dogaru, et al. (2009) also identify school adjustment and positive attitudes towards school as important outcomes of successful transition (Dogaru, et al., 2009). This review has identified a set of promising practices to promote a successful transition to school for children with a disability and their families. These are discussed below.

Community-wide strategies

- *Collaboration between agencies* – It is widely acknowledged that collaboration between agencies is required to ensure a smooth transition process, and that this process takes a significant amount of time (Dogaru, et al., 2009; Kemp, 2003; Malone & Gallagher, 2009; Rous, 2008; Rous, et al., 2007; Rous, Myers, & Stricklin, 2007). Researchers have highlighted the need for staff to be released from other duties to allow time for setting up opportunities and participating in interagency collaboration and transition activities (Branson & Bingham, 2009; Kemp, 2003). One method of documenting the collaborative process is the utilizing of interagency agreements. Interagency agreements can guide the transition process and include specific information about:
 - actions, roles and responsibilities of team members (Forest, Horner, Lewis-Palmer, & Todd, 2004; Rous & Hallam, 2006)
 - information about the financial and resource commitment of each agency (Rous & Hallam, 2006)
 - time frames for transition activities (Forest et al., 2004; Rous & Hallam, 2006).

Wischnowski, Fowler & McCollum (2000) examined supports and barriers to writing an interagency agreement for the age three transition to preschool in the US, and found results consistent with Harbin and McNulty's (Harbin & McNulty, 1990) conceptual model of 'interagency collaboration'. According to this model, there are six dimensions of interagency collaboration: climate (e.g., support from decision makers in the agencies), resources (e.g., staff time), policies (alignment of policies across agencies), people (e.g., key individuals), process (e.g., group facilitation, conflict resolution) and agency (e.g., bureaucratic structures of agencies). Participants in the Wischnowski et al. study identified an additional dimension, that being outcomes associated with the process.

- *Continuity and alignment between programs* – Focus groups made up of administrators, practitioners and families in the US identified the need to ensure developmentally appropriate practices are in place at school for children who have developmental delays, and that there is clear alignment

between guidelines, training, structure and curricular across preschool and school programs (Rous et al., 2007).

- *Timeliness of transition* – Timeliness of the transition process was identified in the Critical Incident Study by Dogaru et al.(2009) both in terms of the process occurring on time and allowing adequate time to discuss the needs of individual children and relevant services. This aspect of transition was also identified by the review and survey conducted by Forest et al. (2004). Early childhood professionals rated a range of transition practices in Rous's study (2008) in the US. Practices that were endorsed by 90% of survey respondents included those relating to the timeliness of transition activities. In particular, respondents emphasized that timelines for referral processes, transition activities, enrollment procedures and eligibility processes should be clearly specified.
- *Training and technical assistance in the community* – Rous, Hemmeter and Schuster (1999) presented the Sequenced Transition to Education in the Public Schools (STEPS) Model, used as a tool to build community capacity to facilitate transitions from early intervention to preschool in the US. The model aimed to encourage development of formal transition procedures within four areas: administration, staff involvement and training, family involvement and child preparation and follow-up. The transition procedures were aimed at achieving successful placements in inclusive settings. In the study by Rous and colleagues, systems change occurred for all included sites, with the most significant change occurring in the areas of child preparation and follow-up, the outlining of staff roles and responsibilities and staff training and administrative policies. The study highlighted the time commitments involved in this process of community planning and the importance of participants determining for themselves the areas of change that need to occur.
- *Community resources* – Organizations that help families understand their rights in relation to transitioning to school as well as community and neighborhood resources that increase a child and their family's participation in community activities have been identified as resources that support transition to school for children with disabilities (Rous et al., 2007)
- *Evaluation of transition activities* – Evaluation of transition activities has become increasingly acknowledged in the literature as an important part of the transition planning process, along with the need to pass the formal evaluation of the process on to an administrator, who is responsible for the transition planning (Forest et al., 2004).

Rous and Hallam (Rous & Hallam, 2006) stress the importance of evaluation efforts reflecting local transition practices. They suggest integrating evaluation into a local plan by asking questions such as: What

are the expected outcomes of the activity?; Who will benefit and how?; What are the best ways to gather information about the change and who needs to receive the outcome information?

