

# Preparing Pre-Service Teachers for Special Education Transition Planning

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**Abstract:** This qualitative research explored pre-service teachers' understanding of special education transition planning. Findings suggest pre-service teachers increased their understanding of transition planning, accessing post-secondary services, and supporting students obtaining and maintaining employment. By including expert community members, pre-service teachers made connections to the content and complexity of this process.

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## Introduction

Transition planning for students with disabilities is a critical component of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and is mandated by special education law. There are three areas that are supported by the secondary transition plan: post-secondary education and training, employment, and independent living. These areas are to be addressed within the IEP and based on student strengths, interests, and results of formal and informal transition assessments (Plotner et al., 2017). As outlined within IDEA (2004), the age of 16 is when transition planning should begin for individuals with disabilities, however, within the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, as determined by regulation, students with disabilities begin the transition planning process at the age of 14 (Harrison, et al., 2017). Many secondary special education teachers do not feel prepared in effective transition plan writing and special education preparation programs show a lack in the instruction and training on transition standards, transition planning, and documentation of transition planning within a student's IEP (Anderson et al., 2003; Black et al., 2000). Existing research shows a growing need for instruction and curriculum in special education preparation programs focused on transition planning (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009). Pre-service teachers need specific training prior to leaving their teacher preparation program in order to support students with disabilities during transition planning.

## Review of the Literature

When evaluating various components of post-secondary transition planning, special education law mandates transition planning for students with disabilities when they reach the age of 16;

however, in Pennsylvania, this must begin at 14 (Pennsylvania Department of Health, 2013). As part of Pennsylvania's State Performance Plan, Indicator 13 monitors the requirements of the transition plan within the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and holds its own requirements within the compliance monitoring expectations for school districts within the commonwealth of Pennsylvania (Harrison et al., 2017). However, students with disabilities have been found to be unprepared for a successful transition to the post-secondary environment (Hendrickson et al. 2017). Riesen et al. (2014) summarized data from the National Organization on Disability (2010) that explained that individuals with disabilities are employed at a rate of 21% compared to 59% of individuals without disabilities. Students with disabilities are unprepared for post-secondary education and the independent living and self-advocacy skills required for a successful transition to the post-secondary environment (Hendrickson et al., 2017).

Regarding transition planning at the secondary level, research focused on three main areas: post-secondary education and training, employment, and independent living (Harrison et al., 2017). Within IEPs at the secondary level, IEP teams should be addressing these main areas and ensure that goals are based on the individual student's strengths, interest, and result from formal and informal assessment (Plotner et al., 2017). It is critical that special education teachers possess the essential knowledge and skills that empower them to effectively plan and deliver transition services.

Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistant Network (PaTTAN, 2018) describes the secondary transition process as a "bridge" to adult life. A six-step process is used to develop the IEP and guide parents, students, service providers, and educators to prepare students for their next steps

(PaTTAN, 2018). This allows students to explore the three main areas of transition: post-secondary education and training, employment, and independent living (Hendrickson et al., 2017). Through assessment, student present levels, building partnerships, planning, writing goals, and progress monitoring, the transition team can build an educationally meaningful plan to support the student's transition to adulthood (PaTTAN, 2018).

Research has shown that secondary special educators feel poorly prepared to support and plan for most transition needs of their students (Swindlehurst & Berry, 2023). A majority of secondary special educators reported receiving transition training within the field and believed they were unprepared to engage in effective transition curriculum and instruction (Greene & Kochhar-Bryant, 2003; Morningstar et al., 2008). When studying teacher preparation programs, Anderson et al. (2003) reported that less than half of the preparation programs in their national study addressed transition standards and 45% offered a transition course. Conderman and Johnston-Rodriguez (2009) explained that beginning secondary special educators believed they were poorly prepared in using instructional grouping systems, designing assessments, and supporting student access to the general education curriculum. Within the current research, many investigators point to the need to better support teachers and call for more research to better recognize how to prepare teachers accordingly.

