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The Role of Transition Plans for High School Students with Disabilities

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Transition is a difficult task for anyone no matter their age or whether or not they have a disability. Queen (2002) discussed the impact of transitioning from middle school to high school and the problems associated with those transitions, both social and academic. When students transition from high school to post high school life, or the “real world” as some refer to it, there are many hurdles that must be crossed for the student to be successful. Those hurdles include: employment, post-secondary education, housing, food, clothing, health, daily routines, community use, and personal relationships (Scanlon, Patton, & Raskind, 2011; Williamson, Robertson, & Casey, 2010).

When considering students with disabilities, those hurdles appear more difficult to cross than for the student who is not disabled. For example, Madaus, Banerjee, and Merchant (2011) reported that 14% of students with disabilities accessed post-secondary education as opposed to 53% of students without disabilities. Kellems and Morningstar (2010) reported students with disabilities when compared to their general population peers were “less likely to be employed ...have a checking account ...and have a credit card” (p. 60). To assist with transition planning the federal government stipulated in the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) 1990 that schools would provide all students with disabilities a transition plan (Scanlon et al., 2011).

To meet the requirements of the IDEA 1990, and the most recent reauthorization in 2004, school systems must integrate transition services into the students’ IEP. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) 2004 mandates that all children with disabilities have a transition plan in place by age 16 and established a definition of transition

services (Li, Bassett, & Hutcherson, 2009; Mazzotti, Rowe, Kelly, Test, Fowler, Kohler, & Korttering, 2009). Williamson et al. (2010) reported that transition outcomes for students with disabilities rank below those of their non-disabled peers. As a result, schools and agencies need to develop programs specifically designed to assist students with disabilities in their transition to adulthood.

The primary purpose of the transition plan is to establish goals for life after high school, identify appropriate transition services, align the IEP goals with post-secondary goals, and coordinate with local and state agencies or organizations to assist in attaining those goals (Mazzotti et al., 2009). The case manager, in conjunction with the transition coordinator, student, students' family, and agencies (as needed) need to work together to develop the transition plan (Scanlon et al., 2011). Transition planning should begin while the student is in middle school and continue through graduation from high school (Mazzotti et al., 2009). It is important for all parties involved to realize that the plan is a working document and is open to change as the interests and abilities of the student change.

As vital as transition planning is for students with disabilities, Li et al. (2009) reported a large amount of students with disabilities are experiencing difficulty when transitioning from school into adulthood. They further suggested one of the primary reasons for this was inadequate training and preparation of special educators and adult service providers in the area of transition plan development. School leaders need to ensure that special educators receive necessary training to develop comprehensive, student centered, transition plans.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze a cross section of literature on postsecondary transition plans for students with disabilities and use the data to identify implications for building level administrators. The Summary and Critical Analyses section of this paper consists of a combination of six research and best practices articles on postsecondary transition planning for students with disabilities.

Summary and Critical Analyses

Li, J., Bassett, D., & Hutchinson, S. (2009). Secondary special educators' transition involvement. *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability* 34(2) 163-172.

Li, Bassett, and Hutchinson (2009) discussed the position and responsibilities of school personnel involved in the transition planning process. The authors identified the regulations that led to transition plan requirement to include the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS), the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 1990 and 2004, and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) 2002 and how the role of the special educator has expanded since the implementation of the transition requirements.

Li et al. (2009) reported that many students are not receiving the transition planning they need for a successful transition to adulthood. They claimed this is due to insufficient training of special educators in the realm of transition planning and development. The purpose of their study was to investigate the perceptions of three types of special educators in transition development: transition coordinator/specialist, special education teachers, and those

who serve both roles. The study specifically looked at the differences between the three groups' involvement in transition planning.

The method of study utilized The Transition Involvement Survey with five domains. The survey was sent to 1,000 special educators who were members of the Council for Exceptional Children. Of the 1,000 surveys distributed, 498 responses were returned "but only 343 responses were from secondary special education teachers, transition coordinators/specialists, or those with both roles" (Li et al., 2009, p. 165). Li et al. (2009) conducted a "confirmatory factor analyses ... through the LISREL (version 8.52) software package" (p. 165). To examine the differences among the groups in the five transition practices, a MANOVA was conducted. The authors also conducted a post hoc discriminant analysis following the MANOVA to determine which transition practices accounted for the differences among the three groups. Finally, an ANOVA was conducted to investigate the impact different training backgrounds had on the implementation of the five transition practices on each of the three groups.

The results of the study indicated that special educators who served dual roles both as special education teachers and transition coordinators were more involved in the transition planning process and were able to develop more comprehensive transition services than those assuming single roles (Li et al., 2009). The authors suggested that teacher preparation programs include transition planning in their curricula.

