

The Bidgee School Transition Program: Review of the Literature

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Abstract:

Engagement with school-based learning is prized in education as key to learning, and the central role that teachers play in promoting this engagement is without question. While most students maintain acceptable levels of attention, behaviour and productivity in school, those who are identified as having behaviour disorders struggle in these important areas. These students have significant social, emotional and academic needs which undermine their chances of success, first at school and then into their adult life. Their high levels of need frequently exceed the resources of classroom teachers, initiating cycles of conflict marked by high rates of stress and burnout for teachers and school staff, and low levels of engagement, performance and belonging for students.

This review of current educational literature explores some of the dilemmas facing schools in the area of special education for students with behaviour disorders. It highlights how challenges associated with transition between mainstream and specialist school settings might actually offer educators opportunities for gains in student learning as well as their own professional development. It also considers the accountability that schools have to provide inclusive educational experiences for all students, particularly in light of recent legislative changes. This review explores findings from educational research which suggests that, in the pursuit of increased learning outcomes and smooth educational transitions, strategic, deliberate efforts towards more effective collegial communications might reap positive rewards for teachers and students alike.

School Can be a Place Students Like

For students to learn in school they must be engaged. Student engagement with learning is the teacher's ultimate aim, and is central to their professional responsibility (U. K. House of Commons Education Committee, 2011, pp 17-19; Alton-Lee, 2003, p. 1). Learning is dependent on students being motivated, confident and on-task, and in this way it is the core task of teachers to facilitate this kind of engagement. For most students, an adequate level of engagement is the norm, and studies show that the vast majority of pupils are generally compliant, productive, and on-task when they are at school (Lambert & Miller, 2010, p. 600; OFSTED, 2005). They complete the work that is set with minimum fuss, within the parameters of the school's expectations for acceptable behaviour and performance.

What really matters in affecting students' experiences and outcomes of schooling ... quality teaching by well-trained and competent teachers (Rowe 2004, pp. 1-2)

The literature suggests that student engagement with school-based learning is inextricably connected to the teacher's skill with motivational instruction (Jordan, Glenn, & McGhie-Richmond, 2010, p. 261; Rowe, 2004, p. 18; Sutherland, Lewis-Palmer, Stichter & Morgan, 2008 p. 226; Savage, Lewis, & Colless, 2011, p. 29). Educators who sustain pupil engagement use the act of teaching itself to enliven the curriculum, transforming its standardised content into 'inspiring, enlightening, liberating and knowledge producing' learning experiences (Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012, p. 2; U. K. House of Commons Education Committee, 2011, p. 3). They employ quality teaching approaches to capture

their students' attention, differentiating tasks to exploit learning strengths, and scaffolding learning experiences to meet learning needs. These teachers are effective in maximising student success because their initiative with managing their students' behaviour is directed exclusively towards making their learning enjoyable, regardless of their students' *'gender, intake, or other background characteristics'* (Rowe, 2004, p. 8).

When students like being in school they are inclined to behave well, and learn more (U.K. House of Commons Education Committee, 2011, p. 12; Theodos, 2005, p. 125). The relationship between on-task behaviour and student learning is well documented and highlights the centrality of students being invited to engage with their learning in both emotional and intellectual ways (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011, p. 266; Humphrey & Ainscow 2006, p. 325). Student well-being is enhanced when they have positive perceptions of school (Herman, Reinke, Parkin, Traylor & Agarwal, 2009, p. 436), and students learn best when tasks are authentic, flexible, interesting, and pitched at a level that challenges, but does not exceed their ability (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 38; Wilson et al., 2011, pp. 36-37, Hamm et al., 2011, p. 268). Most importantly, students need to be encouraged to pursue a sense of ownership and autonomy if they are to engage with learning to their fullest potential (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 38; Theodos, 2005, p. 124; Hamm, Farmer, Dadisman, Gravelle & Murray, 2011, p. 268). When these meaningful levels of engagement are evident in school, behaviour disruptions are minimised because students tend to be busy learning (Ducharme & Shecter 2011, p. 266; Gregory, Skiba & Nogeura, 2010, p. 60). This not only benefits them in the here-and-now of school success, but also provides them with the skills they need for this success to continue into the future (Khoo & Ainley, 2005, p. 3; Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012, p. 2).

