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## Implementing a Holistic Approach to Enhance Career Opportunities for Transition Students with Disabilities

Susan Stuntzner

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*, [susan.stuntzner@utrgv.edu](mailto:susan.stuntzner@utrgv.edu)

Bryan Austin

*University of Idaho*

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**CHAPTER TWELVE**

**Implementing a Holistic Approach to Enhance Career Opportunities for Transition  
Students with Disabilities**

Susan Stuntzner and Bryan Austin, University of Idaho

Transition services are vitally important and an essential component of successful employment, career planning, self-determination, and independent living for students with disabilities. Public schools strive to meet the federal mandates placed upon them to help this group of students reach graduation and beyond. However, students with disabilities oftentimes fall short and do not succeed following high school. In an effort to change this trend, information pertaining to transition services and ways it can be enhanced are provided. This chapter addresses: the necessity of transition services and its relationship to federal legislation, barriers that inhibit students' successful transition to adult life, and the current climate of the public educational system. A framework of recommendations is provided for educators assisting students with disabilities.

Transitioning from high school to the adult world that awaits developing and young adults is a major developmental milestone or marker for all students. For many students, this is that point-in-time, when they leave home, go off to college, enter the military or another training program, travel, and have new life experiences. Due to the plethora of choices and possibilities available, it is an exciting time for many, but what about the experiences and needs of students with disabilities or those who need additional assistance and preparation so they can achieve the opportunities and goals they seek following high school? Do students with disabilities have the same opportunities available to them post-high school compared to their same-aged peers without disabilities? Does their educational training and experience adequately prepare them to be employed or independent, choose occupational and career directions that are interesting and meaningful, become well-informed decision-makers and self-advocates, and to pursue life goals successfully?

Many helping professionals and educators probably hope that is the case, but the reality is that many students with disabilities are not adequately prepared for life after high school; nor are they provided adequate opportunities or exposure to the multiple life and career planning experiences afforded to their same-aged peers without disabilities. Although it is understood that educators work hard to teach and address the needs of their students, the educational, developmental, and vocational planning process of students with disabilities oftentimes is not where it needs to be to ensure adequate and successful transition from high school. Whilst there is legislation and educational mandates to promote equitable access to education for students with disabilities, it is important for us to recognize and admit that legislation and mandates are not enough to effectively meet the transitional needs of students with disabilities; more still needs to be done. Part of this is related to the fact that many social injustices are still

experienced by persons with disabilities. Some of these injustices can be understood as inequities in educational practices; training opportunities; employment versus unemployment rates (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2006); career exploration experiences; access to and knowledge of resources and supports available following high school (Riesen, Schultz, Morgan, & Kupferman, 2014); personal, professional, or societal biases about the abilities of persons with disabilities (Smart, 2009); and varying degrees of expectations held toward persons with disabilities.

In an effort to decrease the margin of inequities sometimes experienced by students with disabilities, this chapter provides an in-depth discussion of legislation and appropriate services as it relates to this population. We focus on several areas including the (a) role of vocational rehabilitation (VR) and interagency collaboration, (b) necessity of transition services as a means to improve employment outcomes following high school, (c) barriers that may inhibit successful transition, and (d) importance of the educational climate is covered followed by several recommendations.

### **Social Justice: A Societal Concern for Students with Disabilities**

Social justice is an issue of concern and of relevance for students with disabilities and society. Often times, social justice is described as a value and a paradigm used by professionals and agencies to pursue and achieve equitable opportunities for people or groups of people who do not typically have them (Rawls, 2011). Bankston (2010) expands this concept by stating that “social justice involves a redistribution of goods and services to improve the state of people who are disadvantaged” (p. 165). When considering the needs and issues of students with disabilities within the educational system, the redistribution of goods and services should not be equated with negative connotations such as a “free handout” or entitlement. Rather, the provision of

quality services is related to the idea that all persons, including students with disabilities, have the ability to help themselves achieve independence, employment, self-actualization, and a better quality of life when they receive the proper education, guidance, and opportunities afforded to their same-aged peers.

