Implementing Transition Activities: How Competent Do Special Education Teachers Feel?

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Abstract
Researchers link the successful performance of students with disabilities to the perception of special education teachers toward their own capability to plan and deliver transition services. Further, teachers who are not fully certified may lack transition training, which may be among factors affecting the special education teachers’ self-efficacy in planning and delivering transition services. The teaching effectiveness literature relates self-efficacy directly to student achievement and student achievement for students with disabilities is dependent upon the delivery of transition services. Therefore, the basic premise of this study was to understand special education teachers’ confidence and beliefs in their capability to plan and deliver transition services, their level of satisfaction with their preparation in transition, and the frequency to which they deliver transition services to students.

Key terms: special education; transition services; self-efficacy

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Transitioning students with special needs to post-secondary activities has been a prominent topic in the special education literature. Congress amended the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997 to not only allow disabled students access to a free and appropriate education (FAPE), but to prepare them for employment and independent living. This preparedness is termed transition preparedness. Under the IDEA 2004 Act, Congress defined transition services as

A coordinate set of activities . . . based upon the individual student’s needs, taking into account the student’s preferences and interests, including instruction, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. (IDEA, 2006, Definition section, para. 34)

As revealed in the definition, transition preparedness involves the delivery of activities that will permit the student to engage in services at other educational levels and prepares them for real world living. Many researchers recognize the transition from high school to post-school activities as a serious challenge for students with disabilities (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005; Shandra & Hogan, 2008; Wehman, 2006). Unfortunately, according to Prater, Sileo, and Black (2000), the preponderance of secondary special educators lack self-assurance in their abilities to address the transition desires of their students. However, the literature reveals little knowledge about how special education teachers proffer transition services to students with disabilities and the scope to which teachers are equipped and satisfied with the services they provide.

Morningstar and Kleinhammer-Tramil (2005) documented that special educators were not entirely ready to deliver transition services to students with disabilities as mandated under IDEA (2004). Support of this finding was evident in the studies of Melby (1995), Woolfolk and Hoy (1990), and Woolfolk, Rosoff, and Hoy (1990) who found that the goal of teachers who had a low sense of instructional efficacy was to provide for students’ basic needs. Other studies also suggested that teachers had a fundamental understanding of the transition procedure, however did not feel prepared to plan and provide transition services to students with disabilities (Blanchett, 2001; Knott & Asselin, 1999; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). The research implies that teacher efficacy beliefs can affect students’ educational learning, self-perception, and aspirations (Melby, 1995; Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990). Ashton and Webb (1986) suggested that poor outcomes for students with disabilities were possibly the result of the special education teachers’ perceptions of their capability to plan and deliver transition services to students with disabilities.

Literature Review

Studies of teachers’ perceptions revealed that their opinions have been instrumental in identifying best instructional practices and in bringing about change in such areas as preparation and professional development programs (Lubbers, Repetto, & McGorray, 2008). For example,
Dickerson (2008) and Mintz (2007) investigated how student teachers perceived their abilities to provide services to students with disabilities. Likewise, studies that Romni and Leyser (2006) and Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007) conducted focused on the perceptions of practicing general and special educators regarding the delivery of services to students with disabilities. Transition planning for special education students is among topics in the literature where the perceptions of educators have led researchers to investigate self-efficacy from various perspectives.

In a study involving over 500 secondary-level special educators in 31 states, Benitez, Morningstar, and Frey (2009) examined teachers’ perceptions of their level of proficiency in providing services. Specifically, these educators indicated their level of preparedness to plan and deliver transition services, their satisfaction with training, and the frequency of implementing transition activities. The researchers found positive relationships between preparedness, training, and frequency of engagement in transition activities. Their results suggested that teachers’ perceptions of self-efficacy in transitioning planning are among factors in determining the special educator’s competence to deliver these services.

Literature on transition planning has begun to establish a list of best practices, including assessing a student’s work skills, teaching social skills, educating the student on available employment options, and the “preparation of a formal transition plan” (Goupil, Tasse, Garcin, & Dore, 2002, p. 128). The importance of self-determination is among areas addressed as the literature suggests that the concept has become central to transition planning best practice (Hartwig & Sitlington, 2008; Oesterreich & Knight, 2008; Trainor, 2008; Van Dycke, Martin, & Lovett, 2006). Results of Benitez et al. (2009) that connect teacher self-efficacy to competence in the delivery of transition services have implications for the incorporation of best practice and training in teacher preparation programs. Their results suggest that teacher efficacy as well as teacher qualifications are inherent in transition planning best practices; therefore, they should be among content areas addressed in teacher preparation programs.