These notions of student learning and engagement paint an idealistic picture of inspiration and transformation. Yet sadly they often elude teachers working at the coal-face who struggle daily with the task of managing their classrooms (Raible & Irizarry, 2010, p. 1200). Indeed, the task of behaviour management is cited throughout the literature as the greatest source of teacher anxiety and burnout, and the area of greatest need in teacher training programs (Ford, 2007, p. 110; Ford, Edwards, Sharkey, Ukoumumne, Byford, Norich & Logan, 2012, p. 2; Robertson & Dunsmuir, 2012, p. 3;). Armies of real life teachers describe the stress which stems from their sense of vulnerability and unpreparedness in managing student behaviour (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Greene, Beszterczey, Katzenstein, Park & Goring, 2002). Some suggest these feelings lead to the use of more punitive management strategies and more teacher-centred methods of instruction, approaches which ultimately erode away the time teachers spend engaging students in quality learning experiences (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011, p. 257). For teachers and students alike, interventions which support the use of effective management and instruction techniques are vital (Ford et al., 2012, p. 2). Every member of the classroom community will benefit when students who exhibit disruptive behaviours can be more actively engaged with their learning.

Student engagement is related to a range of factors. Some suggest that positive school experiences can be crafted by teachers who use their knowledge of peer group associations to establish more effective social learning situations in school (Hamm et al., 2011, p. 274). Others say that the relationships teachers share with students should be

prioritised, so as to motivate learning and facilitate enhanced connections between the student and the school itself (Herman et al., 2009, p. 439). It is said that healthy teacher-student relationships can also inform more effective instructional and management techniques, optimising learning opportunities (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 33; de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 39; Chan, Rhodes, Howard, Lowe, Schwartz & Herrera, 2012, p. 2). Still others commentate on student engagement by outlining the benefits of proactive approaches to behaviour and classroom management (Sutherland et al., 2008, p. 226). The list of approaches available for educators in the pursuit of student engagement is endless, but it is important that they be implemented in a way that impacts students' life chances.

Disruptions to Learning can have Lasting Effects

The effects of learning disruptions are evident at first in the classroom, and later in wider society. Bad behaviour has been described as '*spreading like cancer*' in the classroom, detracting from classmates' learning, monopolising teacher attention, forcing more didactic methods of teaching, and reducing instruction time by up to thirty per cent (U. K. House of Commons Education Committee, 2011, pp. 11-13; Ford et al., 2012, p. 2 ; Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012, p. 11). As the disruptive student gets older, the risks associated with disengagement from school loom like a grey cloud.

Schools are agents of social change (Herman et al., 2009, p. 443)

Typically, these students will struggle to earn the qualifications they need to secure stable employment, they will rarely build the friendship bonds they need to enjoy positive social experiences, and they are unlikely to develop the personal/emotional tools they need to maintain their mental health (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 34; Sutherland et al., 2008, p. 224). There is urgent need for strategies which might help untangle this web of social dysfunction. With youth homelessness, delinquency, incarceration, mental illness, social dislocation and unemployment having direct links to academic under-achievement, it is little wonder that increased attention has recently been directed towards school-based solutions (U. K. House of Commons Education Committee, 2011, p. 12; Gregory et al., 2010, p. 60; Sutherland et al., 2008, p. 224; Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012, p. 2; Cheney, 2010, p. 119; Raible & Irizarry, 2010, p. 1202). These dilemmas incur an immeasurable cost not only to the student themselves, but also to their family, and the wider community (Ford et al., 2012, p. 2).

When students disengage from (or are pushed out of) school, many are set up for failure in other ways (Raible & Irizarry, 2010, p. 1197).

This level of disconnection from school comes hand-in-hand with an associated disengagement from school-based learning (Theodos, 2005, p. 123). With frustration and alienation replacing the confidence and self-esteem they need for school success, students frequently approach school with avoidance and opposition (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006, p. 325; U. K. House of Commons Education Committee, 2011, p. 18). For many students, active resistance perpetuates cycles of dislocation and failure, contributing to an increase in behaviours which not only disrupt their peers and school

staff, but more importantly, undermine their own ability to engage with learning (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 32). This is particularly true for students identified as having behaviour disorders who struggle to maintain engagement with their school work, and who typically *'find themselves disenfranchised from the mainstream schooling experience'* (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 36). There is a groundswell of evidence which suggests this portion of the student population offers educators the challenge of developing more successful methods of intervention (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 34; Theodos, 2005, p. 128). These students need help to learn the skills which can empower them towards social, emotional and academic success (Fuller, 2001, p. 40).

