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Article 96

School Counselors as Key Personnel in Helping Improve the Transition Outcomes of Students With Significant Disabilities

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Introduction

Essential to the role of the professional school counselor (PSC) is to create comprehensive school counseling programs that are aimed at helping students prepare for life after high school (Hatch, Shelton, & Monk, 2009; Roberts, Bouknight, & Karan, 2009). High school graduation marks the beginning of a new era for students as they begin to explore a variety of post-secondary options and plan for adult life. While the vast majority of high school graduates will pursue degrees in higher education some will seek employment (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). Regardless of which path they choose, most students at this later stage of adolescence are becoming increasingly self-reliant and have begun to establish a some sense of personal identity as they begin their search for the meaning of life (Newman & Newman, 2009). Most high school graduates are optimistic about their future and feel that their career paths will lead to financial reward (Johnson, Duffett, & Ott, 2005) allowing them to live to life to their fullest capacity as happy, independent adults.

Students with disabilities do not necessarily share the same enthusiasm as their typical peers as they leave school and enter adult life. This is particularly true for students with significant disabilities, as leaving school marks the beginning of a frightening period filled with many uncertainties (Hardman & Dawson, 2010). This comes as no surprise considering that individuals with significant disabilities are likely to experience poor outcomes in adult life (National Organization on Disability, 2004). Research shows that the quality of life for adults with significant disabilities is poor compared to their typical peers in terms of employment, community participation and independent living (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Deshler & Schumaker, 2006; National Organization on Disability, 2004). Adults with significant disabilities are three times more likely to be unemployed, live in poverty, have fewer social interactions and withdraw from community participation. Consistent with these disparaging reports is that individuals with disabilities also report having lower levels of life satisfaction (Kessler Foundation &

National Organization on Disability, 2010; Neubert, Moon, & Grigal, 2004). It has been over two decades since mandates, instated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990) began requiring that all students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP) have goals and activities related to transition. Since these mandates, the outcomes of students with significant disabilities have improved only minimally (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). Considering the continued poor outcomes it seems evident that students with significant disabilities are continuing to receive insufficient support (Gillis, 2006) and that current practices of transition planning are lacking.

Professional school counselors (PSC's) are experts in the area of transition planning (Roberts et al., 2009) and are expected to provide appropriate supports in their school counseling programs so that every student is able to reach their fullest developmental capacity (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2010). Unfortunately, many school counseling programs do not consider the unique needs of students with significant disabilities (Hatch et al., 2009; Milsom, 2002). Further, many school counselors do not even include students with significant disabilities in the various components of transition planning (Milsom, 2002; Milsom, 2007). According ASCA (2010), PSCs are expected to pay particularly close attention to addressing the needs of those individuals who have historically been overlooked. Students with significant disabilities account for approximately 24% of students served under IDEA (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996) and continue to be fall within a category of underserved individuals.

Although there does not appear to be a universal definition for students with significant disabilities, this article will define this population as individuals with significant delays in cognitive functioning, adaptive behavior, and communication skills (Hughes, Cosgriff, & Agran, 2010). Individuals with significant disabilities often experience challenges in a variety of areas related to adulthood including community participation, independent living, post-secondary education, and employment. This article provides a brief overview of these challenges while drawing connections to deficits in transition planning in secondary education. The article suggests that by modifying current practices of transition planning, PSC's will be better prepared to assist students with significant disabilities during the transition process which will ultimately lead to improved outcomes in adult life.

Challenges in Adult Life

There are a variety of factors that impact an individual's quality of life including: levels of community participation, educational achievement and employment (Badia, Orgaz, Verdugo, Ullán, & Martínez, 2011); and living with independence. Students with significant disabilities are more likely than their typical peers to experience negative outcomes in each of these areas during adulthood.

Having opportunities for social interactions within the context of a community is closely tied to a higher quality of life for adults. Compared to typical adults, individuals with significant disabilities report lower levels of satisfaction in terms of community participation and are less likely to participate in community events. This includes attending religious services, local politics, cultural events, community service organizations (Kessler Foundation & National Organization on Disability, 2010).

Individuals with significant disabilities also report feeling left out of community activities, having fewer opportunities to socialize with friends, neighbors, and members of their family (Neubert et al., 2004).

