

## Enhancing and Evaluating Content on Teambuilding in a Graduate Transition Course

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this qualitative study was to demonstrate and evaluate the incorporation of teambuilding training into a graduate course on transition. A total of 33 students in two different sections of the course participated in six exercises focusing on group development and teambuilding and a group simulation. Students provided input about their perceptions of the teambuilding exercises and their own teambuilding skills in the form of journals and questionnaires. The group simulation was videotaped to provide data regarding the student's acquired skills in a structured group setting. The results demonstrated that a majority of students expressed positive opinions about the teambuilding content and that the knowledge and skills taught were applicable in transition team environments.*

### Introduction

For students with disabilities, the transition from school to adult life is critical for successful community integration. Appropriate educational planning, instruction, and support services during school and the development of relationships with community and adult services are all necessary components in successful transition. To achieve these outcomes, transition teams rely on a comprehensive and longitudinal planning process involving professionals in the fields of special education, vocational education, and related disciplines (Baer, 2005). In principle, the student and his or her parents also play a critical role in developing and implementing the transition plan. In accordance with IDEIA (2004), all of these individuals engage in the transition process as equal partners with an emphasis on team approaches.

The make-up of the team is well established, but equal and cooperative participation in the team remains a challenge. Person-centered approaches suggest the active participation and equal involvement of students and families in the planning process (Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004). However, for many students with disabilities and their parents, their experience is summed up by Rocks (2000), "Traditionally, the IEP meeting has become a meaningless ritual in which teachers dictate the prescribed educational program and then pass the ceremonial pen to parents to secure their signature" (p. 32). Parents often do not see themselves as effective partners in the transition process (Hanley-Maxwell,

Pogoloff, & Whitney-Thomas, 1998). The perceptions by parents and other transition partners that they are not valued contributors in the planning process serve as an indicator that planning is not a genuine and effective team process (Salember & Furney, 1997; Wehmeyer, 1998).

A model in which members cooperate in a coordinated planning process and are also willing to put aside turf issues and meld some elements of their professional roles is the transdisciplinary team (Baer, 2005; Simmons, Flexer & Bauder 2005; Lyon & Lyon, 1980). Through "role release" team members who hold transdisciplinary values embrace the student and parents as equal partners and share responsibilities in planning and service delivery across professional domains. The ability to engage in a transdisciplinary process by professionals is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. It requires both an intent to act in a transdisciplinary manner and training and practice in group work. In order to understand how the transition team can function as an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary team, functional models of team process and group development need to be reviewed.

One such model of cooperative team process that has been widely utilized in industry for several decades is drawn from the methodology of total quality management. Based on the works of Deming (1994) and Ishikawa (1985), the quality control circle is a small group of individuals with a vested interest in analyzing and modifying a particular process toward the goal of improved quality and efficiency of the end product. The

circle members work together to analyze the situation and create solutions through a group process emphasizing equality. Equal value is placed on the contributions of each member regardless of his/her position or rank outside of the group. Decisions by the group are achieved through a consensus of all of the members. The quality circle, along with other processes from total quality management, has been widely utilized in Japan since the 1950's and is considered a major factor in Japanese industrial pre-eminence in electronics and automotive markets worldwide (Creech, 1994).

Recent research suggests that college and university programs are not sufficiently addressing the area of team collaboration in the preparation of transition professionals. Anderson et al. (2004), in a survey of 573 higher education programs dealing with transition content in personnel preparation, found that "both the perceived importance of collaboration competencies and the amount of time dedicated to teaching collaboration competencies are relatively low compared to other competency areas. . . . Few models, strategies, and research on collaboration for transition provide a conceptual base for teaching such content to prospective practitioners" (p. 156). In addressing the need for comprehensive personnel preparation in transition and career development, Blalock et al. (2004) reviewed the diversity of roles of professionals involved in transition services and emphasized the need for teamwork among so many individuals.

Actual transition planning teams need to look more like the models of effective group process and less like those teams whose practices are perceived by parents, students, and other transition partners as lacking

opportunities for meaningful input by all members. One step to improving team functioning in the school setting is the development of teambuilding skills as a part of transition coursework. To this end, university curriculum and coursework for transition professionals must include infusion strategies to promote the development of effective teambuilding skills and competencies as an integral part of their curriculum and instructional methodologies. This study represents a first step toward expanding the preparation of the secondary special education teacher and transition specialist to include teambuilding.