### **Purpose**

Transition planning is an important part of a secondary special education teacher's job. Special education law mandates starting at age 14 and specific transition plans need to be written into the IEP to support students as they transition

into the post-secondary environment. Special education preparation programs need to include specific training and instruction related to transition planning for their pre-service special education teachers in order to better prepare future secondary special education teachers (Black et al., 2000; Plotner et al., 2017). Research shows that current secondary special education teachers feel unprepared to support and plan for transition needs of their students (Black et al., 2000). The purpose of this study was to survey pre-service teachers on their current knowledge of the special education transition planning process. Surveys were completed before and after attending a special education conference on transition planning to find out what pre-service teachers knew before attending the event and what new knowledge they learned from the event.

Topics of the conference included transition planning and college, early intervention transition, a presentation about the services and supports provided by the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), and best practices in transition planning. In the presentation regarding transition planning and college, the executive director of the learning support services explained pertinent laws and regulations for students with disabilities to receive supports and accommodations while in the college setting and the process of accessing these supports. During the presentation regarding early intervention transition, an early intervention preschool teacher explained the process of transitioning from birth to three-year-old supports to preschool aged supports as well as preschool aged supports into elementary aged school supports. The presentation by OVR reviewed the services, process of application for supports, and types of supports provided locally by support counselors for adults in a post-secondary setting as well as early reach supports for

students with disabilities in secondary education setting. Finally, the presentation on best practices in transition planning was provided by a transition coordinator and special education supervisor. Based on previous research and practice in the field, speakers defined transition planning, support and actions taken by teachers in both the elementary and secondary setting, and involvement of Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team members including parents. This conference took place over a three-hour time period with speakers presenting for 30 to 45 minutes on each topic.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

All participants were pre-service teachers and attendees of a special education conference regarding transition planning. There were a total of 11 participants in the pre-conference survey and six participants in the post conference survey. This conference was held at a small, Catholic university in southeastern Pennsylvania in April 2022. These participants were over the age of 18, had less than five years of experience in special education, and had a high school diploma. Participants were students enrolled in a teacher education program.

### **Data Collection**

In March and April of 2022, researchers formulated a pre (Appendix A) and post (Appendix B) online Google Forms survey for participants to complete prior to the start of the conference and at its conclusion. The pre-conference and post-conference surveys contained the same 20 four-point Likert-scale questions. The post survey also contained five open ended questions at the end of the survey. For the pre-conference survey, some of the questions included, “Please answer the following questions using the Likert scale

below: I understand the transition planning process;” and “please answer the following questions using the Likert scale below: I feel that the outside agency representative(s) present at my student's IEP meetings had knowledge of my student’s strengths and needs.” The questions were similar for both the pre- and post-surveys to determine what the participants learned as a result of attending the conference, comparing their answers.

### **Data Analysis**

Following the completion of the surveys, the data was analyzed using descriptive statistics through the Google Forms analyze results feature. By examining the Likert-scale question responses, researchers were able to identify specific areas of transition planning that participants were familiar with prior to the conference and see if they gained further understanding on the topic as a result of attending the conference sessions. Additional themes were developed and categorized based on participant responses to open ended questions in the post-survey.

### **Key Findings**

There was a total of 11 participants who completed the pre-conference survey and six participants for the post-conference survey.

The results from the pre-conference survey revealed that 100% of participants felt comfortable with teaching a student about their disability as well as their strengths and weaknesses (Table 1). 90% recognized the differences between the services available for students in K-12 settings compared to the services for students in the postsecondary setting. When considering their own education, 81% of participants felt they received adequate training in their teacher education program.

72% of participants disclosed that they could adequately prepare their students to obtain and maintain competitive employment and provide input when prior to developing a student's transition plan. 81% believed they could assist their student with accessing services in the postsecondary setting. 72% understood the role of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation in postsecondary planning for students with disabilities. 81% expressed that they could prepare and provide input to the IEP team prior to an IEP meeting with information on each of the agencies that would be attending the IEP transition planning meeting. 72% stated they felt the outside agency representatives that would attend a student's IEP meetings would be knowledgeable of the student's strengths and needs. 90% believed they could teach a student specially designed instruction as it is listed in their IEP, address parent concerns regarding postsecondary services, and help the student meet the goals that were determined in their transition plan.

