Transition in Rural Communities:

Opportunities for Secondary Students with Disabilities

A Meta-Synthesis

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Abstract

This metasynthesis examines transition planning and services in rural communities, especially those in Alaska. It considers the barriers and challenges to transition implementation, the cultural responsiveness of rural educators, the developments in and suggestions for transition services, and approaches and strategies for transition planning. It illuminates the importance of building community relationships and tapping into human resources. Finally, this metasynthesis stresses the rural educator's need for cultural sensitivity in rural Alaska Native communities.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 legally mandated transition planning for all students age 16 to 21 due to concerns over the quality of life of individuals with disabilities (Flexer, Simmons, Luft, & Baer, 2008). IDEA (1990) defines *transition services* as follows:

> The term "transitions services" means a coordinated set of activities for a student, with a disability, that: (A) is designed within an outcome-oriented process, that promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation; (B) is based on the student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests; and (C) includes instruction, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school objectives, and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. (Section 602)

According to Flexer et al. (2008), transition plans must be based on students' needs and preferences, person-centered, planned with interagency collaboration, and inclusive of activities promoting movement from school to post-school.

IDEA of 1997 was revised to include an increased focus on curricula in the "statement of needed transition services" at the age of 14, instead of 16. In addition, the revision required that families be provided with notification of student IEP control one year before the age of 18, when

they would actually be taking the control. The IDEA of 2004 revised transition planning once again by requiring transition plans to "be focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to postschool activities" [Section 602 (34)]. Interestingly, this revision also required the age for transition planning to return to 16. In addition to these changes, IDEA of 2004 focused on the liability for results by mandating the following:

1. Appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills; and

2. The transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the child in reaching those goals. ([300.320(b); Authority: 20 U.S.C. 1414(d)(1)(A) and (D)(6)])

Though these IDEA concepts are good in theory, they remain a challenge in rural Alaskan communities (Wienke, Coombe, & Platt, 1994). The challenge increases when the student's preference is to leave the community to pursue post-secondary goals in a big-city setting. Rural communities do not provide for preparation for city life. Teachers are challenged by a lack of resources and access to real-life city scenarios.

Professionals implementing transition plans in rural areas experience additional resistance. Difficulties include too few resources, remoteness, financial and economic factors, and low population density (Elrod, Devlin, & Obringer, 1997). White (1987) states: "Rural school districts spend less per pupil and have fewer supplemental resources available to them than do urban school districts" (p. 186). White further describes the expenditures existing in rural areas, noting: "Transportation costs are significantly higher, which may, in turn, reduce dollars

available for personnel and instructional materials for transition programs and assessment" (p. 186). This gross discrepancy contributes to the inferior education received by rural students compared to their same-aged peers residing in urban communities. Vocational programs are nearly non-existent in these small schools. Further, rural students preparing for transition to post-school life experience a lack of community resources, such as job shadowing opportunities, to support efforts that are made by their schools.

Additionally, Alaska Native families living in rural Alaska communities have found difficulties navigating the special education system. They feel as if their voices are not heard or even considered with regards to their children's education (Banks, 2004). Cultural differences, including values, communication styles, and learning styles, between educators and the local community can have a profound effect on the quality of education received by Alaska Native students.

1.2. Author's beliefs and experiences

I grew up in a small village along the Alaska Peninsula called Chignik Lagoon. The village of Chignik Lagoon is nestled between the Chignik Range and a small lagoon which is the home to one of Alaska's largest salmon runs. The village itself is approximately two miles long and a quarter-mile wide, accessible only by boat or small plane.

Chignik Lagoon is most prized for its sockeye salmon. Springtime brings hundreds of people into the small village to gear up for the next season. Boats ranging in size from 36 feet to 58 feet long blaze into the lagoon one by one. The tiny village comes to life this time of year: houses that sat empty all winter are being lit up; four-wheelers are buzzing here and there; fishermen are busy loading commercial-sized seines (e.g. nets) aboard their boats with heavy equipment; children are let loose from school for the summer and are playing gleefully with their

friends on the mudflats; families, separated by a long winter, are greeting their loved ones with

smiles and hugs.

Summer brings a mixture of quiet days, when the fishing grounds are open, and noisy

days, when the fishing grounds are closed and fishermen are busy mending their seines and

doing necessary boat repairs. Even school children join their fathers on the fishing grounds

during the summer. Many will grow up to take their fathers' places running the family fishing

vessel.

When the salmon have run their final run, we know that fall time is present and winter

will soon follow. Children leave the fishing grounds and settle in for another year of school,

satisfied that they have helped their families sustain themselves for another year. When the fish

leave, so do the excess people. All 69 residents embrace the reprieve of quiet winter days.

This is my village; this has been my life. I remember the first time I considered another

life. My freshman teacher, Scott Seaton stood before our class of ten students and asked, "What

do you all want to be when you grow up?" The class stared at him in wonderment. Was there

anything else to do besides what we already do? Our mothers stayed at home and took care of

the babies and household. Our fathers fished in the summer time and puttered on necessary

projects in the winter. What else was there? Recalling one of the few trips I had taken to the

"big city," Anchorage, my mind went back to watching a check-out person. I had wondered

what her job would be like. Because Chignik Lagoon had no stores, I had little exposure to the

consumer world. Unable to stand the silence and with reluctance, I raised my hand and

announced that I would like to be a cash register operator. My teacher's face fell in

disappointment. For the rest of the year, he worked hard at educating the class on possible career

fields. By the end of the year, I knew that I wanted to become a teacher, return to my beloved village, and make a difference in the lives of my students.

At the end of my senior year, and after a long summer on my father's boat, I embarked upon my first journey outside of the protection of the Chignik Range and the family to which I was deeply close. I was excited for this change and looked forward to meeting new people and furthering my education. However, the newness quickly wore off and I was homesick. I had decided to attend school in the state of Washington and was undergoing the worst culture shock I would ever go through. I missed my small community, our subsistence lifestyle, the water, and most of all, my family. I called home crying every day. The transition was rough. My parents, supportive of my decision to further my education, encouraged me to stick it through. With sheer determination, I did. After my first year of college in Washington, I moved back to Alaska to finish my education at the University in Anchorage. I was closer to my family and made several trips home every year for visits. Four years later, I earned my Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education. I was the first person who graduated from the Chignik Lagoon School to earn a post-secondary degree.

