

## PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES IN TRANSITION PLANNING

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### ABSTRACT

*For an individual with disabilities, leaving high school and transitioning into society is one of life's most challenging experiences. Planning for this transition is not only important, it is mandated by law. Despite federal mandates and advancements in technology, the unemployment rate of individuals with disabilities is increasing. This study seeks to depict what parents think and feel about the school-based transition program for their child with a disability. A second purpose is to show their ideas of what they would like to see on their child's transition plan. The study was conducted using qualitative research methods. Interviews and casual conversations were conducted to collect data and identify parents' thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Responses from those interviews and conversations were used to provide a constant comparative matrix for data analysis. Parents identified three main areas of concern in the process of transition planning; communication, knowledge, and involvement. Parents are a key component in the transition planning process. However, the parents do not feel they are being included in the decision-making process.*

**Keywords:** *Transition Planning, Parent Perspectives, Students with Disabilities.*

### 1. Introduction

Change is a common part of every individual's life. In an educational setting, the change that students experience when leaving high school and beginning the next stage in life is called transition; "a change, a switch, a move, or a conversion to another place or frame of mind" (Sweet, Dezarn, Belluscio, 2011, p.50). Typical students either plan for college or plan to work. Counselors and school staff work hard to prepare these students for transitions by providing information for being successful on the ACT, ASVAB, or other placement tests. They also provide tutoring to make sure these students pass the required high-stakes tests. They provide scholarship information, community service projects, and plan job fairs to allow students to see what options are available. This process almost seems natural for most students. It is just what a person does at that time in your life.

Individuals with disabilities are the "largest minority group" in the United States (Whittmer, 2011, p.57). For individuals with disabilities, moving from the school setting into the larger world is one of the biggest and most difficult transitions in their lives. This challenge produces "anxiety, uncertainty, frustration, and

turbulent relationships" among families (Jivanjee, Kruzich, & Gordon, 2009, p.435).

Employment data shows a high percentage of unemployed individuals with disabilities in the United States (Certo, Luecking, Murphy, Brown, Courey, & Belanger, 2008, p.88). In Barbara Altman's study on the labor market of individuals with disabilities (2005), she addressed the decline in the number of individuals with disabilities that are employed is steadily decreasing (p.1). The 2010 US Census supports her claim indicating that from 1995 to 2010 the percentage of individuals with disabilities decreased from 27% to 19% (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Even with the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the advancements in technology, employment rates among individuals continue to decrease.

IDEA, public law 94-142, mandates that a transition plan be developed and implemented when a student, that is receiving services through special education, turns 14 years of age. The transition plan must be reviewed and revised as needed or no less than annually until the age of 21. Transition plans should include post-school activities and goals.

These activities include postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated employment, continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, and/or community participation. Each area should be addressed by indicating what skills are taught to provide instruction and remediation in these areas of the student's life. After those areas have been addressed, linkages should be matched with the skills to provide for instruction, related services, training, community experience, adult living, employment skills, daily/independent living, and functional/vocational evaluation. These linkages are added to the curriculum to enhance the areas of transition (Mississippi Department of Education, 2012).

Students with disabilities are placed on a graduation track through IEP team decisions. There are three options for graduating from high school for a student with a disability; a traditional diploma, an occupational diploma, or a certificate of attendance.

The needs of students receiving a traditional diploma for planning life after high school are not much different from that of their typical peers. These students may need a few accommodations or modifications if they continue their education at a community college or university. These students usually have very mild disabilities. They learn to adapt to their environment and therefore function as well as their peers.

Students receiving an occupational diploma need a little more guidance. They typically have moderate disabilities that require some planning and job skills training. They too may need accommodations or modifications if they continue their education at a community college. Students receiving a certificate of attendance need the most intensive transition plan. Most students receiving a certificate of attendance have severe cognitive delays. They need specific skills taught for job preparation and daily functioning. If employed within the community, they may also need job coaches. (Mississippi Department of Education, 2012). Students with severe disabilities need plans that place their names on waiting lists for

sheltered workshops and living facilities. These waiting lists need to be addressed as early as possible so that when the time comes, the needs of the student will be met. According to parents, once students with severe disabilities reach the age of 14 and a transition plan is developed and implemented, transition skills should be the focus of teaching compared to "minimally important" academics (Moon, Simonsen, Neubert, 2011, P.103).

