Voices from the Field: Recommended Transition Strategies for Students and School Staff

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify key elements that contribute to successful transition outcomes for students with disabilities. Given the current emphasis on student choice and student directed transition planning, it is critical to summarize the perspectives of young adults with disabilities and other key personnel directly involved in providing transition services. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 133 individuals, including young adults with disabilities, high school teachers and other school staff, parents, VR counselors, and employers. Four primary recommendations were identified for students with disabilities who are preparing for the transition from school to work: (a) increase self knowledge and self awareness, (b) display motivation and persistence, (c) participate in career exploration and multiple work experiences during high school, and (d) utilize transition services and post school supports. Recommendations for special education teachers or other school staff included: (a) listen carefully to students' interests, hopes, and dreams, (b) provide extensive opportunities for career exploration and community based experiences, (c) promote student self direction and independent decision making, and (d) connect students with appropriate services and supports available through school or community agencies.

Introduction

Improving transition services and outcomes for youth with disabilities has been a central component of special education practice and policy for the last fifteen years. The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) confirms that the fundamental purpose of a free appropriate public education is to prepare youth with disabilities for "further education, employment and independent living" [IDEA 2004 Sec 601 (d) (1) (A)]. In order to facilitate this movement from school to post school activities, transition services are required to be identified in each student's IEP beginning at age 16, or earlier if needed. These transition services must be based on individual needs and take into account strengths, preferences, and interests. In addition, a variety of instructional services and community experiences should be provided to prepare youth for post school employment or education settings.

Although transition services and supports are mandated components of special education service delivery, many youth with disabilities still face multiple barriers preparing for the transition from high school to postsecondary education, employment, and other aspects of community living (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). A recent report from the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability (NCWD) emphasized that, "Youth with disabilities, indeed all vulnerable youth, may need extra supports throughout their transition period to make in-formed choices and become self-sufficient adults" (NCWD, 2006, p. 1). Given these needs, it is crucial for educators and other professionals to better understand the individual and program level components that may support effective transition outcomes.

Numerous research studies have been conducted to identify specific skills, services, and supports that may facilitate the transition from school to adult roles (e.g., Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997; Johnson, Stodden, Emmanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002; National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition [NASET], 2005; Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997). These best practice strategies can be summarized into two broad categories that are closely aligned with the IDEIA transition requirements. Research based transition services include: (a) strategies to promote self determination and student choice, and (b) school and community based services designed to prepare youth for post school employment or education options.

Promoting Self Determination and Student Choice

A central component of effective transition practice is the emphasis on student involvement and student choice. Self knowledge and self awareness are often the first steps in the process of teaching students to identify interests and preferences. Webster (2004) found that successful college students with disabilities had opportunities to develop self awareness and self knowledge, as well as disability knowledge. Other studies have confirmed the importance of self

awareness, disability awareness, and clear self concept in preparing young adults with disabilities for high school graduation and the transition to adult roles (Doren, Lindstrom, Zane, & Johnson, in press; Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992; Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001).

Self determination, which is broadly defined as the ability to make choices and decisions based on one's own needs and preferences, has also been linked to improved post school outcomes (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Self determination includes a number of specific skills including: self advocacy, choice making, decision making, problem solving, and goal setting (Field, Hoffman, & Speiza, 1998). Higher levels of self determination skills can contribute to increased opportunities for employment, post secondary education, and independent living arrangements, as well as community integration (Cooney, 2002; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000). In a study of students with learning disabilities, Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) found that participants who received self determination training were employed at a higher rate and had higher hourly wages than peers who did not receive this training.

Student involvement in goal setting is another important component of effective transition practice. Students with disabilities are more likely to meet transition goals when they play an active role in the creation of those goals (Agran, Blanchard, & Wehmeyer, 2000), and are often more successful after graduation when they have transition services available to meet self-identified transition goals (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Goldberg, Higgins, Raskind, & Herman, 2003). In addition, youth with learning disabilities who: (a) are proactive/goal oriented, (b) have the ability to self advocate, (c) demonstrate an awareness of their disability, and (d) display pro-social coping skills, are more likely to achieve positive post school employment outcomes (Doren et al., in press).

