

Premier’s Australian Association of Special Education NSW Chapter Research to Practice Special Education Scholarship

Secondary Transition of Students with Disabilities

Improving student outcomes by improving what we do

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# Introduction

The transition from secondary school to adulthood is a crucial time for students with disabilities.

As with any transition, one would hope that this process is well planned with clear goals to achieve. A young person leaving school and choosing their pathway into the future would benefit from guidance and support to make this transition meaningful and successful.

As Australia continues a paradigm shift towards inclusion of people with disabilities, a targeted effort is needed to address the rights and needs of people with disabilities. Since the establishment of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) to improve services provided to people with disabilities, there is a need for schools to investigate and implement what works best in order to improve students’ with disabilities post school outcomes, in particular, in the areas of employment and further education.

With greater consideration being given to Evidence Based Practices and Predictors (EBPPs) in secondary transition, the Department of Education (DoE) in collaboration with other key stakeholders (the NDIS, businesses and industries, parents, families and community groups) might be able to make a difference. Subsequently, people with disabilities who obtain and sustain employment, may contribute to the Australian economy.

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2017) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers ( ABS SDAC, 2015), despite Australia’s strong economy and a healthy job market, young people with disabilities are under-represented and do not reach their full potential in the workforce compared to similar aged people without disabilities. Interestingly, according to a 2011 report by Deloitte Access Economics, if employment rates for people with disabilities increased by just one third, Australia would increase its Gross Domestic Project by $43 billion over the next decade in real dollar terms.

# Focus of Study

The focus of my study was to look at evidence-based practices (interventions/strategies) and predictors (in-school experiences) in the USA that have been identified by research as effective, based on a systematic correlational literature review. These effective practices used by secondary schools enable students with disabilities to achieve quality post school outcomes in the area of education, independent living and, in particular, employment.

A key secondary transition planning component focuses on strategies based on family involvement and high expectations by family members. These strategies include engaging parents in all aspects of their child’s learning by providing parents with options for involvement (e.g., pre- Individualised Education Plan (IEP) planning input, flexible IEP meeting times) and relevant transition planning information in an ongoing manner.

While family involvement is crucial for student success, the importance of interagency collaboration can greatly enhance this positive outcome. Schools that actively promote collaboration between stakeholders are more likely to achieve better outcomes for their students. This may include strategies used on an individual (i.e. writing an IEP with the transition component), school (i.e.connecting students with local agencies/businesses) and community level (i.e. providing an array of transition services). Programs such as ‘I’m Determined’ and Project SEARCH are examples of learning experiences that promote students’ self-determinantion skills and develop skills to increase employability.

As schools learn about the evidence-based practices shown to be effective for students with disabilities, they now need to engage in implementing them. A few websites (e.g., the National Technical Assistance Center for Transition (NTACT) website ([www.ntact.org](http://www.ntact.org/)) presented in this paper are a great starting point as they provide educators with high fidelity practices, research-to-practice lesson plan starters and current online training.

# Significant Learning

When looking at Special Education both in Australia and the USA there are system differences in relation to legislation, dissemination of evidence-based practices and predictors, as well as transition programs which assist students in aquiring the necessary skills to obtain and maintain employment.

### Legislation

In the USA all processes including secondary transition within Special Education are legislated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 1990 (IDEA). IDEA ensures that all children with disabilities are entitled to free public education to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living. There are six components of IDEA to guide practice: Individualized Education Program (IEP), Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), Appropriate Evaluation, Parent and Teacher Participation, and Procedural Safeguards (<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/>).

Unlike in the USA, secondary transition as a part of Special Education services is not federally mandated in Australia. Australia, however, is obligated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) to provide equal access to education and employment to all children and people with disabilities

### Evidence-based practices and predictors (EBPPs), and their dissemination

In the USA, evidence-based practices and predictors in secondary transition are continuously researched and disseminated via online and face-to-face professional learning. This occurs through university courses for pre-service teachers and through Department of Education learning initiatives for existing employees across the states. One of the examples of disseminating findings on secondary transition leading to improved post secondary outcomes for students with disabilities is the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) website (https://transitionta.org/). It was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the Rehabilitation Services Administration Grant.