The myriad of need these students bring to school are incredibly demanding (O'Neill & Stephenson, 2009, p. 6). Although they are thought to comprise up to approximately seven per cent of the student population, it is estimated that they are responsible for up to half of the *'reported incidents of problem behaviour in schools'* and consume up to *'eighty per cent of their teachers' time'* (Ford, 2007, p. 110). The students' typically high levels of non-compliance and aggression combine with their typically low levels of literacy and social skills, along with their deficits in self-awareness and self-determination, to create a volatile classroom concoction (Sutherland et al., 2008, pp. 224-225; Cheney, 2011). The quest for an appropriate educational response to these needs has seen students with behaviour disorders being enrolled in droves in NSW special education settings since the late nineties (Graham, 2012, p. 166). There are widespread calls for multi-faceted approaches to education which step outside traditional models of schooling so as to be more responsive to the intricate web of academic and behavioural needs of students with behaviour disorders (Sutherland et al., 2008, p. 230; de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 30; Theodos, 2005, p. 125). These calls for more integrated, holistic strategies have been made in pursuit of the outcomes which empower students with behaviour disorders towards enhanced schooling achievements, and improved whole-of-life prospects (Alton-Lee, 2003, p. 7; Atkins & Bartuska, 2010, p. 14).

Addressing the needs of students with behaviour disorders is a complex task because it involves dipping into each student's unique melting pot of issues related to mental health, social functioning, and school culture. These students' concerns have been associated with the social and emotional difficulties of adolescence (U. K. House of Commons Education Committee, 2011, pp. 40-41), their exposure to violence and aggression (Gregory et al., 2010, p. 61), and their need for explicit instruction in areas such as sustaining positive social interactions, managing aggression and increasing self-determination (Cheney, 2010, pp. 55-56; Ducharme & Shecter 2011, p. 265; Hamm et al., 2011, p. 275). Students with behaviour disorders find it especially difficult to fit in at school and research consistently points to the fact that they lack a sense of belonging, acceptance and connectedness with school people and processes (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 30; Fuller, 2001, p. 41; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012, p. 510). There is evidence to suggest that this sense of displacement from their peers, their teachers and their school's structures compounds the educational struggles of such students (Moritz Rudasill, Reio, Stipanovic & Taylor, 2010, p. 393), but also that this might potentially offer a site of intervention primed for reaping positive rewards (Carmen, Waycott & Smith, 2011, p. 168; Fuller, 2001, p. 44; Hamm et al., 2011, p. 275; Chan et al., 2012, p. 2).

Meeting Special Behaviour Needs is Pressing

Classroom teachers confront daily the angst which surrounds the schooling experiences of students with behaviour disorders, and while it seems they are strategically positioned to intervene in their students' resistance to school, the literature indicates that they struggle themselves to manage the dilemma (Ducharme & Shecter 2011, p. 257; Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012, p. 11; Roberston & Dunsmuir, 2012, p. 4). The majority of teachers seek professional help in their work with these students, but report that when it is given, assistance is neither timely nor effective in meeting their needs (Ford, 2007, p. 114). Teachers tell of their frustration with ongoing behaviour management problems which surpass their resources, training and abilities (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011, p. 257; Ford et al., 2012, p. 3). They describe the conflict and hopelessness of trying to provide for their challenging students, because their misbehaviour causes significant disruption to the learning environment, and then the time and energy it takes them to respond robs other students of valuable instruction (Sutherland et al., 2008, p. 226; Ford et al., 2012, p. 2). Against this backdrop it is understandable that for teachers and students alike classrooms are perceived as '*aversive*' and sadly, requests to have students with behaviour disorders removed to an alternative learning setting all together are the most frequent type of intervention sought from overwhelmed teachers who literally see no other options (Sutherland et al., 2008, p. 225-226). Jordan et al. recently reported on a study which found that although two-thirds of the teachers surveyed believed in principal in the benefits of inclusion, '*less than one third believe(d) that inclusion can be successful with the resources available to them*' (2010, p. 259; Wood et al., 2012, p. 386).

