TRANSITIONING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM TO AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS: SOCIAL VALIDATION OF IMPORTANT TEACHER PRACTICES

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The transition of young children with autism from early intervention to school needs to be carefully managed in order to maintain intervention gains, protect against the risk of child-and-family anxiety, and enable a successful start to formal education. While many North American studies have mapped high-intensity practices for transitioning children with disabilities to school, only a few have recently examined autism-specific practices. The present study drew on this literature to identify and socially validate transition-to-school practices for Australian children with autism and their families. Queensland intervention and advisory teachers (N = 91) used an on-line survey to rate 36 transition practices. Results indicate that all practices were perceived to be highly important in the Australian context. Future transition-to-school research can draw upon this socially validated practice listing.

The increasing number of children on the autism spectrum requiring intensive supports provides an unexpected 21[st]century challenge to teachers and education systems (Coakley, 2010). The sharp spike in autism prevalence in the USA (Lord & Bishop, 2010) and Australia (MacDermott, Williams, Ridley, Glasson, & Wray, 2007), coupled with the complex communicative and socio-emotional needs of these children, can destabilise the routine process of transitioning young children to school. Considerable attention has been paid to how teachers use low-intensity practices to manage entry to school for most children and their families (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Rous & Hallam, 2012), but competencies and practices needed by *sending* teachers to effectively manage this transition for children with autism have received little attention.

A strong North American commitment to mapping high-intensity practices for *sending* teachers to use with individual children with disabilities has been evident across the past three decades. For example, DeStefano, Howe, Horne, and Smith (1991) generated a listing with 16 transition practices; Odom, McLean, Johnson, and LaMontagne (1995) a listing with 22 transition practices; and Rous and Hallam (2006) a listing with 21 transition practices. In the main, these practice listings have focused on (a) interagency coordination and collaboration and (b) child and family preparation and adjustment.

The initial autism-specific study by Forest, Horner, Lewis-Palmer, and Todd (2004) drew on this comprehensive bank of practices to construct an autism-specific listing of 25 transition practices. They clustered these practices into an activity-based timeline of transition phases (12 months prior to kindergarten placement; 6-12 months prior to kindergarten placement; 6 months prior to placement; 3 months and 12 months follow-up after placement). They used this listing to interview families and teachers who were supporting three children with autism in transition between preschool and kindergarten and obtained retrospective ratings of perceived levels of importance and implementation of each practice on a 1-6 response format. High mean ratings of importance for most practices examined in this small-scale North American study provided the content validation for the listing. Denkyirah and Agbeke (2010) then used importance as the measure in a 10-item survey of issues identified by Forest et al. to gather information from sending teachers of preschoolers with autism in Ghana and the USA.

A gap has been acknowledged in teacher readiness to support and coordinate successful transitions into school for children with developmental disabilities generally (Hanson, 2005; Daley, Munk, & Carlson,

2011) and for children with autism specifically (Forest et al., 2004; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011). Many sending and receiving teachers presently have limited knowledge about effective, high-intensity transitions. *Teachers reported they did not use transition practices specific to children with special needs; rather, they used low-intensity practices such as those for the class as a whole* (Rous & Hallam, 2012, p. 233).

Rous and Hallam (2012) have articulated the need to focus on teacher practices that are responsive to context when transitioning individual children to school rather than to overfocus on strategies to teach children specific skills to deal with their transition. Similarly, drawing on previous autism-specific research (Forest et al., 2004; see, also, subsequent cross-cultural work by Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010), Quintero and McIntyre (2011) argued that children with autism *may require more comprehensive transition supports than other children* (p. 418). They emphasised contextual issues in preparing for transition (e.g., practices related to engaging the transition team, including parents and receiving teachers) rather than strategies for preparing the child per se.

The present study was a response to the emerging need of Queensland teachers working in early intervention services to better support young children with autism to go to school. The state government has increased provision of autism-specific intervention services for these children and their families as prevalence has increased. This situation has placed additional pressures on teachers, parents, and children. Quintero and McIntyre (2011) reported that teachers were much more concerned about transitioning young children with autism to school compared to children with other developmental disabilities. Moreover, there is substantial evidence that parents of a child with autism are more stressed than parents of children of typically developing children and those with other disabilities (Keen, Couzens, Muspratt, & Rodger, 2010; Pisula, 2007). There is also considerable evidence that, from an early age, children with autism display more symptoms of anxiety and stress than other children especially in relation to coping with change (e.g., MacNeil, Lopes, & Minnes, 2009; van Steensel, Bögels, & Perrin, 2011; White, Oswald, Ollendick, & Scahill, 2009).

