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The Need for Transition Programs

by

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Special Education 430

Dr. Little

TRANSITION

The newest words in special education today are "Transitional Planning". First, it is necessary to define what transition is. Then the question of why we need this particular plan needs to be addressed. In order to answer these questions we need to look at what is happening now and what are the hopes for the future. According to the Final Report of the Illinois Transition Plan by Bates, Suter, & Poelvorrdde (1986), transition is viewed as:

a dynamic process involving a partnership of consumers, school-age services, post-school services, and local communities (employers, neighbors, etc.) that results in maximum levels of employment, independent living, integration and community participation. Within this process, transition services are those school and post-school programs that include goals and objectives related to employment, independent living, and community participation outcomes (p.2).

Questions from this definition arise. Aren't the special education programs that are now serving the students with handicaps providing a curriculum that does lead to the areas of employment, independent living and community participation? What is happening to the special education students who are leaving the public education programs? Do these people and their families have access to the adult services for the disabled?

Although transition planning involves all who are engaged in any type of special education, this paper will study only the students who are considered mildly handicapped. Let us first look at students who are leaving the mandated public education programs.

Fardig, Algozzine, Schwartz, Hensel, & Westling (1985) researched the data of postsecondary employment of mildly handicapped people living in rural areas. The areas of concern included employment statistics and any correlation between secondary education and

and employment. The 113 subjects from four rural counties had met the following criteria: 1) classified as EMH, SLD, or ED during grades 9-12, 2) completed at least one year of pre-vocational or vocational training during grades 9-12, and 3) completed at least the ninth grade and part of the tenth, 4) completed at least one year of school from the school graduated or withdrawn from. The academic information included classification in special education, courses taken, exit information, reading and math achievement scores, and number of months out of school. Employment statistics included current employment, position, length of employment, and wages. The majority of these students (72.6%) were classified as EMR. The mean number of years of school completed was 11.4. The mean reading grade level was 3.8, and the mean arithmetic application grade level was 4.4. The typical courses of prevocational home economics and vocational work experience were worth half a credit per course. The employment data indicated that the subjects were employed 57.6% of the time since school. Fifty former students earned the minimum wage or more. An analysis showed that the highest level of school completed, math and reading levels were better predictors of postschool adjustment. The vocational course work was the lower predictor. Of those who were on the lower end, there had been little follow-up of the students since leaving secondary school. One particular special needs vocational teacher spent her own time following her students after they left school. Her students ranked in the higher group of adjustment after school. Although there was a higher correlation between academic achievement and success after leaving school, there seems to be questions about the type of prevocational and vocational classes engaged in by the students. There also appears to be a need for a plan which helps the secondary special education students make

the transition to living as adults.

Another article by Okolo and Sitlington (1986) summarized several studies which depicted the employment status of various groups of Learning Disabled students. This article also stated information concerning the types of programs that are now in many secondary education programs and what could be improved to benefit the future conditions of the students exiting secondary schools.

One of the studies cited provided the employment status of 47 young adults in comparison with 59 other young adults who were not previously classified as LD students. These two groups had been out of school from one to seven years. The previous LD students were reported to have held jobs at the same rate as their peers, but their jobs held less social status and were found to be less satisfying to the LD students compared to their peers' situation. Another study cited by Mithaug, Horiuchi, and Fanning (p. 142) gave data on 234 individuals who graduated from schools in Colorado. Of this group, 32% were LD. Eighty-two percent of those responding stated they had a job at one time since graduation, but only 69% were employed at the time of the interview. One-third of these students were working full-time and 29% stated they were working part-time. The earnings stated was 43% making less than \$3.00 per hour, and 13% earning less than \$4.00 per hour. Another study done by Hasazi, Gordon, and Roe (p.142) stated that a comprehensive study of randomly selected students served in special education in Vermont resulted in the following tabulations: 55% of their total sample held jobs at the time of the interview, but only 65% of these were full time. These facts were from a group of 451 students.

