Parental Awareness of Transition Planning for Students with Severe Disabilities

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Abstract

Raising parents’ awareness of transition planning for students with disabilities begins from the moment their children are born. Implementing a transition plan may be simple, however issues may arise when parents or guardians lack information about transition resources available for their children after graduation. This analysis examines parents' awareness of the transition plan that is implemented in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) for students with disabilities, specifically for students with severe needs. Parents and guardians of students with severe needs were asked what they know about the transition planning process, where they received their information, and what additional information would they like to know about the transition plan. Drawing information from the questionnaire will guide researchers and educators’ understanding of where parents of Southeastern Ohio are receiving their information and what additional information could be provided, enabling them to feel more comfortable with the transition planning and processes for their children with special needs.
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Transitions are a part of each child’s life and while every transition is vital to future outcomes, transitioning from high school to adult life is a significant transition point in every individual’s life. As for students with severe disabilities, this transition is momentous. These individuals are guided through transitions with the assistance of laws that mandate services and include transition plans in their Individual Education Plans (IEP), and assistance from professionals to make the transition plan realistic, and finally executing the plan after graduation which constitutes a lifetime process.

Various factors can affect transition planning and implementation to ensure successful outcomes for individuals with severe disabilities. While transition is a lifelong process, transition planning begins when students are teenagers and provides an opportunity to implement the student’s and family’s plans for the future. Involving parents or guardians is a key factor when creating and implementing a transition plan for children with severe disabilities. While parental involvement plays a large role in any child’s life, laws are in place to offer opportunities for parents and schools to learn more about collaborative opportunities between home and school, and opportunities for parents and guardians to educate themselves about different strategies and resources. With countless resources available and provided for parents and guardians, a great deal of information can become lost in translation. Discovering where parents receive their information, what they know, and how much they know about the transition process can guide education professionals, in the intricate details of transition programming that one must communicate to the parents of students with disabilities.
Literature Review

Through the past few decades, students with special needs have received support not only for their individual rights and assistance, but also for guidance into their adulthood. Beginning in the 1970’s, laws were starting to mandate that supports must be provided for students with disabilities. Over the last 40 years, laws such as P.L 142, ADAA, and IDEIA authorize that students with disabilities must be provided supports for their daily lives, education, and also transition into adulthood. Each law is an important step in providing equal rights for individuals with disabilities and offering support systems could lead them towards a successful life. Students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) are required to have a transition plan implemented into their IEP. This mandate provides these students with support systems guiding and preparing them for life after high school. Transitioning from high school to the real world one major event that occurs through an individual’s life is transitioning. Transitioning into life after high school can be difficult. In this study I examine the importance of collaborating with parents and families, developing and implementing a transition plan and the possible opportunities post graduation.

Legal Foundations of Transition Services

The groundwork of transition planning features historic and legislative foundations. In the early years in the field of education, the government embraced institutionalization for individuals with severe disabilities, which led these individuals to fend for themselves (Mahanay-Castro, 2010). With the civil rights movement in the 1950’s, people began to recognize that individuals with disabilities had a right to equal education. These led to the birth of P.L. 92-142: The Education of all Handicapped Act of
1975 which, after several revisions through the years is now formally known as the
Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 (Mahanay-
Castro, 2010). Before P.L. 92-142 (now IDEA) in 1975, each state was entitled to address
the needs of students with disabilities as each saw fit. When IDEA was put into place, all
states were mandated to educate all students with disabilities. Beginning with the
reauthorization in 1990, transition services were required to be addressed in the student’s
Individualized Education Program (IEP) (Mahanay-Castro, 2010).

Additionally in 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed to end
discrimination against individuals with disabilities and create an equal playing field. This
civil rights act mandates protection for individuals with disabilities in public
employment, all public services, public accommodations including transportation, and
telecommunications (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010). Correlated with ADA, the
Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 forbids discrimination against individuals with
disabilities; this act provides amenities such as funding, training opportunities, integrated
employment, and post-secondary education. Section 504 of this act:

Focuses on the needs of adults and youth transitioning into employment setting
and ensures the development and implementation of a comprehensive and
coordinated program of vocational assistance for individuals with disabilities,
thereby supporting independent living and maximizing employability and
integration into the community. (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010, p. 14)

In 2001, the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act strengthened the
standards approach towards education and expanded federal responsibility. It requires
educators to increase academic learning for all students (McDonnell, & Hardman, 2010). In IDEIA 2004, transition services are now defined as:

A coordinated set of activities that are designed to be a result-oriented process focusing on the academic and functional achievement of a student with a disability to facilitate post secondary education, vocational education, integrated employment, continuing education, adult services, and community living. (Cater, Austin & Trainor, 2011, p. 233)

Transition services should purposefully guide students to achieve their career and life goals and actively participate within their community. Each transition plan must be in the IEP in place when the student turns 14 years old, and should be revisited each year to adjust to the interests, strengths and needs of the individual student (Mahanay-Castro, 2010). The IEP team should be evaluating all aspects of student development to design a plan that incorporates all necessary components for the student to succeed (Bakken & Obiakor, 2008).