The purpose of this article is to describe a strategy for operationalizing transdisciplinary team theory as applied in special education planning within a transition course. The design of the project was to train graduate students in team building and analytical strategies derived from group process and total quality management within the context of a graduate course in transition. The research questions for this qualitative study focused on assessing both the graduate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the teambuilding exercises on the development of their teambuilding skills and their ability to apply teambuilding skills in a structured group simulation.

To address these research questions, three forms of data were collected from the students: questionnaire responses, journal entries, and videotapes of the group simulation activities of each group. Triangulation was achieved through the analysis of these three data sources. The usefulness of the strategies was determined by the students' opinions about the value of the exercises and their self-assessment of the improve-

ment in their own team skills as a result of training as well as by their demonstrated ability to apply teambuilding skills in a simulated team activity.

## Method

### *Participants*

The sample for this study consisted of 33 graduate students who were enrolled in two different sections of *Transition Programs and Services*—a graduate level course in special education at a large mid-western university. The sample consisted of practicing transition specialists, secondary special education teachers, and pre-service full-time graduate students enrolled in a transition specialist graduate program. The students brought a wide range of teaching experience in special education, from less than one year to fifteen years working in rural, urban, and suburban school districts. All of the students had some current level of professional involvement with transition-aged students with disabilities. The majority of the students had current or prior involvement with the university's Transition Center and were participating in the class under the sponsorship of an Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (U.S. Department of Education) personnel preparation grant.

The students were asked to indicate prior group experience or training they had and the setting. Two students indicated some training in total quality management through employers other than school districts (i.e., Department of Human Services), and several participants indicated that they had done group work (such as role playing or group projects) as part of other teacher education classes. None of the participants had participated in specific teambuilding training in the past.

## Teambuilding Curriculum and Activities

Six exercises drawn from two different quality management training programs were selected for inclusion in the course. These activities were selected to provide students with theoretical knowledge of team and group concepts and processes as well as practical methods for organizing and analyzing information and achieving consensus in the team setting. The order of the exercises was designed to allow the students first to develop a base of knowledge about group stages and interactions, then to learn and practice specific skills and competencies related to team practice, and, finally, to apply the knowledge and skills in a team setting. Graduate students completed five sessions encompassing six exercises, followed by a simulated team activity. There were six exercises presented in the order which follows.

### LIFE MAPS

Pairs of students interviewed each other using set questions, charted the responses on poster paper, and presented a profile of their partner to the class. The questions elicited information about the interviewees' educational and employment background, personal experience with disabilities, current interests, and long-term goals. The exercise is a standard ice breaker for developing group cohesiveness. It is also useful as an information-gathering tool to be used in the assessment of students with disabilities.

### WHAT'S YOUR SYMBOL?

Students were asked to choose one of four geometric shapes which best symbolized their personality. The students were then placed in discussion groups based on their selection, and the group brainstormed to identify common personality

characteristics of the members. The groups then shared the results with the other groups and compared their responses to lists of characteristics developed by the exercise's creator. This exercise demonstrates how differing personalities contribute to the make-up of a group. It also provides an introduction to concepts of personality types which were later elaborated on in the career development section of the course content.

### COG'S LADDER

This activity illustrates the stages of group development as described in the Cog's Ladder model through a simulated team problem-solving task (Charrier, 1974). The Cog's Ladder stages were: (a) polite, (b) why we're here, (c) bid for power, (d) constructive, and (e) esprit; these stages parallel Tuckman's (Tuckman, 1965; Hills, 2002) group development stages but with more emphasis on the emotional and confrontational aspects of group interaction. Following a lecture on the stages of group development, students were arranged into a task group and an observation group. The task group was given a problem to solve by consensus within 20 minutes. The observers noted the task group's movement through the stages as well as significant comments or events in the group process. At the end of the process, members of both groups shared their impressions of the experience. The exercise effectively demonstrates the movement of a task group through progressive stages to resolution as well as how individuals assume roles and form alliances as part of the group process.

