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## Transition services in special education : What is working? What are the challenges? : a thesis ...

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Transition Services In Special Education: What Is Working? What Are The Challenges?

By

Sharon Duty

A Thesis Submitted In Partial Fulfillment  
of The Requirements For The Degree of  
Masters of Arts In Education

California State University Monterey Bay

The School of Professional Studies

Department of Education

May 2006

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**Action Thesis Signature Page**

TRANSITION SERVICES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: WHAT IS WORKING?

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

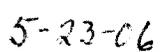
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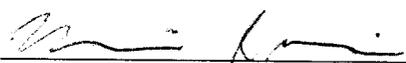
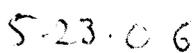
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to investigate how a district's itinerant special education vocational team, including teaching and vocational staff, can work together to better serve the transition needs of high school students with learning disabilities. The aim of transition planning is to help these students successfully access postsecondary opportunities, including jobs, vocational training, and additional education. The six participants that volunteered for this study were special education vocational teachers and staff members. Participants completed a questionnaire with six open-ended questions; took part in a semi-structured focus group interview; and provided archival data related to transition services provided for students. This investigation has provided information about how the special education vocational team views the challenges experienced in providing services; the core transition services that should be provided for students; who is responsible for providing these services; and ideas for change. Participants suggested three methods to increase communication among teachers and staff members: 1) To provide information directly to teachers, parents, and students about how to contact outside agencies and access available services; 2) To develop an online database to track transition services provided to students; and 3) To develop a consistent structured vocational curriculum that all vocational team members can implement. Outcomes of this research included: 1) Participants statements about concerns regarding the program; 2) Shared ideas about methods to improve communication among the special education vocational team; and 3) A commitment by the vocational team to work with the district's special education teachers on improving transition services.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

Adolescence, the stage between childhood and maturity, can be an unsettled time. It is also a time for developing and acquiring the skills needed for adult life. During this period social relationships gain greater importance, academic skills are developed to prepare for future education and training, and the exploration of individual interests with a focus toward planning for the future is encouraged. Our nation's youth are expected to spend much of the last four years before reaching adulthood in high school. Our high schools play a key role in helping students gain the requisite skills needed for independence and self-sufficiency.

Preparing all students for a successful transition to adult life, where they become contributing community members who acquire and maintain employment, is a primary purpose of our nation's high schools (Kelleher, 2005; Rusch & Millar, 1998). Although employment was identified as one of the most commonly accepted postschool outcomes by which school effectiveness is measured, Rusch and Millar (1998) claim, that three-fourths of high school students who enter the workforce do not have the academic and entry level skills to succeed in the workplace, and youth with disabilities have particularly poor postschool employment outcomes. Creating a system to support all students' successful transition from high school has been the subject of major education reform movements and legislation since the 1980s (Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002; Rusch & Millar, 1998).

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, was one piece of legislation that was designed to support all students in the transition processes, enabling them to

successfully enter the workplace, or access further education and training (Johnson et al., 2002; Rusch & Millar, 1998). According to Norman & Bourexis (as cited in Rusch & Millar, 1998) the law outlines basic transition program components and expected outcomes of students participating in school-to-work transition systems that (a) enable all youth to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to transition smoothly from school to work or further education, (b) prepare all youth for a first job toward a career and further education, and (c) strengthen the linkage between secondary and postsecondary education.

The transition service needs, of individuals with disabilities, were addressed in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990. As stated in IDEA, transition services are:

A coordinated set of activities...based upon the individual student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests, including instruction, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. (as cited in Janiga & Costenbader, 2002, p. 464)

In 1997 federal legislation established regulations requiring state and local education agencies specifically to address the school and post school transition service needs of students with disabilities. This legislation was in the form of an amendment to IDEA, and added the following components: (a) student involvement and progress in the general education curriculum, (b) beginning at age 14 (or younger if determined appropriate) students should be invited to participate in their Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting

if a purpose of the meeting is to consider transition needs or services, (c) by age 14 the IEP team must address the coursework the student must take to reach their post-school goals and a statement of transition needs must be included in each subsequent IEP, and (d) by the age of 16 the IEP must state what transition services are needed to help the student prepare for leaving high school and if appropriate a statement of the interagency responsibilities or any needed linkages. These student's transition service needs are addressed in the Individual Transition Plan (ITP), typically included as part of the IEP. Transition planning includes discussing and planning for areas such as the student's employment, postsecondary education (including vocational training or continued adult education), independent living, eligibility for various adult services, or community participation (Hasazi, Furney, & Destefano, 1999; Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002; National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities [NICHCY], 2002; Rusch & Chadsey, 1998). According to DeStefano, Wermouth, and Wehman (as cited in Hasazi, Furney, & DeStefano, 1999) this legislation followed at least a decade of attention to the need to develop transition policies, programs and services for youth with disabilities that would allow them to make successful transitions from school to adult life.

Transition services for students with disabilities are generally delivered and monitored by the special education teachers and vocational staff that work with these students. Transition goals and objectives are developed by the IEP team, which includes the student, their parents, their general and special education teachers, a school administrator, and others as appropriate.

Given the importance of effective transition planning to successful postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities, this study looks at the transition services/activities that are important for those students, and how the special education team can best work together to provide needed services. Learning disabled students comprise the largest group of students identified with a disability in public schools (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). For this population with average to above average intelligence (Collet-Klingenberg, 1998), the expectation is that with an appropriate high school education they can successfully transition to adult life in terms of accessing employment, vocational training, higher education, and living independently.

#### Statement of the Problem

While transition services for special education students are mandated, the research suggests that progress has been slow and inconsistent across states and school districts nationwide in implementing these policies and creating comprehensive transition services in secondary education (Johnson et al., 2002). Collet-Klingenberg (1998) talks about the importance of effective transition planning to students with learning disabilities and how longitudinal studies have demonstrated that post school outcomes are “dismal” for this group of students. Edgar (as cited in Collet-Klingenberg, 1998) states that while students with learning disabilities have the highest rate of employment for all disability groups, they are underemployed and receive lower wages when compared to the general population. Johnson et al. (2002), discuss how students dropping out of school is one of the most serious problems for special education nationally, and with the pressure of the increased academic standards and “high-stakes” testing this may become an even bigger

problem. A focus of transition planning is to help students identify a direction and meaning in their education and to encourage them to stay in school.

For the population I work with, staying in school and experiencing academic success is a major issue. I work as an itinerant special education Resource Specialist in alternative education high schools, supporting students with learning disabilities. Students attend these schools because they have had difficulties in more traditional academic settings. Some of their past problems may include: drug and gang involvement, other juvenile justice issues, truancy, lack of support in the home environment (including abuse and/or neglect), being extremely behind in credits, and teen parenting issues. Many special education students come to these programs with little hope for the present or the future. From my experience working with them I have learned first hand how important transition services can be to these students. Often, having a job while in high school or the promise of financial help and guidance for postsecondary vocational training or education is the only reason students stay in high school and work toward earning that diploma. Once they gain sight of the possibilities and options available to them, they begin to set more realistic goals, and work to determine their own path through developing self-advocacy skills and a plan to make the transition to adult living.

Some students have parents who have advocated for them, in terms of special education services, from the time they were very young. These students have been taught along the way how to advocate for themselves as well. When it comes time for transition planning and connections to the services that go with it, they benefit once again. They and their parents understand the system and how to ask for needed services they are entitled to, i.e., opportunities for subsidized employment and job shadowing while in high

school or linkages to agencies that provide funding for education and training after high school. Some of these students even go directly to a four year college, others to a two year program or vocational training. Kohler (1998) discusses how parents involved in student's education during high school tend to maintain that support as they transition to adulthood. As a special educator with years of experience, this is not always the case for students with disabilities. These students really need and will benefit from the regulations established by IDEA requiring state and local education agencies specifically to address the school and post school transition service needs of students with disabilities.

In our K-12 district with the repeated cuts in funding and the focus on standards-based academics and assessment, many of the vocationally oriented classes, available to both general and special education students, have been eliminated, and much of the vocational team in special education, have been cut as well. This itinerant vocational team consists of four Career Development Specialists, classified employees, and two Vocational Specialists, who are credentialed teachers. More is required of the remaining staff and there are fewer funds available to provide needed services. The Special Education Local Planning Area (SELPA), within our district, had a strong transition program that was growing and increasingly able to serve more students. With the cuts to the vocational staff, the SELPA is now down to one Vocational Specialist providing services to five middle schools and the other Vocational Specialist and four Career Development Specialists covering three comprehensive high schools and eight alternative programs.

In this school district, part of the special education teacher's job is to collaborate in whatever ways possible with vocational staff to help accomplish transition planning

activities and goals with students. As an itinerant Resource Specialist in small alternative programs, I visit my schools only one to two days a week to work with students on their IEP/ITP goals, and the Career Development Specialists serve these students even less frequently. An itinerant specialist such as this, working with many students in various locations makes communication among staff members difficult at best.