Li et al. (2009) identified two main limitations of study. First, they recognized that the participants were all members of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). They cautioned that this is a professional organization and the opinions of its members may not reflect those of

all special educators. They also recognized that the data was self-reported. It was possible that the reported data may not reflect the true beliefs of the respondents.

A major finding of the study was that those educators who had dual roles as both transition planner and special educator were able to develop more comprehensive transition plans than those educators who had a single role. This information could be useful to school leaders as they develop policies regarding transition plan development.

The study attempted to quantify the results of a 28 question survey using a Likert scale based on a numeric 1-5 rating system. Though the responses were quantifiable, I question the overall reliability and validity of such a survey. To add validity to their findings, the authors could have utilized other data sources to include a free response questionnaire or interviews of select personnel.

Kellams, R. & Morningstar, M. (2010). Tips for transition. *Teaching Exceptional Children* 43(2) 60-68.

Kellems and Morningstar (2010) discussed the importance of the transition planning for teenagers as they move from high school into adulthood. The authors cited the results of the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2) to support the need for transition plans for students with disabilities. They also discussed the transition requirements detailed in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) and made note of the fact that the IDEA “defines transition services but does not give examples of the services” (p. 61). This fact leaves the actual developmental details of the transition plan up to the individual states and localities.

The authors discussed three research / evidence based transition activities that have been implemented across the United States. The first transition study discussed by Kellems and Morningstar (2010) was the What Works Transition Research Synthesis Project of Colorado State University. The researchers analyzed twenty years of transition research and practices to develop best practices for transition plans for students with disabilities. The results of the study indicated a “relationship between functional life skills, social/communication interventions, and transition related outcomes” (p. 61).

The second evidence based transition study discussed by Kellems and Morningstar (2010) was the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC). The NSTTAC study consisted of two phases. The first phase concentrated on experimental research studies. The second phase consisted of correlational research studies. Using a compilation of both studies the NSTTAC assessed the success of transition practices and listed “sixteen predictors associated with improved postschool outcomes” (p. 61) and listed those outcomes in a table.

The third transition study discussed by Kellems and Morningstar (2010) was the Division on Career Development and Transition (DCDT) that focused on evidenced based field level transition practices. The main purpose of DCDT was to identify effective transition practices at the grassroots level. The objective of DCDT was to “collect, document, and share transition practices...to provide suggestions to others in the field” (p. 61). Part of the DCDT process was collection of tips or suggestions which were categorized into eight specific groupings to include: “transition planning, student involvement, transition assessment, assistive technology and

universal design for learning, family involvement, interagency collaboration, tips for specific disability groups, and curriculum and instruction” (p. 61). The authors further discussed each of the eight categories giving definitions and multiple suggestions or best practices per category.

The authors cautioned that though the suggestions in their report were evaluated and supported by experts they were based on grass roots ground level practices and were not necessarily research based. The main purpose of Kellems and Morningstar (2010) was to identify best practices being used by ground level practitioners and to make them accessible to others in the field.

The information discussed by Kellems and Morningstar (2010) was written in a reader friendly fashion and was easy to comprehend. The research conducted by the authors utilized statistical data and research that was relevant to the topic. They utilized graphics, charts and tables to further display their data and suggestions. They also included a table of online resources for transition planning. It was obvious the authors designed the information to be beneficial and useful to the ground level practitioner.

Mazzotti, V., Rowe, D., Kelley, K., Test, D., Fowler, K., Kohler, P., & Kortering, L., (2009). Linking transition assessment and postsecondary goals: Key elements in the secondary transition planning process. *Teaching Exceptional Children* 42(2) 44-51.

Mazzotti et al. (2009) discussed the evolution of the IDEA (1990), and the supplemental reauthorizations, and their impacts on students with disabilities. The authors concentrated their research on the transition plan section of IEPs for students with disabilities who are over the age of sixteen. The purpose of their study was to identify information for special educators

to use in the development of effective transition plans. The authors organized the data in their report into six primary categories to include:

- the role of transition planning,
- meeting the requirements of indicator 13,
- transition assessment as a guide for postsecondary goals,
- writing measurable postsecondary goals,
- aligning postsecondary goals with transition services,
- aligning annual IEP goals with transition services and postsecondary goals

(Mazzotti et al., 2009, pp. 44-50)

In each category the authors detailed research-based best practices that educators could use while developing transition plans.

