Transition Planning: Improved Methods to Promote Student Success from High School to the Workforce

Christopher Martin
Richard T. Boon
The University of Georgia

Cordy Love
Southern Illinois University

Abstract

Successful transition planning for students with disabilities from school into adulthood seems to be a complex and difficult process. The 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) promote the development of successful transition planning; however, research has shown that special educators are not likely to engage in behaviors during transition planning meetings to facilitate appropriate transition planning principles and guidelines (Thoma, Rogan, & Baker, 2001). In this paper, we will provide an overview of the assessment process, integration approach, and the multicultural aspects as they relate to transition planning to assist the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process in making secondary school decisions.

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Many students dream about the day when they will be able to leave their childhood behind, enter the workforce, begin to enter adulthood, and make some decisions for themselves. Often they measure what they are learning by how often they will use the information later in life. Although some argue that students should learn for learning's sake, others say that for many students with disabilities who have found learning to be difficult, learning for learning's sake is not helpful in terms of post-high school outcomes (Thoma, Held, & Saddler, 2002). This is one reason why a focus on transition from school to adult lifestyle is so important, and particularly why students with disabilities need to be actively involved in gathering important information that they will use to shape their adults lifestyles. Often times, the future for this population of students is shaped with the assistance and support of their teachers, parents, and other supporters on their transition planning committees.

More recent literature recommends that students' self-determination be an integral part of the transition planning process (Field, Hoffman, & Spezia, 1998; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). However, the realism is that many special educators do not know how to teach the skills that are necessary for the component of self-determination (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000). Furthermore, additional research has shown that special educators are not likely to engage in behaviors during transition planning meetings to facilitate student self-determination in the process (Thoma, Rogan, & Baker, 2001). Another cause for concern is the impact of ethnic diversity as it

relates to the transition planning process and the lack of cultural knowledge that may be present when making post-secondary decisions. Research has stated how the field of transition has evolved to focus on issues considered most important to post-secondary outcomes (e.g., career development, life skills instruction) while issues such as cultural diversity and cultural aspects go unrecognized (Meier-Kronick, 1993). It is important that special educators, administrators, parents, and other individuals involved in the transition process become familiar with strategies and best practices that facilitate proper assessment, planning, integration, and multicultural aspects rather than making general assumptions and decisions during the transition process. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the assessment process, integration approach, and the multicultural aspects as they relate to transition planning to assist the IEP process in making secondary school decisions.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

Assisting students with disabilities and helping them prepare for their lives after school is an extremely important aspect in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) development. With the passage of IDEA in 1990, schools were required to include transition goals and plans in the IEPs for students age 16 or older (Cronin, Patton, & Lock, 1997). The 1997 Amendments to the act mandate that transition planning begin when students reach the age of 14. Plans must include information regarding the relationship between the student's plan of study and the student's goals and aspirations beyond the secondary level. Furthermore, the IEP must clearly state the transition services required by the student and the responsibilities of adult agencies to assist in providing such services (Tucker, 1997). Consistent with IDEA mandated priorities, Bates, Bronkema, Ames, and Hess (1992) described transition planning as a threefold process: (1) development of a vision of adult transition outcomes that focuses on employment, post-secondary education, residential settings, and community participation; (2) identification of specific services and service providers that are needed to attain and maintain transition-related outcomes; and (3) interagency planning.

Transition planning does not guarantee that a student will have post-secondary success with all of the goals; however, McDonnell, Ferguson, and Mathot-Buckner (1992) mentioned how the planning process can decrease or eliminate many of the barriers that limit a student's success after leaving high school. Unfortunately, some of the recent research addressing the quality of transition planning suggests that the process is often an insignificant part of the IEP (Inge, Wehman, Clees, & Dymond, 1996). Many times the lack of emphasis placed on transition planning leads to misguided and inadequately conducted meetings, which may partly explain why students with disabilities experience poor post-secondary outcomes (Grigal, Test, Beattie, & Wood, 1997). Grigal et. al. (1997) encountered many vague statements of student's outcomes and activities, responsible personnel, and timelines while reviewing IEP's in 1994 following the transition mandate. Also, they found little indication of long-range planning or of annual revisions of the goals or plans. Other research on the IEP indicates that assessment information, which reveals the student's interest, preferences, strengths and needs, is often not used as a basis for writing goals and objectives and making educational decisions (Smith & Simpson, 1989).