### BRAINSTORMING

Following a brief lecture outlining the types of brainstorming and guidelines, small student-led groups practiced freely generating ideas using three differ-

ent methods of brainstorming (i.e., free-form, round robin, slip). Students focused on special education and transition-related subjects during the brainstorming, such as community resources for transition planning and potential on-campus jobs for a supported employment program. Students shared their results with classmates (*due to student misunderstanding or instructor miscommunication, there were no journal entries for this exercise*).

### FISHBONE DIAGRAM

Following a lecture/demonstration on the use of a fishbone diagram to graphically display a transition goal (Ishikawa, 1985), small groups of students were given a sample transition plan. They then diagrammed the goals, objectives, and activities on the fishbone chart for each of the three transition goals.

### GANTT CHART

In small groups, students developed a responsibility matrix from the information contained in a sample transition plan. The responsibility matrix delineates calendar deadlines and responsible parties for Individualized Education Program goals, objectives, and activities in a chronological fashion. The students used the matrix to sequence the objectives and activities leading to the attainment of a transition goal and to indicate the responsible parties for service delivery.

## Group Simulation

After the completion of the training exercises, students were given the opportunity to demonstrate the team skills learned by participating in a simulated team activity focusing on planning transition services for secondary students with disabilities. Groups of five to six students were given the task of designing a school-wide program related to providing transition services for a mild-

moderate population in a high school setting. The mission charged to each group was to determine by consensus a plan for the program within a \$5,000 budget. The groups were given a two-hour time frame to complete the task. The groups were videotaped throughout the process, and the tapes were analyzed by the researcher to determine the success of the group based on:

1. The movement of the group through the developmental stages to consensus.
2. The group's use of specific teambuilding tools such as brainstorming and the Gantt chart in their process.

The six exercises were taught as part of five consecutive classes of a semester-long graduate course focusing on transition from school to adult life for special educators and transition specialists. The Gantt chart and fishbone diagram were taught together in one session. The teambuilding sessions lasted about 45 minutes to one hour out of each three-hour class session over a five-week period. The group simulation exercise was conducted in a single two-hour session following completion of the teambuilding sessions. The activities were designed to be integrated into the curriculum of a graduate course on transition, and the content of the exercises was selected to impart or reinforce the transition content of the overall course.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

Students maintained a journal throughout the training period, and they were instructed to complete a one- to two-paragraph entry for each training session and the simulation exercise. The students were given instructions to describe each exercise and their impressions about it without further direction to allow the students an

open forum. The journal data were analyzed using the qualitative method of inductive analysis, in which statements are analyzed for emerging themes and categories inherent in the data (Patton, 1995). The journal entries were divided into individual statements; and through re-reading and analysis of the statements, the emerging (indigenous) themes of description, opinion, or application were identified. Each statement was classified into one of these three categories. Description statements were defined as comments describing the exercise content and activities and/or the student's role in that. Opinion statements were defined as comments expressing positive or negative feelings, insights, opinions, judgments, and suggestions regarding the exercise. Application statements were defined as comments which indicate an understanding of how the exercise or its lessons can be applied to other situations, including IEP and transition planning processes. This category also applies to comments reflecting the student's application of the concepts to past experiences. Opinion statements were further analyzed and classified as positive, neutral, or negative. Each statement was also classified by the specific exercise to which it pertained prior to the research as sensitizing categories.

The final team simulation exercise for each group was videotaped in its entirety by a stationary camera. The tapes were viewed by the researcher and another rater and analyzed to determine two factors. First, each group was assessed on their movement through the team stages per Cog's Ladder (Charrier, 1974) culminating in a consensus decision. In addition, the researcher identified the use of specific teambuilding

tools such as brainstorming and the Gantt Chart. Agreement between the raters was 100% on team stages and 95% on tool use.

At the end of the training period, each student completed a questionnaire covering the effectiveness of the training and the student's perception of his/her skill improvement. The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions in two sections. The questions in the first section used Likert scales to rate the applicability of the overall training. The second section of the questionnaire asked students to rate the effectiveness of each of the six exercises. Frequencies, means, and standard deviations were calculated for each of the questions in the first two sections of the questionnaire.

