Teacher Preparation and Confidence Regarding Post-Secondary Transition Plans

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Abstract

Post-secondary transition plans are a mandatory component of the individual education program (IEP) for all students aged 16 and over, that are eligible for special education services. This regulation has been in effect since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. IDEA has been reauthorized twice in the ensuing two decades, dropping the age for mandatory transition plans to 14 and then returning it to 16, where it remains. In this study four teachers were interviewed to determine the levels of training they have received, and their confidence levels in their abilities to develop and implement effective post-secondary transition plans. All four were resource specialists at medium sized high school in Northern California. One was an expert in the field of transition planning, having received training and licensing in a Midwestern state, where he also worked as a transition specialist. Another was the chairperson of the special education department. All of the participants were case managers for approximately 20-25 students and were responsible for the development of transition plans for half or more of the students on their case loads. Results of the study indicate that little progress has been made over the past twenty years in teacher training and in the confidence that teachers have in their ability to develop and implement effective post-secondary transition plans. The results further reflect that the community-based resources available greatly affect the development and implementation of those plans.

Chapter 1 Introduction

As a high school resource specialist, I work with students who are arguably the most at-risk students in our society. These are the kids with high-incident disabilities such as speech & language impairments, and specific learning disabilities. They are the kids who may or may not graduate from high school. The few who do dream of going to college will struggle mightily. They will have no guarantee of the type of support they received as a result of mandated special education services. They will no longer be eligible for special education services when they either obtain a high school diploma, or reach the age of 22. Mandatory services will no longer be there, but disabilities that impede academic success don't adhere to the same timetable, so success may prove to be even more elusive than it had been in the past. These students need a plan to help them know what to do when they leave high school and enter college or the job market. If they were more highly disabled, they might qualify for other services that would follow them throughout their lives, but my students will be out on their own. These kids need a plan that they can begin to implement before they leave school, so that they have an idea of what the next steps are that they need to take.

Transition plans have been a mandatory element of IEPs since 1990. With the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, the requirement is for all students aged 16 and over who are receiving special education services to have a plan to assist their transition to life after high school and special education.

As I began asking other professionals about writing and implementing effective transition plans, I began to very quickly learn that few case managers felt well prepared for this task, while very many of them agreed with my conclusion of the importance of the transition plan. Because I have worked in three different districts, each in a different county, during my first few years as a resource specialist, I also realized that the resources available to my students will vary from place to place. This in turn lead me to understand that if you took two very similar students, both with identical goals for life after high school, their transition plans might vary greatly due solely to locally available, community-based resources.

Statement of Problem

Transition plans have been legally mandatory since the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA; however transition plans are not defined, nor are there any guidelines, other than they should be based on age-appropriate transition assessments. The assessments range from technical, formal instruments such as the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) to interviews with students about general job interests. There is no training structure that teaches case managers about age appropriate assessments, or locally available services such as the Department of Rehabilitation. Even when the case manager knows what assessments are available, then the problem becomes looking at the results and knowing what to do with this information. Also, another mysterious component is something called Transition Services which is in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) paperwork, but very few case managers seem to understand.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to pull together what individual case managers have had to learn independently in order to create a knowledge resource bank of best practices and community based resources that may successfully affect post-secondary transition plans. This may also provide an insight into methodology aimed at improving pre-service and in-service teacher training processes.

Research Question

What is the current "best practice" for writing and implementing effective post-secondary transition plans for students with high incident disabilities? The two common most common areas are specific learning disability (SLD) and speech and language impairment (SLI).

Theoretical Rationale

The Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's led to several key court decisions that had specific bearing on educational systems and equitable treatment of students with disabilities. In its 1972 ruling in the case of PARC v Pennsylvania, the Supreme Court mandated education for all kids with disabilities. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 states that no person shall be denied access to any program based solely on their disability. These rulings, along with a host of others, laid the foundation for the right of every child to receive a Free, Appropriate, Public, Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

Assumptions

Currently, there is no training in the credentialing process that prepares teachers specifically for developing post-secondary transition plans. Additionally, the availability and nature of community based resources to assist students varies widely, making the nature and implementation of effective transition plans highly localized.

Background and Need

In 1990, with the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), congress mandated that post-secondary transition plans be included in the Individual Education Program (IEP) of all students with identified disabilities who were aged 16 and over. This meant that all case managers who were responsible for developing IEPs also had a new responsibility if they had students aged 16 and over for whom they were responsible: the development and implementation of post-secondary transition plans. While the law mandated a new responsibility, it did not mandate how, or even if, teachers would be trained to fulfill this responsibility.