I am now a special education teacher at the Chignik Lagoon School. I have five students, ranging in age from 8 to 17 and with varying diagnoses, including Cognitively Impaired, Autistic, and Learning Disabled. All of my students are of Alaska Native descent and take part in the subsistence lifestyle, a common identifier in Alaska Native villages. My students each bring strengths to my classroom and their regular education classrooms where they are fondly accepted for who they are and the strengths they bring. The community also values these individuals for their charismatic qualities. Like most students, my students have dreams of further education and satisfying employment for a meaningful life. My worry for my students

does not stem from an inability to reside and contribute to a small community lifestyle, but for their ability to live and survive in a larger city.

Looking back, I remember the heart-ache of leaving my village, the difficulty of the transition. I often wonder what the transition will be like for my own students. With such a small community, opportunities for experiencing life on the "outside" are not plentiful. Still today, the largest source of income is the fishing industry. Even though each of my students commercial fish with their fathers, they also have dreams of the outside world. One wants to obtain an education in diesel mechanics; another wants to become a pilot. However, job shadows and class demonstrations are near impossible in this small community. Dirt roads and four-wheelers are not avenues to teaching students a driver's education class. It is difficult to connect many aspects of city life to the lives of my students. This disconnect is certainly a struggle.

My life experiences and my work in special education have led me to ask the following questions:

1. If the transition from a rural Alaska community was difficult for me, a student without disabilities, how much more challenging will it be for my students with disabilities?

2. How can I help my students to make that transition successfully with the few resources at my fingertips?

3. What transition resources are available to rural students, and how can I make these resources available to my Alaska Native students at the Chignik Lagoon School?

1.3. The purpose of this metasynthesis

The first purpose of this metasynthesis is to explore available resources in rural Alaskan communities for secondary students in transition. The second purpose is to discover resources

unavailable or unknown to rural Alaska and find ways to adapt them for students in remote,

rural, and predominately Alaska Native communities. A third purpose of this metasynthesis is to

discover whether or not rural community schools and school districts are fulfilling their

obligations toward students in transition. My final purpose in carrying out this metasynthesis

was to identify significant themes that surfaced in these articles and to connect those themes to

my experience as a rural Alaskan teacher of secondary students embarking upon transition to

post-school life.

2. Methods

2.1. Selection criteria

The 37 journal articles included in this meta-synthesis met the following selection

criteria:

1. The articles explored issues related to transition planning in rural communities and/or

    American Indian/Alaska Native communities.

2. The articles were published in journals related to the field of special education.

3. The articles were published between 1988 and 2010.

2.2. Search procedures

I conducted data base searches and ancestral searches to locate articles for this meta-

synthesis.

2.2.1 Database searches

I conducted searches within the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC,

Ebscohost) using these specific search terms:

1. ("Transitional Programs" AND ("Special Education") AND ("Rural").

2. ("Transitional Programs") AND ("Special Education") AND ("Alaska Natives" OR "American Indians").

3. ("Individualized Transition Plans") AND ("Rural").

4. ("Individualized Transition Plans") AND ("Alaska Natives" OR "American Indians").

5. ("Special Education") AND ("Alaska").

6. ("Individualized Education Programs") AND ("Alaska").

7. ("Transitional Programs") AND ("Rural").

These database searches yielded a total of 34 articles (Baer, Flexer, Beck, Amstutz, Hoffman, Brothers, Stelzer, & Zechman, 2003; Banks, 2004; Barley, 2009; Baugher & Nichols, 2008; Brolin, Cook, & O'Keefe, 1994; Bugaj & Robertson, 2000; Bull, Montgomery, & Beard, 1994; Clark & McDonnel, 1994; Curl, Hall, Chisholm, & Rule, 1992; D'Alonzo & Giordano, 1994; Elliot, 1988; Elrod, Cahalane, & Combe, 1997; Elrod, Devlin, & Obringer, 1994; Greenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2005; Greenwood, 1992; Gliner, Ross, Duke, & Spencer, 1999; Lindsey & Blalock, 1993; Lombard, 1994; Martin, Oliphint, & Weisenstein, 1994; Maddux & Arvig, 1988; Oesterreich & Knight, 2008; Ramasamy, 1996; Roessler, 1994; Roessler & Peterson, 1996; Ryan & Dennis, 2000; Ryan-Vincek, 1995; Lombard, 1994; Schalock, Holl, Elliot, & Ross, 1992; Shearin, Roessler, & Schriner, 1999; Spruill & Kallio, 1994; Vermilion, 1986; Wheeldon, & Lehmann, 1999; White, 1987; Wienke, Coombe, & Platt, 1994; Woods, Sylvester, & Martin, 2010).

2.2.2. Ancestral searches

An ancestral search involves reviewing the reference lists of previously published works to locate articles relevant to one's topic of interest (Welch, Brownell, & Sheridan, 1999). I

conducted ancestral searches of the reference lists of articles retrieved through my ERIC

(Ebscohost) database searches. These ancestral searches yielded three additional articles that

met the selection criteria (Collins, 2003; Sheehey, 2003; Siegel, 1991).

2.3. Coding procedures

I used a coding form to categorize the information presented in each of the 37 articles.

This coding form was based on: (a) publication type; (b) research design; (c) participants; (d)

data source; and (e) findings of studies.

2.3.1. Publication types

After evaluating each article, I classified them according to *publication type* (i.e. research

study, theoretical work, descriptive article, opinion piece/position paper, annotated bibliography,

or review of the literature). *Research studies* analyze quantitative and/or qualitative data and

explain to the reader the process of collecting and/or analyzing the data. *Theoretical works*

explain and/or create a theory about a specific topic. *Descriptive articles* describe experiences

and occurrences; however, unlike research studies, they do not utilize a systematic approach to

collecting and analyzing data. *Opinion pieces/position papers* give explanation to an author's

judgment or opinion on a particular topic of interest. These papers may advocate for or persuade

against education's most recent theories, hypotheses, or approaches. *Guides* direct the

professional in implementing a process, strategy, or recommendation. An *annotated*

bibliography provides the reader with an alphabetized list of books, articles, or chapters and a

brief paragraph summarizing each resource on a given topic. A *review of the literature*

synthesizes and summarizes relevant literature on a defined topic and identifies and describes

emerging themes from an analysis of the literature (Table 1).