Research has indicated that assessment within transition-planning allows the IEP committee to make more accurate decisions as it relates to the student's present level of performance (e.g., social skills, vocational skills, life skills, employability) to assist with deciding planning and service delivery (Thoma, Rogan, & Baker, 2001; Storms, O'Leary, & Williams, 2000). Also, the research mentions how transition planning should incorporate various assessments (e.g., formal, informal, alternative) as it relates to determining a student's strengths, needs, preferences, and interest for current and future planning (Thoma, Held, & Saddler, 2002). Storms, O'Leary, and Williams (2000) listed three components that are important in designing and implementing transition plans:

1. Coach every student along with his or her family, to think about goals for life after high school and to develop a long-range plan to get there.
2. Design the high school experience to ensure that the student gains the skills and competencies needed to achieve his/her desired post-school goals.
3. Identify, and link students and families to, any needed post-school service, supports, or programs before the student exists the school system. (pp.6-7)

These activities flow from information gathered with each student by the important people involved in their daily lives. The basis for any transition plan within the IEP that is developed must be the information gathered through the assessment process, to include the student's needs, interests, and preferences (Thoma, Held, & Saddler, 2002).

Sitlington, Neubert, and Leconte (1997) stated, "transition assessment is the ongoing process of collecting data on the individual's strengths, needs, preferences, and interests as they relate to the demands of current and future working, educational, living , and personal and social environments." It is important that special educators understand and be knowledgeable enough to use a variety of different assessments, strategies, and instruments when working with students to assist in developing a transition plan. As stated by Herman (1992), good assessment is built on current theories of learning and cognition and is grounded in views of what skills and capacities students will need for future success. Being knowledgeable about planning and skilled at deciphering various forms of information can make a tremendous difference in the process and outcomes of transition planning (Thoma, Held, & Saddler, 2002). These details about various forms of information gathering and assessment are described in more detail below analyzing the three main types of assessment (e.g., formal, informal, alternative).

Formal assessments are standardized instruments from commercial publishers that yield targeted information (Thurlow, Elliot, & Ysseldyke, 1998). Typically, they are used for screening and placement decisions for students for disability services. Standardized assessments have been tested and have reliability and validity measures to support their use for a specific purpose or population. Some formal assessments are developed to gather information about a student's current performance level, aptitudes, and interest so that educational strategies can be applied that will benefit the student receiving special education services. However, formal assessments have limitations and are not able to provide a complete picture of a student's understanding or that student's abilities. This is true for students that are not motivated to perform well on standardized assessments (Wiggins, 1993). Some students may have an adverse attitude to standardized assessments for fear of the assessments pointing out their weaknesses and performance level.

Informal assessments are assessments that are typically not standardized and are frequently developed by teachers or a local agency. Often, informal assessments are open-ended procedures that can be used as is, or adapted for particular uses and situations. They can be used in the classroom, at home, work, or somewhere in the community. Sometimes they are given to parents, family members, and friends to try to get a complete picture of the student or environment associated with the student. These assessments are particularly useful in gathering information about a student's functional skills and interests and are necessary for the transition into the adult world (Thoma, Held, & Saddler, 2002). Informal assessments are mostly subjective assessments and more than one person should give them. Some examples of informal assessments include observations, curriculum-based assessment, interviews, surveys, and task analyses.

Alternative assessments are typically performance-based assessment procedures that require students to demonstrate what they know by doing or performing tasks. Performance assessments require students to generate rather than choose a response and they require students to actively accomplish complex and significant tasks while bringing to bear prior knowledge, recent learning, and relevant skills to solve problems (Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992). Alternative assessments provide a broad view of a student across time, rather than at a point in time, and use self-evaluation and continuous feedback as components of the assessment process. Through the alternative process, students can learn to evaluate their own abilities and learn to measure progress by participating in this process (Thoma, Held, & Saddler, 2002). Performance-based assessments measure students' abilities and progress by requiring them to perform tasks that are real-world related. For example, students can demonstrate math skills by paying their bills and maintaining a budget and managing money as it relates to real-world situations. Other examples include short-term work that provides an opportunity to apply what was learned, demonstrations of mastery, oral exams of knowledge, portfolios, and person-centered planning.