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

The purpose of this literature review is to look at current research into the state of post-secondary transition plans, the planning process and what resources, services and assessment vehicles are available to education specialists responsible for formulating, delivering and implementing transition plans. Of particular interest to me are students with high-incidence disabilities such as Specific Learning Disability (SLD) or Speech Language Impairment (SLI), as these are the students with whom I primarily work and because they comprise the largest segment of the population of youths being served in special education programs.

Overview

The review examines the history and current legal status of transition planning, and then at age-appropriate assessment tools, research into efficaciousness of transition plans, teachers' perceptions of their own effectiveness, and lastly pose questions for future consideration in the realms of research, and teacher training/professional development for teachers and other professionals responsible for transition planning. Academic databases were searched for information on the topic, and articles were summarized following guidelines developed by Truesdell (2010). Although not a formal piece of a transition plan, which is part of a student's IEP, this review also looks briefly at the Summary of Performance (SOP), a new requirement under IDEA 2004. The SOP is to be provided to all individuals prior to their exiting special education either by graduating with a regular high school diploma or by aging out at age 22.

Legislative History

1965: Public Law 89-750 established the Bureau of Education of the Handicapped and for the first time established a Federal grant program that was aimed at educating children with disabilities at the local school level, rather than at special state-operated schools or institutions. The Bureau of Education of the Handicapped later became the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) which today operates within the federal Department of Education.

1972: PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The United States District Court in Philadelphia found that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania had denied mentally retarded students Equal Protection guaranteed in the 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution and ordered the state to provide a free public education to all mentally retarded persons from age 6 to 21. The ruling also decreed that additional appropriate training must be provided to these people based on an individual's learning ability.

1973: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 becomes law, protecting qualifying individuals from discrimination in school settings based solely on their disability.

1975: Public Law 94-142 the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) is enacted. This law, which later becomes IDEA, is the first time that states were mandated by the federal government to educate all children with disabilities. At this time there was still no emphasis on, nor mandate of transition planning for students with disabilities.

1983: According to Madeleine Will (1983) and the U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), transition is defined as:

> . . . an outcome oriented process encompassing a broad array of services
>
> and experiences that lead to employment. Transition is a period that
>
> includes high school, the point of graduation, additional post secondary
>
> education or adult services, and the initial years of employment. Transition
>
> is a bridge between the security and structure offered by the school and the
>
> risks of life. p.2.

1985: Andrew Halpern (1985) revises and broadens Will's definition of transition and its objectives to include students' future residential, employment and social interpersonal networks. "This revised model suggests that living successfully in one's community should be the primary target of transitional services" (p.480).

1990: Public Law 101-476, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is passed and for the first time, it was mandated that IEPs for all students aged 16 and over, contain transition language for the explicit purpose of assisting a student to meet the his post-secondary school adult living objectives.

1990: Public Law 101-376, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) becomes law, guaranteeing equal access for all Americans with disabilities.

1997: IDEA is reauthorized as Public Law 105-17. Transition planning is mandated for all students aged 14 and above.

2004: IDEA is reauthorized as Public Law 108-446. Transition planning is mandated for inclusion in the Individual Education Program (IEP) of all students aged 16 and above. All IEPs for these students must have measurable post-secondary goals that are based

upon age appropriate assessments. The areas of need that must be address in the IEP are post-secondary education and/or training, employment and independent living skills.

The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (1983) definition of transition is the federal standard:

> The term "transition services" means a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that: (a) is designed to be within a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, and community participation; (b) is based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests; and (c) includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. 20 U.S.C. 1401(34) § 300.43

The definition advanced by Halpern (1994) has been adopted by the profession as represented by the Division of Career Development and Transition (DCDT) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC).

> Transition refers to a change in status from behaving primarily as a student to assuming emergent adult roles in the community. These roles include employment, participating in post-secondary education, maintaining a home, Becoming appropriately involved in the community, and experiencing satisfactory personal and social relationships. The process of enhancing transition involves the participation and coordination of school programs, adult agency services, and natural supports within the community. Transition planning should begin no later than age 14, and students should be encouraged to the full extent of their capabilities, to assume a maximum amount of responsibility for such planning. p.117

Whetstone and Browning (2002) point out that in spite of the many similarities of these two definitions, what seems to set them apart most significantly is the difference that is at least subtly implied, as to the role of the child in the development of the transition plan. They contend that the role of the child in the OSERS definition is one of a consumer, who is simply offered a few choices. These choices are developed and put forth by the professionals responsible for including the transition plan into the child's IEP, and not by the child himself. In contrast, Halpern contends that the goals of the plan

should be selected by the child and therefore to the extent of his knowledge and abilities, the child should be the primary person responsible for developing that plan.