Research on why individuals with significant disabilities participate less in community activities points to several different environmental factors identified as potential barriers. First, many individuals with significant disabilities report that when they have experiences of any of the following they are less likely to participate in community activities: (a) feeling as though their opportunity to participate is dependent upon another person; (b) concerns about becoming the victim of teasing; and, (c) having the perception that people hold negative biases toward people with disabilities (Buttimer & Tierney, 2005). Other barriers reported by individuals with significant disabilities include limited access to transportation and lack of financial resources; both of which impede one's ability to participate in leisure activities.

Individuals with significant disabilities are also less likely to engage in volunteer activities within their community. This finding may come as a surprise considering individuals with significant disabilities also report being well informed about volunteer opportunities within their community. However, despite having awareness of such activities, many describe community organizations as being unsupportive which in turn was listed as a reason not to participate (National Organization on Disability, 2000).

Individuals with disabilities also experiences problems associated with post-secondary education. Participation in post secondary education has been identified as an important factor for increasing a person's quality of life (Salkever, 2000). Further, in a parent survey on desired outcomes for students with disabilities, college was indicated as the most important outcome for their children. This finding was consistent across the board, regardless of the severity of their child's disability (Neubert et al., 2004). In 2005, the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) reported that more than three-quarters (77%) of students with disabilities indicated that post-secondary education was considered a primary goal (Wagner et al., 2005). However, out of all the groups of students leaving high school, students with significant disabilities were the least likely group of individuals to attend post-secondary education with only seven percent making it on to college campuses (Wagner et al., 2005). Further, research shows that those individuals who do attend are less likely to receive a degree in comparison to their typical peers (Agran, Cain, & Cavin, 2002).

Perhaps the largest gap between individuals with and without disabilities lies in the area of employment. Approximately 70% of individuals with disabilities that fall within the category of significant are unemployed within two years of leaving high school (Wagner et al., 2005). Further, researchers indicate that there is a 38% employment gap between people with disabilities and those without disabilities, where 21% of people with disabilities were employed full or part-time versus 59% of people without disabilities (Kessler Foundation & National Organization on Disability, 2010). Even college graduates with disabilities have more difficulty finding jobs than their non-disabled peers. While some individuals with significant disabilities are reportedly in the workforce, the majority of these individuals obtain entry level positions, often in sheltered workshops without benefits that offer minimal pay (Metzel, Boeltzig, Butterworth, Sulewski, & Gilmore, 2007; Migliore, Mank, Grossi, & Rogan, 2007). Consequently, the majority of individuals with significant disabilities have limited

financial resources and live in poverty (Kessler Foundation & National Organization on Disability, 2010) and less than 15% are living independently (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009).

Linking Poor Adult Outcomes to Insufficient Transition Planning in School

The continued poor outcomes of individuals with significant disabilities post high school are a clear indication that current transition practices need to be examined and modified. A brief review of the issues related to transition planning for students with significant disabilities indicates that students have limited experience with typical peers and there seems to be a disconnect between post secondary goals and programming that offers insufficient work experience and limited access to transportation.

While it seems evident that transition goals should be reflected in the transition services that students receive it seems that this is not necessarily the case. In a study conducted by Baer, Daviso, Queen, and Flexer (2011) it was reported that the number of students with significant disabilities that had transition goals related to work was high. However, fewer of those students received career or technical education that was deemed by recipients as meaningful. Another sign of disconnect between goals and services related to post secondary education. In the same study (Baer et al., 2011), out of the students with significant disabilities that planned to go on to college, fewer reported participating in mainstream classes and indicated that they had received fewer college related transition services that they considered helpful. Consequently, these students experienced poor academic performance.

Another area of concern in terms of transition related services was the availability of appropriate employment experiences. Students who do not have the opportunity to experience work during high school are more disconnected from both employment and post secondary education (McLaughlin, Sum, & Fogg, 2006). Research indicates that finding rich work opportunities for students with significant disabilities can be challenging as many individuals lose out on job opportunities due to the competition presented by their typical peers. Consequently, rather than receiving goals and training opportunities that consist of integrated employment experiences many students with significant disabilities receive goals and training that consist of sheltered workshops (Migliore & Domin, 2011). Other reports indicate that both transportation and insufficient planning time for job development and supervision at worksites are reasons that students are not afforded better work experience opportunities (Collet-Klingenberg & Kolb, 2011). Such gaps in work related transition services are interfering with students' ability to develop skills necessary for obtaining competitive employment. Employers and colleges have similar expectations for high school graduates and expect students to be prepared to work (ACT, Inc., 2006).