Person-centered planning involves sitting down and conferencing with the student and getting to know him/her. Person-centered procedures involve becoming aware of the student's goals, aspirations, and outlook on the future and using that information to develop long and short-term goals and objectives.

Getzel and Defur (1997) conducted a study that discussed the implications for person-centered planning for students with significant disabilities. The study consisted of examining the participation in the IEP planning process by family members, students, school personnel, and adult agency representatives. Also, post-school employment, independent living, recreational environments, support needs, and types of vocational training and support provided at the secondary level were examined. The study consisted of 10 school districts and eighty-four public school children that participated in a Virginia Transition Planning Information System grant, which was a longitudinal database that was designed to track trends in the design and delivery of transition services across school districts. The students were both from rural and metropolitan school districts. Data collection was achieved through the use of an IEP transition planning information form that was part of the Transition Planning Information System. The form collects a wide variety of transition-related information and was based on similar forms developed by Bates (1990). The information collected on each individual included basic student demographics, employment, living arrangements, recreation, participants in the transition process, anticipated settings students were planning to enter in education, and whether or not special supports would be needed. The form was designed to be completed at each IEP meeting to ensure that information obtained on each student reflected the results of the meeting. Also, the school personnel

completed a form describing the student and his or her long-term goals as well as the transition services it was anticipated the student would need. Next, the information was routed to a central database for review and analysis before being entered and generating a report.

The results of the students' characteristics indicated that most of the students involved in the study had 3 or more years remaining in public school. Most of the students were Caucasian, 26% were African American, and 1% were Hispanic. The racial demographics were believed to be parallel to the demographics in public education in Virginia. The results of the participants of the IEP meeting were 89% for parents and guardians across all grade levels. Most of the representatives attending the meeting were school representatives with the special education teachers and speech therapists being the most frequently cited. A little more than 36% of other participants were physical therapists, vision teachers, and other specialized staff. About 10% were guidance counselors and regular vocational teachers along with 14% of the transition team members being occupational therapists. In anticipated post-school settings, employment was mostly identified as a student's primary post-school goal as opposed to post-secondary education. A little more than 38% of the plans identified competitive employment options as transition goals. Full-time employment represented 12%, part-time 5%, and supported employment was 21%. Next, sixty percent of the plans identified living arrangements with family members after high school, and 19% identified supervised living. Fifty-six percent identified specialized recreation activities, while 13% identified self-directed activities as a goal. Most transition plans identified special transportation (57%) or transportation by family members (63%), while only 16% planned to utilize public transportation. Finally, recommended in school services were reported to include 66% needing learning materials modified, 62% with curriculum modification, 62% with support services such as team-teaching or vocational research teachers, and 67% with adaptive physical education. Forty-four percent of the plans included assistive technology. The most frequently identified supports on the IEP's included guidance and counseling (33%), daily living skills (84%), and social skills training (75%). Eighteen percent of the students had supports focusing on self-advocacy skills specified on their plans.

Thoma, Held, and Saddler (2002) conducted a study that took a survey on transition assessment, the level and the type of transition involvement in the transition process, and the use of alternative assessment procedures in the transition assessment and planning processes. The study consisted of a survey that was mailed to 84 special educators in Arizona and Nevada. The special educators provided instruction for students between the ages of 14 and 21. Thirty-three percent of the educators were from a middle school setting, forty-four percent were from high school, and a little less than 5% were from a school providing education to students in grades K through 12. A four page survey was developed using information about assessments. The first page consisted of demographic information (e.g., positions, grade level taught, etc.). The second page consisted of questions relating to the specific types of assessments used such as the use of curriculum-based assessments, standardized assessments, parent surveys, portfolios, person-centered planning, etc. The third page gave the respondents an opportunity to explain how the assessments were used in making decisions during the transition planning process. The fourth page of the survey consisted of questions relating to the domains for the transition assessment such as employment, daily living skills, social skills, community living, etc. The results indicated that the decisions about which assessments to use were made as a group. The special education administrator and school psychologist were most commonly identified as the individuals that administered the assessments. The most commonly used was an interview with a student followed by student survey. The least frequently used were student self-determination assessments and ecological inventories. The most commonly used standardized assessments were the Kauffman Test of Education Achievement (KTEA), Wechsler Intelligence Scale (WISC), and the Wide-Range Achievement Test (WRAT).