Another website-based resource with a great input from the leading researchers in secondary transition, such as David Test and Mary Morningstar, is called the IRIS Centre ([https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu](https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/)). This project, which was again funded by OSEP and headquartered at Vanderbilt University’s Peabody College, creates online resources about evidence-based practices to help improve the learning and behaviour outcomes of all students, particularly struggling learners and those with disabilities.

Although Australia recognises best practice in secondary transition, only some of the evidence-based practices and predictors are present in our schools. With such a strong research base available in Australia (Strnadova & Cumming, 2014; O'Neil, Strnadove & Cummings, 2016) and the USA, we could be encouraged to employ more evidence-based strategies with a greater consistency and accountability. Current research in transition practices linked to positive post-school outcomes for students with disability has been done mostly in the US using Kohler’s (1996) Taxonomy for Transition Programming. This framework (<https://www.transitionta.org/sites/default/files/Tax_Trans_Prog_0.pdf>) describes practices in five categories, indicative of best practice:

* student development
* student-focus planning
* family involvement
* interagency collaboration
* program structure.

### Transition Programs

In the USA students are allowed to stay within the educational system after their graduation for a period up to three years in order to facilitate their secondary transition. Students have a few options. They can enter community programs or transition school to work programs. These programs are usually organised out of school grounds on the premises of different businesses (e.g. Project SEARCH at hotels, hospitals, conference facilities) or at tradetraining centres that have been established within the same school district (e.g. BOCES - Board of Cooperative Educational Services). Highly trained transition specialists provide secondary transition services for students transitioning from high school to postschool life.

In support of secondary transition universities offer Masters in Transition Degrees. For example, such a degree can be obtained via online study at the George Washington University (<https://gsehd.gwu.edu/programs/masters-interdisciplinary-secondary-transition-services>).

Similarly, due to the current changes introduced by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) in Australia, students with disabilities are offered up to two years in the School Leaver Employment Support (SLES) program that is designed to facilitate a smooth transition from high school to employment. SLES providers (noneducational) will assist students to reach their goals of obtaining and hopefully sustaining employment. This approach is yet to be evaluated.

### The NYS PROMISE Project

An ongoing research in secondary transition provides educators with the array of effective practices that have been put into practice through different programs or initiatives. The NYS PROMISE Project (<http://www.nyspromise.org/about/>) was designed to validate and identify ways that best support 14-16 year old teenagers to achieve their full learning, living and earning potential. This project is a research initiative developed in partnership between New York States (NYS) agencies and Cornell University to improve transition-to-adulthood outcomes for students with developmental disabilities who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI). NYS PROMISE began in October 2013 and will continue until September 2018.

The PROMISE Project hopes to challenge the status quo for youth with disabilities who are trapped in circumstances that prevent them from achieving success. However, with assistance and support tailored through a person centred planning, self determination training and multiple evidence-based strategies in transition, these young people may succeed at a higher rate. Consequently, on completion of this research we will learn about the best ways to support students from high school to adult life in order to maximise their success. If successful, this project may benefit society on many levels. The results will be published at the end of 2018.

Main secondary transition themes and evidence-based practices and predictors (EBPPs)

The transition from the familiarity of the high school environment to post-school life is a significant milestone and can be an exciting time for young people. For some, however, making decisions about the future can be disconcerting, in particular, for students with disabilities and their families.

Research based on a systematic correlational literature review has shown that family involvement (i.e. parents as active and knowledgeable participants in transition planning) and high parental expectations (i.e. having high expectations for their children) are evidence-based predictors of post-school success (Test et al., 2009). “Along with youth with disabilities, families … are the most important stakeholders in the transition planning process – and can provide critical information to help identify a student’s interests, strengths, needs and abilities” (Rowe, D., Mazzotti, V., 2015, p.12). Further, parental involvement has been defined (Rowe et al., 2015, p. 114) as “parents /families/guardian are active and knowledgeable participants in all aspects of transition planning (e.g., decision-making, providing support, attending meetings, and advocating for their child)”.

Some great ideas on how education professionals and administrators could support families and their children with disabilities can be found on the Council for Exceptional Children website (https://www.scribd.com/doc/272303809/dcdt-fast-fact-parental-involvement-delphi-final).