The authors stressed the concept that all individuals involved in the transition planning process understand that every student has goals and ambitions for life after high school. It is up to the individuals composing the transition plan to incorporate those goals and ambitions into the transition plan and ensure the student is taking the necessary steps to reach those goals. Mazzotti et al. (2009) also emphasized the importance of ensuring that the students complete aptitude assessments so the plans are crafted towards their “strengths, needs, and preferences” (p. 51).

Though this article could not be considered truly research based, it did contain information that would be essential in the development of postsecondary transition plans. The authors based their suggestions on published research and federal regulations such as IDEA (2004). The way in which the authors organized their information made the article an easy read and gave the practitioner many ideas and suggestions that could be used at the building level in the development of transition plans.

Williamson, R., Robertson, J., & Casey, L., (2010). Using a dynamic systems approach to investigate postsecondary education and employment outcomes for transitioning students with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 33, 101-111.

The purpose of the study by Williamson et al. (2010) was to “examine the variables that may relate to successful transition for students with disabilities from school to employment and postsecondary education in adult life from a fluent and interactive perspective” (p. 101). To put this into other words, the authors were attempting to identify what factors led to students being successfully employed or attending some type of postsecondary educational facility.

To identify the factors, Williamson et al. (2010) concentrated on seven predictor variables of students with disabilities who completed high school with a minimum of a standard diploma. The seven predictor variables were: “student timing, student behavior, student personal care, student independent living, classroom performance, classroom cooperation, and classroom self-help skills” (Williamson et al., 2010, p. 102). The seven predictor variables were divided further into two subgroups: “(1) the student and (2) the educational subsystem” (p.102). The student subsystem consisted of features that related to the students’ home or community. The education subsystem related to “teacher lesson structure and the overall quality of instruction” (p. 103).

Williamson et al. (2010) posed the following research question:

“Are the characteristics related to the student and/or education subsystems as measured by a pre-vocational skills survey, correlated to employment or postsecondary success within six months of high school graduation?” (p. 103)

To answer their question, the authors designed a quantitative, non-experimental correlational study. The focus of the study was to examine the amount of correlation between the subgroups and the graduates obtaining postsecondary employment and or education within six months of graduation. The authors also conducted a non-experimental correlational study to gather data on the prediction variables that were in each subgroup.

The authors collected data utilizing student information obtained from the school district consisting of the students' summaries of performance, psychological assessments, and prevocational skills checklists. The data derived from the student information were coded into a Likert scale and was analyzed using a computer spreadsheet program. The authors also conducted phone interviews six months after high school graduation. Those students that agreed to participate in the study were asked two questions: "Are you now or have you ever been employed since graduating from high school? Are you or have you ever attended postsecondary education of any kind since graduating from high school?" (p. 104). The authors utilized follow up questions, as needed, to clarify the participants' responses.

The results of the study indicated that of the participants, 75% attended postsecondary education and 75% had been employed within six months after graduating high school. Williamson et al. (2010) indicated that research conducted by Lopez and Elrod (2006) offered supporting evidence that suggested the finding was significant since only 53% of students 18-25 without disabilities attended postsecondary education. Williamson et al. (2010) further stated that a study by Brooks, Ravell, and Wehman (2009) indicated that 78% of students without disabilities had been employed within six months of graduation.

Williamson et al. (2010) identified two limitations to their study. First, the study was conducted in fairly small geographic area. Generalizing the study outside the immediate area of the study would be difficult. Second, the use of the performance assessments and prevocational skills assessments could have led to corrupted data. The reliability and validity of the studies were not verified prior to their usage.

The data for the research was based on the prevocational skills assessment that had previously been completed by the student. The prevocational skills assessment is not a standardized test and the results from that cannot be found reliable or valid. The lack of reliable data could cause the results to be skewed and cause one to question the validity of the results.

Another concern regarding the study was the small sample size of 40 participants in small geographic area of the Southeast United States. Utilizing such a small sample from a small geographic area could make the study difficult to generalize. The results of the data collected may not be valid in other school districts or in districts outside the geographic area of the study.

Finally, the organization and writing style of the authors made the report difficult to follow and the results difficult to comprehend. The use of multiple acronyms that were similar in composition also added to the comprehension difficulty. The authors also incorporated seven tables into the report to serve as a visual graphic of the results. Though the graphics were intended to assist the reader in identifying the results, many of the tables were difficult to understand as there was little explanation for them in the text of the report.

Hudson, D. (2011). Perceptions of high school counselors' involvement in the provision of postsecondary transition services to students with specific learning disabilities. UMI Number: 3462049, ProQuest LLC.

