



## Transitions for students with special educational needs: implications for inclusion policy and practice

by Geraldine Scanlon, Yvonne Barnes-Holmes, Michael Shevlin and Conor McGuckin, Oxford, Peter Lang Ltd, International Academic Publishers, 2019

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Transitions for students with special educational needs: implications for inclusion policy and practice**, by Geraldine Scanlon, Yvonne Barnes-Holmes,

Michael Shevlin and Conor McGuckin, Oxford, Peter Lang Ltd, International Academic Publishers, 2019, 214 pp., £40 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-78707-972-4

**Reviewer 1: Richard Rose**

Periods of transition in the lives of children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities can often prove stressful to both the individual child (Topping 2011; Zhao 2019) and their parents (Zeedyk et al. 2003; Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008). Although it may be difficult to generalise the pressures experienced by pupils during phases of transition, or the ways in which schools and families react to these, it is important to gain insights into the most effective ways in which such pressures may be addressed. In considering the factors that both support and inhibit successful transition and presenting some of the strategies adopted by schools to support pupils and families, this book makes a welcome contribution to the literature.

Changes in the content and delivery of the curriculum and to processes of assessment and identification of need have had an impact upon the education of pupils with special educational needs. The authors whose work is presented in this text articulate the consequences of recent legislation upon the ability of schools to make successful provision, and to ensure appropriate support. The opening two chapters address the policy context, by considering both international and Irish legislation and its implementation. In the first chapter Scanlon and Barnes-Holmes locate policy from both Ireland and the UK within the international debates surrounding inclusive schooling. The authors rightly assert the influence of international initiatives on the development of policy in these two administrations and indicate how these have shaped significant documents such as the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (2004) in Ireland and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (SEND) (2015) from the UK.

There are undoubtedly similarities between the education systems in the UK and Ireland; however, there are also significant differences in respect of provision, legislation and professional roles in schools. As close geographical neighbours, it is understandable that comparisons are made between education provisions in the two countries, though I suspect that much could also be learned from a wider comparative approach.

A strength of this book is the presentation of data from several studies conducted within Ireland. In chapter two, Scanlon discusses data obtained from focus groups and interviews conducted with pupils, parents and teachers across 44 primary and special schools and key professionals from post-primary schools involved in the transition process. The data presented include excerpts from some of these interviews that reveal many issues similar to those reported in other studies. The notion of 'fitting in' and coping with the additional academic pace and requirements at post-primary level, and the importance of providing pre-transition visits and additional information, have been discussed by other researchers (Fredrickson, Jones and Lang 2010; Bailey and Baines 2012). As Scanlon asserts, having data that highlights specific issues is an important factor in respect of raising awareness and encouraging professionals to

consider how they might create secure and effective learning environments, during this critical phase in the educational lives of vulnerable pupils.

Having identified the challenges posed during transition, Scanlon provides a foundation upon which Barnes-Holmes in chapter 3 and Shevlin in chapter 4 are able to build towards examples of innovative practice. Barnes-Holmes presents contrasting, though complementary approaches to parental support during the transition phase. Advocacy and structured approaches to supporting academic work are both highlighted as beneficial, as is participation in school social events. Here again, extensive use is made of excerpts from interview data, many of which emphasise the anxieties which parents feel as their child enters post-primary education. As is often the case when presenting data of this type, the examples are helpful to the reader in providing the authentic voices of those involved. It would, however, have been interesting to know how representative the views expressed are, as there can be a tendency to match the expressions of the respondent to the themes to be emphasised by those who report research. The examples provided are undoubtedly powerful and deliver a strong message to professionals about the need to develop support mechanisms. In some instances, useful examples of actions taken by schools enable the reader to reflect on what might be the components of a model of good practice, which could be generalised beyond the sample schools.