The detrimental effects of unmanageable student behaviour are evident in classrooms around the world, with widespread reports of teacher stress and student underachievement directing attention towards the contemporary challenges of behaviour management throughout school systems globally (Wood et al., 2012, p. 375; Savage et al., 2011, p. 29). The ongoing complexities of classroom strife coincide with wider systemic concerns related to a decrease in the access young people have to specialist health services and the consequent pressure this places on schools to respond to student's high levels of need in areas such as mental health and language development (Herman et al., 2009, p. 433; de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 34). Education systems are increasingly being asked to work in areas traditionally outside their purview as local schools are confronted with the task of meeting more complex social demands (O'Neill & Stephenson, 2009, p. 6). The effects of these influences in every day terms are felt by students who come to school with needs which exceed the capacity of their school and place their classroom teacher under immeasurable strain (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011, p. 257; Roberston & Dunsmuir, 2012, p. 3). At the heart of this dilemma is the fact that each student has a right to a quality education which promotes increased access to educational services, acceptance of diversity, participation in school life, and academic achievement (Jordan et al., 2010, p. 259).

Inclusive education ... can be understood as the process of developing educational practices that facilitate the learning and participation of all pupils (Humphrey & Ainscow 2006, p. 320)

The accountability schools have to provide inclusive educational experiences for all of their students is not only one to morality and social justice, but with the enactment of the Disabilities and Discrimination Act (1992), and then the Commonwealth Disability Standards for Education (2005), this responsibility is now one upheld by multiple acts of legislation. In Australia's schooling system this heightened accountability for the equitable provision of education has effectively placed the ball of social justice in education back in the court of local schools, demanding that they rise to the challenge of managing the special needs of students with behaviour disorders in ways which do not in any way limit or deny their access to or participation in education (DDA, 1992, 2:22, p. 23). This legislation is built on philosophies of educational inclusion which acknowledge that strategies used to meet the special needs of diverse students can be implemented for the benefit of all, and that educational change which pursues these ends should be sought out and implemented (Humphrey & Ainscow 2006, p. 320). Approaches to education which focus on inclusion have the ability to '*transform school cultures*', improving educational access, participation, and achievement for all students, as well as increasing their acceptance of diversity (Jordan et al., 2010, p. 259). In times where the task of managing student behaviour in an equitable manner is becoming increasingly challenging, and more stringently enforced, stretching school resources and teacher capacities, it is time for schools to adopt a new outlook with new strategies.

There is consensus throughout the literature that the prevalence of extremely challenging student behaviours is on the rise in today's secondary schools (Graham, 2012, p. 166; Wood et al., 2012, p. 375; Ford et al., 2012, p. 2; NSW DEC, 2012a, p. 5; Lambert & Miller, 2010, p. 600), and with this upsurge comes an intensification of the pressure teachers face as they juggle the complexities of '*competing professional demands*' (Jordan et al., 2010, p. 260). The spotlight is on schools as they attempt to manage the practical needs of students with behaviour disorders whilst simultaneously upholding their right to an inclusive education (Wood et al., 2012, p. 390). The conflict embedded in the task has sparked an interest in alternative ways of doing school, and an exploration of the sorts of changes that might be possible if there is to be lasting success in our school systems, for teachers and students alike. Alternative education settings boast community connectedness and student centred learning choices (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, pp. 36-39; Atkins & Bartuska, 2010, pp. 17-18), and in their departure from the policies, practices and traditions of mainstream schools, they might offer valuable options for special behaviour education.

Offering Targeted Support Requires Innovation

Alternative education settings operate within constraints related to the accountability of government funding, and the scrutiny of the public who frequently doubt the validity and rigour of their academic program (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 34). Community assumptions of deficit, which have lasting effects on the students themselves, can fuel these sorts of reservations, overshadowing the belief that students with behaviour disorders can respond positively to intervention, develop the social and academic skills they need to thrive in mainstream settings, and return successfully to their home school (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006). Alternative education centres need to overcome commonly held misconceptions that they are 'dumping grounds' for problem youths with a mandate to cure their problems, train them in basic life skills, and

keep them out of jail (Ferrari, 2010; de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 32). For alternative schools to be recognised as effectively providing for the unique social, emotional and academic needs of students with behaviour disorders, they must retain high standards in their curriculum, an *'evidence-based'* approach in their teaching, and positive momentum in their community connections (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 39; Cheney, 2010). Most importantly, for students to enjoy maximum, lasting benefits from these special placements, it is essential that alternative schools collaborate closely with their mainstream partners to facilitate a mutual exchange of student information, specialised skills and essential support (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 36). This inclusive approach to special education prizes staff cooperation and establishes student support networks, increasing the likelihood that students will engage immediately in school based learning opportunities, and later in wider community settings (Humphrey & Ainscow 2006, p. 327).

