

# Transition Issues for the 1990s

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■ As we conclude this special issue on transition, it might be appropriate to reflect for a moment on some of the issues we continue to face. Space requires an admittedly truncated treatment of those that emerge as particularly salient.

## Who Identifies with the Transition Movement?

An issue at large is the sense of identity with the transition concept. The major contributors to the literature have been those involved in research and demonstration projects addressing the transition needs of youth with moderate and severe levels of retardation relative to the American Association on Mental Deficiency classification scheme (Grossman, 1983). An examination of this literature reveals that the term "severely handicapped" frequently is used as a population descriptor when in many cases the term has been applied generally without definition or clarification.

In addition to the overgeneralized use of the "severe" classification, there is currently a drift in population characteristics traditionally associated with the mild and moderate retardation levels. Polloway and Smith (1983) have argued that a variety of trends related to prevention, early intervention, more cautious assessment, and better teaching have interacted in such a manner as to produce upward shifts along the intellectual and adaptive behavioral functioning continua.

Extrapolating the problem of defining functional levels beyond mental retardation, how

do clients and professionals in other disability areas using severity levels for classification purposes relate to the concept of transition? Curricula and interventions for persons with severe hearing impairments, severe learning disabilities, and severe mental retardation are markedly different. Is there occurring a subtle, de facto exclusion of clients and professionals who cannot extract relevance from the extant transition literature?

Literature addressing adult adjustment suggests that might very well be the case. It is apparent that individuals nominally classified according to a variety of disability categories, as well as within a wide range of severity levels, need transition services (Nash & Castle, 1980; White et al., 1980). However, neither all groups nor all severity levels within groups necessarily need supported employment services—a keystone of the vocational transition literature. Some need assistance only in matters concerning independent living and social networking. If the transition movement in special education is to have a positive impact on the quality of adult living for all persons with handicapping conditions, then the literature needs to broaden its focus and parameters so that a wider audience may identify with its findings and benefit from its implications.

## What is the Role of the High School in the Transition Process?

Currently, research is under way at the University of Kansas in which high school programs are being addressed via nationwide samples and naturalistic case studies for demographic and program-related descriptors, and for indicators of exemplariness (Clark, 1985). Informal, preliminary observations already have suggested some role implications for high schools

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and related challenges for special education personnel preparation programs.

With respect to the high school, what will be the effects of the excellence-in-education movement on its role in transition planning? For example, in Texas, Georgia, Florida, and Oregon, where diplomas are now contingent on both credit hour and minimal competency test requirements, the issues of "special" diplomas and attendance certificates will have a bearing on special education program content and philosophy, and on the reception of the handicapped student by the adult community.

Given the movement's predicted effects, such as the further stratification of high schools' general program offerings (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1985), and the increasing relevance of the "shopping mall" analogy in characterizing such offerings (Powell et al., 1985), will the excellence movement impede the provision of an appropriate education by high school special education programs? Will handicapped students transit into adult life only to experience the exclusion and inaccessibility their school-age counterparts faced 15 years earlier?

In relation to the challenges high schools face, the role of personnel preparation programs for high school special education and special needs teachers is equally critical. One generality implicit in several of the programs described in this special issue is the role specialization teachers need. Such specialization (e.g., transition specialist, job developer) requires differential role preparation on the part of training programs (Clark, 1984). The emphasis on interagency involvement in transition and the changing nature of the high school require training programs to *act* rather than *react*: reaction being the characteristic response to the aftermath of P.L. 94-142's passage when school personnel were asked to perform role functions for which they were not trained.

### What Is Change and How Is It Attained?

Transition means change. And implementation of quality transition programs requires change. Moreover, as many of the contributing authors have concluded, such change will need to be radical in character as well as in form. Several transition models have been advanced in this special issue. But models are blueprints—organized concepts intended to achieve transition goals. We are reminded of models similar in form that accompanied the educational community's response to P.L. 94-142. And we are also reminded of the precious few characteristics of effective change efforts that predicated the implementation of these models. Perhaps some of the false starts of the 1970s can be

prevented by developing the necessary policies for change along with the policies to change.

The articles in this special issue on transition reflect a tone of conviction about the need for change to occur locally and with local ownership in the implementation of transition models. It was also recommended that assessing and evaluating model implementation be done at its outset, not its conclusion. In addition, a variety of barriers to change have been identified, not the least of which were a continued lack of a community base for services and resources, and the reticence of schools to assume the very ownership necessary for change in regard to transition planning.

Until special educators come to grips with how to effect system-wide change, the struggle to implement transition models will go on as did the struggle with the zero-reject, least restrictive environment, and appropriate education models of the 1970s. With every challenge, however, comes opportunity. In this case, we have the opportunity to learn from our history and we have the leadership (much of it represented by the contributing authors in this special issue) to assist us. Moreover, we have the opportunity to contribute to a significantly improved lifestyle for all handicapped youth in the 1990s.

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