The Relationship Between Quality Early Childhood Programs and Transition Services in Inclusive Education of Young Children

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The relationship between quality early childhood programs and transition services in inclusive education for young children has not received the needed attention in current literature. School transition services are important for all children but pose potential challenges for many young children with special needs. By connecting and integrating quality and inclusive education into transition programs, all children entering the school environment can have a positive experience. This paper discusses the significance and application of quality transition services within inclusive education and highlights four interactive components; relationships, wellbeing, involvement and an active learning environment. Various factors in the development of a quality early childhood inclusion program are also discussed. The paper concludes with some recommendations of how a quality inclusive transition can support children entering school happily and successfully.

Keywords: quality, transition, inclusive education

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to situate inclusive education for young children in preschool quality discourse and transition practices in early childhood education. Inclusive education is a complex process and is not only about settings where children with and without disabilities study together. It entails children accessing quality education and experiencing

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appropriate transition programs. For children with disabilities, the quality of early childhood education and transition programs can be more challenging and complex. These challenges have equity and social justice aspects. Children who are denied access to quality transition programs do not receive the full range of child development services that young children need in order to enhance their learning. They therefore do not function well in their learning environment (Winter, 2010). Our perspective is that effective inclusive practice in the early years, incorporating high quality programs and transition services have the capacity to enhance equitable practices and promote all children's learning and development. To begin with, it is important to understand the principles of effective early childhood inclusion, transition practices and quality programming to response to the individual needs of the child.

During the previous decade, governments and early childhood educators globally became aware of not only inclusive education but also the importance of quality and transition issues. Consequently, many governments have produced policy and curriculum documents to advance the course of equity and quality, and improve early childhood education and care for all young children of different needs and abilities (Department for Education UK, 2012; UNESCO, 2010). Previous studies have shown that the majority of parents are concerned about their children not receiving quality early learning experiences, thus compromising their children's future (Fenech, Harrison & Sumsion, 2011). It is important that quality programs are commensurate with a child's needs and maximise his or her potential regardless of whether the child has a disability or not. For instance, Makiguchi (1989) proposed that quality education should be based on humanist principles as education revolves around people. A focus on quality allows educators to create their own beliefs and practices based on children's individual needs and "value children as human beings with their own rights and responsibilities" (Nevile, 2009, p. 401). It is therefore worth arguing that the most critical early learning component is *inclusion* with a strong quality transition programme to assist children to transit smoothly and successfully through their educational journey.

Griebel and Niesel (2003) stated that transition for some children, particularly those with disabilities, may cause social and emotional turmoil as well as discontinuities in learning if not organized comprehensively with families. In order to ensure that inclusion takes place smoothly, children with disabilities require extra support. This may include a subsequent

follow up and adjustment during the transition into a kindergarten or mainstream primary school. Further, acknowledging families with support needs often leads to less involvement with schools and more with the families. This is an important point of transition in providing opportunities to establish patterns of interaction and support. This is consistent with the research conducted by Dockett et.al. (2011) who found that building relationships between and among children, families, educators and other professionals is needed in order to achieve an effective transition. Thus, appropriate support and enabling practices, processes, and policies would contribute to an effective transition experience for children and families and in particular children with disabilities.

The first section of this paper frames inclusive education of young children and the key components that contributes to a successful inclusion. This is followed by a discussion of concepts of quality and transition, and why these should be a strategic focus of any inclusive education for young children. The paper concludes with some directions as to how these could be implemented to ensure all children achieve the best outcome in early childhood education.

Framing inclusive education of young children

Inclusive education in the early years is established as a process to remove barriers and discrimination for all children accessing early childhood programs. From this perspective, early childhood inclusion takes on

> the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities and society (Allen & Cowdery, 2012, p. 7).

This definition considers inclusive early education not only for children who have special educational needs or disabilities but for all children to belong to their school community. Providing access means that all children have equal attention and opportunities to engage in various activities, settings and communities as a feature of high quality early childhood inclusion.