Factors Influencing Teacher Perceptions

Among reasons for the reluctance of some special educators to deliver transition services to students are that they lack specific types of certification, have not received adequate transition training, and perceive that their overall knowledge needed to deliver transition services is not sufficient (Held, Thoma, & Thomas, 2004; Lee-Tarver, 2004). A special area of research in the field of transitioning planning focuses on “the knowledge of transition held by professionals, in particular, teachers” (Lubbers et al., 2008, p. 281). The need for training focused on managing transition plans has been evident through various publications. Hasbrouck, Parker, and Tindal (1999, p. 83) concluded that teachers needed more “support and guidance to modify their instructional practices to meet the needs of (special) students.” The failure of teachers to manage inclusion also led to some teachers taking on the role of consulting teachers to provide training to regular teachers in assessing and implementing strategies for special education students. However, Hasbrouck et al. (1999) were among those who suggested that these teachers also lacked information perceived as useful in instructional efforts to improve student performance. Whether most teachers involved in transition processes for special students possess the knowledge they need to use best practice remains a serious question in the research literature.
The lack of transition training may also be influencing the special education teachers’ self-efficacy in planning and delivering transition services. Entering the profession without complete certification or through an alternate route may contribute to special education teachers feeling ill equipped to employ transition services successfully (Morningstar & Clark, 2003). Wehmeyer (2003) and Morningstar and Clark (2003) found that special education teachers must have basic transition competencies and content knowledge that go beyond the abilities and knowledge many secondary special education professionals receive in their undergraduate preparation programs in order to plan and effectively deliver transition services.

The literature on transition service has identified service requirements for over three decades. However, special education teachers who are not equipped to plan and deliver transition services or confident in their capability to plan and deliver transition services may perhaps contribute to the unfortunate outcomes that adult students with disabilities demonstrate. The literature that links teacher self-efficacy to student achievement supports this observation (Hoy & Spero, 2005; Romni & Leysner, 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007) and reveals that teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to provide modifications based on the needs of students.

Research has revealed that some trained teachers indicated that their personnel training programs did not deal with specific knowledge and skills essential to teaching such as overseeing paraprofessionals, making use of professional literature to address teaching concerns, and teaming up with general education teachers (Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, & Willig, 2002). As a result, these teachers of teachers reported that they did not feel highly qualified to work with students with disabilities. For this reason, special education teachers’ perception of their capacity to plan and deliver transition services may have a negative impact on the transition outcomes of students with disabilities. However, studies show that teacher efficacy increases during student teacher training (Hoy & Spero, 2005). Therefore, the teacher quality research implies that schools of education provide, to the greatest extent possible, increased field experiences in the area of transition (Carlson et al., 2002).

Teacher Preparation and Transitioning Demands

Studies have investigated the perceptions of teachers about their role and skills in transition planning (Benitez et al., 2009; Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, & Scheer, 1999; Goupil et al., 2002; Jones, 2005). Studies have found that teacher practice in transition planning and the transition process as a whole is at variance with best practice (Lubbers et al., 2008; Martin et al., 2006; Thomas, Held, & Saddler, 2002; Wagner & Davis, 2006). Generally, the results of studies indicate that most teachers are aware of a gap between theory and practice and that they will require more training in order to help special education students in transition (Davis & Bates, 1997; Held, Thoma, & Thomas, 2004; Lee-Tarver, 2004; Neubart, 2003).

The Secondary Teachers Transition Survey identifies teachers’ perceptions on 46 transition competencies (Benitez et al., 2009). Benitez et al. (2009) used the instrument in their study to measure competency levels on three scales: preparedness, training, and frequency of delivery of transition activities. Participants reported that they were somewhat satisfied with training provided in teacher preparation programs and somewhat prepared for the delivery of
transition services. They also indicated that they occasionally engaged in the delivery of transition activities for students with disabilities (Benitez et al., 2009). Their findings suggested the need to include an assessment instrument in preparation programs to determine why participants were only somewhat satisfied with training and what actions were necessary to enhance skills for the provision of transition activities.

In addition to investigations of how teachers conduct their roles in view of the changing society (Wasburn-Moses, 2006), studies have also focused on students’ families in terms of the roles played in transitioning planning and the effectiveness of the participation (Ward, Mallett, Heslop, & Simmons, 2003). Most importantly, the researchers have concluded that teachers must find a way to step to the side to allow special education students to fully establish self-determination in the transition process (Torgerson, Miner, & Shen, 2004; Trainor, 2005; Trainor, 2007; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Garner, & Lawrence, 2007). Again, these results have implications for training special education teachers regarding student and family involvement in transition planning.