Transition Services and Supports

There is also a substantial body of literature describing specific school and community based services that contribute to successful transition outcomes. Career development is one area often identified as key to the transition process (Morningstar, 1997; NASET, 2005; NCWD, 2006). Career preparatory experiences, such as career awareness, career exploration, and career assessments can help youth explore options, while at the same time identifying their interests, abilities, and potential need for accommodations. Students who participate in career exploration activities are also more likely to recognize and identify a variety of career options (NASET, 2005; Lindstrom, Benz, & Doren, 2004; Ochs & Roessler, 2001).

Youth with disabilities who receive explicit vocational, life, and social skills training also are better prepared for the transition to adult roles in the community (Johnson et al., 2002). An important extension of vocational and career skills training is community based work experience. Work experiences offer hands on learning and structured opportunities to build work skills and habits. Participation in community based work experience activities in high school is also associated with improved graduation and employment outcomes (Benz et al., 2000; Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997).

Transition is also a collaborative process that involves connections to a number of public and private organizations, agencies, and programs (NASET, 2005). These may include Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Social Security Administration, Centers for Independent Living, and post secondary education and training programs (Mellard & Lancaster, 2003). Transition personnel should insure that these types of post school services are made available to students, and that these supplemental services are effectively integrated into the transition plan (Johnson et al., 2002; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003).

Effective transition practices have been well documented in the special education literature. A number of longitudinal studies have also been conducted to document post school status and transition services received (e.g., Benz et al., 2000; Wagner et al., 2005). However, very few studies have collected in-depth qualitative data from multiple key informants to shed light on critical needs for transition services. Given the current emphasis on student choice and student directed planning, we felt it was vital to solicit input from young adults with disabilities who have recently completed the transition process. We were also interested in carefully examining and documenting the perspectives of other key informants who have provided career planning and other transition services. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to identify and summarize key elements that contribute to successful transition outcomes from the perspectives of: (a) young adults with disabilities, (b) school staff, (c) parents, (d) VR counselors, and (e) employers.

Methods

Our findings are drawn from a large scale qualitative research project designed to explore individual, family, in school, and

post school factors associated with positive transition outcomes for young adults with disabilities (see Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007; Doren et al., in press). This ongoing research project utilizes a multiple case study design, which is ideally suited for developing an in-depth understanding of a complex process (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). For this particular study, we analyzed specific components of the existing case study data focusing on recommendations for students and teachers surrounding transition preparation. Qualitative methods allowed us to gain unique insights and "give voice" to the critical perspectives of young adults and other individuals most directly involved in the transition process (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Stake, 1995).

Sample

Our sampling strategy was designed to meet the purpose of this study – to summarize key recommendations that contribute to successful transition outcomes from multiple perspectives. We utilized a two phase purposeful sampling process to select participants. Purposeful sampling is a commonly used method in qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 2002), which allows investigators to select a sample based on certain predetermined criteria. After completing recruitment and informed consent procedures, the total sample for this study included 133 individuals including: (a) young adults with disabilities (N = 33), (b) special education teachers and other school staff (N = 35), (c) parents of young adult with disabilities (N = 28), (d) community employers who have hired and supervised young adults with disabilities (N = 22), and (e) VR counselors di-

rectly involved in providing transition services to high school youth with disabilities (N = 15).

RECRUITMENT: YOUNG ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES.

We recruited our initial pool of participants by sharing information about the study with a statewide network of high school special education teachers and transition specialists. School staff were then asked to nominate individuals who: (a) had a documented disability and were eligible for special education services during high school, (b) participated in a school to work transition program for at least one year, and (c) were between three and seven years

out of high school. Nominated individuals who indicated an initial interest in participating in the study were contacted by phone and provided with additional information. Only those young adults who completed informed consent procedures and met all of the purposeful sampling criteria were included in the study. The final young adult sample included 33 participants between the ages of 19 and 27. Participants were equally distributed by gender and included a range of primary disabilities. The majority of the sample were employed either full time or part time after high school, and about 20% had enrolled in some type of post secondary education

Table 1
Participant Demographics: Young Adults with Disabilities

		N	%
Gender	Male	17	52
	Female	16	48
Age	19 - 21 years	6	18
	22 - 24 years	20	61
	25 - 27 years	7	21
Primary disability	Learning disability	17	52
	Developmental disability	8	24
	Orthopedic disability	7	21
	Emotional disability	1	3
Ethnicity	Caucasian	25	76
	Native American	4	12
	East Indian	2	6
	African American	1	3
	Pacific Islander	1	3
School completion status	Alternative diploma	16	48
	Standard diploma	15	45
	Dropped out	2	6
Employment status	Full time	14	42
	Part time	15	45
	Not employed	4	12
Post secondary education and training	Enrolled	7	21
	Completed	3	9

or training program. See Table 1 for complete demographic data.

