How did COVID-19 impact post-school transitions for young people with disability and how can these be better supported?

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The COVID pandemic has had wide impacts on children and young people with disability in their education. Students with disability have not only had their education interrupted, but the pandemic has reinforced the existing inequality they face in their education. This report explores experiences of young people with disability transitioning from secondary school in 2020 or 2021 and explores whether the COVID-pandemic has had a significant impact in the post school transition period. The research was co-produced between two academics and two young people with disability who were co-researchers employed by Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), the national representative organisation of children and young people with disability.

Transitions can be difficult times that involve a number of practical and emotional implications for all young people and a key transition time is leaving secondary school. This has important implications for future economic and community participation. Young people with disability experience challenges with transitions from secondary school at higher rates than non-disabled peers.

Post-school transition processes are particularly high stakes for young people with disability given that this group is one of the most disadvantaged cohorts in the labour market, experiencing unemployment and underemployment at higher rates than their peers. The literature consistently evidences that where post-secondary school transitions are done well and are supported appropriately, they have a significant impact on the future lives of young people with disability.

In this research we interviewed eight young people with disability about their post-secondary school transition experiences.

Key findings:

- We found that COVID meant that many of the young people we spoke to did not get the transition experience they expected. Usual transition activities were cancelled as learning moved online and 'rites of passage' events such as graduation, end of year events and trips were cancelled, leaving many experiencing anxiety and sadness.

- The challenges that COVID posed in terms of schooling meant that many of the young people we interviewed were focused on this and not what would come next. Many people spent large amounts of time, for example, seeking adjustments and special considerations for final assignments.

Executive summary

- Interviewees experienced a broad range of transition issues from not having access to technology, low expectations of what they might go on to achieve, not being supported to take risks, not being able to undertake appropriate orientation opportunities, missing out on social interaction, having to secure extensive evidence to support accommodation requests and additional challenges related to intersectional identities. What was common is that these issues were not well supported, and interviewees were not surprised by this as they are used to not being supported well and most had experienced challenges with schools and teachers over their education.

- Interviews did identify factors that help in transition processes including individual teachers, friends and peers, family members and job coaches.

- For many of our interviewees they had transitioned from secondary school despite the system and not because they had been actively supported by it. Many were left on their own to find a path and had to do extensive work to marshal resources to support this process. Given the levels of social isolation and disconnection experienced by young people with disability it is not hard to imagine the countless young people who will have missed out on the supports our interviewees described.

- While our sample size for the research was small, we draw on these findings and the broader literature to set out a series of strategies and activities that might better support young people with disability as they transition from secondary school. We set out a range of short- and long-term strategies that are important to prevent the longer term scarring effect of the pandemic and also to work towards better inclusion of young people with disability in education.

Introduction

Introduction

All of us will experience a number of times of transition in our lives. When we move from one school to another, from one house to another or from training into work, these are all transitions. They involve a number of practical changes to our lives and how we go about these. They also involve emotional processes as we detach from a place or activity and build relationships with a new community. A key transition time is when we leave secondary school and go into further education or work. This is an important transition in ensuring future economic and community participation. Having a secure pathway provides increased independence and a sense of meaning[1]. It also determines opportunities for social inclusion and a sense of adult identity, which are important determinants of wellbeing[2-4].

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) the national representative organisation for children and young people with disability has, for a number of years, collected data that shows young people with disability have significant challenges in transitioning from school. This is problematic because a poor experience at this point can lead to negative life outcomes relating to low participation in employment or tertiary study and social exclusion[5]. If young people experience difficulties in transitioning out of secondary school this can have a negative impact on social inclusion or achieving work throughout an individual's life[6] and even result in overall lower quality of life[7]. In contrast, a secured pathway towards further study or employment offers increased cognitive functioning, social interaction opportunities and peer relationships[8, 9].

In this report we present data gathered from young people with disability who left secondary school in 2020 or 2021. We wanted to explore whether the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on young people with disability transitioning from secondary school. The research was co-produced between two university-based academics (Catherine Smith, Helen Dickinson) and two young people with disability (Amy Marks, Jess Mitchell) employed by CYDA. Our research finds the post-secondary school transition processes for young people with disability were not well supported during the COVID-19 pandemic. But this was no surprise to interviewees as schools often did not support these students well before the pandemic. We make several recommendations about what might be done differently to more effectively support this process.

The report is structured as follows; in the first section we explore what is already known about these issues. We define school transitions and set out why these are so important for young people with disability. We then provide an overview of the approach we took to this research and following this the findings. In the final section we set out a number of recommendations about what can be done differently to better support school transitions in terms of immediate actions that can be taken and what some longer-term aims might be.

Background

Background

In this section we define some of the concepts that are important in this research and we set out what is already known about how young people with disability experience transitioning from secondary school. Where we talk about 'school transition' what we mean here are the movements into, between, and out of education settings. Transitions occur at a number of points in our schooling in terms of early childhood settings, primary school, middle school, high school, and university, TAFE or post-school environments. In this research we focused on the transition between secondary school and a range of post-secondary school destinations that young people may experience.

Transitions can be a difficult time as we move from one setting to another and experience a high level of change[10]. Often there are a number of practical changes that have to be made like learning how to get to and navigate a new setting. These times are also emotionally challenging as we leave one set of people and have to develop relationships with new people and communities[11]. This can be a time of real opportunity for some people as we experience new people and places. But for some, transitions can also be associated with anxiety, grief, and loss of social and emotional support. Some people find this process of change more difficult than others, and some are presented with far more frequent and challenging home and school transitions than others. Students who have negative transition experiences are more likely to experience depression, lower learning attainment, poorer peer connections, lower self esteem, and higher levels of anti social behaviour[12]. There are several factors that predict if a young person generally will have a more difficult transition process, including:

- having attended more than one primary school[12];
- frequent previous school absences[13];
- previously being disengaged from formal education[12];
- school refusal[14];
- previously having been bullied[13, 15];
- worries about safety[15];
- worries about making friends[15];
- worries about relationships with teachers[15];
- low self-esteem or self-confidence[15]; and,
- not belonging to the dominant culture represented in school materials and practices[16].

