

STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION AND THE TRANSITION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES TO SCHOOL IN NEW SOUTH WALES: AN APPLICATION OF ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

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ABSTRACT

The transition of a child with disabilities to kindergarten presents many challenges for the child, the family and the educator. This paper outlines a heuristic framework based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of development (EST), which will enable multi-level exploration of stakeholder experiences of collaboration in a proposed study of inclusive transitions into NSW government schools. Research has consistently implicated effective collaboration as a fundamental prerequisite to successful inclusion. However, the nature of stakeholder collaborations in inclusive transitions to school has been identified as a weak link in the transitional chain. Applying EST, the proposed case study will explore stakeholder collaborations as the focal proximal process in determining inclusive transitional outcomes. Multi-level, in-depth interviews will be conducted, with parents (microsystemic level), early childhood and primary school teachers (mesosystemic) and representatives of the Department of Education and Training (exosystemic). Policy and practice guideline analysis will inform the research at the macrosystemic level. It is anticipated that this methodology will identify how stakeholders experience transitional collaboration and, secondly, what potential inconsistencies exist between macro-level policies and actual practice. The implications for the planning and implementing of effective transitions for all stakeholders will be considered in light of these findings.

Background to Proposed Study

For any child with a disability, the transition to school can be considered the first and most critical step in the inclusion process (Chadwick & Kemp, 2002). Kindergarten is significant milestone in life (Richardson, 1997), and one which differs socially, environmentally and academically from early childhood environments (Margetts, 1999). For many children with disabilities and their families, this transition will require specialised planning to facilitate continuity as they move across educational environments (Sainato & Morrison, 2001). Research suggests however, that even with the best planning, many experiences of transition are not what they could be.

Collaborative, family focused consultation is explicitly embedded as the guiding communicative framework with respect to the provision of all services for children with disabilities in NSW (see NSW Department of Disability, Ageing and Home Care, 2002; NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004). The New South Wales Department of Education's transition guidelines (1997/2000) articulates that meeting teacher, student and family needs during transition is best facilitated via a flexible, family focused agenda, which engages all professionals and parents in collaborative planning.

The policy framework for transition and inclusion to public schools in New South Wales is contained in the Special Education Handbook for Schools (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1998) This framework operates within a support cycle of appraisal of student need, accessing of services, programming and reappraisal. The policy recommends the establishment of a learning support team, the core members of which are the parent, the principal, the classroom teacher, the school counsellor and the student. This framework, and stakeholder (parent, early childhood and primary school educators and administrators) experiences of it, as children with disabilities move into mainstream government kindergartens in NSW, is the focus of the proposed study.

Of the multitude of factors that have been reported to influence the outcomes of inclusive education, perhaps none is regarded as more critical than that of collaborative consultation (Hanson & Widerstrom, 1993; Odom & Schwartz, 2002). However, collaboration is "a nebulous concept" (Walther-Thomas, Korinek & McLaughlin, 2005, 183) and many personal, organisational and external barriers appear to hinder positive outcomes of collaborative efforts in schools (Spedding, 2005).

Collaborative consultation is widely acknowledged as best practice in the planning and implementation of educational support in inclusive settings (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson & Beegle, 2004; Dinnebeil & McInerney, 2001). The practice has been variously described as constituted by positive trusting and equal partnerships (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson & Beegle, 2004), wherein stakeholders possess a shared vision in working together to solve a common problem (Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman, Gerke & Higgins, 2001; Schulte & Osborne, 2003). Importantly, with the evolution of family centred policies, particularly in early childhood education, the involvement of parents is now regarded as a fundamental indicator of best practice in inclusive education (LaMontagne, Russell & Janson, 1998).

Long established paradigms of, and social responses to disability, childhood development, school readiness, transition and indeed models of consultation are being challenged by the emergence of ecological models of human development (see Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Petriwskyj, Thorpe & Tayler, 2005; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000; Villa, Thousand, Paolucci-Whitcomb & Nevin, 1990). Traditional, maturationalist assumptions of school readiness for example, which have informed the bulk of transitional research to date, are giving way to an interactionist view which acknowledges not only the developmental level and qualities of the child, but also the resources, perceptions and objectives of the community within which the child develops (Dockett & Perry, 2002; Meisels, 1999). How these emergent understandings are being realised and experienced within the context of inclusive transitions in New South Wales is an important and relatively unexplored question.