Strategies for child and family

- *Support for families' participation in process* – Trusting, positive relationships between agencies and families can ease the stress of the transition (Rosenkoetter, et al., 2009). Beyond the support provided by centre-based preschool professionals, Kaczmarek, Goldstein, Florey, Carter and Cannon (2004) in a US study, highlight the value of parent-to-parent support by trained family consultants. They found that parents identified a number of benefits to this approach, such as the provision of information, emotional support and contributions to improved parenting. Parents also identified the value of this program in preparing them for the transition to school the following year. The reflections of respondents in Dogaru et al.'s (2009) Critical Incident Study also highlighted support for families during the transition period. Parents' comments in this study reflected how much they valued the support of professionals who knew their child well. Russell (2005) conducted a qualitative review of 19 families' expectations as they started school. Results showed that families sought support to access ongoing and accurate information, greater knowledge and experience of potential schools that their child may attend, and the opportunity to discuss their expectation of beginning school.

Participants in Rous, Myers and Stricklin's (2007) focus group study discussed the importance of family involvement in planning meetings, sharing information with families and preparation activities, such as workshops designed to help parents understand the transition process, as effective ways to support family participation. A survey of early childhood professionals in the US also validated the transition practices of assessing and addressing family needs, the provision of information, linking to resources and services, and meaningful participation as partners in program and community-wide transition efforts (Rous, 2008).

- *Identification of potential program placements and services for the child in the new environment, including visiting new classroom* – Forest et al. (2004) identified 25 important transition elements from the literature and built these into a survey tool that was used with the parents and teachers of three children with autism. Results of this study and a focus group study by Rous et al. (2007) highlight the importance of early agency intervention and family identification of potential program placements and services for their child, including child, family and teacher visits to classrooms.

- *Teaching children skills in preparation for the school environment* – In a study of 33 children with intellectual disabilities and their teachers in Australia, Kemp and Carter (2005) found that teachers nominated classroom, social and self-help skills as critical to school success. Children who were identified by teachers as being more successfully integrated at the end of the year demonstrated better on-task behaviour and response to group directions; however, the authors noted that the relationship between direct measures of this behaviour and teachers' perceptions of this behaviour was weak. This finding points to the need for caution when interpreting research based entirely on the perceptions of school staff. In two other studies, Chadwick and Kemp (2000, 2002) found that self-help and classroom skills were nominated as important survival skills for the classroom.

In the US, McIntyre et al. (2006) conducted a study investigating child characteristics which predict early adaptation to school. Participants were 67 children with an intellectual disability, their mothers and teachers. Results demonstrated that social skills as measured by the Social Skills Rating System (completed by both mothers and teachers) reliably predicted adaptation to school. It is important to note that adaptation to school was defined as having few teacher-reported problem behaviours, and positive student-teacher relationships.

In her study of transition practices, Rous (2008), identified the importance of ensuring children have opportunities to develop and practice skills that they need for the next environment. Collectively these studies suggest that teachers and parents highly value the presence of social, self-help and classroom skills in the preparatory year of school, and children should be given adequate opportunities to develop these as well as other skills that may be needed for successful transitions to the school environment.

- *Instructional activities* – Various instructional activities, including home visits by teaching staff, formal orientation events and individualized materials such as provision of a calendar of events, daily schedules, transition packages or handouts with information and suggested preparation activities have also been recognized as ways to enhance the transition process (Forest, et al., 2004; Rous, et al., 2007).

Strategies for kindergarten, school and other service providers

- *Experience of high quality preschool programs* – The Early Years Transition and Special Educational Needs (EYTSEN) project is a longitudinal study of a large sample of UK children between the ages of three and seven (Taggart, et al., 2006). Findings of this study included the benefit of high quality preschool programs in reducing numbers of children considered 'at risk' of developing special education needs.

- *Designated individual to lead the transition process* – Having an individual responsible for coordinating a child’s transition to school is considered an important strategy in terms of providing leadership and support for the transition process (Forest, et al., 2004; Rous, et al., 2007)
- *Support from administration* – Support from school administration, as well as support at a State level, was considered important by respondents in Rous et al.’s (2007) study of 43 practitioners, family members and administrators involved in planning transition processes for children with a disability. This support included provision of time to communicate with others and build collaborative relationships.
- *Preparation of the school environment* – Preparation of the physical school environment, as well as the behaviours and attitudes of service providers at school, are identified important strategies to promote successful transitions to school for children with disabilities (Dogaru, et al., 2009; Forest, et al., 2004). Notably, the behaviours and attitudes of service providers have a bearing on the views formed by parents and other service providers about the transition process (Dogaru, et al., 2009). Additionally, a survey study of parents, sending [UNCLEAR TERM?]service providers and receiving teachers of 314 children with disabilities, sheds light on key factors related to teacher perception of success. These include receiving school attitude and school community acceptance of the child; receiving teacher perception of the adequacy of support received; the preparation of parents of other children in the class; and receiving teacher perception of the value of liaising with parents (Chadwick & Kemp, 2002).

