TRANSITION TO SCHOOL
Position Statement

Preamble

Worldwide recognition of the significance of the early childhood years for later development and wellbeing and the importance of investing in high quality early childhood education (OECD, 2006) has promoted a great deal of interest in transition research, policy and practice. This trend is seen in Australia, particularly in COAG commitments to early childhood education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009b), including the *Early Years Learning Framework* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009a). These commitments are being enacted at the same time as the Australian curriculum is being developed and implemented. It is timely to consider the transition to school as the point at which different contexts, systems, curricula, philosophies and approaches meet. Beginning school is also a time when all involved have responsibilities to promote a positive transition.

The importance of a positive transition to school has been emphasised in research around the world. It is well established that a successful start to school is linked to later positive educational and social outcomes. Children who have a positive start to school are likely to regard school as an important place and to have positive expectations of their ability to learn and succeed at school (Alexander & Entwisle,

1998; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Margetts, 2007; Peters, 2010).

A successful transition to school is marked by children's positive approach to school and a sense of belonging and engagement. Families have critical roles to play in supporting positive transitions, as do educators*, health and other professionals, as well as communities. Societies benefit when children and families view school as a positive place to be and when education is regarded as valuable, relevant and attainable. A positive start to school, leading to greater and ongoing connection with school, has been identified as a factor in disrupting cycles of social and economic disadvantage and in promoting resilience among young people (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009b; Smart, Sanson, Baxter, Edwards, & Hayes, 2008).

This position statement has been developed by a group of national and international transition to school researchers who have been working in the area over the last 20 years. An overview of the researchers' seminal research is included at the end of this document. The authors have been assisted in this task by a wide range of educators and policy makers, who have reviewed the document and enhanced it through their constructive criticism.

Charles Sturt University

Purpose

This position statement has been developed as an aspirational document targeted to all concerned with the education, care and wellbeing of young children. This includes policymakers, educators, health and other professionals, families and communities. The position statement reconceptualises transition to school in the context of social justice, human rights (including children's rights), educational reform and ethical agendas, and the established impact of transition to school on children's ongoing wellbeing, learning and development. These principles support a range of educational entitlements around the transition to school.

This position statement has been developed as an aspirational document targeted to all concerned with the education, care and wellbeing of young children.

The position statement is based on national and international understandings of the importance of the transition to school. It provides a strong basis for action for government, organisations and individuals as all strive for policies and practices that support the best possible start to school for all children and their families.

The statement is underpinned by the importance of:

- understandings of all children as competent, capable and creative, who have already learned a great deal before they enter school, regardless of their context or backgrounds;

- acknowledging and supporting children as active participants in their own transition and learning;

- recognising and valuing the strengths of all involved in transitions to school;

- genuine partnerships involving reciprocal, responsive, respectful relationships;

- critically reflecting on established policies and practices and their underlying assumptions; and

- curriculum and pedagogy relevant to children's characteristics, interests and circumstances.

In this document, transition to school is taken to be a dynamic process of continuity and change as children move into the first year of school. The process of transition occurs over time, beginning well before children start school and extending to the point where children and families feel a sense of belonging at school and when educators recognise this sense of belonging. This means that transition may occur over a longer period of time for some children.

Transition to school is characterised by:

- opportunities;   • expectations;

- aspirations;   • entitlements.

Opportunities

Opportunities are afforded to children when they are recognised as competent and capable, when their cultural heritage and histories are respected, and when they are supported in their approaches to new and challenging situations and interactions. The transition to school provides opportunities for children to continue shaping their identities and to extend their existing knowledge, skills and understandings through interactions with adults, peers and family. Children are well placed to respond to these opportunities when they feel secure, valued and respected for who they are and the histories they bring – when they feel a sense of belonging at school. The transition to school provides opportunities for children to become citizens within school communities and to experience the rights and responsibilities associated with this.

Transition to school provides opportunities for families to collaborate with educators and other professionals in ways that strengthen and support each child's ongoing learning and development. It provides opportunities to reflect on children's attainments and to share responsibilities for future achievements.

Children are well placed to respond to these opportunities when they feel secure, valued and respected for who they are and the histories they bring – when they feel a sense of belonging at school.

