Transition from School to Employment: What Rehabilitation Professionals Consider Important for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities

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We mailed a survey questionnaire to directors of employment training programs in six states providing rehabilitation services to individuals with developmental disabilities. We sought information on (a) activities considered important in the process of transition from school to employment, (b) persons participating on the interdisciplinary team who planned the transition and the person primarily responsible, and (c) transition-related goals identified in individual program plans. Our findings indicated that "matching skills to jobs" was considered the most important activity; that different professionals were designated as participants and persons responsible for transition; and that numerous transition-related goals were identified.

Congress enacted Public Laws 98-199 and 101-476 to improve transition services. These laws helped reduce work disincentives, establish incentives to employers, encourage development of supported employment programs, and encourage states to implement transition policies (Snauwaert & DeStefano, 1990). Also, experts (Brown, 1986; Halpern, 1985; Martin, Mithaug, & Husch, 1988; McDonnell, Ferguson, & Mathot-Buckner, 1992; Wehman, Kregel, & Barcus, 1985) designed model transition programs. Collectively, these programs emphasize starting transition planning at an early age, assessing and training skills in the actual work environment, involving parents/guardians, and establishing cooperative working relationships among schools, rehabilitation agencies, and employment training programs.

Yet, several key questions about transition planning remain unanswered. Who is responsible for transition? Who else participates in transition planning? These questions may be addressed in different ways, such as analyzing state transition policies (Snauwaert & DeStefano, 1990), observing transition procedures directly (Agran, 1986; DeStefano & Wagner, 1992), or surveying perspectives of rehabilitation professionals in the field.

In this study, we chose to survey rehabilitation professionals because we believe their perspectives may validate the model transition programs or pinpoint necessary changes. Their perspectives may also assist rehabilitation counselors in identifying key features of transition programs. Therefore, the purpose of this survey was to assess the perspectives of rehabilitation professionals on transition. Specifically, we sought to examine which activities were considered important to the transition of individuals with mild and severe developmental disabilities.

Method

Sample

A list of all programs accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) in Arizona, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Wyoming, and Utah were identified from the CARF directory. These programs

were accredited by CARF to provide work adjustment, work services, or supported employment. From this list of 88 programs, three programs primarily serving individuals with brain injury or mental illness were excluded since their transition procedures and objectives may have been different from those for programs serving individuals with developmental disabilities. The remaining 85 programs primarily served individuals with developmental disabilities (e.g., mental retardation, cerebral palsy, sensory impairments). Survey questionnaires were mailed to directors of these programs. Directors were asked to respond personally or to forward the questionnaire to a staff member in the program who was most knowledgeable of transition activities. Follow-up letters were sent to nonrespondents after 4 weeks. Of the 85 mailed questionnaires, 11 were returned as undeliverable and four were returned blank. Of the remaining 70 questionnaires, 44 (return rate = 63%) were completed by respondents. These surveys were analyzed using coding procedures described below.

Survey Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire sought information from respondents in four areas, including (a) demographic data (e.g., employment position, size of community, primary type of disability served), (b) activities judged important to transition, (c) persons participating on the interdisciplinary team who planned for individuals' transition and the person primarily responsible, and (d) transition-related goals identified in a youth's plan (e.g., individual program plan or individual work rehabilitation plan).¹ The three latter sections of the questionnaire are described below.

A draft of the questionnaire was reviewed by three special education teachers from a local high school and two staff members from a local supported employment program.

Prior to mailing, the questionnaire was revised based on feedback from these reviewers.

Importance of activities to transition. Twelve activities (e.g., teaching job skills, involving parents/guardians, teaching access to community services) related to transition were identified in a brief phrase. Respondents were asked to identify five of the 12 activities that they judged most important to transition, or to identify alternate, unlisted activities. Activities were generated by the authors after a review of the transition literature (cf., Harnish & Fisher, 1989; Wehman, Moon, Everson, Wood, & Barcus, 1988). Respondents were to identify activities based on whether they worked primarily with individuals having mild developmental disabilities (e.g., mild mental retardation or learning disabilities) or with individuals having severe developmental disabilities (e.g., moderate, severe, or profound mental retardation; autism; multiple sensory or physical impairments). Descriptions of mild and severe developmental disabilities in the survey questionnaire were based on information from Fewell and Cone (1983) and Grossman (1977).