Beakley, Yoder, and West state that transition planning is a process that looks at postsecondary training, employment, independent living, and community participation (2003). Services that should be included in the transition process include vocational programs, independent living, and community participation (Pierangelo & Giulian, 2004). Vocational programs assist students in the exploration of different job opportunities, and gain awareness and appreciation of different careers. In a second focus area of transition addressed in the IEP, independent living skills, students learn about social and personal relationships, parenting skills and basic finance to understand basic living expenses, banking and paying rent. A final focus area included in the IEP requires
the preparation of students for participation in the community, such as participating in activities as going to the library, movies, restaurants or other local places in their community to ensure actively involvement (Mahanay-Castro, 2010). Each of these focus areas must address the student’s actual interests and not just meet a simple “check list” (Bakken & Obiakor, 2008). Transition services are designed to provide students with practical skills guiding them towards a successful transition into adulthood.

Having legal mandates and guidelines in support of a transition planning process in students’ lives affects each individual involved in the student’s school career and life after graduation. With multiple people involved in the transition process, from planning to implementation, collaboration and communication becomes the center of keeping the process moving forward successfully.

Collaboration and Communication with Families

Communication strategies with parents. There are important and effective communication aspects to consider when teachers collaborate with parents and guardians. Having different approaches to effectively communicate is critical when collaborating with parents. While teachers should always communicate in a positive manner and problems should always be discussed with parents, school systems must determine the most effective strategies to use when communicating with parents. Communicating through email, phone, letters home, or talking in person can all be strategies used to communicate with parents and guardians. School personnel should share any new information, in addition to building a foundation with families throughout the year by asking them their preferences, sharing successes and difficulties, implementing their input, and making them feel welcome can create an open environment for collaboration
While some parents may not understand their rights and the laws, it is important that teachers build a foundation with the family by supplying them with information throughout the school year, and asking parents for input when making decisions about their child to determine their preferences (Matuszny et al., 2007).

**Communication strategies for culturally diverse families.** With the U.S. population continually growing, Matuszny, Banda, and Coleman (2007) found that “by 2020, 50% of students in the United States public schools will be representing diverse backgrounds” (p. 24). Therefore, not only should teachers become culturally observant, they need to also encourage culturally diverse parents of students with disabilities to become involved in their children’s education. Children from foster, culturally diverse, or traditional homes make collaboration between the school system and home even more important, because parents may have a lot of uncertainties about their children’s education process. Due to increases in culturally diverse families, school systems must determine strategies to effectively communicate with nonnative parents as well. The communication between native parents and nonnative parents should include many of the same strategies for providing information. Like many native parents, nonnative parents may not understand the rights and laws in their own language. It is important that teachers build a foundation with the family by supplying them with information throughout the school year, and asking parents for input when making decisions about their child to determine their preferences (Matuszny et al., 2007). It is appropriate for teachers to ask parents if they feel comfortable communicating in English, but if parents are not, teachers need to offer and make available a translator. Reading about other cultures and encouraging parents to share their own culture in the classroom, provides an
array of opportunities for teachers to learn more about families’ cultures (Al-Hasson & Gardner, 2002). When teachers encourage parents to be involved, parents can identify that the teacher recognizes and values their specific child’s needs and education preferences (Matuszny et al., 2007).

The law requires a transition plan be included in students educational plans if they have an IEP and provides opportunities for support systems surrounding them to guide them towards a successful transition into adult life after graduation. The communication and involvement of parents and families is required through this process. Since the families of students with disabilities are the ones who supporting them throughout their entire lives, their involvement in the transition planning process is critical. The family’s involvement and awareness of different opportunities for their child’s future will assist in shaping the development of an appropriate transition plan.

Development of Transition Plans

The development of a transition plan involves several important aspects and each piece is an important part of the transition process for the child’s future. Involving parents, looking at different curriculum options such as inclusion, community-based instruction, and person-center planning can guide and prepare students for life after high school. While there are different ways to improve communication and understanding between parents of children with disabilities and school systems, it depends on how the information is presented to the parents and understanding their background.

Parental involvement. As soon as children with disabilities become eligible for special education services, parents should immediately become involved with the school and build rapport with the teachers. It is important for parents to be involved in any
service the school system or teacher provides, so parents are able to gain knowledge, specifically when it comes to transition services for their child. When parents are called to meet with their child’s teacher it is important for parents to become involved with various activities the teacher and school provides.

With the required implementation of a transition plan and services there are several factors involved in making an effective transition plan. When developing a transition plan for students with disabilities, it is important to focus on the curriculum, transition plan within the IEP, create self-determination, and involve family members.