In order to establish an Australian listing of teacher practice in transitioning young children with autism to school, the study capitalised on the work of Forest et al. (2004) and, more broadly, on the collection of recommended practice studies for young children with disabilities. The aim of this study was to identify, through social validation, important practices from the perspective of teachers sending these young children from intervention programs to Preparatory (Prep) classes in government schools throughout the state of Queensland, Australia. Prep is equivalent to kindergarten elsewhere.

Method
Two interrelated methodological approaches—the definition of and judgment about transition practices—were used to construct the listing in this study. First, a listing included practices ranging across *service delivery patterns, organisational structures, programming principles, and instructional strategies documented as effective and relevant within a specific educational context* (Beamish, 2008, p. 44). Second, this listing was seen to require strong endorsement by practitioners (i.e., their social validation of the practice listing in the local context for service provision with its unique sociopolitical and geographical features). As a rule, practice inquiries in special education (e.g., Eichinger & Downing, 1992; Williams, Fox, Thousand, & Fox, 1990) and early intervention (e.g., Odom et al., 1995; McLean, Snyder, Smith, & Sandall, 2002) have used support from the field to validate practices.

Transition practice generation
The study followed the established procedure used to generate practice listings for special education and early intervention (Odom et al., 1995; Williams et al., 1990). This procedure has typically involved three steps (i.e., identify-sort-edit). In order to identify specific recommended practices (Bussye, Wesley, Snyder, & Winton, 2006), the literature is reviewed. In order to sort and reduce the set of practices from different sources, each practice (and its elements) is then compared for overlap and duplication. Finally, the practice is edited for contextual meaning. That is, while care is taken to retain the intent and integrity of the practice content, the language of the practice is adjusted to match that used within the service system. In this case, the service was the early intervention service of the Queensland Department of Education.

This structured identify-sort-edit procedure was used to generate a set of practices for transitioning young children with autism to school that is recommended, comprehensive, and contextually meaningful. Recommended practice has been described as systematically constructed, based on scientific and

experiential knowledge, and designed to facilitate sound decisions under specific circumstances (Bussye et al., 2006). Within this definition, all practices considered for this listing fitted within the Simpson (2005) classification of scientifically based and promising practices for children with autism. For example, in this study, one of the weaker practices in terms of evidence base was *social story*. This practice, however, was accepted for teacher scrutiny because it has been identified as promising autism-specific practice (Simpson, 2005), it has attracted strong support in the field (Reynhout & Carter, 2009), and it is a well-documented intervention for children with autism (see, for example, review by Test, Richter, Knight, & Spooner, 2012).

The first step led to the identification of 86 specific research-based practices. Practices were sourced initially from the autism-specific list of 25 practices provided by Forest et al. (2004). The extra 61 practices were identified from published practice listings from the more general disability literature (e.g., DEC, 1993, with 22 practices; DeStephano et al., 1991, with 16; Mitchell, 1991, with 1; Rous, 2008, with 21) and from specific articles (e.g., Fox et al., 2002; Stoner et al., 2007).

In the second step, practices were sorted into a working set of 36 practices. Eleven new practices relevant to autism were extracted from the extra disability practices over and above those in the Forest et al. (2004) practices. This set of practices was sequenced into five transition clusters, from initial planning to follow-up, as developed by Lerner, Lowenthal, and Egan (1998). All practices were checked for their feasibility (i.e., sensible and do-able by teachers) when supporting the transition of children out of and into educational programs.

The third step, editing, involved progressive rewording and elaboration of practices. Editing protocols used in previous studies provided a systematic procedure for assuring practice quality (Beamish, 2008; Beamish & Bryer, 2012). A three-part process was followed. First, the primary source for the wording of each practice was systematically re-checked, and its wording was adjusted to absorb refinements embedded in similar practices. For example, the teacher-friendly language used by Mitchell (1991) was used to elaborate on the brief wording of *Specific kindergarten placement is selected* used by Forest et al. (2004). This change more clearly expressed the teacher's practice in assisting parents to make a decision about placement (see Appendix, Decision support). Second, the list was reviewed independently by two early intervention teachers with both substantial field experience and specific postgraduate training in early intervention, and further minor contextual adjustments to wording suggested by these reviewers were made. Finally, researchers polished the wording across the list of 36 recommended practices (see Appendix).