2.3.2. Research design

In addition to publication type, I also classified each article according to research design (i.e. quantitative research, qualitative research, mixed methods research). *Quantitative* research is a collection and analysis of numerical data, which can be represented by graphs, tables, or charts. *Qualitative* research uses language (not numbers) to describe experiences. *Mixed methods* research is a combination of both quantitative (i.e. numerical) and qualitative (i.e. language-based) research methods (Table 2).

2.3.3. Participants, data sources, and findings

In each of the studies I reviewed, I identified the participants (e.g., rural students with disabilities in grades K-12, Alaska Native/American Indian students with disabilities in grades K-12, teachers of K-12 rural students, teachers of Alaska Native/American Indian students). Next, I identified the data sources that were collected and analyzed for each study (e.g.,). Lastly, I summarized the findings of each study (Table 2).

2.4. Data analysis

I used a modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method previously employed by Duke (2011) and Duke and Ward (2009) to analyze the 37 articles that I included in this metasynthesis. First, I identified significant statement from each article. These significant statements represented issues related to: (a) the meaning of transition and the responsibilities of school personnel; (b) continuing education for teachers implementing transition plans; (c) continuing education for teachers implementing transition plans; (d) cultural responsiveness in implementing transition plans; (e) developments in and suggestions for implementing quality transition services in rural areas; and (f) approaches and dissemination strategies to transition. Next, I developed a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping (verbatim) significant statements with (paraphrased) formulated meanings. The (paraphrased) formulated meanings characterized my

interpretation of each significant statement. Finally, I categorized the formulated meanings from all 37 articles into theme clusters (or emergent themes). These emergent themes symbolized the essence (or content) of the entire body of literature (Table 3).

3. Results

3.1. Publication Type

I located 37 articles that met my selection criteria. Each article's publication type is identified in Table 1. Fifteen of the 37 articles (40.5%) were descriptive articles (Baugher & Nichols, 2008; Brolin et al., 1994; Bugaj & Robertson, 2000; Collins, 2003; Elliot, 1988; Elrod et al., 1997; Elrod et al., 1994; Gliner et al., 1999; Lombard, 1994; Lindsey & Blalock, 1993; Martin et al., 1994; Oesterreich & Knight, 2008; Wheeldon & Lehmann, 1999; White, 1987; Wienke et al., 1994). Fifteen of the articles (40.5%) included in this meta-syntheses were research studies (Baer et al., 2003; Banks, 2004; Barley, 2009; Bull et al., 1994; Greenen et al., 2005; Maddux & Arvig, 1988; Ramasamy, 1996; Roessler, 1994; Roessler & Peterson, 1996; Ryan & Dennis, 2000; Ryan-Vincek, 1995; Shearin et al., 1999; Schalock et al., 1992; Spruill & Kallio, 1994; Woods et al., 2010). Four of the articles (10.8%) were guides (Clark & McDonnell, 1994; Curl et al., 1992; D'Alonzo & Giordano, 1994; Vermilion, 1986). Three of the articles (8.1%) were reviews of the literature (Greenwood, 1992; Siegel & Gaylord-Ross, 1991; Sheehey & Black, 2003).

Table 1

Author(s) & Year of Publication	Publication Type
Baer et al., 2003	Study
Banks, 2004	Study
Barley, 2009	Study
Baugher & Nichols, 2008	Descriptive Article
Brolin, Cook, & O'Keefe, 1994	Descriptive Article
Bugaj & Robertson, 2000	Descriptive Article
Bull, Montgomery, & Beard, 1994	Study
Clark & McDonnell, 1994	Guide
Collins, 2003	Descriptive Article
Curl, Hall, Chisholm, & Rule, 1992	Guide
D'Alonzo & Giordano, 1994	Guide
Elliot, 1988	Descriptive Article
Elrod, Cahalane, & Combe, 1997	Descriptive Article
Elrod, Devlin, & Obringer, 1994	Descriptive Article
Greenwood, 1992	Review of the literature
Greenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2005	Study
Gliner, Ross, Duke, & Spencer, 1999	Descriptive Article
Lombard, 1994	Descriptive Article
Lindsey & Blalock, 1993	Descriptive Article
Martin, Oliphint, & Weisenstein, 1994	Descriptive Article

Maddux & Arvig, 1988	Study
Oesterreich & Knight, 2008	Descriptive Article
Ramasamy, 1996	Study
Roessler, 1994	Study
Roessler & Peterson, 1996	Study
Ryan & Dennis, 2000	Study
Ryan-Vincek, 1995	Study
Shearin, Roessler, & Schriner, 1999	Study
Schalock, Holl, Elliot, & Ross, 1992	Study
Sheehey & Black, 2003	Review of the Literature
Siegel & Gaylord-Ross, 1991	Review of the Literature
Spruill & Kallio, 1994	Study
Wheeldon & Lehmann, 1999	Descriptive Article
White, 1987	Descriptive Article
Wienke, Coombe, & Platt, 1994	Descriptive Article
Woods, Sylvester, & Martin, 2010	Study
Vermilion, 1986	Guide

3.2. Research design, participants, data resources, and findings of the studies

As previously discussed, I located 15 research studies that met my selection criteria (Baer

et al., 2003; Banks, 2004; Barley, 2009; Bull, et al., 1994; Greenen et al., 2005; Maddux &

Arvig, 1988; Ramasamy, 1996; Roessler, 1994; Roessler & Peterson, 1996; Ryan & Dennis,

2000; Ryan-Vincek, 1995; Shearin et al., 1999; Schalock et al., 1992; Spruill & Kallio, 1994;

Woods et al., 2010). The research design, participants, data sources, and findings of each of

these studies are identified in Table 2.

