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Collaboration between Secondary Special Education Teachers and Community Rehabilitation Service Providers: A Focus Group Analysis

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Abstract

Collaboration by professionals across agencies has been identified as a research-based practice associated with successful post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. Successful post-school outcomes include community employment, postsecondary education (such as involvement in 2- or 4-year college programs), and independent living for young adults with disabilities. Vocational rehabilitation counselors, special educators, and community rehabilitation providers (CRPs) must collaborate to increase the probability of successful outcomes, particularly given the advent of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). Five core areas of Pre-ETS include: (a) job exploration counseling, (b) work-based learning experiences, (c) counseling, (d) workplace readiness training to develop social skills and independent living, and (e) instruction in self-advocacy. The purpose of this study was to gather qualitative data on the current status and future directions of relationships between high school special education teachers and CRPs regarding transition service delivery. In this study, focus groups were used to gather information specific to interagency collaboration. Three primary themes were generated: (a) barriers to effective interagency collaboration, (b) collaboration needs, and (c) recommendations to improve collaboration. Barrier included (a) lack of communication, (b) community issues, (c) school issues, and (d) student and family factors. Both special education teachers and CRP professionals offered information regarding needs and recommendations to improve collaboration. Specific recommendations were identified to improve collaboration, such as improving the intake and discovery process by interviewing the special education teacher prior to the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting and creating a roles and responsibility chart including methods for communication and follow up, among others.

Plain Language Summary

Students with disabilities have more success when educators work together. Working together is called collaboration. When educators collaborate, students with disabilities are more likely to get jobs. Students are also more likely to continue with education after high school and live on their own in communities. Legislation states that teachers and other

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professionals should collaborate. There is a recent law called for "pre-employment transition services," or PRE-ETS. This law is a part of the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act. This law requires that students with disabilities explore possible jobs with a counselor. The law also states that students should learn job skills at community employment sites. PRE-ETS requires educators collaborate as they work with students with disabilities. The purpose of this study was to gather information about collaboration from educators. The educators were special education teachers and other professionals who help students with disabilities get jobs (called Community Rehabilitation Professionals, or CRPs). We held "focus groups," which means teachers and CRPs met online with an interviewer. We asked questions about how much teachers and CRPs collaborated. The teachers and CRPs told us there were problems that limited collaboration. Teachers and CRPs made several recommendations to improve collaboration. We describe problems preventing collaboration in this article. Also, we describe the recommendations made by teachers and CRPs.

Successful post-school outcomes for young adults with disabilities in the U.S. continue to lag far behind outcomes of their peers without a disability (Erickson et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2011). Youth with disabilities are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education than their peers without disabilities (Snyder et al., 2016), and those who do attend postsecondary education are less likely to graduate (Fleming et al., 2017). The Office for Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) found that only 43.9% of youth with disabilities aged 20-24 were employed compared to an employment rate of 74.4% of their counterparts without disabilities (ODEP, 2019). Because of poor post-school outcomes facing young adults with disabilities who no longer receive special education services, teams representing educational systems and service-delivery programs must collaborate to increase the likelihood of success.

Interagency collaboration in the transition process has been identified as a research-based practice associated with successful post-school outcomes (Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2015; Rowe et al., 2021, Test et al., 2009). Friend and Cook (2013) defined collaboration in educational settings as "a style of direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision-making as they work toward a common goal" (p. 4).

Collaboration in the transition process for youth with disabilities has received attention in federal legislation (Brinck et al., 2021). As described in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), schools must invite agencies to a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting (IDEA, 2004) if transition services will be provided. When these circumstances exist, IDEA clearly indicates that collaboration with outside agencies is required for transition planning. With the advent of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA; U.S. Department of Labor, 2014), Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) professionals may collaborate with secondary special education professionals to ensure secondary students with disabilities ages 14-21 years are provided with pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS). Five core areas of Pre-ETS include: (a) job exploration counseling, (b) work-based learning experiences, (c) counseling on opportunities for enrollment in comprehensive transition or postsecondary educational programs at institutions of higher education, (d) workplace readiness training to develop social skills and independent living, and (e) instruction in self-advocacy (34 CFR §361.60).