Since either the Resource Specialist or Career Development Specialist may provide transition services/activities for students, communication about student's needs, and what services have or have not been provided is important. Some examples of these transition services include: completion of interest inventories; interviews about previous work experience and vocational/educational plans for after high school; assistance in applying for jobs through the Workability Program or on their own (i.e., completion of paperwork); resume writing, and other career exploration activities. The itinerant nature of these special education positions and large caseloads make communication among staff difficult, especially about which activities have been completed or are expected to be completed. There is no structured method for communicating this information, or a system of timelines involved for completion. This creates possible duplication of services or activities that are overlooked. These services become even more critical as students get to their junior and senior years when connections to other agencies and supports should begin. Staff are scattered and burdened with caseloads that are too large and as a result, many of the students we serve, may not receive the transition services and the support they need.

### Purpose of the Study

Having worked in a high school for fourteen years, as well as supporting two of my own children through this system and watching them move on to college, I have come to realize that our high schools are geared to support, guide, and encourage those who do well and are motivated. Rusch & Millar (1998) report that, “Our nation’s high schools remain vested in the primary pursuit of preparing students who intend to pursue a college education” (pg. 36). Students with learning disabilities frequently struggle academically from the beginning of their school career. Their experience is often very different from nondisabled peers and they may experience academic failure and disappointment from an early age. These same students appear to have more than their share of behavioral problems in and out of school. Findings by Wagner (as cited in Collet-Klingenberg, 1998) indicate that within five years of graduation, 31% of individuals with learning disabilities had been arrested at least once. As the struggles between student, school personnel, and parents increase the students move further from the desired purpose and goals of a high school education, including graduation, job, vocational training, and college. Various studies (Adelman & Vogel, 1990; Edgar, 1987; Malcom, Polatajko, & Simons, 1990; as cited in Collet-Klingenberg, 1998) report high dropout rates for students with learning disabilities of 36%, 42%, and 56%, respectively.

It is my position that comprehensive transition planning for students with learning disabilities, the largest portion of students identified with a disability in public schools (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002), is essential to keep many of our students from dropping out and to help them successfully access postsecondary opportunities, including jobs, vocational training, and additional education. The purpose of my research was to

investigate how my district's itinerant special education staff, Resource Specialists, Career Development Specialists, and Vocational Specialists can work together to better serve the transition needs of students with learning disabilities.

### Research Questions

The research discusses the importance of effective transition planning for students with learning disabilities and the connection between students finishing high school and making a successful transition to postsecondary opportunities for employment training and higher education. The goal of this study was to work with the special education vocational team in my district to identify the transition services that are the most important to provide for students, determine who should provide the needed services and activities, and how the team can better communicate with each other about services provided. For the purpose of this research project, the central questions asked were:

- 1) What are the core transition activities/services that should be provided for learning disabled high school students?
- 2) Who is responsible for implementing each of these activities, i.e., Resource Specialist or Vocational Staff?
- 3) How can the special education vocational team better communicate with each other about activities completed, to be completed, and timelines involved?

### Definition of Terms

Individualized Education Program (IEP) – a written education plan for a child or youth with disabilities, developed by a team of professionals (teachers, therapists, etc.), the student's parents, the student, and others (as appropriate). The IEP is reviewed and

revised yearly. It describes how the student is presently doing, what the student's learning needs are, and what services the student will receive. By age 14 an Individual Transition Plan (ITP) – must be included as part of the IEP, to develop a statement of the transition service needs of the student (NICHCY, 2002).

Transition Planning/Services – in special education, when the IEP/ITP team looks at the student's transition from high school to the adult world. By the age of 14 the team must begin to look at what coursework is needed to prepare the student for post-school goals. The process includes looking at the student's "needed transition services," beginning by age 16, and planning for such areas as employment, postsecondary education and training, independent living, and community participation (NICHCY, 2002). This study focuses on transition services provided to students with learning disabilities.

Learning Disability – a disorder in one or more of the basic processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language; as a result of a learning disability, students may have an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations (NICHCY, 2002). The most common characteristic of such disabilities in children is that the children manifest an educationally significant discrepancy between their apparent capacity for learning and their actual level of functioning in the classroom. Their learning problems are not due to sensory deficits, motor impairment, mental retardation, or inadequate schooling (California Department of Education, 1994).

Itinerant special education vocational team (referred to in this study) that work directly with learning disabled students to deliver transition services include:

- 1) Special education teachers – Resource Specialists working in small, alternative education, high school programs within our district to deliver special education services according to student’s IEP’s.
- 2) Vocational Staff – Career Development Specialists (classified staff) & Vocational Specialists (certificated staff) who also work in these same programs to provide for students transition needs.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

Although transition services for special education students are mandated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990, and its amendment of 1997, according to Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, and Mack (2002), progress has been slow and inconsistent across states and school districts nationwide in implementing these policies and creating comprehensive transition services in secondary education.

Transition planning includes discussing and planning for areas such as the student's employment, postsecondary education (including vocational training or continued adult education), independent living, eligibility for various adult services, or community participation (Hasazi, Furney, & Destefano, 1999; Johnson et al., 2002; National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities [NICHCY], 2002; Rusch & Chadsey, 1998). Collet-Klingenberg (1998) writes about the importance of effective transition planning to students with learning disabilities and how longitudinal studies have demonstrated that post school outcomes are "dismal" for this group of students. I work as an itinerant special education Resource Specialist in alternative education high schools, along with the itinerant Career Development Specialists and Vocational Specialists, to support the transition needs of students with learning disabilities. The itinerant nature of these special education positions and large caseloads make communication, about which activities have been completed or are expected to be completed, difficult between staff. There is no structured method for communicating this information, or a system of timelines involved for completion. The purpose of my

research was to investigate how my district's itinerant special education team can work together to better serve the transition needs of students with learning disabilities.

While reviewing the research several factors were consistent throughout the literature with respect to the implementation of transition policies, practices, and procedures. The importance of these factors, and how they either supported or inhibited transition planning, was discussed. Four of these components of transition planning identified most frequently for positive post school outcomes were: parent and student participation in the transition planning process, teaching students self-determination and self-advocacy skills, interagency collaboration and linkages, and career exploration and preparation.

#### Parent and Student Participation

Parent and student participation in transition planning and decision making was a factor that was consistent in the literature. It seems to be one of the biggest challenges. Although parents usually attend these meetings, the importance of their role is often not understood or acknowledged. Johnson et al. (2002) report that while parent participation in developing the Individual Education Program (IEP) has been required since the inception of the Education of the Handicapped Act (PL 94-142) of 1975, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) amendments of 1990 and 1997 have also required education agencies to notify and include parents in transition planning for students, it is unclear if parents have found "meaningful" or "valued" roles in this process. Johnson et al. (2002) emphasize parent involvement in discussions of student's school and post school options as an important component leading to positive postsecondary outcomes. Strategies for parent training and outreach programs to include

parents from diverse multicultural backgrounds and those living in poverty are suggested as ways to increase parent involvement (Johnson et al., 2002). Boone (1992), Harry (1992), Sontag and Schacht (1994), and Turnbull and Turnbull (1996) (as cited in Hasazi, Furney, & Destefano, 1999) all advocated incorporating diverse family and cultural perspectives in transition planning. Too often parents sit by passively because they have difficulty understanding the language and mandates of the IEP/Individual Transition Plan (ITP) process. The real meaning of what is being discussed is not clearly explained to them. Kalyanpur and Harry (1999) cite an example of a 22-year-old Native American woman with moderate developmental delays, whose parents, on the advice of a professor from the local community college, enrolled her in a program for learning independent living skills. A course in self-advocacy was part of the program. The parents decided to pull her out of the program because, “she had learnt to talk back to them and her father did not like that” (p. 125). Had there been better communication and transition planning between staff and parents this program might have worked for the young woman. They would have had the opportunity to discuss, understand, and negotiate the differences in the goals they had for her. Rusch and Chadsey (1998) suggest that professionals need to be aware that families are deeply affected by the transitions of their children from school to adulthood and that they are dealing with transition on many levels.

It is frequently difficult to get students to attend their own IEP/ITP meetings. According to Johnson et al. (2002), although IDEA '97 regulations require that all special education students age 14 and older are to be invited to their IEP meetings when transition is being discussed, there are a significant number who are not involved.

They suggest strategies to increase student participation in IEP/ITP meetings, by supporting development of decision-making, communication and self-advocacy skills necessary to take a leadership role in these meetings. Hasazi, Furney, and Destefano (1999) discuss the success of one of the “model sites” in their study in the use of person-centered planning to increase parent/student participation in the IEP/transition planning process. They also implemented curricula designed to teach students how to lead their own IEP/transition planning meetings.

Johnson et al. (2002) contend that families need additional tools to participate in the IEP/transition planning process and suggest developing a “user friendly” guide to school and community services as a major strategy to supporting their involvement. Collet-Klingenberg (1998), in her observation of student and parent participation in this process, reports that “...they typically played a passive role, as recipients of information rather than active, contributing members of teams” (p. 5). We as educators have to find ways to help students and parents become part of that decision making team, the plans “we” devise, are, after all, for the student.

