Evaluation Case Study

Building school capacity in transition-focused education

MSSD Output 12: Support for student transitions

Brisbane Catholic Education Queensland
School Service Centre North
Building school capacity in transition-focused education

Abstract

This case study reports on the capacity building approach to improve post-school outcomes of youth with additional needs. Contrasting approaches used by two Colleges are described and analysed in this case study – one emphasising case management by a small team and the other focusing on skills development by many teachers and support staff. The initiative adopted by the Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) School Service Centre North Team addresses transition issues amongst students in 14 Catholic Colleges. Centre staff work with lecturers from Griffith University in implementing four guiding principles, including a systematic process of engagement with staff, parents and students in each College underpinned by data-gathering and tailored strategies to assist designated youth with transition issues. The Kohler Taxonomy for Transition Programming (1996) is used as the applied framework for identifying, organising and reporting on College practices.

Key elements and actions

The P-12 College

The P-12 Catholic College is a small school that services families in several townships in South East Queensland. The College has approximately 50 staff and 350 students - including around 25 from Aboriginal families, and a growing number of students with a diverse range of verified disabilities. The College transition strategy focuses on these two student groups in the senior years, where it has developed strong partnerships with many local businesses to improve career pathways particularly via school-based traineeships and apprenticeships.

As part of the BCE Consolidating Post-School Transitioning Opportunities project, the College had received College benchmarking data, considered information provided by parents, students and post-school service providers, and completed the Teaching Benchmarking Questionnaire which rated levels of agreement with, and current implementation of, a total of 13 Programme Structure practices.

This data was combined with other school information to determine a transition project goal for the College to improve student success at work experience and their employability skills. The project leadership team of the Principal, Guidance Counsellor, Support Teacher Inclusive Education and VET Coordinator agreed that a key mechanism for achieving this goal was to be the employment of a Career and Employment Transition Coach. Anecdotal evidence existed from past students with disability that highlighted the need to extend this coaching role to supporting young people after they had left the College.

The first challenge for the project leadership team was to develop a position description for the role of the coach. There appeared to be little relevant information available from comparable Australian schools, so the team located a model from Ireland that provided some assistance. The College defined the broad range of skills required to complete a wide variety of tasks, many which involved complexity, discretion and judgement. Typical duties of the coach’s role were to include:
• assisting developmentally-appropriate student learning for employment transitions, both at school and in the workplace, either individually or in groups, under the general supervision of the Support Teacher Inclusive Education and VET Coordinator

• modifying educational programmes to meet the learning needs of specific students with disabilities, Indigenous students and those at risk of leaving formal education

• liaising between the school, employers and the student’s family regarding planning, implementing and achieving transition outcomes

• supporting these young people in their first year of post-school transition.

The coach has recent and extensive industry experience, particularly in assisting those gaining entry-level positions with local employers. The early focus of the coach was on developing inter-agency collaboration to support specific young people in making successful transitions to the world of work in the community. To date, the coach has:

• developed coaching relationships with 15 Year 11 and 12 students who meet the project criteria (8 Indigenous and 7 with disabilities), as well as with their parents/carers as appropriate

• researched local industry and employment statistics to highlight the health and hospitality opportunities for entry-level employees in a region with high rates of youth unemployment

• co-facilitated a Year 11 Transition Day session where students approached entering Year 12 like paid employment (i.e. position description, job application, role play interview, understanding team dynamics and differences, communication and power in the workplace)

• supported students in course work completion for Certificates and TAFE/job/funding, as well as with resume writing

• networked with employment agencies and using internet searches to proactively seek various employment opportunities, scholarships, traineeships, apprenticeships and work experience for specific students

• joined the local Chamber of Commerce for further networking and scoping of job opportunities.

The Secondary College

The Catholic Secondary College services around 940 students. It has a strong track record in student focused learning and flexible pathways and it was a finalist in the 2012 Australia Training Awards ‘School Pathways to VET’ and in the same year work was completed on a Trades Training Centre.

The transition emphasis at the College lies at the intersection of Student-Focused Planning and Student Development. College staff are initiating ways in which the school can respond to the development of each student’s social skills, their work-related behaviours (e.g. job-seeking skills) and their ability to identify, plan and advocate for their personal needs, preferences and interests. They are attempting to achieve these ends via three related strategies:

1. Developing a tracking tool for Personal and Social Capabilities as one of the General Capabilities as described in the Australian Curriculum documents.

2. Mapping these across the whole secondary curriculum and other school co-curricular experiences to identify strengths and gaps.