Sadly, as the studies cited above indicate, we know that young people with disability experience a number of these risk factors at higher rates than their peers. What this means is that school transitions are likely to bring more challenges for young people with disability than their non-disabled peers. Additionally people with disability often have less access to information technology[17], devices and adapted technology and poor inclusive practices by other students and teachers. Young people with disability are one of the most disadvantaged cohorts in the labour market experiencing a range of complex barriers to finding quality and stable work[18]. This means that post-school transition pathways are particularly high stakes in determining the future outcomes for young people with disability.

Background

Data from a 2019 national survey conducted by CYDA found eighty percent of respondents feel schools are not providing appropriate information or support about career planning and more than half do not receive adequate support to think about or plan their future or find the assistance and information that their school provides to be useful[19]. Two thirds of respondents to this survey felt their school did not have high expectations of young people with disability with respect to employment or further education. Fewer than one in five students report receiving assistance in understanding their strengths and skills for post-school transition; practical assistance such as resume-writing; or assistance to plan any study or training. Additionally, parents report feeling a significant degree of responsibility for the career-planning process, and note that the support provided is generally not tailored to students with disability, and therefore options are limited[19]. There are also concerns that students with disability, especially in segregated education settings, are encouraged by schools to enter the supported employment system rather than seek or aspire to open employment[19, 20].

A lack of support for employment is concerning because economic participation is central to supporting people with and without disabilities to meet socio-economic needs, maintain health and well-being, and civil and political participation[21]. Indeed, the socio-economic and mental health benefits of employment versus unemployment for people with disability are likely to be even more significant than for people without disability[22, 23]. It is established in the literature that when students with disability engage in paid or unpaid work experiences during the time they spend at secondary school and learn skills needed to be successful at work, the likelihood they will be employed after secondary school increases[24].

Furthermore, when students are instructed on goal-setting and decision-making skills, there are higher outcomes of post-secondary employment success in the long-term[25].
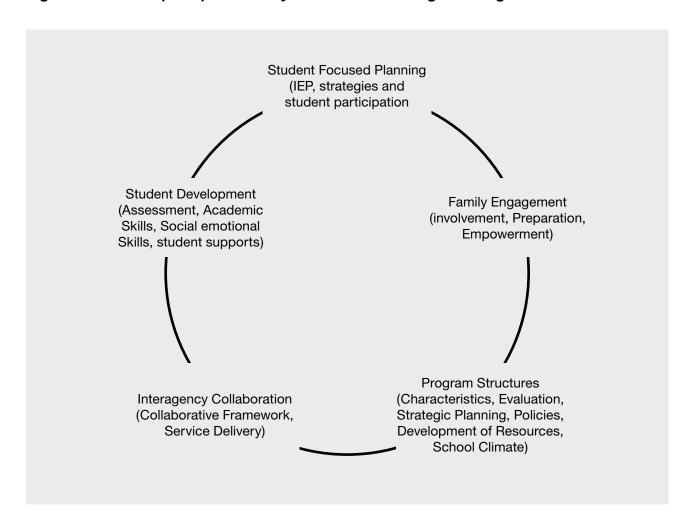
While the positive effects of employment might be more greatly felt by people with disability, so are the negative effects of unemployment and underemployment. Because people with disability face a range of socio-economic disparities, those who do not go into work are more likely to face social exclusion, economic disadvantage, poor mental and physical health, and housing insecurity[26-28]. One research study in the US[29] demonstrates the particular differences that young people with Intellectual and Developmental Disability (IDD) face in transitions compared with outcomes for peers without a disability two years out of high school. The research found 23% of youth with IDD were employed compared to close to 60% of youth without disabilities. The low employment rate was determined to be due to limited development of self-determination and career-related skills during the transition years in schools, as well as inadequate collaboration between schools and employment agencies; limited vocational experiences and pathway education in school and inadequate transition support.

Background

Generally, students with disability benefit from strong careers advisory instruction, meaningful experiences that aid in making informed decisions, and personalized supports as they transition through secondary school to adulthood[30]. Attempts to model transition planning for young people with disabilities and their families[31, 32] struggle to capture the complexity and diversity required for a useful plan[33]. However, it is broadly seen that successful transitions from school to adulthood include a career path, some aspect of social emotional learning, involvement in community activities, leisure, and recreation participation, and most importantly for our report, self-determined action. From such studies, Kohler and colleagues[34] developed a Taxonomy for Transition programming represented in Figure 1. Kohler's model highlights that opportunities for student and family development and input, as well as focussed planning, links with agencies and systems supports are all important areas of support. Consistently across the literature it is evident that when post-secondary school transitions are done well and are supported appropriately, they have a significant impact on the future lives of young people with disability.