### Teaching Students Self-advocacy Skills

Teaching students self-advocacy and self-determination skills was an important theme in the transition literature. Janiga and Costenbader’s (2002) survey of college service coordinators on how well students with disabilities had been prepared by transition services they received in high school was particularly enlightening. They rated student’s preparation for self-advocacy as the greatest weakness of current transition services. They pointed out that it was important for students and parents to understand the differences in the rights of students under IDEA and Americans with Disabilities Act

(ADA) of 1990. From birth to age 21, student's educational rights are guaranteed under IDEA, and schools are mandated to provide appropriate services and accommodations. When students with disabilities enter postsecondary education, special services are governed by ADA, which guarantees that students who are otherwise qualified for enrollment, are not denied access simply because of their disability. What qualifies, at this level, as a reasonable level of accommodation is much less defined in ADA legislation and the responsibility for initiating services falls on the student not the institution. Janiga and Costenbader (2002) assert that self-advocacy requires that the student be able to function independently, and that it is the responsibility of high school transition teams to provide students with a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and the specific accommodations they will need to participate at the college level. Haszai, Furney, and Destefano (1999) also point out the importance of transition planning and related instruction in teaching self-determination and self-advocacy skills to students with disabilities. Collet-Klingenberg (1998) describes an example of how "related transition instruction" might focus on teaching skills such as problem-solving, organization, self-advocacy, and communication. Too often, our students leave high school without having developed these much needed independent living skills.

#### Interagency Collaboration and Linkages

IDEA (1997) mandates the formation of teams for individualized transition and for interagency collaboration. This interagency collaboration and the supports provided by agencies can be one of the most important factors in creating postsecondary opportunities and connections that many students otherwise might never access. One of these programs is WorkAbility. "WorkAbility itself officially began in 1982 as an

interagency agreement between three state agencies: the Employment Development Department, the State Department of Rehabilitation, and the California Department of Education” (Grady, 2004, p.1). Transition services involve: career awareness activities, pre-employment skills, work experience, connections to other agencies, etc. One of the most important services for students that WorkAbility provides is the opportunity for on-the-job experience where students are able to earn money. It appears to be the vital factor that has kept some students I have worked with, in school, and connected long enough, to take the next steps necessary to graduate, and transition to the postsecondary program that is appropriate for them.

Collet-Klingenberg’s (1998) case study provides a comprehensive example of interagency collaboration and how it works for one rural community. The school had school based as well as community based transition teams that worked together to provide transition services and linkages for students. The community based team was made up of representatives from the four area school-based transition teams and included adult service agency representatives, postsecondary educators, parents, and area business leaders. Her findings stressed the importance of communication and collaboration in this team process and the positive effect that the use of school-based and community-based transition teams had on other transition practices. In Janiga and Costenbader’s (2002) survey one of the needs identified by college coordinators of special services was for greater communication between transition team members and local college personnel to clarify the skills that students with learning disabilities need at the postsecondary level and to determine the specific services available.

Johnson et al. (2002) identified positive postsecondary employment outcomes for students with disabilities when connections are established before high school graduation with the community agencies that provide post school services. They also discussed the wide range of collaborative approaches and models used throughout the nation to improve transition services and post school outcomes for students with disabilities. Suggestions to improve collaboration at all levels were: a) Promote general education and special education collaboration, b) Establish cross-agency evaluation and accountability systems, c) Develop innovative interagency financing strategies, and d) Promote collaborative staff development programs.

The programs identified as “model sites” for transition services in Hasazi, Furney, and Destefano’s (1999) study reported positive student outcomes associated with successful interagency collaboration. The positive outcomes cited were: high percentages of students participating in employment and other community programs during high school, high rates of students participating in co-funded career assessment and development opportunities, increasing rates of concurrent enrollment in high schools and community colleges, and increasing numbers of students with disabilities being referred to and served by a variety of adult service agencies. As an implication for improving practice, they reported the importance of schools, adult service agencies, and communities frequently evaluating the degree to which interagency collaboration occurs and its effectiveness.

### Career Exploration and Preparation

Blackmon (2004) describes three essential features of career exploration and awareness: understanding the connection between school and careers; becoming familiar

with the many options in the world of work; and discovering the requirements for entry and success in specific careers. She asserts that according to the research on drop out prevention, one of the reasons students leave school is because they can not see the connection to real life. Blackmon (2004) further states that for many students, because of socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural barriers, they may not have exposure to the range of career options available to them, and for this reason, it is particularly important that they learn about the possibilities while still in high school.

In her case study, Collet-Klingenberg (1998) also identified the importance of career exploration/vocational activities. The school in this study provided a comprehensive outline of career exploration activities for grades 9-12. However, when she questioned both students and teachers about student participation in these activities there was confusion on both sides about what they had and had not completed. When asked about involvement in the work experience program or vocational classes such as carpentry she reported that student enthusiasm was much greater. Students reported that they liked the “real-life skills” and “hands-on” experiences.

An issue brought up in the readings I find troublesome is that the current general education reforms appear to be affecting transition planning and vocational programs for students with disabilities. Blackmon (2004) reports that with the “standards-based education” and “high-stakes testing” there may be no time left for transition planning in the instructional day. One is reminded that helping students identify their interests and goals may be instrumental in providing the motivation they need to remain in school. Johnson et al. (2002) addresses the challenges presented by trying to align the transition requirements of IDEA '97, that give students with disabilities greater access to the

general education curriculum and assessment systems, with state and local standards-based assessment systems that either fail to include students with disabilities or provide inadequate accommodations to support their participation. Hasazi, Furney, and Destefano (1999) report that there appears to be “emerging tensions” between standards-based reforms and reforms associated with transition and vocational education. They report that in some schools students are being asked to choose between a standards-based academic program that leads to a diploma, and a community-based program focused on employment and transition. This presents problems for students who want to focus on vocational courses and also want to earn a diploma.

### Summary

The literature identifies best practices and what is working in transition planning, for special education students with learning disabilities, as well as the challenges and what needs to be improved. Not surprisingly, some programs provide much more comprehensive transition planning than others. The size of programs, locale, student needs, and program funding all appear to factor into the inconsistencies among programs. The research identifies the key issues in implementing transition requirements of IDEA and after acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the programs studied make recommendations for improvement (Hasazi, Furney, & DeStefano, 1999; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Johnson et al., 2002).

There are four factors consistently identified in the research as important to transition planning that lead to positive post school outcomes for students with learning disabilities: a) While parent and student participation in the IEP/ITP process is mandated, it is noted that they often play a passive role. Strategies to increase parent involvement

and to help them find a meaningful and valued role in the IEP/ITP process were discussed. Strategies suggested to increase student participation included supporting development of student's communication, decision-making, and self-advocacy skills so they are better equipped to take a leadership role in these meetings; b) Teaching students self-advocacy skills was identified as important to them being able to function independently after high school. It is suggested that transition instruction might include teaching skills such as problem-solving, organization, self-advocacy, and communication; c) The importance of interagency collaboration and linkages, while students are still in high school, to positive post school outcomes are discussed in terms of postsecondary employment, participation in community, higher education, and access to adult services; d) Career exploration and awareness is cited as important to students connecting school and careers, becoming familiar with the options in the world of work, and discovering the requirements for entry and success in specific careers.

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

The focus of this study is to investigate how the itinerant special education vocational team in my school district can work together to better serve the transition needs of alternative education students with learning disabilities. Research was conducted to identify: the transition services that are the most important to provide for students, who should provide those needed services and activities, and how this vocational team can better communicate with each other about services provided.

Special education teaching and vocational staff share responsibility for completing transition activities with this group of students, however, there is not a method or structure to communicate when and what activities/services have been completed. Expectations among the vocational team are not clear especially about the major priorities and when services should be implemented. This research is to determine and prioritize the areas of transition services that need to be provided and by whom; during which year of high school these activities should take place; and how the vocational team can better communicate expectations, timelines for completion of activities, and next steps to take.

#### Setting

The population that is the subject of this study, high school students with learning disabilities, is part of a K-12 school district that lies in an agricultural area of the Central Coast of California. The ethnic makeup of this learning disabled student population is predominately Latino (69%), Caucasian (29%), and all other groups (2%).

This study was conducted in the Special Education Departmental offices within this school district. This was a convenient location because the participants' offices and the archival data reviewed were both located there. Interviews were conducted in a conference room adjacent to these offices, right after the participant's weekly staff meeting. The conference room provided a comfortable space where participants could speak with confidentiality and without interruption. Because of the time of day, a light lunch was provided.

### Research Participants

The participants who volunteered for this study were special education vocational team members that work in the same district as the researcher. We work with the same alternative, special education population and provide over-lapping transition services for these students. This team consisted of six members and all volunteered for the study. While there are four Career Development Specialists (classified staff) and two Vocational Specialists (credentialed staff) all participants provide similar transition services for students. The Career Development Specialists (CDS) are all female. One CDS has 9 years experience working in this position; one has 7 years; one 6 years; and one has 1 year experience. One of the Vocational Specialists (VS) is male and has worked in this position for 9 years; the other is female and has 11 years experience. Each of the participants completed the study questionnaire. Five staff members participated in a focus group interview and the sixth (who was unavailable at that time) was interviewed individually within the same week.

## Data Collection

Data was collected through a variety of methods. Questionnaires and interviews were used. In addition, archival data provided by the vocational team each year were used for this study.

### Questionnaires

After signing appropriate consent forms (see Appendices A and B) the six vocational team members were asked to complete anonymous questionnaires (all were completed and returned). Questionnaires were used to determine the vocational team's expectations about the importance of and priorities for transition services/activities to be provided, who should provide these services for students, timelines involved, and why these services are important. The questionnaire asked six open-ended questions and is attached in Appendix C of this study.

