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Nuehring, M.L. & Sitlington, P.L.

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Transition as a Vehicle

Moving From High School to an Adult Vocational Service Provider

Michelle L. Nuehring, *Cedar Rapids Public Schools*

Patricia L. Sitlington, *University of Northern Iowa*

This qualitative research study examines the transition of adolescents with autism from high school to adult vocational service providers. The article looks at the current, ongoing transition of a high school senior and also analyzes the transitions made by three previous graduates. In so doing, it allows for a look inside three separate vocational service providers, revealing both areas of strength in the transition process across these providers and the school and areas in need of improvement.

Transition—a simple-sounding word that encompasses complex concepts. To understand the broader context of transition, we must look beyond the professional literature and observe the process firsthand.

This study examined the transition experiences of four students with autism. Three of these individuals had made the transition from school to work, whereas the fourth was in his senior year of high school. In this article, we will examine the transition process, the key participants, and the planning tools and resources, and we will offer recommendations for improving the process. We will also examine the extent to which our experiences resonate with what has been described in the professional literature in the field.

According to the language of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 and the 1997 amendments to it, the term transition services refers to a coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability that:

- a) Is designed within an outcome-oriented process, that promotes movement from school to postsecondary education, adult services, independent living or community participation; and
- b) Is based on the individual student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests (34 C.F.R. § 300.27).

Transition includes a multifaceted look at the student and a variety of services. An ongoing process, transition allows individuals an opportunity to collaborate with community agencies and make meaningful career choices for their future. Transition planning requires an outcome-oriented approach that looks at future vocational placements, residential options, funding sources, and community resources. For the purpose of this article, we will focus on the vocational placements for students with severe disabilities, specifically, the developmental disability of autism.

Initial Question, Participants, and Site Selection

We conducted this research project on transition to better understand the complexity of the process. We wanted to see how the transition process in place was working and whether it was doing all that it could for adolescents with autism. In order to answer these questions, we chose to study transition from the standpoint of a senior in high school. We also looked at three individuals who had already graduated from high school. These students had been educated in a classroom for students with autism at Central High School, through which they each received some job training at community-based work sites before graduation. Each of these students selected a different adult vocational service provider to attend after graduation.

Data Collection and Analysis

All observations and interviews were conducted by one of the co-authors, who is also the classroom teacher at the high school where all four individuals attended. Several tape-recorded interviews were completed. These interviews contained structured, open-ended, and depth-probing questions, as recommended by a number of authors (Berg, 1995; Bogden & Biklen, 1992; Eisner & Peshkin, 1990; Glesne, 1999; Guba, 1990). The co-author spent many hours observing at each of the three vocational service providers; she also talked with the transition coordinator from each of these programs at great length. Because the high school has a large impact on transition, the co-author spoke with the work experience coordinator from Central High. To fully understand the decisions and thought processes that occurred during the transition, she also spoke with each of the student's parents. The co-author also spent time as an "observer as participant" (Glesne, 1999) in the students' high school classroom. From these interviews and observations, she transcribed the tapes, made careful notes, and wrote reminder memos.

In our analysis, we looked for themes and trends within the research. We used multiple sources, implementing what is often referred to as triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, we made comparisons from our analysis to the professional literature on transition.

Transition as a Vehicle

Transition is the process through which students leave high school and become members of an adult community. We like to consider it a "vehicle" because this process takes the student from one place and delivers him or her to another. For the rest of the article, we will take you on a journey in the vehicle of transition. (Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the confidentiality of the participants and programs.)

The Journey Begins: Joshua's Story

Joshua bounds into the school with a spring in his step and a smile for all. He chirps a cheerful "Good morning," then begins his daily routine. Joshua is a tall, dark-haired young man who always has a smile on his face. He is very social and delights in making new acquaintances. He has become an icon in the halls of Central High School. Most know Joshua, and if they do not, he will introduce himself to them before the year is through. This social butterfly is also a 21-year-old student with developmental disabilities and a secondary diagnosis of severe mental retardation. Joshua's disability has resulted in significant limitations. For example, Joshua has limited communication skills, he is very distractible, and he engages in self injurious behaviors when frustrated. Joshua is experiencing his final first day of school as a high school student. He will graduate from Central High School this year. After 5 years of high school programming, he is finally ready to begin his 6th and final year. He can officially be called a senior. Joshua does not realize the time, careful planning, prayer, preparation, and compromise that have occurred to guide his career path.

The transition process that enables this career path choice began several years ago. This same process will guide Joshua through the preparations and training needed for his upcoming vocational future. It will guide him after he has graduated from high school. The transition process is a critical career map that will keep Joshua moving in a forward direction.

What Are High Schools Doing to Prepare Students for Transition?

The goal in educating students with disabilities has to be to help them become productive members of society as adults; however, few schools have directed these students into meaningful employment opportunities that are appropriate for their strengths and achievements (Wehman & Revell, 1997). Quite often, an adult vocational service provider could assist such a student in developing his or her vocational strengths and opportunities. Before a specific service provider can be chosen, however, the high schools have to "do their job" in preparing students to become productive citizens.

According to Wehman & Revell (1997):

Transition for any student with a disability involves several key components, including: (1) an appropriate school program; (2) formalized plans involving parents and the entire array of community agencies that are responsible for providing services; and (3) multiple, quality options for gainful employment and meaningful post-school education and community living. (p. 67)

The program in place at Central High School strives to provide an optimal education for students with disabilities. We will show you what curriculum and experiences are in place in order to guarantee appropriate programming.

Five years ago, Joshua came to Central High School at the age of 15. For Joshua's first 3 years, he was integrated into high school activities as much as possible. He joined a music class, participated in an adapted physical education class with no disabled peers, and enjoyed lunch in the cafeteria every day. Within his special education classroom, Joshua was beginning to work on vocational tasks

designed to increase his time on task, promote independence at jobs, and teach general work habits. His days were very well-rounded and included integration activities, functional academics, and vocational tasks. Joshua spent most of his days within the walls of the high school.