Key Points in Legislative History

Transition planning is the law of the land for all students aged 16 and over who are receiving special education services, and for younger students as well if the IEP teams deem it to be appropriate. Regardless of which definition of transition one chooses to embrace, and who is to be the chief architect of a transition plan, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) (2004) makes clear that any such plan must be built upon "measurable post-secondary goals based upon age-appropriate transition assessments" (p.118). IDEA (2004) further stipulates that the transition plan should address the child's future training, education, employment and independent living.

Response to Transition Assessment Requirements

Morningstar and Liss (2008) investigated how State Education Agencies (SEAs) are responding to the new transition assessment requirements. The purpose of the investigation was to develop a preliminary understanding of the measures and policies that various SEAs were putting into place in order to meet the new requirements under IDEA 2004. An online survey was developed and SEA representatives from all 50 states and the District of Columbia were asked to complete the survey; the researchers made a deliberate effort to contact the staff responsible for transition to complete the survey. A total of 35 SEAs responded to the survey. The results of the survey indicated that the majority of the states were involved in discussions regarding establishing state policies

and regulations. "It seems that approximately 2 years after the passage of IDEA, SEAs recognize the importance of addressing the new mandates but have not fully developed procedures to guide local practices" (Morningstar & Liss, 2008, p.53). One telling piece of evidence is the estimation of the proportion of IEPs in each state in which a student's postsecondary goals were actually based on age-appropriate transition assessments. Only one state indicated that all student postsecondary goals in its IEPs were based on transition assessments. One state indicated that none of the goals were based on transition assessments. 66% of the states fell in the midrange from *some* of the IEPs to *a few* of the IEPs were based on assessments. 43% of the states said that they recommend specific age-appropriate transition assessments for schools to use.

Leconte (2006) analyzed the evolution of career, vocational and transition assessments and their implications for the Summary of Performance (SOP). The goals of her article were to discuss assessments and their evolution from two different theoretical frameworks. It is noted that the term transition assessment is used for the first time in IDEA 2004, but it is not defined in the law, and is therefore left to professionals to define. How an individual chooses to define transition assessment is a function of his or her theoretical orientation. The bases of the two orientations are:

1. Transition assessment is an outgrowth of career guidance. From this perspective, age-appropriate transition assessments may present themselves as alternatives to paper and pencil assessments.

2. Transition assessment is a natural extension of the standard norm-referenced psycho-educational assessments that have been used to determine eligibility for special education.

While the author stops short of condemning this latter point of view, it is clear that she deems this to be at least in part, if not in whole, a legalistic point of view with an objective of insuring that legal mandates are fulfilled and foreseeing litigation a possible consequence of the mindset. The author then devotes much of the article to her view of what the Summary of Performance can and should be. The SOP should be viewed as an opportunity for the entire IEP team to assist the student in putting his or her best foot forward rather than just another compliance issue. The author concludes that career, vocational and transition assessment should be an ongoing natural result of the combined efforts of all members of IEP teams, and that after exiting special education, the student, student's family, and other concerned parties should continue transition assessment and planning on an ongoing basis. Unfortunately, the career centers at vocational schools, community colleges and even universities are still offering little more to students with disabilities that they did years ago.

Elements in Transition Planning Process

Mazzotti, Rowe, Kelley, Test, Fowler, Kohler and Kortering (2009) discussed the key elements in the transition planning process. This article was fairly typical of the majority of the articles that I looked at, in as much as it stated that secondary transition requirements must be based on age-appropriate assessments and that measurable post

secondary goals are a required part of the IEP for all students aged 16 and over. It then

went on to discuss several other articles and describe how transition assessments should

be both formal and informal in nature.

Examples of formal assessments are career aptitude and interest assessments such

as the Self-Directed Search, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, the

Brigance System, and the Kuder® Career Planning System. Also falling into the formal

transition assessment category are the same standardized, norm-referenced assessments

that are commonly used for initial placement and triennial reviews for special education

services, such as the Woodcock-Johnson III Test of Achievement and the Vineland

Adaptive Behavior Scales. Examples of informal assessments are student interviews,

direct observation (such as classroom or workplace), employee performance assessments

and some paper and pencil assessments such as the Transition Planning Inventory or the

Life-Centered Career Education Performance and Knowledge Battery (Mazzotti et al.,

2009).