Setting and sample
For almost 30 years, the Queensland Department of Education has made a substantial investment in providing a statewide early intervention service for young children with developmental disabilities, including those with autism. Teachers at these early childhood developmental programs (ECDPs) have always played a central role in supporting the transition-to-school experience for children and their families. In rural and remote communities with no local ECDP, advisory visiting teachers have performed this role. Both groups of teachers have acquired practical experience in transitioning young children with high support needs to school. Hence, the entire population of sending intervention and advisory teachers in this large governmental service was targeted as potential participants in the present study. A statewide invitation and recruitment process was undertaken across all education regions in order to obtain email addresses of potentially interested and experienced teachers at ECDPs and in advisory visiting teacher positions. This process yielded 123 potential participants for a statewide survey.

On-line survey development and administration
An on-line survey was constructed to collect teacher views about the relative importance of the identified 36 transition practices. Survey content comprised 10 demographics items (background information, teaching experience, and self-appraisal), the 36 practice items, and a final question to elicit any additional comments about transitioning children to school. The practice items were distributed across the five transition areas: Initial Planning ($n = 7$); Preparing Child and Family ($n = 11$); Preparing the Prep Class ($n = 8$); Introduction to Prep Class ($n = 7$); and Follow-up Support and Evaluation ($n = 3$). Each practice statement was presented with a six-category response format from *not important* to *highly important*. This response format was similar to that used by Forest et al. (2004).

The on-line content was prepared in LimeSurvey, a reliable open-source application hosted by Griffith University. The survey then received university ethics approval, was pilot tested by experienced early interventionists, and was activated in the middle of the school year (see Klieve et al., 2010). An initial email containing an information-and-consent package about the study established contact with the target population. A subsequent email invitation provided a direct link to the survey that allowed each individual to respond anonymously to the survey. A register of invitations then monitored all responses to the invitation and issued two follow-up email reminders to non-respondents at fortnightly intervals to boost the overall return rate (Cook, Heath, & Thompson, 2000).

Participants
Altogether, 91 teachers (74% response rate) submitted a completed survey. All but one were female (*n* = 90), and this gender distribution was consistent with that of teachers working in this service. Table 1 shows that most respondents (76%) worked in ECDPs fulfilling teaching and administrative roles respectively. Other respondents were advisory visiting teachers and other teachers performing a variety of support roles. Most respondents were in their midcareer years, in the 39-49 age bracket, but younger and older teachers also took part. Metropolitan, regional, and rural locations were well-represented in responses. The majority of respondents (56%) had a Bachelor of Education degree, and almost half the teachers (46%) held a qualification in special education.

Table 1. Key Characteristics of Responding Teachers

Characteristics	ECDP[a] Teacher (*n* = 39)	ECDP HOSES[b] (*n* = 30)	AVT[c] (*n* = 14)	Others (*n* = 8)	Total (*N* = 91)
Age (years)					
<30	5 (71.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (14.3%)	1 (14.3%)	7
30-49	24 (42.1%)	21 (36.8%)	6 (10.5%)	6 (10.5%)	57
50+	10 (37.0%)	9 (33.3%)	7 (25.9%)	1 (3.7%)	27
Location					
Metropolitan	29 (61.7%)	10 (21.3%)	3 (6.4%)	5 (10.6%)	47
Regional	6 (25.0%)	10 (41.7%)	8 (33.3%)	0 (0%)	24
Rural	4 (21.1%)	9 (47.4%)	3 (15.8%)	3 (15.8%)	19
Highest Teaching Qualification					
Teaching Dip	1 (7.7%)	7 (53.8%)	4 (30.8%)	1 (7.7%)	13
BEd	14 (53.9%)	4 (15.4%)	3 (11.5%)	5 (19.2%)	26
BEd (Special Ed)	15 (60.0%)	8 (32.0%)	2 (8.0%)	0 (0.0%)	25
MEd	1 (16.7%)	1 (16.7%)	3 (50.0%)	1 (16.7%)	6
MEd (Special Ed)	6 (35.3%)	9 (52.9%)	2 (11.7%)	0 (0.7%)	17
Other	2 (50.0%)	1 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (25.0%)	4

[a]ECDP denotes Early Childhood Development Program; [b]HOSES denotes Head of Special Education Services; [c]AVT denotes Advisory Visiting Teacher.