When Joshua began his 4th of 6 years at the high school, his programming began to change. The emphasis on in-school integration was replaced by an emphasis on integration into the community. He began to explore community-based vocational work sites. These work sites were officially classified as learning experiences, not as employment, as defined by the Fair Labor Standards Act (Pumpian, Fisher, Certo, Engel, & Mautz, 1998). In Joshua's 6th and final year of high school, he is in the process of completing several jobs at community based work sites during his school week. At these sites, Joshua is exposed to various tasks in a variety of businesses. He performs jobs under the watchful eye of a job coach employed by the school district. The job coach teaches work skills to Joshua and, when necessary, assists him in completing the task. The aim of this program is to increase Joshua's independence so that ultimately he will be able to complete the job independently. This would obviously make him more employable after graduation. Research has also shown that students with developmental disabilities who had a work-study experience while in school had a significantly higher level of vocational adjustment than students who took regular academic programs that did not involve work experience (Brolin, Durand, Kromer, & Muller, 1989).

The job coach oversees the tasks and also teaches basic work habits such as punctuality and responsibility while at work. She also continues to teach a sequence of skills and activities that build upon one another, increasing in complexity and promoting mastery of basic skills. Another goal is for Joshua to develop problem-solving skills and higher-order critical thinking. This work-based learning also helps him develop and apply social skills.

Joshua also receives functional academic instruction in the classroom as it relates to transition. He is instructed in money use, knowledge of personal information, telephone usage, and survival sign recognition and application, and he is involved in continued communication activities. Along with vocational and academic instruction, Joshua performs daily living skills such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, and personal care. He also receives instruction in community awareness and access. He participates in activities such as shopping at grocery stores or the mall and going to a movie theater, bowling alley, skating rink, and public library. He also learns how to use public transportation by taking the city bus to several of these destinations.

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) Drives Transition

In determining the previously mentioned areas for instruction, Joshua's educational team met with Joshua to ascertain what skills needed to be incorporated into his school day. This team consists of Joshua, his parents, the teacher, and a school administrator from the high school. Support staff from the intermediate education unit are also on the team, and they include the work experience coordinator, a consultant, the school social worker, and a speech pathologist. Transition programs require the support and activities provided by transition teams in order to effect meaningful change (Blalock, 1996).

The approach that is used is an outcomes-based one; that is, the team looks ahead to where Joshua

is going after graduation and then outlines the services and instruction that he needs to get there. To this effect, the IEP drives Joshua's transition to life after graduation. Through assessments and analyses of existing programs in the community, the team members mutually determine that upon graduation, Joshua will be served by an adult vocational service provider in the community. This decision was made because the team feels Joshua will benefit from the ongoing support and structure that this type of provider can offer him. One of the highest priorities of the team is to find a program that can allow Joshua to maintain his high level of community-based employment. Joshua and his mother, along with the work experience coordinator and teacher, agree to tour the three programs that are available in the area.

Joshua's mother has been extremely happy with the high school program and wants an adult vocational program that provides the same kinds of training and experiences. She knows the adult service providers are primarily vocational in nature and expects to see as much on the tours. She is also concerned that the level of care that Joshua receives remain high. She indicates that she doesn't want to see him "sitting at a table, bored, or aimlessly wandering around all day without someone keeping him on task."

Joshua's teacher wants to find a place where a "best match" could be made for Joshua (Sitlington, Neubert, Begun, Lombard, & Leconte, 1996). The best match for Joshua would mean that through analysis, his strengths and weaknesses would be taken into account and then compared against the different environments. She wants his strengths and preferences taken into consideration and programmed for in such a way that he can continue to become more independent. She believes that such independence requires continuation of Joshua's community job placement. Joshua has a real talent for working with others in a competitive job in the community, and he has trained for a community job throughout his last 3 years of high school. Joshua's teacher would hate to see this training wasted. She also knows that his level of happiness would decrease if he were to be placed within a rehabilitation facility all day. Through assessment data, the team knows that Joshua thrives on social interaction that can best be achieved in the community.

Choosing the Destination-Adult Vocational Service Providers

Joshua and his mother have just begun the long journey that other students and their parents have already completed. This study looked at three other students who had chosen a destination upon graduation from high school. Each of the three chose a different adult vocational service provider. To gain insight into their choices and the programs, one of the coauthors conducted several interviews at each facility and spent approximately 10 contact hours at each location conducting observations as a participant observer (Glesne, 1999).

According to Steele, Burrows, Kiburz, and Sitlington (1990), "The facility should never be viewed or utilized as a training vehicle to teach work skills and behaviors" (p. 28). It seems, however, that all three of the rehabilitation facilities visited used this as their main goal. Steele et al. went on to say, "Usually the opposite occurs in that individuals acquire undesirable behaviors and develop few work skills that are applicable to community employment" (p. 28). A vocational program should be seen as a service that can help provide competitive employment and supported employment, as well as high-level facility-based employment. We are going to describe the three adult service providers that the three former Central High School students chose to attend after graduation: Connections, Pathways,

and Vocational, Inc.

Connections

Tom, the transition coordinator for Connections, sat in a quiet office where he answered various questions posed about the facility and the programs that are run within the system. Connections has just increased its program space and capabilities by adding another building that is aimed at serving a higher functioning population. These groups of consumers typically are individuals who live in some type of supported residential living. Along with vocational goals, they are working on increasing their social skills.

Tom stated, "Our goal is to try to have high expectations for them (consumers) and get them into some type of employment [in] the community." Currently, Connections' main service population is adults who have been institutionalized for some time, although the program gradually is serving more young adults entering directly from high school. As the students graduate, Connections looks at their needs and abilities to see what kind of vocational programming is available for each student.