Table 2

Authors	Research Design	Participants	Data Sources	Findings
Baer et al., 2003	Quantitative	140 randomly selected special education high school graduates who were one to three years post-graduation	Phone survey and record review	Rural school graduates were involved in more extracurricular activities, job shadowing experiences, technology training and in-school jobs than urban school graduates. Urban school graduates were found to have more vocational education, career exploration, resume writing, and informational interviews. The logistic regression model developed from the study predicted full-time employment 74% of the time and postsecondary education 73% of the time when taking into consideration the following variables: years out of high school, having a learning disability, being from a suburban school setting, work study participation, vocational education, and regular academics. Urban transition coordinators experienced greater time expenditures tracking students and had fewer positive communication experiences than did rural transition coordinators.
Banks, 2004	Qualitative	6 parents or caregivers of American Indian/Alaska Native children	Ethnographic interviews	Professional development is a necessary, but lacking component of head start classrooms. Lack of information sharing has led

		with disabilities		to the underutilization of services by American Indian and Alaska Native families. Glaring legal infractions involving the appropriate, timely, and comprehensive assessments of and implementation of IEP/IFSPs American Indian and Alaska Native students. Alaska Native and American Indian families have found a lack of cultural sensitivity and competence in service providers.
Barley, 2009	Qualitative	9 midcontinent teacher preparation institutions that addressed preparations for rural schools	In-depth telephone interviews	Seventeen of 120 teacher preparation institutions in the mid-continent had a rural program emphasis and nine of those 17 had three or more rural programs. Of the nine programs, three offered multiple certifications to teachers candidates; seven of the nine offered online courses; four of the nine recruited students from rural communities; and two of the nine sought student teaching placements in rural community schools.
Bull, Montgomery, & Beard, 1994	Qualitative	State Directors of Special Education	Questionaires	Three directors reported that at least 99% of the their districts had transition programs, most participants reported that over half of their state's school districts had transition programs, and two directors reported that less than 10% of their districts had transition programs. Most participants identified

				competencies desired as public relation skills, interagency coordination skills, job coaching, development of management of job support networks, employment procedures, and community planning teams.
Greenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2005	Qualitative	31 culturally and linguistically diverse parents	Focus groups, in-depth interviews	Seven main categories have been shown to inhibit parental involvement in transition planning: power imbalance, psychological or attitudinal, logistic, information, communication, SES and contextual factors, and cultural influences. Participants of this study identified strategies for better supporting parent involvement including: positive communication, preparing for transition at an earlier age, information on transition planning, use of a parent advocate, emotional support for parents, and flexibility in meeting formats.
Maddux & Arvig, 1988	Qualitative	One special education teacher from each of the 127 high schools in the state of Arizona	Questionnaires	More than 17% of Arizona high schools do not use interest inventories for placing students in appropriate vocational education programs, none of them being urban or suburban schools. As opposed to urban and suburban schools, fewer rural schools that do administer interest inventories use the results of such assessments for

				placement, instead placing mildly handicapped students in special vocational programs.
Ramasamy, 1996	Qualitative	132 Apache Native American former students of Alchesay High School, 66 with disabilities and 66 without disabilities	Face-to-face interviews	Results of this study indicated that all students do poorly after exiting Alchesay High School, signifying a need for the School to explore the possibility of vocational training for students while still attending school. Results of this study also indicate that community interagency collaboration needs to be strengthened to facilitate a smooth transition from high school to employment for these students.
Roessler, 1994	Quantitative	41 members of school-level transition teams in four school districts in a predominantly rural state	Mail survey	This study indicates a need for rural school transition teams to more consistently address post-school student follow-ups and planning for post-school case management services. However, 90% of participants responded positively to their school-level teams in: development of transition policy and procedure, individualized transition planning procedures, training of school staff in transition services, and parent input to school-level transition teams. Barriers identified by participants for school-level transition teams included insufficient funding for needed services, the curriculum not

				meeting everyone's needs, and lack of adequate transportation. The study concluded that the development of policy may address the shortcomings cited by school-level team members.
Roessler & Peterson, 1996	Mixed Methods	Parents of 41 seniors in special education in six Arkansas high schools serving as a demonstration site for a statewide transition project in Arkansas	Interviews, surveys	Most of the participants indicated that they were pleased with the way the schools were preparing their children for the future. Overall parents were satisfied with transition planning activities, with improvement needed in the area of discussions with rehabilitation counselors and other adult service providers. Parent concerns for their children included: no plans for schooling after high school, being taken advantage of, being unable to cope with life, and getting into trouble.
Ryan & Dennis, 2000	Qualitative	12 rural educators, 6 of whom were Alaska Native, from six rural communities throughout Alaska who were taking 4 college level courses focusing on best practices and strategies in inclusive education	Questionnaires, permanent products, group audio-conferences, in-depth individual interviews, researcher field notes	Participants of this study each report personal stories which affected the way in which they viewed their inservice preparation program. Participants identified perceived lack of knowledge and skills related to special education strategies and techniques, lack of resources, and lack of shared values and beliefs regarding the importance of full inclusion among teachers, administrators, families and the community at large as challenges with

				implementing full inclusion programs. Participants believed culture to be a challenge in the decision making of integration of special education policies and practices of inclusive education.
Ryan-Vincek, 1995	Qualitative	Parents of 29 children living in rural Alaska with complex multiple disabilities	Interviews	This study found that parents rated "getting the right equipment at the right time," "caring and consistent professionals," and "responsive and flexible medical and support systems" as the most important factors for their children living with complex needs in rural Alaska.
Shearin, Roessler, & Schriner, 1999	Quantitative	Not applicable; the research did not collect primary data from human subjects	68 IEPs of students with disabilities; rating forms containing 82 items over three sections	This study found that important life goals were overlooked on the IEPs and transition plans evaluated such as personal care, safety, family planning, child care, clothing selection and care, and self-advocacy training. Additionally, adult agencies were scarcely mentioned within these IEP/transition plans.
Schalock, Holl, Elliot, & Ross, 1992	Mixed Methods	298 post-graduate students identified as having a specific learning disability or mental handicap	Checklists, interviews, observations	This study found that the transitional experience is more successful for post-school employment than for independent living. Those participants who were employed were done so with low-paying jobs and limited benefits. Additionally, those who were employed generally