Responding teachers reported extensive experience not only in early childhood education and intervention but also in working with and transitioning children with autism (see Table 2). Experience in early childhood education was clustered and evenly dispersed across the 2-5 year (26%), 6-10 year (25%), and 11-20 year (27%) periods. By comparison, teachers with the most experience in early intervention were clustered across two periods: 2-5 year (35%) and 6-10 year (34%). In addition, three quarters of the teachers (76%) indicated that they had been working with children with autism for at least 6 years, and the majority (94%) had been involved in transitioning these children to school for at least 2 years. On average, teachers reported involvement in transitioning at least 17 children with autism to Prep across the 2005-2010 period.

Table 2. Work Experience of Responding Teachers

Experience	Early Childhood Ed (*n* = 81)	Early Intervention (*n* = 83)	With Autism (*n* = 89)	Transitioning (*N* = 91)
< 1 year	3.7%	4.8%	1.1%	5.6%
2-5 years	25.9%	34.9%	23.6%	43.3%
6-10 years	24.7%	33.7%	32.6%	32.2%
11-20 years	27.2%	16.9%	21.3%	13.3%
> 20 years	18.5%	9.6%	21.3%	5.6%

In this study, teacher experience was paired with knowledge of and confidence in the transition process. High to very high levels of knowledge and confidence were self-reported by 69% and 72% of respondents, respectively. The effectiveness of actual transitions during the 2007-2009 period received somewhat lower evaluations, with the majority of teachers assigning either a moderate (35%) or high (40%) rating to transitions in which they had involvement.

Analyses

The quantitative components of the survey comprising demographics and practice ratings were analysed using SPSS Version 18.0. The assessment of level of practice importance was measured on a 6-point scale from *not important* = 1 to *highly important* = 6. In order to examine the level of importance of each of the 36 practices, the research team then used two long-established benchmarking conventions: the 50% criterion level (Odom et al., 1995) and the more stringent 80% criterion level (Williams et al., 1990).

The text from the final comments, the qualitative component of the survey, was compiled and analyzed using the linguistic analytic tool, PASW Text Analytics for Surveys (TAS) 3. This SPSS-compatible software provided a systematic means for the research team to build, refine, and cross-member check a set of key issues or themes in respondents' views of and experience with the transition process. Automatically generated themes were reviewed by inspection of actual comments, renaming and expansion of themes if not appropriate to text, and final rechecking of text linkages to all themes. A bar graph showing the frequency of thematic issues was then produced and subsequently tabularized to display theme frequency (see Table 4). Finally, a graphic map (see Figure 3) was created to show theme importance (viz., circle size relating to frequency) and relationship between themes (i.e., the greater the thickness of the line between themes indicating the stronger the connection between themes).