Tom explained the transition process from high school to a Connections program. He said that they work with the classroom teacher "if the teacher is fired up and energetic and wants to be involved. On the other hand, sometimes it doesn't seem as if the teacher cares one way or another" He believes that for the majority of the students, the high schools are doing a great job in preparing them for their facility. He did caution, however, that the schools sometimes spend too much time on producing "letter stuffers and lettuce shredders." Tom believes that the students are not taught how to be flexible for changes in jobs. He would rather see basic work habits for example, following directions, being punctual, and being adaptable-taught to the students. Tom also believes the socialization skills are far improved from where they were 20 years ago. As he expressed it, "Special education has done so many wonderful things as far as being able to fit in with a group, being able to socialize, being able to make eye contact and communicate."

Tom was asked about the process that is in place for transitioning a student from high school graduation to work in a community placement. He responded that it is a "commonsense" type of placement. Tom noted that sometimes the schools are able to help determine appropriate placements. If Connections is unable to obtain much information on a student, the staff will place the client at a workstation and, after initial placement, move him or her around as his or her abilities allow. Connections will try jobs that require moving around the building, and if the client succeeds at these placements, eventually he or she will be placed on mobile work crews. If the individual is successful at this level, he/she will be recommended for competitive employment in a supported situation

Finally, when asked what would make the transition process easier, Tom replied:

Keep them (students) in school so you can give them a variety of vocational experiences. The funding is there at the high school-keep them there as long as you can. Also teach them to be flexible and not just focus on a specific job and saying this is what they do. More than anything, teach people that life is change. Change is the hardest thing to learn of all. The problem is if you teach them to be

an envelope stuffer and then they come here and we have to teach them about change. We have less qualifications and less money than the schools do. That isn't quite fair.

To assist in illustrating our impression of the Connections program, in the following section we will share our observations of Joe, a former student who is currently employed by Connections. For each succeeding program we discuss, we will include similar observational data on the former Central High School student employed through that program.

Joe's Story

Joe is a 19-year-old individual with autism who has been at Connections for 1 month. He has been diagnosed with a moderate mental disability. From the perspective of educators and other professionals, Joe's strengths are often diminished by his need to seek adverse attention from adults he deems to be "in charge." In other words, he has cleverly discerned that it is easier to gain attention by acting in a provocative manner to persons in positions of authority. In this regard, he is no different from many other adolescents or young adults; predictably enough, his antics create obstacles to his vocational success and future opportunities.

Within the large, yet quiet, room that is part of Connections, all of the consumers seemed actively engaged in various activities. Joe was sitting at a table with five other consumers and one supervisor. They were engaged in a social skills class that centered on dealing with one's own and others' emotions. They were looking in magazines for people who were smiling. This activity is similar to social skills classes in which Joe would have participated and that he would have enjoyed while in high school.

After his social skills instruction, where he actively participated with the other consumers, Joe transitioned to the break area, where he had a snack. Joe looked like an old pro as he moved to this area and enjoyed his treat. After his snack, he had 45 minutes to complete a task, which consisted of wiping off the table, sweeping the floor, mopping the floor, and setting the table for lunch. This daily task was one of his assigned duties. All of these jobs would be consistent with the programming he had at Central High.

Tom indicated that one of the goals of the program is to teach the consumers skills that would be applied when they move into a group home or apartment. Joe's supervisor indicated that he did a good job of completing his service job, but he did need prompts to stay on task and not wander into other areas. These skills are also similar to programming that Joe received in high school. Connections, therefore, was still teaching transition skills for the next step in Joe's life.

The building housing Connections was an open area that allowed viewing of other activities that were occurring simultaneously. In one corner, two consumers and a supervisor were making garbage bags that were to be used in residential facilities where some of the consumers lived. Next to the kitchen area, where the service jobs were occurring, five consumers and a supervisor were putting coupons into picture envelopes for a film-processing company. In another corner, there was a break area where two consumers were playing a game of cards. Other areas in the room included a nurse's office, the social skills table, and an exercise area that contained a treadmill and an exercise bike.

One of the supervisors indicated that the consumers rotated throughout the day to the different areas. Each person had an individualized schedule. Connections also had three work crews that were out on job sites. The individuals who go on these sites rotate in and out. Joe had not yet gone into the community. The supervisor anticipated that he would be placed on a work crew when he was able to stay on-task for longer periods of time.

One of the most impressive observations made while at Connections was that the consumers were always engaged in an activity. They seemed to be progressing through specified objectives and plans. Tom shared Joe's Individualized Program Plan (IPP). This document was similar to the school's IEP in that Joe's schedule was specifically designed to be consistent with the goals in his IPP. Another similarity included aspects of his vocational training, such as increasing his time on task.

Another impressive observation about Connections was the ratio of consumers to staff members. Seven staff members were assigned to 17 consumers. Each consumer was receiving the personal attention that he or she needed.

In summary, it appeared that this highly organized program implemented many of the transition activities and processes of the Central High School program. Moreover, we were favorably impressed by the varied and well-planned activities.

From here, we move to a description of the Pathways program. Our observations of Jill, the former Central High student enrolled in Pathways, will serve to depict the vocational and transition services offered through this program. As will become clear to the reader, several aspects of Pathways services were less than adequate from our perspective.

Pathways

As one enters the automatic door at the Pathways, a large sign directs visitors to the office. Once in the office, visitors sign in, listing name, purpose of visit, and contacts to see while in the building. Visitors are then given a bright orange name badge that reads "Visitor." Clearly this is not a place for casual observations.

