

# ACCEPTED VERSION

Daniel Mays, Divya Jindal-Snape, and Christopher Boyle

## Transitions of children with additional support needs across stages

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DANIEL MAYS, DIVYA JINDAL-SNAPE & CHRISTOPHER BOYLE

## 10. TRANSITIONS OF CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL SUPPORT NEEDS ACROSS STAGES

### INTRODUCTION

Educational transition is a dynamic and ongoing process of adaptation due to a move from one educational context and set of interpersonal relationships to another (Jindal-Snape, 2010). The educational context can involve a change in educational systems or moving across different stages of education, such as moving from one class to another, moving from primary school to secondary school, or from a special school to a mainstream primary or secondary school. The changes in interpersonal relationships involve leaving old peers and staff behind and forming relationships with the people in the new environment. Further, transition also involves a change in identity, for example from a primary to a secondary school student, with subtle and hidden changes in expectations and rules in the new educational context (Bronfenbrenner, 2009). Transitions trigger fundamental changes in personal circumstances and can be a period of intensive learning, with the individual experiencing multiple, and in some cases, simultaneous phases of accelerated change (Griebel & Niesel, 2004; Mays, 2014). The child's educational transitions are therefore embedded in other simultaneous, multiple transitions. Their transitions trigger transitions for significant others, such as their family and professionals, and vice versa. Therefore, transitions are multiple and multi-dimensional (see Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions Theory, Jindal-Snape, 2016).

Research suggests that most children navigate transitions successfully and that for some, they involve adaptation and adjustment over a longer period of time (Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Lucey & Reay, 2000). The same child can find educational transitions to be positive at one time point but challenging and stressful at another. Positive transitions can stimulate a child's development, while negative transitions can lead to difficulties with their social and emotional wellbeing as well as to a dip in their academic attainment and academic motivation (Galton & Hargreaves, 2002; Jindal-Snape, 2016). The stress is sometimes triggered if the environment and staff are unknown, there is a loss of friendship groups without ongoing networks outside the school, by the need to form new relationships, by navigating the new physical, academic and social environment, and/or due to the high Need for Cognitive Closure (NCC) that some children might have (Jindal-Snape, 2016). Children and young people with high NCC find it important to have all the relevant information before going into a new situation or environment in order to reduce their sense of confusion, uncertainty and ambiguity (Kashima & Sadewo, 2016). This kind of information, however, is not always available to them if there is a lack of effective transition practice that familiarises them with the new environment and context over a period of time (Jindal-Snape, 2016).

These transitions can be even more complex for those with *additional support needs* or *special education needs*. For example, for children who were migrants or refugees, a transition might involve learning to study in a new language, living in a new country and studying in a new educational system (Gunasekera Houghton, Glasgow, & Boyle, 2014). Despite this, there is a dearth of literature about

transitions of children with additional support needs (see Hannah & Topping, 2013; Hughes et al., 2013; Jindal-Snape, Douglas, Topping, Smith & Kerr, 2006; Mays et al., 2016; Rosenkoetter et al., 2009), and what little exists largely focuses on post-school transitions (Richardson, Jindal-Snape, & Hannah, 2017). A systematic literature search in databases such as ERIC, PsycInfo and Fachportal Pädagogik clearly shows how the focus on transitions varies between different fields and different language areas. Take, for example, the transition from a special school for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties to mainstream education. Only a few empirical studies have been completed in this area in Germany (the country of this chapter's first author), despite the fact that the proportion of students educated outside the mainstream system remains steady and the originally defined role of such special schools was that of a preparatory or "transition" institution (Mays, 2014; Mays, 2017). As an example, North Rhine-Westphalia – the most populous state of Germany and commonly shortened to NRW – is, with a population of approximately 18 million, the fourth largest by area. Since 2009, around 15,000 students with additional support needs in the area of emotional and social development have been educated separately in special schools. It is not possible to ascertain any reduction in the number of students with EBD schooled in special schools, however (MSW NRW, 2017). The re-integration of these children from the special school to the general school is a key challenge in the German school system even 10 years after the ratification of the UN Disability Rights Convention.