This article, like so many of the others that I looked at, spent the bulk of its time

on describing the ideals of transition planning and even a little bit of what specifically

should go into meeting the requirements of a transition plan, but it says nothing at all

about what has been proven to be effective.

Test, Fowler, Richter, White, Mazzotti, Walker, Kohler and Kortering (2009)

looked at evidenced-based practices in secondary education. The purpose of their article

was to do a thorough analytical literature review in order to identify evidenced-based

transition practices. This purpose arose from two factors, first was that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) required that teaching methods and effectiveness be based on scientifically based research and evidence. Later, the same definition of scientifically based research and evidence that was spelled out in NCLB was adopted in IDEA (2004) to be applied to a student's special education services outlined in the IEP. The initial criteria for articles yielded approximately 1300 written between 1984, the time that Will's definition of transition was adopted, and March 2008. Additional criteria to insure the quality of the intervention study or literature review narrowed their list to 240. From these articles, they were able to identify 32 evidence-based practices. Instruction of skills to a student comprised the majority of these practices; only 2 were supported with strong evidence, 28 with moderate evidence and 2 were supported by a potential level of evidence. Some of the practices in student development were: Teaching Life Skills, Teaching Banking Skills, Teaching Cooking Skills and Teaching Functional Reading Skills. This no doubt is a reflection to some extent, that the range of students' disabilities in the intervention studies and literature reviews covered the entire scope of individuals receiving special education services and may in fact have had a disproportionate representation of students with more severe disabilities. Particularly noteworthy in my opinion, was the recognition that although the identification of these 32 evidence-based practices did provide education professionals strategies for teaching specific transition skills to students, there was no correlation between student skill development and improved post-school outcomes.

Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering and Kohler (2009) did a systematic

review of secondary transition correlation literature. The purpose was to identify

predictors of improved post-school outcomes in the areas of education, employment, and

independent living for students with disabilities. Not surprisingly, the methods were a

similar search of literature from approximately the same 1984 – 2009 time period as Test,

Fowler, et al. After applying all of the selection criteria, the study included 22 articles in

the final review. The review of these studies identified 16 predictors of post-school

outcomes. Further scrutiny determined that of these 16 different predictors, 4 predicted

outcomes in the three different post-school areas (education, employment and

independent living), 7 predicted outcomes in education and employment, and the

remaining 5 predicted outcomes in the area of employment only. The literature reviewed

included students from all qualifying classifications in the realm of special education,

although not all of the individual studies that were reviewed included students from all

classifications. Of particular interest to me, as I am trying to determine how I can

improve transition planning for students with high incidence disabilities, was the fact that

some of the studies reported negative relationships between the predictors and outcomes.

Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, fowler, Kortering and Kohler (2009) cite Heal & Khoju, "A

significant negative correlation between those students having a mild disability and the

support variable set was also reported ($r = -.47$). Heal et al. stated that these negative

correlations suggested support was greater for participants with more severe disabilities

who had spent a substantial amount of time in special education" (p.178). This seems to

confirm my notion, based on my searching the literature, and experience working in the realm of special education, that youths with more severe disabilities, do benefit from a more established support network and services, while youths with high incidence disabilities may be being underserved in the area of transition to post-school life.

In the introduction to Carter, Trainor, Sun and Owens (2009), the authors note "The paucity of empirical research available to guide secondary educators in conducting meaningful transition assessment is concerning, the transition assessment literature consists almost exclusively of discussion papers articulating policy and practice recommendations… but it currently lacks data-based findings that can inform educators about what they might learn or issues they might encounter during the assessment process" (Carter et al., 2009, p.75). The study assessed the transition-related strengths and weaknesses of adolescents with high incidence disabilities. The study looked at 160 high school students with ED and/or SLD, ranging in age from 13.8 to 20.7 years old. The Transition Planning Inventory (TPI) (Mazzotti et al., 2009) was selected to use in this study. The TPI consists of 46 items clustered within 9 transition domains, such as employment, further education and training, daily living, leisure activities, community participation, health, self-determination, communication and inter-personal relationships. The questionnaire has three parts, one for the student, educator, and parent; each part contains the same 46 items phrased for the targeted participant. Originally, 173 students were selected and returned permission slips to participate in the study. Of those, 160 had teachers complete and return the TPI, 146 students completed and returned the TPI, as