Theresa, the transition coordinator for the facility, immediately apologized. Because this was her first year as a transition coordinator, she was afraid that she would not be able to answer all of the questions posed to her. Theresa began by stating that Pathways was a facility that concentrated on different skills for the consumers. A vocational facility, Pathways' job offerings included work involving outside contracts from businesses that are brought back to the facility for the consumers. This was the only source for consumer work within the facility. Pathways also had a few consumers involved in supported employment and some who were on regular work crews.

Pathways was organized into different sections that were labeled, and actually called, the "Red Room," the "Blue Room," and so forth. Consumers were grouped according to their functioning levels and disability labels and then placed in these various rooms. When Theresa was asked what assessments were conducted in order to accurately place students in these various groups, she

indicated that ideally she likes to see the students in the high school classroom before they graduate in order to get an idea of their skill levels and capabilities. She would prefer to make the initial visit during the student's junior year of high school.

Theresa also attends the student's senior year IEP conference where the transition to Pathways can be planned. In the past, the student has attended the facility for half days before the actual graduation and move occurs. Before a consumer officially attends the facility, a screening meeting occurs with staff from Pathways, the consumer, his or her parents, the case manager, and the classroom teacher. At this meeting, Theresa stated, the student's "capabilities, skills, behaviors, . . . aggressions" are discussed. It is then decided which section the student is best suited to attend.

Once the student is placed into a section, there is very little movement to other sections. Theresa could not recall any consumers who had been placed in another section when they became proficient at the skills in which they were currently engaged. She was also not aware of the placement issue ever being revisited after a set time period-or annually, as the school IEP had been.

Each section was assigned contractual work that was brought into the facility. These contracts were specifically assigned to a certain section. If one section's members ran out of work, they did not borrow work from somewhere else. The sections often ran out of work, and the consumers sat idle, not engaged in activities. The section labeled as the "highest functioning"-the "Purple Room"-always had the most varied and complex work, and its members were usually kept busy with contracts to finish. Most of these individuals worked independently and needed little prompting. These consumers appeared to be excellent candidates for community job placement or competitive employment instead of completing contracts within the facility, and such a move would also leave more work for individuals with more significant disabilities.

As noted previously, some sections did not have work all of the time, and many of the consumers sat idly or walked around the room. In three of the sections, Red, Green, and Yellow, the focus was not on vocational tasks. Theresa described these sections as more "recreational in nature." These consumers seemed to be the "lower functioning" individuals. One section that was of particular interest, the Blue Room, was set aside for individuals with developmental disabilities. Jill, a member of this section, graduated from Central High last year and had just completed her first year at Pathways.

Jill's Story

As one approaches the Blue Room, one notices an enclosed room with construction paper over all of the windows. A "Please Knock" sign hangs on the door. Jill is 22 years old, is nonverbal, and has severe disabilities. She communicates by using some signs that are strictly her own. While in high school, she worked independently at familiar vocational tasks, such as shredding papers, sorting colors, and stuffing envelopes. She had also worked two times a week at a used clothing shop in a no paid, community-based experience involving a job coach and one other student. At this store, she hung shirts on hangers. She was also in charge of operating the washer and dryer.

In high school, elements of structured teaching were in place in the classroom. Jill used a visual

schedule to transition through her day. She completed tasks in a top-to-bottom, left to-right fashion. Jill could stay on task at independent jobs for up to 30 minutes without requiring a break. The high school provided her with weekly community mobility trips and integration into physical education classes; she also ate lunch every day in the cafeteria with the rest of the student body. Jill was regarded as a good worker, and the employer at the clothing store enjoyed having her there each week.

In the Blue Room at Pathways, Jill was sitting at a table by herself. The only activity in which she was engaged was repetitively taking her shoes on and off. Along the perimeter of the room were cubicles composed of U-shaped room dividers and a sheet pulled across the opening. Each consumer in the Blue Room had a cubicle. In addition, a cubicle at the end of the row was used specifically for sensory experiences. This cubicle was darkened and contained various lights and vibrator devices.

Although the Blue Room had a visual schedule system for each of its consumers to use, these were not utilized during the numerous observations made at the facility. There were seven consumers and an adult who was the "sub" in the room. This sub sat behind her desk marking on white paper bags a task that appeared to be part of a contract for that section. Jill was sitting at the table in the middle of the room with a bucket of various toys and a preschool-level wooden farm yard puzzle. She was engaged in a self-stimulation activity, twirling puzzle pieces between her fingers. She was also continually taking her shoes and socks on and off at a rate of approximately three times per minute. The other consumers in the room were sitting around tables, wandering around the room, sleeping, or pushing a chair around the room; one consumer was drinking ice water. No one was working on this particular morning, and most individuals did not even have a recreational item in front of them. When one of the consumers would wander up to the sub, she would tell them, "You need to sit down." It appeared the consumers were quite bored. This nonactivity continued throughout the observation period.

As one of the co-authors was conducting the observations, another adult entered the room. She was the area supervisor who originally transitioned Jill to the facility and helped to decide that the Blue Room was the appropriate placement. She began asking questions of the co-author (Jill's former teacher) about Jill. These questions were asked in front of Jill, discussing her as if she were not in the room. The questions ranged from basic brainstorming questions ("How can we keep her shoes on?") to whether Jill had ever been taken for a walk while in high school. Apparently during the whole year in which Jill had been at this facility, they had never taken her out of the Blue Room.

Consumers in the Blue Room used a bathroom housed within their room; the group ate lunch in this same room, although Pathways did have a cafeteria. When asked why they ate in the room, Kay, the supervisor, told me, "Consumers like this cannot handle the unstructured nature of the cafeteria." The consumers also completed all of their vocational and recreational activities within the walls of this room. Once the consumers entered in the morning, they literally did not see outside their room until they went home at night. This area had no windows to the outside, and as noted earlier, the only windows to the inside were covered with construction paper.