Notwithstanding the above, the issue of stress and anxiety for some children who are vulnerable as a result of the transition process is an important one to acknowledge as this may cause them to require additional support in school (Jindal-Snape, 2016). For example, this requirement for extra support when moving between schools can be more prevalent for students who are from refugee backgrounds due to their particularly unique set of circumstances both inside and outside of the school setting (Gunasekera et al., 2014). As the authors write this chapter in late 2017, it is clear that the intake of refugees is an issue for many countries, most notably Germany. The reasons why many current refugees seek to leave their home country can be multifaceted, however it is clear that many will have experienced or witnessed violence as a result of oppression and/or war situations. Transitioning between schools is even more problematic for many of these students than would normally be expected and the issue of education with appropriate support provision through the lens of inclusive education is paramount to successful transitions and thus schooling.

Hattie (2013) put the main aspects which influenced student achievement in school in rank order. He found that "mobility" (which we can take to mean a transitional factor) was ranked last, with a negative effect of -0.34. His research was based on meta-analyses and individual studies concluded that the most important fundamental factor for ensuring success in school is that of developing strong friendships within the first month of transitioning to a new school (Hattie, 2013). This importance of the social aspects of schooling can quite often be forgotten in the ever prevalent rush to gain success in government initiated school metrics, which only focus on exam performance as opposed to the myriad of other factors relevant to student development (Boyle, 2014; Hardy & Boyle, 2011). This is despite repeated evidence that children and parents are more focussed on the social and interpersonal aspects of transitions rather than the academic aspects (Jindal-Snape, 2013).

The installation of professional and system-linking support might be a key factor in improving transition processes (e.g. for reliable information exchange about

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students. Professional support is required, however, this should transcend all levels from individual student support to that of interactional and contextual support.

This chapter will seek to set out the influence that transitions can have on children with additional support needs, examine some of the legislation which is relevant to this area, indicate appropriate transition practice in this area, and finally to make recommendations for effective inclusive transition practice.

### IMPACT OF TRANSITIONS ON CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL SUPPORT NEEDS

One of the first major studies on school transitions was conducted by Nisbet and Entwistle (1969). Over 2,000 children from 33 schools in Scotland took part in the project. The researchers investigated the age at which the transition to secondary education appeared to be most appropriate, and whether moving schools affected a child's development. The study found that students who experienced difficulty in adapting in the transition phase performed worse at school than students who did not. It also concluded that less motivated students often came from working class families and had greater trouble adapting (Nisbet & Entwistle, 1969). It has also been indicated in various research studies (see Mays, 2014 & Mays et al., 2018) that students who require additional support may be more at risk of being negatively affected during the transition periods. This section will discuss the different stages of educational transitions and consider research evidence related to the experience of students with additional support needs. The stages are:

1. Pre-school (nursery) to primary school
2. Primary school to secondary school
3. Post-school transitions.

#### *Pre-school (nursery) to Primary School*

Although research is limited at this stage, studies have highlighted issues in relation to these transitions for children with additional support needs, especially due to variability in practice of professionals and views of staff. A US study suggested that children who were found to have more severe learning difficulties had more pronounced issues with making a successful transition into primary school than those with less severe learning difficulties (Carlson et al., 2009). They found that teachers in the regular primary school made use of five strategies in order to support the transition of students with additional support needs, whereas special educators were found to have used substantially more strategies. These particular strategies were found to have included supplying documented information to parents, encouraging advance school visits by both parents and students as well as teachers in the new school conducting a 'reverse' visit to see the student in his/her current school, and providing students' school records in a timely manner. The study reported that the child's characteristics played a role in their successful transitions and school readiness, such as severity of disability, academic ability as well as social skills. In Scotland, Gorton (2012) reports a similar issue; parents of children with additional support needs were more willing to postpone the transition to primary school so that there would be more opportunity for the child to 'mature' and thus have more opportunity to attend the mainstream school rather than special school. This study suggests that the maturational approach to school readiness versus the interactionist approach may be more prevalent in many cases. In order for the transition to be inclusive it is necessary that the interactionist approach is accepted as this will incorporate the individual's supports needs necessary for each child.

Readiness for school exists as various levels both inside and outside school, and school, community, and family are essential in the transition process (Mayer, Amendum, & Vernon-Feagans, 2010). It is not surprising that, the ecological and systemic perspective has received wide-ranging support for the analysis and transparent development of transition concepts. Advocates for this type of approach work on the assumption that the way in which a child or young person is prepared for and supported through changes by people from their immediate environment can have a significant influence on the success of the transition (Bronfenbrenner, 2009).

