

Article Information

Received date : January 14, 2021

Published date: January 18, 2021

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Key Words

Post-secondary; Transition; Special
education; Occupational therapy

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Post-secondary Transition Services and the Role of the Occupational Therapist

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Abstract

Post-secondary transition services are federally mandated, yet there are great differences in implementation. The purpose of this study was to explore the current practices in post-secondary transition services and to understand how occupational therapists are involved in transition services. Public school administrators from 11 school districts were interviewed, all of whom work in transition services. Triangulation of data, member and stakeholder checks were all completed for validation and to ensure trustworthiness. Analysis of the interviews revealed four assertions:

- a) Districts use a variety of personnel as the transition coordinator
- b) Transition assessments need to be continuous and more comprehensive
- c) More training is needed for the entire transition process
- d) Occupational therapists are underutilized in transition services

From these assertions, one global theme emerged: There is a need for increased training on the overall process to deliver best practice transition services, including timeline, assessments, agency involvement, and training for parents and staff. This study also discussed the importance of parent involvement for student success. Future research is recommended on the implementation of the pre-employment transition services and the process of evaluating students throughout their transition years.

Introduction

In the United States, the 2004 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) defines transition services as “based upon the individual child’s needs” and “includes instruction, related services, community experiences and the development of employment” [1]. With such a broad definition, it is understandable why there is such great variation in services provided from district to district and state to state. The National Technical Assistance Centre on Transition (NTACT) initiated providing evidence-based practice guidelines for transition services, however the recommendations currently have a limited focus on practices to teach academics, employment, or life skills [2]. In 2014, new legislation passed, called the Reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, which requires vocational rehabilitation agencies to allocate 15% of their federal funding towards pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS). In some states, the Pre-ETS also expanded the eligibility to children ages 14 and 15. While these new initiatives are aimed to provide improved outcomes for post-secondary employment, transition services remain a confusing and complex process for many school districts. How to provide consistent training to educational staff, how to individualize community based vocational training, when to contact and involve community agencies, and how to best educate parents, are some of the challenges facing school districts today. The Council for Exceptional Children’s Division on Career Development and Transition (2013) has competency standards for transition specialists on their website to guide the training and educational process for professionals. Despite these competencies, the research shows that competency standards are not widely implemented [3] and special educators working in transition do not feel competent in their ability to plan and implement transition services [3]. Another factor to consider is the diverse requirements from state to state for a transition specialist. Although it is known that transition specialists require specialized knowledge and training pertinent to their role, there are limited certification programs or required licensure [3]. One of the focuses of transition planning is vocational training, which is imperative to the success of young adults with disabilities maintaining employment after exiting high school. A 2018 U.S. study found only 37% of people with disabilities are employed, equalling 6.8% of all employed individuals ages 21-64 years (Shepard, 2020). The success of vocational training, as part of transition services, has been found to be linked to community-based learning, rather than in a school setting [4]. Community-based, supported vocational programs have also been found to be cost effective when compared to facility-based employment programs, saving tax dollars by up to 47% [5]. Small-scale initiatives have been found successful, where local business owners have agreed to provide non-paid vocational training and employment for a small number of students with disabilities [6]. Paid or unpaid work was listed as the most substantiated transition practice by Landmark with community or agency collaboration listed as the least substantiated best practice. Interagency collaboration and family education are two areas of transition planning that are currently lacking in research [7].

Another area in transition planning is the creation of the individualized educational and transitional plan (IEP) for each student. Students with disabilities often receive occupational therapy (OT) as a related service within the public educational system, yet only 7.5% of these students have an occupational therapist participating on their transition team [8]. OT focuses on improving the quality of life through attainment of independence through occupation, focusing on improving social, educational and vocational skills. Occupational therapists are trained to “provide interventions that support students in establishing new skills, transferring skills to new contexts and activities, and modifying contexts and activities to increase performance and participation and prevent new performance problems”. Occupational therapists have the training and skill set to be a key member of the transitional team, yet previous research indicates occupational therapists are not widely utilized in this capacity [9]. In fact, the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) mandates education on transition services for every OT student in the United States [10]. The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) also released a fact sheet on OT’s role in post-secondary education in 2013, promoting the skill set of the occupational therapist and the distinct value occupational therapists can bring to the transition team [11]. Despite these efforts, a recent scoping review of school-to-work transition services found OT to be absent in the literature and reported an imperative need to identify what services are being provided by occupational therapists [12]. The purpose of this research study was to (1) gain a better understanding of current



practices in post-secondary transition services and to (2) explore the role of occupational therapists in transition services from an administrative viewpoint. The viewpoint of the public-school administrator was selected to determine if administrators understand the full scope of OT services and to help understand why occupational therapists are not utilized to their full potential in post-secondary transition services.