By all accounts, the Blue Room was supposedly a wonderful, cutting-edge program. A nearby well-known university had trained the staff in this room in structured teaching methods. By word of mouth, this program was highly recommended as "the place to go" for persons with developmental

disabilities. Once you were allowed in the private room, however, it became evident that the quality of the program was in name only.

It appeared that Jill had regressed immensely since her graduation from high school 1 year ago. At that time, she had several work skills, all of which were highlighted during her transition. Were these forgotten by the Pathways staff or were they simply ignored? If the staff at Pathways truly did not know the extent of Jill's abilities, why wasn't an assessment of her skills completed? It seems as if the school has failed Jill. Obviously, the transition was not as complete as the IEP team would have hoped, because much of the information regarding her previous knowledge and milestones did not seem to have been disseminated to the staff at Pathways. This example made us realize that another major role of the transition team has to be advocating for the student. Some type of follow-through should also be completed to make sure we are best meeting the needs of the student.

In summary, there was a lack of continuity with the high school program, community placement of individuals with disabilities was not a priority, and there was a definite lack of meaningful work. In addition, there was no evidence of an assessment process for the consumers. From our perspective, Pathways provided a glorified adult daycare service under the pretense of a vocational program.

We will now describe the third adult vocational service provider that is an employment option for Joshua-Vocational, Inc. A former Central High student, Chad, is an employee of Vocational, Inc. Our observations will serve to depict the vocational and transition services offered in this program.

Vocational, Inc.

Vocational, Inc., is a well-known adult vocational service provider with a number of separate sites. The company has its own retail stores, can recycling operation, contract area, and donation sorting area. All of these constitute employment opportunities for consumers. In addition, Vocational, Inc., employs persons with and without disabilities. Some of the individuals who do not have disabilities are hired as job coaches within the facility; others are hired to complete a certain job, as they would be hired to do in any other place of employment.

Vocational, Inc., offers a range of in-house work as well as supported employment, competitive employment, workplace evaluations, and case management services. The transition coordinator, Christine, outlined the services that Vocational, Inc., provides while detailing how each service was accessed.

The transition process begins with a referral from the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Vocational Rehabilitation serves as a time-limited funding source for most of the consumers who utilize the services. After the time-limited funding expires, the consumer's program is funded by the county. Once referred, the consumer goes through a multi week work evaluation program composed of multiple assessments that measure the consumer's strengths and weaknesses across several environments. Christine described it as, "kind of like a work crew that they would do at school. We would try the stores, housecleaning, janitorial, contracts, containers, the can line-all the different things we would do here."

The assessments look at basic work skills, including items such as on-task behavior and punctuality, as well as other areas needed for employment, such as appearance and manners. Vocational, Inc., uses a checklist that focuses on approximately 10 different behaviors. Based on this checklist, the transition coordinator writes recommendations for the consumer. If the individual has not had much experience, the next step the coordinator would recommend would be a work adjustment training period.

Work adjustment training is another multi week period where the consumer is working at the facility and polishing his or her work readiness skills. At this time, job coaches might be working with the consumer to train the individual in some specific areas where he or she needs remediation. This is also a good time for the consumer and Vocational, Inc., to begin the process leading to supported employment in the community for the individual. If the consumer is ready for out-of-facility employment, Vocational, Inc., would assist him or her in creating a resume and selecting a job that is a good match. The criteria for matching a consumer to a job are the consumer's interests and formally assessed skill levels. Initially, all consumers who go out into the community are supported by a job coach. This support continues as long as the consumer has a need for it.

After the work adjustment period is completed, Vocational, Inc., provides a recommendation for the client. A consumer plan, similar to the IEP that the education system utilizes, is devised. This plan details vocational goals for the consumer for the following year and drives the vocational program for him or her. If the consumer is not ready for community placement or supported employment, he or she will be assigned a job within Vocational, Inc.'s facilities. Each consumer's progress is closely monitored, and his or her goals are updated on a regular basis. The goal of the program is to assist the consumer in obtaining community employment as soon as he or she is ready. Clearly, Vocational, Inc., wants the consumers to find meaningful employment that matches their interests and skill levels.

I asked Christine how well she felt the high school programs were preparing the students who were coming to work. She replied, "I think a lot of students come in with office/ clerical skills and have some basic skills in that area. It's not always the best because there aren't always jobs out there in that. Actually, there are very few jobs in that field." She added that one of the areas for which she would like high schools to prepare the students would be service-oriented types of jobs, particularly positions involving retail store skills. The retail area was where she felt more jobs were available.

When asked what she believed would improve the transition from high school to their facility, Christine stated that "communicating with the parents" was a big area that sometimes did not get enough attention. She wanted to see the high schools introduce the parents to Vocational Rehabilitation, Vocational, Inc., and other vocational service providers, as well as all of the available residential options. In her opinion, this process needed to begin earlier than the student's junior or senior year because by that time, "The parents get so much information and are so overloaded." We believe she made a good point.

Christine also believed that students would greatly benefit from preparation regarding employers' expectations in terms of work habits. For instance, they should learn the importance of taking responsibility for calling in if they were unable to be at work. She believed that these major work habits and ethics were missing from the students' skills. She felt that too often, students with disabilities are excessively sheltered and are not compelled to take responsibility for their own

actions. Responsibility is key to obtaining and maintaining employment.

Road Advisory Report

Throughout the previous sections, the reader has had the opportunity to see an in-depth view of three different adult vocational service providers and the stories of three consumers. All three of these consumers had graduated from the same program at the same high school. Given that each student had the same education, one might think their transitions and employment might resemble one another. This was not the case, however.

Chad's Story

As one enters the large warehouse room, one quickly gets the impression that everyone is focused on the business at hand. Each person is engaged in some task. Twelve consumers are sitting at various stations, diligently peeling tape off of plastic bags or using a razor blade to cut labels off the bags. A radio plays softly in the background; the mood is set for a very comfortable work environment. This scenario is similar to what may be seen at some of the various factories around the area. One supervisor and one trainer wander among the consumers, monitoring the quality and pace of their work. In the middle of this area, Chad is working steadily. His smile and facial expression show pleasant concentration.

