GENUINE ENGAGEMENT WITH CHILDREN: A PRINCIPAL'S REFLECTION ON CREATING A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT WHERE EQUITY IS UPHELD, AND DIVERSITY EMBRACED

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the reflections of a principal in his experiences of supporting and transitioning the inclusion of learners with diverse needs into both primary and secondary schools. His extensive experience has led him to challenge established practice to find alternatives that support all learners. His journey has guided him on a path to broaden the definition of education from developing intellect and attaining knowledge to one that also includes emotion, connection, invention, and innovation. The purpose of education for all children is encouraging them to be thinkers, doers, and to embrace opportunities to develop their competence. This chapter includes his reflective approach to learning with a strong emphasis on the need for supporting students with diverse needs as they transition through the often-complex schooling arena.

Keywords: Inclusion; principal; transition; parents; collaboration; innovation

INTRODUCTION

In my time as principal for 29 years I have worked in remote aboriginal, isolated rural, mining, low socioeconomic, high growth suburbs, high socioeconomic, primary, and secondary schools. What I know to be true is that post code does not discriminate when it comes to students with diverse needs. In the schools I have led they have all had upwards of 10 students funded for having a disability. As a high school principal there were more than 40 in my school and in my present primary school, in a high socioeconomic environment, we have had upward of 20 students each with quite diverse needs.

In each of these schools, I have worked to create learning communities that are vibrant and dynamic and deliver outcomes for all students. My philosophy for students with diverse needs, as with all students, is "see the student." We belong to one community, and we need to learn to live with, and have empathy for each other, and this can occur through having a gradual release model that schools create. Individual accountability and responsibility are gradually increased through planned designated steps with achievement markers used as sign posts to progress to the next step. Students transition over time from being in an environment that is very controlled to being autonomous. I have learned a lot along the way and especially the critical importance of identifying and supporting transition processes through a philosophical belief in putting the child central to any decision-making and working collaboratively to ensure the input of all stakeholders. My way to do this is to create an environment where children's safety and wellbeing is at the center of thought, values, and actions of all in the school. Every child is everyone's responsibility.

THE SCHOOLING PROCESS: CREATING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

The schooling process is not just about learning academics; it is about learning to be part of a community. It starts small in kindergarten and progressively gets larger and more complex as the student moves through school until they eventually leave after Year 12 and enter the community at large. Through this journey, students learn academic skills and knowledge; however, I believe they have the opportunity to learn something far more important such as the soft skills and knowledge that enables them to be functioning and engaged members of the community. It is hoped that all children are given the same rights and opportunities and importantly leave with an inherent belief system that the world is a place of opportunity, and effort is the driver of progress. It is everyone's responsibility to support this. It is for these reasons that schools need to closely resemble the real society, by teaching empathy and understanding explicitly, role modeled, and importantly experienced.

Creating a school environment where all children enthusiastically engage in learning experiences and cultural values of safety, wellbeing, connection, inclusion, and personal best are entrenched, is aspirational and requires high level

skills and commitment by all. We know what this should look like and the research lays out the "how" and the "what"; the question is why isn't every school like this? The answer is, it's hard! Schools are complex and complicated organizations and to achieve these ideals requires sophisticated thinking, skills, and behavior. It starts with clarity of moral purpose and investing in people. This, coupled with trusting people, establishing a culture of high expectations, a solid understanding of teaching and learning practice, and a belief of "what we stand for," provides the foundation for a successful school. The big challenge for schools in integrating students with diverse needs is the development of a philosophical framework of competency, autonomy, growth, and progress, which is embraced by all. This is extremely difficult as anchored biases and belief systems held by individuals and systems create constant challenges. Transition processes are the key strategy for actioning this philosophy, and they are the nuts and bolts for students, staff, and parents. Stakeholder involvement in their establishment is critical. That involvement is a safe way for biases, fears, and beliefs, to be acknowledged, challenged, and appropriate learning and accommodations implemented.

