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The Transition to School for Children with Special Needs: A Phenomenographic Study

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For all people, there are times in life when significant changes occur. These transitions, to a new stage, although often positive, may still be times of uncertainty and stress. For the families of young children with special needs, commencement at school constitutes a significant transition. There are often professionals involved in the process of transition to school, and as significant stakeholders in the process, their beliefs and practices are central to effective transitions.

A recent study in NSW was designed to provide a snapshot of current processes of transition to school for young children with special needs. As this is a relatively new area of study, with the need for theories to emerge, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in an attempt to provide a rich and meaningful picture of the process and the people involved in it. Early childhood teachers are major stakeholders in the transition to school process.

Anecdotal evidence and previous research (Brewer, 1995a) suggested dissatisfaction and concern amongst early childhood teachers in schools about the transition to school for children with special needs. Prominent writers in the field also call for examination of transition processes saying " the field of early childhood education needs to assess the extent to which transition planning procedures are or are not implemented, and whether their implementation makes a difference in services received" (Fowler, Schwartz & Atwater, 1991, p.143).

The transition to school was selected for study as the importance of successful transitions is believed to be a key determinant of children's future success at school. For families of children with special needs, the potential stress of a poorly planned and implemented transition process, has been demonstrated (e.g., Fowler, Schwartz & Atwater, 1991).

Recent policies developed in NSW by the Department of School Education attempt to address concerns about continuity in the transition to school for children with special needs (NSW Department of School

Education, 1994). Research with families, however, shows that even after introduction of this policy, there are still many areas of concern (Brewer, 1995b). In the recent study, continuity was examined through the Beliefs and Practices of some teachers involved in the implementation of the policy.

Methodological considerations

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection and analysis. The application of qualitative and quantitative methodologies was considered desirable because of recognition that the transition process is complex and dynamic and involves a range of stakeholders and pedagogical issues. Hence, it

cannot be treated as a single event or variable. Several approaches to data collection and analyses allow a richer picture of the transition to school to emerge.

Much research in the area of special education has in the past been of a quantitative nature. Greater emphasis on the use of qualitative methodology in special education is an attempt to generate more theory development in the field. Using an inductive approach the researcher hypothesises and theorises as the investigation proceeds, as opposed to setting out to prove a theory or hypothesis as in quantitative research. The teachers in this study can be seen as learners attempting to come to terms with philosophies and processes that are relatively new to them. As such the qualitative methodologies proposed by Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle (1984) in the study and analysis of the learning processes of tertiary students can be usefully applied in this context. Entwistle (1984) suggested that their approach can be seen in a general way to apply to other areas of education.

A phenomenographic approach

Phenomenography is an approach to research which aims to identify people's qualitatively different experiences and understanding of the world, and systematically describe them in terms of categories of description (Marton, 1981; 1986). Prosser (1993) explains that phenomenography is not in itself a theory of learning but a view of learning that incorporates a number of principles for the practice of teaching and learning. People understand and experience the world in qualitatively different ways and the "how" of experiencing and understanding the world is inseparable from "what" is experienced and understood. Learning occurs when something is seen and understood in a qualitatively different way to the way it was seen or understood previously. Learning is seen as a conceptual change. It is generally accepted that people learn from their experiences and teachers are no exception to this maxim. While phenomenography is more usually used to describe the process of student learning, in this case it was used to

analyse the learning that teachers go through in the process of including children with special needs into regular classrooms. It would be commonly accepted that teachers come to their teaching from a range of backgrounds, conceptions of education and predispositions towards teaching derived from personal experience and philosophy, coupled with subsequent training.