With WIOA, state VR agencies are required to set aside 15% of their federal funds to provide Pre-ETS services to qualifying students. Qualifying students must be aged 14-21, enrolled in an education program (secondary or postsecondary), and have a disability under IDEA or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Carlson, 2021). Pre-ETS services are to be delivered by VR counselors or providers with which they contract. Research indicates that VR counselors report being inadequately trained to provide Pre-ETS (Awsumb et al., 2020; Neubert et al., 2018). Neubert et al. found that VR counselors rated the importance of performing pre-ETS services higher than they reported their preparation to actually enact such services. The participation of VR counselors on interagency transition teams is identified as a necessary component for successful transition outcomes for students with disabilities (Luecking et al., 2018; Poppen et al., 2017). Unfortunately, because of the large caseload size and limited time, VR counselors often utilize the services of community rehabilitation programs (CRPs) to provide employment-related services to clients (Ipsen et al., 2019; Schultz, 2008).

CRPs are an important source of employment supports for individuals with disabilities and it is estimated there are approximately 12,000 CRPs in the U.S. (Domin & Butterworth, 2012; 2013). CRPs vary widely in size, the population they serve, and the services they provide. Increasingly, VR agencies contract with CRPs to provide Pre-ETS services to students with disabilities (Awsumb et al., 2020). With the implementation of WIOA (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014), CRPs may play an integral role of the planning and implementation processes because they are direct service providers much like special education teachers. According to a survey of 164 Pre-ETS providers, participants expressed confidence in their knowledge of WIOA but desired additional training in each of the five Pre-ETS areas (Awsumb et al., 2020). Although Pre-ETS makes valuable pre-employment training opportunities available to youth and young adults with disabilities, it redefines the roles of VR, special education, and CRPs in service delivery. In many cases, VR may best play the role of service vendor. In turn, CRPs may become primary service providers but only if they collaborate with special education teachers who know the students' characteristics and histories. Pre-ETS may dramatically expand availability of services to youth and young adults with disabilities but makes imperative a collaborative approach to service delivery.

Despite legislation calling for interagency collaboration, researchers described barriers for professionals from different agencies in effectively working together to assist transition-age students with disabilities (Oertle et al., 2017; Riesen et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2016; Trach, 2012). For example, in a national survey of 318 special education teachers of transition-age students and 78 VR counselors with transition caseloads, Taylor et al. asked respondents to rate the importance and feasibility of 14 collaboration practices related to transition. Practices rated highest in importance and lowest in feasibility (i.e., barriers) by both teachers and VR counselors were (a) the need for teacher training in transition, and (b) lack of coordinated referral and planning across agencies. Taylor et al. commented that transition teachers and VR counselors were not optimistic about whether collaboration efforts can be improved. Similar results were reported by Oertle et al. in a survey of statewide transition supervisors (35 special education supervisors and 37 VR counselor supervisors) who rated collaboration activities as important but rated frequency and preparedness for the same activities as consistently lower.

Povenmire-Kirk et al. (2015) implemented and evaluated a model transition collaboration program called Communicating Interagency Relationships and Collaborative Linkage for Exceptional Students (CIRCLES) as one method to increase interagency collaboration during transition planning. In this type of collaboration model, community providers, school providers, and the IEP team members had set meetings and progress reporting procedures. The researchers studied 48 high schools in two different states and conducted focus groups with the district staff who used this collaborative model. Researchers generated themes from the focus groups to determine barriers and challenges as well as successes in implementing the program. They identified five barriers and challenges: (a) lack of awareness among agency and school staff, (b) inadequate preparation of the students and families for meetings, (c) providers not receiving student information prior to meetings, (d) issues with follow-up after meetings, and (e) practical issues (p. 63). Povenmire-Kirk et al. also identified four areas of success in implementing CIRCLES: (a) increased collaboration between agencies and school staff, (b) improved communication about services, (c) empowerment of students and families to conduct meetings, and (d) assistance towards allowing students to change lives (p. 62).