The second phase of sampling involved recruiting other key informants who were directly involved in the school to work transition process for the young adult participants. For each participant, we first recruited parents or guardians and key high school staff including classroom teachers, transition specialists, and/or advocates. If the young adults were currently employed, we asked permission to include the current job supervisor in the study. Finally, for those youth who were eligible for and received VR services, we recruited their VR counselors to provide additional information and perspectives on the career and transition planning process during high school and the early transition years. Between two and six key informants were interviewed for each participant, for a total of 100 key informants.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection for this study was structured interviews with participants and other key informants (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Each young adult was interviewed twice. The first interview focused on family background and high school experiences, while the second interview focused on post school opportunities and experiences. Interviews with key informants were designed to collect additional data on high school and post school services, and employment experiences over time. In addition, we conducted a file review of special education and VR records for the purpose of verifying disability status, ethnicity, high school completion, diploma type, school and VR services, and employment status.

For all 33 participants and 100 key informants, we conducted face to face interviews following a structured case study protocol (Yin, 2003) that included between 11 and 28 major questions depending on the participants' role. Each interview lasted 90 minutes to 2 hours. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview protocols included an in-depth discussion of high school, transition preparation, and employment experiences (see Lindstrom et al., 2007; Doren et al., in press). At the conclusion of the interviews we asked participants to respond to the following questions from their unique perspectives: "What advice or recommendations would you give to *students with disabilities* who are making the transition from school to work?" and "What advice or recommendations would you give to *high school teachers or other school staff* who are preparing youth with disabilities for the transition from school to work?" Analysis of all open-ended responses to these two questions formed the basis of this study.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the interview transcripts following a multiple stage process recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994). We began by reviewing the written transcripts in order to develop a set of broad descriptive codes, based on key themes identified by participants. We used these descriptive codes, such as "explore career options" or "self knowledge," to assign concrete labels to individual passages of text. To insure inter-coder reliability, all interview transcripts were coded by two of the co-authors following a common coding scheme (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Olszewski, Macey, & Lindstrom, 2007).

In the second phase of analyses, we used cross case methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002) to further describe and verify our findings. First we created individual data tables for all participant groups (e.g., young adults, school staff, parents, etc.). Since the interview questions were open-ended, participants were able to offer multiple narrative responses to each question. We reviewed each individual response and placed it into a category based on the coding scheme described above. Individual responses were then tabulated and rank ordered by frequency of response for each participant group. Finally, we created summary tables that allowed us to compare and contrast findings both within and across participant groups.

Findings

Our interviews with young adults with disabilities provided new insights regarding services and skills needed to facilitate effective transitions. Participants were able to reflect on the school and work based training they had received, and think carefully about elements that contributed to their successes and struggles. Our key informants were also immersed in providing career development and transition services and offered their insights and recommendations from their perspectives as family members, school staff, employers, or VR counselors. Primary themes identified by each respondent group are displayed in rank order in Tables 2 and 3. In the following section, we provide a description of these themes organized by our major questions: (a) recommended transition strategies for *students with disabilities*, and (b) recommended strategies for *teachers and other school staff*.

Recommendations for Students with Disabilities

Four primary themes were identified by the school staff, young adults with disabilities, employers, and VR counselors

who responded to this question. (See Table 2.) These four themes/recommendations were intended to assist students with disabilities to be better prepared to make positive career choices and enter the workforce successfully. In this section we elaborate and provide descriptive data for the four themes that were identified by three or more respondent groups. (Note: Parents were not asked to make recommendations for students, thus their responses are not included in this section.)