Transition participants and person responsible. Two questions addressed the educational and rehabilitation personnel who were typically involved in transition planning. In one question, respondents identified all participants who typically worked on a team that planned an individual's transition. Seventeen potential participants (e.g., consumer, parent/guardian, teacher, vocational rehabilitation specialist) were listed. Respondents either selected from the list or identified alternative, unlisted participants. In a second question, respondents identified one person who was primarily responsible for transition planning. Seventeen possibilities (e.g., teacher, case manager, vocational training

Table 1
Characteristics of Respondents^a

Position	Primary Disability Served ^b			TOTAL	Location of Service	
	Mild MR	Moderate MR	Severe/Profound MR/Autism		Rural	Urban
Administrator, Sheltered Workshop	9	7	1	17	2	15
Director, Supported Employment Program	6	6	0	12	0	12
Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist	1	4	0	5	2	3
Work Supervisor, Work Activity Center	2	0	0	2	2	0
Transition Specialist	2	0	1	3	1	2
Testing Specialist	1	1	0	2	0	2
Trainer, Supported Employment Program	0	1	0	1	0	1
Work Supervisor, Sheltered Workshop	0	1	0	1	0	1
Case Manager	0	0	1	1	0	1
TOTAL	21	20	3	44	7	37

^a Respondents checked only the primary disability that they served.

^b "MR": Mental retardation.

representative) were listed. Again, respondents could list alternative persons.

Goals of transition. Respondents were asked to identify goals which were commonly included in transition plans. Seven specific goals (e. g., training specific skills, obtaining a specific job) were listed. Respondents checked all goal areas which were commonly identified in transition plans or listed alternative, unlisted goals.

Data Recording and Analysis

One person recorded responses on all completed questionnaires. Data were expressed as frequencies and/or percentages of total respondents who checked specific items. Data on the survey item about the importance of activities to transition were analyzed separately for respondents who primarily worked with individuals having mild versus severe developmental disabilities. The five activities identified as most important were tallied across respondents and expressed as the percentage of respondents working with mild and severe disabilities who identified each activity as among the five most important activities.

Interrecorder agreement. A second person independently recorded responses on 16 surveys, or 36% of the total. Interrecorder agreement was calculated by examining each blank on these 16 questionnaires and determining whether the two recorders agreed on whether (and how) the respondent marked it. Interrecorder agreement, computed by dividing the number of agreements by agreements plus disagreements times 100, was 95%. Using the kappa statistic (Kazdin, 1982) to adjust for chance agreement, interrecorder agreement was .90.

Results

Demographic Information

Table 1 presents demographic data on survey respondents. As shown, most respondents were administrators of sheltered workshops ($n = 17$) or supported employment programs ($n = 12$). Twenty-one respondents (48%) worked primarily with individuals having mild developmental disabilities, while 23 (52%) worked with individuals having severe developmental disabilities. Thirty-seven respondents (84%) worked in urban areas (i. e., communities with populations of 20,000 or more).

Importance of Activities to Transition

Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents identifying activities as among the five most important to transition. As shown, "matching skills to jobs" was identified as one of the five most important activities by 76% and 78% of respondents working with mild and severe developmental disabilities, respectively. The second most frequently identified activity among respondents working with mild disabilities was "teaching job skills" (67%). However, this activity was identified by only 39% of respondents working with severe

disabilities. Nevertheless, a chi-square analysis (Ferguson, 1981) revealed no statistically significant difference between respondents working with mild versus severe disabilities on the importance of "teaching job skills", $\chi^2(1) = 3.26$, $p > .01$. Four other activities ("teaching social skills," "transportation services," "involving parents/guardians," and "case management") were identified by 48% to 57% of respondents. Differences between respondents working with mild or severe disabilities on the importance of these activities were not significant.