Although researchers have identified a model program resulting in effective interagency collaboration, barriers remain at the practitioner level in many programs. While existing research explores the collaborative experiences of secondary special educators and VR counselors (Oertle et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2016), there are limited numbers of studies on perspectives of CRPs. Yet, with Pre-ETS legislation requiring service provision to youth and young adults with disabilities, the importance of effective collaboration between secondary special education teachers and CRPs is heightened. Focus groups with special education teachers and CRPs may reveal ways to collaborate and thus create awareness and share information. Knowledge generated from the focus groups' current understanding of CRPs and Pre-ETS services may lead to the creation of training materials to educate both teachers and CRP professionals.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to gather qualitative data on the current status and future directions of relationships between high school special education teachers and CRPs regarding transition service delivery. Using focus groups, the researchers sought to address the following three research questions.

1. What will participants of each agency report as their current knowledge and understanding of services available for their students/clients, as measured by themes from focus group transcriptions?

2. What barriers will focus groups members identify that limit collaborative relationships between special education teachers and CRPs?

3. What activities will focus group members recommend to strengthen the relationship between special education teachers and CRPs?

Method

Focus Group Methods

Focus groups represent a research tool used to capture the views and experiences of participating individuals in an informal, conversational manner. According to Kitzinger (1995), focus groups are one form of group interview that capitalizes on communication and interaction among research participants. Focus groups explicitly use group interaction to explore people's knowledge, attitudes, and experiences. Using a focus group produces thematic data based on social interaction and nonindependence of responses as participants make their own connections from conversations with other participants (Levers, 2006).

Focus group research exploring aspects of service provision in rehabilitation have been utilized as a way to improve collaboration and experiences of consumers (Packer et al., 1994). In the current study, focus groups were considered a method for gathering information specific to interagency collaboration of professionals working with transition-aged students with disabilities.

Participants and Setting

In one Western state, funds had been allocated from the State Office of Rehabilitation to develop a limited number of contracts between CRPs and school districts to provide Pre-ETS. This particular state was chosen for the research project because contractual relationships between school districts and CRPs had already been developed. At the time of the study, there were three CRPs in the state with Pre-ETS contracts in place with five school districts. Schools were able to connect with any of the state-approved Pre-ETS providers with oversight from the State Office of Rehabilitation, thus allowing for schools and CRPs to work directly with each other. For this reason, researchers viewed the working relationships between schools and CRPs ideal for focus group analysis.

Prior to starting the study, researchers submitted a proposal to the institutional review board (IRB) describing participant recruitment and safeguards, confidentiality and privacy, focus group methods, and management of data. The study conformed to recognized human subjects research standards.

Once IRB approval was obtained, researchers contacted special education teachers and CRPs requesting participation. Five secondary special education teachers and five CRP professionals agreed to participate. They were divided into three focus groups for this research project. The inclusion criteria for participants were (a) licensed secondary special education teachers within a specified school district, or (b) CRP professionals with current Pre-ETS contracts in place with a school district. Focus groups were created by pairing the CRPs with the teachers from districts currently contracted to provide Pre-ETS services.

To initiate recruitment, the first author emailed the school district transition coordinators

identified in the Pre-ETS contracts, who in turn, forwarded the study information to secondary special education teachers who were involved in the transition process. Additionally, the first author contacted staff of the CRPs named in the Pre-ETS contracts to participate in the study. Once participants emailed the first author agreeing to participate, they were emailed a polling tool used to schedule online focus groups. They also received a survey with questions asking about demographic information.