The transition to school is an opportunity to establish and maintain positive, respectful collaboration between home and school contexts that sets a pattern for ongoing interaction. Families have opportunities to build links for their children between prior-to-school and school experiences.

During the transition to school, educators have opportunities to build relationships with children, families and communities that provide the basis for effective learning and teaching interactions. Educators have opportunities to share their own expertise, while recognising the expertise of others, as they communicate and make connections with children, other educators, families and communities. The transition to school is a specific opportunity for prior-to-school and school educators, and the systems in which they are employed, to work together and to draw support from each other.

Educators have opportunities to share their own expertise, while recognising the expertise of others, as they communicate and make connections with children, other educators, families and communities.

Community recognition and support for transition to school marks this transition as an important life event. Transition to school affords opportunities for communities to celebrate children and families and to demonstrate the value of early education as well as respect for those involved in this endeavour. The transition to school is an opportunity to strengthen the community identity of schools and prior-to-school settings and the place of these institutions within communities.

Aspirations

As they start school children are enthusiastic learners, keen to extend their learning in a safe and friendly environment. They seek to maintain existing friendships and build new friendships as they engage in play and learning. They hope that school will be an enjoyable context which supports their developing autonomy and their active engagement in learning. Children want their learning to be recognised and valued in both process and product.

Families aspire to positive educational outcomes for their children, as well as continuity between the early childhood settings – at times of transition and beyond. They would like their children to be happy and successful at school, to have friends and be respected and recognised as individuals within the various groups of which they are members. Families also aspire to contribute to their children's education through the development of trusting, respectful and reciprocal relationships.

Educators aspire to the development of strong partnerships with families, other educators, professionals and communities as part of strong and supportive educational environments in the first year of school. They want children to learn to their full potential in an inspiring, challenging and supportive environment.

Communities aspire to provide ongoing support and resources to promote children's positive engagement in school and to reap the social, cultural, educational and economic benefits of education that are regarded as valuable, relevant and attainable. Communities also aspire to provide the support, resources, services and living conditions that promote the wellbeing of children and families. Communities with strong social networks and access to resources that can be mobilised to support children and families are well positioned to promote positive transitions to school.

Within educational organisations and systems, policy makers aspire to all children engaging in positive educational trajectories and achieving sound educational outcomes. This is based on commitments to reducing inequalities in educational access and outcomes. Strategies to achieve positive educational outcomes for all include continuity of curriculum and pedagogy and strong coordination between the prior-to-school and school sectors.

Educators aspire to the development of strong partnerships with families, other educators, professionals and communities as part of strong and supportive educational environments in the first year of school

Expectations

Transition to school is a time of changing expectations for all involved.

Children and families start school with a range of expectations about what school will be like and what it means to be a school student or parent of a school student. Children start school expecting to learn and to be recognised as learners. They expect to encounter challenges and to be supported in their approaches to these. Children expect to engage with their friends, family and community at school and about school. Children seek continuity of support as they encounter change as they start school: changes in themselves, their environments and their interactions.

Children and families start school with a range of expectations about what school will be like and what it means to be a school student or parent of a school student.

Families expect that their knowledge of their children will be respected at school. They expect that their children's educators will draw on this, as well as their own expertise and that of other professionals, to create the best possible learning environments for their children. Families expect to contribute to their children's education, and may seek guidance from educators about how partnerships can operate effectively. Families expect children's safety and wellbeing to be central features in decisions about educational provision. They expect schools to recognise the strengths their children bring, as well as to be responsive to their diverse learning needs. Families expect to be advocates for their children, and to be supported in this by the advocacy of other professionals.

Educators expect to engage with children, families, other educators and professionals in the creation of positive learning and teaching environments during the transition to school. They expect appropriate support and resources to create challenging learning environments for all children. Educators expect to work with children, families and other professionals to recognise children's strengths and to provide appropriate support. They expect appropriate professional recognition and regard for their roles in promoting each child's learning, development and wellbeing during the transition process.

Communities expect schools to be sites where children are regarded as competent and capable learners, experience a sense of belonging, and enact the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Effective schools attend to the wellbeing of all involved, generate positive and respectful learning environments and have regard to the communities in which they are located.

Within educational systems and organisations, there are expectations that all children will benefit from education. Further, education is identified as a major force for reducing inequality and disadvantage and promoting long-term social and economic productivity.

