

Transition Services for Students with Significant Disabilities: Building Successful Collaborations among School Professionals

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Abstract

Students who have significant disabilities have the same aspirations as their non-disabled peers: living productive, enriched, and self-determined lives. Adolescent-to-adulthood transition services have the potential to help position students with disabilities to obtain the best possible outcomes, thereby helping them lead full and included adult lives. It is vital that school and community-based support professionals act in concert with students with significant disabilities and their families to develop and implement successful transition services. This article discusses how partnerships across disciplines can help position students with disabilities for the best possible outcomes during the crucial period of their transition from the United States secondary school setting to adulthood. Perspectives and suggestions are presented for working collaboratively across fields to ensure successful transitions within the scope of practice of each professional area.

Keywords: disabilities, transition services, interprofessional collaboration

Educational and community professionals offer expertise that is vital to the success of students with special needs including those with significant disabilities in secondary school settings. However, once students graduate and transition into adulthood, many of the services previously delivered cease to exist, leaving these individuals without the supports they desperately need (Haber et al., 2016; Morgan & Riesen, 2016). The nature of disabilities encompasses all areas of development (communication, social, cognitive, play, motor, adaptive skills) and may necessitate involvement of multiple disciplines to bring about effective, long-ranging services. Positive effects of interdisciplinary transition services are well-documented; however, collaborative work among professionals is often lacking in secondary school settings across the United States (Boele, 2017; Kangas, 2018; Oertle et al., 2017). This is unfortunate because schools with coordinated efforts to promote self-determination and self-advocacy have seen an increase in these critical skills (Shogren, Garnier Villarreal, Lang, & Seo, 2017), leading to better transitions and improved life outcomes.

Davis et al. (2012) suggested that secondary school settings are the critical window for learning the skills related to post-secondary school living. Abilities such as social

interaction, choice-making, and independent living skill formation (King et al., 2018) pave the way for the development of self-determination, which is critical due to the link between self-determination and positive student outcomes (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Rifenbark, & Little, 2015). Service providers can also foster self-awareness and self-advocacy, which also lead to post-secondary independence. Collaboration among multiple service providers is paramount to the success of the process (Wehman et al., 2015). This article discusses practices to advance partnerships among the professionals who are critical in supporting students with significant disabilities as they transition from secondary school settings to adult roles. According to Li et al. (2009), the consensus among studies showed greater roles and responsibilities for secondary special education teachers for the coordination of transition services. Powell (2018) emphasized the vital function that speech-language pathologists (SLPs) play in the overall curriculum for students with communication disorders. School counselors also work with transitioning students by teaching skills that enable them to move into independence (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). Because of the parallels of the work of school counselors, special educators, and speech-language pathologists in addressing the needs of students in the transition process (Buckley & Mahdavi, 2018), the roles of these professionals are highlighted.

Transition Services

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act ([IDEA], 2004), transition is the process of moving from secondary school to post-secondary community-based living. While posing challenges for all young adults, this period is particularly demanding for individuals with disabilities and even more daunting for students with more significant support needs. Vocational and community living outcomes (e.g., employment, time with friends, engagement in the community, access to internet) are reportedly far less favorable for individuals with significant disabilities when compared to those with other or no disabilities (Sprunger et al., 2018). Research suggests that young adults with significant disabilities are far less likely to be enrolled in postsecondary and vocational programs, be employed, live independently, belong to organized community groups, and have friendships (Ule, 2017), leaving them socially isolated.

Predictors of positive adult outcomes for students with significant disabilities have been studied and include career awareness, inclusion in general education, work experience, self-determination and self-advocacy, parental involvement, self-care/independent living skills, social skills, vocational education, and work study (Mazzotti et al., 2016). The coordination, enactment, and promotion of programs and services related to these predictors require various stakeholders, including students and their families. Transition services help students with significant disabilities achieve their full potential and touch upon numerous domains, settings, timelines, and supports (Carter et al., 2014; Collier et al., 2015; Rowe et al., 2015).