### *Transition to Secondary and High School*

A wide range of educational, developmental, emotional and cognitive transitions occurs at this stage; moving school, the onset of puberty, and the emergence of formal operational reasoning, all of which have to be managed by the students at the same time (Cole et al., 2001). Children are excited about the transition to secondary school due to the greater choice of subjects, social aspects, and sports. There are further opportunities to meet new people and, of course, leaving some friends behind. Suddenly there are many teachers instead of the same one throughout the year and there are opportunities to gain more independence and to potentially have new or change to one's identity (Akos, 2010; Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2008; Jindal-Snape, 2010). However, children can be anxious due to schools being generally larger, in a different location and with a different setup, as well as due to the loss of lifelong friendships, the requirement to make new friends, and suddenly having to understand the requirements of many teachers instead of a few (Jindal-Snape, 2016). This difficulty can be magnified many times for children who are on the autistic spectrum and have a detrimental effect on their wellbeing (Hannah & Topping, 2012).

Jindal-Snape, Douglas, Topping, Smith and Kerr (2006) found that the five children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) in their small-scale study in Scotland had multiple routes when moving to secondary school such as from mainstream primary to mainstream secondary school, mainstream primary school to a communication support unit attached to a mainstream secondary school, primary communication support unit to a secondary communication support unit, primary communication support unit to autism-specific day provision, and primary communication support unit to autism-specific residential provision. Parental choice played a role in the selection of the pathways. However, there were significant delays in placement, leading to stress for children and families, with two children experiencing a break in schooling, one for approximately ten months. Similarly, in the English context, parents highlighted that professionals and the local authority should view their child as the "whole person", with placement based on their wishes and needs, rather than the financial implications for the local authority (Poet, Wilkinson, & Sharp, 2011).

Furthermore, a new social environment can support development in transitional phases (see Mays, 2014). It is possible that a new start for children and young people with behavioural difficulties can be positive as the shifting peer affiliations provide youth who have previously experienced social difficulties an opportunity to establish new social relationships, roles, and identities which foster their adjustment and adaptation (Farmer et al., 2011). However, it has also been reported that those with behaviour problems are at an increased risk of being perpetrators and victims of bullying (Farmer, Petrin, et al., 2012; Gumpel & Sutherland, 2010; Swearer, Grills, Haye, & Cary, 2004). Therefore, the new social context can be both a protective and a risk factor (Farmer et al., 2015). Similarly,

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Langenkamp (2010) suggests that students’ social relationships at primary school (and their continuation) and ability to form new positive social relationships in secondary school protect them from not only emotional but also academic vulnerability.

#### *Post-School Transitions*

The post-school transition is one fraught with many difficulties especially for those young people who have some form additional support need (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2014). It seems that those with complex needs have limited options (or are only made aware of limited options) for moving on from school, with the most frequently mentioned destination being further education college, where they go on to take practically-oriented, skills-based courses, or vocational training as in the case of Germany (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2014). It is not clear whether the young people who do move onto vocational training or further education end up in positive work environments and further research is required to follow this population more diligently.

At this stage, the collaboration between professionals from children’s services and adult services becomes crucial. This can be problematic due to tensions surrounding inter-professional collaboration and a lack of clear responsibilities, the handing over of responsibilities and the lack of a feedback loop to see what has worked. For example, the post-school transition meetings in Scotland involve several professionals from different agencies, and young people and families can find such meetings to be overwhelming; with power dynamics making it difficult for young people and families to express their views. Also, there are several reports of young people *being invited* by the teacher but declining to participate (Aziz, 2014). There are only a small number of reports of young people being involved in a meaningful way, such as through the use of pre-prepared Power-Point presentations, taking a friend along with them, and/or the use of other visual and various creative ways of expression (Richardson, 2015).

This is also the time that the person is developing into a young adult with the accompanying need for independence and developing adult relationships. For those with complex needs, such as serious health problems, this might also involve the adaptation of their living space before such things can happen. Also, for some, having grown up in a relatively protected environment due to their complex needs, independent living might require gradual psychological adaptation, both for the young person and the significant others in their life (Jindal-Snape et al., 2015).