In his chapter, which draws upon data from a larger Irish national longitudinal study, Shevlin provides a detailed account of two case study pupils with contrasting needs. As with Barnes-Holmes, Shevlin makes effective use of the voices of his respondents to discuss the issues confronted by pupils, families and professionals. Having followed the case study pupils over an extended period, he is able to discuss in those approaches adopted by schools to ensure effective support during and after transition. An important factor identified by Shevlin is that of creating an environment in which all professionals share responsibilities for settling pupils into school and addressing their social and academic needs. Here the reader is presented with evidence not only of the successful adjustment to a different school environment, but also that relating to the academic progress made by the case study pupils. Whilst it is difficult to directly equate transition procedures to successful learning outcomes, it is likely that the measures taken by schools to provide support had a positive effect in this area.

Moving on from school education to post-school life often sees a diminishing of support mechanisms for young people with special educational needs. The second half of this book considers this period of transition with an emphasis on the importance of continuing education as a means for preparing individuals for independent living.

McGukin adopts an interesting approach in discussing an ecological model that he suggests 'helps us to understand the various actors and issues involved in the process of transition, and provides the professional with a ready-made schemata of how to view and understand the intersecting and competing issues and people' (page 97). Here he considers the roles of professionals and how their actions impact upon both the individuals within the education system and the environment in which they must work. This chapter is particularly helpful in suggesting the actions that may be taken to increase independence whilst still maintaining appropriate levels of support.

A greater link could have been established between McGukin's theoretical model and the discussion of policy at post-compulsory education level presented in chapter 6. This latter chapter presents an interesting account of policy and its place in ensuring effective provision, but an opportunity to discuss how this might best be achieved through the adoption of a model such as that advocated by McGukin was missed. However, for the general reader who wishes to understand some of the challenges to be confronted at this phase of education if it is to become more inclusive, chapter 6 provides an opportunity to consider these.

It is suggested that resourcing and understanding of special educational needs are less well-developed in the post-compulsory phases of education. The evidence provided by the authors of this text indicates a rather nascent state of educational support at this level. The vagaries of the current system of point accumulation required for progression and a lack of flexibility in admission procedures are a concern, and the discussion of these issues here may well be important in accelerating progress towards a more equitable education system.

At the conclusion of the book Scanlon and Barnes-Holmes build upon what they have learned from the literature and the evidence provided from their own data, to recommend further actions to enhance the management of these critical periods of transition. Making good use of Nicholson's transition cycle (1987), they discuss phases of preparation and the actions taken to provide secure progress for all pupils and follow this with examples of innovative practices drawn once again from both Ireland and UK. The authors discuss the necessity to ensure effective communication, which can lead to action at whole school, classroom and individual levels, where respect for individuals is assured whilst the practicalities of institutional change are also considered. By presenting examples from existing initiatives that have been presented in two countries, the authors are able to critique these against potential indicators of good practice.

This book will be welcomed by practitioners in schools who are concerned to address the challenges of providing effective transitions. The principles discussed apply not only to young people with special educational needs, but to all who are undergoing critical periods of change. Unlike previous texts that have discussed this important aspect of education, the authors of this work have made vital links between original data collected in Ireland and the actions which they advocate for the promotion of change. The text should also be welcomed by researchers as an example of how data can be used to inform the work of professionals and policymakers, whilst provoking debate and discussion of a critical educational issue.

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## Reviewer 2: Maria Pallisera, University of Girona (Spain)

Children and young people undergo different transition processes throughout their lives; These are times when different situations converge and are associated with significant changes linked to the environments where they develop. New opportunities are created

together with challenges that need to be overcome. This book addresses the transition processes linked to the educational system experienced by students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); Specifically, it focuses on two key moments: the transition from Primary to Post-Primary school and the transition from Post-Primary to Third-Level education in UK and Ireland from an inclusive perspective.