In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (IDEA, 2004) provided guidelines for transition planning. By mandate, the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team is charged with transition plan development and must initiate the process before the student turns 16 years of age. The team should document the processes and outcomes assuring that the resulting plan is individualized as well as based on the strengths, preferences, and interests of the student. The goal of the process is a results-oriented plan that provides opportunities for skill development to prepare the student for what lies ahead whether furthering education, seeking employment, or living independently.

An Interdisciplinary Transition Team

The provision of comprehensive services by an efficient and collaborative team of interdisciplinary professionals is crucial to positive life outcomes for students with significant disabilities. A joint partnership allows for a holistic assessment of skills and needs and provides for a more decisive move into adulthood (Morningstar & Shoemaker, 2018; Wehman et al., 2015). Essential to this process is the integration of multiple viewpoints of individuals who are familiar with both the student and the environment into which the transition will take place. It is recommended that the composition of the transition team depend on the needs of the student and may include, in addition to the youth and their family, a wide range of service providers, such as special education teachers, speech-language pathologists (SLPs), school counselors, physical and occupational therapists, school administrators, school psychologists, school social workers, and rehabilitation counselors (Fabian et al., 2016). These community and academic professionals target the same developmental domains and provide complementary services, even using similar strategies at times but viewing the unique needs of transitioning students through different lenses (Butler, 2016). An understanding of a shared vision, open lines of communication, and mutual understanding are requisites for a successful partnership of professionals (Butler, 2016).

All members of the transition team bring valuable perspectives to the planning process that are critical to

delivering opportunities for continuing education, meaningful employment, and access to both community resources and recreation for students with significant disabilities as they transition from school to young adulthood. While these facets are crucial to all students' qualities of life, those with disabilities too often fall through the cracks as their supports drastically change after high school graduation (Haber et al., 2016; Hedges et al., 2014; Morgan & Riesen, 2016). Therefore, members of the transition team must be knowledgeable about their role as well as the roles of others in order to provide the needed services to this vulnerable student population.

Professional teaming skills can be developed through a number of different avenues. Frazier and colleagues (2019) recognized the value of not only transition services for individuals with disabilities but also the importance of interprofessional partnerships and outlined graduate coursework designed specifically to prepare school and community professionals on the art of interprofessional collaboration. Traditional coursework, the researchers posited, lacks the comprehensive and practical experiences needed to instruct future professionals on collaborative and interprofessional practices. Along with coursework offered at institutions of higher education, professionals can also hone skills and strategies via continuing education opportunities, which are increasingly accessible through professional organizations (Treiger, 2018). Access to first-rate preparation in transition and collaborative skills is essential to all professionals serving the unique needs of students with significant disabilities (Pearlman & Michaels, 2019).

Planning a Successful Transition

Successful transitions from school to adulthood involve much more than just compliance in paperwork on an IEP. Multiple perspectives add depth and individualization to the student assessment and planning framework. The vantage points of school and community professionals, students and their families who form the transition team aid in the evaluation and assessment of student skills and needs (Carter et al., 2014). One of the most essential aspects of the transition team is developing a shared vision that will support the unique needs of transitioning students and their families (Suc et al., 2017). The transition planning process must emphasize the active involvement of both the students and their families/legal guardians in order to create a plan that incorporates their goals for the future in terms of work, recreation, and independent living in the community as well as the needed supports for all of these.

Determining an end goal is a useful strategy to begin the collaboration process and will aid in the development of a joint vision to address the unique needs of the transitioning student (Roose et al., 2019; Wiczer et al., 2013). Starting with a conceptualization of the future, which incorporates the strengths and takes into account the challenges for the student, helps frame the discussion for the decisions ahead

and aids in identifying the gaps between the student's current state of performance, the behaviors and skills needed for the next level, as well as appropriate accommodations and changes to the current and future environment (Morgan & Riesen, 2016). It is imperative for the team to keep in mind that students with autism and other significant disabilities may need support communicating their wants and needs and may have difficulty with cognitive communication skills typically needed to plan for the future (Feeney et al., 2017). Therefore, it becomes imperative to embed each team member's knowledge of and experience with the youth into the planning process. For example, a team member may be aware of a transitioning youth's love of dogs and strengths in following multi-step directions. This knowledge could translate to possible employment as a groomer or as a community involvement opportunity as a dog walker for a local animal shelter. Once a positive and possible opportunity has been identified, transition goals can focus on skills needed for success.

