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THE TRANSITION FROM EARLY INTERVENTION TO SCHOOL: A 360-DEGREE PERSPECTIVE

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>> Good morning, everyone. Thank you for coming.

I'll just give a few seconds for people to find a seat.

My name is Janet Jamieson, and I was supposed to be presenting with a panel. I'm representing a research team of five of us, and two of my colleagues were supposed to be standing up here with me, Brenda Poon and Nancy Norman, but because of personal family situations for each of them, they weren't able to be here.

So here I am.

I am a professor in ‑‑ I'm a co‑director of the program in education of the deaf and hard of hearing at the University of British Columbia. And just think Washington State and go north.

And I'm part of a ‑‑ our program prepares professionals in our province who go on to work in both the early intervention system and the school system. And even though the entry into school differs for many of us, a particular point at which that occurs, we thought there would be enough generalization among what we found that it would resonate, I think, with many of you.

First of all, before I start I would just like to tell you one thing and ask you one thing.

What I would like to tell you is that in British Columbia, our early intervention system begins at the point of identification and, of course, we have newborn hearing screening, so it begins as early as possible after birth and continues on until September of the year when the child turns five.

And at that point the child enters the school system, enters kindergarten.

And I know for many of you, the point that the child moves from one system to another is a little bit different from that, but I think that the key point is, what is the point of transition?

The question I'd like to ask you is: How many of you, whether you have a child who is deaf or hard of hearing or not, how many of you have gone through the transition to school with your child?

Keep your hand up.

How many of you found some degree of stress associated with that?

Okay.

And my hand is up there as well. I am a mother of two young adult sons and I experienced stress particularly for the first when I was entering the school system.

When he was entering the school system.

Why are we interested in the transition to school?

Well, this really is for children the first major transition in their lives, and we know that a successful transition is a major investment in that child's later school years.

In fact, what happens when children enter school is that their performance across ‑‑ after the first few years in school, their achievement remains relatively stable for the remaining years until they're finished school.

And when the school ‑‑ in the early years, when we have, at the point of transition, we have a developing system. Think of the system as the school system, the family, the child, all working together to form this new system working together. It is at that point that the system is most open and flexible and malleable to change and that even small adjustments can have long lasting and positive or negative impacts. So transitions really matter.

So, what do we know about parent response as well? As you just showed, the transition to kindergarten is ‑‑ it's a big deal for parents, any parents taking their children to kindergarten. I remember myself, moment of true confession here, when my first son entered kindergarten, I was a professor in the faculty of education where I am now. I had supervised practicum students going into that school. I knew the curriculum. I knew the system. I knew the school.

As I walked my son over to school, there was a lump in my throat that day and I cried all the way back home. Knowing full well what was in store for him and that he had a great adventure ahead of him. The transition to school is a stressful time for anyone.

But if you're the parent of a child with disabilities, we know that that stress is amplified. There is increased concern about expectations for the child, increased concerns about communication, the child's readiness for school, but what we didn't know until we studied, looked into this, was, what is the experience like for children who are deaf or hard of hearing, who as we all know, face unique challenges.

And this is really preaching to the choir, but early intervention in school differ in some very important ways. For the child, the child is expected to take part in more structured learning experiences, work cooperatively as part of a group, and there are greater expectations for that child to get along with peers and with adults, and for parents, compared to early intervention, the contact with teachers, the parent‑teacher contact, is more formalized than it was in early intervention. It's less frequent.

If we had to distill this down to just a nugget, the difference really is that parents and children have gone from a family‑centered system of early intervention to a child‑centered system of school.

One word that I've heard over and over again ‑‑ two words that I've heard over and over again, over yesterday and this morning as well are "journey" and "path."

Janet DeGeorge mentioned this morning about the journey of raising a child who is deaf or hard of hearing. She spoke of a journey. Many speak of it as a journey or a path.

The implication that it's one continuous path. Well, the experience for parents really is that looking back on it, it is one path, one journey, but there are points of disconnect. There are points of discontinuity.

So really... and I borrowed this from the B. C. Early Hearing Program, our newborn screening and early intervention program in British Columbia. This is one piece of the family path that was developed for parents to help guide them and the people who support them as they move on their journey from identification through to the end of early intervention.

So how do they move from this path to this... I'm pointing to this laptop as though you are all looking over my shoulder.

To the school? How do they move from one to the other?

As we found out, it's not a smooth path.