Social justice and its relationship to personal empowerment can be an instrumental perspective for educational professionals to understand. From this view, we are not denying the reality that many students with disabilities do not receive equitable attention, services, or training throughout their lifespan; nor are we stating that everyone will reach the same level of equity and quality of living if they receive additional support and guidance. What we are trying to stress is the fact that options are available and should be promoted among students with disabilities to bridge the gap and to narrow the void so they are given more opportunities to learn the skills deemed adequate and necessary to live as independently as possible and to achieve the best quality of life they can. Furthermore, it is through this process of experiencing success throughout their life that students with disabilities become empowered and oftentimes “come to believe” that a better way of life is possible.

Being more conscious and equitable in the approaches used and the services offered to students with disabilities, does more than enhance their lives; it also has the potential to positively impact society. For example, students who successfully graduate and transition to the adult world of work and achieve employment become better integrated into society. Through societal integration, persons with disabilities, become employees, economic consumers, role models, and potential agents of societal change – all of which benefit society. More specifically, students with disabilities who become successfully employed start to give back to society rather than take away from it as is sometimes the case when they are relegated to living off of social

security. Those who earn an income typically spend money on products and services which also gives back to society. Furthermore, students with disabilities who receive adequate training, become employed and live more independently may serve as role models to all people, not only students with disabilities, about the capabilities and possibilities available to persons with disabilities which in turn may have a positive impact.

### **Federal Legislation and Student Transition Services**

Making the transition from adolescence to adulthood is one of the biggest adjustments for all young people in America today. For students with disabilities (ages 16 to 24), this transition becomes an even greater challenge. For example, there have been long-standing negative societal attitudes toward the abilities and potential of people with disabilities that remain prevalent (Smart, 2009). Students with disabilities also have a wide array of physical, cognitive, and emotional/behavioral disabilities that oftentimes require a multitude of service needs. To address these primary challenges, two landmark pieces of disability legislation originally were passed and necessarily amended overtime; The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Education for All Handicapped Children's Act of 1975.

In 1973, the Rehabilitation Act was passed mandating the state and federally funded VR programs to provide services to consumers with the most severe disabilities and involve VR consumers to a greater degree in the rehabilitation planning process (Peterson & Aguiar, 2004). In 1975, with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act, youth with disabilities were afforded the right for a free and appropriate public education, same as young people without disabilities, in an integrated and least restrictive environment (Peterson & Aguiar, 2004). In 1990, this act was amended and re-named as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and for the first time required the public schools to develop Individual Education Plans (IEP's) by age 16 to include documentation of the need for transition services that target post-

school outcomes, such as vocational training, post-secondary education, employment, independent living, and other community-based services (Morningstar, Kleinhammer-Tramill, & Lattin, 1999). Further, these act amendments mandated schools to invite the student, family, school personnel, adult service providers, and other community participants to be part of the transition team (Morningstar et al., 1999). Following suit, the Rehabilitation Act, reauthorized and amended under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, made interagency collaboration an explicit priority by mandating VR to work more closely with schools to better ensure an uninterrupted delivery system of services that more effectively promote students' transition from school or work. The National Council on Disability (NCD) (2008) provides a list of such VR mandates and are bulleted below:

- VR agencies must coordinate with educational personnel and enter into a formal interagency agreement with state education agencies;
- use student information from education programs for eligibility and vocational planning purposes;
- develop and write an Individual Plan for Employment (IPE) before the student leaves high school;
- collaborate with state education programs in providing transition services; and
- provide outreach and identify students with disabilities who may need transition services. (pp. 19-20)

Along with this mandate for interagency collaboration, WIA mandated One-Stop Centers throughout the United States (U.S.) inclusive with programs designed to meet the needs of youth (including transition students) with and without disabilities that provide access to and



participation in both youth and adult services such as training, job placement, and other career-related resources (Luecking, Crane, & Mooney, 2002).

Following this 1998 amendment of the Rehabilitation Act, the IDEA, again amended and re-named in 2004, as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), also mandated public schools to provide transition services to include interagency collaboration (Oertle & Trach, 2007). Currently, the IDEIA defines transition services as:

...a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that:

- Is designed to be within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child [student] with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment); continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation;
- Is based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests; and
- Includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation.

[34 CFR 300.43 (a)] [20 U.S.C. 1401(34)] (United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2007, pp. 1-2)

As can be seen with this definition and legislative amendments presented, transition services require a considerable amount of attention and interdisciplinary expertise to help students with disabilities be successful and prepared as they embark upon their future careers,

education, and daily living. Thus, the importance of helping young people prepare for and succeed in adult life must be a focal point in both public schools and VR.