If the identified future goal is employment, the transition team considers the behaviors and skills that are highly valued by employers. Time management, flexibility, problem-solving, taking initiative, and asking for help when it is needed can assist individuals in not only obtaining a job but also retaining employment as well (Walstrom & Malvey, 2015). Many of these skills are often included on IEPs throughout the school years to help students navigate academic settings (Lavay et al., 2015); however, if competitive employment is a goal for the student, providing opportunities to display these skills in real-life settings before the workforce will help foster these traits as students move into adulthood.

Research confirms that active collaboration between families and service providers results in a more tailored and appropriate process, which ultimately leads to more positive adult outcomes (Carter et al., 2014). The establishment of a network of professionals and resources designed to guide young adults as they navigate the uncharted territory of post-school life is imperative to ensuring success (Boele, 2017; Chen, 2019; Kangas, 2018; Shogren, Lee, & Panko, 2017).

Collaborative Role of Special Educators in Transition

In many school districts, special education teachers typically lead transition planning efforts for students with disabilities. Special educators assist and often lead the transition team in considering the requisite skills, services, and experiences that students with disabilities, particularly significant disabilities, will need to prepare for adult living, including employment, access and engagement in community events and recreation, independence at home, and adult social relationships (Shogren, Lee, & Panko, 2017). While coordinating the efforts of the transition team, the special educator also focuses on educational experiences necessary to develop skills and knowledge identified by the team.

As the instructional specialist, the special educator identifies student strengths, needs, and interests, aligns these with evidence-based instructional practices, works with interdisciplinary teams, the student, and their family to develop interventions based on team determined student goals, and monitors student progress, as well as the effectiveness of the intervention. The Council for Exceptional Children (2015), the national professional organization for special educators, extended the description of the role of the special educator into professional standards specific to special educators engaged in transition necessitating knowledge and skills in: (a) transition specific assessment aligned with post-secondary goals; (b) evidence-based instruction and curricula addressing employment and postsecondary preparation, skills in self-advocacy and self-determination; (c) community-based instruction relevant to the family and the individual student; (d) research informed programming; (e) advocacy and leadership specific to transition; (f) ethical approach to work and professional development; (g) collaboration with families, school-based and community-based professionals.

Although special educators are key to the transition planning process, it is also one area for which they report feeling less prepared (Ruppar et al., 2016). Additionally, teacher preparation programs continue to lag in provision of coursework that incorporates specific knowledge and competencies related to transition (Williams-Diehm et al., 2018). Given the crucial role of special educators in transition, this knowledge gap is critical for pre-service and school-based professional development programs to fill. It is vital that special education teachers have access to the latest evidence-based transition practices (Courtade et al., 2014) as well as the opportunity to hone their collaborative skills to build school-based teams that can meet the unique needs of a student with significant disabilities (Bonati, 2018).

The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) attended to this gap in knowledge and skills related to transition by identifying and organizing evidence- and research-based practices (Test et al., 2009). Resources have been created based on these practices, which can be utilized by special educators to support team-decisions on practices to embed into instructional design (see National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, <https://transitionta.org/>), as well as comprehensive transition planning specific to components of transition planning as well as specific needs of students (e.g., culturally and linguistically diverse youth, mental health and transition planning). These resources, while important to the work of special educators, can be made available to other school- and community-based professionals to aid them in their efforts related to transition.

Collaborative Role of Speech-Language Pathologists in Transition

Along with special educators, SLPs also teach important transition skills to students with disabilities. Speech and language services in both primary and secondary school settings focus on communication for success in the academic arena, in addition to social skill supports designed to foster relationships with peers and school faculty. As students transition to adult settings, the SLP guides the transition team as they consider requisite skills for adult living, including employment, access to community events and recreation, and adult social relationships. SLPs understand communication needs of students with significant disabilities as well as the technology required for transitioning students to be successful in work, home, and social situations (Pearlman & Michaels, 2019). Although they serve an essential role in transition planning, they are often underutilized in the process (Butler, 2016). According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association ([ASHA], 2016), only 14% of SLPs in the United States work in secondary school settings. However, speech and language services are one of the most commonly requested services for secondary students with intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorders (Wei et al., 2014).