My Favorite Woollen Jumper

What is a school? Build it better! It is important to create places where everyone has a place where they belong. I have a saying that I share with all new parents into my school, "We strive to create a place where it feels like your favorite woollen jumper, the one that you want to put on each day." It is a bit cliché and could be construed as trite by some. For me, though, it is a metaphor for having responsibility for leading a school where children feel safe, secure, and thrive. Schools are more than buildings, beautiful grounds, and academic results. They are communities and are in essence a microcosm of society where children learn about life, living, and what really matters. What they experience everyday creates a blueprint on their beliefs, values, and behaviors. Given the opportunity, students can participate in learning communities within their schools and neighborhoods, and be ready to assume constructive roles as workers, family members, and citizens in a global society (Saravia-Shore, 2008).

Nurturing Children with Diverse Needs

It is widely recognized, empirically and epistemologically, that the characteristics of a civilized society/community are based around safety, affinity, unity, responsibility, friendliness, cooperation, and adherence to rules and general order. Schools as communities are no different. If children experience these each day both toward themselves and others, then, they will imitate them as a means of connecting, engaging, and belonging to their social environment. Nelson Mandela is quoted as saying "History will judge us by the difference we make in the everyday lives of children" (2002). This is a poignant statement for all adults. Children need to be nurtured in a supportive environment, in which parents and other caregivers provide positive guidance. The quicker and more efficiently a

child can demonstrate the mores and behaviors of their environment the more effective their inclusion into the social fabric of the classroom or the playground. This in my experience is the greatest challenge for students with diverse needs. Our social society is complex and the skills to navigate it for many are intuitive, but for students with diverse needs, they need to be supported with time and patience to learn, rehearse, and practice these skills. This highlights the importance of having efficient and effective transition processes and welcoming inclusive environments throughout a child's schooling.

Transition into Preschool Years

The transition of children from a home or childcare environment into a school is a critical time, especially for those with additional needs. The preschool years are foundational for teaching children the fundamentals of social interaction – sharing and compromise, cooperation, and verbal communication. Consistency is the key for all students, day in day out, year in year out. The creation of patterns and routines from the outset of schooling that are consistently adhered to throughout schooling, enables the young child to learn within an environmental context to see patterns and then can formulate reliable predictions for learning academic, social, and behavioral skills. This is so important for a child with diverse needs as they need opportunities to see, feel, hear, and do across multiple settings and contexts for habits to be formed. To achieve this requires all adults, teachers, support staff, and parents to work toward making a difference to children with diverse needs by making their lives consistent, routinized, and predictable. Further reason for, and the imperative of transitions.

TRANSITIONING THE COMPLEXITY OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

The following two case studies highlight my personal experiences with a primary and a secondary student's progress through school. Even though decisions are not always effective, both cases demonstrate the importance of continued flexibility and a willingness to keep trying. They also underscore the vital importance of safeguarding consistency across the various transitions that a child must cope with during their school life, through a collaborative approach.

The valuable lesson learned from David's journey is that it is important to have a team approach with the right people, an individual approach for each child, and educators who demonstrate a willingness to learn and adapt. It is critical for all to stay consistent, especially once an effective approach has been established and as the child transitions into further years.

The key learning from Raymond's story is that it is never too late to make a difference to a student's journey in education. Transitioning between schools can provide an opportunity to reframe the direction a child is taking and help them refocus to become fully included in school life. Consistency in approaches, and a clear understanding of how to support the numerous transitions a student must deal with are essential components to success.

David* is a student with Autism and has been in the school since Kindy and he is now in Year 4. His journey is the classic tale of our approach and transition processes being successful, going off the rails, and then getting back on track. David entered our school in Kindy and with the support of our Student Services team and the tremendous work of our Kindy teacher and teacher assistant he made an excellent transition into schooling. By the end of his Kindy year, he had established routines and was grasping the curriculum.

The next step in his schooling was where I went wrong and decided to place him with a teacher whom I thought would continue with the agreed plan. As an experienced teacher, though, they aimed to implement their own previously effective strategies. Unfortunately, these did not meet David's needs. This had a significant impact on his well-being, inclusivity, and education, as well as creating a great deal of confusion for the parents. Because of the experience and high regard, the teacher was held by the community, the parents just followed. It quickly became apparent that other parents and his peers were becoming very unsettled by his behavior. It became a particularly challenging year for all concerned because the teacher would not change their approach and David became more and more a polarizing figure in the classroom and the parent community. Both student and parent became isolated and marginalized.