SELF KNOWLEDGE AND SELF AWARENESS. The first recommendation offered by all participants was for students to understand themselves, including being able to clearly articulate career goals, strengths, and interests. School staff, young adults with disabilities, employers, and VR counselors all identified self knowledge as one of the most important elements that should be present to facilitate a successful transition into the workforce. Self knowledge was the most common recommendation offered by VR counselors and the second most common response provided by young adults with disabilities.

Participants talked about self knowledge as the ongoing process of discovering career interests and goals. One young woman with a developmental disability focused on the importance of self awareness as the first step in the transition process, *"I would say figure out what you really want to do first."* This was echoed by an experienced VR counselor who noted, *"I also recommend people figure out who they are. And it's hard. I mean, you're going to change. And I think a lot of people end up making the wrong choices because they don't know who they are."* This reflective process of self exploration and self discovery was often described as the first natural step in effective career planning.

In addition, many participants extended the concept of self knowledge beyond simple vocational exploration and goal identification. Developing a more comprehensive understanding of one's own strengths, limitations, and capabilities contributed to this broader level of self knowledge. A male participant with a physical disability offered the following advice to other students:

I think that to take pride in themselves, to really work on the barriers that stop their growth mentally, spiritually, and emotionally, and really take a critical hard look at who they are. Turn the mirror around, is a good analogy, I guess. Turn it facing them. That's because our life's work is in ourselves.

Participants from all four respondent groups believed that this deeper level of self awareness would lead to the ability to set more appropriate career goals and identify post school plans based on interests and abilities.

MOTIVATION AND PERSISTENCE. The second major recommendation provided by young adults with disabilities, VR counselors, and employers focused on the importance of motivation, determination, and persistence. Motivation and persistence was the most common recommendation identified by both young adults with disabilities and employers.

Although the need for transition services and supports has been often documented in the literature (Johnson et al., 2002; Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997), young adults with disabilities identified persistence and a high degree of motivation as the most important element in preparing for adult roles in the community. Many of the participants in this study had to overcome multiple barriers in the school to work transition pro-

Table 2
Recommendations for Students: Themes in Rank Order by Respondent Group

Respondent Group	Major Themes Identified
School staff (N = 35)	1. Explore career options 2. Access transition supports and services 3. Increase self knowledge and self awareness 4. Utilize opportunities for planning & goal setting
Young adults with disabilities (N = 33)	1. Display motivation and persistence 2. Increase self knowledge and self awareness 3. Utilize opportunities for planning & goal setting 4. Access transition supports and services
Employers (N = 22)	1. Display motivation and persistence 2. Engage in specific skill training 3. Increase self knowledge and self awareness 4. Explore career options
Vocational Rehabilitation counselors (N = 15)	1. Increase self knowledge and self awareness 2. Explore career options 3. Access transition supports and services 4. Display motivation and persistence

Note: Parents were not asked to respond to this question.

cess (e.g., difficult family situations, challenging academic requirements, lack of employment options in the community). Looking back, they often credited hard work and determination for their initial successes. When asked what advice they would provide to other students with disabilities, many said simply *"Don't give up,"* or *"Stick with it."* One young woman who struggled to complete her high school diploma related in her interview:

> *My senior year I wanted to quit. I was tired of school and I wanted to quit. But in my mind I was like, "No. I have to keep going. Just a few more months until graduation,"…I'm proud of that decision.*

Self confidence was another aspect related to this theme of motivation and persistence. Many participants talked about the importance of adopting a positive confident attitude — an underlying belief in their own skills and abilities to achieve. One participant with a developmental disability who is currently employed and living in her own apartment, offered her own story as an example of the need for self confidence and personal determination.

> *Well, for instance, I have this friend and she has a learning disability so she thinks she can't do anything. And she has to have someone constantly helping her and I've told her, if I can do it you can do it. I told her for instance, look at me. I've been through this and look where I am now. I'm on my own. So mainly I told her she can do anything. If she really wants it, she can do it.*

Employers who have hired and trained young adults with disabilities also reinforced the need for high levels of motivation and persistence. One job supervisor who provided ongoing training and support offered this advice, *"Be patient. Listen. Don't get discouraged with the first obstacles that come your way."* VR counselors also identified these internal qualities of hard work, determination, and focus as the key to post school success.

