# *Step Up into Education*

# *Podcast One –* *Listening to children in the transition to school*

This podcast is designed to support professional conversations about evidence-informed approaches to transition to school and early years practices, as identified in current research and literature. This is the first in a series which will focus on supporting Queensland schools to translate research into everyday practice to:

* define and understand the term ‘student voice’,
* understand the importance of gathering the perspectives of children during planning and the evaluation of transition programs, and
* unpack ethical challenges and children’s perspectives.

**Sue Dockett** is Emeritus Professor, Charles Sturt University, Australia and Director, Peridot Education Pty Ltd. Since retiring from university life, Sue remains actively involved in research in the field of early childhood education and is an advocate for recognising and responding to the perspectives of young children. She continues to work with children, families and educators to explore transitions to school, children’s play, and learning. Sue is a co-chair of the Special Interest Group on Transitions at the European Early Childhood Education Research Association. In collaboration with Bob Perry, Sue has been researching and publishing in the transition to school field for almost 25 years.

**Bob Perry** is Emeritus Professor at Charles Sturt University, Australia and Director, Peridot Education Pty Ltd. Recently retired after 45 years of university teaching and research, Bob continues to research, consult and publish in conjunction with Sue Dockett in the field of early childhood, with particular emphasis on transition to primary school, researching with children; and evaluation of educational programs. In 2015, he was awarded the title of Hedersdoktor by [Mälardalens Universitet, Sweden for his collaborative work in educational transitions and early mathematics education.](https://www.mdu.se/artiklar/2020/november/tre-nya-hedersdoktorer) Bob continues to publish extensively both nationally and internationally in these areas.

**Announcer:**

This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Welcome to the Queensland Department of Education podcast series about the importance of listening to children in the transition to school. Hi, I'm Virginia Bowdidge, and in this podcast, I'll chat with researchers, Bob Perry and Sue Dockett. Both Bob and Sue are Emeritus Professors from Charles Sturt University and Directors at Peridot Education. Bob and Sue are extensively published, nationally and internationally, in the areas of educational transitions, including the transition to school, researching with children, and the evaluation of educational programs. They have recently co-authored a book titled, Evaluating Transition to School Programs: Learning from Research and Practice. Thanks so much for your time today, Bob and Sue. It's an honour to chat with you.

**Sue Dockett:**

Thanks, it's great to be here.

**Bob Perry:**

Thanks very much.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

We know there is a substantial amount of national and international research about the importance of supporting children as they transition from kindergarten to Prep, including the planning and implementation of effective transition programs. There is less research, however, about the evaluation of transition to school programs and how to measure the effectiveness of these programs from the perspectives of children, families, early childhood educators, and school teachers.

Sue, I know you have been a long-time advocate for the importance of recognising and responding to young children's perspectives. But what does this mean, and why is this so important to you?

**Sue Dockett:**

Well, thanks, Virginia. It's important because Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. That convention makes it clear that children have the right to be heard on matters that affect them. And clearly, transition to school is a matter that affects them. We know that children are the closest to their own experiences. If we actually want to find out what's important for children and what's happening for children, then we know that they're capable of telling us what's happening for them, provided we are able to listen to that appropriately and they're given the appropriate opportunity.

We also, I think generally as educators, know that children are at the heart of what we do. They're able to tell us what's happening for them, and also to give us clues about how we might make that a more successful or effective or a more positive transition in many ways. So, it's just genuinely important to listen to children, to hear about their experiences from them. Bob and I have been working in the field of transition to school for a long time and one of the major facets of that work has been working with children to understand their experiences of transition, and to genuinely listen to what they're saying and try and respond to that in positive ways.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Thanks, Sue. Bob, why involve children in the planning and evaluation of transition programs?

**Bob Perry:**

Well, Virginia, as Sue said, they have a right to be involved. Transition to school affects them, and they have a right to be involved in all matters that affect them. Transition to school will happen to them, and they have questions about what will happen. They don't necessarily know, they haven't necessarily experienced, the transition to school and I think that we need to listen to them because if we don't, then adults can only guess at what's going on in their heads, what concerns the children, what they really want to know. When we started with our transition to school program many years ago, Sue and I spoke to anyone who would talk to us in a couple of schools and one of the findings from that little experiment was that children's experiences of transition to school are very different from those of adults, and from those of other children.