There is unquestionably a need for further expansion of quality, flexible learning programs to cater for an increasing number of young people who find themselves disenfranchised from the mainstream schooling experience (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 36)

In response to rising levels of student need and more stringent legislative requirements, the NSW Department of Education and Communities (NSW DEC) has worked hard to increase the amount of targeted support offered in the area of special behaviour education. Since 2001 the NSW DEC has established thirty-five Special Behaviour Schools, called Learning Centres, to provide for the unique needs of students who fit within categories of Behaviour Disorder/Emotional Disturbance/Mental Health (NSW DEC, 2010, p. 1). Department figures from 2011 indicate that this has opened a total of 1 120 placements in these schools alone (NSW DEC, 2011c). In addition, the NSW DEC has established 117.8 classes in mainstream schools and a further 132 classes in special education settings to cater for the needs of students with emotional disturbance (NSW DEC, 2010, p. 2). The most recent surge of provision in special education for behaviour has come under the banner of the NSW DEC Every Student, Every School initiative, which is situated within the larger policy movement of Local Schools, Local Decisions (NSW DEC, 2011a). This shift in NSW education policy reflects the department's increased efforts towards ensuring that every single student, in each unique school is taught by education experts who engage them with learning experiences which target their individual needs. In their quest for student engagement with learning, the department boasts *'a wide range of support services for students with disruptive or challenging behaviour'* (NSW DEC, 2011c).

The establishment of Learning Centres in particular enables the NSW DEC to provide for the needs of students *'whose behaviour can no longer be supported by the students' home school'* (NSW DEC, 2011c). In order to provide an inclusive education where students have access to the benefits of participating in mainstream education, students are never permanently enrolled in these Learning Centres. Rather, their enrolment is shared between their mainstream Home School and the specialist setting with priority being given to the maintenance of strong links between these two education providers (NSW DET, 2007, p. 24). Usually the length of enrolment in these specialist Learning Centres are restricted to periods of *'up to one year'*, with those who need additional specialist support allowed to remain for longer (NSW DEC, 2011c). A sincere commitment to inclusion when implementing these enrolment conditions is vital to ensure that the alternative education program offered by specialist Learning Centres conforms to Disability Standards

for the provision of education (DDA, 1992, p. 30). Members of the mainstream Home School community must work alongside staff from specialist Learning Centres to ensure that each student is offered a genuinely inclusive education where pathways to intervention, transition and support are collaboratively constructed and maintained by all stakeholders. It is only through mutual investment in these ends that the NSW DEC will be able to fulfil the requirements of the Disability and Discrimination Act (1992), and that the students served by the program will have the best shot at social and academic success.

There is clear consensus that the influence of the school environment on its members is impactful enough to warrant ongoing consideration ... interventions are needed to maximize positive outcomes at multiple levels within the school system (Herman et al., 2009, p. 436)

In their Every Student, Every School initiative, the NSW DEC has demonstrated their commitment to increasing the capacity of all school staffs who work with students who have special behaviour needs (NSW DEC, 2012a, p. 3). Every Student, Every School empowers staffs in local schools to develop the tools, systems and strategies they need to establish learning experiences marked by continuity and support as these students navigate their shared enrolment. In the absence of inclusion principles to direct this work, this overlapping environment can be marred by the conflict associated with the rivalling demands of schools, staff, and students (Jordan et al., 2010, p. 260; Wood et al., 2012, pp. 390-391). However, there is evidence to suggest that the act of balancing these delicate needs in this shared space can be achieved when those involved are devoted to the establishment of inclusive schools (Jordan et al., 2010, pp. 259-260; Humphrey & Ainscow 2006, p. 321; Cheney, 2010). Indeed, as all stakeholders invest together in supporting their students with special behaviour needs, newfound opportunities for professional growth and development become apparent. Authentic efforts towards collaboration can unite school staff across this shared space in the common pursuit of student-centred educational change, igniting creative innovation, building on the momentum of success, and exposing opportunities to learn from each other's exemplary practice (Humphrey & Ainscow 2006, p. 327). This sort of professional training and development, borne directly from authentic teacher work, is consistently embraced throughout the field as offering highly relevant, practical learning which best serves teachers' day-to-day workplace needs (NSW DEC, 2012b; U. K. House of Commons Education Committee, 2011). In its commitment to authentic teacher training in special education, and under the banner of Every Student, Every School, the NSW DEC is has funded the Special Schools as Centres of Expertise project, providing avenues of resource for staff at specialist Learning Centres to provide authentic teacher training for their mainstream school partners (NSW DEC, 2012b). The complexities associated with students moving between their two schools, and the opportunities for learning and growth embedded in these processes, make the issue of student transition poised for attention through this project.