did 76 parents. Complete assessments (teacher, student and parent all returning TPIs) were obtained for only 69 students. Focusing primarily on these 69 students, the researchers found that the perceived transition needs and strengths varied both by disability (ED v. SLD) and by participants. Whereas teachers and parents tended to rate student's strengths similarly in several of the domains, students consistently rated their own strengths more highly than parents and teachers did. Students rated themselves more highly than their parents did in all nine domains, and more highly than their teachers' ratings in all domains except further education/training and communication. SLD students rated consistently and significantly higher than were the students with ED, suggesting that educators rethink varying service models for these two groups. Another key point of this study was that it brings to light the need for bringing multiple perspectives into the assessment transition process. They found that teachers marked "don't know" for a relatively high percentage of items in the domains of daily living, leisure activities and community involvement, while parents and students were more likely to mark don't know in the domain of further education/training. Clearly no one person, parents and students as well as teachers is able to accurately determine all of the student's strengths and consequent needs in transition planning. By extension, the fact that the research was done utilizing only one assessment, brings to light even more the need to use multiple measures of assessment in order to most accurately determine students' strengths and needs in transition planning.

Benitez, Morningstar and Frey (2009) conducted a survey to determine teachers'

perceptions of their transition competencies. They developed a survey and sent it to 557

middle and high school teachers in 31 states. "The purpose of this research project was

to examine a national sample of special education teachers' perceptions of their own

transition competencies pertaining to levels of preparedness and satisfaction with training

in transition, and the extent to which they deliver transition services to students" (Benitez

et al., 2009, p.7). The survey asked teachers to rate their levels of preparedness,

satisfaction with training and frequency of delivery in 6 different domains:

1. Transition Planning

2. Curriculum and Instruction

3. Instructional Planning

4. Assessment

5. Collaboration

6. Additional Competencies

Respondents were asked to use a 4 point scale to rate their levels of preparation (1

= very unprepared to 4 = very prepared), satisfaction (1 = very unsatisfied to 4 = very

satisfied) and frequency (1 = never to 4 = frequently) with which they performed 46

different transition activities. The results were analyzed and checked for reliability using

standard statistical methods. The teachers rated themselves *somewhat unprepared* to

somewhat prepared (M = 2.69, SD = 0.65) in their overall level of preparation. Teachers'

rating of their satisfaction with pre-service transition training was in the midrange, closer

to *somewhat unsatisfied* (M = 2.59, SD = 0.67). The level of frequency of engagement in

transition activities fell within the range of *rarely* to *occasionally* (M = 2.70, SD = 0.56).

The results were further broken down by demographics, both of teachers and students,

with somewhat, in my view, predictable results. Teachers with more years of experience

were more likely to view themselves as more prepared and therefore more likely to

deliver services. Teachers of students with mental retardation were more likely to

perform transition activities than were teachers of students with learning disabilities.

Regardless of teacher background or the students with which they worked, the need for

better preparation and implementation for transition planning and activities was a

common theme.

In their review of earlier research by Blanchett (2001) Prater, Sileo, and Black,

(2000), and Wolfe, Boone, and Blanchett (1998) conducted some years prior to the

adoption of IDEA 2004 and its new mandates that transition planning must include

measureable post-secondary goals based on age-appropriate transition assessment,

Benitez et al. noted that special education teachers felt unprepared to develop and deliver

transition plans that effectively addressed the transition needs of secondary students. It is

concerning to note that this new survey of teacher preparedness, satisfaction and

competency comes five years after the passage of IDEA 2004, yet the results are still very

similar. Ten years ago, teachers who felt more prepared and competent to deliver quality

transition planning were much more likely to implement transition planning, and the

same still holds true in this 2009 survey.

The teachers in the study had a mean of 16.6 years teaching experience and a mean of 28 hours of professional staff development devoted to transition planning and implementation. This averages to 1.7 hours per year of training. Approximately 14% of teachers reported that throughout their careers they had received no transition staff development hours. Consequently, teachers reported that the overall frequency with which they planned and delivered effective transition services fell between rarely and occasionally. The mean number of transition related classes that the respondents have taken is 1.07, and with 63% of the participants holding master's degrees (and 1% holding doctoral degrees) it is unclear whether at what level those classes were typically taken. The authors did not specify whether or not they had the data to answer the question of where and when those classes were taken nor the content of the classes.

"One troubling result was that the mean scores from the Frequency subscale were higher (albeit slightly) than the Preparedness and Satisfaction subscales. It would appear that although teachers reported being only somewhat prepared, they are still required to engage in delivering transition services, which potentially could mean that low-quality transition services are being provided" (Benitez et al., 2009, p.13).