Results

Ratings of practice importance

Figure 1 provides a summary of ratings for the 36 practices across five clusters: Initial Planning; Preparing Child and Family; Preparing for Prep Class; Introduction to Prep Class; and Follow up After Transition to Prep. All respondents assigned very high levels of importance (average mean scores all above 5; maximum possible score = 6), thereby exceeding the stringent 80% international benchmark convention for a recommended practice (Williams et al., 1990). Strong consensus about these highly sensible practices was evident among these sending teachers.
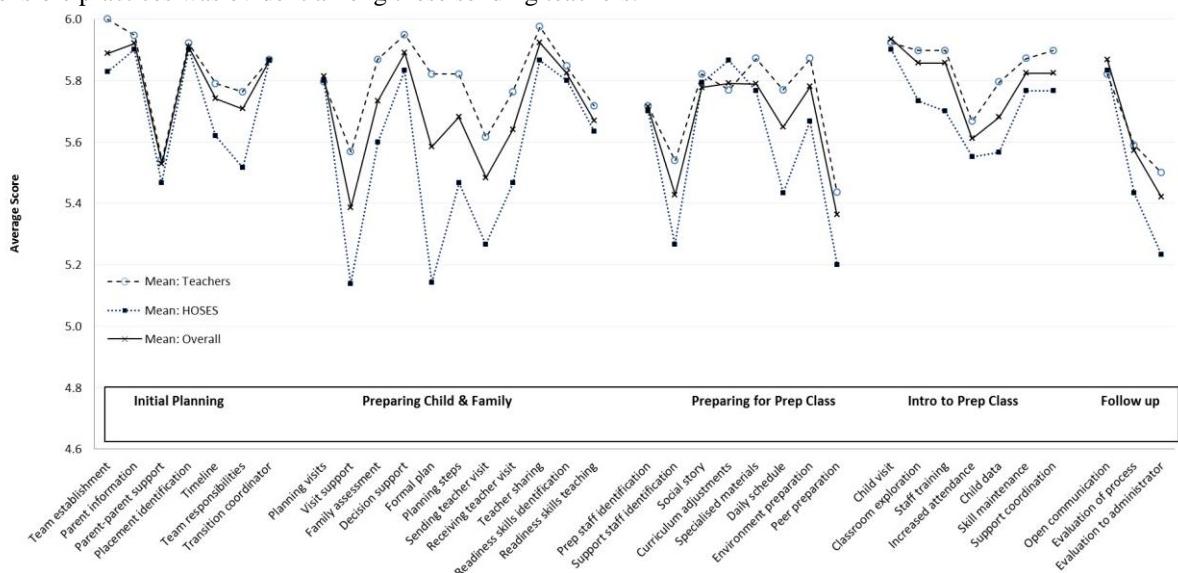

Figure 1. Mean ratings of importance for the 36 transition practices (*N* = 91).

Table 3 shows examples of some differentiation across practices. Participants gave slightly lower ratings to a few items scattered across the five areas. For the five most and least supported practices, average mean ratings ranged from 5.93 to 5.36 on the 6-point scale. These minor fluctuations in high ratings, which occurred within each cluster of transition practice, suggested that some practices were perceived as critical and others, while valuable, were potentially more subject to discretion in the field.

Table 3. Most and Least Supported Transition Practices by Mean Rating and Standard Deviation

Cluster	Transition Practice	Abbreviation	Mean	SD
ntro to Prep Class	Child is well supported on initial visit to Prep classroom	Child visit	.93	27
nitial Planning	Parents are provided with information about the transition process and available program options	Parent information	.92	71
reparing Child and Family	Teachers (sending & receiving) share information about the child and link needs to curriculum, resourcing, and facilities	Teacher sharing	.92	07
nitial Planning	Prep placement options (regular school, special school, specialised program) are identified	Placement identification	.91	25
reparing Child and Family	Parents are supported in making their decision for selecting a specific Prep placement	Decision support	.89	48
reparing Child and Family	Sending teacher visits receiving Prep classroom	Sending teacher visit	.48	70
Preparing the Prep Class	Support staff needed for Prep placement are identified	Support staff identification	.43	45
ollow-up	Evaluation of transition is passed on to administrator, who is responsible for transition planning	Evaluation to administrator	.42	61
Preparing Child and Family	Parents and sending teacher visit multiple placement options at least one time	Visit support	.39	76
reparing the Prep Class	Prep children are prepared for the child's transition into the class	Peer preparation	.36	13

Differences in role, location, and experience may have contributed to minor fluctuations observed among ratings. For example, in the Preparing Child in Family cluster, *teacher sharing* was one of the most highly rated practices (Mean = 5.92), while the practice of assessing multiple placements in *visit support* was one of the lowest (Mean = 5.39). While both practices require time and effort, the relative ratings may reflect the difference between a practice that is considered critical to effective transition and essential to the sending teacher's role versus one that is resource intensive and less practicable in the transition context.

The ratings of ECDP teachers and ECDP HOSES (i.e., administrators) were also graphed in order to consider whether their respective roles in sending a child with autism to school contributed to these minor fluctuations. Closer inspection of Figure 1 shows that the sending teachers consistently assigned higher ratings than HOSES. Moreover, in the Preparing Child in Family cluster, they gave higher ratings to 5 of the 11 practices. Respective roles appeared to contribute to these discrepancies, with teachers as aspirational *do-ers* wanting to deliver the best outcomes for the child and the family and administrators taking a more pragmatic view of do-ability because they are sensitive to procedural and resourcing issues.