In Australia for example, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (2009), provides an inclusive vision for all children to "experience learning that is engaging and builds success for life" (p. 128). The conceptual metaphors, 'belonging', 'becoming' and 'being' which frame the EYLF consider family, community and early childhood settings as interactive components that enhance inclusive practice. It is documented that all children are born belonging to a culture, which influence their experiences, values and beliefs (EYLF, 2009). All children need a sense of belonging and to feel included, to develop their own identity and have a sense of self-respect. Therefore, inclusion is a fundamentally imperative option for developing the kinds of practices and supports necessary to achieve high quality early childhood inclusion.

Principles of Effective Early Childhood Inclusion

Important components of successful early childhood inclusion include healthy relationships, wellbeing, involvement and an active learning environment. These four interactive components are worthwhile educational components for developing quality early childhood inclusion programs.

Relationship

Quality relationships provide a context for the development of positive dispositions for learning. A plethora of research establishes that the quality of relationships with children is a cornerstone to their construction of personal identity and motivation to learn (EYLF, 2009). The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2009) statement reiterates:

> Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development. Relationships engage children in the human community in ways that help them define who they are, what they can become and how and why they are important to other people (p. 1).

This statement validates the point that in the absence of established positive relationships in inclusive classrooms children may have difficulties developing a healthy personality and positive behaviors that enhance their own development and those of others. Quality relationships are a significant feature of collaborative engagement between individual children and teachers and lead to quality early childhood inclusive education. Children learn best when they are able to collaborate in a

network of community. If children are separated from their relationships with teachers and other children, their actual developmental and learning conditions cannot be fully understood and supported (Winter, 2010). It can be argued that children's quality relationships can help develop social ties in the classroom. Allen and Cowdery (2012) also suggest that collaboration can assist teachers to mobilize knowledge and develop creative activities within early childhood programs to address the needs of all children.

Positive relationships with children can contribute to children's social, emotional and academic aspects (Thijs, Koomen, Roorda & Hagen, 2011). Dunkin and Hanna (2001) argue that the interaction between teachers and children can be identified at two levels. The first interaction is named 'surface interest' in which teachers show limited interest and often use 'closed' questions. The second interaction can lead to positive contributions and is called 'genuine interest'. In this perspective adults extend the child's knowledge and often use 'open-ended' questions (Dunkin & Hanna, 2001).

A number of researchers indicate that positive relationships are supportive of a productive classroom environment that leads to children having a positive attitude for learning (Margetts & Raban, 2011). This is because children feel comfortable to discuss and share relevant knowledge and interests with teachers which would enable them to identify and respond to the individual needs of the child. Supportive and encouraging teacher-child relationships can reduce the risk of a child failing at school and is correlated to successful schooling (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Similarly, positive relationships can contribute to children's cognitive and social-emotional outcomes (Thijs, Koomen, Roorda & Hagen, 2011) as well as children becoming active participants and making active decisions which are an important element of quality early childhood education (Theobald, Danby & Ailwood, 2011).

In Allen and Cowdery's (2012) view, partnerships with families are a significant part of good quality inclusive practice because parents and teachers can share important information about their children. This allows teachers and parents to discuss the child's progress; if a problem occurs, they can facilitate addressing the problem which benefits the child. However, partnerships in inclusive settings cannot occur if parents do not feel welcome, valued and have a sense of belonging (Margetts & Raban, 2011). Research on inclusion by Agbenyega and Klibthong (2012) has

shown the complexity of inclusion and that any attempt at implementing successful inclusive education, particularly for young children, must establish relationships with communities and children. When children participate in communities, they develop a capacity for independence and self-direction. Thus, the success of inclusion depends upon the connection between home, school and community.

Wellbeing

Children's wellbeing is crucial to effective inclusion. Wellbeing consolidates the integration of physical, social, emotional, cognitive and spiritual areas as core aspects of children's development. There are many different ways in which childhood wellbeing has been conceptualized. Wellbeing is defined as "a state of successful performance throughout the life course integrating physical, cognitive and social-emotional function that results in productive activities deemed significant by one's cultural community, fulfilling social relationships, and the ability to transcend moderate psychosocial and environmental problems" (Pollard & Davidson, 2001, pp. 10-11). It is recognized that wellbeing has some key elements including the ability to demonstrate flexibility in a variety of situations, to function successfully with others, to engage in culturally productive activities and to feel at ease and comfortable with oneself (Marshall, 2004).