A successful transition plan is an outcome of "coordinated planning, collaboration, and decision-making among school staff, families, and a network of community agencies" (Davies & Beamish, 2009, p.248). Planning is the best strategy to meet any goal. The better planning that happens the better the outcome. This process is not different for meeting the goals of students with disabilities. Ultimately, the goals of a school are established to produce productive members of society. Therefore, the strategy would be to teach the skills needed for students to become productive members of society. These skills need to be appropriate and relevant to the students' life after leaving high school. Transition plans should be set up to teach and "empower students with the necessary skills to become productive and independent citizens of society" (Koch, 2004, p.7).

Parents are one of the strongest links between students and their lives after high school. Teachers are considered to be the "complement" to the parent (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2010, p.287). A parent knows what the child will need to function within their community. They know the appropriate social skills that are acceptable and the jobs that could be available for the student. Parental involvement and input into this plan are very important in an effective transition plan. The parents know what they want for their child. A study conducted by Jivanjee, Kruzich, and Gordon (2009) found that parents are asking "to be considered as a resource" (p.435). Instead of being used as a resource, these parents are finding themselves "excluded" from the planning process (Jivanjee, Kruzich, & Gordon, 2009, p.435). More and more studies are

reporting “low levels of family participation” (Davies and Beamish, 2009, p.249). The skills and experiences set up in the transition plan should provide the child with the least restrictive functioning ability within the local community. If set up effectively, the child should move from high school to either their employment setting, post-secondary educational setting, or living facility smoothly. The No Child Left behind Act required schools to “partner” and “involve” parents (Vaden-Kiernan et al., 2005, p.2). However, the lack of involvement is still a major concern of parents.

## 2. Method

This study used qualitative research methods to gain insight into the parents’ perspectives of their children’s transition programs. Once approval was granted to conduct the study, recruitment letters and informed consent were distributed to students. The first 3 parents that responded by returning the informed consent were selected to participate in the study.

### Data Collection

Formal interviews were scheduled for each of the participants. During the interviews, discussion topics were addressed to parents about their perspectives on their children’s current transition programs. Topics of discussion included students’ current transition plan, interaction with teacher/school, contact initiated by parent/school, parent’s view of parent role in planning, community interaction, and concerns with the program. Parents initiated a discussion by providing ideas or suggestions for possible activities they would like to see their child participate in.

They also provided a discussion on specific skill needs they felt would most benefit their child for life after high school. Some interviews were recorded for accuracy; however, some parents requested not to be recorded. In the cases of no audio recording, detailed field notes were taken during interviews. Interviews were conducted at the school site in the child’s classroom.

After the initial interviews, the participant and the researcher interacted in many casual conversations. Follow-up

questions, comments, and quotes from other interviews and literature were used to prompt discussion on transition planning from the parent’s point of view. Casual conversations were also conducted in the child’s classroom at the school site. The conversations took place when the parents dropped off or picked up their children from school.

### Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed. After the interviews were transcribed, the typed transcription was given to participants to be checked to make sure the transcription correctly portrayed the perspectives of the parents.

A constant comparative matrix was created using the data from the interviews and casual conversations. Common themes of knowledge, communication, and involvement were identified from interviews and casual conversations. Parents’ ideas, thoughts, and feelings were placed in the matrix to find similarities and differences.

### Setting

Interviews were conducted in the children’s classroom at the school site. The classroom was set up for students with severe and profound disabilities. There was one teacher’s desk on the east wall and an assistant desk against opposite walls with a bookshelf full of manipulatives to the side of it. The classroom had a whole group area with a smart board and dry erase board on the wall with 7 desks facing the wall. The classroom also had three independent workstations pushed up against the north wall. These were desks with chairs and shelves. The shelves contained boxes of activities in the order the student was to complete them. The classroom also had a functional living section in the northeast corner of the room.