In general, the literature presents a scenario where special education teachers are responsible for multiple responsibilities that can be very demanding. Suggested in such a scenario is the belief that because of the demands, special education teachers suffer from more role conflict and ambiguity. Wasburn-Moses (2005), interested in improved efforts to define the role of special education teachers, examined the lives of a target group of 379 high school learning disability (LD) teachers in the state of Michigan. The surveys focused on their roles, responsibilities, and the effectiveness of their teacher preparation. Wasburn-Moses’ primary finding was related to the time participating teachers spent in one-on-one instruction with students. About half of the participating teachers contributed less than an hour weekly in individual instruction and in general, teachers engaged students in one-on-one instruction two hours or less during a week. Such findings are quite revealing as special education calls for individualized instruction. Wasburn-Moses (2005) argued that the multiple responsibilities of these teachers might leave them little time for what they see as an “extra” dimension of teaching.

**Methods**

The researcher selected respondents for this study from a population of 446 elementary, middle, and high school special education teachers from school districts in the Mississippi Delta. Separate public school districts, county school districts, and consolidated school districts constituted this population. Respondents consisted of a purposeful sample of special education teachers employed during 2009-2010 in schools located in 15 rural counties. These respondents were 191 females representing the following ethnic groups: African American, Asian American, Native American, White, and Other.

The researcher selected a quantitative research design to assess data reflective of elementary, middle, and high school special education teachers’ perception of their capabilities to plan and deliver transition services to students with mild-moderate disabilities through a cross-sectional survey strategy. Participants responded to questions on the Secondary Teachers Transition Survey (STTS) that Benitez et al. (2009) created. Survey items inquired of participants’ level of preparation, satisfaction with training, and frequency of performing...
transition activities. Part II of the STTS consists of a four-point Likert scale and elicited participants’ perceived levels of preparation, satisfaction, and the frequency with which they performed transition activities.

The researcher categorized survey questions to coincide with the research questions and hypotheses in preparation for analyses and uploaded responses from survey items in the SPSS 18 database for running descriptive and inferential statistics. These responses represented each of the three scales: preparedness, training satisfaction, and frequency of transition activities. The researcher hypothesized that teachers’ perceptions of their level of transitioning preparedness would have a significant relationship to their level of training satisfaction and teachers’ perceptions of their level of transitioning preparedness would have a significant relationship to the frequency of transition activities performed. The researcher also hypothesized that teachers’ perceptions of their level of training satisfaction would have a significant relationship to the frequency of transition activities performed.

The researcher used the Pearson Product-Moment Coefficient (Pearson r) to test the hypotheses for significant relationships at the .05 and .01 alpha levels. In addition to employing Pearson r for the three hypotheses, the researcher also performed data analysis through cross tabulating demographic variables from the survey to the three scales examined in the study (transition preparedness, transition training satisfaction, and transition frequency of service implementation). The analysis procedures also included descriptive statistics for demographic variables and competency ratings related to the scales of preparation to perform the activity (transition preparedness), satisfaction with training (transition satisfaction), and frequency of performing transition activities (transition frequency). These statistics indicated the frequencies, means, and standard deviations for the demographic variables, the independent variables (teaching experience, satisfaction with training, and preparedness [self-efficacy]), and the dependent variables (preparedness [self-efficacy] and transition performance). Demographic variables included type of certification, number of years as a special education teacher, type of preparation courses, number of transition courses taken, number of staff development hours attained, and grade level of students taught.

Results

The analyses revealed a statistically significant relationship between participants’ perceptions of their level of transition preparedness and their satisfaction with training, $r = .275$, $p \leq .01$. The second analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship between that teachers’ perceptions of their level of transitioning preparedness and the frequency of engagement in transition activities, $r = .260$, $p \leq .01$. The third analysis indicated that a significant relationship existed between the perceptions of teacher training satisfaction and the frequency of engagement in transition activities, $r = .160$, $p \leq .05$.