3. Developing a tool that will assist teachers to monitor student’s exposure to these skills.
College staff have completed the first two of these strategies as part of their data gathering for the MSSD transition project. Their tracking tool uses a four level rating scale (not addressed/minimal/partial/extensively addressed) for a total of 25 elements, as follows:

**Tracking tool items for SELF**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Awareness</th>
<th>Management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of emotions</td>
<td>Appropriate expression of emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-knowledge</td>
<td>Self-discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-perception</td>
<td>Goal setting &amp; tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-worth</td>
<td>Working independently &amp; showing initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practices</td>
<td>Confidence, resilience &amp; adaptability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tracking tool items for Social**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Awareness</th>
<th>Management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciating diverse perspectives</td>
<td>Working collaboratively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributing to civil society, advocacy for and service to others</td>
<td>Decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding relationships</td>
<td>Conflict resolution &amp; negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building &amp; maintaining relationships</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Leadership</td>
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The staff have mapped the extent to which these elements are addressed for each unit offered at each year level across the Years 8-12 curriculum. They have identified some tentative strengths and gaps in the relative provision of opportunities for development of these Personal and Social Capabilities in the curriculum. They acknowledge that they need to also consider key co-curricular activities experienced by most students (e.g. retreats) to complete this mapped picture.

The third and final strategy will likely be even more challenging than those already accomplished: developing a tool to assist teachers in monitoring the exposure of specific students to these skills. Whereas the previous tasks have their basis in professional interpretation of documentation used for the school curriculum, the final phase focuses on addressing the needs of students who are deemed ‘at risk’ of making a less than optimal transition from schooling to post-school life. In addition to students with verified disability (30 in 2013, 36 projected for 2014), the College currently intends to identify up to one-third of its student body as falling into the ‘at risk’ category.

Staff are aware that many of these young people may have entered secondary schooling with relatively limited skill development in many of the elements identified as being crucial Personal and
Social Capabilities. A more intensive programme for that earlier transition may be a key to establishing a benchmark foundation on which the secondary experience is better able to build. Not surprisingly perhaps, staff at the P-12 College appear to have come to a similar conclusion - albeit arriving from a different direction.

The Secondary College’s transition programme is developing a bank of pedagogic strategies which teachers can select from to differentiate and personalise the social and emotional learnings of students, especially those identified as being ‘at risk’. This requires significant commitment to professional development and to programme development, as well as to ongoing innovation in classrooms. If successful, it should smooth the way for many students as they pursue their VET pathways to gain significant work experience and knowledge of the world of work.

**Outputs and outcomes**

The timing of this case study was such that relatively few outcomes of the school responses to the transition project were clear-cut and finalised. Most activities were either still underway, under development, or part of a larger strategy being implemented. Nevertheless, there were some outputs from each of the Colleges visited that showed promise.

A key part component of the coaching and case-management approach to intervention adopted by the Career and Employment Transition coach at the P-12 College is the development of a Transition Pack for each student in the form of a ‘Ready, Set, Go’ folio. This takes the form of sets of documents, or written ‘tracks’ signalling the rights and responsibilities that help to mark the transition between youth and adulthood, and as required by the various agencies operating in several domains, including, for example:

- personal health and legal issues (e.g., Birth Certificate, Medicare Card, Learner’s Licence, 18+ Card, and if over 18 a Will and Enduring Power of Attorney)
- schooling outcomes (e.g., School Reports, Certificates and Qualifications, Proof of Extra-Curricular Achievements)
- employment and work transition (e.g., Resume/CV, Proof of Work Experience, Centrelink Reference Number, Proof of Community Work)
- banking and financial arrangements (e.g., Tax File Number, Transactional/Savings Accounts, Superannuation Account)
- government and citizenship responsibilities (e.g., Electoral Roll information and requirements, Emergency Service Numbers, key Department contacts).

Just as the P-12 College folios provide a useful map for students in transition to adult responsibilities, the Secondary College mapping of self, social awareness, and management capabilities provides a framework for all those concerned to improve the transition preparation of students, as well as for the students themselves. Thus the key output at the Secondary College to date has been the clear elaboration of the 25 elements of Personal and Social Capabilities and their use in analysing the opportunities provided for students as they progress through the College experience. For both Colleges, these maps provide the practical framework which underpins their specific approach to generating improved transition outcomes for targeted students.
Lessons learned

Key observations
The most striking early observation about this project was the quality of the intellectual work that went into its design, formulation and implementation. The shared use of Kohler’s Taxonomy by the project team and leadership and team members in Colleges, as well as with their stakeholder communities, was a strong foundational feature. The focus on capacity building via a data-driven strategy and an action research paradigm in each College were also intelligent design decisions. In combination, these shared project features ensured an ongoing coherence, even as the project was implemented in diverse ways at different sites. The net result is one of strong ownership of the innovations at the College level and of justifiable pride at the project level in seeing the design realized in diverse ways.

Sustainability
The important roles played by the Education Officer Post-School Transitions and the Griffith University staff in laying strong project foundations at both theoretical and pragmatic levels cannot be overstated. The case study confirms their perceived importance as key contributing factors for the early successful implementation of the project. As well as articulating coherent design and implementation principles, these professionals were also able to provide professional development and to guide Colleges towards strategies with the potential to drive successful transition activities.