According to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, one in 12 children has been diagnosed with a communication disorder (Black et al., 2015) and receives services in both primary and secondary school settings (Kayama et al., 2015). The SLP, working in conjunction with other service providers, has the potential to prevent negative outcomes for transitioning students. For example, integrating sensory strategies into speech/language services and occupational therapy allows students to sustain arousal, maintain attention, respond with appropriate emotions and affect, and purposely engage with others (Jordan & Lofland, 2016). The SLP can also ensure that transitioning students' voices are heard and considered in team discussions by preparing students to communicate their choices and desires. Given their unique understanding of communication skills and deficits, SLPs can also be key resources in preparing other transition team members for interprofessional communication that fosters the development of inclusive practices and positive student outcomes (Butler, 2016).

According to Butler (2016), SLPs guide the transition team in understanding the importance of functional communication and how communication disorders affect daily routines and an individual's ability to establish relationships. SLPs also are instrumental in documenting current communication skills, strategies, and abilities in the form of communication profiles that can serve as a baseline for future habilitation plans and as a resource for future service providers. Furthermore, SLPs provide valuable insights to the team regarding supports, accommodations, and assistive technologies needed for post-secondary living. As students transition into more of a vocational setting, SLPs can help identify communication demands of jobs or of functional settings and develop specific strategies to cope with these challenges.

Social interaction makes up the majority of day-to-day life and plays a vital role in vocational and workforce settings (Bal et al., 2018). Keay and colleagues (2015) addressed the importance of social/cognitive considerations to be addressed in transition planning. Social and cognitive performance are important skills that SLPs target in peer group sessions. Miller-Warren (2016) found that parents ranked *relationships* as one of the most important goals of the transition process. This finding points to the need for service providers to infuse social development strategies into their planning and programming for transitioning students. These abilities are enhanced through the unique expertise provided by a collaborative relationship with SLPs.

Collaborative Role of School Counselors in Transition

The American School Counseling Association emphasizes the importance of the school counselor serving all students (ASCA, 2019; Geddes Hall, 2015; Luft, 2016), and this emphasis specifically includes assisting with transition services (ASCA, 2016). Skills that allow students to move into independence can be taught by school counselors as a part of their career preparation core curriculum via classroom lessons or in small groups (ASCA, 2019). In the United States, ASCA's professional standard for school counselors includes meeting the transition needs for students with disabilities. Professional school counselors thus work closely with other support professionals to plan for students' successful life outcomes. ASCA (2016) clearly stated the role of the school counselor in working with students with disabilities in their position statement, positing that they should provide both direct and indirect services in an inclusive setting which is the least restrictive environment as defined by the IEP (Tarver-Behring & Ingraham, 1998). School counselor responsibilities may include, but are not limited to: (a) providing school counseling curriculum lessons; (b) delivering individual and/or group counseling to students with special needs within the scope of the school counseling program; (c) providing short-term, goal-focused counseling in instances where it is appropriate to include these strategies as a part of the IEP or 504 plan; (d) encouraging family involvement in the educational process; (e) consulting and collaborating with staff and families to understand the special needs of a student and understanding the adaptations and modifications needed to assist the student; (f) advocating for students with special needs in the school and in the community; (g) contributing to the school's multidisciplinary team within the scope and practice of the school counseling program to identify students who may need to be assessed to determine special education or 504 plan eligibility; (h) collaborating with other related student support professionals (e.g., school psychologists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, special education staff, speech and language pathologists) in the delivery of services; (i) providing assistance with developing academic,

transition and postsecondary plans for students with IEP's and 504 plans as appropriate (ASCA, 2016).