During my study tour it has become very obvious that family engagement is crucial to successful secondary transition. According to Dr Steve Constantino, who was at the time I met him, the acting State Superintendent of public instruction for the Commonwealth of Virginia, family involvement plays a key role in improving student outcomes. Dr Constatino is passionate about finding the ways to improve learning outcomes for students. When he was working as a principal in 1995 at Stonewell Jackson High School he stumbled across research about the effects of family engagement on student learning and was immediately convinced that this was the missing ingredient in helping all children learn. His work at engaging families contributed greatly to improved student outcomes.

Another example of the significance of family involvement in secondary transition planning was voiced by Roberta Dunn, who is an Executive Director of the FACT (formerly: Family Action Coalition Team) Oregon ([http://factoregon.org](http://factoregon.org/)), an organisation that assist families who have children with disabilities to become well-informed and active participants in their child’s life. Roberta became an advocate for her own son who has a disability before she emerged on a bigger scene to empower other families. Her inspiring and knowledgeable presentation delivered during the Oregon Statewide Conference on Secondary Transition emphasised the importance of equipping families with tools necessary to support their children, schools and service providers in order to produce improved outcomes.

Although interagency collaboration in Australia is not within a Special Education teacher ‘s regular scope and sequence activities, Special Education teachers can work towards establishing relationships with businesses or community groups that provide students with work experience and community access activities. However, usually it is the role of a Support Teacher Transition (who services multiple schools with hundreds of students across them) to support special educators at school in connecting them to these businesses and community groups.

Schools need to be aware of the role this particular predictor (i.e. interagency collaboration) plays in the secondary transition planning process and that students could benefit by an active collaboration between stakeholders at their level such as Special Educators, Career Advisors, Transition Advisers, parents, students and a Support Teacher Transition to improve outcomes.

Unless we establish strong communication and accountability between stakeholders, this important process may not be effective and fail to improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

Additionally, through my discussion with Dr Joan Kester from the George Washington University, I have learnt that there are different models used to establish interagency collaboration. One is called Communicating Interagency Relationships and Collaborative Linkages for Exceptional Students (CIRCLES). CIRCLES was developed as a model for interagency collaboration to support the successful transition of students with disabilities. The CIRCLES model is made up of three levels of interagency collaboration.

1. The communitylevel team provides administrative leadership for the array of transition services offered and assists in finding solutions for problems that may arise in service delivery.
2. The schoollevel team provides each student with access to an array of representatives from community agencies that may provide services to the student after graduation.
3. The individuallevel team writes the IEP including the transition component (<https://www.transitionta.org/transitionplanning>).

Nancy Hinkley, from Cornell University, provided me with a very comprehensive overview of secondary transition processes and facilitated many visits to different programs and projects sites in New York State (NYS). I was able to observe great examples of interagency collaboration between students, parents, general and special education teachers and employers. Whether it was a high school with a special education class, an off-site transition program involving a group of students or a tailored just for one student program in a particular business, I was able to observe best practice and meet students who were learning skills while on the job. For example, the Project SEARCH Transition-to-Work Program is a unique, business led, one year employment preparation program that takes place entirely at the workplace. The goal for each participant is competitive employment. I have met students who on completion of this program obtained employment and were working and earning equal wages like their colleagues. To reach that goal, the program provides real life work experience combined with training in employability and independent living skills (https://www.projectsearch.us/transition-to-work/).

Hinkley, who works at the Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability, conducts surveys and qualitative research on issues pertaining to gaps between policy and practice. Her work is concerned with the implementation of evidence-based practices in transition planning and services throughout NYS. She is in charge of the [Transition Services Professional Development Center Project](http://www.yti.cornell.edu/projects/transition-services-professional-development-center). As school districts are required to provide students with disabilities with appropriate transition services to help them meet their post school goals in education, employment and independent living, the project’s goal is to build on what works in transition from school to adult life and to advocate for research-based practices. This project offers access to a website <https://transitionsource.org/>that provides resources based on in school experiences that are predictors of post school success for schools, agencies and parent centres.

Throughout my study tour great attention has been given to evidence-based predictors which improve secondary transition for students with disabilities in the areas of education, employment and /or independent living.

David Test, who is a Professor of Special Education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and presented at the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Conference in Tampa, has identified 16 evidence-based predictors. The predictors are:

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| --- | --- |
| * career awareness
 | * program of study
 |
| * community experiences
 | * self-advocacy/self-determination
 |
| * high school diploma status
 | * self-care/independent living
 |
| * inclusion in general education
 | * social skills
 |
| * interagency collaboration
 | * student support
 |
| * occupational courses
 | * transition program
 |
| * parental involvement
 | * vocational education
 |
| * paid work experience
 | * work study
 |

Although, some of these predictors already appear to be present in Australian schools, Professor Test's identified predictors list what is going to improve our students with disabilities’ post school outcomes. This is a great start for developing and expanding programs, evaluating existing programs and improving the quality of student Individual Learning Plans (ILPs).