School capacity building takes time. The MSSD initiative generated staff commitment and enthusiasm by making time available for meeting and planning. There were, however, some barriers to success, including a perceived lack of support from some school administrators to follow through on recommendations, as well as when time constraints were artificially imposed on the capacity building process.

Potential for adoption in other contexts
The capacity building model adopted in this MSSD initiative is quite demanding in terms of the resources required for its leadership, development, time commitment and implementation. This demand factor may restrict its ready adoption in other contexts where resources are more limited or where early commitment levels are variable. However, there is likely to be much interest from some staff from other schools wanting to learn about this process and also about progress achieved for targeted students. However, partial adaptation seems more likely than wholesale adoption. In particular, take-up of some of the strategies, products and outputs by other interested schools may be expected in the coming year. For example, both the ‘maps’ developed by the two Colleges featured might be useful for other schools searching for tools and strategies that can be used to drive towards better transition outcomes for their students with additional needs.

Background

MSSD Output
Output 12: Providing additional support for students with disabilities to transition effectively between stages of schooling and/or from school into further education, training or employment.
Case study methodology

The case study examines the capacity building approach adopted by the Brisbane Catholic Education School Service Centre North Team to address transition issues for youth with additional needs in a set of ten Secondary and four P-12 Colleges located across a large area in the north and north-west of Brisbane. Site visits to the two schools were conducted in October 2013.

Description of activity

For many educators, schooling is conceived as a series of transitions for children and youth: home to preparatory year, primary to middle schooling, middle to senior secondary years, and finally to post-secondary education, training and/or employment. Transition to post-secondary education is when most young people face multiple adjustments and challenges as they are expected to progressively take on adult-like roles and responsibilities. While many students may have challenges in some of these domains, for students with disabilities this post-school transition process is often more complex and may take longer to complete, requiring explicit teaching and support to enable mastery of all the necessary knowledge and skills for them to be able function successfully as more autonomous young adults.

Additional Background

Work under the MSSD initiative by BCE North in the 14 Colleges involves a total of 112 staff for 8295 students enrolled across Years 8-12, with 425 (or 5.1%) of these students with verified disabilities. The Transition-Focused Education (TFE) approach adopted by BCE North has four guiding principles:

1. Consistent use of an evidence-based framework across the Colleges.
2. Emphasis on building of the overall capacity of each College.
3. A data-driven strategy used for the project.
4. An action research paradigm to be used in each College.

As a practical framework to build capacity in Catholic Colleges and organise practices for better post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities, the BCE TFE team works from the five-component Taxonomy for Transition Programming developed by Kohler¹:

1. **Student-Focused Planning.** Short and long-term goals, especially as recorded in relevant documents (e.g. IEP/ Curriculum Plans, Transition Plans, SET Plans, Work Experience opportunities and other co-curricular and community experiences).
2. **Student Development.** Required skills sets for life and employment via student instruction, assessment and academic skill development (e.g. school-based and work-based learning experiences).
3. **Interagency Collaboration.** Facilitates involvement of local businesses, organizations and agencies in supporting skill development (e.g. via Traineeships, Work Experience and

introducing students and their families to Disability Support Agencies while still at school in Year 12).

4. **Programme Structures.** Efficient and effective delivery of transition-focused education and services (e.g. via flexible planning, resource allocation, and programme delivery).

5. **Family Involvement.** Practices associated with parental and family involvement in planning and delivering education and transition services (e.g. family empowerment, developing shared understanding).

Work with Griffith University specialists has resulted in use of a common capacity building model of decision-making process at each College. The leadership team and TFE team members, use a data-driven strategy based on Kohler’s Taxonomy, including with their stakeholder communities, as a mechanism to ensure coherence on:

- teacher questionnaires on agreement and implementation of transition best practice
- parent questionnaire on student experience and outcomes
- focus groups with parents, students and post-school providers.

The action research includes:

- data presentation (especially questionnaires, focus groups)
- selection of capacity building area (from teacher questionnaire data)
- a College SWOT analysis
- a goal setting exercise
- strategy decisions for the College.

In November 2012 presentations were made by those Colleges identified as ‘Wave 1’. Poster sessions were scheduled from all 14 Colleges in November 2013 with several follow-up coaching sessions:

- Programme Structures: Response to Intervention (RTI) within a TFE Model
- Interagency Collaboration: Building Relationships and Sharing Expectations
- Programme Structures: Curriculum Access to Improve Outcomes - RTI revisit
- Student Development; Job Coaching; Support Staff
- School visits on a regular basis for ongoing support.

By November 2013 BCE North staff produced a video designed to advance the youth transition project to the next level of implementation highlighting practices adopted in two Colleges:

- The P-12 case study college — emphasising inter-agency collaboration and intensive case management of targeted students by a small team of staff, in particular by a Coach with extensive industry experience.
- The case study secondary college — emphasising development of personal and social capabilities across the curriculum for ‘at risk’ students as they progressively engage with VET, work experience and co-curricular activities organized by the college.