Policy makers within educational organisations and systems expect that specific programs will be required to promote educational engagement and attainment for all children. One key area for such focus is the transition to school.

Entitlements

All children are active participants in their transition, entitled to access high quality education that is respectful of, and responsive to, their existing competencies, cultural heritage and histories.

High quality education builds upon these competencies by creating educational environments that provoke, recognise and celebrate each child's learning potential. These environments acknowledge the central roles of families and communities in children's educational outcomes. There is potential for transitions to school to provide a site for the enactment of these entitlements from the very beginning of children's school careers.

Families are entitled to be confident that their children will have access to education that promotes equity and excellence and that attends to the wellbeing of all children. Families are entitled to be respected as partners in their children's education.

High quality education builds upon these competencies by creating educational environments that provoke, recognise and celebrate each child's learning potential.

Educators are entitled to professional regard and respect for their work with children, families and communities during the transition process. They are entitled to levels of professional support and resourcing that facilitate the creation of the best possible learning and teaching environments for all children, and to opportunities for ongoing professional development and critical reflection, both individually and collaboratively.

Communities are entitled to be regarded as essential contributors to children's education, and to have a major role and place within education institutions. Policy makers are entitled to expect that education systems will work towards alignment and continuity, providing necessary supports and provocations to promote high quality education for all.

Communities are entitled to be regarded as essential contributors to children's education, and to have a major role and place within education institutions.

Educational systems and organisations are entitled to expect that educators, families and communities will be active contributors to the wellbeing, learning and development of young children.

Recommendations

This position statement has been developed as a call to action for all with an interest in the wellbeing, development and learning of young children. This includes policymakers, educators, health and other professionals, families and communities. In urging individuals, groups, communities, organisations, systems and governments to recognise the importance of a positive transition to school for all children, we recommend the development of processes, practices and policies that incorporate the following:

1. Recognition of transition to school as an integral component of quality educational provision.

2. Commitment to equity and excellence in the development of transition programs, evident in the engagement of children, families, professionals, educators and community members in the implementation of relevant, appropriate and meaningful approaches.

3. Approaches to ensure that all children, families and communities have access to appropriate support across the processes of transition.

4. Focus on the competencies, strengths and achievements of children and families as they make the transition to school.

5. Acknowledgement of the central role of relationships in positive transitions and opportunities for those involved to build and maintain these relationships.

6. Recognition of children's active roles in shaping their transition experiences and the importance of consulting them about transition.

7. Enactment of the principles of family engagement in education, based on trusting, respectful and reciprocal relationships.

8. Appropriate support for educators whose roles encompass transition to school, including support for the development of curriculum and pedagogy that supports positive transitions, opportunities for critical reflection on policies and practices and appropriate professional development.

9. Recognition of the transition to school as an opportunity to build positive connections between the many systems and sectors that engage with young children and their families.

10. Acknowledgement of the major roles in transition played by those outside school systems, including prior-to-school educators, special educators and other professionals, families and communities.

11. Opportunities for systems and sectors to define transition approaches and to consider constructive alignment of curriculum and pedagogies across educational contexts.

12. Ongoing commitment to the entitlements of all children, families and educators in positive transitions to school.

This position statement has been developed as a call to action for all with an interest in the wellbeing, development and learning of young children.

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Authors

The authors of this statement are leading researchers in the field of transition, from Australia and around the world. Individually and collectively, they have conducted high quality research on the transition to school over many years, published widely in prestigious academic journals, addressed learned forums, informed professional practice and provided input for policy. Their work has formed the basis of advice for various levels of government, educational organisations and systems and provided the framework for approaches to transition in their respective countries, as well as internationally. The researchers and key publications are listed below.

Professor Sue Dockett, Murray School of Education, Charles Sturt University.

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Emeritus Professor Aline-Wendy Dunlop, University of Strathclyde, Scotland.

http://www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/courses/education/staff/dunlopaline-wendyprof/

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Professor Jóhanna Einarsdóttir, Faculty of Education, University of Iceland, Iceland.

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Professor Beth Graue, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA.

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Associate Professor Linda Harrison, Charles Sturt University.

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Dr Mei Seung (Michelle) Lam, Assistant Professor, Department of Early Childhood Education, Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong.