Demographics

Table 1 displays demographic information collected from 10 focus group participants. Three teacher participants had severe disability endorsements and two had mild/moderate disability endorsements. The five teacher participants had between 3-25 years of experience. Four of the five teachers reported being "somewhat familiar" with Pre-ETS and one teacher reported being "familiar." Three of five teachers were male and two were female. Because of previously established permissions from parents/legal guardians, all teacher participants were allowed direct communication with outside agencies to report on student progress towards IEP goals and four of five responded that they could initiate services with outside agencies and invite agencies to IEP meetings. The five CRP professionals had between three and 20 years of experience working with transition-age students. Four of five CRP participants reported being "very familiar" with Pre-ETS and one CRP participant reported being "familiar." All CRP participants were female. CRP participants stated that, in their role, they were allowed to

Table 1

Demographics of Teacher and CRP Participants

Source	Sex	Years on the job	Role	Familiarity with Pre-ETS
Focus Group 1				
Teacher 1	Male	6	Teacher	Somewhat Familiar
Teacher 2	Male	6	Teacher	Somewhat Familiar
CRP 1	Female	9	Administrator	Very Familiar
CRP 2	Female	6	Direct Service Provider	Somewhat Familiar
Focus Group 2				
Teacher 3	Male	3	Teacher	Somewhat Familiar
CRP 3	Female	6	Administrator	Very Familiar
Focus Group 2				
Teacher 4	Female	25	Teacher	Somewhat Familiar
Teacher 5	Female	15	Transition Specialist	Familiar
CRP 4	Female	20	Direct Service Provider	Very Familiar
CPR 5	Female	3	Direct Service Provider	Very Familiar

communicate directly with their students' special education teachers. All participants identified their ethnic background as White and primary language as English.

Procedures

Each focus group was scheduled for 60-90 minutes. The first author began with introductions and an explanation of the purpose of the research then briefly discussed focus group methods. Each focus group took place using an online video platform. The researchers opted to hold virtual focus groups to remove geographic and logistical barriers for the meeting. Each participant used a computer to attend and had the opportunity to turn on/off their computer's video camera and use their microphone to respond to focus group questions.

In each focus group session, the first author asked five semistructured questions to elicit participant responses related to knowledge and understanding of transition processes and outcomes, barriers, and collaboration recommendations. The questions were as follows.

1. Teachers - What is your experience working directly with CRPs who are providing services to your students? CRPs - What is your experience working directly with your student's special education teachers?

2. What would you like to know about (the other)? Go ahead and ask them.

3. What stressors or barriers do you have to deal with in your profession that you would like teachers/CRPs to know about so that they better understand you and your role?

4. How would closer collaboration benefit a student's transition services?

5. I will now give you 10 min to work together to generate the top three things you would recommend as a group to strengthen the relationship between CRPs and special education teachers. (10 min passage) What are your three recommendations?

After each question, the first author asked related "probe" questions that were raised as a result of conversations sparked by original question prompts. The discussion on each question continued until it appeared the topic was exhausted. Following each focus group, the first author summarized the key points of the discussion and asked the participants to confirm that their ideas were accurately captured.

Following data analysis, researchers sent a follow-up member-checking email to all focus group participants allowing them to see the overview of the findings and provide the researchers with feedback regarding the accuracy of the final coding and themes. The member-checking process adds credibility to the study as it checks the researcher's accuracy of understanding the participant's discussion and context (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Data Analysis

Focus group sessions were recorded, with participant permission, using the recording

system embedded in the online video platform. The focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim into a spreadsheet allowing researchers to analyze transcripts to identify themes in the data. The thematic analysis utilized for this study followed the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) in which researchers: (a) familiarized themselves with the data, (b) independently generated initial codes, (c) independently sought out and identified themes, (d) reviewed themes and cross checked them with other researchers, (e) refined themes and created a definition and name for each theme, and (f) created the final report. Requiring each researcher to individually review, code, and thematically organize the data helped to control for interpretative validity problems (Altheide & Johnson, 1994).

Initially, three researchers reviewed the focus group transcripts independently and identified codes and themes individually. Next, the research team worked collaboratively to compare identified codes as well as to describe and define themes. When themes were identified and agreed upon, the researchers worked collaboratively to identify subthemes.