At the end of the year as David was to transition into Year 1, we reset with an experienced teacher of students with diverse needs. Transitioning David into a new structure in Year 1 when entrenched beliefs by parent and child had been established, was a very difficult task: a lot more than I thought it would be. We were forced to go back to the beginning. It was a difficult year for all; however, by the end of the year David was back on track, his behaviors were far from consistent, and his learning was not where we were comfortable with. Once we had re-established a consistent approach that met his needs, David's transition to Year 2 was excellent and so was Year 3 and again in Year 4. David is now an accepted member of his cohort and the school. The progress David has made socially and academically is summed up in one action. David wrote a card and presented it to me in my office requesting to organize a fund raiser for "Genes for Jeans Day"** and explained why he wanted to. I wrote back and approved it. He was so excited that he immediately showed his teacher and then classmates who all responded positively. He then returned quietly back to his seat and continued working. A remarkable transformation.

*Note: Pseudonyms are used for all case study names.

**Note: A fund-raising activity to support people with genetic disorders.

Raymond's story is a secondary student's story. Raymond is Autistic and transitioned into my last school in Year 7 (first year high school). He was 13 years old and came with a very large file from the primary school of behavior infractions and case conference notes, with a reoccurring theme of conflict between the school, parents, school psychologist, and the child. On enrolling in the school, the parents made a point of having a meeting with me and I listened. It was more of a plea for help than a meeting. For over an hour they poured out their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. We created a plan and an approach to support Raymond. In a high school it can be more challenging for a student with Autism, and for the staff. With so many different year level teachers, it is also difficult in ensuring a coordinated approach. However, the mechanism I had used previously in a primary school setting I used in the secondary setting with the same positive outcomes.

From day one, Raymond started to demonstrate patterns of behavior that were entrenched and destructive to him being accepted and gaining an education. With teenagers, relationships are the key. The school was organized around teams of teachers working together to support students rather than just being subject based. This meant for students like Raymond the planned approach remained consistent as the student transitioned between lessons, between semesters, and between each year level. Predictability and consistency were the mantra.

Raymond was in my home group and as a result I saw him every day and I was able to ensure that Raymond transitioned into the day the same way. I was his home room teacher for all six years of his schooling. In that time, I witnessed Raymond grow into a young man, become confident in processes and learning, get a part time job, and become a high functioning member of the high school. He became a student who enjoyed school, went on camps, participated in significant events such as socials, the Debutante Ball, and successfully achieved positive learning outcomes in completing his Victorian Certificate of Education achieving entrance to his university course of choice. The highest achievement for Raymond came from his acceptance by his peers to an extent that he became a House Leader in Year 12.

EVERY CHILD IS EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY

Every child is everyone's responsibility and as a principal my role is to support this through the establishment of transparency in processes, pedagogy, curriculum, and student management. Staff and students need to have a school environment that is so consistent that the school day is as predictable as the sun rising and setting. For this to occur it requires a high level of empathy by all adults in

the school. All decisions in the school need be prefixed with "What is the impact on the child/ren?" I will often pose this scenario to guide people to move to a place of empathy for students.

> Imagine you are taking a journey in your car from home to a place seven suburbs away. Each suburb has a different set of traffic rules. There is no doubt that your journey would be very stressful. This is what it is like for children if we don't have a classroom and playground environment that is consistent and predictable. As teachers in a school, it is essential that we understand the predicaments children face each day transitioning from different environments, classrooms, events and or learning activities. This is particularly important for the child with diverse needs.

The Home – School – Home Transition

John Bowlby (1969), a British psychologist, was the first theorist to describe connectedness between human beings as lasting, known as Attachment Theory. In my experience Attachment Theory extends beyond the home and includes the school environment for students with diverse needs. It also makes the connectedness between home and school a crucial transition point. When children are frightened or anxious, they will seek proximity from their primary caregiver to receive both comfort and care (Cherry, 2019). How this translates for a student with diverse needs is, if they are stressed, do not feel safe and secure, learning cannot happen. For these reasons, smooth consistent predicable transitions for students with diverse needs are essential. This applies to all transitions, home to school and school to home, be it between lessons, movement between classrooms, or more significant transitions from one year level to another. The transitions must be well thought out, planned, understood, and supported by all, and most importantly consistently implemented.