The washer, dryer, and restroom were in the functional living section. Connected to the classroom where a computer lab and reading room with an open walkway between them. The reading room was set up with computers along the west wall and shelves of books.

A second assistant's desk was against the north wall. Every wall was filled with informational posters. Some were commercial posters; but, many were student work. The bulletin board on the west wall had pictures of students receiving awards at the honor roll ceremony and Special Olympics and pictures of students from newspaper articles. Another bulletin board on the south wall had steps for successful writing and a checklist for students to use to check their papers before turning them in. There was a table under this board where students completed writing activities.

The classroom had a window on the east wall that looked to the courtyard. The air was cool, but not too cold. For each interview, the sun was bright and shining. There were no students in the classroom since the interviews took place after school or during planning times. The building was quiet except for a few children passing by the classroom for after-school activities.

### **Participants**

For this study, 3 participants were selected from a rural school district. Participants all had children that were served through special education services in that district. The children had to be at least 14 years old to make sure that a transition plan was required to be in place for that student. Each participant had a student that was between the 15 and 19 years of each. Participants had students that were eligible to receive special education services for learning disabilities in reading comprehension, autism, and intellectual disabilities. Learning environments for each of the students ranged from self-contained to general education with inclusion as remediation.

All three participants are in a rural area of Mississippi. Their children attend school in their local public school district. The students are all picked up and dropped off daily by their parents.

### **3. Results**

After interviewing and participating in casual conversations, three common themes were identified: communication, knowledge, and involvement. These are areas that all the

parent participants addressed in the interviews and casual conversations and were consistently initiated by parents whether directly or indirectly.

#### **Communication**

Parents felt that there was a lack of informative communication between school and home. Several responses by parents were "I don't know" or "I'm not sure" when asked about goals that were on their children's transition plan. Due to the parents picking up their children and dropping them off in the mornings, there seemed to be a large amount of communication.

Two of the three parents have daily communication. However, the parents seemed to feel the communication was not informing them of their child's progress or providing information the parent needs about the planning of their child's future. One parent even said, "I do not feel it is enough."

#### **Knowledge**

A second key concept that parents addressed was knowledge. Parents rely on the school system, teachers, special education directors, and administration for information about what their children need. About asking which goals on the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) were transition-related, one parent stated, "No one has ever brought it up, so, I did not know it was important." This concept relates to the lack of communication between school and home. The school is not providing information to the parents in a way that they understand the procedures and options they have for their child.

#### **Involvement**

Parents have great ideas. During the interviews, all of my participants offered suggestions such as "job fairs", "job shadowing", and providing a simulated sheltered workshop for students. These are great ideas that have never been done in this environment for students with disabilities. However, parents are not sharing their ideas during the planning process. According to one parent, her reason for not sharing was, "I did not know I could". Again, parents are

uninformed of what their options are. One parent stated that she asked a question about the transition page and she said the school staff “acted like I did not ask the question and kept going on with other topics”.

In addition to providing great ideas for activities in transition services, parents have more insight into the needs of their children. The parent knows what skills their child needs to function within their sector of the community better than any teacher or school personnel. “Money skills”, “self-help skills”, and “working long periods” are a few skills that were mentioned that parents feel their children need. Once again, parents are not sharing this in the transition planning process.

Community involvement was something that all parents mentioned as a need for their children. Parents indicated that their children were not provided with activities within the local community. Parents want the school to teach their children how to function in society by taking them to “places they will have to use and be familiar with when they finish high school”. Parents indicated they wanted their children to attend local functions.

One parent indicated that she wanted the school to “take them to a restaurant to teach them how to order and make change”.