### **How Vocational Rehabilitation Can Help**

VR can be a critical resource and service provider to students with disabilities and their efforts to make the successful transition from school to work and adult life. VR assists people with disabilities who require services to overcome their disability-related barriers to obtain or maintain employment. VR focuses on consumers' vocational interests, abilities and skills and work with other adult agencies to help consumers achieve their career potential. Services may include, but are not limited to: assessment, vocational counseling and guidance, job search assistance, job placement, rehabilitation technology (assistive technology), transportation, on-the-job support, job readiness training, occupational/vocational training, and college or university training. There is also a substantial research base to validate the efficacy of VR services that are positively associated with employment outcomes for various disability populations (Austin & Lee, 2014; Saunders, Leahy, McGlynn, & Estrada-Hernandez, 2006).

VR agencies hire vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors who have specialized expertise in providing direct services to people with disabilities in the primary areas of vocational assessment, career counseling, case management, and job placement. Consequently, VR counselors who work with high schools, transition specialists, and who have transition students on their caseloads, can be an integral part of the IEP team (Oertle, Trach, & Plotner, 2013). Further, VR counselors may also be nationally certified rehabilitation counselors (CRCs) which means they have met knowledge and competency standards for VR practice established by the profession. Certified counselors are required to adhere to a professional code of ethics (Commission of Rehabilitation Counselor Certification, 2009) and must also complete a

minimum of 100 hours of continuing education credits every five years to maintain their certification credential. Both of these requirements raise the bar for VR counselors and ensure they keep up with current trends and update their skills to provide quality and ethical rehabilitative services.

### **Interagency Collaboration**

Interagency collaboration by school transition programs is a particularly crucial component to providing individualized services for students with disabilities and may have the most positive upside for helping students achieve their transition goals (Morningstar et al., 1999). Oertle and Trach (2007) suggest that formalized transition planning can produce positive results for both transition students and communities because of the connections made to work and educational training. *Interagency collaboration* can be defined as:

...interactions and activities between special educators and rehabilitation professionals such as working as a team, sharing information, attending transition planning meetings, combining resources, and establishing and utilizing effective lines of communication to benefit students with disabilities as they transition from high school to the adult world (p. 37).

There are many potential benefits of interagency collaboration between state VR and school transition programs. VR and school transition programs are both able to meet their federal mandates as stated in the law (Edmondson & Cain, 2002). Students and educators can benefit from the vocational expertise provided by the VR counselor to assist with transition planning. Collaboration can also be increased through student and family involvement with VR agencies who can provide linkages to other adult agencies during the transition process which can lead to

greater student success in students achieving not only their employment goals, but also their goals in independent living and post-secondary education (Oertle, Trach, & Plotner, 2013).

Despite the importance of interagency collaboration, barriers remain that impede effective collaboration between school transition programs and VR agencies. Ashby and Bensberg (as cited in Edmondson & Cain, 2002) suggested one of the barriers of collaboration between school transition and VR agencies has been the interpretation by both systems of the IDEA and Rehabilitation Act and deciphering who should do what and when. Benz and Lindstrom (1999) concluded in their review of the research that interagency collaboration does not happen regularly because of misperceptions by schools, students, and parents about the nature and scope of VR services, and lack of formalized procedures to facilitate student referrals to VR agencies. A survey of VR counselors and special educators showed that most educators did not or rarely invited VR counselors to be part of the transition team (Agran, Cain, & Cavin, 2002). It was inferred from this same study that VR counselors may not be invited because “...(a) teachers did not believe they could be of much assistance, (b) they were not aware of the valuable information they could potentially provide, or (c) because they did not know who to contact” (p. 152). An absence of well-established relationships between VR counselors and educators may also explain this disconnect (Oertle et al., 2013). In a similar study, lack of knowledge of community-based supports (i.e., VR, social security benefits, on the job training, and other disability resources) were perceived as “high impact” barriers to transition (Riesen et al., 2014).