Summary

With all of this history and legislation behind it, the implementation of effective transition planning, using transition assessment, vocational and employment programs, interagency coordination, curricular areas involving community and independent living, as well as the evaluation of transition programs are all reported at low levels of

implementation by educators. This is especially true of educators serving youths with high-incidence disabilities such as emotional and behavioral disabilities and specific learning disabilities. One primary reason that transition planning is being implemented at low levels is that teachers do not feel that they are adequately trained and prepared in either their pre-service programs or during professional development.

Reflections

As Carter et al. (2009) so aptly pointed out, the vast majority of the material that I looked at for this literature review were themselves, literature reviews. I felt like a dog chasing my tail because some of the most salient points from the article in my right hand were made by summarizing the article that I held in my left hand. While I do not claim to have made an exhaustive search of the literature on the topic of transition, I will defend the efforts that I made as having been relatively thorough, and in those efforts, I read only one article (Carter et al., 2009) that actually involved secondary students in any research, and only two others that did any first hand data collection (Morningstar, & Liss, 2008; Benitez, et al., 2009). All of the information that I found on the Summary of Performance was implementation suggestions, although to be fair, the SOP was only first introduced with IDEA 2004, so there has been little time for research on that.

The implication of this review is that there is a very great need for teacher training in the realm of transition planning and activities for students, especially those in the mild/moderate range with high incidence disabilities and there is also a need for research into what activities have proven to result in positive benefits for the students. Test,

Mazzotti et al., (2009), in their article about secondary transition predictors, pointed out that there was no correlation between student skill development and improved post-school outcomes. As a teacher, I would like to know what has been proven to improve my students' post-school outcome so that I can employ methods and practices that have a proven track record of success, rather than merely being able to predict a student's future failure. I imagine that all teachers must feel and want the same.

Chapter 3 Method

Introduction

Methodology employed is non-experimental design, emerging from a qualitative

approach (Patten, 2009). Data collected involved creating a survey and incorporating

teacher interviews to determine their formal training and confidence levels in their

abilities to write and implement post-secondary transition plans for high school students

with special needs.

The nature of the research question was important in determining the

methodological approach to gathering dates. This research follows a research approach as

described by Patten (2009).

Sample and Site

Special education teachers/case managers were selected to form a purposive sample.

Four teachers set aside time to meet with the researcher and respond to open ended

questions regarding their formal training in developing transition plans. Also included

were questions about best practices for these teachers in working with their target

population, knowledge and use of community based resources, and personal reflections

on the degree of success or effectiveness that the transition plans were deemed beneficial

for the students.

Demographic Information

The participants who agreed to be interviewed included two Caucasian men and women,

all of whom worked at the same comprehensive high school in northern California. All

of the participants work as resource specialists at the school and have case-loads of

approximately 20 or more students. The participants have all been in the teaching field

and in special education for ten or more years.

The school is located in an agriculturally based, rural community. The district is a

unified K-12 district which serves approximately 5000 students. The district has one

comprehensive high school with approximately 1200 students and one continuation high

school with approximately 50 students.

Data Gathering Strategies

The participants each agreed to spend approximately an hour discussing their experience

with transition planning. The researcher took notes about participants' responses during

each interview. Additionally, one participant agreed to allow the researcher to tape

record the interview. A series of six open-ended questions were pre-scripted and asked

of all participants and responses to these questions led to further inquiries for additional

information.

Data Analysis Approach

The responses to questions were reviewed and analyzed to determine unique differences

and common themes.

Ethical Standards

All participants were informed of the nature and scope of the study. Prior to interviews,

each participant was informed as to the purpose, nature and scope of the study.

Participants were informed about any potential risks and/or benefits that could result from

their participation, and each was assured that all information gathered would remain confidential. Additionally, each of the teachers interviewed were informed that they were free to decline to answer any or all of the questions, or to end the interview at any time if they felt inclined to do so. Each participant received this information in writing and signed an authorization form agreeing to take part in the study. This research adheres to the ethical standards for use of human subjects in research as documented by the American Psychological Association (2010).

Chapter 4 Findings

Description of Site, Individuals, Data

The school operates on a 6 period schedule for most students with a 0 and 7th period available for credit recovery and/or extracurricular activities. A block schedule is in effect, with extended times for periods 1, 3 & 5 and 2, 4 & 6 meeting on alternating days. Periods 0 and 7 meet on a daily basis. All classes meet for a shortened time on Wednesdays.