**Curriculum.** According to McDonnell and Hardman (2010), the curriculum focuses on the organization, performance, and instruction in the classroom. Most states have an approved academic content and achievement standards that focus on standards, benchmarks, and indicators. Standards pinpoint skills and a general area of knowledge the student is required to master. Benchmarks describe knowledge and skills key to a specific grade level, and indicators express the demonstration of how the student masters each specific grade level benchmark (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010). Adjusting instructional settings to improve students’ educational needs is an additional option to ensure students are experiencing a supportive environment for their transition to life after high school.

**Inclusive setting.** An inclusive classroom can improve educational benefits through support from peers, content aligned with post school outcomes and participation in content area classes (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010). It is critical for students with disabilities to spend time in the classroom and engage in activities with their typical peers to learn appropriate behavior while building friendships (Hughes, 2008). These
opportunities promote self-directed learning and improve student participation in inclusion classrooms. In addition, applying Universal Design for Learning (UDL) creates alternative ways for students to validate their understanding and skills while accessing content covered in class (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010). Each of these options allows students to engage in activities that will prepare them for post-secondary life.

**Community based instruction.** Community Based Instruction (CBI) is an instructional strategy that can be used in the classroom to assist in the transition process. This instruction is intended to promote functional skills in a natural setting after classroom instruction has taken place (Beakley, Yoder, & West, 2003). The components of this strategy include ongoing systematic instruction that takes place in the community, that increase generalization of skills in different settings, with frequent assessments that can be gathered that easily complies with state standards and federal mandates (Beakley et al., 2003). CBI helps students link what they are learning in school to what they will do post graduation, and therefore is essential to effectively prepare students for their transition form school to life after graduation (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010). This form of instruction can be easily implemented while using the regular curriculum. According to McDonnell and Hardman (2010) “research has shown that students with disabilities will frequently need to be provided with direct instruction in actual performance settings to become independent” (p. 173). When implementing instruction in a community-based setting it is important to be aware of the steps in a task that a student must properly complete. Instruction in the community should include an outline of what students are expected to correctly complete in three or more settings (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010).
The effects of CBI on students has not gone unnoticed with adult service agencies, as these agencies have seen that students exposed to CBI are more prepared to work in a competitive and supported employment setting and additionally live in a supervised or semi-independent living arrangement (Beakley et al., 2003). While the instruction may occur in a work, recreation, or leisure setting, the goals that can be accomplished through this style of instruction are important factors in educational planning. Creating a constant focus in specific areas will guide students with severe disabilities to accomplish their goals and create connections in their adult life, which is key towards planning a successful transition (Beakley et al., 2003).

**Person-centered planning.** Creating a long-term vision is another approach parents can use to become more attentive of their child’s transition process. A long-term vision is designed to express the wants, hopes, and dreams of the individual with a disability and their family. Such an approach looks at the goals students want to meet within the next 3-5 years, and connects with short-term goals. This structured process, known as person-centered planning, occurs before the annual IEP meeting. In person-centered planning, parents are given the time and guidance to reflect on the goals and dreams they have for their child, which can be empowering for parents. Teachers indicate that having a long-term goal in place provides an appropriate direction for the IEP goals and objectives which can then be regularly revised (Meadan, Shelden, Appel, & DeGrazia, 2010).

Neece, Kraemer, and Blacher (2009) report that the person-centered planning process has demonstrated value for high school-age students with developmental disabilities and has increased parental involvement in the transition process.
Implementing person-centered planning and instruction helps lay out the steps necessary to achieve a student’s vision for the future. When this action plan is done correctly, it can provide a basis for the development of the student’s transition plan in the IEP (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010). With these necessary steps to achieve a vision, communication becomes an important piece of the process.

**Communication awareness.** McDonnell, Mathot-Buckner, and Ferguson (1996) suggest that in order to meet developmental needs of high school students, programs will have to be structured towards anchored learning in real-life situations, and provide opportunities for exploration of different career and living options. One barrier to successful transition planning is a lack of communication between the school system and home, which can lead to parents not receiving enough information about their children or their transition plans. This can lead parents to feel like outsiders in their children’s schooling. In a study by Hetherington et al. (2010), parents were not involved with the transition process, and were typically not informed until their child’s senior year about the transition process. With a lack of parental knowledge about their child’s transition process, more information and guidance from teachers about necessary transition services is needed. However, providing information about transition services too late in the process becomes useless for parents leading to a lack of preparation for the future and not enough time to implement student or parental decisions (Hetherington et al., 2010).

Additionally, educators should determine the parents’ preferred method of communication to ensure effective communication (Ankeny et al., 2009).

When communicating with and providing information to parents, it is important that the material is written at an appropriate reading level. This is especially important
when teachers collaborate with culturally diverse parents. When providing information to culturally diverse parents, teachers should include written or oral material, making it easy to read with simple words and symbols, and supplying information in the parent’s native language (Al-Hasson & Gardner, 2002).