Methods

The principal investigator’s institutional review board approved this qualitative study. A phenomenological approach was chosen due to the exploratory nature of the questions. A semi-structured interview with flexibility for elaboration was utilized. Questions were open ended to encourage a rich dialogue. Examples of questions include, “What do you feel is the biggest barrier to community based vocational training?” and “Who provides training for transition services?” Follow up questions were used when necessary to expand upon the subject matter. Both authors, an occupational therapist and an educational administrator, both with doctorate degrees, conducted interviews. The participants gave consent verbally prior to the interview. Interviews were scheduled at a time and location convenient for the subjects, with some interviews taking place in person and some over the phone.

Participants

Participants were recruited through an educational list serve, through convenience of location and from snowball recruitment. Subjects were geographically located in one state. The researchers contacted educational administrators from rural, suburban and urban areas to request interviews. Eleven school districts participated in the study (Table 1). The school district personnel interviewed consisted of directors of special education and special education coordinators.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics.

Table with 5 columns: Subject, Position Title, Employment, Size of School District, Location. It lists 11 participants with their respective roles, employment types, school district sizes, and locations.

Note: School district size is determined as large (over 10,000 students enrolled), medium (2500-9,999 students enrolled) and small (<2500 students enrolled).

Data Analysis

To ensure rigor, the researchers kept a detailed account of all participant activity, such as email correspondence and dates of interviews. The in-person interviews were

recorded, when given permission and transcribed. All interviews were transcribed and read at least twice prior to coding. The interviews were analysed into nine codes. From the nine codes, nine organizing themes emerged, and four assertions were made. Out of the four assertions, one global theme was found. Validation was achieved through triangulation and through member and stakeholder checks. After both researchers coded and analysed data separately and agreed upon themes, the thematic analysis of the data was presented to three subjects that were interviewed to make sure the findings resonated, and the subjects agreed with the findings. After the member checks, the trustworthiness of the data was further ensured by completing a stakeholder check with a transition expert. The transition expert was a special education teacher with over 20 years of experience working with children with disabilities ages 14-22 years. The transition expert was recommended from the state’s department of education, post-secondary transition coordinator and was not previously known by the researchers. The results of the study and the thematic analysis was shared with the transition expert, who was also in agreement with the study’s findings.

Results

Overall, the data analysis yielded one global theme: there is a need for increased, consistent training on the overall process to deliver best practice transition services, including timeline, assessments, agency involvement, as well as increased training for parents and staff (Table 2). The subjects all discussed the need for training; training for the educational school district personnel, training for the community sites and educational opportunities for the parents. In order to keep confidentiality, quotes will not be linked to participants.

The training for educational personnel is needed on the paperwork, timeline, assessments to evaluate student skills, agency involvement, and procedures for obtaining vocational sites in the community.

“As one special education director stated: To be honest, that is one area, one target area, and there are certainly areas of opportunity to refine and sort of improve our programming, and how we write, transition plans, and what does that look like and starting very, very early.”

Another subject Stated

“So, that is an area of deficit for us because we tend to as a district, and this was past practice; and I am hoping that we develop more internal programs, but really, we did not have to do a lot of that training because if the district thought a student needed that, they would send them to and took care of them. In addition, we are paying them a small fortune to educate them.”

The data also revealed four assertions labelled as identifying a transition coordinator, skills assessment needs, training needs, and the underutilization of occupational therapists.

Identifying a transition coordinator

The process of identifying a transition coordinator or members of the transition team tends to be dependent on the unique characteristics associated with the district. The districts interviewed had a variety of personnel serving as the transition coordinator/ specialist. Out of the 11 districts interviewed, two had a position designated as a “transition specialist.” The other districts had a special education coordinator or a special education teacher serving in the role of transition specialist. The districts also reported a variety of varying members for the transition team, including the student, parents, regular education teacher, special education teacher, related services when appropriate, school counselor, Department of Mental Health, Department of Developmental Services, State Rehabilitation Commission and other outside agencies when appropriate.

Skills assessment needs

The second assertion was that there is a need to provide a more comprehensive, continuous, skills assessment to better understand the individual needs and strengths of each student. Six of the 11 districts discussed the need for students to be evaluated on a continuous basis. Although the students are evaluated when they first receive a transition IEP, the participants commented on the need for a more comprehensive skills assessment. There is also the need for continuous skills assessments for specific occupational activities within the home, school and community settings. A student’s ability to do laundry, take public transportation and work as a cashier at the local grocery store all require varying skills that may be developed into IEP goals. Given that some students continue through



Table 2: Thematic analysis framework.