## **Results**

### ***Journal Analysis***

Several patterns and trends emerged from the inductive analysis of the journal data. A cross categorization of the indigenous and sensitizing themes shows the frequency of descriptive, opinion, or application coded statements for each specific exercise (see Table 1). The overall number of comments for the Cog's Ladder exercise was 98, 30.6% of the total of 320 comments. This was the highest frequency of comments for any of the exercises. The Fishbone diagram and the Gantt Chart had the lowest number of comments at 34 (10.7%) each. Of the indigenous categories, the most comments fell into the Opinion category (165 of 320 or 52%). The application category had the least number of comments at 61(19%).

Each of the 165 narrative units which had been coded under the indigenous category of opinion were reviewed and rated as positive, negative, or neutral. The positive rating was used for comments which included such adjectives as "good",

“cool”, or “excellent”, such verbs as “enjoyed” and “liked” in describing the exercise, and those comments otherwise expressing a favorable attitude toward the exercise. The negative rating was used for comments which were critical of the exercises, using such adjectives as “redundant”, “underdone”, and “hard to understand”. This category also included comments which described negative experiences or interactions within an exercise, or self-critical comments (primarily the Cog’s Ladder and group simulation exercises) although not necessarily critical of the exercise itself. The neutral rating included those comments using the ambiguous adjective “interesting”, as well as comments which gave insights and observations not readily identifiable as positive or negative. The greatest number of opinions (44.8%) was rated by the researcher as positive. Less than one quarter

(23.7%) of the opinions were rated as negative.

The following statements are excerpts from the student journals organized by the specific exercises (sensitizing categories). In selecting sample comments from the journals, we focused on the indigenous categories of opinion and application as the comments in these categories are more evaluative than comments in the descriptive category.

For *Life Maps*, students wrote about the usefulness of the exercise to overcome difficulties in information gathering and discussing long-term visions with the student and family. One student journaled that “It is sometimes hard to think on the spot about exact interests and favorite things or topics,” noting the difficulty of thinking years ahead and the reluctance of parents to share information on their child. *Life Maps* can be useful for discuss-

ing decisions on where parents see their child living or what they want for their child in terms of employment, which are often gray areas. Another student pointed out how the exercise “would help the special education teacher develop a transition plan for each student by exploring their likes and dislikes. A vision statement could be developed by finding out their goals. . . .”

Students wrote quite favorably in their journals about *What’s Your Symbol?* Many of them made insightful comments about the exercise and their participation. One student noted the following: “I enjoyed the opportunity to learn more about my peers, our commonalities, and differences.” Students reflected on the value of self understanding as exemplified in this next statement from one of them: “The activity was creative in the fact that I had come up with reasons that I was a tri-

Table 1  
Cross-Categorization of Narrative Units from Journal Data by Sensitizing and Indigenous Categories<sup>a</sup>

*Sensitizing/ Brainstorming Categories*

Indigenous Categories	Description	Opinion	Application	Total
Life Maps	8	22	17	47
What’s Your Symbol?	13	41	10	64
Cog’s Ladder	37	50	11	98
Fishbone	8	14	12	34
Gantt Chart	10	18	6	34
Group Simulation	18	20	5	43
Total	94	165	61	320

<sup>a</sup> Students did not make journal entries for brainstorming.

angle. I also liked the personality assessment that came with my symbol." Others, though, entertained new ideas about their personal characteristics as well as related the exercise to group concepts. It was noted that understanding others' personalities "is truly something people must recognize in order to get along." Another quote directly related to group process principles: "Sometimes it is just a matter of accepting each other's differences in order to work efficiently and effectively." Additional comments discussed the exercise's potential applications related to working with students as well as applications for collaboration and teamwork. Several of the students requested copies of the complete exercise and materials for use on their jobs. One student noted: "This activity was good for establishing teamwork and collaboration of team members."

*Cog's Ladder* drew the most feedback of any of the exercises. Several students were able to relate the stages of group development they observed in the exercise to their experiences in special education planning on the job. One student noted that "The activity we did on group development was helpful in understanding the different stages. It is interesting to see how a group goes through these stages while figuring out an issue. It is helpful to know and recognize these stages, since we will be collaborating with others on a regular basis."