Sixty-four percent of the respondents mentioned that transition-related assessments were administered as needed, and fifty-two percent stated assessments being given annually. Also, the majority of the respondents mentioned that the assessment data were used to develop IEP goals, to help students determine vocational interests, and the help students to determine life goals and preferences. Finally, most of the respondents mentioned that they were self-taught about transition assessment strategies, procedures, and instruments from a variety of sources.

Integration Approach

Collaborations across multiple agencies that organize delivery of services into a unified coordinated system have been termed service integration (Gerry & Certo, 1992). It is often stated that the transition process clearly requires interagency collaboration (Nisbet, Covert, & Shuh, 1992). Integration of services assumes that focusing on several needs produces more positive results than focusing on each need in isolation. Furthermore, these models are designed to share resources in order to maximize the outcomes of expertise and available funds (Certo & Pumpian, 1997).

Participating systems must change how business is conducted for true integration to occur. Modifications of new service roles such as a reduction of paperwork, provision of new services, as well as a network of potential service providers must be implemented to create an effective process. In order for service integration to be effective, each system must assume full responsibility for the total service outcome, and jointly assist others to achieve that outcome (Certo & Pumpian, 1997). For example, continuous collaborations have existed within a service integration model between some public health and education districts. The educators often observe physical and mental health issues that affect a student's performance in the classroom and schools. The integration of educational and health services through the operation of a school-based health clinic can increase access to primary health and mental health care, health education, and related services for students (Certo, Karasoff & Wilson, 1993; Levy & Shepardson, 1992). The application of a service integration approach to a simpler and more focused variation of this concept is responsible for the same employment and community living format, however, each system tends to operate separately. It is the similarity in outcome responsibilities which suggests that integrating service delivery across at least three systems (e.g., public education, rehabilitation, and developmental disabilities) at the point of transition has strong potential for solving long standing problems of unemployment for individuals with disabilities (Certo & Pumpian, 1997).

Public schools, rehabilitation agencies, and developmental disabilities agencies need to enter into agreements to integrate services and jointly share the cost of those services when implementing an effective service integration model. These agreements, if fully operationalized during the student's final year in school, should; (a) plan the transition of students with disabilities into community jobs, and (b) develop and implement individualized, recreational, personal, leisure and community living plans. The public schools would maintain traditional services and responsibilities coordinated prior to the final year, and rehabilitation or developmental disabilities systems would continue to assume service responsibilities after the individual leaves the public school system. The major overhaul of the service integration model would entail changes in service and support responsibilities during the student's last year of school (Certo & Pumpian, 1997). It can be anticipated that a service integration model would accomplish the following outcomes; (a) it collectively leverages additional funds and resources at the point of transition, (b) it is an essentially cost effective option for each agency participating, and (c) it's organizational structure results in the elimination of discrepancies between community settings, activities, and personnel

providing professional support during school (Certo & Pumpian, 1997).

Simply improving the adequacy of services at the point of transition can be ineffective if adult receiving agencies are not available to continue to support the individuals' work needs after the proposed year of transition under a service integration model. It would seem commonplace that agencies would be responsible for maintenance and expansion after the point of transition with providing the direct services from the final school year into adult services. One such requirement would eliminate the need for additional service vendors to provide ongoing services after school, and provide assistance for the individual served that might be associated with changing providers (Certo & Pumpian, 1997).