The transition process that often gets missed, however, is the one that carries the greatest weight in terms of impact on the student and that is the one with the parent at the beginning and end of each school day. A successful transition to and from school enables the student to form predictable routines and creates favorable conditions for success. This transition process cannot be taken for granted, it must be understood, rehearsed, and adhered to. When daily transitions are consistently implemented, positive constructs are developed around expectations, connection, and genuine collaboration between the student, parent, and teacher. In my current school we have established a model which has become accepted practice that all students are met and greeted at the door each day. This is to ensure that every child is welcomed into the day and the teacher makes an immediate connection by making each child feel valued. For students with diverse needs, we go one step further by making the transition a connection with the child and the parent. This is a powerful symbol of unity around common desires of success for child, parent, and teacher. The transition at the end of the day is equally important. All classes have a plenary to conclude the day. The plenary reviews all the learning intentions for the day, and it is also a time for the students to highlight what they have learnt and teachers to recognize effort. For students

with diverse needs, this time provides a framework in the transition process with the parent when the day concludes, by asking the child to communicate what they have learnt. It is a positive and engaging process around success and connection to transition to going home.

The following case studies illustrate parental perspectives of the importance of schools establishing effective transition processes to support families transition their children into school.

Parent One

The valuable lesson for me here was the reminder to listen to the parent. Not just hear the words but also hear the emotion behind the words and to listen to the words without forming judgment. As principals we can get cornered by policy and procedure. In this case I listened to what my gut instincts were saying. The conversation with the parent was measured. The parent was not running away from their responsibilities nor were they shopping around to find a school that would give them what they wanted; it was a genuine plea for help. They knew their responsibilities; they loved their child and needed a school that supported their child to learn.

My child has been diagnosed with Autistic spectrum disorder/Severe mental disorder.

Having had very damaging experiences at two other local primary schools, our current primary school was the third school our children attended in under 12 months. The genuinely inclusive culture at this school was a game changer, not just for our kids, but for our whole family. As the principal said to me at the end of our very first meeting "All you want, is to be able to send your kids to school and know they'll get the care and education they need." The principal and his staff have certainly delivered on this, beginning with a smooth transition into the school then supporting and empowering our kids throughout their primary school journeys.

From our experiences, having the opportunity to engage in open and frequent communication with all pertinent staff has been absolutely essential in achieving mutual understanding and facilitating the best possible outcomes for our kids. This open dialogue has always made our kids' transitions through the school very smooth and given staff valuable information to help accommodate our kids' needs. Our children have thrived at this PS in a supportive environment where every child matters and kids with additional needs are not treated like they are a burden on the school. Rather, they are celebrated just that little bit more and made to feel like they truly belong.

Our son is 11 years old and was prenatally diagnosed with Klinefelter's Syndrome (47 XXY). While he has achieved physical development milestones he is socially withdrawn and has demonstrated anxiety from an early age. He did not achieve speech and language milestones and started speech therapy at two years of age. He has been to several schools during his short life and is now in his fourth school.

He started preschool at four and a half years old. He enjoyed the company of other children, but it was evident early on that he was not able to cope with the classroom learning. He would often sit under the desk, be disruptive, and sit in the corner. We applied to have him transferred for Grade 1 to a private school, dedicated to speech and language development. He settled well but socially he was not happy. Visual clues were extensively used to support his learning and classrooms were minimally decorated to reduce visual stimulation. Unfortunately, he was unable to complete Year one at this school when our family had to relocate. He was not permitted to transfer to a speech and language school. We then enrolled him in an independent school hoping that a small school environment would provide the supports he required. When that teacher left, and he had a new one the outbursts and the frequency of them increased so we decided to remove him and we moved him to our local government catchment school.

The school model for him now consists of an education assistant learning support, a nurturing teacher, and an inclusive school. With this combination for the first time, we have seen him finally thrive at school. One of the biggest changes we have seen in him is his new positive behavior toward school, and it has been his enthusiasm every morning to get to school early and to want to stay back and play with the kids. This year he transferred to a Year 5 class, and we are very pleased that he has not faltered once in accepting the change to the new teacher. A great achievement for the team at this school for a smooth transition. The two Deputy Principals have provided him with great support when he has escalated and is unable to self-regulate. They have taught him to signal to teachers when he needs a moment to calm himself. We have discussed this approach at home to reinforce the school's agreement with him. We are very happy with this collaborative approach. He sees the consistency between school and home and knows that he's always supported and always receiving the same messages.