Counselors who provide services to students with disabilities while in the classroom are in a unique position to contribute to multiple aspects of development, including academic, career, and personal/social characteristics (Buckley & Mahdavi, 2018; Geddes Hall, 2015; Goodman-Scott & Carlisle, 2015). They may provide face-to-face services such as advisement, appraisal, and counseling, or indirect services to advocate on a student's behalf such as consultation, collaboration and referrals (ASCA, 2019). ASCA (2016) also clearly defined the areas that are not considered appropriate for the scope of practice of the school counselor. While the school counselor is an integral part of this transition planning, their collaboration with additional service providers falls within the scope of their duties so long as they are not tasked with supervising or coordinating execution of the IEP that describes these services (ASCA, 2016). These guidelines (ASCA, 2016) offered a best practice model in terms of the role of the professional school counselor in the special education process, enabling them to advocate for special education students while maintaining boundaries within their scope of practice.

A Cooperative Relationship among Professionals

Due to the parallels of the work of school counselors, special educators, and SLPs in addressing the needs of students with significant disabilities, a cooperative relationship among professionals in each of these roles has enormous potential for planning services that substantially improve the transition process (ASCA, 2020; Buckley & Mahdavi, 2018; Luft, 2016). Boardman et al. (2016) found that when a team-based teaching approach consisting of an SLP and special educator was used, students benefited from the unique perspectives and teaching styles of each specialist. Barnes and colleagues (2003) posited that the roles and responsibilities of school counselors and SLPs appear to be moving in similar directions, suggesting a prime opportunity for a natural partnering of these professionals. Also, special educators, as transition team leads and instructional experts, share knowledge with school counselors and SLPs in impacting the successful provision of services and programs related to the predictors of positive adult outcomes. Furthermore, students who are being served by both the special educator and SLP may experience counseling-related issues such as a lack of self-esteem, a lack of social skills, an inability to self-advocate, and difficulties in transitioning to postschool settings (Barnes et al., 2003). An alliance among these professionals has the potential not only to assure more positive educational outcomes for students with significant disabilities but also to enhance the lives of future citizens.

It is recommended for SLPs to work closely with school counselors to develop lesson plans and activities that school counselors and special educators can implement with

transitioning students to further prepare them for positive life outcomes (ASHA, 2016). Moreover, continued collaboration during the transition process can extend and amplify successes. School counselors, working in concert with special educators and SLPs, ensure that students' programs of study include opportunities to be included in general education, engage in work experiences, and take advantage of vocational or career technical education programs. School counselors can support special educators in promoting family engagement and building expectations for students upon secondary school completion. Additionally, school counselors, special educators, and SLPs may collaborate on systematic efforts to support self-determination skills and self-advocacy opportunities for students. Finally, with the increase in opportunities for students with disabilities in post-secondary education settings (i.e., colleges and universities), school counselors can ensure that IEP teams have considered all future settings for transitioning students and promote future vocational and educational opportunities.

Connecting Students to Community and Vocational Resources

School counselors can spearhead the creation of transition teams composed of numerous individuals with multiple specialties, including teachers, counselors, psychologists, and representatives from community service providers, such as mental health, vocational rehabilitation, and social service agencies. This variety of viewpoints is integral to performing comprehensive vocational assessments that reveal student-specific information that can be incorporated into an individualized transition plan (Kellems et al., 2016). Further, the inclusion of members from future service provider agencies on the IEP team for the purpose of transition planning is a requirement of the IDEA. Vocational assessments generally address skills in academics, daily living, and personal/social interactions as well as evaluate career maturity and vocational interests, aptitudes, and skills (Joseph et al., 2017). The professional school counselor utilizes such instruments with students as a part of implementing ASCA mindsets and behaviors (ASCA, 2019), such as the Design My Future scale (di Maggio et al., 2016), College and Career Readiness Counseling Support scale (Lapan et al., 2017), or the Career Adapt-Abilities scale (Savickas & Porferli, 2012). These assessments "describe the knowledge, skills and attitudes students need to achieve academic success, college and career readiness and social/emotional development" (ASCA, 2019, p. 1). Career assessments can be valuable for transition teams to assist educational and vocational planning allowing students to make an optimal adjustment to work, postsecondary education, and community living (Joseph et al., 2017).