				did not change jobs and earned consistently positive job evalutions.
Spruill & Kallio, 1994	Quantitative	15 secondary special education teachers of students with mild disabilities, 10 high school guidance counselors, one vocational coordinator, and one special education administrator from rural Wisconsin	Surveys	This study found that the school districts sampled provided adequate vocational preparation opportunities to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Students reported satisfaction with the program and most were satisfactorily employed post high school. Areas of weakness for these school districts were found to be holding transition planning meetings, writing transition plans, involving parents, and accessing community agencies.
Woods, Sylvester, & Martin, 2010	Quantitative	19 students in an intervention group and 16 students in the control group	Primary transition knowledge test, alternate transition knowledge test, Student Self-Efficacy Scale	Participants receiving instruction in the *Student-Directed Transition Planning* program believed they now had the ability to actively participate in transition planning meetings and had a significant knowledge increase in areas pertaining to transition-specific vocabulary.

3.2.1 Research design

Seven of the 15 studies (46.7%) included in this meta-synthesis used a qualitative research design (Banks, 2004; Bull et al., 1994; Greenen et al., 2005; Maddux & Arvig, 1988; Ramasamy, 1996; Ryan & Dennis, 2000; Ryan-Vencek, 1995;). Six of the studies (40.0%) employed a quantitative research design (Baer et al., 2003; Barley, 2009; Roessler, 1994; Shearin et al., 1999; Spruill & Kallio, 1994; Woods et al., 2010). Finally, two of the studies (13.3%) used mixed methods, collecting and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data (Roessler & Peterson, 1996; Shalock et al., 1992).

3.2.2. Participants and data sources

Most of the 15 research studies (93.3%) included in this metasynthesis analyzed data from human subjects; however, one study (6.7%) analyzed secondary data sources (Shearin et al., 1999). The remaining 14 studies collected data from post-graduation students with and without disabilities, transition team participants, parents or caregivers of children, educators, students with disabilities, and teacher preparation institutions. Four of the studies (26.7%) analyzed data collected from post-graduation students with and without disabilities (Baer et al., 2003; Ramasamy, 1996; Shalock et al., 1992; Woods et al., 2010). Two of the studies (13.3%) analyzed data collected from transition team participants (Roessler, 1994; Spruill & Kallio, 1994). Two of the studies (13.3%) analyzed data collected from parents or caregivers of children (Banks, 2004; Greenen et al., 2005). Two of the studies (13.3%) analyzed data collected from educators (Maddux & Arvig, 1988; Ryan & Dennis, 2000). Two of the studies (13.3%) analyzed data collected from students with disabilities (Roessler & Peterson, 1996; Ryan-Vencek, 1995). One of the studies (6.7%) analyzed data collected from teacher preparation institutions (Barley,

2009). Finally, one of the studies (6.7%) analyzed data collected from State Directors of Special

Education (Bull, 1994).

Of the 15 studies reviewed for this metasynthesis, eight (53.3%) analyzed data collected

through interviews (Banks, 2004; Barley, 2009; Greenen et al., 2005; Ramasamy, 1996; Roessler

& Peterson, 1996; Ryan & Dennis, 2000; Ryan-Vencek, 1995; Shalock et al., 1992). Four of the

studies (26.7%) analyzed data collected from surveys (Baer et al., 2003; Roessler, 1994; Roessler

& Peterson, 1996; Spruill & Kallio, 1994). Three of the studies (20.0%) analyzed data collected

from questionnaires (Bull et al., 1994; Maddux & Arvig, 1988; Ryan & Dennis, 2000). Finally,

two of the studies (13.3%) analyzed data collected from scaled-based assessments (Shearin et al.,

1999; Woods et al., 2010). Other sources of data included in many of these studies included:

permanent products, group audio conferences, researcher field notes, observations, and

checklists.

3.2.3. Findings of the studies

The findings of the 15 studies included in this meta-synthesis can be summarized as

follows:

1. Parents involved in the transition process feel they face challenges with power

imbalance, communication and cultural differences with transition team members. They fear

their children will be unsuccessful post-school, taken advantage of, unable to cope with life, and

will get into trouble.

2. Parents of children living with complex needs in rural Alaska feel that schools are

lacking the right equipment for their child's education, caring and consistent professionals, and

adequate medical and support systems within the school.

3. Students graduating from rural school districts are more involved in extracurricular activities and activities important to transition, such as job shadowing experiences and technology training, than urban school graduates. Students graduating from urban schools are involved in more career exploration, vocational education, and resume writing. Rural school graduates tend to be employed in retail stores and janitorial positions; whereas urban school graduates' employment varied greatly.

4. A limited number of teacher education institutions exist with a rural educational emphasis. Of the programs that do exist, few actively seek rural community placement for teacher candidates.

5. Classified personnel in rural communities are seriously lacking professional development and cultural sensitivity. Many legal infractions have been found involving the implementation of IEPs and IFSPs.

6. Examinations of IEPs and transition plans show a lack of personal care and safety training. IEP and transition plan meetings lack interagency collaboration, parent and student involvement, and consideration of student interests. Barriers identified by school-level team members included insufficient funding, inadequate curriculum, and lack of adequate transportation.

3.3. Emergent themes

Six themes emerged from my analysis of the 37 articles included in this metasynthesis. These emergent themes (or theme clusters) include: (a) the meaning of transition and the responsibilities of school personnel; (b) continuing education for teachers implementing transition plans; (c) continuing education for teachers implementing transition plans; (d) cultural responsiveness in implementing transition plans; (e) developments in and suggestions for

implementing quality transition services in rural areas; and (f) approaches and dissemination

strategies to transition. These six theme clusters and their associated formulated meanings are

identified in Table 3.