All students, including those with disabilities, change classes throughout the day. Students with disabilities are served in a variety of manners which include, in increasing level of support, placement in general education classes with support in an Academic Study Skills class, Resource level classes in all core subject areas, and Learning-Handicapped (LH) level classes for students who are designated as Special Day Class students. Some students who qualify for LH level classes are bused to the site from other local districts that are not large enough to provide that level of services. All students who live within the district boundaries who are classified as having moderate to severe disabilities receive their services through the county office of education.

All of the interviews took place in the teachers' classrooms either after school or during lunch. The following are brief descriptions of the participants numbered 1-4.

Participant 1 is a resource specialist who teaches 4 resource level math and algebra classes and one Study Skills class in addition to his case management responsibilities. He has been teaching in this district for 3 years. This is his first year

working at the comprehensive high school. His previous teaching assignments in this district were as a resource specialist, dividing his time equally between the continuation high school and one of the district's elementary schools. Prior to coming to this district he taught in a metropolitan district in the Midwest. He received his teaching licenses in the Midwest, where he taught special education for 3 years. After being a classroom teacher for 3 years he returned to school at a state university and received a state Work Experience – Handicapped (WEH) authorization. At that point he went to work at a public high school that operated specifically to assist 18-21 year old students who had not yet received a high school diploma and were therefore still eligible for special educations services and a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). His responsibilities at this school were as a workplace coordinator and transition specialist.

Participant 2 is a resource specialist and is the chairperson of the special education department at the high school. She teaches LH level science, economics, history and one Academic Study Skills class. She has been teaching for 30 years with the last 26 being both in this district and in special education. She has been teaching at the high school for all of those years and has been the department chair for the past 12 years. She received her general education at a public university and her special education credential at a small, liberal arts college, both in California.

Participant 3 is a resource specialist who has been teaching for 15 years, all at the high school in the district. He began teaching English and after 2 years he returned to school to obtain his special education credential. He currently teaches resource level

math and science classes as well as one Study Skills class. Both his general education and special education credentials were earned at the same public university in northern California.

Participant 4 teaches 3 classes of LH level English, supervises senior projects and teaches one Study Skills class. She has been teaching for a total of 34 years, with the last 24 of those in special education at this high school. Prior to teaching special education at this school, she taught general education English classes in another northern California school district. She received her general education credential at a private university and her special education credential at a public university, both in northern California.

Overall Findings

The background and experiences of participant 1 stand in stark contrast to those of the other 3 participants. After obtaining his teaching licenses for general education and special education, participant 1 took another 30 semester hours of college credits to get his WEH license to qualify him as a post-secondary transition specialist. While in the Midwest, he worked as a transition specialist at a high school that was operating specifically to meet this need. The school was located in the heart of a metropolitan area of 3,000,000 or more people. As such, he received specific training in working with the state's department of rehabilitation and in using interest and aptitude assessments to help guide a student's career choices. He also was trained specifically to be a jobsite evaluator. This responsibility was twofold, pre-hiring and post-hiring. This entailed having local businesses that were interested in participating by hiring a student, first submit an

application for acceptance into the program. Participant 1 would then visit various

potential jobsites and determine their suitability for the program. Participant 1 stated that

he was trained to recruit businesses, but that he never had to do so because the program

was well known enough in the community that there were always ample opportunities

without the need to recruit. He would then identify suitable students and match them

with a particular opportunity. He would then work with each student on employment

skills and to prepare the student for the hiring process. The post-hiring facet of his

jobsite evaluation responsibilities was to regularly visit sites at which his students were

employed to observe the student at work and to communicate with students' job

supervisors. This enabled him to be in a position to offer further guidance and instruction

individual students. Another beneficial aspect of his worksite supervision was that he

was often able to see former students who were still employed in the same positions,

thereby allowing him to informally evaluate the effectiveness of some students' transition

plans in the first few years after leaving high school.

Where participant 1's experiences did closely mirror those of his three colleagues

was that none of the four said that they felt that they had received any significant formal

training in developing and implementing transition plans during their pre-service special

education credentialing programs. Neither was he, or any of the others ever given any

type of formal training regarding the issuance of a Summary of Academic Performance.

All three of the California trained teachers stated that the training that they have

received regarding the writing of transition plans came through in-service trainings

conducted either by the district or the county special education local plan area (SELPA). None of the three expressed satisfaction with the training that they had received, and upon further questioning, all stated that they felt that the trainings have generally been concerned with managing the forms involved, whether they were paper or electronic, rather than what constitutes an effective transition plan.

