

Identifying the factors that place mainstreamed students at risk of not belonging in secondary school: A Western Australian longitudinal study

Sharmila Vaz^{1,2}, Anne Passmore^{1,2}, Errol Cocks^{1,2}

¹Centre for Research into Disability and Society, Western Australia, Australia, ²School of Occupational Therapy and Social Work, Western Australia, Australia, ³Curtin Health Innovation Research Institute, Western Australia, Australia, ⁴Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia, Australia

Introduction:

Transition to secondary school is challenging for some, as they negotiate concurrent developmental and ecological transitions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Fenzel, 1989). Mixed findings across the literature have led to a consensus, that the effects of transition are not universal, and neither inherently "good" nor "bad" for students at this age (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991). Gaps currently exist in the understanding of factors that may promote or limit positive school outcomes, especially for students with social or health related problems, some of which have been addressed in this paper.

Objectives:

The study was set out to determine whether adjustment of students in the final year of primary school could predict adjustment in the same cohort in secondary school, with emphasis on students with disability and chronic illness within mainstream education.

Methods:

A longitudinal study design was employed. 266 participants from 45-feeder primary schools and 81-secondary schools across metropolitan and regional Western Australia comprise the sample. Cross-informant data from stakeholders was retrieved using psychometrically robust measures.

Results:

Stepwise logistic regression revealed that students' sense of belongingness in primary school was a significant determinant of 'not fitting in' the first year of secondary school. No differences in belonging to secondary school as a function of gender, health status and household income level were identified. Those who had emotional and behavioural problems ($\beta = 0.082$; $p = 0.008$) and were lonely in primary school ($\beta = .038$; $p = 0.03$) were more likely to feel as if they 'did not belong in' the first year of secondary school. Participation in social-leisure pursuits ($\beta = -0.06$; $p = 0.03$) when in primary school emerged as a significant protective factor across time.

Conclusion:

This research highlights that students with emotional and behavioural problems, those who are lonely, and who have low social participation levels when in primary school, are vulnerable.

Contribution to the practice/evidence base :

Supporting students' emotional and behavioural needs, and affording them with opportunities to engage in social-leisure pursuits, when in primary school, have important predictive value in improving inclusive outcomes for all. Occupational therapists have an important role to play in promoting student belongingness.