### Interviews

A semi-structured, focus group interview was held as a follow-up to the questionnaire. At the beginning of the interview each participant was given a copy of the questions to be asked. The researcher read a brief introduction stating the purpose of the research and how the interview would be structured. The seven open-ended group interview questions (see Appendix D) were phrased to allow staff to elaborate and provide more detailed information about their responses to the questionnaire. The importance of all group members having the opportunity to respond to the questions was emphasized. The researcher read each question and kept a check list to ensure that all participants were given the opportunity to respond. Participants responded in an informal manner, often commenting on or adding to another's response. This informal discussion helped provide a shared understanding of the questions asked. When it appeared that all

participants had finished answering a question the researcher asked if there was any further comments and re-read the question before moving on to the next question.

Five staff members attended the group interview. The sixth participant, who was unable to be there, was interviewed individually the same week. Both interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, with notes being taken as well. These tapes were used only to supplement the researcher's notes and were destroyed after all data had been collected and recorded. To maintain confidentiality, and protect the identities of the research volunteers, participants responses were coded either CDS (Career Development Specialist) or VS (Vocational Specialist) when the interview was transcribed.

#### Archival Data

The archival data used for this study was data that the vocational staff provides and submits each year for the WorkAbility I Grant that funds the program. Vocational staff collects data about which transition services are provided to special education students, how many students receive these services, and at what grade level specific services are provided. As the researcher, I reviewed the information provided for the last two years to gain an understanding of which services are expected to be provided for students, which have actually been provided, and how many students have received services. The data was then coded to compare with information already provided in the questionnaires and interviews.

#### Data Analysis

After completion of the data collection, that included questionnaires, interviews, and analysis of archival data, I used my research questions to organize the information from each source, by identifying and coding recurrent and emerging themes. I identified

areas that the vocational team found to be important and the patterns that emerged.

Questions addressed while analyzing data were: a) Do vocational team members identify similar priorities in the types of transition services provided? b) How do services tracked by the WorkAbility I Grant (from archival records) compare to services that staff provide or feel are important to provide? c) Do vocational team members feel that there is a need for greater communication among the team to improve transition services to our students? d) Have they identified any structured method for improving that communication?

Tables were used to analyze and organize the archival data and participant responses to questions from the questionnaire. Each participant identified and prioritized the transition services that they felt were important to provide for students, what year in high school these services should be provided, and whether all services were important to provide for all students. Recurrent themes that emerged from the focus group interview and questions from the questionnaire included:

- 1) Continuity and structure of the vocational program
- 2) Communication/collaboration between vocational staff members and special education teachers
- 3) Not enough time and staff to provide needed services
- 4) Large student caseloads
- 5) Inadequate office space on campuses that they serve
- 6) Lack of respect and recognition from administration and teaching staff at the schools they served

Some of the immediate outcomes that resulted from this research project were increased communication among vocational team members regarding what was working

well in the transition program, as well as individual program concerns. In addition, team members began to discuss ways to expand upon the ideas shared for improving communication between vocational and teaching staff. Finally, participants voiced a willingness to commit to working on future projects to implement the proposed methods to increase communication/collaboration among team members.

## CHAPTER IV

### Results and Discussion

For this study an action research approach was used to investigate how the itinerant special education team (Resource Specialists and vocational staff, which includes Career Development and Vocational Specialists) in my school district can collaborate to better serve the transition needs of the alternative education high school students with learning disabilities. Research was conducted to identify: the transition services that are most important to provide for students, who should provide needed services and activities, and how staff can better communicate with each other about services provided.

Special education teaching and vocational staff share responsibility for completing transition activities with this group of students, however, there is not a method or structure to communicate when and what activities/services have been completed. Expectations between staff are not clear about priorities for and timing of activities. This research was designed to determine and prioritize the areas of transition services that need to be provided and by whom; during which year of high school these activities should take place; and how staff can better communicate expectations, timelines for completion of activities, and next steps to take.

The study's research questions were used to organize data collected from each source: archival data (from the Workability I grants for 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years), questionnaires completed by participants, and a focus group interview.

Six special education vocational team members volunteered to participate in this study. Each of the participants completed the study questionnaire. Five staff members

participated in a focus group interview and the sixth (who was unavailable at that time) was interviewed individually the same week. Four of the participants are Career Development Specialists (classified staff); they are all female and have between one and nine years experience in this program. The other two participants are Vocational Specialists (certificated staff); one is female and has eleven years experience in this field and the other, a male, has worked in this position for nine years.

### Research Question I:

What Are the Core Transition Activities/Services That Should Be Provided for Learning Disabled High School Students?

### Results

#### Archival Data

The archival data reviewed for this study is reported each year, by the vocational staff, to the WorkAbility I Grant that funds their program. WorkAbility I is a “School-to-Career program for Youth with Disabilities.” Vocational staff collects data about which transition services/activities are provided to special education students, and how many students receive specific services, as well as, other demographic information as required. I reviewed the reported data for the last two years to gain an understanding of the services which have actually been provided, and how many students have received the specific services.

Three broad categories were identified for reporting: 1) A School-Based component that integrates academic and occupational learning; 2) A Work-Based component that involves worksite learning experiences or activities that connect classroom learning to work; and 3) Connecting Activities that include programs and

services that help link school and work-based educational programs. The corresponding activities for each of these categories and the number of students who participated in activities/services are listed in Table 1. Also listed are the total number of students in the WorkAbility I program for our district, the number of students whose primary disability is “Specific Learning Disability”, and number of students in paid employment. The data reported did not distinguish between disability groups when listing services/activities provided.

Of the total number of special education students reported for both years, students with specific learning disabilities comprise approximately 70% of this total. It is this student population’s transition services that are the focus of this study. Most transition services/activities listed are provided to students within the school setting by teachers, with support and collaboration from the vocational staff. This accounts for the high level of participation in certain activities, i.e., “academic skill development,” “vocational assessment,” “self-advocacy training,” etc. The high level of “parent participation” reflects the parent’s role in the student’s Individual Education Plan/Individual Transition Plan (IEP/ITP) meetings where transition planning takes place. When asked about the difference in the numbers of students participating in certain activities in the two years represented in Table 1 (i.e. self advocacy training, vocational classes, counseling and guidance, independent living skills, and partnership collaboration) the vocational staff responded that this may be due to differences in interpretation about what defines these activities. They further explained that in 2003-2004 each staff member individually recorded student data for their caseloads, whereas, in 2004-2005 one staff member was responsible for gathering and inputting this data.

Table 1

Information from WorkAbility I Baseline Reports About Participation of Special  
Education Students in Transition Activities

	<u>School Year</u>	
	<u>2003-2004</u>	<u>2004-2005</u>
Number of Special Education Students	754	741
Students with Specific Learning Disability	525	515
Number in Paid Employment	147	157
School-to-Career Activities	2003-2004	2004-2005
<b>School Based Component</b>		
Academic Skill development	752	688
SCANS Competencies Certification	8	5
Curriculum Integration of SCANS	740	736
Special Career, Vocational Assessment	730	737
Portfolio	749	628
Self Advocacy Training	730	484
Vocational Classes	728	413
Counseling and Guidance	750	433
Independent Living Skills	728	283

### Work Based Component

Career Awareness Activities	608	733
Job Shadowing	68	35
School Based Projects/Businesses	83	64
Service Learning	54	12
Internship	2	0
Apprenticeship	3	0
Community Classroom	66	85
Referral and Placement	127	99
Job Search and Retention	233	66
Mentoring	59	79
Job Coaching	89	69
Mobility Training	42	36

### Connecting Activities

Partnership Collaboration	752	50
Parent Participation	656	735

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### Questionnaire

All six participants responded to the questionnaire (Appendix C) which asked six open-ended questions. The results of questions 1-4 are reported here (the results of questions 5 and 6 are reported under research questions 2 and 3). The first question was, “What are the core transition activities/services that should be provided for learning disabled high school students?” Question two asked participants to prioritize these

activities/services listed from their response to question one. Participant responses to question one and the frequency for each response are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Core Transition Services/Activities and Corresponding Frequency Data

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School Based Component	
Portfolio Development	3
Vocational Assessment	3
Academic Skill Development	1
Self Advocacy Training	1
Vocational Classes	1
Work Based Component	
Job Search and Placement	5
Career Awareness Activities	3
Job Shadowing	2
Connecting Activities	
Linkages to community agencies/programs/businesses	3
Other Activities/Services Listed	
Goal Setting	2
Introduce Non-traditional vocations	1
Pre-vocational Services	1
Monitoring	1

---

While participants did prioritize their listed activities that should be provided for learning disabled high school students, all did so differently. Five of the six respondents listed some form of “job placement,” or work experience, as an important transition activity. Portfolio development, vocational assessment, career awareness activities, and linkages to community agencies each received three responses. Job shadowing and goal setting were listed twice.

Question three “Are these particular activities important to accomplish with all of our students? Why or why not?” referred back to participant’s responses in question one that asked which “core transition activities/services” should be provided for high school students with learning disabilities.