> *And I just look at my caseload in general. Students that I feel confident are going to make it are the ones that seem to have good work ethic and a sense of enthusiasm for the future. They're willing to roll up their sleeves and do some work to help in the development of their own plan. They're focused.*

EXPLORE CAREER OPTIONS.
A third recommendation that emerged from this study was for young adults with disabilities to explore a variety of career options and engage in community based work experiences during high school. Career exploration was not one of the major themes identified by the young adults with disabilities, but it was the highest ranked piece of advice provided by special education teachers and high school transition specialists. Employers and VR counselors also identified the need for career exploration and work based learning opportunities.

School staff described the benefits of career exploration as a mechanism for helping students understand the expectations and realities of work. One high school transition specialist felt that it was important for students to engage in *"lots of career exploration and not just on the computer, but actually going and seeing and touching and smelling and feeling and meeting people, talking to people about jobs."* Another school staff member commented, *"I like to make sure students don't close their eyes too tightly or look too narrowly down any one career path. They need to try different things."* Participants noted that job shadowing and job site visits, as well as guest speakers provide opportunities for students with disabilities to get an initial exposure to a variety of possible career options. This process of ongoing exploration was identified as a critical component of transition preparation.

In addition to career exploration activities, school and VR personnel often described the need for structured work experience. Work experiences offer another means for hands-on learning and continued exposure to the realities of work. A special education teacher from a rural community talked about the need for students to engage in community based training. She advised, *"I wouldn't have them sitting in a classroom anymore. I would have them out in the workplaces, working at a job and learning the skills that people need."* A VR counselor who specializes in youth transition, emphasized the value of work based learning during high school,

> *Urge them to get out and get into work before they get out of high school. After school jobs, summer jobs, something. Learn some work behavior, because it makes the final push into work a whole lot easier if you know a bit about the world of work. If you don't then it's sometimes a real shock.*

These work experiences help students with disabilities gain an initial awareness of what it means to work, while also building valuable skills and habits.

ACCESS SUPPORTS AND SERVICES.
Finally, school staff, young adults with disabilities and VR counselors all believed it was important to access the transition services and supports available through the high school and community. Young adults with disabilities and their families may not be aware of the range of services and programs available. Participants noted the need for youth and their fami-

lies to get information about high school coursework or training options, community based agencies such as Developmental Disabilities Services or VR, along with specialized programs for adults with disabilities.

Participants also talked about the need to reach out for assistance in order to benefit from these valuable support services. One young adult who had been fired from a series of jobs and floundered in a community college program, reflected on the need for young adults with disabilities to *"ask for help."* Other school and VR personnel remembered many individuals with disabilities who simply *"didn't seek services"* and lost opportunities for support. A special education teacher who was closely involved in providing individualized transition services to youth with multiple disabilities clarified the value of reaching out for services and supports:

> *Based on his experiences in school, I guess what I would say is reach out for the support that's available to you within the framework of the school. And if there are community based agencies that can also support your transition from high school, reach out for that advocacy early on.*

Recommendations for Teachers and School Staff

Table 3 provides a summary of major themes identified by the five respondent groups (school staff, young adults with disabilities, parents, employers, and VR counselors). These recommendations for teachers or other school staff were intended to assure more successful career and transition planning experiences, and promote positive post school outcomes for youth with disabilities. In this section, we present the four major recommendations for school staff that were identified by three or more of the participant groups.

LISTEN TO STUDENTS.
The most common recommendation offered for school staff was to carefully listen to students' hopes, dreams, and desires. An overwhelming majority of the responses from young adults with disabilities fell into this category. This was also the most often cited piece of advice offered by parents and VR counselors.

Young adults in the study often spoke of the need for teachers to *"listen better"* or *"pay attention"* to the needs and interests of students with disabilities. Instead of making career or transition plans for students, one young woman with a physical disability asked that school staff *"just take the time to really, really listen to kids. Listen to what they think and what they want. Because that is going to determine their success more than you tell-* *ing them what you think they should do."* A parent in the study reinforced the importance of active listening skills, advising school staff to *"sit down and not think of anything else but that person that is in front of you. Listen to why they are saying what they are saying."* Along the same lines, a VR counselor recommended, *"You've really got to listen to them. One of the most important things that we can't do with kids is squash their dreams."*