From my personal experience it has been the sharing of experiences from other families in research papers that have helped us govern our son's journey. His current school has been such a fabulous support network for our son and we need to shout that from the rooftops.

Parent Two

The insight gained from this example underscores the importance of a school's culture to facilitating inclusion. A commitment to inclusion should be evidenced from the point at which the student and the parent enter the school. Students want to fit in and belong, and when surrounded by other students whose actions and words represent inclusive principles, new students quickly adapt. Consistency in implementing predictable and reliable processes for all students leads to the establishment of a culture of safety and trust. To promote effective transitions for students with diverse needs, schools as a moral imperative must establish and maintain a culture that values and supports inclusive practices.

STRATEGIES FOR CREATING AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Cultivate an Environment for Social Inclusion

School is about more than academics. It is a social community that incorporates valuing and belonging for all students. It is a place where students acquire skills for social interaction and where they seek social inclusion. Establishing structures and routines that facilitate social inclusion is essential to building a community where students feel safe and secure. This may be particularly important during times of transition, especially for students with diverse needs.

Patterns for social inclusion should be consistently and explicitly modeled by teachers. Through classroom activities and interactions, students can learn about each other, their similarities and differences, their strengths and shared interests – information that can be used to establish friendships and enable students to support one another within the learning environment. When students learn to value and respect one another as individuals they develop attitudes and skills that promote relationships building, rather than distancing.

View Teachers as Enablers

In my experience, teacher practice both in and outside the classroom is a key attribute to a child with diverse needs' success – socially and educationally. It can be an enabler or an inhibiter. It is an unfortunate truth, in many cases, that the attention a student receives is negative or critical because of belief systems held by the teacher, reinforced by school norm and practice. This attitude toward students inhibits teachers from forming effective and supporting relationships with their students and can create a distance between the teacher and the student. In turn, this creates a class norm and may alienate the students with diverse needs, causing resentment, frustration, anger, and an unresponsive attitude to learning in the classroom.

In many cases, classroom norms and expectations flow over to the playground. This belief then tends to form part of the transition narrative as the child moves

from one year level to the next, resulting in potential isolation, deregulation, and disengagement become the prevailing experience for the child. Teachers need to position themselves as enablers, and view children with diverse needs as just "children,", not challenges, but children deserving of care, and support.

Quality teaching by teachers with positive attitudes is extremely important. This is demonstrated when teachers employ instructional strategies in the classroom that facilitate learning for all students. Quality teaching may require an innovative approach to incorporating a willingness to adapt lesson planning and delivery to each child's strengths so that optimal outcomes can be achieved. According to Alton-Lee (2003):

> Evidence internationally is that what happens in classrooms through quality teaching and through the quality of the learning environment generated by the teacher and the students, is the key variable in explaining up to 59%, or even more, of the variance in student scores. This finding of the far greater magnitude of influence on outcomes of teachers and classes than schools has been evident for different outcome measures and different educational systems across a range of studies and countries. (Alton-Lee, 2003, p. 2)

Promote Collaboration and Teambuilding

Much has been said about getting the right people into your organization; however, in my experience, it is all about creating the right environment so that people will step into the role of being the right person. I believe in investing in people through trust and quality professional learning. By giving people training in the right approach using empirically researched best practice, providing direction, tools, and support, along with autonomy, it is my experience that a school becomes full of the right people. An important factor is establishing a genuine collaborative culture, staff wanting each other to succeed and wanting all children to thrive and where adherence to pedagogy and process is expected and celebrated.

As a principal, one of my main goals is to establish processes where internal and external professional development are directly connected to the school goals and direction. Through professional development, teaching staff are able to see how their own learning will have a positive impact on the students they teach and how enacting what they have learned will support the school to achieve its student learning goals. Staff by-in is achieved when professional development is viewed as relevant, engaging, and targeted.

One of the major agencies for change is supporting performance and development of staff. Establishing a culture that encourages individuals to critically review their present practice and assume accountability for personal performance, school priorities, and their professional growth needs is important. Learning teams and the allocation of financial resources through the appointment of teaching and learning coaches, investing in, and training of team leaders, and allocating meeting time, are all useful mechanisms for disruptive innovation to embrace change. What results is the development of agreed standards and protocols to encourage the sharing of ideas to provide positive and constructive feedback.