Wellbeing is connected with relationships because when children feel happy or emotionally stable they can work with teachers and other children. When all children experience wellbeing, they become involved in their own learning activities. Children who do not experience wellbeing may feel excluded. Similarly, active learning environments ensure wellbeing as children do not feel like passive recipients of knowledge. Research evidence indicates that children's feelings of wellbeing and satisfaction, enjoyment and reward, comes from involvement and contribution in their learning process (Marshall, 2004). All children in inclusive settings thus need a sound base of wellbeing in order to engage in learning experiences and to become knowledgeable.

Involvement

Children's involvement refers to their participation and engagement in their learning activities which is a key aspect of inclusive practice that contributes to their learning and development (DECS, 2008). Involvement can only happen when children have quality relationships and experience wellbeing with other children and teachers which is increased through an

active learning environment (DECS, 2008). It involves opportunity for child initiated activities, supporting children to persist on tasks, and providing complex but interesting activities that induce creativity and enabling children to learn through play (DECS, 2008). Fleer (2011) indicates that when children are actively involved in play and leisure activities, they are more likely to build their creative thinking and understand concepts and inquiry processes which are necessary for children's lifelong learning. Further, children's active involvement can change what they know and value, and also transform their opportunities.

A plethora of research indicates that inclusive education practices thrive on healthy involvement and cooperation between professionals, staff, parents and children (Deppeler, Moss &Agbenyega, 2008; Gonzalez-Mena, 2008). Berthelsen and Brownlee (2005) argued that children's involvement in joint activities with educators and other staff can give a sense of meaning through interdependence and reciprocity. Therefore, teachers need to involve children to achieve critical situations to learn by providing information, demonstrating an action, giving informative feedback and by providing encouragement.

Active learning environment

Research suggests that an active learning environment is highly important in inclusive early childhood education (Allan &Cowdery, 2012). In an active learning environment greater emphasis is placed on children's exploration and creativity, experimentation with different materials and plenty of space for children to play alone and with others(National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2008). Siraj-Blatchford (2008) also asserts that active learning environments are educational settings where children can ask questions, make hypotheses, and form new concepts. In an inactive learning environment children are not recipients of packaged knowledge but are co-constructors influencing everyday learning activities in the inclusive classroom. If children have limited opportunities for interactive active learning in their learning environment, this may reduce their capacity for critical thinking (Fleer & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2009).

In an active learning environment, early childhood educators perform an important role in supporting and participating in children's learning experiences as they learn to play together through cooperative negotiation and solving interpersonal problems (Siraj-Blatchford, 2008).

However, teachers who orchestrate fear for safety can limit children's curiosity to explore their learning environment (Tomasello, 2009). Being in static learning spaces can restrict children's investigative and cognitive capacities and hamper relationship development. It is important that teachers, in inclusive classrooms, design learning environments that carefully match opportunities and contexts for children with diverse abilities. The components discussed above have implications for quality programming. This is discussed in the next section.

Relating quality early childhood education to inclusion

Effective early childhood inclusive education is not only about equity and access but also the quality of the education and care provided to all children. A longitudinal study (Campbell et al., 2008) confirmed that high quality early childhood education is significantly important to the early years learning experience. This also has long-term effects on children's cognitive and social development as well as positive impacts on the economic and social benefits of society (Siraj-Blatchford, 2008; UNESCO, 2005). Understanding quality gives educators a space to critique the nature of early childhood educational programs for all young children. Quality is a complex discourse due to varied views and beliefs, philosophical thoughts and different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Lambert, Abbott-Shim & Sibley, 2006; Rivalland, 2007). The Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report (2005) states:

> Although there is no single definition of quality; two principles characterize most attempts to define quality in education: the first identifies learners' cognitive development as the major explicit objective of all educational systems; accordingly, the success with which systems achieve this is one indicator of their quality. The second emphasizes education's role in promoting values and attitudes of responsible citizenship and in nurturing creative and emotional development. The achievement of these objectives is more difficult to assess and compare across countries (UNESCO, p. 5).