In addition to respectfully listening to student input, participants believed it was vital for school staff to utilize this information to shape individualized career and transition services. Young adults and parents both felt it was essential to ask students with disabilities for their ideas, and then use this information to determine their sup-

Table 3

Recommendations for Teachers and Staff: Themes in Rank Order by Respondent Group

Respondent Group	Major Themes Identified
School staff (N = 35)	1. Provide opportunities for career exploration 2. Listen to and support students 3. Promote independence 4. Connect students with services and supports
Young adults with disabilities (N = 33)	1. Listen to and support students 2. Provide opportunities for career exploration 3. Promote independence 4. Offer special skills training
Parents (N = 28)	1. Listen to and support students 2. Provide opportunities for career exploration 3. Increase communication and collaboration 4. Connect students with services and supports
Employers (N = 22)	1. Offer special skills training 2. Provide opportunities for career exploration 3. Promote independence 4. Listen to and support students
Vocational Rehabilitation counselors (N = 15)	1. Listen to and support students 2. Provide opportunities for career exploration 3. Connect students with services and supports 4. Increase communication and collaboration

port needs and goals. One long time special education teacher described this student centered planning approach, noting that transition staff need to always, *"Look at people as individuals. Start with the positive. Work with the ability before you look at the disability."* A VR counselor reinforced the importance of utilizing student direction and input. In talking about the career planning process for young adults with disabilities on his caseload, he noted,

> *I would say, listen to them. And some kids don't want to go to college but they want to have a vocation of some sort. Let's help them do that. You know if a guy wants to be a nurse, cool. We need nurses. And if a girl wants to be a truck driver, cool. I've got a young woman right now that wants to drive a truck. And I've been the first person that has been able to work with her.*

PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPLORE CAREER OPTIONS.

The second recommendation offered consistently by participants from all five respondent groups was for school staff to provide extensive career exploration and career planning activities during high school. This was the most frequent recommendation from school staff and the second most common theme identified by young adults, parents, employers, and VR counselors.

Participants from all groups described the need for school staff to offer a variety of community based experiences, ensuring that youth with disabilities participate in as *"many things as they can"* during high school. Many professionals spoke of the need to get students out of the classroom and into the *"real world"* in order to learn valuable skills and gain an understanding of the workforce. One teacher reinforced the value of community internships and

work experiences, saying,

> *I think most of our teachers know this, but I think it is important to provide as many experiences as we can that are real. In the field. I do a lot of internships with kids and after they are done they say, "That was the best thing I've ever done." So you know sometimes I think in education we get all caught up in what we're doing here at school and sometimes it doesn't have anything really to do with what they are doing in the real world. I think kids need to have those experiences. In fact, I know they have to have them.*

This early and ongoing exposure to a variety of career options was a crucial element that participants identified for successful post school planning.

A second component of career exploration was for school staff to help students with disabilities get complete information about a range of post school training options. One young adult commented, *"You don't need to go to college to be somebody. Remember that there are lots of other options."* Many participants suggested that school and adult services personnel provide detailed information on career options and a variety of possible post school training programs. One VR counselor noted,

> *Be very specific on what the options are, and where those years are going rather than just presenting a program with no context around it. So present it with follow-up. If you choose this program this may lead to a career in food service. If you choose this program this may lead into mechanical (work). Be very specific because a lot of times the kids that are participating in these programs are not able to see what the goal is.*

PROMOTE INDEPENDENCE.

Three of the five respondent groups described the need for

high school personnel to promote independence and allow opportunities for autonomous decision making. School staff, young adults with disabilities, and employers identified independence as a fundamental strategy in preparing students with disabilities for adult roles in the community.

Many school staff focused on the power of providing choices, and allowing students a high degree of control in making decisions. A high school transition specialist suggested that, *"Instead of having your own agenda, build an agenda with the students and really make an effort to give choices and options. Let that person feel the power that comes with being independent and making your own choices."* Another special education teacher who worked primarily with students with developmental disabilities echoed this need to provide opportunities for independent decision making, even if it seems clear that a student's plan may not succeed.