Teaching can be a very insular profession, for significant periods of time teachers are alone in their classroom with the children. To address this isolation, I invest highly in the establishment and development of teams; professionally, financially, and personally, through relationships and coaching. All teachers are grouped in professional learning teams, vertically Kindy to Year 6 as well as a separate year level team. Teams are used to develop a culture of collaboration and collective responsibility. Teachers take responsibility for improving instructional practices to achieve gains in learning for all their students. Genuine team-based work implies more than the simple act of working alongside colleagues. It involves teachers working in a spirit of openness and critical reflection, sharing their experiences, ideas, and expertise with each other, and engaging in an ongoing process of inquiry that promotes deep team learning. The work of teams is guided by a clear and systematic model of problem-solving and learning, one that encompasses a learning → application → refinement → application cycle.

Highly effective learning also comes from establishing processes for visiting classrooms for peer observation and the provision of feedback. Success comes from respect and familiarity, in this case through knowing each other and knowing the needs of children in the school. This enables teachers to share effective strategies for learning, which can be especially important during times of transition for students with diverse needs as each teacher views their responsibility to support and build on the efforts of previous teachers.

Provide Feedback and Hold High Expectations

The establishment of team and learning norms leads to the development of practices that have significant impact on students with diverse needs, i.e., feedback and high expectations. I hold firmly to the belief that you cannot have one without the other. When teachers hold high expectations of themselves and their students, successful outcomes naturally flow. To have high expectations teachers must accurately know their students, value them as learners, and understand how to support their learning through quality and timely feedback. In the classroom, teachers can do this by challenging their students and encouraging continuous improvement through promoting high expectations by engaging in ongoing and meaningful classroom interactions with their students. Teachers' beliefs about their students influence how they teach and interact with them.

The role of the principal is to provide the same for the teachers, i.e., high expectations, support, and feedback, with the addition of a framework of assistance, guidance, and data, so progress can be measured and celebrated. One of the difficulties teachers may experience is the feeling that the child is their responsibility alone. My role as principal is to provide clarity regarding the teacher's role as well as the ongoing supports provided by other professionals, and the assurance that all parties will work together to craft a unified plan and a united approach to education. It is a well-worn quote, but it is so true, the journey of education "is a marathon not a sprint." The role of the principal is to be a mentor and motivator to stay the course, and to maintain consistent and reliable partnerships.

Promote a Whole School Approach

School processes for transition need to be inclusive of teachers, students, and parents and should encompass a belief of creating the conditions for success. For this to occur all the people in each student's education are required to have ownership of the processes in the school, take responsibility for their role, and be actively involved in the student's education. This must occur not only when they are directly involved in teaching them, but also in the transition processes when receiving the student and when delivering the student. This incorporates all transitions, with another teacher, whether it be to a specialist teacher, preparation for a relieving teacher, including a new student to the school, or a student leaving, or transitioning to the next year level. Success as a whole school comes from teachers embracing transitioning as an essential component of school, not a "nice to have." This can be achieved through many strategies, but none of them are successful without the whole staff having and accepting high expectations for themselves and colleagues. This individual and collective accountability means the plans and the processes actually work because they are not pieces of paper and talk, they are actioned, and people hold themselves and others to account.

A CHILD-FOCUSED MODEL

Throughout this chapter, I have focused on the "why" and the "how" of transitions. I have deliberately left discussing the "what" to last. In my experience the "what," more simply put as the education plan for the student, is the glue that clarifies roles, has targets to aim at, and has common reference points that define progress. The planning process for students with diverse needs begins from the outset of the student entering the school. It is essential that the family feel welcomed, supported and listened to. The listening to the parent and the child is the important first step. For people to be equal partners and feel valued they need to be heard. It is not our place to start by telling people who know their child better than we will ever know them, how things are going to go. Trust comes from being equal partners where all members of the team equally contribute to a plan that will provide for the unique needs of the student. Effective plans come from having comprehensive information about the student, qualitative and quantitative data. It is the merging of all this information that can lead to the development of a comprehensive plan and approach.