Following the conference, participants filled out the post-conference survey which included many of the original questions in addition to a short-answer section. Comparing the pre-conference survey and the post-conference survey results, there was a 0-28% increase in positive scores for all 16 questions. There was no decrease in any areas in the post-conference survey. 100% of the participants were confident in transition planning after attending the conference. The questions with the biggest change were "I feel comfortable giving my input regarding a student's transition plan prior to it being developed;" "I understand the role of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation in assisting students after graduation from high school;" "I can adequately prepare a student to obtain competitive employment;" "I can adequately prepare a student to maintain competitive employment;" and "I feel that the outside

agency representative(s) present at my student's IEP meetings had knowledge of my student's strengths and needs.

Key themes from the short-answer section of the post-conference survey included the importance of "communication," how the information "helps prepare in-service teachers for the future," and that the conference was "important and highly needed." Participants felt everything shared in the conference was beneficial. In regard to areas that should be included in the training, participants shared that they would like "parent input" or "specific accommodations for behavioral concerns." For future training, participants added that they would like it to be "more interactive."

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations of this study. First, all participants were undergraduate preservice teachers at a small-sized university. Students participated in this study following one day of a conference on the topic. This study also relied on the perceptions of the effectiveness of the conference rather than a particular set of outcomes measures that more directly assess a new teachers' preparation for the field. This study also had a very small sample of respondents. There were only a few participants who chose to participate in this study. Because the sample size of the participants was so small, this research cannot be generalized to other populations of pre-service teachers. A larger sample size would have provided a deeper insight into the perceptions of pre-service teachers on the effects of the transition conference on their preparation to support students with disabilities during the transition process. Recognizing potential limitations of this work, future research will attempt to mitigate these limitations.

## **Discussion**

This transition conference had a positive impact on pre-service teacher understanding of the transition planning process as well as aided in their preparation for supporting students with disabilities as they transition out of their secondary education placement. Participants' written responses at the end of the post survey also shows the positive impact of this conference. Of the 6 participants in the post survey, 100% reported strong agreements with their understanding and skill levels in the transition planning process and supporting future students with disabilities in this educational area.

Pre-service teacher participants had the largest amount of growth in understanding of the post-secondary education and training, employment, and independent living area of the survey. This data is notable because of the unique nature of the conference in which post-secondary transition community members spoke directly to participants from their own personal experiences and knowledge. The conference speakers, who were outside resources from the traditional pre-service teacher preparation program, were pivotal components to furthering pre-service teacher understanding of this transition planning process. Through the introduction of community members who specialize in post-secondary transition planning, the conference was able to bridge gaps of knowledge in pre-service teachers' understanding to create a holistic view of this difficult process for students with disabilities.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Teacher Preparation educators should continue to provide education in

these pivotal areas of transition planning in order to better prepare future teachers for the transition planning process. As most participants found this training to be beneficial, continuing to grow pre-service teachers' understanding of transition planning may lead to increased success in this area for students with disabilities. Teacher educators should increase the amount of content embedded in pre-service teacher coursework on transition planning. Content on this topic within coursework could include case studies, access to outside agency providers and other experts in this specific area, and project-based learning on completion of transition planning documentation. One final recommendation would be to increase the variety of information in conferences like this in order to broaden the depth of student understanding on this complex topic as well as to expand the audience of potential conference attendees (and survey participants) to include in-service teachers and administrators.

## **Conclusion**

This research is one example of how to increase pre-service teachers' understanding of the special education transition process. The findings showed all participants increased their knowledge of this process with the most growth in the area of post-secondary education and training, employment, and independent living. Through the inclusion of community members with expertise in the areas mentioned above, pre-service teachers were able to make strong connections to the content and complexity of the transition planning process. We recommend using this type of training, with real-world service providers presenting actual practices from the field, in pre-service teacher preparation programs.