One of the questions we asked ourselves, based on what we were hearing from families, prior to actually beginning this study, is we wanted to know, do early intervention in school systems function as silos? Well, one of the reasons we thought maybe they do is that early intervention is very much a bottom‑up process. We tend to start with the family. We focus on the family. We think about what it is that that family and that child and that social context, what do they need to grow, to thrive? What do we need to provide in order to support that family?

So we're working from the foundation of the family up. Schools, on the other hand, indicated by the red arrow... schools, on the other hand, function very much in a top‑down procedure. Before a child comes into school, there needs to be documentation, information has to be transferred from one system to another system. The child is expected to fit into a preexisting structure of services that are available. And from there the journey begins. So they're actually, philosophically, very different. Or so it seemed to us.

So the question that my research team and I asked was: What are the facilitators, what are the supports, and the barriers to a smooth transition into school for children who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families?

And to do that, over the course of one transitional year, we looked at all of the stakeholders. And that is why we called this a 360‑degree perspective. In fact, this probably should really have been arranged as a circle. And maybe if I could have figured out how to do that on PowerPoint, it would have been.

But anyway...

We followed 12 parents from the time that the season before transition and we interviewed them four times throughout the transition process twice pre‑transition and twice once they were into the transition, into school.

We met with early interventionists and interviewed them. We interviewed itinerant teachers, and with those not familiar with the term, itinerant teachers are special teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing in school districts. And as children are integrated or included into regular classrooms, in most cases they will be followed by an itinerant teacher, who will provide support to the classroom teacher and also work with the child individually.

And we consulted the receiving kindergarten teachers, who have no specialized knowledge of education of the deaf and hard of hearing, but who are the teachers who spend most of the time with these children once they're in school.

And we spoke with administrators. We spoke with the principal of the school for the deaf. We spoke with directors of special education. We spoke with the principal of a school in which there was a resource program, specialized resource program within that school.

Now, if you see the numbers in white, that means we interviewed the individuals. The numbers in black refer to the fact that those people receive questionnaires ‑‑ they provided the information by surveys.

So it was a very busy year, and as you can imagine, we amassed lots and lots of data.

What I'm going to talk about this morning is what we found as children transition into regular elementary school, as they move into what we call "inclusive settings."

And the reason I'm separating out the school for the deaf is just because that is enough of a different process that it warrants a separate presentation.

So, without going into this very much, we did a content ‑‑ thematic or content analysis and used a script of statistics to pull all of this together.

And if we had to distill this into one slide, into one takeaway, this would be it. It is all about relationships. Every school district without exception will have its forms to be filled out, will have its policies, will have a list of meetings that should take place. Some do, some don't. Some take place and some don't. But if you have individuals from the early intervention system who have a relationship with individuals in the school system, because they connect, they network at professional meetings, because they attended the same teacher training program, because they are SLPs and teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing, who connect over their shared work. If... as happened in one instance, their next‑door neighbors, if you've got a relationship, there's a much better chance that there will be a smooth transition.

Sounds like some of you have experienced that.

So, because it's all about relationships, what I'm doing here is I'm going to break it down into three different types of relationships. Home and early intervention. Early intervention and school. And home and school.

Okay, in terms of home and early intervention, well, most of that has to do with the pre‑transition period. And that went smoothly. One big facilitator was if the early intervention began early and had ongoing discussions with families about their child's development and the options that were open for them, difficult conversations sometimes, because not all options are available to all parents, especially if they live in remote or rural areas.

But not all families can access that information, even when it's available. If families live in rural areas, if they live in remote areas, if English is not their first language, if there is a cultural difference. Many families are unintentionally excluded from this point of access.

It was very important that the early intervention program made the first overture to the school. We saw instances where that happened and instances where parents were left to negotiate that relationship initially on their own.

Big difference if the early intervention program initiates that.

There was a gap. If early intervention services end in June and school starts in September or late August ‑‑ and I'll get into that in a minute ‑‑ big problem when that happens.

I'm a parent. I've read a lot about those transition processes and how you have to be very proactive in the school and be an advocate for your child, because it's not easy for other people to understand what it is to have hearing loss. So, you can see the attitude from parents really was ‑‑ at least from this parent was very much kind of girding her loins for battle, being prepared to take on the school system. That was the sense that we had before parents actually moved ‑‑ before their children were in school.

And the relationship between early intervention and school... very interesting.

It made a big difference if the early intervention program, as I mentioned, and the school program met together with the parents at least for once. So the three of them are together. Rather than leaving ‑‑ having one exit meeting, one entry meeting, but no point of contact made a big difference. And, again, it was about a relationship.