Figure 1. The bar graph shows the percentage of respondents working with individuals having mild developmental disabilities ($n = 21$) and individuals having severe developmental disabilities ($n = 23$) who identified activities as among the five most important to transition.

Less frequently identified activities included "interagency cooperation," "involving employers," "teaching job-seeking skills," "teaching access to community services," "assessing available jobs," and "career education." Differences were found in the frequencies of some activities identified by respondents working with individuals having mild versus severe disabilities. For example, while 57% of respondents working with severe disabilities identified "interagency cooperation" as among the most important, only 33% of respondents working with mild disabilities identified it. However, the difference was not statistically significant, $\chi^2 = 2.16$, $p > .01$. More respondents working with severe disabilities identified three activities ("involving employers," "teaching access to community services," and "assessing available jobs") as important. More respondents working with mild disabilities identified "teaching job-seeking skills" as important.

Participants in Transition Planning

Table 2 presents the persons identified as participants in transition planning and the persons primarily responsible for the transition process. Forty-two respondents answered this question. As shown, the consumer and parent/guardian were listed by all respondents as participants. Five other partici-

pants (teacher, vocational training representative, job coach, case manager, and rehabilitation specialist) were identified by at least three-fourths of the respondents ($n = 32$ or more). Employers were identified as participants by 17 respondents (40%). The case manager was most frequently identified as the person responsible for transition ($n = 19$) but accounted for only 45% of the total sample responses. Others identified as responsible for transition included the vocational training representative ($n = 10$; 24%) and the teacher ($n = 5$; 12%).

Table 2
Number of Respondents Identifying Various Persons Who Participated in/ Were Responsible for Transition Planning^a

Person	Participant in Planning	Person Responsible
Consumer	42	0
Parent/Guardian	42	0
Teacher	36	5
Vocational Training Representative	35	10
Job Coach	34	3
Case Manager	33	19
Vocational Rehab. Specialist	32	3
Psychologist	23	1
Local Educ. Agency Representative	17	0
Employer	17	0
Other Response	2	1

^a $N = 42$

Transition Goals

Table 3 presents the number of respondents who identified various transition goals. These data are expressed in terms of whether the respondent primarily served individuals with mild or severe disabilities. Forty-two respondents answered this survey question. As shown, the most frequently identified goal areas were "specifying ongoing services," "teaching specific skills," "identifying the level of independence to attain," and "identifying a specific job to attain." These goal areas were identified by at least 60% of respondents working with both mild and severe disabilities. Other goal areas, such as "specifying time-limited services," "identifying several potential jobs," and "identifying a sequence of potential jobs" were identified less frequently.

Transition Program Materials

Six respondents sent transition planning materials used by their programs. Five of these respondents provided transition plan forms and one sent a program description. Most transition forms included sections on goals, objectives, methods, person responsible for implementing objectives, date implemented, and date of review. Some forms listed various planning areas, such as employment placement and training, skills to be trained, transportation needs, medical

Table 3
Number of Respondents Identifying Various Goals of Transition Planning According to Primary Type of Disabilities Served

Goal Area	Primary Disabilities Served			
	Mild Disabilities (n = 21) ^a		Severe Disabilities (n = 21) ^b	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Specify ongoing services	14	67	19	90
Teach specific skills	13	62	20	95
Identify level of independence to attain	13	62	20	95
Identify specific job to attain	13	62	18	86
Specify time-limited services	12	57	12	57
Identify several potential jobs to attain	8	38	6	29
Identify a sequence of potential jobs	6	29	6	29
Other goal areas	4	20	4	20

^a Includes mild mental retardation and learning disabilities.