Figure 1 Kohler's (2016) Taxonomy for Transition Programming

Student Focused Planning
(IEP, strategies and student participation

Student Development
(Assessment, Academic Skills, Social emotional Skills, student supports)

Family Engagement
(involvement, Preparation, Empowerment)

Interagency Collaboration
(Collaborative Framework, Service Delivery)

Program Structures
(Characteristics, Evaluation, Strategic Planning, Policies, Development of Resources, School Climate)
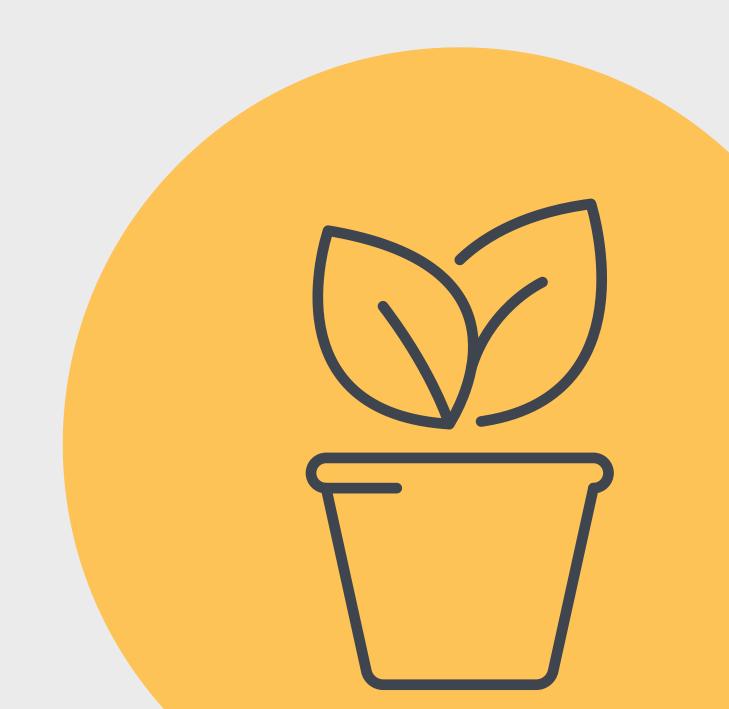
Background

With the disruption of the COVID pandemic, as with all education planning and support, transition planning and support was even more significantly disrupted. While again, the literature is sparse, there are some important additional challenges identified for transitioning students with disability during this prologued period of interrupted routine, practice and support. One Canadian study shows COVID-related challenges included decreased engagement in schooling, additional expenses for equipment, technical challenges and an impact on mental health[35]. Further, students identified under-employment, difficult working conditions, difficulty finding work that lead to a lack of work experience, as well as cancelled or reduced internships or placements, lack of volunteer opportunities, uncertainties about career pathway due to even less opportunity to explore options, opportunities and venues for future work or study (35). Many of these challenges were exacerbated for young people with disability, especially those with limited employment experience before the pandemic.

Against this background we sought to explore what the experience of Australian young people with disability were who left school in 2020 and 2021 and in what ways the pandemic had impacted on their transition experiences.

Our approach

Our approach

This project was a piece of co-production between two university-based academics (Catherine Smith and Helen Dickinson) and two young people with disability employed by CYDA to be co-researchers (Amy Marks and Jess Mitchell). Our co-production research approach brings these perspectives into the research, combining lived experience ('insider') and academic ('outsider') perspectives to enhance the validity and relevance of research findings. Co-production has been shown to have a number of positive impacts in research. This kind of approach can help ensure the concerns and interests of people with disability are central to projects and can improve their real-world impact[36]. These approaches try to live the notion of *nothing about us, without us.*

As a team we co-designed the entire research approach, following the principles set out in the University of New South Wales's guidelines for co-producing research with people with disability[37]. Early work was done to ensure that the project was founded on a sense of shared responsibility and joint ownership. Every stage of the research was co-designed between the team. Weekly meetings were held to discuss any issues as they arose, to ensure the process was accessible and to be transparent. In terms of how we collected data, we used interviews, and these were led by the CYDA-based researchers, with the academics supporting and taking notes. Those who took part in interviews were given a $50 pre-paid visa card to compensate for their time spent in interview. Ethics approval was granted by the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Committee (HC210197).

In the next section we now move on to set out our findings and details of those who took part in the interviews.

What
we found

What we found

We struggled with recruitment to this project. We had initially aimed to include 15-20 young people in the research, but only recruited eight despite an extended research collection period. Our challenges in recruitment were a combination of delays in ethics approval and some broader issues. As the research did not start when we anticipated, in late 2020 we missed an important window prior to schools and universities starting back after the summer break. Some potential interviewees were not able to take part as they had to focus on going back to school or starting work or university.

All but one of the young people we spoke to left school in 2020 and had transitioned into an array of destinations. Of those who had already transitioned, two had gone on to study at university, one was in a bridging course into tertiary education, two were in technical and further education (TAFE), one was engaged in a variety of capacity building programmes and work trial, and one was in a School Leaver Employment Supports programme and currently in employment as part of this. The group were mostly based in Victoria[4], although with two in New South Wales and one each in Queensland and Canberra. We had a mix of genders with three males, three females and two non-binary/transgender young people. For purposes of confidentiality, we use the pronoun they/them for all the young people we interviewed for the research. We also refer to each different interviewee via a code number. (e.g. ST001)

Difficulties in isolating COVID-19 impacts

In this research our interest was the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on school transitions for students leaving secondary school in 2020 and 2021. In general, the young people we spoke to struggled to identify these impacts beyond some broad parameters. To some extent we might expect this, if you have not been through a transition experience before it is difficult to know what to expect. Although some young people did have a sense of this from their friends who had been through this process previously. As one interviewee explained:

"I was quite close friends with the Year 12s that graduated before me, so I knew what the process usually was. But it was completely disrupted by COVID. I ended up getting a completely different experience from what was supposed to happen, and what we were all expecting. We were supposed to have, all the Year 12s were supposed to have one on one sessions with our career's counsellor, and with our VCE – with our career's counsellor and the VCE coordinator. That did not end up happening". (ST001)