In addition to collaborative communication, teachers need to supply parents with the appropriate transition resources specific to their child. Ankeny, Wilkins, and Spain (2009) suggested one way to help parents is by “supplying families with names of individuals responsible for implementing and following up on various aspects of the transition plan” (p. 29).

Ankeny et al. (2009) conducted a research study examining mother’s experiences in transition planning for their children with disabilities. The mothers indicated the importance of identifying goals and barriers related to the child’s independence in adulthood, making the transitioning process ongoing, and the importance of communicating with and supporting mothers. The mothers’ in this study thought it was important to initiate transition early because there are so many unknowns in their children’s transition process, and that teachers’ feedback should be respectful and honest since it directly impacts their children’s future. In general, parents know their children the best, therefore it is important for teachers to respect parent’s knowledge and look into and utilize parental resources (Ankeny et al., 2009).

Discussing transition options with the student and the other individuals involved in making decisions creates a plan for the student’s future. Having future-oriented goals in place can guide the student toward a successful and supportive transition environment if there is continuous and open communication between the school and home. Without
the assistance and communication of a team, it can make it difficult to implement transition plans.

**Implementing Transition Plans**

When implementing a transition plan in the IEP, family participation and collaborative teams are key components in the process. According to IDEA, inviting the student and family to the IEP when discussing transition services is now a requirement (Mahanay-Castro, 2010). Families of students with disabilities are typically the primary source of support and students will often live with their parents after high school (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010). Organizing a collaborative team is critical in order to create efficient planning and involve individuals who take part in day-to-day responsibilities and interactions that will help implement students’ transition plans. An extended team consisting of individuals who might be participating in future transition planning should also be established (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010).

**Support team.** Having parents and numerous school professionals form a team is a positive way to begin creating a vision of the student’s IEP (Martin, 2005). Committee members are those who act on the decisions made by the group for the student’s IEP. These committee members include but are not limited to the general education teacher, special educator, speech pathologist, behavior specialist, principal, and special education coordinator (Martin, 2005). When involved in the IEP process, the general education teacher will deliver extra support for the student as well as providing needed attention. The special educator specifically works with students one-on-one and guides them towards meeting the goals the team has developed. If needed, the speech-language pathologist will assist with language components of the IEP, while the behavior specialist
designs a behavior intervention plan specifically for the individual if needed. Finally, both the principal and special education coordinator collaborate and oversee all staff that involved in meeting the student’s IEP goals and also support school efforts at home (Martin, 2005). Each professional involved in the IEP process needs to evaluate the child’s level of performance and decide if there are needs for specialized educational services. If the professionals determine there is a need for additional services, they work together to design, review, and modify the program as needed (Martin, 2005). Each committee member shares their results gathered through observations and assessments, and assists with the group decision-making process.

As part of the team, and at no additional cost, parents can be provided with a facilitator during IEP meetings. Facilitators assist with the overall organization and conduct of the meeting. While they are able to maintain order and focus throughout the meeting, they can also provide an opportunity for the parents to address any concerns they may have during the meeting rather than later during the year. It is important the facilitator is a district employee that does not know the child or family, or work with anyone directly involved in the IEP meeting. Their role is to assure each member of the IEP team is participating, vocalizing their opinion, keep the group on task, and ensure each member agrees to the goals and objectives on the IEP, which includes the transition process (Mueller, 2009).

School systems and educators need further training on effective strategies for collaborating with parents. Many parents have trouble being involved in their child’s transition planning process because of the lack of communication between school and home, teachers lack in providing resources for transition planning, the teachers’
expectations of parents, and also the teacher’s lack of knowledge about parent’s cultural backgrounds (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). Schools and educators need to focus on building relationships with parents and guardians to create a collaborative approach towards their child’s education (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). Each collaborative approach and building those relationships gradually can impact one’s future.

**Collaboration and communication.** Collaboration involves sharing information with positive and courteous regard (Palladino, 2006). Schools and educators play an important role in increasing positive school outcomes for students with disabilities. First, teachers need to initiate the majority of contact with parents. Starting communication at the beginning of the year is very important to build rapport with parents before school even begins (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). Whether that includes daily journals sent home, monthly newsletters, home visits, emails, or inviting parents to special events, it provides an open and welcoming environment for parents.

Second, parents could join support groups. In a study conducted by Hetherington and colleagues (2010), parents were encouraged to join a circle of support, enabling them to collaborate with other parents during the transition planning process. Although it was beneficial in the short-term as a support group, parents felt the circle was unable to lead them to effective transition planning. Some services may not be as effective for individual parents; therefore they should be encouraged to contact parent centers in their local school district for information. The parent center will help parents understand their rights as a parent and the rights their child has in the school system (Weinfeld & Davis, 2008).
When it comes to meeting with the school system about a child with a severe disability, parents should feel comfortable in the chosen setting and should inform the teacher of the best way to communicate with them and the best place to meet and talk. Teachers need to make the time to meet with parents to provide them with materials that are needed to positively affect their child’s transition. It is also vital for teachers to inform parents about the positive effects of parental involvement in their child’s transition process (Al-Hasson & Gardner, 2002). When arranging for services provided by the school system or community supports, parents should be encouraged to gather all the resources that they can to help guide them with their child’s transition process (Hetherington et al., 2010).