Comments on transition practice
A large number of responding teachers (45%) took up the option to provide additional comment. These comments were expansive with some remarks exceeding 200 words. Some comments addressed a single issues or theme, but many covered several concerns about transition. Table 4 summarises the 12 key themes, with *the transition process* (*n* = 36), *links with parents* (*n* = 15), and *constraints* (*n* = 12) being the most frequently raised issues and concerns. Initial inspection revealed the espousal of professional values in all key issues.

Three examples related to these issues are cited to illustrate the kind of values held by teachers in this field (see below). In these examples, teachers affirmed transition as a distinct process in intervention practice for children with autism, acknowledged the critical role of continuous communication among stakeholders, and recognised the need to circumvent constraints on achievement of the best possible outcomes.
Transition is extremely important for children with Autism, as it is for all children with disabilities. We don't treat it as part of the IEP process; transition is treated as a separate process.
The most important factor in transitioning students with Autism into Prep is a continuous stream of communication between all staff (Prep, special education, specialists, other agencies) and parents.

Current practices are often based on 'the best you can do with what you have' and some very creative responses to meet children, families, teacher and school needs are required.

Table 4. Key Themes Raised in Final Comments by Frequency

Themes	Frequency
Transition	36
Parent links	15
Constraints	12
Teaming	10
Stress	6
Individualised approach	6
Individual Education Plans (IEPs)	5
Communication	5
Placement	5
Administrative support	3
Teacher training	3
Importance of Early Childhood Development Programs (ECDPs)	3

Figure 2 shows the varied response patterns among these issues revealed in TAS text analysis. Very strong links between issues, shown by the strength or thickness of lines, were evident between transition process and links with parents and between transition process and constraints. Quite strong linkages occurred between transition process, links with parents, teaming, and communication. These patterns of connections suggested that partnerships and communication between staff team and family are essential elements throughout the transition process.
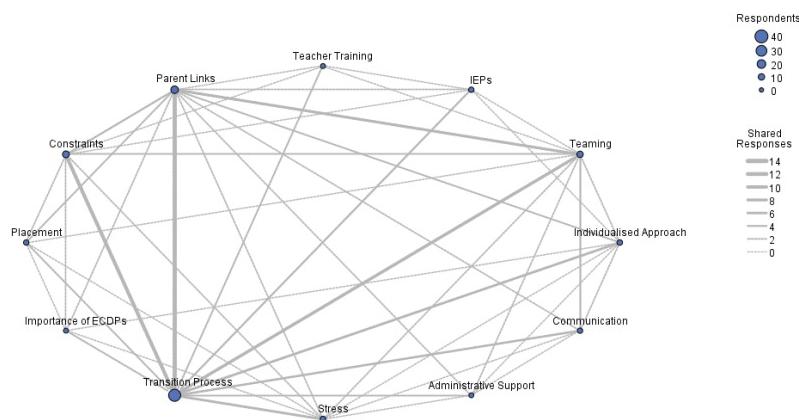

Figure 2 Connections among issues in final comment (*n* = 51).

This study brought together a range of sensible and feasible practices into a new listing of important practices. Sending teachers and administrators affirmed the importance of all of these practices to the transition process. However, their slightly less positive response to some practices suggested that salience and context are issues.

Discussion
This Australian study obtained sending teacher views about the importance of 36 transition-to-school practices previously identified as recommended practice in the North American context and compiled as a practice listing for the Queensland context. A substantial sample of experienced intervention and advisory teachers (*N* = 91; 74% response rate) dispersed over the wide geographic area of Queensland consistently allocated high ratings of importance to each and every one of these practices using an on-line survey. They did not choose to reduce the number of practices or to add to them. This strong endorsement confirmed the ecological relevance of the practices to this Queensland service. The sending teachers demonstrated their awareness that transition is a comprehensive process that extends beyond their specific roles and responsibilities (Rous & Hallam, 2012), and, in their extra comments, they made clear their awareness of contextual linkages affecting this process.