Measuring outcomes of transition programs and practices

As discussed earlier in this review, no clear consensus is present in the literature regarding what determines a successful transition to school for children with a disability or developmental delay and their families. Many studies use measurement of parent or teacher perception of satisfaction or success as outcome measures. Rous et al. (2006) and Harbin, Rous, Peeler, Schuster and McCormick (2007) have proposed a framework for conceptualizing child and family outcomes for transition. Three proximal child outcomes were identified:

1. Engagement with others and the new environment
2. Adaptation to the structure and culture of the setting
3. Continued growth and development

The distal outcome for the transition process for the child is the achieving of academic success in school.

Four proximal family transition outcomes include:

1. Knowledge
2. Skills to facilitate their child's development
3. Adaptation and meaningful participation
4. Self-efficacy

The family's engagement and involvement in their child's program is considered the distal outcome in the transition process. The outcomes are seen as inter-related, able to indicate the degree of success of the transition process and also influenced by the amount of time a child and their family needs to prepare and adjust to the new setting. They suggest a critical time period of between 4-12 weeks for children to adjust to the new setting. The authors propose that this framework be used to strategically guide the choice of transition strategies and systematically evaluate the implemented strategies.

In the reviewed literature, two potential assessment tools were identified to measure the degree of success of the transition process for a child and their family. Harbin et al. (2007) provided the example of the Family Benefits Inventory which measures family outcomes in four areas, including knowledge, skills, well-being (includes self-efficacy) and community participation. Based on a review of the literature, Forest et al. (2004) developed a 26-item interview, which can also be used in survey format. Twenty-five transition elements (identified as important by parents, preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers for the successful transition of young children with autism from preschool to kindergarten) are built into the survey instrument. The authors have called the survey, 'Elements for Transition to Kindergarten' (ETK), and suggest that it could be used to guide transition intervention. They also acknowledge the need to test the reliability, validity and sensitivity of the ETK as a measurement tool.

In Rous and Hallam's book, 'Tools for Transition in Early Childhood' (2006), the authors present the 'Community Transition System Impact Evaluation Survey' as a means to evaluate community-wide transition programs. A photocopy-able version of the form was included for use by local transition groups. They also emphasize the need for evaluation efforts to be configured to capture local information which will be meaningful to the community.

6. Review of Practice Guides and Resources

A search of the internet using the identified key search terms and targeted reference scanning was used to identify international, national and state practice guides and resources to support a child with a disability and their family's transition to school. Additional book resources were identified during the database search. Relevant practice guides and resources are presented below.

International

National Early Childhood Transition Center

The National Early Childhood Transition Center (NECTC) in the US conducts research investigating factors which promote a successful transition for young children with a disability. Their research explores which practices and strategies enhance early childhood transitions and lead to positive school outcomes. NECTC has a website which provides access to publications such as reports and research briefs; and a Transition TiPS web-based tool which guides the choice of particular practices and strategies that may be used during the transition process.

Tools for Transition in Early Childhood: a Step-by-Step Guide for Agencies, Teachers, & Families (Rous & Hallam, 2006)

This book presents a community-based approach for establishing transition processes and policies for children who have and do not have a disability. It provides practical resource tools for setting up an interagency team to plan transitions in their community, including templates with permission to photocopy.

National

South Australia- Department for Education and Children's Services

South Australia's Ministerial Advisory Committee: Students with Disabilities was established to investigate transitions for young children with a disability. An initial report (Ministerial Advisory Committee: Students with Disabilities, 2008) documents findings to date in relation to five Children's Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting. The Children's Centres have co-located childcare and preschool facilities. Results of qualitative interviews with staff indicated that the Children's Centres and their collaboration with disability agencies were in the early stages of establishing transition processes for children with disabilities but this was a strong model for working in partnership. Outcomes of the report recommended the development of an overarching set of guidelines for the transition of children with disabilities.