Going through the planning process for transition can be extensive and stressful process, therefore having parents involved in their children’s education and transition process can reflect their child’s success later in life. Agencies strive to include parents since having other individuals support parents throughout this process can be beneficial (Smart, 2004). Two different approaches for parents to become more aware and informed about their children’s transition process is to include a facilitator in the IEP meeting, or create a long-term vision focusing on person-centered planning for their child. Either approach would work well together, or individually.

**Post-Graduation Transition**

Essential transition factors that include home and community living, leisure and recreation, employment training and job placements, are each touched on in IEP transition planning. Each factor plays a large role towards transition to adult life and are areas that every person experiences. Generally, individuals with disabilities participate
less often than typical peers in their communities, and can experience remoteness and seclusion (Chambers, Hughes, & Carter, 2004). Examining each factor provides insights that can lead to improved outcomes for individuals with disabilities and aid in their integration.

**Independent living.** Studies from Chambers et al., (2004) indicate the primary priority parents have for their children with disabilities is to have independent and supported living. While there are steps professionals can take to guide family members when looking for community living options and identifying their desires, it is important to keep in mind the student’s ideas, values, and preferences. After creating a map of the student’s desires, it must be determined what needs to be accomplished in order to create a perfect match with the families’ values, and preferences (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010).

Post school residential alternatives range from institutionalized settings to more independent settings to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities. Before moving into a residential facility, there is a readiness approach where individuals with disabilities demonstrate specific competencies to determine the least restrictive environment for their living arrangements. Based on specific individual needs and preferences, a personal assistant service allows them to select the supports they need to live as independently as possible (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010).

To meet the desire for independent or supported living, students will need to increase time spent in the community, learning independent living skills, interacting with coworkers, and sampling jobs as they approach the end of their high school career. These opportunities can help create a match for supported employment placements that
are based on previous experiences (Hughes, 2008). Instructional approaches to support living skills include community-based instruction, inclusion settings, and instruction that is embedded through routines at home, school, and in the community (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010).

**Recreation and leisure.** Legislative acts such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) and the Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act (ADAA) have dramatically increased the range of alternative options for leisure and recreation for students with disabilities (McDonnell, Mathot-Buckner, & Ferguson, 1996). While this population is potentially at risk for declining health and obesity due to lack of leisure time, leisure and recreation transition programs can provide students with skills to help lead them to live a healthy lifestyle (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010). Observational learning, task analytic instruction with promoting strategies, and community-based instruction are forms of instructional approaches used with leisure and recreation instruction (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010).

The first instructional approach, observational learning, raises awareness of leisure and recreation. This is where individuals have an opportunity to become aware of differences between work time and leisure or recreational time. Through this instructional approach, individuals with disabilities are introduced to a wide range of leisure and recreation activities and resources to become actively involved (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010). A second instructional approach is task analytical instruction where individuals are learning skills needed to engage in a leisure activity. Individuals are taught to use different resources and skills such as social, communication, and other related independent skills to help them participate in a wide array of activities (McDonnell &
The last instructional approach involves community-based instruction, where individuals are practicing self-determination and learning how to make independent choices towards initiating leisure and recreation time (McDonnell & Hardman). While the focus of leisure education is different during middle school, high school, and transition periods, each builds upon the previous by incorporating each skill learned and applying it to daily routines (McDonnell et al., 1996).

**Employment.** The purpose of employment training is to provide instruction on work-related skills, discover students’ preferences and needs, and identify the level of support to ensure their success (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010). Vocational education classes, school jobs, or job sampling provide opportunities for students to determine their strengths. Having students take vocational education classes will guide their understanding of the significance of work and researching a variety of jobs. On a daily basis, students can perform different school jobs, which provide a basic understanding of important work-related skills. Job sampling provides an opportunities for students with disabilities to see employment options available in the community and to discover their work interests. Partnerships with businesses that are open to providing placements for students create more considerations for potential jobs (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010).

Pierangelo and Giuliani (2004) state

> Two aspects must be considered when confronted with vocational decisions—finding a job and keeping a job. The student may require little or no help with one or both aspects, or he or she may require a great deal of help. (p. 95)

When examining these two aspects, supported employment may be a potential option to assist individuals to succeed. “Supported employment focuses on a person’s abilities and
provides the supports the individual needs to be successful on a long-term basis” (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2010, p. 95).