Students Need Help to Transition between School Settings

... students require support from teachers regarding their social experiences, such as fitting into the social structure and managing social aggression (Hamm et al., 2011, p. 275)

When students with special behaviour needs move between schools, the change is often accompanied by the difficulties associated with educational transitions of any kind. Feelings of fear and anxiety are commonly experienced by students moving between school settings as they confront unknown school sites, unfamiliar routines and procedures, changing curriculum, new peer groups, and different staff members (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006, p. 324). The change of setting can undermine students' sense of belonging, replacing it with social, emotional and academic vulnerability (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006, p. 327). Students transitioning through specialist Learning Centres already struggle with responding appropriately to confronting or challenging social situations, so the impact of this vulnerability can be significantly magnified (Cheney, 2010, p. 217; Smith, 2000). For these students, the misbehaviours which arise from the angst of transition can initiate cycles of suspension and/or truancy from school (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 34), perpetuating their disengagement with learning and inflaming their opposition to school staff and structures (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006, p. 320). A variety of suggestions have been made to remediate the difficulties of transition, including the enhancement of teacher insight to student worlds (Hamm et al., 2011, p. 267), increasing mentoring support (U. K. House of Commons Education Committee, 2011, p. 66), refining orientation procedures (Theodos, 2005, p. 124), and offering individualised intervention (Carmen, Waycott & Smith, 2011, p. 168). In 2006 the Queensland Government advocated the establishment of *'transition focused education ... (which) represents a shift from disability-focused, deficit-driven programs to an education and service-delivery approach based on abilities, options, and self-determination'* (Queensland Government Department of Education, Training and the Arts, 2006, p. 2).

The approach taken by the NSW DEC echoes this sentiment. The Special Schools as Centres of Expertise program is intended to provide an avenue of targeted, specialised support for students transitioning through specialist Learning Centres, *including preparation, transfer, induction and consolidation of student's access and engagement in education* (NSW DEC, 2012b). Successful and effective transition programs for students with special behaviour needs conceive the provision of formal schooling experiences from a perspective of inclusion rather than deficit, acknowledging that *student needs are variable over time, and that they require support from the network of people legally and morally responsible for their care* (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 32). A smooth transition through the special school setting can help to alleviate the risk of students being negatively labelled, and help to avoid the potentially serious effects of low self-esteem and social stigma (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 32).

In the Riverina Region, learning support for students with special behaviour needs is provided by The Bidgee School in Wagga Wagga. Wagga Wagga is the hub of the Riverina region, serving diverse student populations from surrounding districts (NSW Department of Education & Communities, 2011b). The school's regional setting affords the benefits of close community connections and strong student-teacher relationships, providing valuable tools for success with their students (Wood et al. 2012, p. 377; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012, p. 500). For The Bidgee School, the NSW DEC Special Schools as Centres of Expertise project provides an opportunity to improve the processes of transition for their students. The Bidgee School's Transition Program is built on the school's assumption of professional responsibility to the students of the Riverina, acknowledging that initiatives like this one have the potential to redefine the way their

students experience school, reversing patterns of school failure and alienation towards more positive classrooms today and hopefully, brighter futures tomorrow.

Students who feel connected to school through positive relationships with teachers tend to have higher school performance ... and are more likely to behave prosocially and responsibly

(Moritz Rudasill et al., 2010, p. 393)

The complex challenges of transition through specialist Learning Centres are best met by schools who acknowledge that the potential for success in this area lies with the network of staff who work on a daily basis with the students (Savage et al., 2011, p. 31), because it is what teachers do in classrooms which affect the most change in student achievement (Hattie, 2003, p. 1-2; Alton Lee, 2003, p. 2; NSW DEC, 2012a, p. 13; Chan et al., 2012, p. 11). Teams of teachers with compassion and exemplary inter-personal skills can work together to support students, directing their efforts in behaviour management towards educating their students *about* behaviour rather than regulating it themselves (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, pp. 37-38; Savage et al., p. 30), and in taking this approach they contribute to the students' own development of '*positive learner identities*' (Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012, p. 13). This pedagogical turn-around relies on entire school systems embracing inclusive approaches which aim for the '*improvement of teaching and learning for all*' (U. K. House of Commons Education Committee, 2011, p. 17; Savage et al., 2011, p. 32). An undying commitment to collaboration will craft new opportunities for success, because in circles of trust and support, school teams can explore innovative ways of providing better instruction, mentoring and support for students with special behaviour needs (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 37, Wilson et al., 2011, p. 36). As teachers across diverse educational settings advance in their mandate to support students with behaviour disorders, entire school systems can evolve to form seamless networks of educational care and concern marked by ongoing social and emotional support for students, continuity of curriculum, and consistency in approaches to the management of student behaviour. It is upon these ambitions that the Bidgee School has developed their Transition Program.