How Can Professional School Counselors Help?

There is a strong correlation between transition success from high school to adulthood to the quality of life of students with significant disabilities (Blacher, 2001). There are a variety of steps that PSC's can take in order to help alleviate some of the stress that students with significant disabilities experience during the transition process

and improve their outcomes in adulthood. PSC's should begin by ensuring that they have a clear understanding of the legal rights of transition-aged youth and incorporate transition planning, so that they are better equipped to advocate for their students.

Student Rights

Under Public Law 101-476, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990), schools must provide transition-planning activities for individuals with disabilities during the period of transition. This means that all students with disabilities must have an education plan that addresses their transition needs by the time they turn 16. Transition planning for students with disabilities must include the student's interests and preferences and the activities should be centered on preparing students to function within the adult environment of their choice. Further, students with significant disabilities need exposure to a variety of environments that are inspiring, with options to choose, solve problems, and make decisions. This is essential so that students can develop self-determination and self-directed learning skills (Hughes, & Avoke, 2010).

Provide Age Appropriate Transition Services to Students 18-21 That Encourage Independence

Students with more significant disabilities often stay in school systems until they reach the age of 21, at which time they are no longer eligible for services provided under IDEA (Wagner et al., 2005). While it is perfectly acceptable to provide high school services to students until age 18, once students turn 18, programs must shift to include a variety of postsecondary educational experiences (Fisher & Sax, 1999). Such experiences should include opportunities for students to practice skills related to employment, post secondary education, and independent living. When providing transition services to students in this age group, PSC's are encouraged to look for alternative settings outside of the school building and out in the community. Increasing opportunities for community participation is helpful in increasing feelings of connectedness (National Organization on Disability, 2010).

One option is to move instruction onto local college campuses (Papay & Bambara, 2011). College campuses provide an array of post-secondary educational training options including the opportunity for students to interact with typical peers and further develop skills while participating in college classes, vocational experiences, and peer mentoring programs. Transition programs on college campus have been shown to have a positive impact on students with significant disabilities. In a qualitative analysis that examined the experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities who participated in a transition program while living in a college dorm, students showed overall improvements in a variety of areas including improvement in life skills and higher goals related to employment (Kirkendall, Doueck, & Saladino, 2009). PSC's should seek to form partnerships with faculty from both two- and four-year colleges as this type of post-secondary programming promotes inclusion, as well as acceptance of students with significant disabilities.

Utilize Planning Approaches That are Person-Family Centered

Individuals who possess the tools to navigate the world in which they live and are afforded the opportunity to take charge of their lives by making decisions, often feel a

greater sense of empowerment which is associated with a better quality of life (Karr, 2011). To help improve transition services, PSC's are encouraged to use a person-centered approach and include family members throughout the entire process. Person-centered planning is centered around the notion that individuals with disabilities have unique strengths, interests, and capacities, and that activities, supports, and services should be customized accordingly (Kim & Turnbull, 2004). Person centered planning includes input from family members with the belief that those who know the student and will continue having involvement in the student's life, will be able to shed light on the student's strengths and interests. PSCs must recognize that, similar to their typical peers, students with significant disabilities have desires, preferences, and dreams for their futures.

Family members are often active participants in the lives of students with significant disabilities and this will often continue as the student progresses as an adult (Kim & Turnbull, 2004). PSC's must consider the cultural norms when transition planning for students with significant disabilities. It is also important to foster a sense of choice by keeping both the student and family informed about their options for services and supports and allow both to exercise their rights. Ultimately, PSC's need to ensure that both family members and students are satisfied with provided services, which may lead to greater life satisfaction (Kim & Turnbull, 2004).