This was Chad's third year at Vocational, Inc. At Central High, he was always regarded as a good worker. He had always worked well independently, but occasionally he had some problems with social skills and working with others. Chad split his days between this contract area and a custodial area. In the custodial area, he worked with Rusty, the janitor, and cleaned parts of the facility. The supervisor said that Chad was working very well and his productivity was high. In addition, he was talking to others much more than in the past.

At 10:00 A.M., Chad and all of the other consumers got up and went into the break room. Chad sat quietly and drank a soda during his 15-minute break. He seemed at ease with the other consumers. The room looked like any other break room: There were vending machines in the corner and a newspaper and magazines to read. Time passed quickly, and the consumers filed out of the room and punched the time clock in order to begin working again. Chad followed suit and was quickly back on task with his plastic bags.

After lunch, Chad began his custodial duties for the day. Rusty said that in the afternoon, Chad cleaned the cafeteria, wiped off tables, filled napkin holders, cleaned bathrooms, and emptied garbage. In the beginning of Chad's training, they gave him a flip chart to show how to complete each task, but he did not need this tool anymore. Rusty noted, however, that it was very hard for Chad to change routines.

After graduation, it took some time for Chad to adjust to his new environment. The transition was difficult, requiring a lot of one-on-one sessions to calm Chad and teach him to complete different jobs. Rusty wanted Chad to work at a community job site, such as a hotel. Vocational, Inc., was ready to make this placement for Chad; however, Chad's parents were apprehensive regarding such a

placement, because they feared going through yet another transition.

Vocational, Inc., was run like a business. It was very efficient, with a clear chain of command. The supervisor made the comment that they never ran out of work; therefore, all consumers could be steadily employed without "down time." Chad was still smiling as he completed his work. Although the transition had been difficult for Chad, it appeared that a very favorable match had been made. He was engaged in meaningful work and, above all, was happy.

What Went Well

There were several positive aspects of the transition process between the high school and the adult vocational service providers. One of the most positive things was the choices that the students with disabilities had. Throughout this article, we described three adult service providers that worked to meet the employment needs of adults with disabilities. In many locales, this variety of choice would not be available. All three providers served an important role in the community, as they were filling a desperate need.

Each of the programs employed a transition specialist whose job was to help adolescents and young adults with disabilities, their families, and the school staff sort through all of the necessary procedures and make good employment matches. This specialist was a vital link in the process. He or she disseminates program information and helps educate persons with disabilities, their families, and others about the upcoming changes that will be made in the students' lives. This was evident in the specialists' participation in Agency Nights, which described their services; it was also evident in the specialists' participation in the local education agencies' transition meetings. These individuals were willing to talk about their respective programs and give tours upon request.

High schools would benefit from a strong relationship with the transition specialists. Working relationships between the schools and adult service agencies are at the heart of effective transition planning (Wehman, 2001). To ensure a successful transition, the specialists and the high school teachers need to work together (Steele et al., 1990). Although each of the transition specialists encouraged such a relationship, it was seen only on a limited basis in this study.

Another positive aspect of one of the vocational facilities Vocational, Inc.-was the use of assessment when matching the consumer to prospective jobs. These assessments took the form of behavior observations, situational assessments, an analysis of background information. The assessment data was used in determining what jobs consumers could do well, for which jobs they needed assistance and training, what work habits needed further development, what their interests were and what the next placement should be.

This use of assessment data has been recommended by experts in the field of transition (Sitlington, Neubert, & I conte, 1997; Thurlow & Elliott, 1998). It is also in compliance with the law (Baer, 2001; McDonnell, Mathot-Buckner, & Ferguson, 1996). The 1997 amendments to IDEA require that transition services and planning be based on the student's needs, preferences, and interests. Although not bound by this amendment, Vocational, Inc.'s use of assessment in transition is a perfect example of best practice.

What Needs Improvement

Although the transition process from high school to the adult vocational service providers had many positive aspects, there still is room for improvement. Based on current research and our observations and interviews, we chose four areas in which improvement would make the transition process stronger. Those areas are as follows:

1. More education for high school teachers (regarding the transition process) and for the staff of the adult vocational service providers (regarding characteristics of individual disability areas);
2. inclusion of assessment in the transition process;
3. increased communication among the individual, his or her family, the school, and the adult provider; and
4. aligned programming between the school and the adult provider.

Increased Education. As the turnover in special education teachers has increased, it has become apparent that all too often new teachers are assuming roles in different positions. Upon assuming these roles, the teachers find themselves in classrooms where they are unfamiliar with all the procedures. Teachers in high school classrooms where there are students with disabilities must acquaint themselves with the transition process and transition planning for their students (McDonnell, Wilcox, & Hardman, 1991; Sitlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000).

Transition planning serves several important functions:

- introduces the family to the adult service system;
- determines support required by the student to live, work, and recreate in the community as an adult;
- identifies adult service system gaps and inadequacies, enabling transition team members to advocate for more appropriate services;
- provides information to adult service providers about individual needs so that these providers will not assume all people with disabilities have identical needs when planning services and implementing programs; and
- provides information critical to determining appropriate IEP goals. Through the IEP, parents

and educators can target which skills need development in order to ensure a smooth transition (Indiana Resource Center for Autism, 1996).

According to this list, the teacher needs to know about available adult service providers and what

services each provider offers. He or she needs to know the contact persons or transition specialists at each agency and must also be able to relay this information to parents and students. The teacher must develop a timeline for the transition process and identify what steps need to be followed in order to ensure success.