In 2012, Ohio’s Governor, John Kasich, launched Ohio’s Employment First Initiative, where individuals with developmental disabilities are matched with available opportunities for community employment. This statewide collaboration creates pathways leading towards community employment integrating individuals with developmental disabilities to work alongside their peers, and ultimately creating more independence and personal empowerment for them. Having a statewide collaboration creates more supportive opportunities for these individuals and their families to be involved in during the transition process. With this new executive order, youth with developmental disabilities have opportunities to learn about employment options and planning while they are still in school. Upon graduation, support teams can be involved in their adult lives to understand how the individual’s abilities and interests can match different opportunities within the community work field (“Ohio Employment First,” 2013).

Cater et al. (2011) reported that in 2002, less than one quarter of adults with severe disabilities took part in supported employment while the remaining adults received services within segregated day programs and sheltered workshops. Now with the Ohio Employment First Initiative in place, these individuals are given the opportunity for supported employment matched with their abilities and interests (“Ohio Employment First,” 2013).

Job sampling helps students determine what types of jobs they enjoy and provides them with work experiences before an actual employment goal and profile have been established (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010). Having a community-based job with the
bene
fits of paid work experience is an important element for creating a positive transition for students. Having opportunities in the final two years of high school allows for the development of a variety of vital vocational skills, understanding, and ambitions that provide a strong foundation to help students bridge to future careers (Cater et al., 2011). All of this is more accessible in Ohio through the support system of Ohio’s Employment First Initiate.

Numerous options are available for life after graduation. Some post-school employment options include competitive employment, entrepreneurship, paid supported employment, and employment with the assistance of a job coach. Paid supported employment is typically in an inclusive environment for those with substantial support needs whereas, a job coach supports the employee with training, extended supports, and guidance in job development (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010). There are several ways individuals with severe disabilities can find job opportunities, now with the Ohio’s Employment First Initiative it creates more supported opportunities for these individuals. Finding the perfect residential option, a suitable employment opportunity, or even the options of postsecondary to further their education opens doors for students and their family members.

**Postsecondary education.** When exploring postsecondary education options, students who develop self-determination skills throughout their high school career experience higher success rates when moving toward postsecondary education (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010). A variety of options are available for postsecondary education that include postsecondary vocational and technical programs, junior or community colleges, four-year colleges or universities, and adult education programs.
With an array of options after graduation, it is important for students to recognize their accommodation needs, and possess self-advocacy skills in order to identify with their disability (Bakken & Obiakor, 2008). Vocational and technical programs have supports and resources similar to high schools in order for students to be successful and persist for two years in order to obtain a certificate or an associate’s degree (Bakken & Obiakor).

Junior colleges are privately supported programs leading towards a liberal arts degree while community colleges are publicly funded with no or low cost tuition but offer more programs; each leading toward a certificate or associate degree (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2004). Tailoring the educational program towards each student’s specific needs is a primary asset for these two types of colleges (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010).

An additional postsecondary educational option is a four-year college or university that leads to a bachelor’s degree or completing four years of prescribed work (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2004). Adult education is a final postsecondary education option where the courses offered are designed for home maintenance and repairs used for extra-curricular or leisure activities (Bakken & Obiakor, 2008). Each institution must ensure equal access to services, programs, or activities offered by the institution and must present reasonable accommodations so students can meet requirements for their programs of study (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010).

Social workers, school counselors, and special education teachers can assist students in understanding the application process at the university level, lead them to a contact in a disabilities service office, and advocate on students’ behalf with the disabilities office (Dente & Parkinson Coles, 2012). With multiple choices for postsecondary education options, transition supports offered during high school years
will help inform and prepare students for education after they graduate (Bakken & Obiakor, 2008).

Transitions play an important role all throughout our lives, however making the jump from high school to life after graduation can be difficult. Therefore many different supports are needed for the transition process. Mandated laws encourage the transition process to begin early with a support team highly involved in the individual student’s needs and interests to have a successful future. Family involvement creates an opportunity for collaboration between the school and understanding the student’s desires through this process. Since parents will continue to be in contact with their child post-graduation, their viewpoints are vital through the transition process. Therefore collecting data on where parents receive their information, how much they know about the process, what more they would like to know are important pieces of information that can offer researchers and instructors a better understanding of how and what to communicate to families going through the transition planning process.

**Method**

**Context**

Participants in this research study were from Southeastern Ohio. Three different parent support groups stretching over five different counties and one school designed for students with severe needs took part in contacting parents on their list serves by distributing the consent form and link to the survey. Each of these support groups were based in the state and provided resources to parents of students with disabilities. Parental support group #1 served one county while parental support group #2 served two counties and parental support group #3 also served two counties. The school designed for students
with severe disabilities serves multiple school districts but overall serves an entire county. All three-support groups contacted parents through email to send the consent form and survey link. The school used the identical message sent in email however they contacted parents about the study using letters sent home.