- All six participants responded that transition services should be available to all students, with one stating that, “We are mandated to provide appropriate transitional services to all students under an IEP.”
- Four participants went on to explain that while all students should receive services:
  - 1) “Not all activities may be appropriate or necessary for all students.”
  - 2) “Students have different needs and may not need guidance in all of the areas mentioned; i.e., some are good goal setters, some have family businesses or see themselves going into the military and may already have a vocational plan.”
  - 3) “Some services may not be of interest to students; i.e., they may be planning on going to college and not interested in vocational classes.”

- 4) “Some students may be able to accomplish activities on their own, but still should be guided.”
- The remaining two participants responded that all the transition services mentioned were important for all students. The reasons given were:
    - 1) “All were important factors for transitioning to a successful vocational career.”
    - 2) “Students need as much information as possible to make the right choices for themselves; and they should be educated about programs available for education, training, and financial planning.”

Question four asked, “When should each of these activities be carried out, i.e. freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior year?” Participant responses to this question are listed below in Table 3. Because respondents tend to refer to the same activities with different vocabulary, for consistency and ease of understanding responses are organized under the same general categories as in Table 1. It is important to note that although there are only six participants in this study, there may be more than six responses for a listed activity. Some respondents indicated that certain activities should be addressed at more than one grade level. For example, “Academic Skill Development” was indicated as appropriate for all four years, with more emphasis at the freshman and sophomore levels than for juniors and seniors. All four years were addressed for “Career Awareness Activities” as well. For “Vocational Classes,” “Job Shadowing,” “Referral and Placement,” and “Partnership Collaboration,” there were no responses for the freshman and sophomore years.

Table 3

Participant Responses: Year in School Various Transition Activities Should Occur


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	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior
<hr/>				
School Based Component				
Academic Skill Development	3	3	1	1
Special Career, Vocational Assess.	0	2	1	1
Portfolio	1	1	1	0
Self Advocacy Training	0	1	2	2
Vocational Classes	0	0	1	1
Counseling & Guidance	1	1	0	1
Work Based Component				
Career Awareness Activities	2	2	2	1
Job Shadowing	0	0	2	2
Referral and Placement	0	0	2	1
Job Search and Retention	0	1	0	1
Connecting Activities				
Partnership Collaboration	0	0	2	3

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### Focus Group Interview

Five participants attended the group interview and the sixth, who was unable to be there, was interviewed the same week. There were seven open-ended interview questions (Appendix D). The results of questions 1 and 2 are reported here (the results of interview questions 3-7 are reported under research questions 2 and 3). The first was, “What is currently working well in terms of serving our student’s transition needs?” Two recurrent themes identified from participant responses to this question were:

- 1) Continuity and structure of the vocational program; and
- 2) Communication/collaboration between vocational staff members, and special education teachers.

Continuity and structure of the vocational program were emphasized as very important, especially with all the changes in recent years; with staff reductions, increasing caseload numbers, and all staff becoming itinerant (moving between multiple sites). Three of the participants stressed the importance of their regular weekly staff meetings. One staff member commented that, “I think that weekly meetings in this crazy time, when we are all over the district, are really important to the continuity of this program.” Familiarity with the high school campuses served and special education staff at each site were reported as important factors in serving student’s transition needs as well. The vocational staff’s years of service in the field was cited as contributing to this familiarity and the program working well (five of the staff members have between 6 and 11 years experience with one having 1 year). One participant expressed, “You need a personal connection to the site,” and another responded, “Having a place (office) on each campus is important; a place where students know where to find you; having contact with

those students and being available to them.” A final factor that was stressed as important to the continuity of the vocational program was that they have begun to document the procedures and guidelines for providing transition services to students, so that new employees know where to begin. A participant reported that, “When I started here nothing was written down. There was no formal structure and the continuity was lost over time.”

The second recurrent theme from participants emphasized communication and collaboration between staff members. One responded that although the vocational staff were all itinerant, their primary offices were located within the same larger office building, giving them more access to one another which has promoted greater communication/collaboration. Two participants felt that communication/collaboration with the special education teachers at the sites they serve was one of the most important parts of their jobs. They are able to discuss daily activities of students, find out what the teachers need from them in terms of student’s transition services, i.e., job placement, vocational curriculum, interest inventories, connections to outside agencies, etc. As one participant commented, “Anytime we are at those sites and can talk to those teachers about students we both work with, it’s invaluable.”

The final response to this question came from the participant who was interviewed individually. Resources, personnel, and good funding for transition activities was cited as what was working well for serving student’s transition needs. It was also cited, “Not many districts have all three programs (WorkAbility, Transition Partnership Program, and a Postsecondary Program). Just having those three programs in place is

what is working well, irregardless of how things are being handled. If you remember at the WorkAbility conferences other districts do not have as much.”

The second focus interview question asked, “What are some of the challenges involved in providing transition services to our students?” Recurrent themes identified from participant responses to question two were: 1) Not enough time; 2) Not enough staff; 3) Student caseloads being too large; 4) Inadequate “housing” (office space) on campuses that they serve; and 5) Lack of respect and recognition.

Not enough time to do all that was required for their jobs was the most frequent participant response when asked about the challenges involved in providing transition services to students. The time factor was mentioned a total of nine times during the interview and was an expressed concern of four of the six participants. One participant commented that often they were just too busy to spend any “quality time” to meet with students individually about transition needs. Instead, at times, group presentations were held quickly with handouts for students and staff was unable to check in with individuals to make sure they understood services available to them. Another participant was concerned that vocational staff did not have the time they needed to meet with special education teachers so that they could educate them about transition services available to students. The teachers could then provide information to the groups of students that they meet with regularly. Participants agreed that cutbacks in staff, an increased student population, and a new high school site added to their caseloads, all contributed to them not having time to cover all that they needed to accomplish.

Three participants mentioned “not enough staff” as a challenge that directly led to “student caseloads being too large.” All participants were in agreement with this, citing

that currently all of the vocational staff was itinerant (covering more than one school site), thus they felt very “scattered” and not able to keep up. Previously, before cutbacks, a Career Development Specialist was assigned to each of the larger comprehensive high school sites.

These itinerant positions that all of the vocational staff now have were cited as being related to the problems with “housing” or office space. Previously, when staff members were on campus five days weekly they had their own office space where they were able to meet with students and other staff members. Now, that they are on each campus only one or two times weekly they have difficulty securing a place to meet with students. Staff and students tell them they do not know where to find them and this makes delivering services to students all the more difficult. One participant commented that, “Students ask, ‘where are you on Wednesdays?’ I don’t know where I am until about November.” Another participant stated that, “We get lost on the large campus,” and went on to explain that they are no longer visible and other staff members are unaware of what they do and the services they provide.

Four of the participants went on to explain that they viewed these “housing” issues as an example of the lack of support they felt from administration. One stated, “We are thought of as second class citizens” and the rest nodded in agreement. This brought up how the vocational staff felt a general lack of “recognition” and “respect” for the jobs they do. One participant commented about how the high school staff is unaware of what they do, “They don’t know who we are or what we’re there for. There needs to be some way to let others know of the services that we provide for our kids.” Another participant reported that recently two of the sites she serves did not notify her of “job fairs” or

“college days” that were taking place. Part of what the Career Development Specialists and Vocational Specialists do is notify and educate students about these events so that they attend and are able to take full advantage of these opportunities. Another participant cited access to students as a problem, “Sometimes I feel that access to our students is challenging. When you go to pull them out of classes some teachers won’t let them out of class. I think this is a matter of respect. When I worked as a counselor and sent for a student there was no problem getting them out of class.” One participant referred to the challenge of providing appropriate recognition for teachers and businesses that support special education students in the transition process. She commented, “Three or four years ago we used to do our formal ‘thank yous,’ our plaques, and our cups, when there was more time, staff, and money. I think that was a very important component to our program.”

## Discussion

### Archival Data

The archival data used for this research, including information from the WorkAbility I Baseline Reports, and reported in Table I provides a good over-view of the transition services expected to be available to special education high school students. Activities are categorized and labeled to enable WorkAbility I grant recipients to report and be accountable for transition services provided for students. The listed activities reflect the transition services mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 1990, and its amendment of 1997, discussed in Chapter 2. The four components of transition planning identified and discussed in the literature review as supporting

positive post school outcomes for learning disabled students (parent and student participation, self-advocacy skills, interagency collaboration and linkages, and career exploration) are transition areas that are included in and must be addressed for the annual WorkAbility I report.

It is important to note that when reviewing information reported in Table 1 many of the activities reported had much higher rates of participation for students in the school year 2003-2004 than 2004-2005. This researcher asked the participant that submitted the grant for 2004-2005 about the differences in the number of services provided to students in 2003-2004. The participant responded that in the 2003-2004 each staff member did the computer “input” for the students they worked with, where as, in 2004-2005 one person gathered the information from the others and was responsible for the data input. This participant was somewhat surprised by the results and speculated that the difference may reflect staff member’s different interpretations of the categories and where various services should be reported.