The Literature

Research suggests that while early childhood and primary school educators strongly endorse the philosophy of collaborative practice, this does not necessarily translate into practice. (Hopps, 2004; Timperley, McNaughton, Howie & Robinson 2003). Timperley, *et al* found the expectations that early childhood and primary school teachers have of one another in regards to the facilitation of transitions to school are very different. Furthermore, over 70% of both early childhood and primary teachers interviewed perceived that the other party did not take enough responsibility for the transition of children. So even when respondents reported strong relationships with the other service provider, few respondents expressed satisfaction with transition processes overall. In a case study of two NSW government primary schools, Hopps (2004) sought to explore teacher beliefs and practices about mainstream preschool-school communication. The findings of this study with regard to teacher beliefs about the importance of communicating mirror those of the Timperley study. There appears to be a philosophical divide between early childhood and primary school teachers and systems, which contributes to a lack of professional understanding and difficulties in establishing meaningful dialogue (Dockett & Perry, 2002a, Hopps, 2004).

Special education research addressing the practice and influence of collaborative relationships in New South Wales is conspicuous by its paucity. The bulk of the literature has explored transitions involving typically developing children. With respect to children with disabilities, Australian research has focused on the identification of perceived "critical factors" for "successful transition" (Chadwick, 2000; Chadwick & Kemp, 2002; Kemp, 2001, 2003), school readiness and classroom survival skills (Kemp & Carter, 2000, 2005). While the importance of this research can by no means be discounted, the lack of academic inquiry into the broader social context of inclusive education in public schools in NSW is of concern.

The findings of Chadwick & Kemp (2002) suggest that while parents and early childhood educators consider collaborative consultation to be an important component in successful inclusive transitions, primary teachers do not. Parents and sending service providers rated issues such as collaboration, attitude and child/parental support highly, while the primary concerns for receiving teachers were related to information and supports that those teachers required to meet student needs in the classroom. Kindergarten teachers rated classroom skills, such as following teacher directions, self help skills and social skills, as the most important factors for the successful integration of children with intellectual disabilities into mainstream kindergartens (Kemp & Carter, 2005).

Westwood & Graham (2000) explored the question of collaborative consultation as experienced by teachers of students with additional needs in mainstream primary settings in New South Wales and South Australia. While the majority of teachers in each state perceived the practice of collaborative consultation to be of significant value, lack of time to consult on, plan and implement objectives, and lack of training in collaborative relationships were cited as the most significant barriers to implementing effective collaboration. These findings continue the trend of research indicating that while two thirds of general educators support the practice of inclusion, less than one third feel they possess the time, skills, training or resources to implement the practice effectively in the classroom (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996).

Family involvement is strongly implicated in successful experiences of inclusion and transition (Dettmer, Thurston & Dyck, 1999). Cross, Traub, Hutter-Pishgahi & Shelton (2004) sought to identify factors that contributed to the successful inclusion of seven preschoolers, with multiple disabilities, at different community-based sites. The relationship between parents, staff and other professionals was identified as a critical factor in the successful inclusion of these children. These relationships were reciprocal, interdependent, based on mutual respect, and ongoing. Teachers actively sought parental input, and parents had an attitude of shared responsibility towards the inclusion of their children. The attitudes of staff and administrators were also found to be critical in the successful inclusion of the children in this study. Conversely, relationships between parents and kindergarten teachers are typically more formal and infrequent, and communications more negative (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 1999). Pianta & Kraft Sayre (2003) have attributed this shift in relationships across systems, and between families and providers, to fundamental differences in culture and expectations on students and teachers in kindergarten settings.

Recent research from the Special Education Centre at Newcastle University explored parental experiences of children transitioning from an early intervention program (Conway, personal communication, Aug 2005). Consistent with existing

literature, many parents in this study reported disparity between the readiness of early childhood and primary school teachers to engage with them. Respondents identified that the re-establishment of parent-professional relationships was the most significant difficulty in the transition process. Conversely, the most positive aspect of the transition process for these parents was the support received by early childhood intervention staff. Conway *et al* also found that the early establishment and maintenance of relationships with well informed school staff contributed to positive transitional experiences. Significantly, 66% of these parents described their transitional experience as negative. Given the highly supportive framework from which the children of these parents transitioned, the findings of this study raise significant questions about how well stakeholders in inclusive early childhood transitions in New South Wales are being supported, and, indeed, how effectively policy is being implemented in early childhood transitions to kindergartens in New South Wales.