Another student said, "Understanding the levels really helps when trying to deal with difficult situations, such as IEP, transition, or MFE (Multi-Factored Evaluation) meetings that sometimes get very tense."

Most of the students related the *Fishbone* to the IEP planning process in their comments. A student commented that "The Fishbone diagram is an excel-

lent visual tool for showing the progression of goals and objectives over several years."

Several of the students demonstrated an understanding of how to apply the *Gantt Chart* to the IEP as a timeline and breakdown of responsibilities by team member. Students noted that the purpose of the chart is also to establish the ideas and sequential steps that are developed during the meeting. It is used as a tool to summarize and display information at a transition or IEP meeting, it assigns each part of the task to someone, and it gives a due date. Thus, everyone involved knows who is doing what and when it will be completed. Some of the students felt that the chart was redundant with information already in the IEP document and, thus, unnecessary.

### *Team Simulation*

Videotapes were made of each group during the group simulation exercise and these tapes were analyzed to determine if students moved through the group development stages described in *Cog's Ladder* (Charrier, 1974) and to identify if the groups used specific techniques learned in class. The tapes were viewed using a review form with notations for the movement through each of the five stages. The form also included a section to check off the groups' use of brainstorming, the *Gantt Chart*, and the fishbone diagram. Videotapes of three groups were analyzed. Two of the three groups moved through all five of the stages with the active involvement of all group members and achieved a consensus on their proposal. The third group experienced problems from the onset. The group was dominated by a single member who brought a pre-conceived idea to the group which he pushed relentlessly. This group became stagnated in the

Bid for Power and was unable to proceed into a Constructive phase as other members of the group declined to actively participate and the dominant member completed the proposal on his own.

All three of the groups employed the technique of brainstorming in their process. Each of the groups used brainstorming to identify potential program options. Groups One and Two also utilized the *Gantt Chart* in order to sequentially organize and create a timeline for their proposal. Group Two also outlined their proposal on a fishbone-type chart. In their journals, students had both positive and negative comments on the group simulation—mostly reflective of their group.

### *Questionnaire Ratings*

Table 2 presents data from the questionnaire items which revealed several means representing applicability, effectiveness, and overall skills about the training. With regard to application of teambuilding, a mean of 1.86 (item #2) on a five-point scale indicated that the respondents recognized the usefulness of teambuilding skills in the IEP/transition planning process. Likewise, the rating of useful in their job (item #1) fell between strongly agree and agree. In evaluating the effectiveness of the individual exercises, the rating for brainstorming fell between highly and somewhat effective based on a three-point scale. All of the individual exercises were rated as somewhat effective or highly effective by at least 75% of the respondents, with all item means below two.

### *Discussion*

It is the role of special educators and transition specialists to facilitate IEP teams in supporting successful outcomes and to ensure the participation of all group members. In order to be

effective in this role, special education professionals need specific training and experience in group process and teambuilding skills. It is important to assess the effectiveness of specific training methodologies in developing team competencies and to determine the perceived benefits of the training by the participants. An emphasis is placed on the impor-

tance of team approaches in curricula for preparing transition professionals, but practical instruction in team and group processes and skills is largely absent from teacher and transition specialist preparation programs (Anderson et al., 2004).

This study developed and tested an approach to enhancing content in a graduate course emphasizing specific teambuilding

skills. Specifically, for the students in this study who were practicing transition daily in their jobs or field placements, overall opinions regarding the usefulness of the exercises was positive. The majority of students rated all six of the individual exercises and the group simulation as effective. A majority of the students also rated the overall teambuilding training as something that would be useful in their jobs. Many of the students were also able to identify actual and potential applications for some of the specific exercises in special education and transition planning and in working with students and co-workers. Although caution is warranted due to the subjective nature of student perceptions, these results confirmed the researcher's expectations that students would respond favorably to the training.

The demonstration of positive student attitudes toward the use of group work in this context is a first step in moving toward the ideal of the transdisciplinary team (Baer, 2005). Role release (Lyon & Lyon, 1980) can only be achieved when individual team members recognize the advantages of working together as a team over working separately. Transdisciplinary process occurs when responsibility for meeting the student's needs is shared, and professionals are able to transcend the habit of operating separately within their own professional framework.