Help Students Obtain Employment Before Graduation

Students who participate in employment experiences during high school have a greater chance of obtaining employment upon graduation (Fabian, 2007) and tend to perform better in both the workforce and in college (McLaughlin, Sum, & Fogg, 2006). Although PSC's are trained to prepare all students for college, many students with significant disabilities will forego higher education and go directly into the workforce (Hughes & Avoke, 2010). It is imperative that these students obtain employment prior to graduation so that they can access vocational support from school personal, including the PSC, (Wehman, 2006) during the skill development phase. PSC's are encouraged to form partnerships with local businesses and create opportunities for students to participate in a variety of work experiences. Participating in a variety of work experiences will allow students to develop skills required to perform different job tasks (Hughes & Avoke, 2010) and also assist students in determining their own preferences for employment. Further, students who receive integrated work experiences are more likely to become financially independent, be included in social situations, and experience personal satisfaction (Migliore & Domin, 2011).

Prepare Students for Post Secondary Education

Research shows that individuals with significant disabilities who participate in postsecondary education are more likely to participate in competitive employment (Gilmore, Schuster, Zafft, & Hart, 2001). There are an increasing number of institutions of higher education equipped to serve individuals with intellectual disabilities. However, only minimal information is available (Hart & Barbour, 2008). The Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI), at the University of Massachusetts Boston, is currently conducting research and plans to disseminate information on a variety of best practices that support individuals with significant disabilities--allowing students to gain access to

the variety of opportunities available on college campuses. PSC's should assist students in achieving their goals of attending institutions of higher education and experiencing success by ensuring that academic supports are available once they arrive on the campus. Further, students need to be taught how to access resources.

Prepare Students for Independent Living

One of the key factors in preparing students for independent living is to present them with a variety of living options which may include apartments that offer assisted living or group home settings (Pearman, Elliott, & Aborn, 2004). PSCs must explore the various housing opportunities within the student's community and provide connections to adult agency support staff as well as other individuals who reside in each of the different settings. Further, PSCs much teach students the skills they need to navigate resources and supports necessary for successful living in different environments. Allowing students the opportunity to visit and have an open dialogue with other agency representatives and current residents in different housing situations will help students and their families determine the appropriate fit for them.

While some individuals with significant or multiple disabilities have the capacity to live independently, others will require assistance in performing the many different tasks associated with independent living. Still, teaching students to perform the tasks that are necessary for independence can assist them in establishing a sense of control over lives which may lead to improvements in quality of life even if they still require assistance (Wehmeyer, 1998; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998).

There are a variety of skills required for maintaining an independent lifestyle. These include but are not limited to shopping, managing money, preparing meals, maintaining a clean living environment, using a telephone, and accessing transportation (Bookman, Harrington, Pass, & Reisner, 2007). PSCs should plan to provide adaptive daily living skills training within the student's own community. For example, if a student will need to access public transportation they should receive instruction and practice utilizing the mode of transportation specific to the one they will be expected to use once they leave school. PSC's should not assume that their students can perform such tasks nor should they assume that with appropriate training and supports that they will not be able to perform at least some aspects of the activity.

Raise Expectations

There is a body of research supporting the notion that the expectations that educators hold for their students are a strong predictor of student performance (Sciarra & Ambrosino, 2011). Benner and Mistry (2007) examined the relationship between parent and teacher expectations and student educational expectations, competency beliefs, and academic outcomes. The results from this study found that the expectations of adults were highly influential in each of these areas. These findings should serve as a reminder for school counselors of the importance of having high expectations of students with significant disabilities as they enter adult life.

Summary

When it comes to preparing for adulthood, students with significant disabilities face the greatest challenges in accessing transition services appropriate to their individual needs (Adkison-Bradley et al., 2007). PSC's must continue to work toward fulfilling their professional/ethical obligation of appropriately serving students with significant disabilities, specifically in the area of transition planning (American School Counseling Association, 2010). PSCs can enhance their current school counseling programs by incorporating many of different strategies outlined in this article.

PSCs are in the precise position to assist students during these difficult times by modifying their school counseling programs to address their unique programming needs. PSCs should explore ways a provide students with significant disabilities a variety of opportunities to learn new skills related to employment, postsecondary education, independent living, and community integration. With real-life training opportunities--and opportunities to practice skills within the context of a community in which they are likely to live, work and socialize--students are more likely to generalize new skills and therefore will experience a more seamless transition into adult life.

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