Finally, participants were sent an email for member checking that provided the final analysis and themes for their confirmation or feedback. This step allowed for assessing the internal validity of the data collection process by the researchers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The timing of member checking overlapped with the worldwide COVID pandemic in Spring 2020 when schools and places of employment were closed. This may explain the limited responses (i.e., only 4 of 10 participants responded to the member-check email—three teachers and one CRP). All four respondents confirmed themes identified by the researchers and offered no additions or changes.

Results

Three primary themes were generated from the multiple rounds of data review and thematic analysis: (a) *barriers to effective interagency collaboration*, (b) *collaboration needs*, and (c) *recommendations to improve interagency collaboration*. These themes are described below with additional findings that support the three overarching thematic claims. To remain true to the essence of the participant's conversations and descriptions, each section contains participant quotes to retain the "voice" of focus group participants.

Barriers to Effective Interagency Collaboration

Members in all three focus groups indicated there were numerous barriers to effectively working with participants from the other agency/organization. Nested within the barriers theme, four subthemes were identified: (a) *communication difficulties*, (b) *community barriers*, (c) *school barriers*, and (d) *student and family barriers*.

Communication Difficulties

The concept of communication difficulties as a barrier to collaboration was embedded in each of the three focus group discussions. Both teachers and CRP participants felt that they would

benefit from training focusing on increased effective communication. As transition professionals, teachers and CRP participants often had full schedules and demands from multiple stakeholders, which limited communication opportunities. This was explained by one teacher:

> *We are all busy and sometimes things sort of slip through, and you don't know what the other person is doing or what their intent is or they don't know what my intent is or what my plan is with somebody.*

One teacher described frustration with unclear communication:

> *I know we had a couple of misfires when working with (specific CRP), a couple of things that didn't go as planned and probably, had I had a little more information, we could have avoided.*

As a barrier, communication was discussed in context of various stakeholders, some of which will be discussed in greater detail in the following subthemes related to other collaboration barriers.

Community Barriers

Focus group participants explained multiple community barriers that negatively affected their ability to be involved in effective collaborative relationships. Teachers reported not understanding when they were supposed to refer students for transition services, as well as confusion around the mission and services of both CRPs and State Vocational Rehabilitation office. One teacher described this community barrier as:

> *I think there is still confusion about CRPs, VR, about who is funding it, whose supporting this area, and whose role and responsibility is it really, because you know we as teachers do what we can, but then also we start doing things that we realize this is actually the CRP role, so I guess, the question would be described in a nutshell: "what is your role and connection with VR and the schools?"*

Within community barriers, participants described difficulty finding new employers in the community who were willing to take students for job exploration activities. Additionally, participants from both CRPs and schools described confusion that employers faced in understanding career exploration activities. For example, one teacher stated:

> *I think the hardest thing is that those community partners, even though we have tried to explain it to them as simply as possible, still don't grasp the whole concept of it. It's not us coming in and doing their work, it's them letting us use their environment to teach skills.*

Beyond finding employers, participants working for CRPs also described the struggle in finding employers that align with student's vocational interest areas. Due to difficulty in finding employers who would allow career exploration at their location, CRPs may not be able to

accurately access a student's vocational abilities. A CRP participant described this scenario, "I have one student that goes to a site every week and he is completely disengaged every time he is there because he is not interested and it has no bearing on his interests at all..." Teacher and CRP participants both noted that beyond the barriers they experience in the community, they also face difficulty with certain school systems and administrations.

School Barriers

Participants noted difficulties with school policy "red tape," as well as some school administrators who did not "buy in" to the transition process. Additionally, teachers stated they were often unsure how Pre-ETS worked and what CRPs can provide. One teacher explained that when she was able to locate employers to accept her transition students for career exploration activities, she faced backlash from her administration:

> I have found that locating community placements makes my administration nervous and there is all this red tape and it's hard to get through the barriers of administrators that think of all the reasons why it wouldn't work, instead of all the reasons why it could work.

Beyond difficulties with school policy and administration, teachers reported additional barriers to collaboration with CRPs because the school district is a nonprofit enterprise. One teacher explained this:

> I'm frustrated because...(school district has a policy) about not promoting anything that is for profit so it's really hard to know and a lot of people will come in from such and such company and I'll have no idea what that company is. I would love it if we could get rid of this ridiculous- so I could know what the pros and cons of each of them are, but it seems like this is very hush hush. We can't really find out about that here because it's for profit.