The variety of professionals can further contribute to the transition process by connecting students and their supporters to various community resources that can improve

student outcomes. Papay and colleagues (2015) showed that it can be beneficial for students with disabilities to participate in career days and field trips, which may be enhanced by strong community connections, especially if done early in the transition process. Research also suggests that early participation in workplace simulations within the classroom and in job-related field experiences has positive effects for these students. These positive effects include young adults with disabilities being more likely to be hired for gainful employment if they have previously completed such a field experience (Alnahdi, 2016; Gray et al., 2014). As students gain these experiences and approach the end of their secondary education career, they are better equipped to perform the everyday job-seeking actions of creating résumés, completing job applications, and practicing with mock job interviews (Joseph et al., 2017).

Recommendations for Future Research

The need and benefits for collaboration in transition services is well documented (Bonati, 2018; Carter, et al., 2014; Suc et al., 2017) but little research has been done in this area. Interviewing professionals from all three areas regarding how they see their roles in the transition process and benefits and needs in terms of collaboration would be helpful. Interviewing the parents and students who work with these professionals to gain their insight into the collaboration process would also be very beneficial. Quantitative research to measure the outcomes for students from this collaborative relationship would also be helpful. Quantitative surveys administered to the professionals in the areas of special education, speech and language and counseling to obtain their perceived role in transition would also benefit policy development.

Conclusion

Multiple perspectives allow an interprofessional team charged with transition planning to evaluate and assess student skills and needs from various vantage points, which ultimately paves the way for better transitions to adulthood (Carter et al., 2014). Each perspective provides a unique vantage point, allowing the student to be seen and assisted more holistically. Incorporating the perspectives of multiple school and community-based professionals may better prepare special educators and the rest of the team to engage in effective transition assessments, planning, and implementation of services and supports.

There are many factors leading to poor transition outcomes for these students, including poor preparation for postsecondary education and/or employment, and poor organization of transition teams (Biggs & Carter, 2016; Luft, 2015; Wehman et al., 2015). Over the past three decades, research on the transition of students with significant disabilities has shown that post-school outcomes of students with disabilities increase when educators, families, students, community members, and organizations

work together in transition planning (Newman et al., 2016). Each professional on the team brings to the transition process a unique set of skills and expertise to the collective group. Mutual awareness and respect for this knowledge and preparation are vital to successful professional partnerships.

Service providers who work with students with significant disabilities share common ground in terms of knowledge and expertise as well as sharing a dedication and commitment to achieving the best possible outcomes for transitioning students and their families. An additional common denominator is the importance of their relationship with student and with their family. Each of these professional roles requires a good working relationship for maximum gain for the student. Because of the overlap and similarities among the goals and processes that each professional composing the transition team brings to the planning stage, these interrelated roles are conducive to collaborative endeavors. Professionals working together affect the multifaceted educational, vocational, psychosocial, and independent living needs of students with disabilities, thereby helping secure the actualization of their full potential.

The research is clear in terms of the benefits of collaboration from all stakeholders in the transition process but currently, there is a deficit in the area of policies in place to serve as a guide. The United States is an international leader and model in the area of special education in terms of policy and implementation (Dovigo, 2017). In their article regarding international implications for promoting postsecondary education transition for students with intellectual disabilities, Cook (2017) suggested embracing a social justice paradigm. This is an area that professionals in the fields of special education, speech and language, and school counseling area all well versed in as they advocate for students and their rights on a daily basis. This commonality could serve as a foundation for the collaboration between these professionals and policy could be created to nurture this partnership and enhance the transition process. Training programs in special education, speech and language and school counseling would be an ideal setting to model this policy, with students from these areas working together in practicum and internships, bringing each needed set of expertise to the table to create the most effective transition plans for students. The United States, as an international leader in the special education field, could serve as a model for this collaborative relationship by creating and implementing such policy. These training grounds would also serve as a great place to conduct research on these collaborations and their benefits.

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