Certo and Pumpian (1997) stated that it is anticipated that implementation of this transition service integration model should accomplish four important objectives. Each of these objectives is based on the assumption that a job and supports are in place prior to finishing school and they are:

1. To provide adequate staffing to accomplish job placement and implementation of other community living supports for graduating individuals during the last year in school.
2. To reduce the cost of transition for each participating agency while improving the outcomes, freeing up funds to expand services for other individuals, thereby maximizing dollars spent.
3. To provide continuation of service after graduation by shifting the direct service responsibility for placement and individualized personal plans from public schools to receiving adult agencies.
4. To proactively establish local models of service integration in response to, and in anticipation of, new federal and state mandates and resources (e.g., School to Work Opportunities Act). (p.6)

Timmons, Whitney-Thomas, McIntyre, Butterworth, & Allen (2004) conducted a study that investigated the transition-related experiences of 30 parents of young adults with disabilities who had been identified as needing support from health care and adult service agencies (e.g., department of mental retardation and vocational rehabilitation) after exiting high school. The parents were selected from various ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Caucasian, African-American, and Latino) from urban, suburban, and rural areas. The participants' children had a range of disabilities that included cerebral palsy, spinal bifida, learning disabilities, and Down's syndrome. The methods of data collection were focus groups and case studies. The focus groups were chosen to understand parental roles through discussions between parents who share common experiences. Questions were asked pertaining to supports utilized and barriers encountered during the transition planning process and parents' hopes and dreams for their children. The case studies were conducted to gain more personal information and take an in-depth look at the various stages during the transition process in order to understand the unique experiences. The parents were asked questions pertaining to their (a) family and young adult with a disability, (b) hopes and concerns regarding their children's futures, (c) experiences in planning for the future, (d) planning resources, (e) whether or not the resources were helpful, and (f) the role of the young person in the planning process.

The results revealed significant challenges in (a) negotiating service delivery systems, (b) coping with day-to-day needs, (c) dealing with the idiosyncrasies of urban or rural locales, and (d) feeling uncertainty about the future. One challenge faced by parents were the difficulties of trying to plan their child's transition from school to adult life with finding, accessing, and relying on service delivery systems designed to support them. Often times, the parents perceived the service delivery

systems as inconsistent, complex, and unresponsive. Another challenge was that parents depicted service delivery systems that were generally unpredictable. They explained that effective service delivery systems were often dependent upon a particularly good teacher, a special education director, or classroom aide. Also, the parents noted that good medical care was often dependent on a good relationship with a particular doctor, personal care assistant, or therapist. The parents' comments revolved around the notion that good service delivery was circumstantial and erratic; leaving parents with the expectations that crucial service could be lost at any time. Next, parents described an additional burden of having to maneuver through and between what they perceived as a complex service delivery system. Parents complained about not being aware or properly notified of most resources. Furthermore, parents perceived complexities in service delivery systems due to lack of coordination between agencies and schools. The parents expressed a need to have increased and automatic agency involvement in the school transition planning process. Also, they expressed that systems were overburdened, and they perceived the unwillingness on the part of the professionals to even try to accommodate their children's needs. Many parents perceived themselves as the primary person bearing the burden of holding together all the elements of many complex systems surrounding their families and their children's transition planning processes.

Multicultural Aspects in Transition

While some culturally diverse families may encounter some discrimination or insensitivity by an educational system at any grade level, it may become particularly important during the transition period. The end goal of transition planning can be determined by cultural-specific values and expectations about many important issues, such as work, community integration, roles expectations, and social functioning (Geenen, Powers, Lopez-Vasquez, & Bersani, 1999; Geenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2001). For example, Meier-Kronick (1993) mentions how the field of transition has evolved to focus on issues considered most seminal to post-secondary outcomes (e.g., School to Work programs, career development, life skills instruction, transition assessment and planning, student participation) and issues related to cultural diversity have typically not been emphasized. The lack of focused attention on the cultural aspects of transition is troubling as culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities often experience poor transition outcomes more than others (Geenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2001).

Blackorby and Wagner (1996) conducted a longitudinal study on the multicultural aspects in transition. Their study revealed that African-American and Hispanic youth with disabilities have greater difficulty than European-American youth with disabilities in finding employment, and earning significantly less money than the European-American workers. Yelin and Trupin (1997) discovered that unemployed European-American adults with disabilities were 40% more likely to find employment than adults with disabilities from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Also, it has been discovered that minority persons do not appear to have equal access to vocational rehabilitation services. Historically, studies have shown that European-American individuals with disabilities are more likely to use VR services, experience greater placement rates, and receive higher wages than culturally and linguistically diverse individuals (Atkins & Wright, 1980).