Teachers' learning is a human activity that occurs in a cultural context. Their approach to learning may be analysed in terms of a deep or a surface level approach. Phenomenographic research as explained by Crawford, Gordon, Nicholas and Prosser (1994), describes the qualitatively different ways subjects relate to phenomena. Their model of phenomenographic analysis was adapted in this study. There is recognition that acting, thinking and feeling are all part of one coordinated system that interacts in reciprocal ways with known objects. The social context for all activity is important and collective external activity precedes individual internal activity. In the case of teachers engaged in the inclusion of children with special needs, perhaps for the first time, their teaching can be seen as a learning process. The present research has applied Crawford et al.'s (1994) analysis of student learning to teachers' learning and subsequent teacher decision making processes. The experience can be conceptualised in terms of a conception of, and an approach to, teaching and learning. The conception can be analysed in terms of what the teachers focus on when reporting their conception of teaching, for example, a quantitative increase in the amount of knowledge they have or a changed understanding of reality.

The approach used can also be analysed in terms of the focus of research: a surface approach versus a deep approach. In a surface approach, the teacher's attention and activity is centred on short term instrumental goals - in this case, survival in the classroom and achievement of management and learning goals. Self evaluation addresses the question "How can I manage with this child/children as well as thirty others in the classroom?" In deep approaches, teachers adopt a more global and personal perspective on teaching and learning. Teaching strategies are aimed at making sense of new information and experiences in terms of existing conceptions and opinions, which may be revised if necessary. This can be related to Marton's (1981) description of students who either seek to memorise bits of information in order to reproduce that information or they seek to abstract meaning with the intention of understanding the material they are studying. With this as a reference point, it can be assumed that an atomistic approach to teaching is where teachers deal with routines and children's learning in an unconnected way, while a holistic approach is where teachers concentrate on forming a cohesive view which takes account of the new ideas.

This phenomenographic perspective provides a basis for the identification of the categories of description of teachers' experiences of learning to teach children with special needs in inclusive settings. Prosser (1993) explained that from a phenomenographic perspective it is the subject's understanding of the experience that is vital. Teachers will experience the process in different ways, focusing on those aspects most relevant to their own experience. The explanation of the teachers' learning process not only has ecological validity within the "real world" of the early childhood context, but also allows the researcher to make an interpretation of the findings which does justice to the totality of the teachers' own experiences (Entwistle, 1984). If teachers are to optimise their understanding of a phenomenon (in this case transition), then we need to seek to change their experiences. In order to do that, we need to be clear on why it is important for teachers to engage in certain activities, to be clear about what aspects of those activities we want the teachers to focus on, and then to help teachers focus on those aspects. We need to help teachers undergo a conceptual change of what they think teaching children with special needs is all about, as well as developing the strategies to see and understand the process clearly. We need to recognise that "learning and teaching need to be considered in relation to both content and context. Teachers...have to reflect on their own individual needs and circumstances" (Entwistle & Marton, 1984, p.211).

Subjects

A representative sample of 45 early childhood teachers in Greater Western Sydney was involved in the study. The teachers came from 90 services for young children approached to participate. Services nominated the teachers who would complete a questionnaire to describe their transition Beliefs and Practices.

Following initial analysis of the questionnaire, elite interviews which probed the views of six teachers, were conducted. The nature of elite interviews is to discuss a subject with respondents who have specialised knowledge or experience. (Anderson, 1990).

Two pre school teachers (one Preschool one Long Day Care), two early intervention teachers and two Kindergarten teachers were selected for interviews. They were chosen from the respondents who had previously

agreed to take part in further stages of this study.

Interview analyses

Themes and sub-themes were formed as they emerged from the teachers' comments. Thematic group headings were influenced by the literature of transition. Comments were then sorted, according to theme, with all

comments recorded. As these data were copious, and sometimes repetitive where individual teachers made similar comments, it was decided to reduce the amount of data by "delimiting" the statements .

Delimiting of themes

After summarising and recording all comments according to theme, the summaries were re-examined in order to delimit the data. Comments that were of a similar nature were collapsed together in order to develop a final summary of concerns according to category. For example, comments such as "class sizes are too big" and "there are too many children in the class", would be delimited to produce one overall comment on class size. These statements constituted the final list of teacher experiences and concerns according to the themes which emerged from the research.