^b Includes moderate, severe, and profound mental retardation; and autism.

needs, insurance, and income/financial support sources. Some forms included a prediction of employment capability. One program sent a brochure describing activities (e. g., vocational evaluation, job training, job finding, information and referral) of a community transition services team.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that rehabilitation professionals working with individuals having developmental disabilities considered "matching skills to jobs" the most important activity related to transition from school to employment. In fact, this activity was identified most often by respondents working with either mild or severe developmental disabilities. The importance of matching skills to jobs has been underscored by Menchetti and Flynn (1990), who described a model of ecological-vocational evaluation that measured not only abilities and aptitudes, but also social and environmental variables. The survey results suggest that rehabilitation counselors may need to pay particular attention to the correspondence between an individual's skills and those required on a job.

Other activities identified as important were teaching social and job skills, transportation, involving parents/guardians, and case management. In contrast, few rehabilitation professionals identified activities such as teaching job-seeking skills, teaching access to community services, assessing available jobs, and career education as relatively important to the transition process. Differences were found in the importance of some activities for individuals with mild versus severe developmental disabilities, although none

reached statistical significance. Teaching job skills was identified more frequently as important for individuals with mild disabilities than for individuals with severe disabilities. Also, interagency cooperation was identified more frequently as important for individuals with severe disabilities. The survey did not determine what accounted for these differences, but at minimum, the findings suggest that activities related to transition may vary somewhat across persons and that priorities should be tailored to specific individuals.

Several different professionals were identified as persons responsible for transition, including the case manager, vocational training representative, teacher, and others. Differences in the responsible person may be due to variations in state regulations or local procedures (Snauwaert & DeStefano, 1990). Alternatively, differences may suggest lack of clarity or uniformity in roles of the team members. The survey did not address this issue. At minimum, however, these data may remind rehabilitation counselors of the importance of clearly designating the person responsible for coordinating transition activities.

Respondents identified numerous goal areas, including ongoing services, specific skills, level of independence to attain, specific jobs, and time-limited services. Descriptions of broader or longer-term goals, such as identifying several potential jobs or a sequence of jobs, were selected less often. Broader or longer-term goals may be important to consider for some individuals, such as those in transition to job markets in which opportunities are plentiful or those who show potential for promotion or upward mobility.

Findings suggest that many respondents are following recommendations of experts (Brown, 1986; Halpern, 1985; Martin et al., 1988; McDonnell et al., 1992; Wehman et al., 1985) by emphasizing the importance of matching skills to jobs, training social and job skills, involving parents/guardians, and establishing interagency cooperation. Results indicate that most programs address transition through the collaboration of schools, employment training programs, vocational rehabilitation professionals, parents/guardians, and others.

Unfortunately, the survey was not designed to gather information directly on the relative success of these activities. What remains unclear is whether use of these transition procedures relates to improved outcomes. Future research should focus on transition outcomes in relation to use of transition procedures.

Results of this survey should be interpreted with caution for several reasons. First, the sample size in the present study was relatively small and limited to CARF-accredited programs. Second, since transition may be dictated by economic and employment characteristics of specific regions, findings from six intermountain states may not be representative of other locations. Thus, more information from other areas and from a larger sample is needed to determine the generalizability of the current findings. Third, activities listed in our questionnaire were described in very brief

terms, making them susceptible to misinterpretation. Fourth, while we differentiated between respondents working with individuals having mild versus severe developmental disabilities, respondents may have conducted transition planning very differently for individuals within the same group (e.g., a youth with moderate mental retardation versus a youth with autism). Thus, we may have combined data on individuals with heterogeneous characteristics.

Nevertheless, this survey represents an attempt to evaluate transition by gathering important information from professionals working in the field. It indicates that professionals approach transition in different ways, and that they can discriminate between activities considered important and unimportant. Since rehabilitation professionals are principally involved in transition planning, their perspectives should be examined by rehabilitation counselors, educators, and program developers. In fact, their information may serve to reshape best practices and help ensure a smoother transition from school to work for individuals with disabilities.

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Footnote

¹ A copy of the survey questionnaire is available from the first author.