Social Context of the Proposed Study

1. Early Childhood Education in Australia and NSW.

The reader is referred to three recent reports. Press & Hayes (2001), Walker (2004) and Hackett (2004) reported on early childhood service in Australia, government preschools in Australia and the Early Childhood Intervention Coordination Program (ECICP) in NSW respectively. While all three reports noted the important role that formal early childhood education plays in Australia, common concerning themes emerged from all three inquiries with regard to the service provided to families of children with disabilities. Questions of access, funding, program inconsistencies and lack of support for teachers emerged from these reports. Walker (2004, 63) reported that preschool services are “fragmented,” resulting in the author drawing an analogy with a lottery system, and the ECICP relies heavily on the goodwill of individuals to meet the needs of families and children (Hackett, 2004). In a joint submission to the Walker inquiry, the teacher and parent of a child with special needs noted that their experience was one of “a quagmire of paperwork” and rigmarole, which only recurred when the parent sought to transition the child to school (Walker, 2004, 60).

2. Public Education in NSW.

Almost a decade has passed since the findings of the Integration/Inclusion Feasibility Study (McRae, 1996) were published in New South Wales. Despite some changes being made in response to the McRae report, such as reduction in class sizes and the consolidation of enrolment policy, significant concerns remain with respect to the funding and support provided to teachers in meeting the needs of children with disabilities in NSW government schools (Vinson, 2002). The primary responsibility for the implementation of special needs interventions rests with teachers (Walther-Thomas, Korinek & McLaughlin, 2005). Given the significant increase of inclusive enrolments in government schools (Vinson, 2002) and the stresses of teaching in inclusive classrooms (Forlin, Hattie, & Douglas, 1996), the extent to which teacher needs are being met, and what impact this has on their ability to facilitate inclusive transitions via collaborative practice are issues which remain largely unresolved.

Research Questions

The guiding question for the proposed study is this: How effectively are inclusive transitions into New South Wales' government kindergartens facilitated by the current policy and practice framework? In exploring this question, the proposed study will ask:

1. Are parents of children with disabilities who successfully enrol their children in the local government kindergarten effective and valued partners in the transitional process?
2. Do parents and teachers communicate and collaborate effectively during the transitional process?
3. How effectively does the current policy framework support early childhood and primary teachers involved in inclusive transitions to NSW kindergartens?

Consistent with both the constructivist paradigm of this research (see methodology) and the emergent and generative nature of research within the “discovery mode” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), it is anticipated that these questions will evolve and inform the research design as findings emerge.

Theoretical Framework: Overview and Application

The ecological systems theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) proposes that development occurs within a nested system of interdependent and dynamic environmental structures. Currently identified as a bioecological model, this framework continues to evolve, and the reader is referred to some of Bronfenbrenner's published work for greater insight (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1999; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). As Kaiser, Hester, and

McDuffie (2001, 143) surmise, "the bioecological model proposes an interactive relationship among four principle components: proximal processes, the developing person, the environmental context, and time spans during which the proximal processes take place."

The critical developmental premise of this theoretical framework is the construct of proximal processes. These processes, or interactions between the developing child and people and systems within his environmental context will operate to cause outcomes of either developmental competence, or developmental dysfunction. These outcomes are in turn dependent on the characteristics of disposition, demand and resource (person characteristics), which each individual and social system brings to bear on the development of any one child. For example, a teacher may be philosophically disposed to support inclusive practices (disposition), and bring to bear his pedagogic knowledge and experience (resources) to meet the needs of his student. Nonetheless, time and resource constraints (demands) may operate to confound his best efforts to meet the needs of that child and others in an inclusive classroom.

The provisional hypothesis for the proposed study is that established policy, practice guidelines and resource allocation frameworks in NSW do not adequately support parents, teachers or administrators who seek to implement and maintain the transition of children with disabilities into government kindergartens in New South Wales.

Methodology

The function of research design within the bioecological model is to facilitate discovery, not test for statistical significance (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The proposed research will endeavour to inform understanding of the processes and experiences of inclusive early childhood transitions through an essentially constructivist lens using qualitative (interview) data collection methodology. In depth Interviews with parents, and educators from across the early childhood-primary school divide will be analysed thematically and interpreted with reference to current policy and practice guidelines. Purposive sampling will be used to identify parents, teachers and administrators that can best inform the research question (Krathwohl, 1997).

Conclusion.

The aim of this proposal will be to explore, from an ecological perspective, stakeholder experiences of transition of children with disabilities to public school kindergartens in New South Wales. Collaborative consultation is the supposed dialogic cornerstone of these transitions. However, parental experiences of transition, and the apparent disparity between early childhood and primary school philosophy and practice are two factors which suggest that stakeholders are not being supported in the practice of effective, family centred dialogue. It is hoped that this research will provide some insight into how to improve the practice of inclusive transitions to schools in New South Wales.

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