#### **4. Discussion**

Transition planning is an essential step in planning for the future of any student. This planning step needs even more attention when planning for the future of a child with a disability. When planning for life after high school for a child with a disability, most of the time the parents should be the primary resource for planning. Through this study, it has been brought to light that parents are not being utilized to their full potential. Parents are not satisfied with their level of involvement in the planning process. The school is not providing information to parents in a way that the parents understand. The parents feel there is a lack of communication that they are not being informed, and they are not included in the planning of their children’s transition programs. Even if the teacher or school feels that they are communicating, informing, or including parents

in this process, they are not doing it effectively.

Life after high school for students with disabilities is the rest of their lives. The students need a plan for care, a plan for income, and a plan for life.

The transition plan is supposed to provide a road map and a guide to teaching skills to make the student as independent as possible after the transition from high school. The best possible link between the student and their future is their parent. Teachers and school personnel need to use the parents as a resource and talk on a level that parents understand to inform them of their options and the process of transition planning.

Parents feel that they do not get even good general information related to transition planning. In one study, 73% of parents identified a “lack of general information and guidance” as a barrier to their child’s success after high school (Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011, p.5). This study showed that parents only know what they understand from the teacher. They depend on the teacher or school personnel to inform them of options, opportunities, and rights. At the same time, this study also showed that if parents do not understand, they typically will not ask for clarification. Involving parents in the formal process of transition planning will place them in an “informed position” (Davies & Beamish, 2009, p.248).

The participants identified several great ideas for students’ transition plans. Community involvement was a great concern of parents. “Restricted levels of participation in community activities” was a concern among more than just the participants in this study (Davies and Beamish, 2009, p.249). Students being involved in the community will provide a firsthand experience of the environment that they will encounter after high school. In Jivanjee, Kruzich, and Gordon’s (2009) study on parent perspectives, they found that parents emphasized the “importance of access to opportunities” for these individuals to reach their goals (p.443). Exposing students and allowing them opportunities to be comfortable in that environment will provide them with a smoother transition. A second benefit of

providing a multitude of community experiences and involvement is if students are already working in partnership with the school and businesses, the business will be more familiar with the students and could enhance their chances of gaining employment. It could also increase the “societal awareness” and reduce the negative stigma that is placed on individuals having disabilities (Wehbi, 2007, p.72). Whittmer (2011) agrees that the community being aware of individuals with disabilities and not having acceptance of them is “the largest barrier to the successful employment of people with disabilities” (p.58).

### 5. Limitations

A limited amount of time was a limitation to this study. The short period that was allowed for this study limited the number of interviews and casual conversations that could be conducted. Throughout the study, casual conversations were held about journal article quotes, statements from other participants, and previous statements from the participant. Toward the end of the study, excellent information was still being received from participants.

The number of participants was a second limitation. A parental perspective was the goal of this study and was limited to only three parents’ perspectives. Increasing the number of parent participants would provide a broader more accurate perspective.

Only two methods of data collection were utilized in this study; interviews and casual conversations. More data collection methods needed to be added to the design of this study to increase the generalization and accuracy of

this data. Observations would have added more insight into what was not being said. Document analysis would have allowed looking at transition plans, goals, and objectives.

### 6. Summary

Students receiving special education services need detailed plans describing how to teach them to be successful and productive citizens of society. Planning should be a team effort from all stakeholders that are directly involved in the child’s educational plan. Although they do not feel they are being used as resources in the planning process, parents are a great asset to the planning process. Parents want communication to be on their level of understanding so they can be involved in the planning process. They feel as if they may not know to be able to participate. Some parents do not even know they have the right to participate in the planning process. Parents rely on teachers to provide this knowledge base for them to be able to participate. Most parents think they come and hear what the teacher has to say and sign in agreement.

They have great ideas and suggestions to contribute to their children’s transition plan. These ideas may work great for their student, but they may also work great for other students. Parents know their children the best. They want to feel like they are included and part of their children’s educational process.

Home-to-school communication needs to improve to a level where it is not just being done; it is being done in an effective way that meets the needs of the parent, student, and school.

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