Empowering Students to Succeed at School

For students with behaviour disorders to achieve success at school, they must be encouraged to develop a sense of autonomy in their education, and be able to maintain authentic personal connections with school based learning experiences (Cheney, 2010, p. 51; Theodos, 2005, p. 127; Savage et al., 2011, p. 32). The Bidgee School Transition Program endeavours to facilitate a strong sense of ownership and empowerment for students, providing for their personal contribution in establishing learning and behaviour goals, and in discussing the arrangements of their ongoing transition. Through the Program students are invited to participate actively in making and evaluating arrangements which directly relate to them, so that they are given the opportunity to develop the motivation they need to participate in school with enthusiasm, the confidence they need to take risks, the relationships they need to accept help, and the skills of reflection they need to make personal changes in their lives (Cheney, 2010, pp. 127-134; Khoo & Ainely, 2005, p. 3). The Program encourages the use of '*connected and conversational*' teaching approaches which balance an

academically challenging curriculum with appropriate social, emotional and cognitive support, targeting each student's unique needs in ways which build authentic connections between classroom learning and the student's own world (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 37). Success in special education for behaviour is borne out of the genuine, respectful relationships that students share with their teachers and school staff, so time invested into building rapport, individualising learning and behaviour management plans, and celebrating success lays crucial foundations to this end (Theodos, 2005, p. 126; Alton Lee, 2003, p. 179; Cheney, 2010; Moritz Rudasill et al., 2010, p. 393).

Along with maximising the rewards of healthy student-teacher relationships, the maintenance of positive peer connections also functions as a pillar of The Bidgee School Transition Program (Cheney, 2010, p. 51; Theodos, 2005, p. 127). The opportunity to interact with typical peers in mainstream settings is an essential component of any inclusive intervention plan for students with behaviour disorders. These social circles provide students with an irreplaceable avenue of learning where they can acquire the knowledge and skills they need to function successfully in society (Sigafoos & O'Reilly, 2003, p. 113; Durcharme & Schecter, 2011, p. 265). They also provide certainty and familiarity for students, giving them the sense of security and connectedness they need to cope with the upheaval of transition between schools (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006, p. 324). In addition, exceptional insight can be gained by teachers who note the dynamics of spontaneous student exchanges and longer term peer friendships. Teachers who understand their students' social worlds can use this knowledge to advantage in the classroom, managing their students' learning and behaviour with sensitive discernment and personalised decision-making (Hamm et al., 2011, p. 268). A central aim of The Bidgee School Transition Program is to equip teachers across school settings with the knowledge and information they need to improve learning outcomes for their students with behaviour disorders.

While healthy school connections are essential to effective educational transitions, it is also vital to extend the same relational approach to links with stakeholders from the wider community (Dockett & Perry, 2007, p. 3; Epstein & Salinas, 2004, p. 12; Padak & Rasinski, 2010, p. 294; Savage et al., 2011, p. 32), so in this way, the development and maintenance of strong home and community connections is another central tenet of The Bidgee School Transition Program (NSW DEC, 2012, p. 1). The involvement of parents and significant adults is prized in The Program, because it increases their likelihood of every student's success both at school, and then into their adult lives in their work, their family, and their physical and mental health (Sanders, Allen-Jones & Abel, 2005, p. 172; OECD, 2001, pp. 91-92; Zhang, Hsu, Kwok, Benz, & Bowman-Perrott, 2011, p. 28). Parents and community members can not only provide schools with valuable information about students and their ongoing needs, but, when working within inclusive school settings, they can also contribute to the development of new and innovative strategies for educational intervention (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006, p. 327; Lowrie, 2007, p. 3; Auerbach, 2010, p. 739; Epstein & Salinas, 2004, p. 17). These collaborative contributions are particularly vital in special education settings (Zhang et al., 2011, p. 30), and can take schools to the forefront of what Booth and Ainscow call '*community building*', knitting people together with the common goal of smoothing the bumps of students' school days to improve their learning and opportunities in life (2000 cited in Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006, p. 327). For students, the strategic development of strong school-home-community ties means more appropriate and effective behaviour interventions (OFSTED, 2005; U.K. House of Commons Education