What we found

Many of the interviewees identified that the pandemic had meant that typical activities had not taken place as they were in their final year of school such as attending university or TAFE open days, work experience and having access to career counsellors. As one interviewee explained:

"With the COVID, none of the things that they were supposed to have done in Year 12 occurred, i.e., work experience, going out into public, et cetera, because all of that lockdown – so none of it really occurred. So, it was really a taste of, well, what more can we do? We really can't do anything". (ST007)

As this quote indicates, schools did not typically have well developed plans relating to what alternatives might be offered to their students. While this was problematic for all students, young people with disability face some specific issues that their non-disabled peers typically do not. For example, for one young person who is visually impaired, this lack of transition preparation was proving to be problematic as they started university:

"I think I would have tried to do campus orientation earlier and public transport because I caught public transport to school, all of high school except in Year 12 I didn't because of COVID. So, I wasn't practising how to get to university particularly early and it's only something that has really happened in the last month or two. Which has made it really difficult because you're doing all your other university prep and stuff". (ST006)

The pandemic also meant many of the young people missed out on 'rites of passage' events, including activities such as graduations, end of year celebrations or trips. As one interviewee explained:

"Well, the school that I was at takes us on schoolies to Queensland, to the theme park. Obviously because of coronavirus we couldn't even go. So, I missed out on that and I was devastated" (ST003).

Such events and experiences provide important links to peers and can be a useful way to aid the emotional aspects of transition as they mark the end of schooling. Particularly for young people who feel socially isolated these are often important events in enhancing and maintaining links to their peers.

Several interviewees explained they had not necessarily thought in detail about what supports they should have received during the year because COVID-19 had such an impact on their final year of schooling. These young people were typically focused on just managing to get through this disrupted year successfully emotionally and/or academically. For some of the young people we interviewed, structure is important, and the loss of routine associated with school had made this a difficult time. As one interviewee explained:

"I actually had a panic attack on the first lockdown, so that was scary… at home I didn't have a routine and that buggered me up. I started raging, I was nearly in the red zone nearly every day, which the teachers haven't really seen me in the red zone…it didn't feel right, it didn't work. It was just getting up in the morning, in front of that laptop". (ST003)

Several interviewees were actively engaged in processes that would provide adjustments and special considerations for their final assessments. While many would have applied for these regardless of the pandemic, others reported their escalation of anxiety and mental health issues made these more necessary and at the same time processes

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of documenting this and gathering evidence was more challenging. The disruption caused by remote learning meant that several of the young people had periods of time where they were unable to learn and for some this caused some significant anxiety. Not only was this period a challenge in terms of the impact that this had on the final year of schooling, for others it was a window into what a first year of post-school study might look like:

"Then also doing Year 12 in a pandemic; I went to an alternative school. It was really hard, and I didn't like it and the thought of maybe I'll have to do another year in the pandemic at a university, which is far less accessible than my alternative high school didn't really feel like something I should have to do". (ST002)

In this case the young person changed their plan about where they would transition to, choosing to attend TAFE rather than university in part in response to this concern.

In addition to classes, work placements, work experience and part-time work were also impacted for participants in the research. While some found additional work available because work for most moved online, these were largely demanding communication-oriented roles. For others, their work and financial security were disrupted, leaving them further isolated and without the independence that their income had allowed. As one interviewee described:

"At the start [of the pandemic] I had one shift, then I went up to three. Then I went down to two. Now I'm down to one…I didn't work that much as I wanted". (ST004)

This pattern was repeated for other extra-curricular activities such as sport and volunteering.

As we have shown in this section, the final year of schooling for interviewees was highly disrupted. They were unable to engage with schooling for periods of time due to the pandemic and this had an impact on their learning. Combined with a lack of usual supports for transitions, many interviewees reported experiencing stress and anxiety and sadness at not being able to take part in the type of social events that often mark the final year of school.

The more things change the more they stay the same

Most of the young people we interviewed expressed that the challenges they experienced in relation to schooling and transition processes during the pandemic was not a surprise. Those who expressed this opinion viewed it less as a new set of issues that emerged because of the pandemic and more an intensification of existing challenges. As one interviewee explains:

"I think it's just like everything was exacerbated this year, nothing [isn't a] problem. Conveniently, I wrote a report for my work where that was one of the outcomes, was proving that everything around COVID-19 was an underlying issue that was made worse, not a new thing. But that super rings true and I've heard it in all the conversations I've had this year about having a disability, about education. Any problem you have, it was there before, it was just more well-hidden". (ST002)

What we found

Those who expressed this kind of opinion typically pointed to the fact that they had generally not felt well supported in school or that their schools and teachers had been unable to accommodate their needs and differences. Several interviewees shared that they had been bullied at various points in their schooling by other students and in some cases teachers. One interviewee explained:

"ST004: Oh yeah. The school don't care.

Facilitator: Do you feel like the school didn't care?

ST004: Yeah, I dropped out.

Facilitator: Is that the reason you left? Because they weren't really involved?

ST004: Yeah. They didn't care that I got bullied or choked, or stuff like that".

In this case the interviewee had left before the end of secondary school, as their experience was so bad and had gone to TAFE for further study. But they had not been able to study the course of their choice as they were under 18, so had done a different course for a year until they could meet the age requirement.