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## Appendix A

### Pre-Survey

1. Consent To Participate (Mark only one oval)
  - I agree to participate in this study. I understand that by providing my consent that my responses will remain confidential. (Continue to the survey)
  - I do not agree to participate in this study. (Please exit the survey).
  - Demographics
2. I am 18 years old or older (Mark only one oval)
  - Yes
  - No
3. What is your current role in the transition process for students with disabilities? (Mark only one oval)
  - Pre-service teacher (student)
  - In-service Teacher
  - Administrator
  - None of the above
4. How many years have you participated in the transition planning process? (Mark only one oval)
  - I am NOT an In-Service Teacher
  - 0-5 years
  - 6-10 years
  - 11-15 years
  - 15 years or more
5. What is your highest level of education? (Mark only one oval)
  - High school diploma
  - Associates
  - Bachelor's Degree
  - Master's Degree
  - Doctorate

### Survey Questions

6. Please answer the following questions using the Likert scale below (Mark only one oval per row):

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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1. I understand the difference between the services for a student with disabilities in the K-12 setting versus services for a student with a disability in the postsecondary setting.
2. I understand the transition planning process.
3. I feel I received adequate training in effective practices for transition in my teacher certification program.
4. I understand the role of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation in assisting students after graduation from high school.
5. I feel comfortable giving my input regarding a student's transition plan prior to it being developed.
6. I feel that I can give input at an IEP meeting regarding a student's transition plan.
7. I am comfortable that I will be able to assist my student's with accessing services in the postsecondary setting.
8. I feel that I can adequately prepare a student to meet the goals outlined in their transition plan.
9. I can teach a student about their disability.
10. I can teach a student about their strengths and weaknesses.
11. I can adequately prepare a student to obtain competitive employment.
12. I can adequately prepare a student to maintain competitive employment.
13. I can prepare the IEP team prior to the IEP meeting with information on each of the agencies that would be attending the IEP meeting.
14. I can teach a student specially designed instruction that is listed in his/her IEP
15. I feel that I am knowledgeable in addressing parent concerns regarding accessing services in the postsecondary setting.
16. I feel that the outside agency representative(s) present at my student's IEP meetings had knowledge of my student's strengths and needs.

## Appendix B

### Post-Survey

1. Consent To Participate (Mark only one oval)
  - I agree to participate in this study. I understand that by providing my consent that my responses will remain confidential. (Continue to the survey)
  - I do not agree to participate in this study. (Please exit the survey).
  - Demographics
2. I am 18 years old or older (Mark only one oval)
  - Yes
  - No
3. What is your current role in the transition process for students with disabilities? (Mark only one oval)
  - Pre-service teacher (student)
  - In-service Teacher
  - Administrator
  - None of the above
4. How many years have you participated in the transition planning process? (Mark only one oval)
  - I am NOT an In-Service Teacher
  - 0-5 years
  - 6-10 years
  - 11-15 years
  - 15 years or more
5. What is your highest level of education? (Mark only one oval)
  - High school diploma
  - Associates
  - Bachelor's Degree
  - Master's Degree
  - Doctorate

#### Survey Questions

6. Please answer the following questions using the Likert scale below (Mark only one oval per row):

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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1. I understand the difference between the services for a student with disabilities in the K-12 setting versus services for a student with a disability in the postsecondary setting.
2. I understand the transition planning process.
3. I feel I received adequate training in effective practices for transition in my teacher certification program.
4. I understand the role of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation in assisting students after graduation from high school.
5. I feel comfortable giving my input regarding a student's transition plan prior to it being developed.
6. I feel that I can give input at an IEP meeting regarding a student's transition plan.
7. I am comfortable that I will be able to assist my student's with accessing services in the postsecondary setting.
8. I feel that I can adequately prepare a student to meet the goals outlined in their transition plan.
9. I can teach a student about their disability.
10. I can teach a student about their strengths and weaknesses.
11. I can adequately prepare a student to obtain competitive employment.
12. I can adequately prepare a student to maintain competitive employment.
13. I can prepare the IEP team prior to the IEP meeting with information on each of the agencies that would be attending the IEP meeting.
14. I can teach a student specially designed instruction that is listed in his/her IEP
15. I feel that I am knowledgeable in addressing parent concerns regarding accessing services in the postsecondary setting.
16. I feel that the outside agency representative(s) present at my student's IEP meetings had knowledge of my student's strengths and needs.

#### Open-Ended Questions

17. What was the most important part of this training and why?
18. Which area of this training did you find to be the least helpful and why?
19. Are there any areas that should be included in this training?
20. How could this training improve in the future?