Another sample by Fafard and Haubrich (p. 142) surveyed 21 adults who had received educational services from a university laboratory school. Of these, 15 had finished or left high school. Four of these had full time jobs, 1 was employed, and 10 held part-time jobs. Most of these jobs were in the food service field. At the time of interviews, these subjects stated that they talked of getting "good jobs" in the future. These last two samples were noted as not having any vocational counseling during school and no contact with vocational services after high school.

It was stated that there are problems in researching students who have been in special education classes and following them after graduation. Problems associated with this aspect as well as the varying economic trends of different time periods does complicate research studies. Evenso, there were some results that need to be evaluated. The students in special education did obtain employment, but many students were either working in low status jobs with "hopes" of obtaining a better job in the future or working for a minimal wage. It was consistently found that many of the students received little vocational counseling at the high school level and had little or no contacts with agencies that could help in training or locating jobs. This data suggest that special education at the secondary level must look at the curricula it is offering in order to better prepare the students for employment, and also set up a link with agencies that serve the mildly handicapped when they are adults.

Edgar (1987) set out to investigate what improvement could be made in the transition of secondary special education students and their employment after leaving school. He performed a study to research whether the curriculum in the high school prepared the students to be able to live independently as adults. Trying to track down the

drop-outs and graduates of the mildly handicapped became a big problem. There apparently is little follow-up of special education student drop-outs from the high schools. Of those he was able to contact came some eye-opening facts. The national statistic of drop-outs (entering 9th grade but not graduating) is 29%. The drop-out rate for special education students is even higher. The LD/BD rate is 42% and the MR rate is 18%. Although the drop-out rate for MRs are lower, so is their employment rate. MRs employment rate is 13% compared to the LD/BD 60% rate. Of the total group only 18% have salaries over the minimum wage. The majority are not capable of living independently. The curriculum in secondary education for the mildly mentally retarded is over-whelmingly geared toward the academic area. A very small percentage is concerned with career/vocational skills. In view of these findings the author suggests that the curriculum in special education be more directed towards vocational programs. There must also be better relations between school and employment/training programs after secondary school.

In the studies cited it is apparent that the content of secondary special education curriculum leans to increasing or remediating academic skills. Okolo and Sitlington (1986)^{stated} that while there is a need for acquiring basic academic skills, there is a problem in how these skills are acquired. They have stated that academic skills must be job-related and transferable. It was stated that once the students learn basic skills, these skills must be practiced in relation to the various conditions and situations that occur in the work place. For example, reading is important, but there is quite a difference in reading a text in school and reading a manual at a job cite. It was also noted that this type of teaching method not only increased the generalization of a basic skill but also was found to be a higher motivator for students to increase their skills.

It was also stated that more training must be done in increasing interpersonal skills of the mildly handicapped. In a survey of 178 members of local service clubs in Delaware, New Jersey, and eastern Pennsylvania, the authors cited Richards (p.144) stating that employers considered effective interpersonal skills much more important than previous work experience. Brown (p. 144) surveyed 5,213 employers throughout Texas. Of the 1,695 who responded 9 of their 10 leading reasons for rejecting job applicants after the job interview were related to interpersonal skills. From the studies cited by these authors it can be noted that many of the mildly handicapped adolescents have difficulty with social skills related to employment. These could include their mannerisms during the interview, accepting criticism from an employer, or providing constructive criticism to a co-worker.

Another area that needs to be addressed in the secondary education programs of the mildly handicapped is the lack of attention toward career/vocational programming. Many studies done (Wiseman; Gerber and Griffin; Schumaker, Deshler, Alley, and Warner; p. 146) stated that LD teachers did not consider vocational training as important, did not consider this part of their role as teacher, or devoted very small amounts of the school day time in vocational training. The vocational education programs that are in the secondary schools also are not without problems in meeting the needs of the special education high school students. The criteria of being accepted into the classes may be too high. Vocational educators themselves do not feel trained properly in working with the handicapped. A lack of communication between special education and vocational teachers also presents a problem. Vocational educators are not aware of the skills needed by the handicapped students - work related and interpersonal skills- in order to prepare them for the working world. There appears to be a need of connecting

the vocational educators with what employers want of future employees as well as a need to link students with agencies that serve the adults with disabilities.