> *And the other thing is to always have a Plan B. If a student is making a choice that you don't think is best, then just say, "Let's try it your way and if that doesn't work out maybe we could do this. Just come back and see me or let's see how we do." Because that way you don't take ownership away from the person that you're trying to help, but rather you're helping them to learn the skills to manage their own world.*

In addition to promoting independence, it was clear that school staff should be careful not to limit students with disabilities or make any assumptions about their skills and abilities. One young man stated simply, *"Don't underestimate us,"* while a high school transition specialist offered this advice:

> *I would encourage teachers not to have any sort of preconceived ideas about any stu-*

dents with disabilities, or try to steer them in different directions based on their own limited ideas of what you think they are capable of doing.

Another school staff member talked about the transition process for a young woman with learning disabilities who struggled to complete high school and eventually moved away from home and landed a high paying job working on a fishing vessel in another state. Her story inspired this participant to reflect on the power of holding onto dreams. *"Let them have their dreams. If kids talk about things like that maybe it will become a reality. Kids can often surprise us. I always say that [Name] is a kid that surprised a lot of people."*

CONNECT STUDENTS WITH SERVICES AND SUPPORTS.

Participants also recommended that school staff be aware of the broad array of services and supports available for youth with disabilities. School staff, parents, and VR counselors all described this as a key theme.

Similar to the recommendation for students with disabilities, participants felt it was critical for school staff to be aware of specific transition programs or support that might be available to assist with career planning, vocational skill building, job development, or transition to post secondary training programs. One particular resource that seemed to be vastly underutilized was Disability Services programs at community colleges or other post secondary institutions. School staff were advised to make personal connections with these services, and then facilitate referrals as needed. A high school special education teacher talked about the value of making these connections saying, *"The only advice I would give would be to stay in touch with*

those around you who are able to help. Use all the resources you can — take advantage of them." This type of collaborative service delivery model was identified as an important element in promoting a successful transition from school to post school environments.

Discussion

Our in-depth interviews with young adults with disabilities and other key informants provided a set of recommendations designed to improve transition services and post school outcomes. These recommendations, which drew upon participants' individual transition experiences and expertise, are quite consistent with the literature documenting best practices in transition (Johnson et al., 2002; NASET, 2005). Study findings confirm the importance of student directed career and transition planning, career exploration, work experience, and building connections with high school and post school resources.

This study had several limitations that should be noted when interpreting the findings. One potential limitation that applies to all qualitative research is the generalizability to other settings or other populations (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003). Sampling procedures also limited the study. Case study participants were selected according to tightly defined criteria and included only young adults with disabilities and key informants from a single Western state. Further research from other regions of the country is needed to confirm these themes and further elaborate on needed services. Finally, our analysis focused solely on responses to two broad questions, therefore the data were constrained by these questions. Participants provided an extensive set of recommendations for students

with disabilities, teachers, and other school staff. In retrospect, it would have been useful to also ask for recommendations for parents or other community agency personnel. In addition, more detailed questions soliciting input on satisfaction with various components of transition services and supports would have enriched the data set.

Despite these limitations, the study provided rich information to inform transition practices. Based on the interview data, we identified four primary themes for students with disabilities who are preparing for the transition from school to work including: (a) increase self knowledge and self awareness in order to make informed career choices, (b) exhibit high levels of motivation and persistence to achieve self identified goals, (c) take advantage of opportunities for career exploration and community based work experiences during high school, and (d) access transition services and post school supports. Study participants also offered recommendations for special education teachers or other school staff who are preparing youth with disabilities for the transition from school to work. The four primary themes for school staff included: (a) listen carefully to students' interests, hopes, and dreams, and use this information as the basis for developing individualized career services, (b) provide extensive opportunities for career exploration and community based experiences, (c) promote student self direction and independent decision making, and (d) connect students with appropriate services and supports available through school or community agencies.

In examining these recommendations across research questions and respondent groups, several overarching issues emerge, which are dis-

cussed briefly here. First, study participants identified a set of *student attributes and skills,* which previous researchers have linked to positive post school employment outcomes (Doren et al., in press; Gerber et al., 1992; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). These key skills include self awareness, knowledge of career goals and interests, self confidence, motivation, determination, and persistence. If students with disabilities can understand and identify their own values, needs, abilities, aptitudes, skills, and interests, they will be able to make more informed career choices. In addition, having the motivation and persistence to follow through with these choices will increase the likelihood of stable employment (Lindstrom & Benz, 2002; Gerber et al., 1992).