In many cases, a work experience coordinator employed by either the school district or the intermediate unit can be a wonderful resource regarding available services, whom to contact, and when to contact them. Because these coordinators often are extremely busy with large caseloads, it is still in the teacher's (and ultimately the student's) best interest for the teacher to fully acquaint him- or herself with this information. In order for this to happen, the teacher must make an effort to tour the provider's facility, talk with the staff, and become familiar with the provider.

On the other hand, the staff of the adult service providers need to be better educated, in particular regarding the individual student. Frequently when a student has been transitioned into the program, the provider has tried to assimilate him or her into its routines without looking at the individual's background. Because these young people are in formalized programming for many years, the various agencies should look into their backgrounds and consult with them, their families, and the teachers to learn what has and has not been successful for a particular individual. This is not the time to "reinvent the wheel." Assessment data collected throughout the transition process should be used.

Such assessment data include analysis of background information (Sitlington et al., 1996). At Pathways, Jill's background information was grossly ignored and simply not wanted. Pathways' staff wanted to get to know Jill "on their own." This resulted in a severe regression in skills from where Jill had been in her high school programming. An analysis of her background information could have prevented this regression.

Staff members of the adult service providers should make an effort to be better educated about the different disability characteristics of their consumers. Although Vocational, Inc., and Connections ran non categorical programs where the consumers were not separated by disabilities, the staff members should still be aware of specific needs that must be met due to the particular individual's disabilities. Similarly, at Pathways, which ran categorical programs, staff members should be continually trained in the disability areas in order to best work with the consumers. Although staff at Pathways had extensive preliminary training, there had been no further training. In addition, it appeared that Pathways' staff did not recognize that the provider cannot offer a "cookie cutter" program where the same strategies and accommodations are applied to all of their consumers.

Specifically, individuals with autism may need specialized programming in vocational areas and transition that addresses communication needs, comprehension deficits, socialization deficiencies, responses to sensory stimulation, and ability to handle change (Simpson & Zions, 2000; Smith, Belcher, & Juhrs, 1995). Staff of adult providers would enhance the transition process by increasing their knowledge of specific disabilities. This knowledge would help them to develop programs that meet the needs of the consumers.

Assessment in Transition

"As individuals with disabilities make the transition from school to adult life, the process of assessment is critical in all areas and stages of planning. Assessment in career development, vocational decision making, and transition planning is an essential process that is often overlooked, ignored, or misunderstood" (Sitlington et al., 1997, p. 69). While the student is in high school, various assessments need to occur in order to best plan for his or her future (Flexer & Luft, 2001; Flexer, Simmons, Luft, & Baer, 2001). Transition assessment focuses on the student's current and future roles as a worker, lifelong learner, family member, community citizen, and participant in social and interpersonal networks (Sitlington et al., 1996). Assessment must occur in the high school, and decisions about the student's future should be based on the resulting data. Assessment can assist in determining a student's interests, strengths, areas for improvement, future placements, and areas for future programming (Flexer & Luft, 2001; Sitlington et al., 2000).

Assessment can be conducted by different methods, including analysis of background information, interviews, psychometric tests, work samples, curriculum-based assessment, behavioral observations, and situational assessments (Sitlington et al., 2000). Once the individual has been assessed, the environment should also be assessed. The environmental assessment should include an analysis of the living environment, a job analysis, a program analysis, and an analysis of resources in the target environment. The next step is to compare the individual and environmental data to see if there is a "match." Once a match is determined, the transition process can continue with the appropriate vocational service provider (Sitlington et al., 1996).

This method of assessment should also be conducted by the adult vocational service provider (Flexer & Luft, 2001). Vocational, Inc., has had great success by completing work evaluations and work adjustments to determine how it can best serve the consumer. Assessment would also be beneficial at Connections and Pathways. Theresa at Pathways noted that such ongoing assessment did not occur in that particular program. Once a consumer was placed into one of the categorical rooms, there was no established method for movement into other sections. In addition, different jobs and work assignments were based on the category of the room and not on the individual abilities of the consumer. Similarly, only certain categories of consumers were allowed to complete supported employment in the community, and this community placement was determined by the room category on the consumer's characteristics.

Increased Communication

When asked what would make the transition process smoother, Christine of Vocational, Inc., easily cited communication as the most essential component of the process. This communication needs to occur among the student, his or her family, the school, and the future vocational facility. Unfortunately, is not commencing soon enough or occurring consistently enough in many transitions (Wehman, 2001).

According to the 1997 amendments to IDEA, transition planning needs to begin by the time the person is 14. Its purpose should be to develop a course of study. Including the student and the family this early in the process offers them time to adjust to the idea of transition and to obtain enough education and information about future changes to make informed decisions (Neubert, 2000). Beginning discussions of future vocational placements early and making the student and his or her family the main focus of these discussions lays the groundwork for future meetings on transition.

During the student's junior year, it is appropriate to bring in staff members from the adult vocational service provider. This linkage should be created only after the student and family have had time to visit a number of programs and to select and thoroughly examine the program that they believe to be the best match for them. Bringing in the transition specialist at this time in the student's high school career allows enough time for him or her to get to know the student and for the student to feel comfortable about the upcoming transition. It also helps to put parents at ease, especially if they are apprehensive about their son or daughter leaving a formalized educational setting of which they have been a part for many years.

Aligned Programming.

Wehman and Revell (1997) cautioned that secondary programs are not providing instruction in ways that will be functional for students with disabilities in terms of gaining employment or making successful transitions into adulthood. These secondary programs should offer several key components to help students secure meaningful employment in the future. According to Wehman and Revell (1997),

First, school programming needs to be revamped to include community-based job training. Second, parents and professionals must develop formal, written plans for transition. Third, schools and community agencies will have to work with businesses to develop a variety of meaningful employment options for citizens with disabilities. (p. 67)

If these three components are in place, a successful transition into meaningful employment is possible (McDonnell et al., 1996; Wehman, 2001). In particular, supported employment needs to be a top priority for increased quality of life. The definition of supported employment in the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992 has three features:

1. It involves competitive work in integrated work settings for individuals with the most significant disabilities.
2. It targets individuals for whom competitive employment has not traditionally occurred or has been interrupted or intermittent because of significant disability.
3. It makes available ongoing support services at and/or away from the worksite as needed for the supported employee to successfully maintain employment.