What happened... what we found was that the IFSPs ‑‑ I don't know if this happens where you are, but the IFSPs were never shared with the school.

The school did not want the IFSPs. Sometimes schools didn't know what IFSPs were. Which meant that continuity of goals was an issue.

And I mentioned the longstanding relationships.

So it was a very difficult situation when the IEPs were developed without the IFSPs, because the parents were not arriving without having ‑‑ being involved with goal setting for their children, goal setting for their family, but the school system, as part of its documentation was responsible for initial assessment and initial intake, and the school system is responsible for determination of placement, not the early intervention system, at least where we looked. And that was a point of sometimes inter‑program conflict. From an early interventionist, part of the process I would like to see is to have a stronger connection from early intervention services to at least the first year of transition. Your family‑centered, and then you go into school and it's like... bam! You hit a brick wall. Let's bring the philosophy of family‑centered care into the school system a little bit more and then you won't have parents pushing back at the system.

So, before home and school, the child is... they've made the connection with school.

So one thing that I would like to mention is that it's very important that the itinerant teacher, who is the one person in the school system with the most holistic knowledge of a child who is deaf or hard of hearing, very critical for that person to be involved as soon as ‑‑ as early as possible in the transition process.

Also, I would like to mention that in terms of individual contact with the parent during the summer, if you think of an early intervention program as ending in June ‑‑ some do, some don't ‑‑ and school starting in September, who does the family belong to during July and August?

That actually was ‑‑ that was something we hadn't expected and turned out to be a very big deal for families. Particularly... well, I'll mention it in a minute.

I talked about that.

And I would like to mention one part that was a barrier, which is that at points of transition, it is not at all uncommon for families to experience a resurgence of grief. Very similar to the grief they experienced following the period of identification. This is a major transition for the child and for the family and is a natural point of resurgence of grief.

If I had to assign that grief to a month, that month would be August.

When sometimes families don't belong to anybody. They don't belong to any system.

If the school system ‑‑ and we saw this happen about four times and, wow, did the parents mention it over and over again!

If the itinerant teacher, the receiving teacher can phone the parents and just say, you know, I've just been thinking about you and wanted to let you know that you've been on my mind and how are you doing... that can be a five‑minute conversation and that's enough.

From an itinerant teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing, the transition for the parent is, I find, dependent on the level of anxiety they have for their child moving from preschool to school.

Usually the worries are around being bullied about wearing hearing aids, and that's their number‑one worry.

So I would like to just mention... I'll skip right down in the interest of time to the bottom bullet point, because I mentioned the others. But there are lots of opportunities that came out of this to promote a smooth transition. One is that we have a crisis on our hands. As I mentioned, the single most important person in the school system for welcoming that child and welcoming the family, who has the most knowledge of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, most knowledge about the equipment, most knowledge about working with interpreters, that person is the itinerant teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing.

At the moment, North America wide we have a critical shortage of itinerant teachers of the deaf. That's a major problem we know for the school system. I see it as a major problem for early intervention as well.

It's very important for all of us to be aware of that and to be advocating with school systems for hiring an appropriate number of itinerant teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing to work with our kids.

And I'm looking at the sign in the back, the minute sign left. Do we have a couple minutes for... two minutes for questions.

Any questions? Any comments?

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: In your interviews, particularly... am I blocking the interpreter?

Okay.

One of the issues that we found in transition... the criterion for eligibility that the school based that on was before the child's third birthday. However, when they start school, they were starting at age three.

My son's birthday is in June. So, he was only qualified to have a small amount of services and we were told that, had he been evaluated to weeks later, after his third birthday, we would have received more.

Is that an issue that you have seen in your research in transition?

It added to the stress and anxiety because we, as the family, were then left to figure out how to bridge that gap.

>> JANET JAMIESON: That's really horrible. What we found was that the services that children were eligible for was determined by the assessments that they had once they entered school. So the recommendations from early intervention pointed sort of a broad ‑‑ sort of in the direction of the kinds of services that they would need but none of that was really determined until school.

Except for equipment. And it made a really big difference. If the school had advanced notice and the equipment for children who use that, if the equipment was in place on day one, that was a big source of relief for parents.

And I'm getting a nod that that's our time.

Thank you very much.

[Applause]

I forgot to put my email on the PowerPoint. If anyone would like to contact me, I would love to hear from you. That's my email address. Thank you.