These individual skills and attitudes are the foundation for developing and accomplishing career and transition goals. As Whitney-Thomas and Moloney (2003) found in their study of student self definition and struggle, "through the development of a clearer sense of self and vision for the future, all students, including those with disabilities, could take a more active and self determining role in the accomplishment of their goals," (p. 386). Although some students with disabilities may display these skills and behaviors naturally, special educators need to provide instruction in self determination strategies and offer structured opportunities to build self knowledge and self awareness in order to facilitate more effective transitions.

Second, our study participants also described a set of corresponding *teacher skills and attitudes*, which promote student self determination and independent decision making. Rather than moving all students through an array of predetermined career inventories, educators need to facilitate an extended process of exploration and decision making (Lindstrom et al., 2004; Morningstar, 1997). It is critical for school staff to carefully listen to student hopes, dreams, and interests without making any judgments or holding onto any preconceived notions about what is "realistic." Transition personnel need to carefully guide and facilitate, without restricting possible career options.

School staff also need to be flexible, allowing for a gradual learning process that may not follow a predictable scope and sequence. Although professionals certainly have expertise and knowledge to share, we must allow our students to learn and grow at their own pace by facing their own set of challenges in the community. Transition personnel should be willing to truly individualize services, while at the same time offering multiple opportunities for students to experience failures and successes as they grow and develop into adult roles.

Finally, our interviews offered a set of *school and program services* designed to increase post school success. Consistent with previous literature (e.g., Morningstar, 1997; NASET, 2005; NCWD, 2006) our study documented the importance of providing a variety of career exploration opportunities designed to expose students to a broad range of career options. Job shadows, job site visits, and guest speakers can help provide a clearer vision of the world of work and the demands of various career options. Community based work experiences were also endorsed as a venue for building employability skills and preparing for the realities of the working world.

In addition, students and school staff were encouraged to learn about and access a range of community supports and services to facilitate the transition process. Specific school and community based programs can offer much needed supports to increase success in both post secondary education and employment environments (Johnson et al., 2002; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003). However, knowledge of transition services is not enough. Young adults with disabilities and their families need to ask for assistance, and school staff need to facilitate these relationships with post school agencies during high school to ensure seamless service delivery models.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Our findings lead to a set of specific recommendations to facilitate skill building and movement from school to post school environments. Based on data across the respondent groups, we have created a list of recommended activities/strategies for high school students with disabilities as well as teachers and other school staff. (See Table 4.) These recommendations are grouped into three major categories: (a) increase self knowledge and promote self determination, (b) explore careers options and gain work experience, and (c) access transition services and supports.

Results from this study confirm the importance of students gaining knowledge, understanding, and insight into who they are and what they want. Self awareness and self knowledge are critical building blocks for other transition skills. In order to facilitate the developmental process of preparation for adult roles, teachers and other key personnel need to truly listen to students and base the design of each transition program on in-

Table 4

Recommendations for Practice

Theme	STUDENT activities/strategies	SCHOOL STAFF activities/strategies
Self knowledge, self determination	• Complete self assessments, interest inventories, or other career planning tools to determine strengths, skills, interests, values • Learn about your disability and accommodations need • Participate actively in career and transition planning activities • Be persistent; strive to meet your goals	• Set individual meetings with students to discuss interests and develop possible career goals • Listen carefully to student dreams and use these as a basis for planning services • Investigate and utilize self determination curriculum and student centered planning approaches
Career exploration and work experience	• Investigate a variety of career options • Participate in as many work experiences as possible during high school • Build work skills through on-the-job training	• Provide multiple options for career exploration including job shadows, job site visits, and guest speakers • Allow each student to explore the full extent of his/her abilities • Offer supervised community based work experiences in areas of student interest • Present clear information about post school training opportunities
Transition services and supports	• Learn about school and community resources • Don't be afraid to ask for help in post secondary or post school employment environments	• Gain information about in school and post school employment, educational, or other community programs • Build relationships and collaborate with staff from these programs • Refer students and facilitate positive connections

dividual needs and interests, ensuring that each student receives the training, experiences, services, and supports necessary to promote the most positive post school outcomes possible.

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