Learners' cognitive and educators' roles are strongly defined within the concept of quality and are situated in a vital position. How children learn and receive knowledge, what activities support children's daily learning and how educators scaffold children's knowledge are important considerations in high quality practice in early childhood inclusive education.

Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007) explained that quality is located in diversity, subjectivity and multiple perspectives. This suggests that quality early childhood education programs must incorporate divergent perspectives and be inclusive of the different capabilities and the individuality of the child. Alternative understandings of quality are found within the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) Articles 29 and 30 which state that education is a strong aspect of human rights and freedoms therefore it is imperative that the concept of quality education should comprise of an individual child's cultural identity, religion, language and values. Framing quality in this way is consistent with the ideology of inclusion in which human rights are a core argument.

Based on the views expressed above, educators need to subsequently have an awareness of various critical issues discussed in the section below, which are commonly associated with quality in order to contribute to knowledge, access and support when developing inclusive early childhood educational programs. This complexity resonates with inclusive education which also has no single definition and therefore different modes of practice.

Quality safe and stimulating environment influence inclusion
Social constructivist perspectives and practices are contingent on providing a quality learning environment that stimulates children's physical, psychosocial and cognitive development irrespective of whether the child has a disability or not (Lambert, Abbott-Shim & Sibley, 2006; Buysse& Hollingsworth, 2009). It is argued strongly that a good structural environment enhances a child's sense of learning, belonging and wellbeing (Australian Early Year Learning Framework, 2009). A recent study regarding preschool children's perspectives on structural elements in some Australian child care centers suggest that children develop a sense of autonomy, a sense of safety and are active learners when the structural learning environment elements are relevant to their needs (Agbenyega, 2011a). This implies the quality of the environment should empower all children to have opportunities to explore, play and practice life skills (Theobald, Danby & Ailwood, 2011).

Educator-child ratios and class size influence inclusion

An effective inclusive education for young children should consider educator/child ratios. It is documented that small class sizes may lead to positive outcomes in educator-child relationships and educator's classroom practice (UNESCO, 2005). Previous research argues that low educator-child ratios and small class size are associated with high quality practice as teachers are able to provide individual attention. On the contrary high educator-child ratios and large class size are considered to lead to poor quality and stress (Huntsman, 2008; UNESCO, 2005). Other perspectives indicate that teacher ratios and class size alone should not be the focus as other important influencing factors such as cultural values and context may play a part (Tobin, 2005). These highlight the need for flexibility and deep understanding of the culture in which the inclusive program is being organized for children.

Educators' qualifications and professional development are keys to quality inclusive practice

Educator qualifications and their training have been found to influence their practices of inclusion (Spodek & Saracho, 2006). Educators' play an important role within the enhancement of quality education and this has led to increased concerns in respect of educators' qualifications, experience and professional development (Berry, 2005). The requirement for early childhood educators to be properly qualified has increased over the past thirty years. Some researchers have found that educator qualifications and experience are not necessarily linked to greater success in inclusive practice (Agbenyega, 2011b; Reynolds, 2007) and that being highly qualified does not always connect to quality practice (Agbenyega, 2011b; Reynolds, 2007) as other factors, such as teacher beliefs and dispositions towards teaching in inclusive classrooms can influence practice (Daugherty, Fuligni, Howes, Karoly& Lara-Cinisomo, 2009), curriculum and pedagogies which educators have constructed from their beliefs (Chan, Lee & Choy, 2009; Rivalland, 2007).

For this reason ongoing professional development is especially beneficial for early childhood educators to constantly reflect on their practice (Carrington, Deppeler & Moss, 2010; Spodek & Saracho, 2006). Wood and Bennett (2000) state that "a high quality professional development course which supports the process of change in educators' thinking and practice at different career points" (p. 646) has better success in improving early childhood inclusive education. This means a deeper

understanding of the philosophy of teaching is rooted in ongoing educator development as an important element for quality early childhood inclusive education (Reynolds, 2007; Spodek & Saracho, 2006).