Others explained their schools had limited resources to support students with disability and this sometimes meant they would miss out on these if they did not meet criteria. While there were reports of some individual proactive and supportive teachers, they were not the norm for most interviewees. One of our interviewees explained how this felt and the implications of not being supported:

"My school has about 1,200 students, and there were probably three teaching aides for the entire school. They were stretched between maybe a group of half a dozen students,

and they were students with very high complex needs. For someone like me who was unfortunately, I hate using this term, but considered high-functioning, I wasn't looked at as a priority, so I didn't receive any support…I got my diagnoses quite late …But I had – almost all of my teachers asked me at some point, starting from about Year 8 to the end of my high school career, whether I was autistic, from the way that I presented myself. The fact that teachers pick up on things like that, but they never go any further with it, which would have made a lot of a difference. Within school, I very vividly remember telling my teachers about when I've had to learn – this specific example, I had to learn a new way to write essays, and I've always been very, very good at English. But I have to write a specific way. I can't break outside of my routine of how I write. I ended up having a full meltdown during class over it. I was disciplined, instead of supported. I was given a detention for disrupting the class, which wasn't fun. It was quite a – I understand, because it was a disruptive meltdown, I was crying and whatnot. But it was seen as, and quite often was, as a disruption, instead of something to be supported" (ST001).

Several young people reported at various points in their school career being disciplined as in this case or seen as a disruptive force when feeling overloaded or unable to cope with tasks or classroom dynamics. Not only was this an unhelpful way to deal with these issues, it also meant that young people felt like they could no longer trust these teachers or their schools to do the right thing.

What we found

Given the diverse group of young people we interviewed, they had experienced a range of different transition-related issues. One interviewee, with a visual impairment, reported experiencing a significant cliff at the end of schooling as they were no longer able to keep the technology that had been provided during schooling. These technologies are not funded under the National Disability Insurance Scheme, meaning that they were potentially left without the equipment they needed to prepare for and learn at university. In this case a not-for-profit organisation helped them to navigate this gap, rather than the school working with them to plan for this:

"The big one for people with vision impairments…while you're at school… all of your technology is provided by the Department of Education. So, things like laptops that can have screen readers put on to them…and all of these things are really expensive, like accessibility technology tends to be. So, it can rack up to about $10,000 worth of stuff that was owned by the Department of Education, but I've been using it for the entire year of my studies. The thing that wasn't supported I guess was information on pathways of how to get funding or support to get this accessibility equipment if you were moving into tertiary study. I think it's because it's expected if you have low vision, you won't be going on to do tertiary education because lots of people expect us to be not particularly smart for some reason…if I hadn't had the external support I had through Vision Australia end my OT there, I would have had no idea. I would have been stuck at the end of Year 12 with

equipment that I had to give back and no equipment then to take to university". (ST006)

Although this young person had done well in school and had been offered a place to study law at a top university, they were facing the prospect of doing this without the equipment that had supported their learning. As they explained, in part this was because there are not always high expectations of what young people with disability might achieve. Several interviewees told us they often felt there were not high expectations of this group, and this was problematic as it made individuals internalise this and narrow considerations of what they might do after school. As one interviewee explained:

"Yeah, it's like okay you should be grateful you got a job at like Hungry Jacks, which there's nothing wrong with that but they're deciding what someone's potential is. It's also like disability enterprises exist that are entirely to not pay disabled people a living wage, because we're less capable and less worthy of work. It's so drilled into society…so of course they're not going to want us to have high expectations for ourselves". (ST002).

If schools do not expect young people with disability to go on and do the type of things their peers might, they will not put the appropriate supports in place or push young people to achieve. Several young people told us their schools did not set them learning activities during remote learning as it would be difficult to do, and their academic performance was seen to count less than some of their peers.

What we found

Others talked about not being supported to take risks as they did not feel like they were being allowed to fail. One interviewee spoke about their desire to become an educational support worker and that they had previously done work experience in this area. However, in going to further study they had been strongly encouraged to go into a work education course, a bridging course into tertiary education. In the interview they expressed the opinion they had not been allowed to take what they perceived as a risk and go into the course of their choosing because of their disability and that if they were not disabled, they would be allowed to make different choices. As they explained:

"I was going to go into education support, that's teacher's aide. So, I wanted to go into that, because I've done a placement in a primary school. I said that's where I want to be, that's my place in life… I just want to go straight into education support, see how I go. If I fail, I fail. But if I excel, I excel and get a good job with not a lot of money but still, at least it's something". (ST003)

Others spoke about being able to find systems that would make accommodations for them and their needs, but only once they had provided extensive evidence to support this case. In school, in university and to access the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), the onus was continually on the young person to provide evidence to prove their case. But this comes at a cost in terms of the time and resources it takes to undertake paperwork and in order to be able to access specialists. Several interviewees referred the idea of the 'disability tax' where they encountered costs associated with garnering supports. In one case having secured the evidence it got lost in the system and they were asked to get these again, as they explain:

"But it was the same process, where I needed to supply evidence from my specialists. Yet again, specialists are really hard to get into. Once I had – that took about a month to get that evidence, and my specialist had sent that to [University], but [University] cannot find it. Cannot find any of the evidence that was sent in, so I have to redo the process, and I just don't – one, I can't get in to see my specialists, and two, I don't have the energy…I understand why they need the evidence, … if it was possible that I could go to see my GP, who has the files collated from all of my specialists, who could just relay the notes, that would be – I could do that in a day. That would be easy as. But the process of having to get specialist evidence is incredibly hard. They also don't consider the fact – you can obviously tell that no disabled person is involved with the writing of the policy, because any person who sees a specialist would know that it's not as easy as ringing up and saying, can you fill this form out for me? It's the time-frames they give you, it's the fact that they need as much evidence as you can". (ST001)

While supports were theoretically available, they often proved difficult to gain access to and there was additional work to do to find these. Given that most of the young people we interviewed had lived with disability their whole school careers, the fact that they had to access evidence in the final year of schooling and during a pandemic provided additional stressors. Overall, most of the young people we interviewed spoke about being let down by schools and broader support systems on multiple occasions and not having a positive experience of