Student and Family Barriers

Both teacher and CRP participants described difficulties in processes that were outside the community and school setting. Teacher and CRP participants reported that, in some cases, students seemed to lack motivation to participate in career exploration programming. In other cases, they reported students were overwhelmed with academic requirements needed to graduate from high school. One of the special education teachers described this barrier:

> ...our students are very focused on earning credit and graduating and their grades can be affected when you want to try and take them out of school to do the kind of things that we want to do which are transition activities...they don't want to participate in the transition activity because they don't want to not get credit and not graduate.

Finally, participants noted ongoing confusion with parents about how and when they

should seek out transition services for their high school student. One teacher explained her difficulty describing Pre-ETS to parents,

> *I've had many parents say to me 'I don't know what to do' and you give them these names (of CRPs), but I haven't really known how to hook them up either.*

Additionally, transportation to and from CRP activities was noted as a barrier to effective service provision to transition students. One teacher explained difficulties for transition students to engage in after-school Pre-ETS with CRPs,

> *A lot of our students don't have resources. A lot don't have drivers' licenses, they don't have money for buses, they don't live near bus lines, and they don't have families who will take them.*

Collaboration Needs

The second primary theme identified was *collaboration needs*. Within this theme, two subthemes were identified: (a) *sharing of information*, and (b) *sharing of resources*. Although collaboration among professionals assisting students with disabilities in their transition out of secondary education is expected, the sharing process can be an unclear and difficult reality.

Sharing of Information

A common frustration impeding collaborative relationships was duplication of work by both special education teachers and CRPs. CRP participants agreed with comments that special education teachers spend an enormous amount of time with transition-aged students and see them across multiple environments, making teachers a vital source of valuable student information. With both CRPs and special education teachers working with large numbers of students at various parts of the transition process, maintaining and sharing student information as well as resources was reportedly overwhelming. One teacher explained how she created an Excel file to both gather and share student information,

> *You have to have an effective method to organize all the information you share. In my case, I co-teach and we have 24 students in our program…we work with all 12 job coaches as well. So, we have all these people to manage and it is hard for us to remember who is (the student's) DSPD coordinator or VR coordinator, so I have an Excel form that tracks things like when their IEP is, when their re-evaluation is, when they exit the school system and what other services providers do they have.*

The teacher went on to explain how having this information contained in one place also assisted the team with writing the student's IEP.

Sharing of Resources

Another CRP participant commented on how increased collaboration can lighten the workload by sharing responsibilities:

We work with some teachers where they are doing a great job at providing some of those Pre-ETS services. But maybe they don't have time to do all of them, so we collaborate and we let them do their thing with the ones you do have time for and do really well. And we can help with the others that you don't have time for, such as taking individuals out into the community into companies to explore or taking them on college tours which you really don't have time to do.

Additionally, CRPs noted that teachers have "so much on their plates" and understood they need to both act as a resource for teachers as well as a mediator to access existing employers (Taylor et al., 2016). A CRP worker explained,

If we access resources for one student, we can share that with teachers so that the next time they can then be sharing that if they see a trend or that as a specific need.

Recommendations to Improve Interagency Collaboration

The third primary theme identified by researchers was recommendations to improve interagency collaboration. Within this theme, three subthemes were identified, (a) increased communication, (b) improved forms, and (c) increased awareness of CRPs.

Increased Communication

As noted in the barriers section, communication was described as the most significant barrier to effective collaboration. Inversely, communication was noted most frequently as a targeted way to increase effective collaboration between special educators and CRP staff. Specific ways to improve communication included CRP staff contacting the special education teacher when they first began working with a new student, even if services to that student were initiated through VR or parent referral. While the intake processes may vary across CRPs, participants suggested that an interview with the special education teacher should be included as part of the initial intake and discovery process.