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Dr Sally Peters, Department of Human Development and Counselling, University of Waikato, New Zealand.

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Dr Anne Petriwskyj, Faculty of Education, Early Childhood, Queensland University of Technology.

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Dr Tuija Turunen, Murray School of Education, Charles Sturt University; University of Lapland, Finland.

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Research students

Several research higher degree students made invaluable contributions to this Position Statement:

Wendy Goff, Charles Sturt University

Kathryn Hopps, Charles Sturt University

Cathy Kaplun, Charles Sturt University

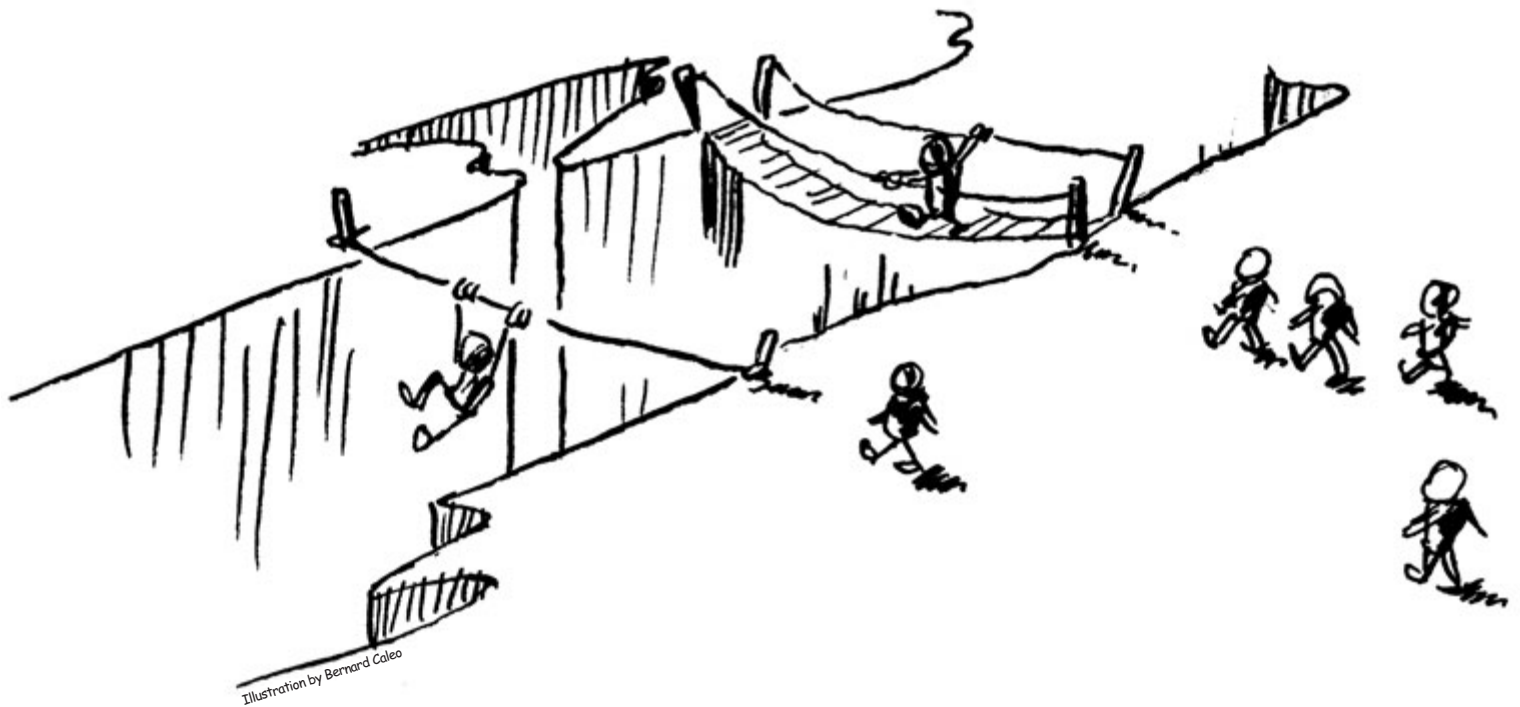Amy MacDonald, Charles Sturt University

Leonie McIntosh, University of Western Sydney

Susanne Rogers, Charles Sturt University

Illustration by Bernard Caleo

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