A resource folder was produced by the Department of Education, Training and Employment entitled, “Including Children with Disabilities and/or Developmental Delay in Preschools: Guidelines for Successful Practice (Department of Education, Training & Employment, 1999). This resource outlined best practice strategies, planning considerations and responsibilities for supporting the transition process for children with a disability or developmental delay.

New South Wales – Department of Education and Training

The New South Wales Department of Education and Training (1997) produced a guide for transitions to school for young children with special learning needs. This guide documents the process of establishing an early learning support team who begin to meet at the beginning of the year before school entry. The process includes the identifying of a team coordinator who takes responsibility for overseeing the process. The guide lists detailed actions for the early learning support team to carry out and suggests time frames for achieving those actions. It outlines the roles and responsibilities of team members and includes questions to guide evaluation of the process.

Victoria

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Transition: A Positive Start to School (DEECD, 2009) and *Sharing Our Journey* (DEECD, 2009d) were developed by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Victoria, and have been briefly discussed in the Policy Context section of this review.

Transition: A Positive Start to School presents guidelines for all children transitioning to school, while the *Sharing Our Journey* resource provides information specific to children with a disability. The Transition Learning and Development Statements, which were introduced in Victoria in 2009, are utilized for all children transitioning to school and include an optional section in which the parent can provide additional information about their child with a disability or developmental delay. Information in the Transition Learning and Development Statement summarizes a child’s strengths, identifies their individual approaches and how to best support a child in their learning and development (DEECD, 2009). The aim of the statement is to provide information to the child’s Prep teacher to assist them in getting to know each child.

The *Transition: A Positive Start to School Resource Kit* outlines ten promising practices to support transition to school for all children. These promising practices were identified in an evaluation of 30 pilots of the *Transition: A Positive Start to School* initiative conducted by The University of Melbourne (Astbury, 2009). They include:

- Reciprocal visits for children – visits to school as well as children who have already started school visiting early childhood services.
- Reciprocal visits for educators
- Learning and Development Statements and transition meetings
- Joint professional learning
- Local transition networks
- Buddy programs
- Family involvement activities
- Learning programs responsive to children
- Social story boards that provide a short story about an individual child starting school
- A community-level transition timetable that provides guidelines for appropriate time frames for transition activities.

The 30 pilot studies of the *Transition: A Positive Start to School* initiative were developed to support local needs and therefore did not involve the implementation of one single program to support transition. A qualitative evaluation was conducted to gather information. Initial findings from the 30 pilot studies include:

- The importance of school transition in shaping ongoing learning
- Challenges to starting up pilots, such as, limited time, workload commitments and cross-sector coordination. Factors supporting implementation included collaborative work through local networks, leadership, local planning, joint professional development opportunities and then linking of activities to policy planning
- Benefits included reduced anxiety on the first day of school for children; earlier identification of developmental delays; improved relationships between parents and early childhood and school professionals; increased family engagement with child's education; and improved communication and understanding of educational practices between agencies
- A provisional theory of change model was developed to guide State-wide implementation of these promising practices.

The *Sharing Our Journey* protocol sets out a plan for children who have a severe disability and have received a support package from the Kindergarten Inclusion Support Service. At kindergarten, parents may participate in a Program Support Group with the kindergarten teacher and early childhood intervention staff. A Student Support Group will form in the preparation for school entry and continue during the child's time at school. This group will apply for additional school funding through the Program for Students with Disabilities if required. The *Sharing Our Journey* protocol suggests beginning transition support activities in Term 2 of kindergarten. Suggested activities for Term 2 and 3 include:

- Enrolling the child at school and advising the school that the child has special needs
- The school initiating the gathering of information to support an application for funding

- The parents receiving a *Sharing Our Journey Parent Kit*

Suggested activities for Term 3 and 4 include:

- Information gathering – medical and child development documentation, kindergarten observations and Transition Learning and Development Statements
- The identification of key school contact/s
- The kindergarten teacher convening a Kindergarten-to-School Support group meeting
- Parent and child visit the school with the support of the Kindergarten-to-School key worker (identified at a meeting and often the family service coordinator)
- The planning of a Student Support Group meeting for Term 1

Suggested activities for Term 1 of the school year include:

- The Kindergarten-to-School key worker having phone contact with the family and prep teacher
- Student Support Group meeting

Linking Schools and Early Years Project (LSEY)

The Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH), Murdoch Children’s Research Institute at the Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne, is leading the Linking Schools and Early Years Project across three project sites: Footscray (City of Maribyrnong), Corio/Norlane (Greater Geelong City Council) and Hastings (Mornington Peninsula Shire) (CCCH, 2010). This project has three goals:

1. Children and families making a smooth transition between early years services and schools.
2. Early years services and school actively connecting with families.
3. Schools being responsive to the individual learning needs of all children.