Examination of these statements showed that the majority were of a "problem" based nature. It seemed important to recognise this important characteristic of the data and to further classify the "problem statements" in order to produce a useful analysis of the perceptions and experiences of the teachers who were involved in elite interviews. To do this, best practice guidelines for the transition to school were developed.

Best practice guidelines

In an attempt to address the question of whether exemplary transitions can be organised in other than the model services which are described in the literature, it was decided to develop a series of "guidelines for best practice in transition to school". These were drawn from the literature, and the researcher's experience in writing transition policy for two early childhood organisations. The result was a list of twenty two "principles" in best practice in the transition to school for children with special needs and their families (Brewer, 1995b). These principles were then used as the basis of categorisation of teachers' comments. Teachers' perceptions of problems in the transition to school were classified according to the area of best practice they aligned most closely with. Comments were collapsed and delimited to identify major issues, as was the case for data in the "emergence of themes".

Identification of significant transition issues

As with the emergence of themes, a feature of the classification of problems was the recurrence of some issues. When the data were delimited it was apparent that there was a need to identify "significant problems". A list of the problem statements that most frequently occurred was generated and these statements were considered to be representative of teachers' major concerns (see Table 1).

Table 1
Significant transition issues

- transition to school is not systematic and long term
- families don't know what to expect from schools

- families are not treated as partners in decision making
- school policies and procedures are not readily available and known by all stakeholders in transition
- pre school teachers do not know what happens in schools
- families not in early intervention Programs are at a disadvantage for transition
- there is discontinuity of curriculum, physical environment and teaching strategies between pre school and school
- schools don't initiate or encourage links with pre school Programs
- schools don't clearly identify their expectations
- information from pre schools is not sent or passed on, through schools, to Kindergarten teachers
- Kindergarten teachers are unsure about their role with families
- Kindergarten teachers need more specific knowledge
- there is discontinuity of support and therapy when children commence school
- there is insufficient classroom support

It is evident from this analysis that the teachers interviewed feel that, despite the introduction of transition policies, there are still many problems to be addressed. It is apparent that transitions are not yet being planned systematically and on a long term basis. There was little evidence of the NSW Department of School Education's involvement in transition planning in this study, despite the introduction of guidelines. There is certainly substantial data to show that continuity is not occurring. In all the best practice areas, comments were made that revolved around the lack of knowledge and understanding by teachers about areas of teaching other than their own. It was strongly evident from the pre school sector, that teachers do not know what happens in schools, what support is available for children, and the expectations held by particular schools. Similarly, Kindergarten teachers are not familiar with the methods and curricula of Programs from which the children have moved. There appears to be little effective communication between the two sectors, with the Kindergarten teachers saying they don't have time to do this, and the pre school teachers demonstrating negative attitudes and recalling bad experiences with regard to school stakeholders' willingness to talk to them.

It is interesting that the area of Teaching and Learning was one in which there were fewer comments. Teachers were more concerned about

resources and the lack of communication between sectors, than the specifics of how to teach children with special needs in the classroom. A surface approach to teaching was evident, particularly in discussion of teaching strategies. Examples are given in this presentation. This has implications for the quality of teaching and Learning experiences by children with Special Needs.

The area of school preparation and resourcing for children with special needs was the one that received the most comments. It appears that schools are not receiving information on children with special needs before they arrive, and this is exacerbated by the reluctance of some pre schools to pass information on. Both pre school and Kindergarten teachers, when they were familiar with classroom support processes, felt that classes were too large to allow continuity from pre schools to be effective. They also both felt that Kindergarten teachers needed more specific training to teach a variety of children with special needs. Again, it was mentioned several times that DSE policies and procedures for obtaining funding and integration support were not easy to find out about.

There is a need for further research about the transition to school process for children with special needs and in particular, phenomenographic analyses point to the need for focused research into teachers' approaches to the Teaching and Learning aspects of transition, especially deep and surface level approaches to the use of teaching strategies.

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