Table 3

Theme Clusters	Formulated Meanings
The Meaning of Transition and the Responsibilities of School Personnel	• Due to research from the 1980s showing poor post-school integration for students with disabilities, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandated that schools develop transition plans for all students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) by the age of 16. • US Schools have the worst school-to-work transition in the industrialized world. • School personnel are responsible for developing individual transition plans (ITPs) with their students, developing collaborative relationships with parents, potential employers, and agencies, and developing and implementing functional curriculum for teaching transition skills. • Special educators must engage in curriculum modification activities in order to engage students in functional skills instruction. • The transition process should include the views and opinions of parents, advocates, schools, youth, adult service providers, employers, and the desires and needs of the students. • Transition outcomes can be measured in terms of postsecondary education, employment, residential independence, and community participation.
Continuing Education for Teachers Implementing Transition Plans	• Rural educators have limited knowledge in developing and implementing transition plans suitable for rural students. • Educators must engage in training programs that would prepare them for understanding and implementing a comprehensive transition curriculum in their classrooms. • Recommended skills set for special education training includes: development and management of job support networks, development and management of community planning teams, counseling skills, public relations skills, first aid and health maintenance skills, skills involving parents, and interagency coordination skills. • Teacher curriculum must convince trainees to make changes in their curriculum to include more transitional and functional skill objectives. • Teacher curriculum must instruct trainees in the use of assessment and instructional materials. • Teacher curriculum must explain how to select, modify and develop instructional materials. • Teacher curriculum must instruct trainees in ways to establish collaborative relationships with students, families, agencies and employers. • Teacher curriculum must provide specific guidelines for implementing curriculum, and provide hands-on implementation activities. • Teacher curriculum must instruct trainees on developing a specific plan

	for implementing curriculum and transition plans. • Distance technology makes trainings on mandates and strategies available to rural teachers.
Challenges and Barriers to Implementing Transition Plans in Rural Areas	• Transition difficulties unique to rural areas include: rural communities do not have vocational training programs available for handicapped students; perspectives of rural community residents and potential employers on potentiality of handicapped individuals; schools in rural areas often have inadequate special education and vocational education; there are few, if any, role models of successful disabled workers in rural areas; adult service agencies are frequently non-existent in rural areas; outreach of vocational rehabilitation is inadequate; there are fewer appropriate independent living options; and collaboration among parents, schools, and potential employers is not developed in rural communities. • Though research shows that students enrolled in transition activities in the form of functionally oriented curricula, community-focused curricula, and community work experiences have increased chances higher quality transition outcomes, these programs are not priority for schools and schools districts. • Although rural school students reportedly have more job-shadowing experiences and training in other technologies than urban students, they have lower post-school employment. • In order to establish on-going community based work experience programs in rural schools, problems such as resource scarcity, long distances, inadequate transportation, a limited economic base, and low population density must be overcome. • The most pressing barriers to transition in rural communities include: availability of employment, adequate resources and finances, lack of transportation systems, securing volunteer support, and personnel to assist with placements. • Job opportunities, limited industry, lack of public transportation, and high unemployment are all hindrances for students with disabilities who reside in rural areas. • The general economy of the community, the educational level of the residents, and the size of the community impact the kind of resources available to transition students. • The location of rural communities impacts the delivery of transition services to both villages and small towns when they are isolated. • Rural schools employ less-than-qualified teachers more often than urban schools do to save money and offset higher costs of transportation. • New teachers in rural areas are challenged by collegial and familial isolation; inadequate salaries; cost of living; multi-level, multi-subject classrooms; and the lack a familiarity of rural schools and communities, among other things.

	- Rural teachers are faced with the barriers involving constrained budgets, limited access due to geography and transportation, and the need to balance inclusion with community-based instruction. - Communication (i.e. the professional use of jargon, nonverbal communication, communication styles) has proven to be a barrier and negatively affects the level of parent participation. - Studies show that poor employment outcomes are directly related to lack of clarity special educators have related to transition responsibilities. - Most schools, especially rural schools, neglect to administer interest inventories or other aptitude tests to ensure quality career matches. - Most parents understand the importance of the child's education, however, they are often unaware of their parental rights and education procedures. - Many post high school students who lack self-determination suffer from social isolation, financial dependency, frequent job loss, and extended periods of unemployment. - Often rural youth are unable to articulate their strengths, needs, and interests due to lack of exposure to the possibilities. - Expectations of career paths for rural youth are notably lower than those of urban youth.
Cultural Responsiveness in Implementing Transition Plans	- Alaska Native families find it difficult, if not impossible, to navigate the multiple systems in special education (e.g., curricular content, teaching methods, testing practices, and related services) and their perspectives are often lost and/or not considered. - In order for positive educational change to take place, special educators, schools, school districts, and collaborating agencies must allow the voices of tribal parents and caregivers to be heard and shared. - Services to students with diverse backgrounds are impacted by the lack of access to effective instruction in education programs and misidentification and misuse of tests. - Students from diverse backgrounds are often mistakenly placed in special education programs. - Children and families from diverse backgrounds are often not receiving the services that they need and qualify for. - Families from diverse backgrounds often feel isolated and at the mercy of a foreign and culturally unresponsive educational system. - Tribal sovereignty can step in a play a role in ensuring that tribal member's needs are being met. - Appropriate education for students residing in sovereign nations includes services which are culturally responsive to tribal values. - Educators must give attention to cross-cultural values, linguistic and communication styles, and learning styles when involving parents and students in educational processes.

	- Educators must have an understanding of the historical abuse of Alaska Native and American Indian people in order to understand their value set, traditions, spirituality, childrearing practices, and views on disabilities and the educational system. - American Indian and Alaska Native students, both with and without disabilities, have a higher dropout rate than any other ethnic group in the country. - Alaska Native and American Indian students and families often feel as if they are not an equal team member when making team decisions and planning. - Alaska Native and American Indian families often feel as if assumptions are made regarding their needs, abilities, and desires because of where they live. - Alaska Native and American Indian families often feel as if judgment by educators on who they are and how they learn affects the delivery of special education services and the implementation of IEPs and transition plans. - American Indian and Alaska Native children, both by treaty and special education law, have the right to a high-quality, culturally responsive service program that is individualized to meet their needs. - Cultural differences between parents and educators profoundly affect the outcome of parent participation, and ultimately, the successful transition of the child. - Cultural perspectives within a community are affected by racial and ethnic backgrounds, religion, language, and socio-economic factors. - Cultural factors affect the community's perspective of *community* and its ability to organize itself for programs related to transition services.
Developments In and Suggestions for Implementing Quality Transition Services in Rural Areas	- Administrators, teachers, parents, and students must work together to match a student's needs with an employer's needs and provide job coaching. - Appropriate curriculum would not only teach students the importance of unpaid and paid work activities and the responsibilities to be fulfilled, but would also teach responsible behavior as it pertains to community members, family members, volunteers, and leisure activities. - Transition plans should contain a life skills component that address employment acquisition, independent living, sexual responsibility, appropriate recreation, and socialization. - Some guidelines for conducting community-based instruction in rural settings include a) assess the community to determine functional skills that families value and the settings in which they should be taught, b) take advantage of local resources, c) involve peers without disabilities whenever possible, d) supplement CBI with classroom instruction when frequent CBI is not feasible, e) use systematic instructional procedures and let data guide instructional decisions.