At the selected sites, the LSEY project will work with the selected schools, early education and care services, local government and child and family services to build collaborative ways to reduce barriers to learning and development. The project runs from 2007-2012. Seventeen percent of the children included in the sample were identified as having special needs by their parents. A report evaluating Round 1 of data collection for the project discussed the main findings (Valentine & Dinning, 2009). These include:

- Schools and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services taking the transition to school seriously
- Improvement being made where necessary by shifting the focus to schools, services and the community becoming ready for the child rather than the emphasis that schools and services place on ‘readying children’ and their parents.
- Establishing relationships between schools, ECEC services and child and family services on which to build new initiatives.

- Attaining a high level of parental satisfaction with schools and ECEC services.
- Attaining a high level of school and ECEC services' satisfaction with orientation programs and individualized learning.

7. Key Themes and Trends

Table 1 Key Themes and Trends identified

- Recognition of the importance and complexity of the transition to school for children with disabilities or developmental delay and their families, reflected in Victorian Government policy and the literature
- Local guidelines in place to support process – *Sharing Our Journey* resource and use of Transition Learning and Development Statements
- Significant barriers to successful transition to school exist for children with disabilities or developmental delay and their families which can increase anxiety and stress experienced during this process
- A number of promising practices has been identified in the literature, including:
 - Collaboration between agencies and families with formal documentation of team roles, responsibilities and actions
 - Building continuity and alignment between programs
 - Adequate time allowed to prepare for transition
 - Provision of training and technical assistance to staff supporting transition process
 - Presence of community resources to support transition
 - Need for evaluation of transition process
 - Providing support for families' participation in transition process
 - Identification of potential program placements and services with family and child visitation of these programs
 - Teaching children skills in preparation for the move to the next environment
 - Provision of individual and group instructional activities, including home visits by teaching staff, formal orientation events, use of calendars, daily schedules, transition packages
 - Importance of attending a high quality preschool program
 - Designated individual to lead transition process
 - Provision of support from administration
 - Preparation of physical school environment as well as attitude of service providers at school

8. Identified gaps in the literature

Table 2 Identified gaps in the literature

- Lack of clear conceptualization of what constitutes a successful transition to school for children with disabilities or developmental delay and their families
- Very limited number of studies identified which explicitly tested a transition strategy or practice
- Difficult to generalize findings from existing studies due to small sample sizes, absence of comparison groups when testing a practice or program, reduced detail used when reporting methods, such as description of sample population, assessment tools, protocols etc.

9. Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Future research is needed to identify critical variables which can be used to enhance successful transitions to school for children with disabilities or developmental delay and their families. A number of promising practices has now been identified in the literature and are also outlined in Victorian Government policy statements and resource guides. The challenge in this area of research will be to design and conduct rigorous research to empirically test these promising practices in a field which has inherent difficulties regarding sample size and a wide variability in disability and factors affecting outcomes. Nevertheless, studies can use a clear conceptual model of transition, such as Bronfenbrenner's *Bioecological Model* (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) or the *Conceptual Model for Transition* proposed by Rous and Hallam (2006) to guide the selection of promising practices and the choice of outcome measures to evaluate transition programs. These models help to acknowledge and consider the many inter-related factors contributing to success, rather than focusing solely on the concept of child 'school readiness'. There is potential to design experimental studies which compare standard transition support programs with ones which incorporate additional identified promising practices. There is also potential to compare two different transition programs. Maximizing sample sizes, using the randomization of subjects and ensuring sufficient statistical power would be important to enable the generalization of findings.

Clearly conceptualizing what constitutes the success of the transition process, whether the program is a community-based or individual one, will be important to guide the choice of both transition strategy and measurement tool. Use of the Child and Family Outcome Framework may guide the selection of measurement tools targeted towards capturing information about different proximal and distal outcomes. It will also be important to consider the child's perception of the transition process. Use of direct observable measures in combination with survey or interview methods capturing experiences may be useful to validate results.

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