Noted Wehman and Revell (1997),

Successful implementation of supported employment requires attention to a number of factors starting with a clear focus on employment in community integrated settings ... it is not readiness training in classrooms or work centers intended to develop generalized skills for use in a job sometime in the future. (p. 68)

Throughout this study, there have been some deviations from what experts say should be the best practices. For all of the individuals in this study, high school careers and curricula have looked similar. Chad, Joe, Jill, and Joshua all participated in an outcomes-based program where a "team" of individuals that included the student, his or her family, the classroom teacher, various support staff from the intermediate service unit, and community providers met to discuss where the student was headed after graduation and what skills he or she needed in order to get there.

All four students' high school programs included community-based work experiences. These experiences were in place for their career development and typically provided the following: career awareness, career exploration, and career preparation. During the transition years of the students' high school program (ages 18 to 21), more time was focused on career preparation. These students were assigned work experiences in the community, where they developed work habits and responsibilities as well as specific job skills.

By the time the students graduated, they had spent a considerable amount of time working in the community. The next logical step would be to continue this community work under the supervision of the adult vocational service provider to which the student was in the process of transitioning. By better aligning adult vocational services and the student's curriculum during high school, less regression among the students will occur. The students will have a greater chance for supported employment and, ultimately, a better quality of life. This means striving to place individuals in the community in supported employment roles (i.e., enclaves, work crews) instead of having them complete facility-based contract work. These people can work in the community and need to be given this opportunity. Ideally, the school and the adult service providers will work closely together during the student's senior year to identify a specific placement for the student as he or she graduates (Steele et al., 1990).

Arriving at a Destination

Although it is clear that a "perfect map" for transition does not always exist, it must be the responsibility of high school teachers to strive for a well-planned move into an adult career for each of their students. This transition process involves the teamwork of many individuals, including the student and his or her family, the teacher, the local education agency support team, and members from various adult service agencies (Iowa Department of Education, 1999; Sitlington et al., 2000; Wehman, 2001).

Joshua's transition involved just such a team of individuals. Joshua and his mother shared their preferences and visions of what life after high school would look like for him. They toured Pathways, Vocational, Inc., and Connections. Throughout his senior year, transition team meetings were held to ensure that the team was still on the "right highway" for Joshua. The team reevaluated his goals and discussed consistency of programming between the school and the adult service provider. Joshua and his mother ultimately selected Connections as his place of employment after graduation.

Several factors made Connections a desirable destination for Joshua and his family. The first was the assurance that supported employment in the community would be a possibility for Joshua. His mother wanted to continue the successes he had in high school when working in the community. Another

factor Joshua and his mother valued was the consistency between the high school and the adult service provider. Joshua also liked the other consumers at Connections. It appeared that he will meet many friends while employed there. Overall, Connections was a good match for Joshua and his family.

After Connections was selected, the IEP team met with the provider's representatives. Connections' staff members spent several meetings getting to know Joshua. Connections' representatives were invited to-and attended-Joshua's senior IEP meeting. They assisted the team in developing goals for Joshua that would be consistent with their programming. They also assisted the team in devising a transition plan for Joshua. This plan details when Joshua will begin work at Connections. He will begin working half-days in their program before he graduates from high school. This learning time will help ease Joshua into his new routine. His transition plan also includes transportation details and how the needed transportation skills will be taught, as Joshua will have to use a different transportation system to get to and from work. By establishing this link with Connections, the school staff was able to move Joshua gently from school to work with the least possible disturbance in his life and without any lapses in services. Joshua seemed happy with the upcoming move, and his mother was confident and at ease during a very difficult time. She undoubtedly was experiencing the same feelings that other mothers of high school seniors feel as they move into the next step of their lives. Through this vehicle known as transition, Joshua has arrived at the next destination in his life.

Conclusion

Throughout this study, we examined in detail the vocational lives of four individuals who graduated from the same high school program. Each individual chose a different career path at an adult service provider in the area. We examined each facility and followed up with each student to see what was successful for him or her as well as what needed improvement. We also examined the professional literature on these topics and wove this knowledge into this article. Obtaining this information allowed us to learn what high schools can do to assist in this type of transition.

We identified various successful aspects of each adult provider, including the employment of knowledgeable transition specialists, the variety of choices students and their families had in this geographic area, and the use of assessment data in one of the agencies.

We also noted four areas for improvement, based on literature from professionals in the field of transition and on our own observations. The areas were increased education of high school teachers and staff of the adult vocational service providers; the use of assessment data throughout transition; increased communication among the student and his or her family, the school, and the future adult vocational service provider; and aligned programming between the high school and the students' future environments.

This study also allowed the reader to take an in-depth look at one aspect of the transition to adult life for a high school senior. We detailed the steps that the transition team took to help make a good match for this student to ensure his continued happiness and satisfaction in his life as a young adult. Transition, if not under repair, is the vehicle that transports individuals from one stage of their lives to the other. Joshua and his family enjoyed their trip.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

MICHELLE L. NEUHRING, MEd, is a special education teacher for the Cedar Rapids, Iowa, public schools. Her interests focus on transition to adult life for students with autism and other severe disabilities. **PATRICIA L. SITLINGTON**, PhD, is a professor at the University of Northern Iowa. Her current interests include transition to all aspects of adult life, assessment, and interagency collaboration. Address: Patricia L. Sitlington, Department of Special Education, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0601.

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