Teacher and Parent Partnerships: the role of common understandings in successful transitions to school for children with disabilities

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This was a study that relied on a group of families speaking candidly about the two year period of transition to school with children who did not conform to the usual idea of a learner aged 5-6. It also relied on the teachers in preschool and school, and their school executive members, talking just as candidly about how they helped the children and their families during transition. I was extremely privileged to have those conversations and to try to accurately represent those experiences from all partner viewpoints. I thank all the participants who allowed me the opportunity to engage and listen.

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ABSTRACT
The background to this exploration of transition to school partnerships between parents and teachers in NSW, Australia from 2012-2013, was large-scale systemic change in disability education at both State and Federal levels. This has had implications for parents, teachers and educational managers working together to provide good educational outcomes for children with disabilities. Starting school is a particularly important test of how well new procedures are being managed and implemented to support parents and children.

In a two-year study of eight families transitioning their young children with disabilities to school, parent and teacher partnerships were the subject of a series of qualitative interviews with individual parent, teacher and executive partners from preschools and then schools. Participants detailed helpful and unhelpful elements of partnerships at interpersonal, professional and organisational levels of the transition to school process, producing data that could be interrogated across people, time, place and process, in a study informed by the theorising of Bronfenbrenner. The eight families’ experiences of partnerships were reported in relation to how well their partners were able to meet family needs, produce good child and parent transition outcomes, and minimise emotional upset and feelings of isolation.

Good transition outcomes for children and families were investigated using NVivo coding and matrix queries; the interview data were able to reveal themes of importance to parents individually and as a group, and also to show a consensus view of what all partners can do to produce good transition outcomes for children. It was agreed by participants in the study, that at a parent-teacher partnership level teaming, shared understanding, understanding own role and communication were most important to successful transition. At the professional practice level it was essential to know parent goals, develop personal skills, show empathy for the parent partner, and to have a partner who understood their role. Organisations did best when they had developed quality processes, made clear their intentions and goals, created a positive school climate, and were the beneficiaries of focussed leadership.
Conversely, poor transition experiences were linked to the absence of the positive processes above. At the parent-teacher partnership level lack of teaming, poor shared understanding, not understanding own role and poor communication contributed to poor outcome or experiences. At the professional practice level the common negative features were; not knowing parent goals, undeveloped personal skills, lack of empathy for the partner and partner skills wanting. Organisational deficits were; poor quality transition processes, unclear intentions and goals, negative school climate and unfocussed leadership.

The study demonstrated strong links between these features of partnerships and good outcomes for children and parents. Where partners reported the same features absent or poorly executed, there were clear links to poor outcomes. This study made a case for more supports at the three levels of partnerships- partnership, professional practice and organisational- to promote common understanding and role clarity. In eight case studies there was evidence that variability in practices had a clear impact on families over the two year period, suggesting that parents, teachers and schools could benefit from clear and consistent transition guidelines which address the skills and knowledge needed in the new era of disability support and education post 2014.