#### EFFECTIVE TRANSITION PRACTICE

Mays (2014) argues that a good transition practice which is not firmly established at multiple systemic levels is highly likely to exacerbate the anxieties of the students. He highlights factors that can act as facilitators or barriers during transitions (see Table 1).

*Table 1: Important Transition Factors (facilitators/barriers) at all systemic levels (Mays, 2014)*

Student level	Teacher level	Organisation level
<b>Social skills</b>	Specialist (integration) competence (psychological)	Human resources

	expertise; knowledge of the mainstream school system)	
<b>Anxieties</b>	Communication skills	How the transition concept is established at the school level
<b>Work</b>	Teacher's basic attitude to integration/inclusion	How the transition concept is established at the education authority level
<b>Intelligence</b>	Subjective perception of workload	Regional structure (area with social problems, size of catchment area, types of school in the vicinity)
<b>Self-concept</b>	Scope for personal initiative	Time available
<b>Developmental age</b>		Incentive systems
<b>Transition stress</b>		Organisation of cooperation (special school/mainstream school)

Many students are at risk of exhibiting behaviour which impedes a successful transition as a result of ongoing feelings of anxiety. Students' anxieties about a transition can be a powerful variable in the transition process, and we need to listen very carefully to the voices of the children and young people to notice these fears (Wigfield et al., 1991; Yeboah, 2002). Repeated measures to strengthen students' self-concept in good time before the transition and to help young people to cope with the upcoming change processes could therefore be the first step in preparing children and young people at an early stage for more complex upheavals, and teaching them how to deal with transition stress (Mays, 2016a).

At the level of the teachers, educational and psychological expertise on the dynamics of transition processes, advisory and communication skills training, the optimisation of cooperation structures (e.g. clear personal contacts; set times for meetings) and greater authority to strengthen the position of the teachers involved in transition were found in the studies to have a positive overall effect (Cheney, 2012; Felner et al., 1993; Galton, 2010; Strnadová & Cumming, 2014; Tissue & Korz, 1998).

Strengthening the individual powers available to teaching staff – for example, by allowing a teacher to organise taster placements easily, individually and at short notice – could be another useful measure. A system should also be developed to offer incentives for teachers and head teachers to actively initiate transitions (Mays, 2015). Effective communication between teachers at the feeder school and transition school is a major aspect of professional transition management. As well as the time resources essential for holding transition meetings, the way in which those meetings are held can also be decisive for a child's educational progress. If certain things are communicated too late or not at all, or if advice on dealing with a given student is not accepted, taken as personal criticism or not even requested, there can be no talk of professional transition management.

The joint and targeted preparation of the teaching staff (for example, subject teachers, special school teachers and learning support staff) for transitions in terms of educational psychology, at universities and on placements or through subsequent professional development is essential if we are to achieve a sustainable improvement

in permanence. Establishing close partnerships for developing joint transition practice is the most important tool for improving permanence at the contextual level. Such an approach must involve a clear definition of roles and responsibilities, agreement on the communication structures and the draft of a transparent “crisis management plan” for dealing with any difficulties that occur. For an effective collaboration to happen, research suggests that the following are important: the sharing of mental models, closing the communication loop and developing trust amongst the professionals (Salas, Rosen, Burke, & Goodwin, 2009), sharing knowledge and respectful relationships (Mays & Grottemeyer, 2014; Bamber, Gittell, Kochan, & von Nordenflycht, 2009), identifying and working towards shared goals as a team (Mays, 2016b; Hackman, 2002), as well as the provision of adequate resources, rewards, incentives (Baggs, Norton, Schmitt, & Sellers, 2004), and time and scheduling (Smith, Lavoei-Tremblay, Richer, & Lanctot, 2010).

The availability of sufficient human resources and a clear process for crediting any additional working time would also appear to be important. There should, moreover, be clear and logical requirements and incentive systems at the level of the school and education authority. Part of such an approach includes, for example, straightforward options for cooperation between schools and the students’ gradual preparation for the new challenges facing them. Particular attention should be paid to the internal school procedures for class composition: for example, ten-year-old Lisa, who joins the same class as two friends from the same area and whose older sister is already at the transition school, will likely see the transition as more within her control and less unsettling than her fellow student Pascal, who travels alone from outside town every morning and was previously taught in a small group at a special school. Children and young people who have had traumatic experiences in early childhood or who display appreciable delays in their emotional and social development as a result of neglect or abuse must be actively protected from transition processes that are damaging to their development (Mays, 2014).