Educator's beliefs and practices influence the quality of the program and inclusion

As discussed above, educators' beliefs and values held about quality can lead to a major impact and substantially affect the creation of quality early childhood education (Fleer, 2010; Logan & Sumsion 2010; Rivalland, 2007). In this regard, to drive the direction toward quality one should consider how educators understand or conceptualize quality and translate this into effective implementation (Ip & Ho, 2009; Rivalland, 2007).

Educators' beliefs and values of quality early childhood education are also influenced by social constructions. This may include personal skills, social environments, professional experience, family and traditional cultural values, economic influences, benefits and mistake acquisitions from teaching experiences, internal and external expectations (Rivalland, 2007). In a recent study by Agbenyega (2011b) it was argued that when early childhood educators understand and base their teaching on established educational theories they are able to bring innovation to their practice in the classroom. It can therefore be argued that educator's beliefs and values have a direct impact on their curriculum development and pedagogy (Agbenyega, 2011b).

Curriculum and pedagogy

The discourse of quality construction for inclusion needs to guide curriculum development and pedagogy in early childhood education (Pacini-ketchabaw& Pence, 2011). The quality of early childhood curriculum has been influenced by social values and knowledge which are situated within different nations (Fleer, 2011). To enhance the quality of pedagogy and curriculum in the classroom, Sheridan (2001) states, "the pedagogues must be aware of how changes in society as well as new theories of learning and development influence the content and working methods in their own practice" (p. 9). Research shows that a quality curriculum and pedagogy can benefit all children now and in later academic experiences (Jalongo et al., 2004), as well as child's cognitive and social development (Edwards, 2003). It can be argued that quality is not an isolated construct. There are various components that make a program a quality one. One such component is transition services for

young children. The final section of this paper discusses issues related to transition and how these are important when implementing inclusive programs for young children.

Conceptualizing transition within inclusion

As indicated in the introductory part of this paper, there is a close relation between transition and inclusion. Before establishing this connection, it is important to provide some insights into what transition means in the context of this paper. There is a variety of definitions on transition in relation to children's starting school. According to Dockett and Perry (2007a) transition to school is a process that occurs over an extended period of time as children engage in a range of experiences that promote their learning, development and wellbeing. The process of transition to school is essentially a period of adjustment, as people change their roles and relationships with regard to school. Transition programs as a series of events or activities for children starting school and their families can support the transition process by providing opportunities to build and maintain relationships among children and adults.

Considering the preparation that children have to deal with it is certain that the transition from an early intervention program or special education setting to an inclusive school setting provides a complex challenge for children with disabilities. This transition is a time of change and vulnerability as children start school and as families areresponsive to intervention. In this process; children and families move from an environment of familiar context andsupport to an environment of unknown contexts; often without continuity ofsupport and with a need to access different services, different people and different experiences. Therefore by recognising thestrengths that children and families bring with them toschool this can be used as the basis for promoting positiveengagement and maintaining a support network delivered by qualified professionalsto build on the opportunities and reduce thevulnerabilities encountered. (Dockett et.al., 2011).

For the purpose of this paper, transition is an inclusive context, framed in an ecological perspective where the child is situated in an interlocking set of systems of home, nursery and school (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) which emphasises the ways in which contexts as well as the people within them, impact on experience. Ecological models situate responsibility for an effective transition to school with all involved in the

process. This broad view recognises that there are many contributors to transition experiences and that the perspectives and expectations of each of these contributors shape those experiences in some way. Embracing this approach enables writers to think about the importance of building positive relationships between stakeholders, for example, the contribution of parents and teachers at the micro-level and education policy makers at the macro level. This is important because positive relationships involving a range of stakeholders increases participation in schools and creates a greater sense of belonging for children and their families to support the transition program.(Dockett et al., 2011).