It is evident that although there is special education in the high schools for students with mild disabilities, a lack of preparing these students for the work world, a lack of who is responsible for the vocational programming for these students, and a lack of what jobs are available and how to find out about agencies who can link students with jobs, has prevented many students who are capable of working from finding meaningful work.

Benz and Halpern (1987) have summed up that there is definitely a need for transition services for secondary students with mild disabilities. They have stated that there needs to be a re-evaluation of the curricula offered in secondary special programs; there needs to be a better understanding of who is responsible for career/vocational planning of these students, and there needs to be better communication between the schools and the adult agencies that will be servicing the students after graduation from high school.

Rusch and Phelps (1987) have stated that congress is addressing educational and employment transitions of mildly handicapped youth. In Section 626 of PL98-199, entitled "Secondary Education and Transitional Services for Handicapped Youth", the major objectives are:

to stimulate the improvement and development of programs for secondary special education and to strengthen and coordinate education, training, and related services to assist in the transition process to postsecondary education, vocational training, competitive employment, continuing education or adult services. (p. 489).

Some of the grant programs are: programs awarded for youth employment projects and postsecondary projects under the Handicapped Children's Model Program, as well as, grants from the Rehabilitation

Services Administration for "Transition from School or Institution to Work Projects". Now and in the next several years will be programs designed to improve the teaching of skills necessary for the mildly handicapped to obtain employment and improve their lives as adults. Research of these programs will have to evaluate their effectiveness.

Besides the schools, adult service agencies and funding for programs, there is a need for parents of the students to become involved. According to Tindall and Gugerty (1985) parents have a lot of power in encouraging the schools to develop interagency linkages for handicapped youth. These authors suggest that committees be formed that include parents, people connected with the vocational programs, special education programs, rehabilitation services, and employers within the community. It is through these peoples' combined efforts that knowledge of possible job placements and information on how programs should be developed in order to enhance a person's success in employment and integration into the community can be accomplished. It was suggested that workshops for parents be established. During these workshops parents can learn what's available and how to go about seeking services their children will need in the future. By knowing what options their children will have, parents and teachers can start proper training in the schools through the IEP goals and objectives. As time passes, new groups of parents can be helped by those who have set up prior contacts.

It is true that people with disabilities have finally achieved their rights to a free, appropriate education. Much time is spent by the parents, their children, special educators, and other professionals in providing specific educational programs. Perhaps we, as professionals and parents, need to sit back now and rethink what the ultimate goal of education is. To this writer, education should be the framework for building skills which will help people learn to live and adjust their lives as adults. At the time of the implementation

of PL 94-142, we may have sat back, relaxed, and thought that now, all is right". All is not right if our students are not living as meaningful and productive a life as is possible. Parents have expectations of what their children can and will be able to do. Students going through the school system have worked hard. It seems logical that training in the schools should be determined by what a person will need as an adult. Equally as important is having available connections with employment agencies and residential service options for the disabled adult. There is debate whether the transition program should begin in the school. To this writer, this does seem the logical place. True, there will be a need for added personnel to oversee this program as special educators and school administrators already have their time filled. There needs to be an umbrella agency which sets up a communication system between parents, students, educational personnel and personnel from the agencies who will be servicing adults with disabilities. Through the cooperation of all these people, the fulfillment of the purpose of the educational system will be achieved - all people will be as fully functioning as possible, and as many as feasible will be contributing members of society.

APPENDIX

- PL94-142 Public Law 94-142 The Education for Handicapped Children Act (1975) gives all children the right to a free, appropriate, public education in the least restrictive environment.
- LD Learning Disabilities - children who are unable to learn through regular classroom instruction due to a problem in perceptual, conceptual, or subtle coordinative problems.
- BD Behavior Disorder
- EMH/EMR Educable Mentally Handicapped/Educable Mentally Retarded
- ED Emotionally Disturbed

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