The purpose of the dissertation by Hudson (2011) was to examine "the high school counselors' perceptions of postsecondary transition services to students with specific learning disabilities" (p. 11). To gain a better understanding of the counselors' perceptions she asked two research questions:

1. What were the perceptions high school counselors provided on postsecondary transition services for students with learning disabilities?
2. What activities have school counselors reported being involved with to help students with specific learning disabilities go to college or obtain employment?

(Hudson 2011, p. 12)

By answering the research questions, the author was hoping the collected data would assist high school counselors in their ability to assist students with disabilities obtain employment or continue their education after graduating high school.

Hudson (2011) conducted the study utilizing a qualitative research design. Seven high school counselors were interviewed to gather their perceptions of the postsecondary transition services for students with specific learning disabilities. The author used purposeful sampling and selected the participants based on the number of years of employment (1 year to 30 years of experience) and the participant had to work as a counselor in the school district. She recognized the size and scope of the sample size as a possible limitation for the study. The counselors were all from the same school district in east Tennessee. Due to the size and scope of the sample, the study may be difficult to generalize to areas outside of the specific school district.

To establish validity and credibility, Hudson (2011) used a peer researcher and member checking. The peer researcher was utilized to assist in identifying and compensate for personal biases of the author. Member checking was used to ensure accuracy by identifying factual errors and determine if there was a need to collect more information from the participants.

From her research, Hudson (2011) was able to develop several recommendations for school administrators when addressing the development of postsecondary transition plans for students with disabilities. Among the recommendations was to allow time for collaboration between school counselors and special education teachers. A second recommendation was for school administrators to encourage school counselors to receive training on “postsecondary transition, community based instruction, and differences between federal laws and teaching students self-determination and advocacy skills” (p. 87). A final recommendation was for school administrators to require school counselors to attend all IEP meetings of the students on their case loads. Following these recommendations would allow the counselor to be more familiar with the needs of the individual student, as well as local, state, and federal regulations involving students with disabilities.

The qualitative design of Hudson’s dissertation allowed her to interview each counselor and gain insight into their perceptions of transition plan development. The qualitative design was the best design for her hypothesis. One challenge to her research was the small sample size of seven counselors and the use of a single school district. Having such a small sample and utilizing a single school district may make the results difficult to generalize and replicate. Though the sample size and location negatively impact the study, the results identified by the study could positively influence school practices.

Trainor, A. (2005). Self-determination perceptions and behaviors of diverse students with LD during the transition planning process. *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 38(3), 233-249.

Trainor (2005) conducted the study to analyze the impact of self-determination during the transition planning process. The study focused solely on adolescent males, of multiple ethnicities, in a single school, in a southwest metropolitan school district. Additionally, all of the participants had to be sixteen years of age or older and qualify for free or reduced lunch. Trainor (2005) utilized a qualitative research design in which “interviews, observations, and document review” (p. 235) data were analyzed to answer the following three research questions:

1. What are the self-determination behaviors of CLD male adolescents with LD?
2. How do CLD male adolescents with LD perceive their own role and responsibilities regarding transition planning?
3. How do CLD male adolescents with LD perceive the influence of their parents and teachers on the transition planning process? (p. 235)

The data that was collected in the study was analyzed for “recurring themes using a line by line examination of the text” and “categorical content analyses” (Trainor 2005, p. 237). The texts were analyzed using open coding to identify emergent themes. Once the themes were identified and categorized, the author utilized “a qualitative data analyses software program, N4 Classic” (Trainor 2005, p. 237). This data analyses program enabled the author to identify five major themes that impacted the transition planning process of the participants. The five themes were discussed in detail during the results section of her study.

A major finding of the study was that the students identified themselves and their families as the figures that were primarily responsible for their transition planning. The individuals in the study did not identify school personnel as essential figures in the transition planning process. In fact the study found a perception among the participants that school officials had a negative impact on their self-determination efforts. As a result of her research, Trainor (2005) made the following recommendations: “engage the students in the transition planning process, align curricular plan with student goals, individualize transition plans, maintain multidisciplinary transition teams, and increase parent family involvement” (pp. 244-245).

Trainor (2005) identified three primary limitations to her study. The first limitation was the size of the participant pool. The overall number of participants was small and the results may not be generalizable. The second limitation she identified was the limited time she had to establish relationships with the study participants. The study was conducted over a five month period but the author did state she met with each participant at least four different times. The third limitation she identified were the ethnic, SES, and gender differences between herself and the participants. These three limitations could have influenced the authors’ ability to collect accurate data.

The qualitative study appeared to be a detailed analysis of the self-determination of the study participants. I agree with the author that the study was limited in size and scope and may not be generalizable to other areas of the country. However, she was able to identify five major themes that impacted the transition planning process of the study participants. She was

then able to identify five best practices recommendations that could be easily adapted and utilized by school districts across the country.