The structure of the book is clear and understandable, beginning with a first chapter devoted to the description of educational policies related to transition in the two countries. Then, each of the two moments of transition is tackled in an orderly manner, and it finally ends with the analysis of educational practices in the UK and Ireland that gives support to young people with SEND in their transition process. The transition from Primary to Post-Primary school involves significant changes for students, families and professionals. The organisational and curricular discrepancies, the increasing academic demands and the re-organisation of student groups are sources of concern and insecurity for both students and their families and fully justify the rigorous study of these transitions, which have been far less studied at the research level than the transition processes from Post-Primary to Third-Level education. Prioritising the voices of the three main players involved in the transition process (pupils, parents and professionals) and illustrating the processes with case studies help to make possible an all-round, comprehensive view of the main challenges of the transition process in the two moments considered and to evaluate the possible actions to be taken to support young people with SEND in their journey throughout the education system. Reading the book confirms the importance of the need for careful, timely planning, of inter-agency collaboration, of focusing the processes on the person, and of the need for a partnership approach as elements that promote the transition; it also suggests new questions for us to raise from a theoretical and practical perspective in order to make advances in the improvement of transition processes. Below we address three of the questions that we understand entail the taking-on of a new role by the school and its professionals.

The first question is related to the relational dimension that accompanies the personal growth of children and young people throughout their development. The narratives of students and families, as well as the experiences of professionals, show a shared concern about the difficulties experienced by students with SEND in establishing and maintaining meaningful long-lasting relationships throughout their journey through the education system. Indeed, the change of centre and reference groups and the system of student organisation have an impact on the construction of friendships. Making new friends is a challenge for every teenager as they transition to Post-Primary school and a necessary element of the sense of belonging to the new school, and the social network is a potential future informal support network that may be needed for independent life. Research shows that young people with SEND often lose friends upon joining secondary school, which may be related to high school organisational issues but also to lack of opportunities to engage in leisure activities in the community (Callus and Farrugia 2016). Paradoxically, this issue, interpersonal relationships and, specifically, friendship, despite being one of the biggest concerns of young people as they experience their transitional processes, has been less well researched internationally and rarely addressed in educational practices for transition support. Taking up this challenge brings the role of school in transitional processes into question and suggests professionals and centres should embark on new strategies aimed at families, students (with and without SEND) and the community and so enhance the establishment and strengthening of young people's social networks.

The second question seeks to further deepen into the role of the school and its professionals in relation to the community. The book confirms the importance of focusing supports

on the individual and establishing relationships of collaboration and coordination between the different agents involved in the transition process. In other words, work from a partnership approach in which students have a priority role in decision-making, and that not only includes them, their families and professionals from different educational services, but also includes representatives from different scenarios (work, vocational, training, cultural, leisure, etc.) within the community where the student develops. Transition training from an inclusive perspective goes beyond educational settings and must take into account the connection with locations in the local environment that can offer a student support throughout their journey. The leadership of the school in this process is crucial. Establishing community connections and networking with community resources suggests new roles for professionals who hold responsibility in transition processes.

Finally, the third question focuses on a key and essential element of the transition process: the central role of SENDs throughout their journey. This book demonstrates the need for actions aimed at enhancing transitional processes based on the demands of the young person him or herself, in this way confirming the desire that young people have to make decisions themselves that affect their own lives (Rome et al. 2015). This underlines the need, on the one hand, for transitional actions to be planned from personalised approaches that decisively involve the student in the decision-making spaces and processes; on the other hand, actions should be organised and implemented to help empower the young person, enhancing his or her self-determination and, thus, his or her decision-making skills. Both actions once again have an impact on the role of the educational system and the role of its professionals.

The three issues all come together in a subject that is directly linked to the need to transform the role of educational professionals working with students with SEND during their transition processes. We believe the associated educational policies and practices should be addressed as a necessity to improve these processes from an inclusive perspective. We are specifically referring to the training of professionals so that they can develop roles of support that are consistent with personalisation and the creation of social connections in inclusive contexts. Despite not addressing it directly, elements that specify training actions to be developed in different territorial environments can be extracted from the contents of the book. These aim to enhance and improve the transitional processes not only of students with SEND, but also globally of all children and young people.

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## Authors' reply Geraldine Scanlon, Yvonne Barnes-Holmes; Michael Shevlin; Conor McGuckin

We are very grateful to Professors Richard Rose and Maria Pallisera for their insightful comments on our recently published book entitled, *Transition for pupils with special educational needs: Implications for inclusion policy and practice*. We are strong admirers of their valuable contribution to the field of education and their feedback on our book is an honour to receive in that context.