Transition services and inclusion
Transition to school is recognised by many researchers as a challenge for children as well as parents and teachers, where all concerned need to collaborate to achieve a successful transition. Researchers in different countries continue to argue for transition to school programs in order to build a bridge between settings for children and families. This means diverse transition activities must involve children, families, teachers, and the wider community. The transition to school is a point where contexts and supports change and where interactions between families and schools set the scene for ongoing engagement in education.(Dockett et al., 2011).To be effective, school transition programs should create a suitable degree of continuity between preschool and school experiences and help children develop strategies to adjust to school and programs. These strategies should be focused on conventional academic skills and the practical *survival* skills necessary for children to face the academic, physical and social-emotional challenges of commencing school. These skills include the ability to work independently, to respond to behavioral expectations, to cope with the length of the school day, to interact with others, accept rules and adjust to the size of a class (Margetts, 2002).

Any transition to school program ideally should answer how children make the transition to school and how parents and institutions help children to make this transition successfully. It can also include home visits before and after children enter school, visits to early years settings and schools, family meetings to discuss teacher expectations; connecting new families with families currently enrolled in the school, dissemination of information to families on the transition to school; and family support groups (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2002).

One way to promote a smooth transition to school is by providing a transition service or transition to school program. The agenda of transition program usually deal with helping children to settle into the school environment before they commence school and to become more familiar with the new environment with teachers/carers, activities and peers (Giallo, Treyvaud, Matthews & Kienguis, 2010).   Related to children with disability, transition to school poses some major challenges because children are faced with personal challenges associated with the shift in identity from a preschool to school, and the challenges of taking on the behaviours and demands of the new environment (Griebel & Niesel, 2000). Related to the inclusive practice in the transition program, children with a disability, transition to school must include a child preparation component (Kemp & Carter, 2005).

Transitions to school programs have already been developed in a number of States in Australia which include recommendations specifically for students with additional needs. In the State of Victoria a set of guidelines has been created to help early childhood services and schools improve the quality of transition to school. There are some issues that should be considered when designing and developing transition programs for children with disabilities: (1) the importance of the early childhood experience for positive transition experiences for children; (2) the importance of long term cross sector collaborative planning and continuity of programs around transitions ; and (3) transition to school can be a highly complex and anxious time for families and has negative long term implications if and problem that emerge are not addressed. A small body of transition research that focused on children with a disability (Foley, 2005) also acknowledges that the transition of children with a disability to the first year of school presents many challenges for the children, families and educators and that collaborative consultation is broadly recognized as best practice in the planning and implementation of educational support in inclusive settings.

In general, the more transition activities that schools conduct, the better children adjust to the school environment (Margetts, 2002; Schulting et al, 2005). Such activities are, particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Schulting et al, 2005), but should be offered comprehensively. Further, participation in the transition program which supports children in a new environment has been shown to be associated with better adjustment to the first year of school, greater self-confidence,

fewer behavioral difficulties and higher levels of social skills and academic competence, and achievement (Giallo et al., 2010).

Currently, many schools and early years' service systems are not well integrated and therefore, are unable to provide organized support to all children and families during the transition to school period (Dockett & Perry, 2007b; Halfon, Uyeda, Inkelas & Rice, 2004). This puts all children at risk and is particularly problematic for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. So far, transition services for children especially those with disability remains a concern for parents. Therefore providing continuity of experience, maintaining parental involvement, strengthening positive relationships between all involved, managing expectations and implementing inclusive early childhood service systems, are crucial for children to have successful experience at school.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed topical issues related to quality programs and transition services in meeting the needs of all children. Quality early childhood programs that support all children have the potential to influence the level to which children experience equity and greater social justice. Continuity of the opportunity to learn effectively is an essential element in children's successful transitions. Important issues addressed by this paper include the principles of attention to quality and transition programs for young children with disabilities in the early childhood literature. At the heart of the focus on inclusive education is a concern for quality and equity of provision. If inclusive provision is to be surely accessible to all children, then there is a need to expand professional knowledge and awareness regarding the relationship between quality education and transition services for young children with disabilities. Satisfactory understanding of the quality of programs and transition services to respond to the needs of all children can support a positive inclusive environment where all children achieve outcomes according to their potential.

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