Codes	Organizing theme	Assertions Identified	Global Themes
Personnel	A variety of individuals in different roles serve as the transition coordinator	The process of identifying a transition coordinator or members of the transition team tends to be dependent on the unique characteristics associated with the district.	-
Transition Team	Other than the required team members, all other transition IEP members are situational.	-	-
Home Evaluation	There is a limited amount of assessment occurring beyond the school walls.	There is a limited amount of assessment occurring beyond the school walls.	There is a need to provide a more comprehensive, continuous, skills assessment to better understand the individual needs and strengths of each student.
Agencies Involved	-	-	There is a need for increased, consistent training on the overall process to deliver best practice transition services, including timeline, assessments, agency involvement, as well as increased training for parents and staff.
Vocational Opportunities	Although community agencies are involved, there is not a clear, defined set of guidelines or timeline for involvement.	-	-
Training	Community Based vocational opportunities are limited for a variety of reasons and not individualized for most.	There is a great need for statewide training on the entire process of transition, including assessment, timeline for agency involvement, how to obtain community vocational sites and the new Pre-ETS.	-
Training	Training varies greatly for every district and there does not seem to be a centralized/standardized training for the services required.	-	-
Barriers	Transportation followed by educating parents were the biggest barriers reported	-	-
Steps for Community-Based Vocation	Overall planning and using the planning form to capture students' interests were the 2 most important steps cited. Educating parents and assessing students' skills were tied for third.	-	-
Occupational Therapists' Role	Occupational therapists are involved minimally in the transition process and only when IEP driven.	Occupational therapists are underutilized in transition services.	-

their 22nd year, students need updated evaluations to assess their current skills that are context specific to address their changing needs for continued progress.

Training needs

The third assertion was that there is a great need for state-wide training on the entire process of transition, including assessment, timeline for agency involvement, how to obtain community vocational sites and the new Pre-ETS. A best practice model for the process of obtaining, staffing and training community based vocational sites is needed. Participants commented on the difficulty of the transition IEP paperwork, the lack of knowledge and access to evidence-based skills assessments, and the difficulty with acquiring and maintaining vocational sites in the community. Some participants also noted difficulty with utilizing paraprofessionals in the community due to contract regulations and training. Respondents also commented on the relationships required for community agencies to be active participants in the transition IEP process. Not only did subjects feel it was difficult to know when and who to contact for outside agencies, but also how to develop and maintain the relationships needed for successful student outcomes.

The underutilization of occupational therapists

The last assertion was that occupational therapists are underutilized in transition

services. Nine of the 11 school districts reported that the occupational therapist is not actively involved as a member of the transition team, unless the student is receiving OT as a related service. Only one district reported that the OT was a regular member of the transition team. Five of the respondents reported that the occupational therapist had too large of a caseload and was only utilized as a direct service provider. The idea of occupational therapists being more involved in transition planning and conducting assessments was reported as favourable, however unrealistic given current caseload demands.

Student success

Other important information gained from the interviews was related to student success. One contributing factor to the students' success was found to be dependent on accessibility of vocational opportunities. In the majority of interviews, the subjects recognized that successful experiences hinged on 1) the availability of local businesses, 2) how well trained and supported both the businesses and support staff are, and 3) the financial commitment of the district to support staff, transportation, and training. One of the problems reported did community sites not fully understand the role of the support staff, such as complaining when the support staff was reading, or complaining that the support staff was too harsh with a student. The community sites and the school districts need to be in regular communication about the changing needs of the students and the importance of weaning support from the support staff. It is also important that sites not



baby or patronize the students with disabilities. Regardless of whether or not a district has the luxury of busing or public transportation to access vocational opportunities in the community, there remains the challenge of getting the district to financially commit to adequately training staff to work with students for both the short and long term. With the constant flux of students in a district from year to year due to aging out and different levels of abilities, keeping the trained support staff in post-secondary transition services was also reported as problematic. Parent involvement was overwhelmingly recognized as the largest influence on student success. The educators interviewed stated it was important for parents to have high expectations of their child's ability. It was also deemed critical that parents are knowledgeable of the laws regarding persons with disabilities. Subjects stated that parents need to understand the supports available to them and how to access those supports. Limited access to transportation and limited parental involvement were two significant barriers reported to inhibit a student's success.