Participants reported that both parties should make efforts to communicate, but the weight of the communication efforts should be with CRPs, as they were perceived to have more flexibility in their daily schedules. While CRP participants reported they were being invited to IEP meetings more regularly, they would ideally prefer more frequent and regular updates on student progress rather than only at annual IEP meetings. Beyond verbal communication, a teacher described a way to improve communication and build relationships,

…one thing that really strengthens any relationship is a willingness to have

compassion and empathy for the other people on the team. I think that is a really essential skill that we often overlook.

Improved Documentation and Data Collection

As a way to increase efficiency and reduce redundancy, participants from schools and CRPs advocated for updated documentation processes. For example, a special education teacher described feeling frustrated when a CRP professional would start working with a student and conduct their own data collection procedures. Often teachers reported feeling the CRP assessments were incomplete as they were only from one time period in one location, whereas teachers worked with the students across time and multiple environments; therefore, giving them a larger picture of students' needs and abilities. One teacher noted that her school had been using grant funds to improve documentation among transition professionals.

I love the form that we've been using, because it breaks it down…what [a student's] school day looks like, what their needs and interest are, the key support people in their life, and all these things so that it really can be a collaborative effort, a smooth transition so that we are all contributing together during these transition years so that when they leave everyone is on the same page, because they have the same page.

Increased Awareness of CRPs

Although there has been an increase in Pre-ETS available in recent years, focus groups reported there are still many teachers, schools, and districts who do not fully understand Pre-ETS and CRP roles and services. Multiple participants desired better delineation of roles and responsibilities across community agencies involved in the transition process. One CRP participant noted,

So, where we have been most successful is when schools say, "here's this person, this is this person's roles and responsibilities they will follow up."

A recommendation made by participants across focus groups was advocating for the creation of a formal roles-and-responsibility chart, including methods for communication and follow-up activities. Additionally, special education teachers recommended better understanding of how funding and eligibility works for Pre-ETS.

To improve teacher knowledge of CRPs, teachers requested more information and more visibility from Pre-ETS programs. One suggestion from a teacher was,

I think being in the school and having students able to vouch for the providers is a good thing so I do think recommendations for teachers and peers can help students get engaged.

Additionally, teachers suggested they could be part of a solution by exposing other

teachers and high schools to the CRPs they work with and to help support other teachers in building collaboration with Pre-ETS providers.

Discussion

This study conducted three focus groups with special education teachers and CRP professionals to identify their current understanding of transition services, barriers to collaboration across agencies, and recommended activities to strengthen relationships. Researchers identified themes regarding barriers in (a) communication, (b) community, (c) school, and (d) student and family factors. Both special education teachers and CRP participants offered information regarding needs and recommendations to improve interagency collaboration.

The barriers identified within the present study were similar to the findings of existing literature specific to interagency collaboration (Oertle et al., 2017; Plotner et al., 2020; Riesen et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2016). Similarities in findings were noted despite different disciplines represented by participants, including special education and VR state-level supervisors (Oertle et al., 2017) and special education teachers and VR counselors (Riesen et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2016). Across these studies, communication between transition professionals was noted as a barrier to successful interagency collaboration when it did not occur, and a reason for effective interagency collaboration when it did. For example, Plotner et al. (2020) noted that higher levels of communication in the transition process led to increased levels of collaboration. Common barriers (or activities considered important but infrequently accessed or infeasible) included ineffective coordination and referral problems, lack of administrative "buy in," and failure to share information and resources. Common recommendations across studies included creating channels for communication and understanding of agency roles and responsibilities (Oertle et al., 2017; Plotner et al., 2020; Riesen et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2016). The importance of joint training across disciplines was punctuated by findings of the Taylor et al., Riesen et al., and Oertle et al. studies. The commonality of findings across multiple studies, including this one, should lead researchers and practitioners to implement and evaluate models of interdisciplinary collaboration.