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transition from school into the post-school environment. But what was more striking was most were not surprised by this, they expected times of transition or new activities or events to be turbulent as this had been their experience for their whole life. As one young person explained this is because the system is not designed with people with disability or any individual who deviates from the 'norm' in mind:

"I think currently, school transitions "intentionally" is not actually about transitions, it's about one person moving from one system to another system but nothing else. Like it is a cis, white, rich, abled student moving from a mainstream high school to a public, prestigious university, and that's it. It means that actual transitions are just not a thing and you're radical if you do anything other than that. The reality of transitions is not actually transitions. I think that's a narrative that's really missed and also a narrative that favours white people, favours able people and favours cis (gender), heteronormative rich people, et cetera". (ST002)

Several of the young people we spoke to feel the weight of intersectional identities. Interviewees referred to the issues associated with identity including those related to gender diversity, first in family to go to university, living in a regional area, being from a low socio-economic group, not living with parents due to safety concerns. All these factors also have a bearing on transition points and pose additional challenges in planning.

What helps in post-school transitions

While some individual teachers were identified as being good supports for some of the young people we interviewed, schools were largely not seen to have been very helpful in supporting post-school intentions. As outlined in the previous section, many of those we spoke to did not have expectations that they would be well-supported as they had often had to engage in significant work to make things happen around schooling. To fill this gap there was a lot of advocacy work done by individuals, peers, and families to support these processes.

For many of the young people we spoke to, they had done extensive work to make sure they could transition to where they wanted to and the supports that they needed to do this were available. As one person explained:

"I'm the first in my family to go to university, so I didn't have that social capital, where I could rely on family members for what to expect. It was really just a process of trial and error. A lot of late nights, frantically searching, trying to find things like ATAR notes forums, what am I supposed to do? But otherwise, yeah, it was trial and error, frantic researching and pretty much just waiting and hoping that it would work out". (ST001)

Several people talked about how they had needed to do much work with schools, with further education institutions, the NDIS, not-for-profits and advocacy organisations to help them identify where they would transition to, the supports they would require and how to secure these. The load of this work fell to the young person and the family rather than a supported process by the school. Some young people and their supporters described

What we found

how they did extensive preparation work in advance. As one carer who was involved in the interview at the request of the young person explains:

"Yeah, so we would talk about it at home. How much went on at school, I'm unaware of that. I'd already researched what job opportunities there were because I knew that that was coming in and used resources like Imagine More … all of those places that I'd researched. Then I looked at job agencies, what was available, et cetera, and even rang and spoke to parents and then went, well, okay, we will do this. So, I had that all organised by around about July…. with the teachers, it was more me advocating and knowing what had to be happening and what steps I needed to put in place and going ahead and getting that done. I worked with an amazing agent – agency here that helped us along the way and have supported [name] for a quite a lot of years. So that's the steps that we've done. Did they do any of that at school? Just – I think I attended two meetings; one was to talk about SLES funding and one was to talk about what we needed to do into the future. So, I arranged tax file numbers and all of those sorts of things, which in other schools, that was all done by the guidance officer and that was part of Year 12 to make sure all of those things were done". (ST007)
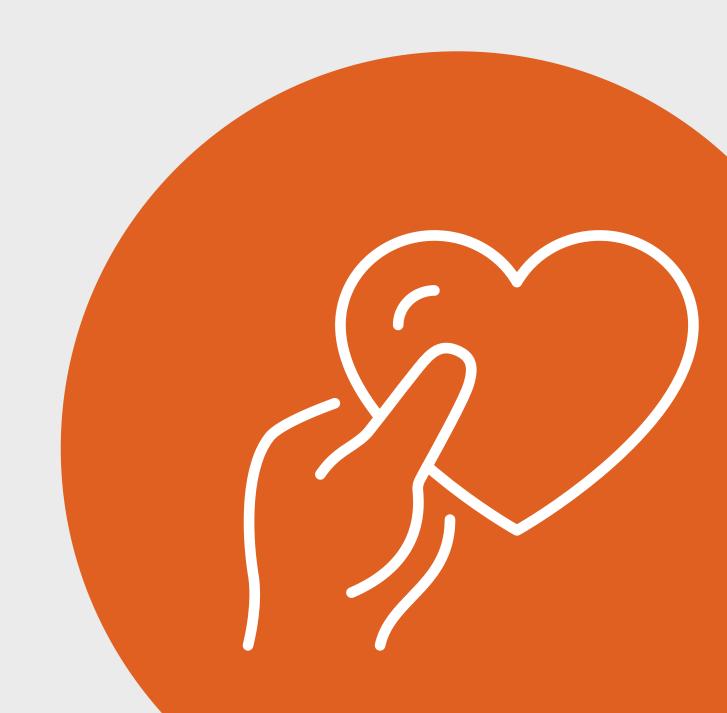
Other young people highlighted that their parents had played important roles in helping to shape their post-secondary school ambitions:

"It really mostly came from mum. I mean she suggested it to me, she was like, oh there's this thing that I've been thinking of doing, what do you think? I was like, yeah that sounds great, but it mostly came from her, I just kind of went, yeah". (ST005)

In this case, the young person had secured a job coach using funds from the NDIS and had also been through a discovery process that had been supported by a not-for-profit organisation. While the school had provided some work experience, the job coach and discovery process had been secured through parental advocacy work. The discovery process was described as particularly helpful as it worked in a strengths-based way to find different paths that would work with the skills and interests of the young person. As this young person went on to describe:

"I mean, during the discovery meeting people came up with so many ideas that I hadn't even considered doing or thought [inaudible], so that was really cool. It opened my eyes to so many other possibilities of things that I could do when I finished that I hadn't even thought of, so that was really cool. I don't know. It just made me feel really confident, like I have all these cool things that I can do. It made me feel very hopeful and excited for finishing school, which was not what I originally felt, but yeah, it was really good". (ST005)

Not only was this a way of identifying activities and pathways that might work for this young person, but it also built their confidence. It started from a sense of what they could do, rather than with what not, which had often been the experience in interacting with the school.