On a general level, Professor Rose highlighted our struggle with the friction between making potentially redundant generalisations across groups of children and young people

undertaking transition and the need to offer some acceptable guidance on the potential pitfalls that educators, parents and individuals might be alerted to. We appreciated acknowledgement of our efforts in the early chapters to provide a broad perspective on the relevant national (Ireland and the UK) and international initiatives and documents which, at some level, influence transition experiences. Nonetheless, we agree with his caution that strong overlap between the UK and Ireland should not be assumed, because local-level variables may influence an individual's actual experience of transition. Our case study illustrates this very point.

We were grateful that Rose saw the benefits of including data sets which we had collected in our own research. We too felt these added something new to the field, even if they only served to bolster existing evidence and opinion (e.g. our findings on the central theme of 'fitting in' and on the importance of young people receiving adequate information). As Rose also noted, our inclusion of a group of pupils with SEN and their families potentially highlights issues that may be specific to this group and as such warrant special attention.

We appreciated Rose's positive reaction to the excerpts we relied upon throughout the book to try to bring to life what the young people reported to us authentically in our interactions with them. On balance, we recognise the shortfall on our behalf in not specifying the prevalence of the various views expressed. In response, however, we would reassure the reader that we selected only those views expressed by many individuals and we did not only present views that matched the core themes we abstracted. Similarly, we selected for our case, an individual whose experiences were not uncommon, and it was reassuring for us to note that in reading this case, Rose fully appreciated that for this young person measures taken by schools did appear to facilitate positive experiences. We were similarly reassured that in the McGuckin chapter Rose saw benefit in the actions we suggested towards increasing independence while still maintaining appropriate levels of support. We acknowledge fully that the theoretical model in that chapter could have been linked in greater detail and sophistication with policy. We genuinely hope, as Rose suggests, that our discussion of the lack of flexibility in third-level systems goes some way towards developing discussions about existing inequities in the education system at that level.

The review by Maria Pallisera highlights key issues in considering the transition experiences of children and young people with SEND. Three key questions are identified as central to understanding the micro-processes often involved in making these critical transitions within the educational system.

The first of these three questions focus on the relational dimension of transitions at key milestones in the lives of children and young people with SEND. As pointed out by Maria there is a recognition among key stakeholders that the difficulties experienced by children and young people with SEND in establishing and maintaining meaningful long-lasting relationships have a major impact on their journey through the education system. The research underpinning this book clearly indicated that school professionals needed to be aware of the relational dimension to transition for students with SEND and the urgency of ensuring that these young people's social networks are strengthened rather than weakened during the transition process.

The second question explores how transition planning needs to take account of the critical importance of the community dimension. The authors were very conscious that their research strongly indicated that collaborative relationships and close coordination were required between the different agents involved in the transition process. Transition to post-secondary settings is particularly complex and support networks appear to be relatively underdeveloped and fragmented which further complicates the transition process for young people with SEND.

Finally, the third question focuses on the central role of children and young people with SEND in actively engaging with the transition process rather than being a passive spectator. It takes conscious planning and strategies specifically designed to enhance the autonomy of the young person to ensure that they are centre stage in the transition process. Traditionally children and young people with SEND have not been active decision-makers in their own lives as professional opinions and family priorities can, often unintentionally, marginalise and disempower this cohort. Our research demonstrates that children and young people with SEND can actively participate in decision-making around the transition process though it is also very clear that well-designed interventions supported by knowledgeable professionals and a supportive family are essential for successful transition outcomes.

These three issues clearly indicate that a reconceptualisation of the role of education professionals in supporting children and young people with SEND through transition processes is urgently required. Promoting the centrality of children and young people with SEND in decision-making around their transition processes is essential in establishing inclusive transition processes.

Both reviews have enabled us to reflect on key issues that have been highlighted including locating these findings more firmly within a policy context. We have been challenged to think through at a deeper level the implications of our research for practitioners, the young people involved and their families. We believe that this book makes a contribution towards rebalancing the power dynamic which often favours professional perspectives and cogently argues for the incorporation of the voice and the insights from the young people and their families into all decision-making processes affecting their lives.

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