When asked about their knowledge of age-appropriate transition assessments, the California trained teachers all referred to two assessments that are primarily used at the school. Participant 1 referred to perhaps a half dozen others, but stated that they are not readily available here, either because they are not applicable to this community, the community-based services that are available, or because of the cost involved.

Participant 1 pointed out that much of the training that he had received was not applicable in his current situation. Whereas he had been in a major metropolitan area, working at a school located in the downtown area, he was now in a rural community where agriculture is the predominant industry. His students in the Midwest were able to access many, varied programs all located within walking distance or a short bus ride from the school sight. Here in California, the community is geographically isolated and the closest metropolis is a drive of an hour or more by car and perhaps two or more hours by bus. All four participants stated that the locally available vocational opportunities are extremely limited, and the few that exist all involve either agriculture or the food service industry.

Chapter 5 Discussion /Analysis

Summary of Major Findings

None of the educators stated that he or she had received any formal training in the development of post-secondary transition plans during the initial portion of their special education credential training programs. Only participant 1 had received any formal training at all, and this was because he had made a decision to return to school to pursue further licensing that was available to him in the state where he was residing at the time. Through a combination of district, state and federal funding, as well as scholarships, his additional training was paid for, which played a significant role in his decision to follow this pathway. Even with his considerable formal training, participant 1 stated that it was of very little value in his current position. The other three participants all stated that what little training they had received had more to do with managing forms and paper than it did with actually helping their students.

All of the participants expressed frustration with the lack of vocational training opportunities that are available to their students within the community. Furthermore, they all expressed concern about the evaluation of the measurable post-secondary goals that they are required to include in their students' individual transition plans. Each expressed that there is no effective means to measure progress after the student has left high school.

Comparison of Findings to Previous Research

The responses of all participants very closely resembled those in earlier studies by

Benitez, Morningstar and Frey (2009), and earlier studies of Blanchett (2001), Prater,

Sileo, & Black (2000), and Wolfe, Boone, and Blanchett (1998). In spite of the passage

of time, and along with it presumably, ongoing efforts at the improvement of teacher

training in this area, not much change has been affected. Teachers, particularly those of

students with high-incident disabilities, still feel unprepared and lack confidence in their

ability to write and implement effective post-secondary transition plans for students with

disabilities.

Limitations/Gaps in the Study

The findings of this study are limited by the scope of the community and participants

involved. Only four teachers were interviewed, and all four work in the same district at

the same school. Therefore, the study cannot be offered as a representation of

widespread practices throughout the state or even the geographic region. A significant

issue that this study does not address is whether or not there are additional training

opportunities currently in place that these teachers are either unaware of or not taking

advantage of.

Implications for Future Research

Clearly, further research is warranted regarding teacher preparation and in particular, the

elements that constitute an effective transition plan. At the outset of this study I had

hoped to be able to gain useful knowledge that would better inform my ability to write an

effective transition plan, unfortunately the participants primarily reinforced the findings of previous studies. Perhaps the most significant implication for future research is the need to establish on a highly localized level, what a good transition plan will consist of. This is due largely to the fact that each community may vary dramatically in its resources and services available to assist students in reaching their post-secondary goals.

Overall Significance of the Study

The very limitations and gaps of this study also expose a great need in the area of writing and implementing effective transition plans. The fact that the study only involved the teachers at one school reflects the fact that there is only one high school in town. In actuality, this school also serves other outlying communities that are even smaller and cannot support a high school. The town and its outlying communities contain approximately 12,000 residents, which makes it small when compared to the metropolitan areas of the nation, but it is still of a size that is as large as, or larger than a significant percentage of towns in the United States. The study did involve the majority of the special education department at the district's only high school and all of the participants expressed frustration with the lack of availability of community based transition resources and vocational/educational opportunities.

The experiences of participant 1 bring into sharp focus a glaring problem with universal standards. The post-secondary transition plan is a universal standard for all students aged 16 and over who qualify for special education services. Even with an advanced level of formal training and certification in developing transition plans, this

participant was frustrated in his efforts to development transition plans, due to the locally available resources, within the school and the community as a whole. This brings to light that a universal standard cannot often be applied universally. The local resources will necessarily affect the contents and implementation of the plan. It is not the contention of the researcher that the idea of a mandatory transition plan be abandoned altogether, however a great deal of clarification is needed as to what a plan must contain and how it can be implemented and monitored.

About the Author

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