Discussion of Research Findings

The body of research focused on postsecondary transition plans for students with disabilities. An analysis of the research articles analyzed in this report identified one overarching theme: the importance of developing an accurate transition plan that is based on the abilities and goals of the student is essential for postsecondary success for students with disabilities (Hudson, 2011; Kellems & Morningstar, 2010; Li et al., 2009; Mazzotti et al., 2009; & Williamson et al., 2010). The cited authors had differing opinions as to who was most responsible for differing parts of the transition plan, however all agreed on the importance of developing a comprehensive, student centered plan.

Transition plans are required under IDEA (2004) for all students with disabilities once the students reach the age of sixteen. However, the authors recommend that school officials begin career discussions with their students by the age of fourteen (Hudson, 2011; Kellems & Morningstar, 2010; Li et al., 2009; Mazzotti et al., 2009; and Williamson et al., 2010). The primary purpose of the transition plan is to identify the students' "needs, strengths, and preferences with regards to postsecondary life" (Mazzotti et al., 2011, p. 45). The most important indicator of a successful secondary education is student success post-graduation. The education a student receives is worthless if it does not prepare them for success after completing high school.

Hudson (2011) in her dissertation focused on the role of the guidance counselor in the development of the transition plans for students with disabilities. In her research Hudson had the participating counselors identify the different assessments that were administered to the students. Among them were the KUDER, EXPLORE, PLAN, ACT, and ASVAB (Hudson, 2011). The assessments were a primary part of plan development as identified by the vocational aptitude and interests of the students.

A recommendation of Hudson (2011) was for school counselors to collaborate with the special education teachers in the development of IEPs and transition plans. Li et al. (2009) identified the role of the special education teacher and transition coordinator in the development of the transition plan. The research conducted by Li et al. (2009) recognized that when the special educator plays a dual role as the transition coordinator the students with disabilities have more comprehensive and accurate transition plans. Comprehensive plans can be developed more easily when the special educator, transition coordinator, and guidance counselor collaborate together.

Kellems and Morningstar (2010) identified numerous best practices which correspond to those previously mentioned. One important aspect they emphasized was the role of the student in the development of the transition plan. Trainor (2005) also emphasized the importance of involving students in the transition planning process and aligning the students curricular plans with their goals. Though it is essential that school personnel work together in the development of the plan, if the goals and interest of the student are not included in the

plan it will not be effective. Scanlon et al. (2011) identified this concept as “student focused planning” (p. 600) and it was identified as a vital aspect of the transition development process.

Kellems and Morningstar (2010) and Trainor (2005) identified the importance of family involvement in the transition planning process. The role of the family is a vital element in the transition plan. Scanlon et al. (2011) also identified the importance of the family in the development of transition plans. The family can assist in the determining suitable transition goals for the student (Scanlon et al., 2011). No one knows the individual student and can give essential information better than the students’ family.

Analysis of the Findings

The information discussed in the synopses of the literature has several implications for building level school administrators. First, it is essential that school administrators understand the legal requirements for transition plans under IDEA (2004) for all students with disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2009; and Scanlon et al., 2011). Ensuring federal, state, and local policies and regulations are being followed is a responsibility of the building level administrator.

Second, the researchers collectively indicated the need for multiple people to be involved in the development of the transition plan. Hudson (2011) recommended the school counselor and special education teachers work collaboratively on transition plans. The information cited in the research articles could assist the building administrator in developing standard procedures for who is required to be involved in the transition plan. In a compilation of the articles the authors suggested that general education teachers, special education teachers, career counselors, guidance counselors, family members, and, most importantly, the

student be involved in the development of the transition plan (Hudson, 2011; Kellems & Morningstar, 2010; Li et al., 2009; Mazzotti et al., 2009; & Williamson et al., 2010).

Third, the information could also assist in identifying what aptitude assessments would best serve the needs of the school and the student. Hudson (2011) identified specific aptitude assessments that could be used to identify the interests and abilities of the student. The transition assessment data serves as the core information used to determine the goals and services in the transition plan and the IEP (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010). Having a familiarity with the different types of assessments could assist the building administrator in determining which tests may best serve the needs of the student and the school.

The transition plan is a vital aspect of the educational process for students with disabilities. The plan assists the student, the students' family, and the school in determining the best courses of action to meet the postsecondary career or educational aspirations of the student. The transition planning process needs to be taken seriously by school personnel and should not be considered as a check the box process. The success of one's education is not simply measured by their academic prowess but more importantly by their success in life after high school. The transition plan is an essential link to ensuring the overall success for students with disabilities in the postsecondary world.

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