What can be done
to better support post-school transitions for young people with disability?

What can be done

As indicated in the findings, we found that for this group of young people school transitions were not well supported. The COVID-19 pandemic likely had an impact for all young people leaving school in 2020 and 2021, but we would argue that the issues faced are heightened for people with disability[38].

Research undertaken by CYDA during the pandemic clearly shows that young people with disability have experienced a greater range of challenges in schooling during the pandemic[39, 40]. This meant the final year of schooling for interviewees was significantly disrupted and issues of transition support were not prioritised. In terms of supported transitions, many typical activities had not taken place but also were not replaced or brought online. For those with an already well-defined post-school pathway, the supports they would have depended upon were disrupted, often leaving the scaffolding around independence less dependable than would previously been expected. As we outlined in the background, the supports needed for successful transitions are well established[5, 33, 35]. In our research we found that these kinds of factors were largely only in place where the young person or their family or care givers arranged them. In our sample, schools had not filled these gaps and in many cases left students with disability to navigate systems on their own, rather than prioritising the support required. This is problematic given disparate rates of employment and economic participation for people with disability when compared to their peers[29, 35, 41, 42]. But this was not a surprise to those who were interviewed in the sense that these are not issues, but older patterns that were heightened and accentuated during the pandemic.

Of those we interviewed, all but one had already transitioned from school into work, further study or programmes and one will later in the year. But for most this had been a challenging time and they and their families and supporters had to do extensive work to support these processes. Having some supportive teachers and family, drawing on specialist advocacy organisations and engaging job coaches were some of the things that supported better aspects of transition processes. In addition to these, policy, support structures, education and training, individual and societal attitude shifts, self-determination and enabling environments are crucial factors in successful transitions[43]. Individualised support with insight into functional needs, aspirations and temporal goal setting, was often lacking. While carers and parents will also be involved in communication, agency and choice should be secured with the young person[44] and many described being unheard around these issues. Our participants identified the usefulness of their social networks in providing information and support. Peer relationships were key to understanding what had been provided in previous years but also in defining what was possible and what supports might be required or accessed at different post-school destinations.

Young people described the feelings of loss of the rights of passage that mark the shift from the routines and rules of school to a more independent step into young adulthood. The celebrations and the associated comraderies that accompany graduation celebrations were lacking for some. The opportunities to secure social links that would last into the future were disrupted and those that were not robust and well established fell away. Re-establishing and strengthening social networks and social emotional skills in anticipation of the post-secondary destination are likely to prove fruitful.

What can be done

The stress and anxiety resulting from the changes in reliable practices and routines brought a range of psychological and emotional responses that were further identified as disruptive. Young people confirmed that adjustments that met their functional needs were not always addressed in online learning. During final assessments, more supports were required than they had previously depended upon because of the disruption and additional cognitive burdens associated with stress and uncertainty. Pathway destinations were also identified as needing to be altered by some, adding extra steps on the path to their aspired destination.

In the processes of knowing themselves as learners and reflecting on their experiences in their previous and current learning communities, participants all had stories of being misunderstood and in a number of cases, being disciplined rather than supported when things were challenging. Commonly, the behaviour resulting from being overwhelmed by tasks or events was incorrectly interpreted by teachers and other members of the school community. Most of our interviewees felt as though the focus was often on their deficits, things they could not do, and behaviours that were not encouraged. If they wanted support they had to go and document these through a range of professionals. This deficit thinking was linked to experiences of low-expectations for support in future encounters. In the moments where help seeking support was most required, these students found themselves judged against normative behavioural expectations and disciplined unjustly. Participants describing these experiences had a range of post-school destinations, and each recognised that the impact of these events had altered their approach to trusting and expecting a 'fair-go' in their pedagogical relationships.

Most importantly, and less explicit in the research literature than these participants identify in their discussions and experiences, peer and personal relationships were key sources for information and support in transition. The social connections young people had and made in their new destinations were consistently identified as key coping and helping resources. Peers help with understanding access to adjustments and aides in some cases and help to identify alternative pathways in others. In transitions, personal relationships with people made many things easier including accessing the technologies and materials required for learning and independent movement, and understanding how to access further support.

While there are many different support organisations that can assist in this experience, access to these was not facilitated generally from within the young people's schools but were accessed through a range of social supports such as family, and importantly, through other young people with the same lived experiences. The persistence required to achieve many of these supports and pathways was notable across interviews. With the awareness that many young people with disability are socially isolated and disconnected, it was hard not to imagine the countless young people who would not have had the access to supports our participants described. While these can be challenges for many young people, those with disability face many more challenges and must navigate across multiple organisational and institutional barriers to achieve successful transitions. In crisis situations the temptation can be to see the many issues that these young people face as being too difficult or complex, but arguably it is here that schools and other public agencies should focus.

What can be done

People with disability face significant discrimination in finding and securing appropriate employment[45, 46]. The longer individuals are out of work, education or training the more difficult it is to secure employment[2, 6]. Moreover, the negative effects of unemployment are felt more by people with disability given the range of socio-economic disparities that are faced[7]. There is a danger that if we do not appropriately support post-secondary school transitions for people with disability that they will not be afforded a chance to achieve economic and/or community participation. Part-time employment and work experience during youth are correlated with long term engagement with the work force[24], Additionally, young people who are able to engage in work are also more likely to establish financial accounts and skills around managing finances. These are areas where young people with disability are less likely to develop the skills around financial management than their peers without disabilities[47].