### **Necessity of Transition Services for Students with Disabilities**

Current practices that support the transition of students with disabilities have been shown to be effective and lead to positive post-school outcomes. Evidence-based transition practices are

an example of services that have led to positive outcomes for students with disabilities in the areas of employment, independent living, and post-secondary education. For example, inclusion in general education, paid employment/work experience, parental/family involvement, student support, interagency collaboration, career awareness, self-advocacy/self-determination, social skills, vocational education, community experiences, exit exam requirements/high school diploma status, self-care/independent living skills, transition programming, and program of study and work study (Test et al., 2009; Test & Cease-Cook, 2012) have been linked to positive post-secondary outcomes for transition students with disabilities. Moreover, inclusion in general education, paid employment/work experience, self-care/independent living skills, and student support during the school years may have an even greater impact for improving student outcomes across all three transition domains: employment, independent living, and post-secondary education (Test et al., 2009).

The National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition (NASET, 2005) provided a comprehensive research document that incorporates many of these evidence-based transition practices and serves as the basis for the National Standards for Secondary Education and Transition. They include: *Schooling*, *Career Preparatory Experiences*, *Youth Development and Youth Leadership*, *Family Involvement*, and *Connecting Activities*. Schooling ensures students are provided access to the general curriculum and held accountable to a standards-based education with the use of assessments, including alternative formats when needed, that upholds high expectations and performance standards (academic and non-academic) for all students (NASET, 2005).

Career preparatory experiences are summarized as being both school and community-based opportunities that provide access to many of the careers and occupations available to

students (NASET, 2005). Youth development and youth leadership are based on the idea that youth with disabilities should take an active role in directing services and decisions that affect their lives (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWDY), 2010). Critical to this process, students need to be supported in developing self-advocacy and self-determination skills and be given the opportunity for person-centered planning (NASET, 2005). Family involvement is important throughout the transition process. Morningstar, Turnbull, and Turnbull (as cited by NASET, 2005) found that youth with disabilities want guidance and input from family members about their futures. Connecting activities are “collaborative approaches [that] bring together community agencies to focus their collective expertise and combined resources to improve the quality of transition planning and services for youth” ( NASET, 2005, p. 44).

### **Employment Outcomes for Students with Disabilities**

Despite the evidence to support current practices, it is unclear how often and to what extent these practices are being delivered as part of transition services in schools. In relation to employment outcomes, lower employment rates and outcomes for transition students with disabilities remains a significant concern nationally (NCD, 2008; Wagner et al., 2006). Employment outcomes for transition students with disabilities, although improving, remain well below that of their same-aged peers without disabilities (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Wagner et al., 2006). In the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), Wagner et al.’s (2006) findings suggest that it continues to be significantly more difficult for transition students with disabilities to achieve or sustain a successful employment outcome; for example, youth with disabilities had an employment rate of approximately 40% versus 63% for same-aged peers in their study of a sample of more than 11,000 youth receiving special education services. Further,

state VR agencies may be serving only a small percentage of youth that could benefit from VR transition services (NCD, 2008). Combined, transition students with disabilities are significantly more likely to be unemployed, underemployed or underrepresented in the current U.S. labor force.

### **Additional Barriers to Successful Transition**

Barriers to successful transition can present themselves from multiple directions. Beyond those already discussed, barriers may come from (a) the student with a disability; (b) others in the external environment (i.e., family members, professionals, agencies); (c) societal attitudes and beliefs about the abilities of persons with disabilities (i.e., employer bias' and attitudes); (d) lack of educational opportunities, training, or knowledge; and (e) school-to-work transitional services and coordinated practices (Riesen et al., 2014; Smart, 2009; Stuntzner, 2012). For example, are the prominent barriers emanating from the beliefs held by the student with a disability about his or her abilities? Are there attitudinal obstacles originating from within the family, other helping professionals, or employers? Do any of these individuals hold lower expectations of the student with a disability because of the particular situation or the disability? If lower or different expectations are held and promoted, how might these affect the success of students' transition from high school to the adult world of work?

Educators who teach and assist students with disabilities can assist the students they work with by identifying the areas or domains mentioned above which are most concerting and problematic. Educators may first consider whether the barriers experienced are self-induced, other-induced, or both. Stuntzner (2014, in press) explains that *self-induced* barriers are those created by persons with disabilities that promote further obstacles to overcome, such as the belief and practice of self-fulfilling prophecies. *Other-induced* barriers are the obstacles within the external environment and those promoted from others outside of persons with disabilities such as

inaccurate beliefs about the abilities of persons with disabilities or employer bias (Stuntzner, in press). In many instances, both of these barrier-types co-exist and promote one another, so the task is to determine which ones to address first.

