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Current practices in schooling transitions of students with developmental disabilities



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the planning processes involved for students with developmental disabilities (i.e., intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorders) as they transition through different stages of schooling in the United States. In order to obtain an understanding of current practices in this area, 167 teachers from three states (California, Texas and North Carolina) were surveyed about transition practices for students with developmental disabilities. The transitions from primary to middle school, middle to high school, and high school to post-school life, as well as home-school collaboration, were the focus. The teachers responded to demographic and open-ended survey questions. Findings indicated that the lack of active student involvement in transition planning remains a serious concern across all three transitions.

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1. Introduction

Schooling transitions are heterogeneous in their nature. Transitions occur from primary to middle school, from middle school to high school, and from high school to post-schooling options. These transitions can be particularly challenging for students with developmental disabilities (Strnadová & Cumming, 2016; Blacher, Kraemer, & Howell, 2010). Understanding current practices in supporting students with developmental disabilities to successfully navigate these various transitions can better inform future practice, while assisting students, families and educators in planning for transitions throughout the school careers of students with developmental disabilities (Hanewald, 2013; Strnadová & Evans, 2013). While the term developmental disabilities is a wide and diverse category, the authors are using this term to include children with moderate to severe disabilities, students with autism and students with intellectual disability. Although the majority of the literature, policy, and legislation is focused on the transition from high school to post-school, the importance of earlier school transitions cannot be overstated, as the handling of early school transitions strongly influences the outcomes of later schooling and transition to post-school settings (Maras & Aveling, 2006).

Special education literature (Cobb & Alwell, 2009; Kohler & Field, 2003; Test et al., 2009) identifies a number of practices that are considered necessary for successfully transitioning students with disabilities from school to post-school settings. These include: (a) active student involvement in the transition planning process, (b) active family participation in transition planning, (c) vocational training, (d) career awareness activities, (e) paid employment or work experiences while still in high

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school, (f) interagency collaboration, (g) identification of and instruction in skills (vocational, academic, social, etc.) that the student will need, (h) specific instruction in self-determination and self-advocacy skills, (i) inclusion in regular classrooms, and (j) assistive technology assessment and implementation.

There is scant literature on best practices for transitioning between school stages (primary to secondary), but the literature that does exist recommends: (a) promoting self-determination and choice making, (b) student and family involvement in transition planning, (c) collaboration in planning between the teachers from both schools, (d) start planning early, based on student's strengths and support needs, (e) attendance at secondary school activities such as open house, orientation and sporting events the year before the transition, and (f) the use of orientation packages containing photos of staff and school/classroom expectations (Carter et al., 2005; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Knesting, Hokanson, & Waldron, 2008).

One of the most essential practices is transition planning (Riches, Parmenter, Wiese, & Stancliffe, 2006; Test et al., 2009). Transition planning includes assessment, planning, and direct instruction related to the student's transition needs (Trainor, Morningstar, & Murray, 2015). Federal legislation requires that Individual Education Planning Teams consider the transitional needs of students with disabilities at the age of 16 (§300.43 Transition Services). Many educators believe that age 16 is too late to begin a successful transition for students with disabilities (Philbin, 2009), and research suggests that the earlier provision of transition services significantly increases the employment rates for people with autism spectrum disorders (Cimera, Burgess, & Wiley, 2013). These considerations are particularly important, as there continue to be disappointing outcomes for adults with disabilities in the areas of employment and postsecondary education (Cimera, Burgess, & Bedesem, 2014; Metzler, Boeltzig, Butterworth, Sulewski, & Gilmore, 2007), independent living and community participation (Billstedt, Gillberg, & Gillberg 2005).

The National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC, 2013) suggests that transition assessment and skills integration begin in the primary grades. This includes assessment and skills integration in the area of adaptive behaviour and independent living skills, and results of assessment provide educators at both the primary and the secondary school with the information needed to plan the student's educational program. The assessment of these skills is important, as the secondary school environment is typically larger and more demanding. Knesting, Hokanson, and Waldron (2008) found that students with disabilities took significantly longer to learn about and become comfortable with school routines than their typically developing peers. This delay caused them to feel less self-efficacious in school.

While active student involvement in the transition planning process is a widely recognized evidence-based transition practice, students with disabilities are not typically involved in this process (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). This is a troubling outcome, given that active involvement in the transition process allows for the development of self-determination and self-advocacy skills (Van Laarhoven-Myers, Van Laarhoven, Smith, Johnson, & Olson, 2014), and is correlated with improved post-school outcomes, such as employment, community living, postsecondary education participation, and perceived quality of life (Van Laarhoven-Myers et al., 2014). There are a number of relevant and well-established transition planning curricula available, such as *Whose Future is it Anyway?* (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Lee, Williams-Diehm, & Shogren, 2011), that support students in building self-determination skills and being involved in transition planning outside of actual attendance at IEP and transition meetings. Family involvement in the transition process is equally important, and associated with positive post-school outcomes of students with disabilities (Smith, McDougall, & Edelen-Smith, 2006).

Carter, Brock, and Trainor (2014) stressed the need for more research in the area of perspectives and expectations of parents, teachers, and students towards transition for students with developmental disabilities in order to determine the ways to better include all stakeholders in the assessment and implementation processes. This is especially true with respect to evidence-based practices for the transitions between school stages. It is important to gather perceptions about what practices currently exist, whether teachers perceive that they are working, and whether there are consistencies in practices across the different transition stages. In particular, understanding collaboration at each transition stage between school and home is crucial to ensure the needs of students with developmental disabilities are met.

With this understanding, the aim of this study was to conduct a preliminary study of current transition practices of students with developmental disabilities. Teachers were asked about their practices during transitions from primary to middle school, from middle school to high school, and from high school to work and/or to post-secondary school/training for students with developmental disabilities. Teacher respondents were also asked to identify practices related to home-school collaboration.

The following research questions led the study:

1. What practices are teachers of students with developmental disabilities currently using to prepare their students for school transitions?
2. In what ways, if any, do teachers believe that these transitions can be improved?
3. What are the teachers' perceptions related to school-home collaboration in the transition process?

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