Stakeholder validation

The stakeholder validation process also yielded valuable information. After validating the thematic analysis, the transition expert offered her professional opinion and advice on transition services. When discussing the varied implementation process, the transition expert stated that there are many transition timelines available, but consistency of usage was problematic. She highly recommended having an education team leader run all the transition IEP meetings, versus having each special education teacher being responsible for knowing the transition paperwork. Having a point person know the timeline, paperwork, agency contacts and transition laws facilitates a successful outcome. The transition expert also recommended to "beginning with the end in mind." An explanation of this phrase included having the student and family discuss what they envision the student's daily schedule to be when the student is 22 years old; including showering, picking out clothes, getting dressed, working, transportation, etc. Mapping out the steps to work towards independence educates the family on what needs to be done at home, at school and in the community. This allows families to understand the roles and responsibilities of both the school and home. It is also vital to explain the importance of decreasing support over time.

Discussion

This phenomenological study highlighted the myriad of practices that districts throughout the state subscribe to in an attempt to best meet the needs of the students requiring post-secondary transitional services. The results based on the thematic analysis showed that a district's transition services are dependent on several key factors: personnel, involvement of agencies, vocational opportunities, and training. It was also made clear that although transition services are mandated, there is not a clearly defined process for implementation. One of the prevailing assertions that emerged was that school districts select the transition team based on the unique attributes of the student and there was no definitive formula for establishing a transition team. This does then beg the question for further discussion about the need to create a framework that could be used to establish a clear set of guidelines for determining the level and type of support a student requires. Such a framework should emphasize the need to properly and adequately train the key stakeholders in the various components associated with strategies and practices that enhance the entire process of transition, including assessment, timeline for agency involvement, how to obtain community vocational sites and the new Pre-ETS. As it currently stands, many districts contract with outside agencies to provide transition training, which can be cost prohibitive. This seminal assertion not only acknowledges this fact but also recognizes more must be done to better support district funded positions in order to improve student outcomes. A study by [13] surveyed transition teams and found similar results indicating a need for more transition training. It is also clear that the role of the occupational therapist is not being utilized in post-secondary transition. This is especially significant when considering that, much of the occupational therapist's expertise entails working with students on life skills that apply to daily work and living experiences. These results support previous findings that the occupational therapist has minimal involvement in transition planning [13-15]. A study examining the perceptions of team members when the occupational therapist conducted the transition assessments found positive results [13]. This indicates there is the potential opportunity to further explore how districts can implement best practices associated with the Response to Intervention (RTI) model to utilize occupational therapists in transition planning. Occupational therapists also bring the lens of the Participatory Occupational Justice Framework [14], which facilitates social inclusion. Social inclusion involves having the resources and opportunities to fully participate and contribute to society [14]. With the Participatory Occupational Justice Framework, "its collaborative, enabling processes are to raise consciousness of occupational injustice, engage collaboratively with partners, mediate on an agreed plan, strategize how to find resources, support implementation and continuous evaluation, and inspire advocacy for sustainability or closure" [14].

This "blueprint for action", supports the post-secondary transition process and all its complexities.

Future considerations

Looking ahead, it is critical to consider the findings of this research and how best to support this specific population of students with disabilities. Further research should be conducted to better analyze ways in which districts could do such. It is clear that the federal government has attempted to clear a path for such work to occur by making necessary adjustments to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in 2014 by adding Pre-ETS, which specifically targets this population. As the program is new and only 18% of students who applied vocational rehabilitation services received Pre-ETS [15], there is great potential for improvement and program development. Next steps or potential future studies should focus on the implementation of Pre-ETS and on the longevity of employment of students who are successfully employed when aging out of the districts. An analysis of the current practice for evaluating students' skills through the transition process would also be beneficial in response to the reported need for ongoing skills assessment. Examining the education provided to families throughout the transition process would also be beneficial. In order to increase the presence of occupational therapists on the transition teams, a recommendation is for academic programs to consider adding or increasing their fieldwork experiences in local transition programs [16]. Having OT students assist on vocational sites in the community, self-determination training and community mapping may bring a greater awareness to the skill set occupational therapists can contribute to the transition team. Occupational therapists within the public schools also need to continue to advocate for a workload versus a caseload in order to increase their participation in non-service driven activities, such as RTI and becoming a permanent member on a transition team. Using the suggested approach by AOTA (2014) [17] to question whether the transition assessments conducted are the most appropriate and completed by the most qualified individual may also provide an opportunity for occupational therapists to express their distinct value.

Limitations

This phenomenological study consisted of 11 school districts all within one state. Although saturation was obtained, the findings may not be universal across the country. The subjects interviewed did not necessarily share the exact same job title and consequently had different roles and responsibilities. It may also be considered a limitation that occupational therapists were not interviewed regarding their role.

Conclusions

Emerging from the study was a clear indication that more training is needed. A dialogue and planning would also be beneficial within and beyond school districts to align common practices; furthermore, it was conclusive that districts were not utilizing the expertise of the occupational therapist.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Sherry Elander for her time and contributions to this study and for her contributions to improving transition services for the children we serve.

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