Developing a Transition Plan

Module 23

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"Not again!" Mrs. Tosatto exclaimed in the conference room of her K-8 school, as she studied the school files for her incoming kindergartners one August afternoon. "When will they learn that I cannot p-o-s-s-i-b-l-y help these kids with autism when I have none of their records?"

"Tell me about it," responded Mr. Ladavat. "I have this new sixth grader coming over from the other elementary building. He's been in our District his entire career, apparently causing a lot of problems, but I can't find a shred of evidence that anyone ever sat down with his mother and tried to get her on board. Now, I'm supposed to call her?"

"I've got you both beat," chimed in Miss Olszewski, a new high school special education teacher. "I'm supposed to prepare for these 'transition planning' meetings for all our eligible kids. They tell me there will be people from all kinds of agencies there—even a psychologist and someone from the vo-tech center. And the students even come to these meetings with their parents. I don't want to look unprepared, so I came over here to see what planning was done when they were in eighth grade. But to be honest, I am not finding much that will help me. How can I possibly prepare a plan for a kid I barely know?

These three teachers face the complex challenge of planning successful transitions for children with disabilities. Notice that transition planning takes place not once, but several times in the life of a student with special needs. At each stage of schooling, students need well-written plans to guide not only their daily activities, but also to inform their teachers, parents, and other team members how best to support them.

Transitioning Students with Disabilities

Transition is a general term referring to the process we implement when a student is moving from one level of schooling to another (Stoffner & Williamson, 2000). For example, in the context of early childhood special education, transition is a specific term used to describe the process for young children to move from an early intervention program to a kindergarten program. Specific planning documents and meetings accompany this move from preschool to the

first year of Kindergarten (See Hale, Brown, & Amwake, 2005). These planning processes are outlined in federal and state regulations and in local district policies.

On the other hand, Miss Olszewski referred to the legal requirement that students be invited to participate in their transition planning, as required under federal regulation (34 CFR§300.321(a]). Here is a description of the transition meetings she was planning:

(a) Transition services. Beginning not later than the first IEP to be in effect when the child turns 16, or younger if determined appropriate by the IEP Team, and updated annually, thereafter, the IEP must include—

> (1) Appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills; and

> (2) The transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the child in reaching those goals. [34 CFR§300.320(b)]

Transitions from one level of schooling to another are especially vulnerable times for all children, but are even more challenging for students with emotional disabilities (Simpson, Peterson, & Smith, 2011). Fortunately, educators can turn to a vast supply of excellent resources to help them, regardless of the level of transition planning underway. In this review, we highlight some of those resources and the research supporting them.

Support for Transitioning Students with Disabilities

Family Involvement

As the teachers in our opening vignette observed, parents and guardians are essential members of any transition planning team. Without family input, educators cannot assemble a complete picture of a child, the context in which he or she lives, and the needs, hopes, and plans that the family has for their child. Therefore, it is not surprising that researchers have cited the need for the involvement of families and the improved outcomes for children and youth, when their families play a role in the transition process (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004; Rosenkoetter, Hains, & Dogaru, 2007).

When asked, families themselves agree with researchers and attribute their children's success to good communications between home and school (See Daley, Munk, & Carlson, 2011). Yet, as the teachers in our opening vignette disclosed, parent-school communications and joint planning are not always achieved. After all, funds for summer preparations may not be available in a district (Kang, 2010). Nevertheless, researchers have suggested several practices that can strengthen the relationship between families and teachers. These include "high-intensity practices" such as visiting the sending school and teachers, preparing for the child's entry, and doing home visits (Daley et al., 2011; Pianta & Cox, 1999).

Preparation of Families for Participation

Merely inviting families (i.e., parents or guardians and youth) to a transition planning meeting is insufficient (and not in compliance with the federal regulations). We know this from studies that have shown that parents and youth often do not find themselves able to participate in a meeting because they lack the knowledge and skills to be effective planning partners. Preparation approaches supported by research include early and welcoming engagement of families, teaching families about their rights, opportunities, and resources, and providing educators with the skills to collaborate with families (Bruns & Fowler, 2001; Hetherington et al., 2010).

Planning for Generalization and Maintenance of Skills

The content of the plan for transition is crucial. If a plan is too vaguely conceived, the student has little hope for a successful transition, because those enacting the plan do not know what to do. On the other hand, when planners carefully consider what we call the generalization and maintenance of skills attained, then everyone has a role to play in the successful transfer of those skills across time and settings. Generalization refers to an individual's ability to use newly learned skills not only in the training setting, but also across a variety of settings (e.g., asking for help in a high school classroom, library, or subway station). Maintenance, on the other hand, refers to the student's ability to preserve and use those skills over time, outside the training environment (e.g., managing one's emotions in the workplace when the teacher is not present). (For a more complete explanation of the ways in which teachers can plan for generalization and maintenance of skills, see Kerr & Nelson, 2010).

When to Implement Transition Plans

Transition programs and plans provide supports to students with disabilities who are moving from preschool to kindergarten, changing schools, programs, or are leaving school for post-secondary employment or education. Transition programs and planning allow educators, families, students, and agency personnel to collaborate to ensure a successful transition that meets the expressed goals of the student and his/her guardians.

Guidelines for Implementation of Transition

Here are examples of roles you might play as a member of a transition team:

- Try to make the transition planning and action easier for the student and family. Sharing evaluation reports, working out scheduling problems, having joint instead of separate meetings all are ways to make the process easier and potentially less costly for a family to manage.

- Assist the team in identifying the student's strengths and interests.

- Encourage the student to speak up and/or otherwise participate in the transition planning meeting.

- Support the parent or guardian by engaging in active listening to his or her ideas.

- Explain key terms so that the student and family members can understand them (deFur, 1999).

- Arrange for the choices and implementation of services from different agencies. For example, you might help a student network by introducing her to a local pet shelter looking for volunteers, but you might also coordinate her volunteer training to take place after school.

- Avoid "turf wars" and power struggles to collaborate and empower students and their families to be partners in the process.

- Learn the best practices for fostering generalization and maintenance of new skills so students can succeed wherever they go. These practices include:

    - Learning as much as you can about the settings your student will move to next, so that you can adequately teach him or her to manage those settings.

    - Using what you've learned about the other settings, assess your student's current functioning and use your assessment to build a transition plan based on relevant skills. We call this "transenvironmental programming" (Kerr & Nelson, 2010).

    - Recruit other staff at your school to differentially reinforce (DRO) your student for the behaviors and skills you are trying to promote. This supports generalization and maintenance when you are not present to prompt or provide feedback.

    - Arrange for your student to spend a little time in the new setting, and monitor and evaluate how well he or she is handling the demands of that setting. Be sure to acknowledge positively the student's new skills.

    - As often as you can, exchange information with the teacher or supervisor in the new setting and with others on the transition team, including family members who can support what you are teaching.

Following these guidelines will increase the likelihood of a successful student transition.

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National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET) - www.ncset.org

National Early Childhood Transition Center (NECTC) - www.hdi.uky.edu/AF/NECTC

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities - http://nichcy.org/schoolage/iep/iepcontents/transition

National Post-School Outcomes Center (PSO) - www.psocenter.org

Video: Foundations of Transition for Young Children - http://tadnet.ning.com/video/latest-video-from-connect