Identifying and understanding the source of barriers is essential for successful transition to occur. Educators can assist students by helping them recognize areas within themselves or their life which needs to be addressed sooner rather than later throughout the educational process. Beyond the internal barriers sometimes experienced and perpetuated by persons with disabilities are those observed and personally encountered externally (Stuntzner, in press). External barriers typically receive more recognition because they are concrete and observable. Some of the barriers typically encountered by persons and students with disabilities are discussed throughout the literature and may include (Riesen et al., 2014; Stuntzner, 2012, in press; Stuntzner & Hartley, 2014): attitudes and bias; lack of physical access; inadequate educational, training, and employment-related opportunities; poor understanding of one's disability or diagnosis and its effects; low parental expectations of students with disabilities; inadequate understanding of self-advocacy skills; lack of understanding about how to access needed services (i.e., VR, assistance with learning in colleges and universities); and educators not feeling fully prepared to provide adequate transition services, just to name a few.

Compounding these issues is the reality that transition services may not be addressed or fully considered until students are approaching their junior year in high school. While many students may be on an IEP throughout their schooling, students with disabilities oftentimes proceed through the educational system without fully understanding their disability (Schreiner, 2007), what it means and how it may affect their future; nor are they given adequate exposure to training, employment, or career-related opportunities or skills pertaining to self-advocacy ( Gil,



2007; McCarthy, 2007; Stuntzner & Hartley, 2014). Students who do receive such services may not begin to have exposure until they are close to graduating and by this time, many are not prepared for the realities that await them post-high school. For these reasons, it is essential that educators and school systems consider the transition needs and skills of students with disabilities earlier in their educational process.

### **Value of the Educational Climate**

Educators, similar to other helping professionals, choose their career path to make a difference in the lives of the people they serve. For educators, this means many choose this occupation because they want to help shape the hearts and minds of students with the hope it will lead to personal well-being, independence, and positive societal change. While meeting the needs of all students is often a challenge, it is an expectation and responsibility held of professionals who teach. Educators are asked to consider how to teach and to promote a learning environment that is inclusive to all students – one that is of high quality and value to both students with and without disabilities (Gillies, 2013).

Educators - not only special educators - have a responsibility to address the educational and learning needs of students with disabilities. Promotion of social justice, equitable services, empowerment, and successful transition services is a value which must be embraced throughout the school setting (Brooks, 2012); it is an attitude of expectation and hope that can be embraced and extended throughout the school district and the various school environments (Theoharis, 2009). School districts that value, integrate, and encourage the promotion of social justice and equity of high quality services (i.e., education, career exploration, self-knowledge) become a model or environmental framework to help guide the decisions and actions of administrators, educators, and staff (Capper & Young, 2014) which, in turn, can affect learning and training expectations and opportunities.

Due to the reality that professional attitudes and expectations are communicated, directly or indirectly from administrators to teachers and staff, it is essential for everyone concerned to consider whether their district, school setting, classroom, or they themselves approach their work with students with disabilities from a positive or negative stance. Similarly, it is important for educator professionals to understand their own values and expectations and how those may be communicated throughout the educational process.

For example, what are the expectations of students with disabilities to learn, graduate, and/or to become productive members of society? Are students with disabilities given equitable opportunities compared to their peers without disabilities to learn, to explore vocational interests and career options, and to build life skills relevant to their independence following high school? Are the needs and abilities of students with disabilities tended to throughout the educational system so they will be as prepared as possible to transition to adulthood following high school? Does the school system approach education and learning opportunities from an empowerment perspective – one that focuses on the abilities and strengths of students with disabilities? Do the schools hold different educational, employment, or independent living expectations of females with disabilities than their male counterparts with disabilities or females without disabilities (Stuntzner, Ricks, & Dalton, 2014). If so, what are these differences and how do they present themselves throughout the educational or career exploration experiences? Or, does the school system address the needs of students with disabilities from a less desirable standpoint, such as promoting the notion that providing them services as outlined in the IEP or helping them graduate is sufficient.