**Participants**

A total of four participants who were all parents of students with severe disabilities, took part in this study via an online survey. Participants were members of a larger group consisting of one specialized school, and three parent support groups that were selected by the researcher. All of the participants were Caucasian, 50% holding a bachelor’s degree and the remaining 50% with a master’s degree. Of the five possible counties that were involved in this study, the participants accounted for only three counties. Fifty percent of the participants were from the same county, while the other 50% were each from a different county. Sixty-six percent of the participants identified that they were not affiliated with any organization for their child with special needs, while 33% identified two different organizations they are affiliated with for their child with special needs.

When asked about how many children under the age of 18 were living with them, 50% participants had two children under the age of 18 and the other half had three children under the age of 18 living with them. More specifically, when asked about how many of those children had special needs, 75% of the participants had one student under the age of 18 with special needs, and the other 25% of the participants had three students under the age of 18 with special needs. Half of the participants have children with special needs that are 10 years old and younger, and the other half have children with
special needs ranging from 14-16 years old. When asked about their involvement in the transition planning process in the IEP, 33% stated they were “a little” involved with their child’s IEP and 67% are “very involved” in their child’s IEP.

**Instrumentation**

To recruit participants and maintain confidentiality, an email was sent from the researcher to each of the three parental support groups. The email contained the consent form and a link to the survey for quick access to the survey. Upon receipt of the email, each support group forwarded it to those on their list serve and copied to the researcher to confirm that it was sent out to the list serve. The researcher sent out a weekly reminder to each support group over a three-week period. The school decided the most efficient form of communication to parents would be sending the invitation to participate as a letter home. The school provided each student with a letter consisting of the consent form and link to the survey to send home with the student for the parent.

The researcher used Qualtrics, an online survey tool to collect and aggregate data from participants. Using this program the researcher was able to adjust the setting for the survey to be taken only one time by each participant. Each of the parent support groups were contacted one time each week over the three week period as a reminder to send out the email with consent letter and web link to their list serve. The specific school for children with disabilities sent a copy of the letter home with each student once a week over a three-week period. This consistency of distribution increased the reliability of distribution and participants receiving the survey.

**Procedures**
Permission was gained from the university Institutional Review Board for the use of human subjects in order to conduct this research. Participants for this study were recruited from Autism Parent Support groups and also a specific school for students with disabilities. A total of 145 families of students with severe needs were offered the opportunity to take part in this research. An email invite/consent was sent to the president of each of the parent support groups with instructions of how and when to distribute the questionnaire to their listserv. Data for this specific study was collected throughout two different trials over a three-month period. During the first trial, three autism society agencies were contacted once a week over a three-week period as a reminder to send out the questionnaire to families on their listserv. The second trial consisted of the same three autism societies and a local school specifically designed for students with severe needs.

During the second trial, the autism societies were sent an email once a week over a three-week period to remind them to send out the link to the questionnaire. Students at the school were sent home with a print out of the email each Friday over a three-week period, which contained a link for parents to type into their web browser rather than click on the link received through email.

Overall, the questions contributed gathered data regarding what parents and/or guardians of children with disabilities know, where they receive services and information from, what they currently know, what they want to know, and where they receive their information about transition plans implemented in their child’s IEP by the age of 14.

**Data Analysis**
Descriptive statistics from the online survey were calculated to determine the mean, standard deviation, mode, and median for all quantitative data. Responses to the open ended questions were analyzed for themes.

Results

The results regarding what parents know about the transition plan in the IEP, where they receive their information and what additional information would they like to know were very clear. Over half (75%) of the parents knew a little about the transition plan in the IEP while the rest (25%) had no understanding of the transition plan in the IEP. However, all participants would like to know more about the transition plan in the IEP.

Participants stated they receive their information from teachers, transition specialists, service coordinators, and/or parent support groups. The results indicate parents receive the majority of their information about transition planning from their child’s teacher (50%), however parents also receive some information from the parent support groups (16%), transition specialists (16%), or a service coordinator (16%). Over half of the parents (75%) wanted to know more about transition services in their area for their child, while only one parent (25%) did not want any additional information.

An examination of what additional information parents would like to receive, the results shows that over half (67%) identified they were uncertain about person-centered planning and would like to know more about this approach. Half of the parents also had some understanding of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and its relation to the transition plan, which left over half (75%) of the parents wanting more info about the laws relevant to transition planning.
Half (50%) of the parents identified they sometimes talk about their child’s future; the other half rarely discussed their child’s future. The results also indicate that half the parents have no tools to prepare them for the IEP and over half are not comfortable with the transition plan. However 75% of the parents identified they are highly involved with their child’s IEP.

**Discussion**

The survey results clearly showed these particular parents of children with severe disabilities do not have much understanding of the transition portion of the IEP, they receive the majority of their information about the transition plan from their child’s teacher, and they wanted more information about the transition plan in the IEP.