So, if we want to draw a full picture about the transition to school for any particular child, that child has to have opportunities to contribute. The other aspect is that we can get a lot of information from older children, not just children going through the transition, but older children who have gone through the transition. They have memories of their transition which are very strong and which can be very helpful. They can also be very helpful interlocutors with younger children. Younger children tend to speak to the older children in ways that are different to the ways in which they speak to adults, and they say different things.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

What does the involvement of children in planning and evaluation look like in practice?

**Bob Perry:**

Well, there are many ways in which the voices of children might be elicited. Not all children will want to talk about it. Some do. Some will be happy to draw pictures. Other young children are very unhappy when they're asked to be drawing pictures. Some will jump at the opportunity of taking photos or videos. Some will want to write down questions, or perhaps, give video questions that they can ask other children. Some will want to give information to younger children coming into the school about what it is like to be at school. Some will talk in groups, some will talk to parents. There are lots and lots of opportunities. And I think one of the things that really is quite powerful is for young children who, perhaps are in kindergarten, writing through their teachers perhaps, to older children, perhaps current preps or even older children, and asking them what school is like.

A number of schools have made videos involving their children, so that they can use those to let children coming into the school in the next year see what school is like. There are lots of things that are different, and the children generally will want to tell us about them. Another thing that we've used particularly around evaluation over many years is what we call a reflection tool, where we get children at the beginning of school to reflect on how they were when they started school. So, we ask them, ‘When I started school, I...’, they can say something which someone might scribe for them, or they can draw a picture. And then later in Prep, we ask them how they are now. And they can, again, draw the pictures and say something. What this shows, not only to the adults, but perhaps even more importantly to the children, is how they've grown during their time in Prep and that can be very powerful for everyone involved.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Thanks, Bob. That's very interesting. Sue, what can transition teams do to understand data arising from children's perspectives?

**Sue Dockett:**

Thanks, Virginia. Well, the very first thing they need to do is to create opportunities for children to share their experiences and tell their stories about transition, because they don't necessarily come out in the normal, everyday classroom activities. So, creating opportunities to hear what children have to say is really important. And the second thing is that listening to those children's experiences is a really challenging task, because so often as adults and teachers, we're busy with the everyday activities, and we think we actually hear what we're being told. But sometimes, we actually need to take the step back and really actively listen to what children are telling us. And that's really important when we consider their experiences of transition.

Sometimes, we might need to seek clarification. Sometimes, what children are trying to tell us isn't necessarily clear to us. We need to have opportunities, not only for children to share their stories, but to help us interpret them, to help us understand what it is they're trying to tell us, give them opportunities, if you like, to explain. And that might mean using different means. Bob's talked about having conversations, engaging children in drawings, the opportunity to take photos. A whole range of strategies can combine to help us give children the chance to tell us, in a range of ways, what's really important to us and to them. So, we need to ask the children what's going on for them, but then we need to check back in with them to make sure that we've interpreted it and understood it in ways that they expected us to.

I think another step is to engage children in the processes of thinking about, ‘well, what do we do next?’. They may have shared with us their experiences and their stories, told us things that we perhaps didn't know or didn't realise, and then, we need to say, "Well, what do we do next?" And children can have a part in that conversation of saying, ‘well, what could we change? What could we do differently? And how would that work for you? I think one of the things though, that we also need to make clear, is that some things we're not able to change. We're not able to change, for example, the length of the school day or school terms or something. But there are things within the school or within the classroom that are open to change. So, I think we need to have some really open and honest conversations with children, listening to what's important for them, understanding that through them and with them, and then, thinking together about what's possible to change as a result of those conversations.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Are there any ethical challenges to consider when gathering and evaluating the perspectives of children?