- Recommended experiences for rural teachers include: developing and adapting curricula for rural students, creating self-directed professional development practices, using a variety of resources to teacher a variety of concepts, using technology to reduce isolation barriers, and functioning in community service areas other than teaching.
- Successful rural work experience programs have created objectives such as: develop personal skills essential to success in the work place; develop greater respect for other people and the work they do; develop an appropriate concept of appropriate work behavior; develop greater control and self-determination over one's own life; develop a positive understanding of self; and increase the connection between school and the real world by understanding between what is learned in school and how it relates to the world of work and everyday life.
- Rural educators must look past downsized physical resources in their areas and explore the wealth of human resources within the rural community.
- Practices that can significantly improve the employment outcomes for youth with disabilities are: individualized transition planning, interagency collaboration, paid work experience, vocational training at employment sites, participation in vocational education and job-seeking skills training.
- Parent education and involvement are pertinent to the success of transition services.
- Strategies to enhance effective parental involvement include: increased positive communication between parent and professional; preparing for transition at an early age; information on school-based transition planning; use of parental advocates; increased emotional support for parents; and increased flexibility in meeting formats.
- Students should be strongly encouraged to attend their IEP meetings to set a direction for their own lives.
- Tools such as interest inventories, behavior checklists and aptitude measurements can be used to help students find possible career matches.
- Developing partnerships between corporations and schools within rural communities may be an avenue to increasing exposure to possible career fields for students with disabilities.
- "Telementoring," mentoring students via the internet, may be an avenue to increasing student knowledge of possible career paths and decreasing classroom teacher workloads.
- The development of local transition committees (LTCs) can assist in ensuring the needs of transition students are being met.
- LTCs are often made up of parents, special education staff, vocational education staff, postsecondary educational staff, and mental health professionals.

	• LTCs can identify resources to expand transition services, evaluate the effectiveness of transition efforts, report local needs to state agencies.
Approaches and Dissemination Strategies to Transition	• Collaborative approaches reduce problems such as rural schools lacking personnel required for specialized programs and rural school being unable to deliver effective programs by cultivating community involvement. • In infusion programs, the traditional academic and vocational content of the curriculum is simultaneously taught with transition concepts. • Limitations to the infusion model include the possible expectation of untrained educators to implement transition concepts into the curriculum. • The separate programs approach advocates for transition in a separate place in the curriculum. • Dissemination strategies for student with mild to moderate disabilities include career visitors; career field trips; career pen pals; career art projects; career dress-up days; career day fair; career books, films, and videotapes; classroom libraries of career pamphlets; classroom libraries of career pamphlets; career bulletin boards; career learning centers; and simplified career aptitude inventories. • Dissemination strategies for students with severe disabilities in school might include turning lights off and on, arranging bulletin boards, distributing items, cleaning, sorting supplies, erasing chalkboards, straightening furniture, collating, and stapling. • Dissemination strategies for students with severe disabilities at home might include cleaning, grooming pets, general maintenance, arranging furniture, sorting items in pantries, gardening, collecting trash, stacking wood, cleaning a pool, taking care of laundry, making beds, baby sitting, cooking, organizing coupons, maintaining vehicles, and checking safety equipment. • Dissemination strategies should teach learners important skills for future employment, such as remaining on task, attending to instructions, responding to verbal feedback, following a sequence, sorting, and comprehending measures of quantity and time.

4. Discussion

In this section, I summarized the major themes that emerged from my analysis of the 37 articles included in this metasynthesis. I then connected these emergent themes to my professional practice as a special educator and, if applicable, my personal life.

4.1. The meaning of transition and the responsibilities of the school personnel

Due to a plethora of research conducted on the outcomes of post high school students with disabilities, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandated that schools develop transition plans for all students with an individual education plan (IEP) by the age of 16, if not sooner. School personnel are also responsible for collaborating with families and outside resources to appropriately implement the transition plans. In addition, teachers are accountable for modifying curricula to include functional life skills instruction.

Though this tiny village in which I live and teach has few useful physical resources for implementing transition plans, I am constantly on the lookout for opportunities for my students. For example, I am currently in the process of collaborating with the one airline agency that serves this small community to find a fit for my student who dreams of becoming a pilot. I have presented ideas such as assisting the community-based airline agent with giving weather reports, transporting outgoing and incoming mail, and giving my student an opportunity to interview pilots whenever possible. The agency is receptive to the ideas and we are currently working out the details.

Students in rural Alaska receive very little exposure to real world employment. I try to relate all curricula to life skills. For example, when teaching a social studies lesson on the federal government and its responsibility to protect its people, I might relate this idea to an employer's responsibility to protect its employees from discrimination and harassment on the

job. The more exposure students receive and examples they are given for preparation for adulthood, the better they will fair when they get there.

4.2. Continuing education for teachers implementing transition plans

Teachers, both general educators and special educators, must be well-versed in developing and implementing transition plans. This is especially true in rural Alaska where resources are scarce and there is not always an on-site special educator. Continuing education for teachers who implement transition plans is pertinent to the success of students. Courses should include curricula focused on management of job support networks; interagency coordination skills; and the selection, modification, and development of instructional materials. Distance technology is an excellent way for rural teachers to obtain this continuing education.