Parents expressed an interest in additional information on a person-centered planning approach, the ADA mandates for transition plans, transition services in their area, and implementation of transition plans in the IEP. Having parents request this much information about the transition plan indicates these parents need more support and resources to guide them towards a greater understanding of the transition planning that should be part of their child’s IEP.

In a study conducted by Ankeny, Wilkins, and Spain (2009), mothers believed it was important to begin transition early since there are many unknowns in their child’s transition process and reported they would feel more comfortable about the transition process if teachers gave feedback that is respectful and sincere since this plan impacts their child’s future. Because parents know their children the best, it is important for teachers to be respectful of parents’ knowledge, demonstrate understanding, and utilize the parents as resources. Ankeny, Wilkins, and Spain suggested that providing names of
different individuals that are a part of implementing a transition plan and others who can be involved in the support team after graduation would be one way to assist parents in being aware of different contacts and resources throughout the transition process.

These results support the idea that communication with parents is vital; as their child gets older, they are uncertain of their child’s life after high school. While parents in the current study indicated they received the majority of their information from teachers, it is clear that even teachers or other support systems are not providing enough information about transition services and planning.

In a study conducted by Hetherington and colleagues (2010), parents were encouraged to join a circle of support, enabling them to collaborate with other parents during the transition planning process. Although it was beneficial in the short-term as a support group, parents felt the circle was unable to lead them to effective transition planning. The researchers identified strategies such as building a foundation with families through the entire year, asking about their preferences, sharing success and difficulties, and implementing the parents’ input. Each of these strategies can make parents feel welcome which provides opportunities for an open environment for collaboration. Hetherington and colleagues also suggested that when arranged services are provided by the school or community, teachers should encourage parents to gather all the resources they can to guide them with their child’s transition process.

Although each of these suggestions could create an open environment for collaboration, Staples and Diliberto (2010) found that teachers lack in providing these resources to parents for transition planning. This leads to another question of whether or not teachers know what information to provide to parents. How much information is too
much, and what would the most beneficial for parents without overwhelming them and guiding them towards a general understanding of what is to come.

While we know parents want more information on the transition process, the questions remain of who should be providing that information, how much, and what specific information should be provided to parents.

**Implications for Practice**

After conducting this research about what parents know about transition planning in the IEP process, where they receive their information, and what else they would like to know, there is evidence indicating that while parents want more information, the next steps are left to those who provide the information. Since parents received the majority of their information about the transition plan from teachers, and have been found lacking, the next question that must be asked is what do teachers know about the transition plan in the IEP, and what information could/should they give parents? Should only teachers who are writing out transition plans be discussing this information with parents, or should this information be discussed in the early grades, even before the transition plan is required in the IEP? It could be that teachers do not possess a strong knowledge base of transition planning to pass along to parents, which could potentially be one reason why parents are not knowledgeable about this topic.

Further implications are for service coordinators or parental support groups. Discovering what information these individuals and groups provide and when they provide it could, again, be vital in explaining why parents do not understand the transition planning process. Service coordinators and parental support groups could use professional development opportunities to further educate themselves about the transition
plan and begin distributing this information to parents even before the transition components are required at age 14.

While teachers, service coordinators, and support groups could each be more prepared with knowledge about the transition plan and aware of what information is most beneficial for parents, parents must still be receptive of this information. Each of these groups could continuously and consistently provide information and work collaboratively with parents, however if parents are not open to the information that is being offered, then they may not benefit or fully understand the transition process.

These implications are just a few ways to improve the educational practices of educating parents of children with severe disabilities about the transition planning process in the IEP.

**Recommendations and Conclusions**

Although this sample included only four participants, a clear limitation to generalization of the findings, this resulted in a case study rather than the intended larger survey sample with more diverse responses. A larger number of participants would provide a better opportunity to determine differences between what parents know about transition planning. One way to extend the sample is by not limiting the research to parents who have children with severe needs. Opening up the study to a broader spectrum would provide more insight from parents of children with a wider range of disabilities and experiences.

To develop a deeper understanding of what parents know about the transition planning process, teachers and others involved in IEP teams should be examined to determine their level of knowledge regarding transition planning, what information they
typically provide to parents, what information they feel should be given to parents, and when. Having data on what type of information teachers and other education professionals provide to parents may provide insights into to what additional information these groups should have or need.

This study focused only on parents of children with severe needs and their understanding of the transition plan in their child’s IEP. The results show that while parents the parents in this study were highly involved in their child’s IEP process, the majority of them did not know a great deal about the transition portion of the IEP. Parents would like to have more knowledge and resources about components of the transition plan and what services and supports are available after their child graduates from high school. While parents receive most of their information from teachers, parents do not know the laws that support this transition for their child, leaving much work to be done in order to ensure the successful post-secondary transition of students with severe disabilities.
References