### Questionnaire

Questions one and two asked participants to list and prioritize “The core transition services that should be provided for learning disabled high school students.” The activities listed most frequently fell in the categories of “job search and placement,” “career awareness,” “linkages to other agencies,” “portfolio development,” and “vocational assessment.” Most of the learning disabled students that we work with who graduate from high school go directly to a job or a vocational training program to prepare for a job. This may account for the categories mentioned coming up most frequently. Blackmon (2004) describes career exploration and awareness as involving three things: understanding the connection between school and careers; becoming familiar with the

many options in the world of work; and discovering the requirements for entry and success in specific careers. She asserts that according to the research on drop out prevention, one of the reasons students leave school is because they can not see the connection to real life. All of these students need to develop basic academic skills to enter the world of work and live independently after high school. Students also have a high interest in working while in high school and knowing about jobs that may be available to them. Often times, job prospects and help with obtaining them are what keep many of these students from dropping out of high school. In addition Blackmon (2004) points out that for many students, because of socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural barriers, they may not have exposure to the range of career options available to them, and for this reason, it is particularly important that they learn about the possibilities while still in high school.

Question two asked participants to prioritize the activities/services listed in question one in order of importance to provide for students. While participants did prioritize listed activities, all did so differently. It appeared that the order of importance coincided with services that they provided most frequently in their specific jobs. For instance, a participant working with students transitioning from high school to job training or college listed “linkages to community agencies/programs” first. However, participants working with younger students in the classroom listed “academic skill development” or “career awareness activities” first.

While all of the activities listed by participants are reflected in the literature review as important transition activities, none of the participants listed parent participation. The importance of parent participation in student’s transition planning is cited repeatedly in the literature as important to positive postsecondary outcomes for

students (Collet-Klingenberg, 1998; Hasazi, Furney, and Destefano, 1999; Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, and Mack, 2002). One explanation that parent participation was not mentioned by participants, may be that since the cutbacks in staffing and funding, vocational staff have been unable to participate in student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings as frequently as they once did. Therefore, they do not have as much contact with parents as previously. Parent participation is, however, reported by participants in the WorkAbility I report. These numbers show that most parents do participate in student's IEP meetings, where transition plans are discussed and goals are written.

When asked in question three if the transition activities they listed previously were important to provide for all students, the six participants responded that transition services were mandated for all students with an IEP. This response reflects the literature cited in Chapter 2 and IDEA. However, they went on to explain that not all services were appropriate for all students and that students' individual needs and interests were to be considered.

For question four, when asked what year in school each of the listed activities should be carried out participant responses varied. It appears there is not a set structure or agreement for when in their high school career students receive specific services. IDEA 1997, however, does state that by age 14 the IEP team must address the coursework the student must take to reach their post-school goals and that by age 16 the IEP must state what transition services are needed to help the student prepare for leaving high school and if appropriate a statement of the interagency responsibilities or any needed linkages.

### Focus Group Interview

Participant responses to the first interview question, about what was working well in terms of serving student's transition needs, emphasized the importance of continuity and structure of the vocational program, and communication and collaboration between vocational staff members, and special education teachers. This communication between vocational staff at weekly meetings and with the special education teachers at the school sites they serve is essential to the planning and delivery of appropriate transition services to special education students. Collet-Klingenberg (1998) stressed the importance of communication and collaboration in this team process and the positive effect that the use of school-based and community-based transition teams had on other transition practices. The community based team in the study was made up of representatives from four area school-based transition teams and included adult service agency representatives, postsecondary educators, parents, and area business leaders.

Another participant reflected that what was working well to serve student's transition needs were the three programs that were in place in our district: WorkAbility; Transition Partnership Program; and a Postsecondary Program (for special education students). These programs are examples of interagency collaboration and linkages to provide transition services for students. Johnson et al. (2002) identified positive postsecondary employment outcomes for students with disabilities when connections are established before high school graduation with the community agencies that provide post school services.

In response to the second interview question, participants listed some of the challenges to providing transition services to the special education population they worked with. The challenges described; not enough time, not enough staff, large

caseloads, office space, and lack of respect/recognition, are viewed as outcomes of the repeated cuts in funding to the special education vocational department. These challenges also represent barriers to the very communication and collaboration that is so important between special education staff members to provide appropriate transition services for students.

### Research Question II:

Who is Responsible for Implementing Each of These Activities, i.e., Resource Specialist or Vocational Staff?

### Results

#### Questionnaire

Question five asked who was responsible for carrying out the transition activities/services listed in questions one through four, Resource Specialists or Vocational Staff. All six of the respondents referred to this responsibility as a team effort between resource and vocational staff, with three of the six using the terms “team” or “teamwork.” Four of the six respondents spoke directly to the importance of collaboration and communication between Resource Specialists and Vocational Staff in “planning what is appropriate for their class and students.” Two of the participants expressed that Vocational Staff should provide most of the services for students with Resource Specialists being more responsible for career awareness and pre-vocational activities. One expressed that, “Vocational Staff should make sure that students have their connections to other agencies, job training, or education before they graduate.”

### Focus Group Interview

Interview question three asked participants what transition services/activities would be helpful for the Resource Specialists (RS) to provide. Four of the participants responded directly to this question with “pre-vocational skills and career awareness activities” as important for the RS to provide. The other two participants did not respond directly to the question, but did participate in the discussion agreeing and providing input.

One participant suggested that, although it is important, RS teachers needed to concentrate less on academic achievement, and more on “real life skills.” Suggestions included, “To me the most important or helpful activities are those that take students out of the school environment, or give them experiences that help them understand how the world works. For example, have them job shadow – where they go out into the world of work and observe; have speakers come in from the human resources departments of local businesses/companies to do presentations and mock interviews with students; take students to visit appropriate agencies like ‘One Stop’ to see how it works.” Two of the participants suggested “One Stop” as an important connection for the RS to help students make. They explained that multiple agencies give presentations there, including: Employment Development Department; Department of Rehabilitation; the California Conservation Corp; and Job Corp. They continued to explain that “One Stop” has programs and technology available for students to research vocational interests and for a job search. Another participant suggested that the RS could, “Help students with what they need to be good at, for instance, being able to request needed services for themselves, and developing self-advocacy and independent living skills.”

Three of the participants suggested the importance of RS teachers incorporating career awareness activities into the daily curriculum; commenting that it needed to be

done consistently across high school sites within the district. Another participant spoke of a committee developing year-by-year vocational curriculum for special day class high school students that may also be useful for resource students. Another participant spoke to the importance of the RS helping vocational staff collect student's documentation that they need for the WorkAbility and TPP programs, and for job placement purposes. After all suggestions were discussed another participant posed the question, "How will we communicate with each other about activities that have been completed? We need a method to keep track of these things."

In response to interview question four, all six of the participants agreed that resource and vocational staff were not duplicating services, but that often times important services were missed. Both time and communication were again concerns, with one participant explaining that they were no longer able to attend as many IEP meetings so that they often missed out on the planning of transition activities and were uninformed about the decisions that were made. Another participant had a suggestion to ensure better coverage of transition services. The proposal was to provide RS teachers with an orientation that introduced them to outside agencies and their representatives. In this way when students needed specific information or services the RS could directly contact an agency to help the student access needed services without having to take the extra step of involving a member of the vocational staff.

### Discussion

#### Questionnaire

In response to question five all of the six participants referred to transition services provided to students as a "team effort" between the RS and the vocational staff.

Johnson, et al. (2002) discussed a wide range of collaborative approaches and models used throughout the nation to improve transition services and post school outcomes for students with disabilities. Participants responded that RS teachers should be responsible for more of the school based transition activities and vocational staff responsible for connections to other agencies. This can be explained in that the RS teachers spend more time in the classroom with students and the vocational staff is more often in the field and meeting with agency representatives.

### Focus Group Interview

In response to question three participants stressed the importance of pre-vocational skills and career awareness activities being incorporated into the student's high school curriculum by the RS. A study by Blackmon (2004) reports the importance of career exploration and awareness and the connection to drop out prevention. According to her research, one of the reasons students leave school is because they can not see the connection to real life. What participants have described is just that, ways to connect high school and transition curriculum/activities to meaningful "real life" experiences. Collet-Klingenberg (1998) summarizes that the success of these programs is aligned with student involvement in work experience or vocational classes that give students "real-life-skills" and "hands-on" experiences.

One participant suggested the importance of the RS teaching students self-advocacy skills that would lead to greater independence. Johnson, et al. (2002) discuss the importance of supporting development of decision-making, communication and self-advocacy skills in students to encourage greater student participation in IEP meetings.

For interview question four, participants once again cited familiar themes when responding to the question of important transition services being missed. They discussed

time as a concern in not being able to attend IEP meetings and missing out on transition planning and information for students. The result of this is that vocational staff is often uninformed and may miss providing needed activities or information. One participant suggested a solution to this problem would be to work with the RS to provide them with direct connections to any outside agencies working with the student, thus eliminating the need for vocational staff to make that connection.

### Research Question III:

#### How Can The Special Education Vocational Team Better Communicate with Each Other About Activities Completed, to be Completed, and Timelines Involved?

### Results

#### Questionnaire

Question six asked respondents for their opinion of what challenges/problems occur in regards to staff (Vocational Staff and Resource Specialists) collaborating effectively as they serve the transition needs of students. Five of the six cited finding time in schedules of teachers and vocational staff members to meet and discuss student's transition needs as a major obstacle to effective collaboration. The second most frequent response, mentioned by three of the six participants, was that there were not enough vocational staff members to cover all school sites and meet with Resource Specialists on a regular basis. Three responses mentioned the challenges of coordinating staff and student's schedules to meet as needed. Two participants responded that communication between vocational and resource staff was a challenge and went on to explain that a

shared understanding of all the aspects of vocational education, as well as the definition of “effective collaboration” was important. One respondent listed “lack of respect” under this question with no further explanation.