The findings of the current study yield specific recommendations from special education teachers and CRP professionals to improve collaboration. Specific recommendations on the day-to-day collaboration activities targeted Pre-ETS (e.g., CRPs contacting special education teachers when they first began working with a new student, sharing student assessment data, using Excel spreadsheets on internet sites so that all collaborators could coordinate services, creating a roles and responsibility chart including methods for communication and follow up).

Although legislation (IDEA and WIOA) call for interagency collaboration related to transition and include provisions for personnel preparation, no legislation has targeted personnel training across disciplines. Legislation, in general, does not call for personnel training across disciplines because it must address only professionals within a given discipline. Therefore, it is left for professionals holding interagency agreements within states or regions to address the

need for collaboration and training through interagency conferences, webinars, or other means. These events could involve professional development hosted by the school district or state agencies offering training to transition teams representing different disciplines.

Concerns about lack of administrative support were described in this study and were identified as a school barrier. Clearly, school administrators have wide-ranging responsibilities and priorities that can, at times, be discordant. As it relates to transition from school to adulthood, administrators must balance a student's college and career readiness with requirements for high school graduation. For students with disabilities like all high school students, administrators are often more concerned with meeting the requirements for graduation than planning for college and career readiness. School-based transition efforts and CRP involvement to increase one's success in future environments may be, at least in today's school administrations, less of an immediate priority. Educators, VR, and CRPs must send strong messages to administrators regarding dismal post-school outcomes of students with disabilities as well as success stories illustrating the effects of interagency collaboration for specific young adults with disabilities. More specifically, administrators need step-by-step instructions in how to integrate highly rigorous academic standards with Pre-ETS and community-based career exploration.

Limitations and Implications for Research

There are at least three limitations to consider in this study. First, focus groups involved very small numbers of participants, which may have limited the amount of information obtained. We chose focus group methodology to gather thematic data to address research questions, but qualitative research, by its nature, is not intended to be generalizable. Second, on a related note, the focus groups were limited to specific school districts and CRPs who already had contractual agreements in place. If teachers and CRPs in other locations do not yet have agreements in place, the themes derived from the focus group questions could have been very different. New, yet undocumented barriers may be experienced as the practice grows more widespread and mature. Third, this research focused exclusively on collaboration between special education teachers and CRP professionals. No attempt was made to gather thematic data from other service providers such as VR counselors or career technical educators. Larger, more robust groups of professionals representing other disciplines may have yielded new or different themes.

Research is needed to better understand systemic, logistic, and interpersonal barriers to effective collaboration. Once barriers are better defined, practitioners in the field may go about the task of unraveling them and developing ways to facilitate collaboration that is more effective. Researchers may use the themes identified in the focus groups to conduct further studies exploring effective ways to implement programs encouraging CRP, VR, career technical education, and special education teacher collaboration in schools.

Implications for Practice

The overarching barrier-related themes identified in this study have implications for

administrators in state education agencies, school districts, and CRPs. With the advent of Pre-ETS, students with disabilities may finally have an opportunity to prepare for their adult roles while still in school. Pre-ETS has opened doors to community environments and teaching of functional skills. Yet now, the barriers to successful post-school outcomes clearly call on administrators and policy makers to step up. Teachers and CRPs can collaborate to improve transition outcomes for students with disabilities, but their efforts may be thwarted because of administration concerns related to credits needed to graduate from high school, transportation, schedules, and paperwork. Administrative buy in must occur starting with the state agency overseeing Pre-ETS. Key administrators must understand the opportunities at their fingertips and the consequences of ignoring them. Consistent with focus group recommendations, action plans must be developed to establish agreements, define roles and responsibilities, and deliver joint training to both special educators and CRPs.

A comprehensive training plan for interagency collaboration is needed, starting with state-level administrators followed by school-level and service provider training to fully take advantage of Pre-ETS. All groups may be trained in ways to take advantage of interdisciplinary networks to improve collaboration. Training opportunities could be presented in state, district, or school-level conferences focusing on ways to break down barriers and develop interdisciplinary teams. In any event, training should be provided jointly among special educators and CRPs, at minimum, and potentially to other service providers to improve collaboration throughout the transition process.

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