Asking these questions may be uncomfortable for some professionals but it is a necessary endeavor because a person's attitude and expectations, spoken or not, are conveyed to students.

Such attitudes and expectations have the ability to positively or negatively shape those held by students with disabilities and their families. For this reason, understanding our own expectations and those of school system are essential for the promotion of social justice and for successful transition to occur.

### **Holistic Framework for Educators**

Educators interested in meeting the needs of students with disabilities throughout the transition process can review the main tenants provided in the following sections. Although the needs of many students are vast and situations are individualized, several of these recommendations are relevant to administrators, educators, allied helping professionals (i.e., transition specialists, rehabilitation counselors), family members, and to students with disabilities. Some of the recommendations provide for a potential framework may be more salient to some people than to others, but the intent is to provide an array of options so that those involved in the transition process can understand how change can occur from both a social justice and a transitioning from high school perspective. In both instances, the primary goal is to learn and incorporate strategies to assist students with disabilities in pursuing and achieving equitable opportunities (Rawls, 2011) that are available to their peers without disabilities and to provide services that can assist students with disabilities in improving their overall quality of life.

### **Communication and Early Planning: An Essential Skill**

As indicated earlier and as is evident throughout the literature, personal and familial involvement is essential for successful transition to occur (Test et al., 2009). For optimal education, training, and employment opportunities to occur following high school, students with disabilities and their family members need to be encouraged and invited to participate and take ownership of their future at an earlier time in the educational process; most likely while still in elementary school.

Due to the multiple layers of barriers and needs often associated with disability, transition planning and post-high school training options should not be postponed until the junior year of high school (Fabian, 2007). A more proactive and engaging choice is for educators to communicate with students and their family members plans and options pertaining to their future. This means discussions should take place earlier rather than later regarding a student's future training, employment and career directions, mentorship needs and options (Noonan et al., 2004), independent living desires, and essential life skills needed for successful living. Educators may need to tailor the content and information communicated so that it is developmentally appropriate based on the student's chronological age and abilities; however, it is a way of approaching one's future and life choices that is more inclusive and empowering.

Beginning the communication and planning process earlier rather than later gives students time to learn about their desires, interests, and needs, and to fully understand their disability and what it means so they can then learn how to effectively self-advocate (Fabian, 2007; NCWDY, 2010). Understanding one's own disability is essential because many graduate high school without fully knowing what their disability means and how it may affect them as adults; therefore, they mature and become adults who have little or negative information about their disability (Schreiner, 2007; Stuntzner & Hartley, 2014). This lack of information may translate into having an inadequate foundation for knowing how to successfully self-advocate (McCarthy, 2007). Further, early planning can assist students and their families in gaining exposure to employment and work-related opportunities and to successful persons with disabilities who may serve as mentors or role models (Noonan et al., 2004). Such experiences may drastically change the way students with disabilities view themselves and their future.

### **Person-centered Planning**

A person-centered approach in transition planning has been gaining in popularity and is designed to empower individuals with disabilities who have multifaceted service needs in the transition to adult life (Hagner, Kurtz, May, & Clautier, 2014). According to Claes, Hove, Vandeveld, Loon, and Schalock (2010), the main goals of person-centered planning are to “develop collaborative, goal-oriented, and individualized programs that are focused on community presence, community participation, positive relationships, respect, and competence” (p. 432). The idea behind person-centered planning is that the consumer of services (e.g., transition student) and his or her parents or family members are empowered to choose and direct the planning and service delivery process and goals of their IEP (Kosciulek, 1999). Although this approach has been more widely used for individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities (Claes et al., 2010) and transition students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Hagner et al., 2014), it should be considered for use with all transition students. For example, the research suggests that the use of person-centered planning may improve social networks, community involvement, choice-making, knowledge about leisure activities, work-related activities and social support, teamwork and family involvement, and reduce challenging behavior (Claes et al., 2010).

When incorporating person-centered planning into the transition process, the student, family, and teacher select important significant others, advocates, and other related support staff who intimately know the student who is the focus of services. Gathering data about the student from others who know the student best better ensures that information collected is more accurate and practical to best meet the needs of the student. Sensitivity to the student’s language and his or her family culture (Callicott, 2003) is a key aspect in the development of IEP goals and

services that match a student's unique interests, assets, and capabilities across areas of employment, independent living, and post-secondary education.