Fig. 1 outlines the approach that I have developed with teams of teachers over my career, and which has proven highly successful. The development of a plan for each student has in equal measure inputs from the stakeholders, parents, the child, Teachers/Student Services Team, and external providers. Integrating these inputs with the following: learning intention, strategies, progress points, and review processes in learning/curriculum, pedagogy, health and wellbeing, and student management ensures there are clear roles, responsibilities, and progress markers. Part of the plan which I believe makes a real difference is the explicit planning and ongoing review of transition strategies to be implemented.
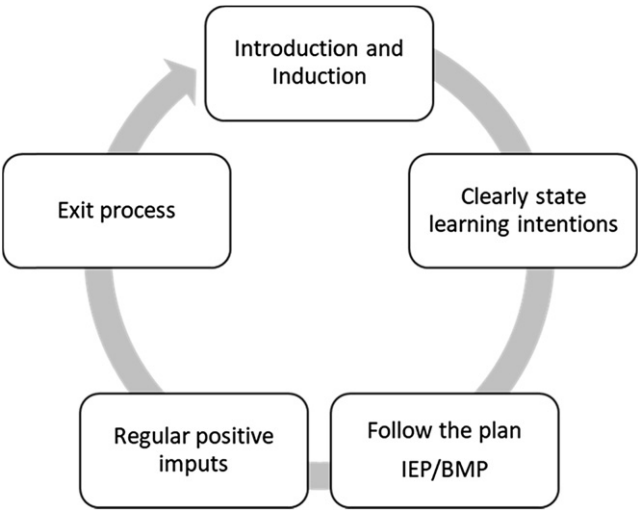
Fig. 1. Transition Process.

The core process for our transition strategy for all transitions is illustrated in Fig. 2. The joining arrow to the right of the diagram is to illustrate the plan and how the transition processes are constantly monitored and adjusted as the student makes progress and advances through the school. The plan and the transition
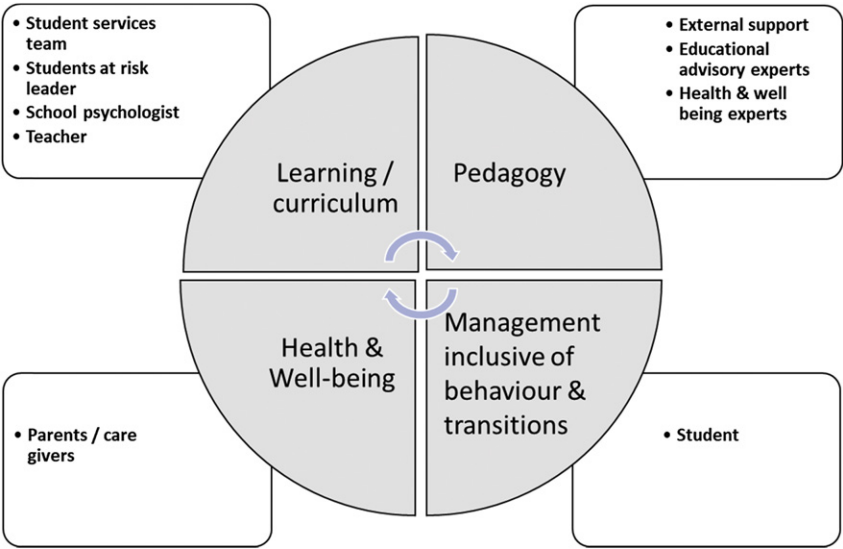
Fig. 2. Individual Planning Process for Students with Diverse Needs.

strategy are designed keep us on the path and ensure that we as a school maintain the consistency in programming and delivery essential to achieving intended outcomes.

CONCLUSION

To bring this all together, I believe that all students have a need to be empowered to learn and achieve in the care of high-quality teachers as people and in practice. Students with diverse needs must experience the best conditions for learning which equip them with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for being a member of not only the school community but also to be able to engage and shape the world around them outside the school environment. All growth comes from the same inputs, consistency, predictability, safety, and nurture. Our challenge is to remain focused on these outcomes.

I believe transition processes are instrumental in developing a culture that embraces a whole school community approach to adult-student relationships involving all school and community members that students interact with in the school. As a principal of the school, I play a key role in ensuring that transition practices and behaviors support all students and staff, and that there is a widely supported set of values and principles as a common thread in daily interactions. For students with diverse needs every interaction requires a carefully planned transition. My role is to maintain a shared vision for a safe learning environment that creates genuine opportunities for empowerment and growth.

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