### Focus Group Interview

The content of group interview questions five and six so closely overlapped that during the interview, participants responded to both during the same discussion, for this reason I am combining responses to those questions. The questions asked were: 5) How can itinerant staff, Resource Specialists and vocational staff, in various locations better communicate with each other about activities completed, to be completed, and timelines involved? 6) Do you have any ideas for a method/structure that we could design to facilitate communication between itinerant resource and vocational staff? (To track services needed and provided for students)

It is important to note that the participant that was interviewed individually (because of not being available for the group interview) was not aware of suggestions made by the group, and responded to these questions differently from the rest. This participant suggested that to communicate better we must “share the knowledge,” and then cited an example of teachers having questions from parents about students working and how it might affect other benefits they received. He reported, “We brought in a benefit specialist from the Independent Living Center. She provided needed information to teachers and provided her card. A teacher then called the parent and there was the connection to the appropriate agency.” He went on to explain, “It would be way more efficient if sometime during the year the teacher gets an inservice from the representatives that deal with specific services. So when the parent asks, the teacher can provide the information or connection to who has the information, rather than calling me

each time.” An “agency day” was suggested as one way of implementing this idea, where outside agencies came and presented to teachers about services they provided. Another suggestion was that this could be an ongoing process where one agency could provide a brief presentation at each site’s monthly special education staff meeting.

In the group interview that the other five participants attended, one participant’s idea of using technology as a method to promote communication between vocational and resource staff to track and provide transition services to students generated a lot of enthusiasm. Other participants had the opportunity to provide alternative suggestions, but chose to respond and expand upon the first idea. One participant suggested, “I have a really good idea about how we can stay connected to each other and resource staff at our sites. It may already be in place with our data software that we use for the end of the year reports to the state, or we may be able to use our district’s SASI program.” She went on to explain, “We could have a vocational page on each student that listed what services were available to them and the teachers could access this information to see what we are working on with the student and incorporate information into IEP goals and curriculum as appropriate.” Another participant suggested that the RS could also provide student transition information into a program and the vocational staff could then access it to track grant information and to provide needed services to students.

Another participant pointed out that each member of the vocational staff tended to communicate with teachers according to their own style, i.e. email, visiting classes, or by phone. She then suggested, “We have different ways of trying to bridge that communication problem, but I really think that if there was one efficient system that we used throughout the district it would make everyone’s job easier.” Another participant

speculated that grant funding does not cover technology and finding a way to fund this may be a problem.

Another suggestion concerned having a consistent structured vocational curriculum that all special education teachers and vocational staff were familiar with, as opposed to each person taking a “hit-or-miss” approach and doing it their own way. This was seen as a way of opening up communication because staff would all be “on the same page.”

When presented with interview question seven “Are there any ideas from the questionnaire that you would like to expand upon?” there were a few responses. One participant responded, “What works one year doesn’t the next because needs change and the program is constantly changing to serve those needs.” Another responded to this with, “So collaboration and communication are really important because of this constant need for change and updating.” Another responded referring to the research project being conducted, “This is good. Anytime someone analyzes the situation between vocational education staff and the teacher, etc. some good comes out of it. There is a lot to fix but a lot is being changed and improved, it’s an ongoing process that personalities factor into.”

## Discussion

### Questionnaire

When participants were asked about their opinion as to the challenges of vocational and resource staff collaborating effectively, to serve students transition needs, familiar themes emerged. Once again, time was cited as a major obstacle to collaboration and communication. Time in staff schedules was discussed as well as coordinating time to meet with students because of conflicting schedules. Insufficient vocational staff was

mentioned again as a barrier to collaboration, in that there is too much to cover. A comment that I found interesting was that there needed to be a, “Shared understanding of all the aspects of vocational education as well as the definition of ‘effective collaboration’ is important”. Janiga and Costenbader (2002) discuss the need for greater communication between transition team members. In addition, promoting collaborative staff development programs is among the suggestions by Johnson et al. (2002) to improve collaboration at all levels.

### Focus Group Interview

The suggestion by one participant to introduce RS teachers to agencies, their representatives, and services was excellent and promotes much of what was reflected in the review of literature as important to providing transition services for special education students. This suggestion promotes collaboration and communication between vocational staff, RS teachers, community agencies, parents, and students. This ties into the idea of school and community based transition teams discussed in Collet-Klingenberg’s (1998) case study. The suggested model would also increase student and parent participation in the transition process, as well as providing greater awareness of available community services.

The enthusiasm expressed by participants in the group interview, about devising a method to use technology to increase collaboration and communication between resource and vocational staff, suggests their agreement in this area. This is something that RS teachers and vocational staff could work on together to save time and increase communication about serving the needs of the special education students that we work

with. The third suggestion about having a structured consistent curriculum is yet another step toward collaborating to better serve students transition needs.

#### Implications for Further Research or Related Projects

This research has provided information about how the vocational staff views the challenges faced in providing needed services, the kind of comprehensive transition program our students need, and their ideas for change. Their concerns, suggestions, and identification of important transition activities corroborate the initial thoughts of this researcher and the previous research from the review of the literature.

Participants stressed the importance of continuity and structure of the vocational program as well as communication/collaboration between vocational staff members and special education teachers. Familiar themes cited by participants, and also present in the review of literature, included: a) “teamwork” - the importance of vocational staff and resource teachers working as a team to provide transition services to students; b) connecting transition curriculum and activities to meaningful “real-life-skills” and “hands-on” experiences; c) teaching students self-advocacy skills that lead to greater independence; d) interagency collaboration and linkages; and e) career exploration and preparation.

When asked about ideas for implementation of a method or structure to facilitate communication between resource and vocational staff the participants came up with three suggestions. The first, “share the knowledge;” was an example of how to connect the teacher, parents, and student more directly with outside agencies and available services. This suggestion included opportunities for ongoing staff development and education about agencies and services available for students during regularly scheduled special

education staff meetings. This would allow teachers or parents to go directly to the source without having to contact a vocational staff member each time to act as an intermediary. This proposal is a good suggestion and appears feasible. It would require vocational and resource staff committed to working together on scheduling and making agency contacts, as well as a commitment of staff meeting time.

The second idea for a method to communicate was more complex. It involved using technology to promote communication between vocational and resource staff to track and provide transition services to students. The proposal was to devise a student data sheet that was part of an existing computer program that could be accessed by resource and vocational staff at various school sites. This suggestion generated a lot of interest and additional ideas among the participants. While it would be an effective and efficient method to communicate, implementation may be difficult. It would involve, funding; the cooperation of site administrators, technology staff, special education administrators, vocational and resource staff. This would be a worthwhile project to begin work on in the near future, with the first step being to assess the level of commitment staff members have to a “feasibility study.”

The third suggestion proposed having a consistent structured vocational curriculum that would be familiar to all special education and vocational staff. There is a committee within our special education department currently working on a similar curriculum, but for a different reason. They are designing a curriculum to help students, who can not meet new state standards for a high school diploma, to earn a certificate of completion. Our special education department is also working on implementing new IDEA requirements for IEP/ITP transition goals and assessments. These efforts will

likely result in all special education staff being required to follow a “consistent structured vocational curriculum” that participants have advocated.

The suggestions for a method that the special education teaching staff and vocational staff can devise to increase collaboration/communication about serving the transition needs of students that we have in common are excellent. Completing this research has provided me with a starting point, to go back to the vocational staff to discuss their ideas and propose a project that we can work on together to improve practice for us all.

## CHAPTER V

### Summary

The purpose of this research was to investigate how my district's itinerant special education staff, Resource Specialists, Career Development Specialists, and Vocational Specialists can work together to better serve the transition needs of students with learning disabilities. Comprehensive transition planning for students with learning disabilities, the largest portion of students identified with a disability in public schools (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002), is essential to keep many students from dropping out. The aim of transition planning is to help these students successfully access postsecondary opportunities, including jobs, vocational training, and additional education.

In the school district used in the study part of the special education teacher's job is to collaborate in whatever ways possible with vocational staff to help accomplish transition planning activities and goals with students. As an itinerant Resource Specialist in small alternative programs, I visit my schools only one to two days a week to work with students on their IEP/ITP goals, and the Career Development Specialists serve these students even less frequently. An itinerant team such as this, working with many students in various locations makes communication among staff members difficult at best.

Since either the Resource Specialist or Career Development Specialist may provide transition services/activities for students, communication about student's needs, and what services have or have not been provided is important. The itinerant nature of these special education positions and large caseloads make communication among the vocational team difficult especially with respect to the activities that have been completed or are expected to be completed. There is no structured method for communicating this

information, or a system of timelines involved for completion. This creates possible duplication of services or activities that are overlooked. These services become even more critical as students get to their junior and senior years when connections to other agencies and supports should begin. In an effort to determine how the district's itinerant special education vocational team might improve transitions services to learning disabled high school students, the research questions asked participants to: 1) identify the services that should be provided for students; 2) identify who should provide these services; and 3) describe how the vocational team might better communicate especially with respect to the services provided to students.