When working on vocational-related goals, the use of person-centered planning may be particularly useful when students are connected to a VR agency. A person-centered plan or written document that results from this planning process can be used to help with determining a suitable employment goal with the VR counselor. Further, incorporating person-centered planning as part of students' VR participation may lead to more successful job placements (Migliore, Butterworth, Nord, Cox, & Gelb, 2012).

### **Internal Social Justice Change Opportunities**

Transition services and opportunities for social justice change can also be discussed from an internal environmental approach. From this perspective, the emphasis is on what is or can take place within the school district or system to promote social justice opportunities for students with disabilities (Brooks, 2012) as well as more successful and meaningful transition outcomes. For starters, it is essential for school districts and administrators to take an active role and interest in the services provided to students with disabilities (Capper & Young, 2014). When a discrepancy in the amount or quality of educational and training services is found, school administrators are in a position to create change. More specifically, administrators have the authority to review, restructure and possibly reprioritize resources so that more emphasis and importance is given to students with disabilities and their future. Such restructuring and reprioritizing efforts have the potential to effect teachers and staff attitudes and expectations of students with disabilities which then translates into more focus on quality educational and training opportunities and higher expectations held of students with disabilities.

Internal change may also be addressed through the curriculum and taught to students in the classroom. While having a quality education should be of high importance for all students, it

is also recommended that school districts, administrators, and teachers consider the importance and value of teaching students about disabilities and the importance self-advocacy.

The precise methods used to approach this topic and skill set may vary based on the school setting but it is an area which needs to be better addressed among students with disabilities. Some school districts may discover ways to infuse the topic and discussion of disability into the educational curriculum so that it benefits all students and learners. In these instances, both students with and without disabilities are afforded the opportunity to learn about the capabilities and abilities of persons with disabilities and skills to effectively advocate for one's own needs. Students learn to view disability as a more normalized experience rather than a pathological one as well as the value of how to advocate for one's own needs. In other settings, administrators and educators may develop and infuse additional learning opportunities for students with disabilities so they can more fully understand their own unique condition or diagnoses, how it affects them, and what they can learn to effectively manage their life in a positive way. Educators may work collaboratively with other team members to construct reading or writing assignments that help promote students' understanding of disability as well as skills pertaining to self-advocacy.

### **External Solutions for Collaboration and Societal Change**

The research shows positive benefits from incorporating career development activities as part of the transition process that can give students career information and work-based experiences they need to make informed choices about their futures (NCWDY, 2014). Activities should be designed to build self-awareness, vocational skills, and competencies necessary for employment and tailored to each student's interests, strengths, and individualized needs (NCWDY, 2010). Self-awareness activities facilitate students' knowledge of their interests, strengths, and values and give students opportunities to better understand what it takes to work in

a profession as well as make connections from the coursework to their life goals outside the classroom (NCWDY, 2014).

Vocational skill activities supports student experiences within their schools and community that further help clarify their career-based interests, strengths, and values, and skill sets needed for identified careers, and educational/training requirements to enter a chosen career (NCWDY, 2014). Competency-based activities encourage students to develop work-related and career decision-making skills that can serve as foundational skills throughout their lives (NCWDY, 2014). Further, students develop job search and work readiness skills, as well as work habits and behaviors necessary to do well in their job, but also to become knowledgeable of the job market and future career opportunities to maximize their employability (NCWDY, 2014).

#### ***Collaboration with VR.***

Interagency collaboration resulting from a strong partnership between the public school system and VR can lead to positive transition outcomes for students (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Fabian, 2007). Johnson, Zorn, Tam, Lamontagne, and Johnson's (2003) study revealed seven factors that can guide efforts for successful interagency collaboration: a) commitment, b) communication, c) strong leadership from key decision makers, d) understanding the culture of collaborating agencies, e) engaging in serious preplanning, f) providing adequate resources for collaboration, and g) minimizing turf issues. Another suggestion is to seek out opportunities that enhance transition knowledge and competencies that clarify information about VR and the role and involvement of the VR counselor as part of the IEP team (Oertle et al, 2013). Educators and VR counselors share mutual responsibility during the transition process and therefore, should both take a leadership role by initiating contact with each other. If the outcome of successful transition from school to adult life is to be achieved,



interagency collaboration between schools and VR must be of high quality (Oertle & Trach, 2007).