**Sue Dockett:**

Sure. There are ethical challenges in all of the things that we do. And many of the things that you will recognise as ethical challenges are the same challenges that you would have when you engage with adults. We're talking about a school situation where we assume that parental consent is available and has a been provided for interactions with children. So, that's not so much the concern at this point. It's more about considering what children are asked to do, why they're being asked to do it, who will see the information they provide, and what will happen with that information. You can imagine being in a situation, even as an adult, where you're asked to comment on perhaps a co-worker or somebody who's slightly regarded as higher in the hierarchy than you are. You might be a little bit cautious about what you say. Asking children to comment on what's happening with their teacher or in their classroom can also be a little bit challenging.

So, it's a matter of being really clear about what children are being asked to do and why, and where that information will go. A bit contrary to many classroom situations, when we're seeking data for something like this, we're evaluating or responding to transition programs, we need to understand that not all children will want to be involved. It's not like a classroom experience where everybody is expected to be doing the same thing sometimes. But we need to recognise that some children will feel really uncomfortable participating in perhaps some of the things that we've structured, or they might be uncomfortable and not choose to participate in some of the questions that we're asking or situations we're creating. Giving kids the opportunity to participate or not, will be really important, one of the ethical principles understanding this data generation process. And also, just recognising that children aren't necessarily going to do or say what we expect, realising that there can be the unexpected and being able to respond to that, is part of our ethical response to children as well.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Thanks, Sue. There's some really important things to consider there. If I can finish on this question, what happens as a consequence of listening to children and taking their perspectives seriously?

**Sue Dockett:**

Thanks. That's a really big question, and it really depends on what the aim of the whole exercise has been. Many things can change and many things can happen as a result to listening to children. I think the first thing to note is that very often, it suddenly hits us that adults and children think quite differently and it reminds us that as adults, our own starting school experiences were often some time ago. So, we get access to a range of different perspectives by listening to the experiences of children who are currently experiencing, or have recently experienced, that transition. Children will expect that having shared the information about transition, that the adults are going to do something about it. So, those conversations about what happens now are really important and together, it's possible that you can come up with some changes.

Sometimes, they can be minimal changes. Sometimes, it's changes as simple as children who've just started school being worried about their possessions. Perhaps, they've been asked to leave their bag outside in the cloak room or on the veranda, and they're worried because they can't see what's happening, or if anyone's taking their bag. Sometimes, it can be as simple as saying, ‘well, maybe it's okay to put your bag somewhere you can see it for a while until you're sure that it's going to be okay’. So, there are little changes that can be made that make life a whole lot easier. But there are also bigger changes that can be made that may affect the class and the school. But those are often only possible when we know what challenges children are facing or identifying.

One of the really important consequences too about thinking about children's perspectives is a change in attitude almost among school personnel, among families, and even among the early childhood educators with whom they work. and that is that transition doesn't happen to children, children are an active part of transition. And changing that focus on transition happening to them, and changing that to having transition happen with them, is a really important change of focus. It looks at different activity levels, different agency, and different strengths. So, the change of mind can be really important.

And I think probably the last thing I'd say in this context is that listening to children and engaging them in different ways to share their perspectives is a really nice, strong reminder of how strong those children are in many different ways, and the strengths that they bring with them already to school. They're able to communicate in a range of different ways about quite complex emotions, activities and interactions. And this is just a nice chance to sit back and listen and reflect on how we recognise and respond to those strengths that children bring with them.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Thank you again for your time day, Bob and Sue. It has been so insightful discussing your work to learn from the research what this may look like in practice. Thank you.

**Sue Dockett**:

Thank you very much.

**Bob Perry:**

Thank you.

**Announcer:**

You have been listening to the Queensland Department of Education podcast.

The Department of Education acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands from across Queensland. We pay our respects to the elders' past and present, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture, and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

© State of Queensland (Department of Education) 2022 ([CC BY 4.0](file:///C:\Users\kmay45\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\INetCache\Content.Outlook\O5R87W5I\©%20State%20of%20Queensland%20(Department%20of%20Education)%202021%20(CC%20BY%204.0)))