Committee, 2011, p. 49), an increase in feelings of belonging and positive self-esteem (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006, p. 324), greater success arising from educational transitions (Dockett & Perry, 2007, p. 3), increased access to public services (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 30), and more authentic connections between their home and school lives (Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012, p. 3). Importantly, strong healthy connections between home and school ultimately lead to increased student learning (Padak & Rasinski, 2010, p. 294). The Bidgee School Transition Program is responsive to the consistent calls throughout educational literature for schools to be *'proactive in establishing relationships with parents and carers'* (U.K. House of Commons Education Committee, 2011, p. 3), *'working together to create better programs and opportunities for students'* (Epstein, 1995, p. 701, cited in Lowrie, 2007, p. 3).

School Communities Growing Together

Communication is the foundation of any solid partnership (Padak & Rasinski, 2010, p. 296).

Opening avenues for communication and collaboration are top priorities in this Program, because students with behaviour disorders in particular benefit enormously when all stakeholders invest in caring relationships which target their learning needs (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 37). The relational focus of The Bidgee School Transition Program provides the strong foundation students need for their personal development, encouraging the growth of resilience and emotional intelligence in the fertile soil of *'connectedness, belonging and empathy with others'* (Fuller, 2001, p. 41; Carmen et al., 2011, p. 168; Theodos, 2005, p. 126). This emphasis aligns with NSW DEC Every Student Every School, strengthening The Bidgee School's opportunity to share their specialist knowledge and expertise more widely with mainstream schools throughout the Riverina (NSW DEC, Every Student, Every School, p. 15). Clear lines of communication provide pathways for the exchange of practical information between schools and teachers, replacing confusion, frustration and anxiety with regular student updates, practical teaching strategies and authentic collegial support (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 36). The journey of transition that every student makes between their specialist and mainstream school settings will be dramatically enhanced by the consistency in teaching and learning that can arise from such ongoing specialised exchanges (U.K. House of Commons Education Committee, 2011, p. 3; OFSTED, 2005).

... new expressions of inclusive practice typically emerge through the collaborative efforts of several practitioners rather than individuals acting alone (Humphrey & Ainscow 2006, p. 327).

These targeted avenues of professional communication open multiple opportunities for educators in the Riverina. In its facilitation of stakeholder investment and increased student-centred dialogue, The Bidgee School Transition Program will enhance the learning opportunities for students with behaviour disorders, maximising their engagement with school, and improving their whole-of-life prospects. At the same time, these processes of educational collaboration, innovation and feedback have the potential to strengthen the network of schools in the Riverina community, connecting teachers, families and community members together to inform the development of better ways to do school for each unique student. A corporate investment into building student capacities through strengthening local schools and

communities opens a third avenue of opportunity for educators in the Riverina, paving the way for professional development grounded in their actual practice. The Bidgee School Transition Program invites teachers throughout the Riverina to engage with the professional learning opportunities inherent in the journey of educational change. This kind of professional development, embedded in the needs and resources of local schools (Ford, 2007, p. 119), has the ability to shine a spotlight on the knowledge and practice of Riverina teachers (Hamm et al., 2011, p. 275), increase the dissemination of best practice for managing student behaviour (U.K. House of Commons Education Committee, 2011, p. 21), and empower Riverina teachers *'to re-think their professional identities, dispositions and purposes'* (Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012, p. 16).

Expert teachers are the jewel of our school systems, and in the Riverina, The Bidgee School Transition Program builds on the strengths of local schools, offering teachers the opportunity to shine in the area of special education for behaviour. Through the Program teachers have a chance to refine the effectiveness of their pedagogies and develop fresh examples of best practice which increase student learning and strengthen the Riverina schools network, whilst simultaneously inviting them to pursue journeys of professional development anchored into their own practice. The significance of the work of teachers in the Riverina extends beyond the walls of their classrooms, opening doorways of success for their students not only in formal learning, but in the wider domains of family, community, and society (Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012). Perhaps this is why in 2003, the Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teachers called for the need to *'increase the numbers of talented people who are attracted to teaching as a career... and build a culture of continuous innovation at all levels of schooling in Australia'* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003a, p. xiii). The Bidgee School Transition Program invites teachers, families and community members to work together to transform processes of transition between mainstream and specialist learning settings in the pursuit of educational success for students with behaviour disorders.

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