The researcher analyzed the descriptive statistics by examining frequencies, percentages, and means for each survey item in each category. Descriptive statistics revealed a mean score of 2.7 on a 4-point scale for the frequency that participants conducted transition services identified on the questionnaire. Participants stated they did not feel competent to deliver the services. The overall preparedness level for elements of curriculum and instruction far exceeded that of other
categories (instructional planning, curriculum and instruction, transition planning, assessment, collaboration, and additional competencies). The majority of respondents indicated that they were prepared to teach career awareness skills \((n = 132\) of \(187\)), to use a variety of behavior management strategies \((n = 118\) of \(190\)), to provide community-based instruction \((n = 108\) of \(189\)), and to use instructional and assistive technology in academic, work, and community environments \((n = 112\) of \(190\)). Frequency counts, percentages, and means for responses supported the finding of positive self-efficacy for elements of all categories; however, overall self-efficacy or preparedness was not a frequent occurrence for most of the 46 practices assessed on the survey. Among the most positive feelings of preparedness were (a) providing accommodations and modifications to instructional activities \((42\%)\); (b) teaching self-advocacy and self-determination skills \((50\%)\); (c) using a variety of behavior management strategies \((67\%)\); (d) teaching career awareness skills \((69\%)\); (e) including instructional and assistive technology into an individual educational plan \((IEP)\) for transition planning \((59\%)\); and (f) understanding different family beliefs, values, and practice \((56\%)\).

According to descriptive statistics, findings for preparedness and self-efficacy based on preparedness also revealed areas where participants felt unprepared or somewhat unprepared. The assessment category contained the highest responses for unpreparedness with the most unprepared skills identified as conducting assistive technology assessments \((M = 2.5)\) and developing accommodations and modifications for state and district testing \((M = 2.7)\). Higher levels for unpreparedness across all categories were (a) identifying post-school services and programs for students with disabilities \((M = 2.5)\); (b) using transition planning strategies that facilitate input from team members \((M = 2.2)\); (c) participating in community level strategic planning for transition services \((M = 2.3)\); (d) knowing methods to increase transition services through interagency agreements and planning \((M = 2.5)\); (e) participating in community level strategic planning for transition services \((M = 2.3)\); (f) using transition planning strategies that facilitate input from team members \((M = 2.2)\); and (g) evaluating the quality of transition services \((M = 2.7)\).

Discussion

The results of the study support claims of other researchers that some special education teachers do not perceive that they are prepared to deliver transitional and other services to their students \((Blanchett, 2001; Knott & Asselin, 1999; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003)\). Results of the study align with findings of Benitez, Morningstar, and Frey \((2009)\). These researchers also examined teachers’ perceptions of their level of proficiencies in transition services. This study, like that of Benitez et al. \((2009)\) found positive relationships between preparedness, training, and frequency of engagement in transition activities. Their findings suggested that teachers’ perception of self-efficacy in transitioning planning is a determining factor in the special educator’s competence to deliver these services.

Somewhat contrary to Morningstar and Kleinhammer-Tramil’s \((2005)\) conclusion that special educators were not entirely ready to deliver the services to students with disabilities mandated under IDEA, participants in the current study perceived they were well prepared regarding IDEA requirements for developing transition IEPs. Further, participants showed high levels of preparedness for the delivery of services in the area of curriculum and instruction.
Overall, however, participants did not consistently demonstrate high levels of preparedness. Other studies also suggested that while teachers had a fundamental understanding of the transition procedure, they did not feel prepared to plan and provide transition services to students with disabilities (Blanchett, 2001; Knott & Asselin, 1999; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). Although this study supports the need for enhancing the preparedness knowledge level among some regular and special educators regarding IDEA requirements, responses to the transition planning preparedness items revealed that the majority of participants felt they were prepared or had average preparedness to develop transition programs based on their ability to use different models of transition programs and practices, and based on the outcomes of their students.

The overall results suggest the continuous need for attention to the training of special educators through teacher training, alternate route, and local school district programs. The findings illustrate specific areas for emphasizing transition training and show that participants received the greatest amount of exposure to transition training through opportunities that their school districts provided. These findings suggest a need for teacher training programs to include appropriate transition courses at both levels that provide special educators the requisite skills for guiding the transitioning process. Further, school districts and training programs (including alternate route programs) should consider initiating or enhancing the coordination of services for transition planning. The researcher recommends that districts engage in an annual needs assessment that involves identifying the type of training teachers complete for transition planning, the type professional development available through local and state agencies, and the availability of resources through agencies that can augment the transition of students. Further study of transition planning training through surveying teacher training programs and school districts’ professional development programs would assist in identifying gaps between training and real world practice. The researcher also suggests that school districts and colleges create a training model that integrates best practice among colleges, school districts, and professional societies for the delivery of transition instruction. Such a model might serve to enhance self-efficacy for teachers guiding transition activities.

References