Parental participation and home-school partnership have been the focus of several transition studies with positive partnership and parental participation being seen to facilitate transitions (Hannah, Gorton, & Jindal-Snape, 2010). Parental participation can take the form of establishing buddy pairings between parents similar to student buddies, which are set up at the organisational level and could lead to effective transition support networks for children and families. We also need to be aware of the parents’ own transitions, which occur due to the transition of their child. Parents should also be better supported through effective home-school partnerships.

Since transition is a dynamic process, it is vital that transition planning and preparation and the associated activities are carried out *across* the educational lifespan and beyond (see Akos, 2010; Galton, 2010; Jindal-Snape, 2016). Following a review of the good transition practices across the educational stages across the world, Jindal-Snape (2010, 2016), summarised some key aspects of effective transition practice. These include listening to the views of the child/young person more closely and actively involving them in their own transition, opportunities to create friendship networks prior to moving to a new context, and once there, a clear and transparent exchange of information between professionals and families, providing the child with opportunities for bonding with staff and peers (through a buddy system), the sharing of pedagogical approaches across all educational stages (this is even more important if it is not the case that all staff have been trained in inclusive education), meaningful parental participation, and information packs (where possible, with photographs and videos of the new environment and people). These transition practices have clear theoretical underpinnings. For example,

opportunities to create social networks with other children starting at the same school or with staff can be linked to resilience theory, as they can provide opportunities to create strong, externally-protective factors through focusing on relationships and networking.

One aspect which is highlighted in the literature and legislation regarding effective transition is *person-centred planning*. This is an approach which places the person at the centre of the plan and assists them to plan their life and support, with a focus on their strengths and capacities. Person-centred planning involves listening and learning about what an individual wants, helping them to think about what they want now and in the future, and significant others such as family members, friends, professionals and services working together with the person to make sure their aspirations are met (O'Brien, 2004; Rasheed, Fore III, & Miller, 2006). Research suggests that person-centred planning for transitions has been considered to be effective by different stakeholders, for example, young people, families and professionals (Wertheimer, 2007), and is widely accepted as the most effective way of transition planning for those with disabilities (Kaehne, 2010).

Although studies cite its use for post-school transitions, person-centred planning could also be useful at all stages, especially if it were linked with Individual Education Plans and Transition Plans. It is seen to be beneficial due to choice, community involvement, contact with friends, contact with family, social networks and scheduled activities (Robertson, Emerson, Hatton, Elliot, McIntosh, Swift et al., 2007; Sanderson, Thompson & Kilbane, 2006). For example, Tobin et al. (2012) developed an ecological transition programme called STEP-ASD as a low-intensity intervention for reducing problem behaviours and distress in children with autism spectrum disorder as they transition to mainstream secondary school. This includes creating an individualised “transitions management plan” (summary of the child’s needs, the support strategies, and people responsible for delivering support) and “student profile” (one-page summary of the plan).

However, these studies also suggest that person-centred planning works differently for different people, and that the evidential basis for its effectiveness is limited, for example, in the context of employment. This might be due to it not being used effectively at present, despite great potential for its use (Aziz, 2014; Richardson, 2015). Further, work is required to ensure that the person-centred planning approach is embedded from the very start.

Above all else, in the light of inclusive school development, there is an urgent need for new research projects to address the issue of transition in more detail. The methodological challenges (e.g. big-fish-little-pond effect, sample size, time required and costs) involved in this research must not prevent this important field from being investigated in the (special) education disciplines. The imbalance between the importance of transition processes in regards to emotional and social development on the one hand, and the almost complete absence of academic and scientific debate in (special) education disciplines on the other, is not acceptable: the issue is central to the debate about an inclusive society which seeks to focus on participation, opportunities and transparency. In the author’s view, the question could be approached with controlled case studies documenting longitudinal development in transition processes.

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AFFILIATIONS

*Dr. Daniel Mays*  
*University of Siegen, Germany*

*Prof. Divya Jindal-Snape*  
*University of Dundee, Scotland*

*Dr. Christopher Boyle*  
*Graduate School of Education,*  
*University of Exeter, UK*