The majority of the students also were able to demonstrate the ability to participate and utilize teambuilding skills in a simulated group task. Two of the three groups achieved a successful outcome by consensus for the assigned task. In the case of the third group, even though they did not achieve a true consensus, some members

**Table 2**  
**Means and Standard Deviations for Teambuilding Questionnaire**

Program Application Items	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. Useful in my job	27	1.96	0.611
2. Applied to IEP planning	28	1.86	0.953
3. Training benefit for students w/ disabilities	28	1.96	0.865
4. Training benefit for parents	28	2.14	0.935
5. More training	28	2.36	1.042
Exercise Effectiveness Items	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
6. Life Maps	27	1.70	0.761
7. What's Your Symbol?	26	1.62	0.738
8. Cog's Ladder	25	1.84	0.731
9. Brainstorming	27	1.41	0.562
10. Fishbone	28	1.82	0.804
11. Gantt	26	1.92	0.729
12. Group Simulation	27	1.59	0.733

were able to identify the problems that the group experienced in their journal entries, indicating an understanding of one of the pitfalls of team process—aggressive or domineering members. All three groups used at least one of the teambuilding techniques presented in the course.

The importance of the results in this study is that the positive attitudes expressed by the participants to a systematic and coordinated teambuilding program demonstrated a recognition that such a program is a useful and desirable addition to instruction in transition. Implicit in this is some degree of intuitive understanding by the participants of a team-oriented role in the transition planning process and the need for specific training to develop the skills for this role. The research is also unique because the teambuilding training used in the research was derived from the methodologies of total quality management and organizational development, more commonly associated with business and industry. The dual focus of integrating team strategies and transition subject matter was an intentional strategy of the instructional design and was considered carefully in the adaptation of the training exercises. The importance of the results is also reflected in the participants' positive attitudes and opinions. The participants' openness toward trying methodologies from outside of traditional domains and their positive responses to them indicate that these individuals are not only willing to seek to improve themselves in non-traditional ways, but they are accepting of new and unique methodologies in teacher education as long as the purpose and value are clear.

### Limitations

The results and conclusions of this research were drawn pri-

marily from qualitative methodologies and this should be taken into account when considering generalization of the research outcomes and implications. The sample for this research was limited only to graduate students in one program at one university. This research examined only a small part of the repertoire of available teambuilding exercises used in total quality management and group process. This study did not examine the graduate students' generalization of the learned teambuilding skills to actual transition planning settings in public schools.

### Implications

The use of group activities is not unusual in teacher education coursework. Instructional methodologies in teacher education typically include activities such as role-playing, discussion groups, and group projects in the context of graduate education classes. These traditional group activities generally were used to reinforce lecture content or allow for practice of learned skills. The importance of the exercises presented in this article is that the exercises involve the use of a coordinated and systematic program of group and team activities. This study supported the concept that the roles of the special educator and transition professional require a high degree of competency in collaboration skills (Baer, 2005; deFur & Taymans, 1995).

The outcome of this research leads to more questions and implications for future research. While this project focused on teambuilding training as part of a university course, similar training could also be arranged in an in-service model in public schools. The trainees could include regular education teachers, administrators, support personnel, parents, and stu-

dents in addition to special education teachers. In this setting, follow up to determine if the processes are being applied to the actual IEP/transition planning process is possible.

### Conclusions

The majority of students did indicate, across data sources, that they felt they developed and improved their teambuilding skills as a result of the teambuilding training. Students expressed positive opinions about the exercises, expressed the opinion that their skills improved, and stated actual and potential applications for the skills and techniques used in their jobs. In addition, the majority of students were able to demonstrate application of teambuilding skills in a simulated task. There is a need in the field of special education and transition to realize in practical terms the theoretical concepts and legal mandates for teams of professionals, parents, and students with disabilities to develop and implement IEP and transition services and activities. Transition and special education professionals need to take the leading role in making sure that all potential team participants are included in the process in a meaningful way. This research is a beginning step toward the goal of developing the role of the transition and special education professional as a team facilitator in special education planning.

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