For example, the Department of Education in Virginia (VDOE) has developed and implemented a state-wide program called ‘I’m Determined’ (<https://www.imdetermined.org/resources/documents/>) that is designed to help students with disabilities to develop their self-determination skills.

Self-determination is an essential skill for all students. Students who are self-determined act autonomously (make choices and decision as needed), are self-regulated (have some personal control over actions), are psychologically empowered (feel and act capable), and are self-realising (understand the effects of their actions) ([http://www.self-determination.org](http://www.self-determination.org/)).

Test et al. (2009) have shown that those students with high levels of self-determination are more likely to go on to post secondary education, be competitively employed and live independently after high school. Training in self-determination and goal attainment should also allow students with disabilities to drive their own ILP meeting, based on their preferences, interests, needs and strengths. Such training can be provided using existing published curricula, for example: ‘Whose future is it anyway’ (<http://www.rytmus.org/shared/clanky/767/Whose%20future%20is%20it%20anyway.pdf>) or by applying the Self-determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) strategy which can be used in the general education curriculum to instruct students on self-determination skills.

Interestingly, there is an emerging agreement among the key stakeholders that for successful secondary transition the process should start at age of 14. ‘A Transition Path to Adulthood’ model, developed by Eivind-Erik Sorensen, a Transition Network Facilitator, from Willamette Education Service District in Oregon has been identified as best practice. In addition, he points out that if transition programs incorporate predictor variables and evidence-based practices that lead to positive post-school outcomes, a student is ten times more likely to access paid employment.

# Conclusion

I believe that schools may have a greater role to play when it comes to secondary transition of students with disabilities.

Successful secondary transition cannot occur unless there is some emphasis given to the transition planning process as part of the education of students with disabilities. This transition planning process necessarily involves collaboration between key stakeholders including students, parents, business, community groups - early in the student's school life.

Transition planning consists of many variables (i.e. Taxonomy for Transition Programming). There are many milestones that students with disabilities need achieve throughout their secondary education (ILP goals and objectives) for a successful secondary transition. With this in mind, if the transition planning process takes place at high school, then emphasis should be given to evidence-based practices and predictors validated by research.

It is vital for teachers to build and maintain a strong partnership with parents, who are the main key stakeholders in a transition planning process, to encourage their participation in their child’s school life, to empower them with the necessary knowledge about changes initiated by introduction of the NDIS and importantly promote high expectations by parents and teachers for post school success.

Currently in Australia, the NDIA "works with Education to support students with disability to make a smooth transition into School Leaver Employment Support (SLES) program or other employment supports" (<https://www.ndis.gov.au/people-disability/sles>).

This assistance is offered for up to two years after finishing Year 12. One would hope that "Education" will revisit their program structures and the quality of instructions in the context of secondary transition and will assign more weight to transition-focused education for students with disabilities in Years 7 to 12.

Naturally, with the existing resources validated by research, tools such as ‘The Post-school /Predictor Implementation/Informal Self-Assessment’ that are accessible on the NTACT website (<https://transitionta.org/system/files/resources/Predictor_Self-Assessment2.0.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=1359&force>=) can be used in the initial and then ongoing evaluation of transition programs at schools.

Such tools would assist teachers support skill development of students with disabilities, including development of ILP goals and objectives. Additionally, schools may also use these tools to identify the areas of secondary transition process, predictor by predictor and plan for its implementation or improvement.

The knowledge I have gained through this fantastic experience will allow me to look at our current school practice with a different set of eyes. A development of secondary transition scope and sequence that incorporates activities reflecting evidence-based practices and predictors is a starting point to creating a solid basis for improving students outcomes. Further, with the use of ‘The Post-school /Predictor Implementation/Informal Self-Assessment’ tool, I will be able to determine which practices can be implemented to enhance our current practice. Lastly, collaboration amongst stakeholders and parental involvement that highlights high expectations need to become paramount in order to improve students with disabilities outcomes.

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