Geenen, Powers, and Lopez-Vasquez (2001) conducted a study to examine the multicultural aspects of parent involvement in transition planning. Their study asked the specific questions of what activities are parents currently involved in during their children's transition plan, the type of participation that is most important to parents, how parents and educators differ in level of importance they assign to participation across different transition activities, and how parents and educators differ in level of parental involvement their report for different plans. The subjects were

from large urban school districts in the western United States and included 474 African-Americans, 106 Hispanics, 250 European-American, and 88 Native American parents whose children fell between the ages of 13 and 21 and were classified as having physical, developmental, or health related disabilities. Also, 130 individuals classified as school staff participated in the study including some middle school personnel involved in setting up the transition plans at the students' age of 14. A survey instrument was developed to examine the perceived level and importance of parent involvement in specific transition activities. The items were devised from a review of literature on transition planning and parent involvement from a study of transition experiences of culturally diverse youth with disabilities and their families (Geenen, Powers, Lopez-Vasquez, & Bersani, 1999). A second survey was administered to school professionals that asked about their perceptions of the level of parental involvement in various activities.

The results indicated that African-American parents placed significantly more importance on talking to their children about life after high school and teaching their children to use transportation than European-Americans. Hispanic and Native American parents assigned significantly more importance to teaching their children about the family's cultural values and beliefs as compared to the ratings of European American families. Next, European American parents reported significantly more involvement in school meetings to talk about transition than did African-American, Hispanic, or Native American parents. Furthermore, African-American parents reported more involvement than the other groups in talking with their children about life after high school and the use of transportation independently.

Conclusions

There is a need for a workable transition assessment, integration approach, and cultural awareness as it relates to the transition planning process. First, various studies have determined that assessment within transition-planning can provide assistance for the IEP committee to make more accurate decisions as it relates to the student's present level of performance and service delivery decisions (Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992; Thoma, Held, & Saddler, 2002). There is a definite need to look at assessments in the transition planning process and how the assessments can impact the planning, programming, and delivery model to coincide with the federal mandates in creating an effective decision-making process for the IEP process. A challenge will be to accomplish quality transition-referenced assessment in the context of many other demands that are placed on special educators to provide better circumstances for students with disabilities.

Next, simply applying the concept of transition service integration has the potential to provide some solutions to long standing problems in the field of special education and individuals with disabilities. This approach can be a positive solution with anticipated benefits to all individuals and groups that are involved. The benefits to individuals with disabilities who want to actively participate in their communities are obvious. It provides a self-determined mechanism for an individual to ensure access to the support services needed to secure and maintain a job and participate in their community. Another possible solution could be the dilemma of inadequate staffing for transition placements and individualized personal schedules for school districts.

Finally, the research indicates that culturally and linguistically diverse parents are actively involved in transition activities, which many may fall outside of the realm of school-based planning (Geenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2001). However, a challenge for school personnel and other individuals in the transition process is to increase their knowledge and sensitivity to other cultural values and cultural influences as they relate to the transition planning process.

Furthermore, educators and service providers have to be aware that placing a culturally and linguistically diverse young adult into adulthood stems from family and community rather than on experiences provided by educational or other formal institutions. The demand is placed on individuals in school-based planning transition process to be more responsive and sensitive to culturally and linguistically diverse parents and students.

Issues of institutionalization, personnel preparation, interagency collaboration, and the agendas of school resources continue to limit some success in transition planning. However, other important models (e.g., integration approach, transition assessment) exist for understanding the students' needs and addressing many of those needs through available community services. It is the models that are deemed effective that require careful consideration by school district personnel and staff as well as other service providers. Increasing the effectiveness of student success will come at the expense of school personnel and service providers altering some of their comfortable roles, group interactions, research practices, and rituals of experimenting with new partners to ensure improved quality of life for students with disabilities.

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