***Student Work Experience and Job Readiness Skills.***

There is considerable evidence that supports the relationship between paid employment during the school years and positive employment outcomes for transition students following exit from the public school system (Carter et al., 2010; Fabian, 2007; Test et al., 2009). To aid in this effort, educators should initiate career development activities with potential transition students and initiate communication with VR agencies before students reach the age of 16 (Fabian, 2007). Further, developing knowledge of the local One Stop Center and its WIA-funded youth programs will also aid students by helping them get involved in community-based programs intended to enhance their career development (Luecking et al., 2002). Given the limited resources by both schools and VR agencies, WIA can share its resources and possibly some the costs of job-related programming (e.g., career assessments, paid internships with employers, job-coaching, job placement) that can further facilitate students' development of job readiness skills. In addition, the importance of family involvement and support may be central to some students' ability to access and follow through on their community-based and employment commitments (Carter et al., 2010). Therefore, engaging parents or family members into the transition process from the get go and eliciting their support in their child's transition program can be crucial.

***Principles of Person-Centered Planning.***

The research highlights the importance of student involvement, empowerment, and self-determination as core values (Test et al., 2009) necessary to effectively prepare students for independence and success in their transition to adult life. To practically apply this underlying philosophy, that adheres to the "spirit of the law" (Edmondson & Cain, 2002), educators should

consider training in person-centered planning. Such training can enhance educators' empathy for their students and families and provide a platform for internalizing person-centered values, essential to this approach (Amano and McBride, 2001). Educators may also have an opportunity to build upon their group leadership skills and acquire important knowledge of the person-centered planning process.

### **Websites and Links for Resources**

A final area of interest pertains to the ways educators can enhance their understanding of the needs and practices promoted in relation to transition services. Five websites and resource options are provided below. These links can assist educators in obtaining information about promising transition practices, one-stop centers, evidence-based practices to support transition strategies, and transition training offered on person-centered planning.

- RSA (Rehabilitation Services Administration): Promising Practices for Basic VR Agencies Helping Transition Age Youth:  
<http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/rehab/promising-practices/transition-age/index.html>
- U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Youth Services:  
[http://www.doleta.gov/youth\\_services](http://www.doleta.gov/youth_services)
- One-Stop Centers: <http://www.onestops.info/>
- Evidence-Based Practices in Secondary Transition:  
<http://www.nsttac.org/content/evidence-based-practices-secondary-transition>
- University of Idaho's Center on Disabilities and Human Development free online transition training in person-centered planning: <http://moodle.idahocdh.org>.

### **Final Reflections**

For students with disabilities the act of experiencing and achieving adequate and equitable transition assistance from high school to the adult world of formalized education or

work is not an automatic process. Whilst legislation exists and is mandated to promote the educational and transition rights afforded to students with disabilities, these legislative acts are not sufficient; further collective action must be taken and promoted by schools, administrators, teachers, allied helping professionals, students with disabilities, and family members of students. Everyone involved has an important role and contribution to make to ensure the transition needs of students with disabilities are equitable, meaningful, and directly related to the post-high school needs, desires, and goals of this group of students. More candidly, this means that the traditional way of approaching transition services beginning at the age of 16 (Fabian, 2007) should not be encouraged. Rather, the holistic process of considering the interests and desires of students with disabilities should be discussed and encouraged at a much younger age in the educational process.

Educators and professionals working with students with disabilities may find this change in thinking and approach to be more work initially, but it is likely the best course of action for students with disabilities, their families, and for society. Given the specific needs of students with disabilities, they need more than an equitable education. They need to understand (a) their disability and how it affects them and their future life choices, (b) the potential obstacles they may encounter in the future so they can learn how to effectively self-advocate (Test et al., 2009), (c) that they have choices in relation to employment, training, career-related opportunities, and independent living, (d) the ways they can access community-based support and vocational assistance following high-school (Carter et al., 2010), (e) how to access role models or positive supports as they work toward their life goals (Riesen et al., 2014), and (f) their role in making decisions, taking actions, and creating the life they want to have (NCWDY, 2010). In essence,

their transition process needs to be approached from a holistic and an inclusive manner; one which begins sooner rather than later.

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