The participants who volunteered for this study were special education vocational team members that work in the district. We work with the same alternative, special education population and provide over-lapping transition services for these students. This staff consisted of six members and all volunteered for the study. The participants were four Career Development Specialists (classified staff) and two Vocational Specialists (credentialed staff). All participants provided similar transition services for students.

Data was collected through a variety of methods. Questionnaires and interviews were used. In addition, archival data collected by the vocational team each year were used for this study.

The procedures within the study included first obtaining signed consent forms (see Appendices A and B) from the six vocational team members. They were then asked to complete anonymous questionnaires (all were completed and returned). Questionnaires were used to determine the vocational staff's expectations about the importance of and priorities for transition services/activities to be provided, who should provide these

services for students, timelines involved, and why these services are important. The questionnaire asked six open-ended questions and is attached in Appendix C of this study.

A semi-structured, focus group interview was held in a conference room, where participants could speak with confidentiality and without interruption, as a follow-up to the questionnaire. At the beginning of the interview each participant was given a copy of the questions to be asked. The researcher read a brief introduction stating the purpose of the research and how the interview would be structured. The seven open-ended group interview questions (see Appendix D) were phrased to allow staff to elaborate and provide more detailed information about their responses to the questionnaire. The importance of all group members having the opportunity to respond to the questions was emphasized.

The final procedural step entailed the researcher analyzing the archival data. The archival data used for this study is data that the vocational team gathers and submits each year for the WorkAbility I Grant that funds the program. The information provided for the last two years was reviewed to gain an understanding of which services are expected to be provided for students, which have actually been provided, and how many students have received services.

The study's research questions were used to organize the data collected from each source: archival data (from the Workability I grants for 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years), results from questionnaires completed by participants, and the focus group interview findings.

Research question one asked: “What are the core transition activities/services that should be provided for learning disabled high school students?” Information from the archival data was reported under this question, as well as the results from the questionnaire (questions 1-4) and the focus group interview (questions 1 and 2).

The archival data used for this research and reported in Table 1, provides a good overview of the transition services expected to be available to special education high school students. Of the total number of special education students reported for both years, students with specific learning disabilities comprise approximately 70% of this total. It is this student population’s transition services that are the focus of this study. Most transition services/activities listed are provided to students within the school setting by teachers, with support and collaboration from the vocational staff. This accounts for the high level of participation in certain activities.

Questions one and two (from questionnaire) asked participants to list and prioritize “The core transition services that should be provided for learning disabled high school students.” The activities listed most frequently fell in the categories of “job search and placement,” “career awareness,” “linkages to other agencies,” “portfolio development,” and “vocational assessment.” While participants did prioritize listed activities, all did so differently. It appeared that the order of importance coincided with services that they provided most frequently in their specific jobs. When asked in question three if the transition activities they listed previously were important to provide for all students, the six participants responded that transition services were mandated for all students with an IEP. This response reflected the literature cited in Chapter II and IDEA. However, they further explained that not all services were appropriate for all students and

that student's individual needs and interests were to be considered. For question four, when asked what year in school each of the listed activities should be implemented participant responses varied. It appeared there was not a set structure or agreement for when in their high school career students should receive specific services.

Participant responses to the first focus interview question, about what was working well in terms of serving student's transition needs, emphasized the importance of continuity and structure to the vocational program, and communication between vocational staff members, and special education teachers. Another participant reflected what was working well to serve student's transition needs were the three programs that were in place in our district: WorkAbility; Transition Partnership Program; and a Postsecondary Program (for special education students). These programs are examples of the interagency collaboration and linkages that provide transition services for students. In response to the second interview question, participants listed some of the challenges to providing transition services to this special education population. The challenges described; not enough time, not enough staff, large caseloads, office space, and lack of respect/recognition, are viewed as outcomes of the repeated cuts in funding to the special education vocational department.

Research question two asked: "Who is responsible for implementing each of these activities, i.e., Resource Specialists (RS) or vocational staff?" All six participants responded that providing transition services for our students was a "team effort" to be shared between the RS and vocational staff. Responses also indicated that participants felt that it would be helpful for the RS to provide more of the pre-vocational and career

awareness services, while the vocational staff covered more of the activities related to outside agencies and linkages to the community.

Research question three asked: “How can the special education vocational team better communicate with each other about activities completed, to be completed, and timelines involved?” Participants suggested three methods to increase communication among staff members. The first involved educating teachers about outside agencies and services available to students while at the same time increasing communication between staff, these agencies, parents, and students. The second method recommended, was the use of technology to track transition services for students that both teaching and vocational staff could access. The final method suggested involved implementing a structured consistent vocational curriculum throughout the districts special education resource classes.

This research has provided information about how the vocational staff views the challenges faced in providing needed services, the kind of comprehensive transition program our students need, and their ideas for change. Their concerns, suggestions, and identification of important transition activities corroborate the initial thoughts of this researcher and the previous research. Participants stressed the importance of continuity and structure of the vocational program as well as communication between vocational staff members and special education teachers. When asked about ideas for implementation of a method or structure to facilitate communication between resource and vocational staff the participants suggested three recommendations. The first was an illustration of how to connect the teacher, parents, and student more directly with outside agencies and available services. This would allow teachers or parents to go directly to the

source without having to contact a vocational staff member each time to act as an intermediary. It would require vocational and resource staff committed to working together on scheduling and making agency contacts, as well as a commitment of staff meeting time.

The second idea for a method to communicate was more complex. It involved using technology to promote communication between vocational and resource staff to track and provide transition services to students. While it would be an effective and efficient method to communicate, implementation may be difficult. It would involve, funding; the cooperation of site administrators, technology staff, special education administrators, vocational and resource staff. This would be a worthwhile project to begin work on in the near future, with the first step being to assess the level of commitment staff members have to a “feasibility study.”

The third suggestion proposed having a consistent structured vocational curriculum that all special education and vocational staff were familiar with. There is a committee within our special education department currently working on a similar curriculum, but for a different reason. They are designing a curriculum to help students, who can not meet new state standards for a high school diploma, to earn a certificate of completion. Recently, our special education department is also working on implementing new IDEA requirements for IEP/ITP transition goals and assessments. These efforts will likely result in all special education staff being required to follow a “consistent structured vocational curriculum” that participants have advocated. At least one participant from this study is working on both of these projects.

Some of the immediate outcomes that resulted from this research project were increased communication among vocational team members concerning what was working well in the transition program, as well as individual program concerns. In addition, they “brainstormed” ways to expand upon the ideas shared for methods to improve communication between vocational and teaching staff. Finally, participants voiced a willingness to commit to working on future projects in order to implement the proposed methods to increase communication/collaboration among team members.

The implications for further research are indicated by the participant’s acknowledgment of the need for and willingness to work on methods to increase communication among the vocational team members that will enable them to better provide for students transition needs. Further research is needed to determine: 1) the willingness of the districts special education teaching staff to participate in projects designed to implement the three methods suggested by this study’s participants, 2) if the special education teachers have any additional suggestions to expand on those already offered, and 3) how suggested methods may overlap with or complement projects already in progress. Future research should also examine the costs and steps involved to implement the recommendation to use technology as a method to track student’s transition services. While this researcher and participants agree that this suggestion would be efficient and would facilitate communication among vocational team members, the costs and other considerations may prohibit implementation.

This researcher is confident of the vocational staff’s commitment to increase communication with the districts special education teachers regarding student’s transition services. The research findings have been presented to the study’s participants. Since the

commencement of this study the participants have initiated several projects: 1) a system of color-coding (by year in school) student's vocational portfolios to indicate services received or needed, 2) an investigation on the possible use of an online WorkAbility personal data page to track transition services provided to students, and to make this information accessible to team members in different locations, and 3) a plan to administer vocational interest inventories to groups of incoming freshman and to include these results in their portfolios as well as provide this information to special education teachers (case managers). In addition this researcher and the study's participants have arranged to begin meeting at the beginning of the school year to discuss plans and investigate next steps for implementing the recommendations that resulted from this study. Collaboration and communication process among special education vocational team members is crucial to the quality of transition services and this valuable process will improve the positive post secondary outcomes for our students.

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**APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX A**

Consent to Participate in Research





**APPENDIX B**

Audio/Video Consent Form



**APPENDIX C**

Questionnaire



**APPENDIX D**

Interview Questions

## Transition Services: Questions for Focus Group Interview

### Introduction:

The purpose of my research is to investigate how special education staff, Resource Specialists and vocational staff can collaborate to better serve the transition needs of our learning disabled students. This discussion is a follow-up to the questionnaires you have filled out previously, and other data that I have collected. I am going to ask a series of questions that everyone will have the opportunity to respond to. The last question will provide an opportunity for any additional information or suggestions you would like to add.

- 1) What is currently working well in terms of serving our student's transition needs?
- 2) What are some of the challenges involved in providing transition services to our students?
- 3) Which transition activities/services would be helpful for Resource Specialists to provide?
- 4) Do you feel that resource and vocational staff are duplicating any transition services provided for students? Are important services being missed?
- 5) How can itinerant staff, Resource Specialists and vocational staff, in various locations better communicate with each other about activities completed, to be completed, and timelines involved?
- 6) Do you have any ideas for a method/structure that we could design to facilitate communication between itinerant resource and vocational staff? (To track services needed and provided for students)
- 7) Are there any ideas from the questionnaire that you would like to expand upon?