I am dedicated to continuing my education, both formally and informally. I am currently enrolled in the Master of Education in Special Education program at the University of Alaska, Southeast and plan to graduate in just a few short weeks. When the opportunity arose for me to write this metasynthesis, I chose a topic that I felt unskilled in as a special educator in rural Alaska. I wanted to know the resources available, the barriers that many teachers face, and ways to overcome these barriers. By conducting this research, I have broadened my horizons and my abilities to implement comprehensive transition plans. With the formal education I have received in researching education, I can now conduct my own informal research as the need arises.

4.3. Challenges and barriers to implementing transition plans in rural areas

Alaska rural isolation presents many challenges to the development and implementation of individualized transition plans. Inadequate special education and vocational education, limited job opportunities and economic base, lack of or very expensive public transportation, and

high teacher turn-over are just a few of the presenting challenges. Rural teachers are often faced with additional challenges such as constrained budgets, limited access to transportation, and the need to balance inclusion with community-based instruction.

As a special educator and life-long resident of rural Alaska, I involve myself in as many committees and councils as I possibly can. This ensures that if opportunities for community-based instruction present themselves, I am able to advocate for my students and present ideas that involve them. For example, I am the secretary of the Chignik Lagoon Village Council and am present at all of the meetings. If volunteer work or paid work experience is available and fitting for my students, I advocate for them to be involved in those positions. I also join committees, such as the Artist in Schools Committee, which gives me an opportunity to push for artists to come to the Chignik Lagoon School who may teach my transition students necessary skills for post high school life.

Living in rural Alaska truly can be a challenge. This is especially true for people who are not already established living in such an isolated area. Groceries and household items are expensive to ship, especially if they come by mail or air freight. Many families in Chignik Lagoon take a less expensive, but more labor intensive route to getting groceries and household items into their cupboards. For example, my parents, my two brothers' families, and I will order groceries twice a year and have them shipped via barge. We must carefully plan to order our items at the same time so that they are all shipped on the same barge and can be picked up at the same time. This is only the beginning of the process, however. Because the village in which we reside doesn't have a dock and the lagoon isn't deep enough for large vessels, the barge lands at a neighboring village. My father or one of my brothers then take their commercial fishing vessel to the next village and loads the pallets of groceries onto the deck of their boat. They return with

the groceries and use heavy equipment to offload the groceries from the boat. The next several

hours are spent sorting and putting away freeze, produce, and household items. Although this

route demands more financial resources up front, in the long run it is far less expensive than

mailing and air freighting goods.

4.4. Cultural responsiveness in implementing transition plans

Alaska Native families struggle to navigate the multiple systems in special education.

The curricular content, teaching methods, assessment practices, and related services are

overwhelming. Families often feel as if their voices are not heard and their perspectives are not

considered important. Educators do not often consider the impact of communication styles,

learning styles, and cross-cultural values. Cultural differences between educators and parents

profoundly impact the level of parental involvement and the successful transition of the student.

Working as a special educator in rural Alaska for the last year has really opened my eyes

to some of the stereotypes that many professionals hold for Alaska Natives. Sitting in a

professional development conference, I listened to an administrator speak on how to go about

"dealing with these village people." I looked around the room and observed that out of the 25

people in the room, only myself and one other administrator (an Alaska Native raised in a

neighboring village) took note of the comment. This disrespectful message is being sent to our

teachers. Sometime later in the school year, I was approached by a fellow educator about a

paper written by a high school student. She disappointedly handed the paper to me, shrugged her

shoulders, and said, "Look at this; it looks like a fourth grader wrote it … Just another village

kid." As an Alaska Native brought up in a village, I have taken offense to the ignorance

displayed by these professionals. It is beyond time for a positive change in the way educators

consider the Alaska Native people and the education of their children.

4.5. Developments in and suggestions for implementing quality transition services in rural areas

Despite the few resources available in rural communities, there are avenues to developing and implementing high quality transition services in rural areas. The development of such services involves collaboration with administrators, teachers, parents, students, and outside agencies. Rural educators must look past the lack of physical resources in their communities and explore the wealth of human resources that exist.

In addition to the programs offered by the Lake and Peninsula School District (i.e. School-to-Life Program, Transition Camp, etc.), my students participate in community-based instruction, volunteer and/or paid work experience programs, modified curricular instruction, interest inventories, development of their own IEPs and transition plans, and functional life skills instruction. These experiences have helped to prepare my students for life after high school and outside of Chignik Lagoon.

4.6. Approaches and dissemination strategies to transition

Different approaches to transition have been tried in rural communities. Among the most effective is the collaborative approach. This approach tends to reduce the problems associated with limited personnel within schools, places an emphasis on communication, and involves the family. The delivery of programs becomes a community effort instead of solely relying upon school personnel. However, the collaborating must begin with efforts at the school level by building relationships between the student, the family, the community, and the school.

Human resources are an important part of village life. Each person relies on the next for building homes, repairing boats and machines, harvesting subsistence, and when disaster strikes. These relationships can and should be built between the community and school as well. Because I am from the village in which I teach, cultivating these relationships has not been a difficult

task. Many of these relationships had already been established when I became a teacher. Others were established easily because I knew the avenues to establishing them. It is easy to understand, however, how this would be a more difficult task for a teacher from outside of the area. With differing cultural backgrounds and communication styles, establishing effective relationships has to be done with care and concern for the transitioning student.

5. Conclusion

IDEA's mandate for transition planning for all students with an IEP has had rural educators searching for useful resources available in their areas. Many educators have focused on the very limited amount of physical resources and ignored the wealth of human resources available. Collaborating with these human resources is key to developing and implementing successful transition plans and services in rural Alaska. Just as important is the modification of curricula to include functional life skills. Continuing education for teachers and administrators can be helpful in coaching teachers to select and modify curricula for instruction.

When working in rural Alaska it is pertinent to involve the families of Alaska Native students with disabilities. Overcoming the stumbling blocks caused by cross-cultural communication and values contributes to the success of the transitioning student. A ninety-one year-old Alaska Native man named Sidney Huntington said it best, "It's the parents we need to talk with and to listen to. They know their kids better than any school ever will."

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