In the present study, strength of field endorsement exceeded expectation, with all transition practices surpassing the stringent 80% criterion level. These results are akin to those obtained by McLean et al. (2002) in the validation of the revised Division of Early Childhood practice listing. In that North American study, every practice was socially validated by a large field sample (N = 388; overall 51% response rate), and *for every practice, 90% or more of the respondents indicated either agree or strongly agree* (McLean et al., 2002, p. 123).

Comparison of the present study with the earlier Forest et al. study shows strong similarities in the core finding about importance. The present study involved a larger sample of 91 specialist teachers who were engaged in sending roles only. The Forest et al. sample was much smaller ($N = 10$) and comprised a mix of parents and early years teachers engaged in sending and receiving roles. Except for one of their 25 practices, the Forest et al. sample rated all practices above a mean level of 4.8/6.0. For our sample, all 36 practices were rated above the mean level of 5.35. For example, comparison of a specific practice about sending and receiving teachers sharing information (see Appendix, *Teacher sharing*) showed very little difference in teacher ratings, with a 5.92 mean rating in the Queensland sample and a 5.85 mean rating in the Forest el al. sample of early years teachers. Furthermore, the Forest et al. study provides some guidance for subsequent research activities in three aspects: (a) perceived importance ratings of teachers with different levels of qualifications and experience; (b) the perceived importance ratings of parents with their consumer perspective and experience; and (c) the pairing of importance ratings with those of implementation or use of transition practices within and between services.

The strong field validation of this transition practice listing is an important outcome. The present study delivers a local list of high-intensity practices, which teachers can put into immediate use in transitioning children into school. This research on specialist teachers' professional practice extends earlier work on strategies that enable children to make a successful transition and other work on teacher and parent perceptions about transition. For example, Australian research on early childhood transitions for children with developmental disabilities has identified essential skills that young children need to function effectively in regular school (e.g., Chadwick & Kemp, 2000, 2002; Kemp & Carter, 2000, 2005). Parents' views about transition issues have also been canvassed (e.g., Bentley-Williams & Butterfield, 1996; Campbell, 1997; Johnstone, McAlpine, & Wheeler, 1993), together with teachers' views about child-focused transition issues (e.g., Green & Kemp, 1998; Newman-Brewer, 1996).

Therefore, this comprehensive practice listing provides a legitimate Australian tool to investigate transition-to-school practice for children with autism and their families. The manageable size of this 36-item listing also provides a convenient tool for benchmarking transition practice in the field. Previous Queensland research on recommended practice (Beamish, 2008; Beamish & Bryer, 2012) indicates that specialist teachers value and use such lists when they are restricted to 30-40 items. A tool of this kind is essential to the setting up of professional action learning cycles in which individual teachers and teaching teams are willing to use a list of specified practices to accept, guide, monitor, and evaluate their practice over time (Umbreit, Ferro, Liaupsin, & Lane, 2007).

In addition, listing content can be infused into tertiary training programs and professional development activities. The building of teacher capacity in the area of transition-to-school practice can positively influence the implementation of these recommended practices (Wolery & Bailey, 2002). Moreover, because joint training of cross-agency staff is seen to increase the likelihood of team cooperation and collaboration across the transition process (Rous & Hallam, 2006), professional development activities can feature joint training opportunities for sending and receiving teachers and other stakeholders.

Limitations and future research
The present study was restricted to one early intervention service and its sending teachers. Immediate follow-up prospects involve a series of on-line surveys to strengthen the validation of this listing and refine practice content to suit child and family needs and service contexts. First, more extensive field testing in a range of services should be conducted in autism-specific intervention organisations, early education and care services, and schooling sectors across Australian states and territories. Second, surveys should be conducted to establish the acceptance of these practices by other key stakeholders who work in partnership with sending teachers in the transition-to-school process. These partners include receiving teachers, families, therapists, guidance personnel, and school administrators.

The iterative process of action research on this socially valid listing has the capacity to build a trustworthy knowledge base among stakeholders and a practical framework for meaningful ongoing communication among parents, teachers, and administrators. This iterative process is consistent with the current view that *successful transitions for children with autism need intensive parent-professional relationships and support for the future staff in program planning and monitoring in order to ensure that treatment gains are not lost* (Fava & Strauss, 2011, p. 517).Moreover, multiple perspectives may clarify whether stakeholders place less importance on practices in those transition phases in which they are less directly engaged.