Despite the many destinations and pathways that are available to young people, both with disability and without, there was a sense of limitation and fatalism around post school destinations in our participants. Schools were described as largely uninformative around different possibilities and few of the young people could recall any career education or pathway support. Research identifies successful strategies include establishing partnerships with local agencies and different facilities and post-secondary education opportunities and considering meeting with people across these destinations to meet staff and explore the supports and opportunities available. This work is ideally done in person, and perhaps even as a supported excursion including family or care circles. Where this has not been possible in person, organising virtual tours and meetings can meet the same needs[44].

While our sample size for this research was small, we draw on these findings and the broader literature to set out a series of strategies and activities that can be taken to support young people with disability who will transition from secondary school this year or over the next few years and these are outlined in Table 1. Many of these actions would be well placed within a COVID recovery plan to prevent the long terms scarring effect of the pandemic. Additional actions are consistent with implementing a longer term plan to improve the inclusion of young people with disability in education. In addition to these recommendations we would also add additional funding for research to explore the longer term impacts of COVID and the range of transition issues experienced by young people with disability.

What can be done

Table 1: Strategies and activities to support school transition in COVID and beyond

Kohler's Transition Taxonomy	COVID-disruption Issue	Short term strategies	Long term strategies
Student Focused Planning (IEP, strategies and student participation).	Disruption to routine supports for learning and transition.	Manage and maintain and continue to update Individual Education Plans (IEPs) with succession planning for moving to more independent self-management or supported management of goals and goal setting[8, 25, 31].	– Begin transition planning in IEPs from the age of 11[34, 48]. – Support professional development and partnership building around pathways, destinations and supports for young people with disability[3, 49].
	Gaining understanding of the disruption and disengagement in learning and routines that young people have experienced.	Include opportunities to discuss this with young people as IEPs and supports are planned for their learning and transitions and ensure that lost opportunities are accounted for and addressed.	Continue systemic reform for school level access to information about post-school destinations, aspiration broadening career planning, and planned pathways for life long goals[5, 33].
Family Engagement (involvement, Preparation, Empowerment).	Families/care circles often work independently of schools to support transitions.	Schools to work with interagency support and families/care circles to develop IEPs including particular goals to identify and plan for aspirations and pathways[6, 19, 33, 49, 50]. Supporting such an asset-based process can build confidence[51].	Consider ways to consolidate funding for education and NDIS in transitions planning in transparent supported processes that provide the young person and their family/care circle with a series of flexible, supported pathway possibilities to lifelong goals[40].

What can be done

Table 1: Strategies and activities to support school transition in COVID and beyond

Kohler's Transition Taxonomy	COVID-disruption Issue	Short term strategies	Long term strategies
Program Structures (Characteristics, Evaluation, Strategic Planning, Policies, Development of Resources, School Climate.	Flexible supports planned for online learning.	Prepare at the start of the school year for meeting IEP and functional learning supports in the classroom and online. Students with disability may have additional requirements for social isolation but this should not impact their access to the opportunitys students attending in person are accessing[44]. *Ex. Create online lessons in the preferred learning management system (e.g., Canvas, Google classroom).*	Ensure students with disability have the skills and capabilities to engage in online tools and methods as part of the curriculum and learning approaches[52].
Interagency Collaboration (Collaborative Framework, Service Delivery).	Part-time work/volunteer work/ work placement disruptions or cancellations.		Collaboration with community partners to design and implement career exploration activities • Career/transition fairs • Mock job interviews • Job shadows • Help students learn interview skills and techniques, practice[30, 44].

What can be done

Table 1: Strategies and activities to support school transition in COVID and beyond

Kohler's Transition Taxonomy	COVID-disruption Issue	Short term strategies	Long term strategies
Student Development (Assessment, Academic Skills, Social emotional Skills, student supports,).	Help Seeking: participants gave a number of examples of support that was needed and not provided such as: how to catch transport and navigate an unfamiliar campus if you are visually impaired, how to apply for university, scholarships and grants or gain access to assistive technologies they had learned and depended on, but were provided by Education Department and were no accessible after schooling ended, how to negotiate when you are not getting work shifts, or lose your job.	Plan for new transitions and addressing practical challenges that arise. Social emotional learning (SEL) for students should include opportunities to build skills around accessing support, help-seeking (both finding and communicating) and should be adapted and practiced according to the young persons' needs and preferences. Opportunities to develop specific coping skills through SEL would also be of benefit[53, 54].	
	Network development.	Help students to map their current networks of support and identify where strategies for further connections are required and where existing supports already exist.	Consider alumni and mentoring processes that help students to build access to lived-experience expertise, strategies and further networks. Use flexible communication options to provide opportunities for young people with disability to talk to different people with disability who have taken different pathways to different work and learning destinations[44].

What can be done

Table 1: Strategies and activities to support school transition in COVID and beyond

Kohler's Transition Taxonomy	COVID-disruption Issue	Short term strategies	Long term strategies
Student Development (Assessment, Academic Skills, Social emotional Skills, student supports,).	Transition to independence for work, work-experience, financial management Etc.	Mapping social networks and supports can be a helpful exercise when working with young people in transitions, as in addition to identifying support and help seeking strategies, it can also help to identify additional interests and pathways to programs or employment[44].	Ensure access to resume writing, interview skill development that support each student's functional needs. Ensure access to appropriate work experience and job tasters.

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