Additionally, this initial inquiry sought views only on the level of practice importance. Level of practice implementation has yet to be investigated. An initial step is to follow-up with the intervention and advisory teachers who participated in the present study. These teachers assigned only moderate-to-high evaluation ratings to their transition experiences and also described the presence of constraints in their transition activities. Hence, this second survey will establish the *do-ability* of each validated practice, together with the identification of barriers and supports for practice implementation within this Queensland service.

Finally, within this large government service, it would be informative to conduct some case studies using the Forest et al. triadic format (sending and receiving teachers and parents) to examine practice importance and use simultaneously. The focus of practice around a single child would allow solution-focused actions to be generated for specific family conditions. Data from sufficient cases should facilitate building an enhanced transition support system into specific service policies and procedures.

Conclusion

This study represents the first Australian autism-specific inquiry into transition to school. As and when targeted federal and state funding to stimulate autism research has run its course in Australia, research of this kind should provide a starting point to examine the effectiveness of implementation and sustainability of these practices (Umbreit et al., 2007) for transitioning young children with autism to school. This practice tool seems likely to be highly portable across local communities and service systems. Moreover, with additional field testing and modification, the tool should assist individuals and teams to guide, assess, and monitor actual transitions against these practices.

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Appendix.Practice Listing for Transitioning Children with Autism to School

Abbreviation	Practice
Initial planning	
Team establishment	Transition team (parents and sending program staff) is established
Parent information	Parents are provided with information about the transition process and available program options
Parent-parent support	Parents have access to a key person (e.g., veteran parent) to support them through the transition process
Placement identification	Prep placement options (regular school, special school, specialised program) are identified
Timeline	Initial transition timeline is created
Team responsibilities	Contents of initial transition timeline include roles and responsibilities of team members
Transition coordinator	A team member is identified as the transition coordinator
Preparing child and family	
Planning visits	The transition coordinator arranges classroom visits to placement options
Visit support	Parents and sending teacher visit multiple placement options at least one time
Family assessment	Families' needs related to transition are assessed and addressed
Decision support	Parents are supported in making their decision for selecting a specific Prep placement
Formal plan	Transition plan is formalised
Planning steps	Transition plan includes specific steps to complete the transition
Sending teacher visit	Sending teacher visits receiving Prep classroom
Receiving teacher visit	Receiving Prep teacher visits sending program to observe child
Teacher sharing	Teachers (sending and receiving) share information about the child and link needs to curriculum, resourcing, and facilities
Readiness skills identification	Readiness skills needed by child to be successful in Prep placement are identified.
Readiness skills teaching	Identified readiness skills are taught to the child, and progress is monitored
Preparing the Prep class	
Prep staff identification	Staff to work with child in Prep are identified
Support staff identification	Support staff (e.g., speech & language pathologist, occupational therapist, physiotherapist, autism advisor) needed for Prep placement are identified
Social story	A social story about the transition to Prep is created for the child
Curriculum adjustments	Adjustments to the Prep curriculum are identified
Specialised materials	Materials specific to the child's needs at Prep are created/ modified
Daily schedule	Individual daily schedule for the child at Prep is created
Environment preparation	Prep learning environment is made ready/ appropriate
Peer preparation	Prep children are prepared for the child's transition into the class
Introduction to Prep class	
Child visit	Child is well supported on initial visit to Prep classroom
Classroom exploration	Child is allowed to explore the Prep classroom at times of low stress and with few expectations
Staff training	Staff to work with child in Prep program are provided with the necessary training
Increased attendance	Child's attendance at Prep program is gradually increased
Child data	Child's file and data are sent to the receiving school administrator

Skill maintenance	Arrangements for maintenance of child's existing skills and behavioural supports are put in place
Support coordination	Support staff to work with child in Prep classroom are coordinated and monitored
Follow-up support and evaluation	
Open communication	Communication lines are kept open between receiving and sending teachers through telephone calls, e-mails, and personal contact
Evaluation of process	Parent and teachers (receiving and sending) evaluate the transition process
Evaluation to administrator	Evaluation of transition is passed on to administrator, who is responsible for transition planning