TRANSITIONING STUDENTS TO POST-SECONDARY SETTINGS: A GROUNDED-THEORY STUDY OF SERVICE PROVIDERS’ PERSPECTIVES AT A NORTHERN CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL

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Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, School Psychology, and Deaf Studies
Abstract

of

TRANSITIONING STUDENTS TO POST-SECONDARY SETTINGS: 
A GROUNDED-THEORY STUDY OF SERVICE PROVIDERS’ PERSPECTIVES AT 
A NORTHERN CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL 

by 

Laurel Christine Schrader

Following high school, students with disabilities continue to lag behind peers without 
disabilities in success with employment, independent living, community engagement, and 
post-secondary education. Despite decades of best practice research, the field of special 
education must evaluate why these discrepancies persist in order to improve long-term 
outcomes for people with disabilities. This qualitative study examined how students 
were prepared for their transitions to secondary settings from the perspectives of 
transition service providers at one northern California high school. Research questions 
sought to answer how transition occurred at this site, what mechanisms contributed to the 
transition process, what challenges and successes existed in transitioning students, and 
under what contextual conditions these events occurred. Data sources included interviews 
with transition service providers, including administration, related service providers, and 
case managers, and IEP document analysis of 25% of the active IEPs at the site. Data 
analysis revealed complex interactions between instructional components for students in 
the classroom regarding transition and the perceptions, preferences, and values of
transition service providers. In addition, a lack of data on student transition outcomes following graduation was found to hinder the improvement of transition service delivery at this site. Service providers’ responses revealed a unique set of limitations imposed on service delivery. These results demonstrated how service providers prioritized transition needs in light of contextual limits, which inadvertently restricted the ability of service providers to implement some transition best practices. This study recommends additional site based studies on transition service delivery in order to inform legislation and future best practice research about how transition service theory is put into practice locally.

_______________________
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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

It has been the ongoing goal of education to produce independent citizens that can effectively contribute to society through means of competitive employment and independence. Despite this nationally shared goal, discussions about how this is best accomplished have sparked debate and eras of changing methodological approaches in supporting individuals with disabilities in attaining these outcomes. Often these methodological approaches have been born out of legislation initiated in response to such societal concerns.

Incoming data from research suggest that individuals with disabilities are underperforming in the areas of wages, socio-economic status, hours of work, level of activity outside of work, and maintenance of living and work environments following completion of public education (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004; Mank, Cioffi, & Yovanoff, 2003). These poor outcomes serve as performance indicators of the transition services received by individuals with disabilities while in high school.

Transition services address needs for individuals with disabilities related to any move from one educational setting to another, particularly from the domain of secondary programs, including high school or 18-22 programs, to post-public school settings. The reauthorizations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, 1997, and 2004 have made attempts to improve transition services for students with disabilities by
requiring sequenced planning and teaching for a student’s move to post-secondary settings. This is addressed through the Individualized Transition Plan (ITP), which outlines which transition services are needed for individual students with special needs within the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) (IDEA, 2004).

Guidelines for best practice in the area of transition are becoming available through the synthesis of past and current research. New models of service delivery currently place an emphasis on success in four outcome areas: community involvement, employment, education, and independent living (Halpern, 1994). Community based instruction, self-determination curricula, and job coaching are recognized methods of best practice to achieve positive results in these outcome areas (Halpern, 1994; Wehman, 2001).

Despite ever increasing knowledge of what works for students with disabilities to create successful transitions, little has been done to address the limitations of putting transition theory into practice at specific educational sites (Rutkowski, Daston, Van Kuiken & Riehle, 2006; Shearin, Roessler & Shriner, 1999). Specifically, layers of contextual problems are imposed upon seemingly simple methods of practice creating barriers when translating transition research into practice. At the bureaucratic level, federal laws such as IDEA 2004 must be interpreted by states. In California, the information is disseminated to Special Education Local Plan Area’s (SELPAs), school districts, and finally, to the school sites themselves for implementation. The end result is a variety of programmatic differences in transition services across the country. For example, transition documents used to create an ITP vary across states, SELPAs, and
even districts. While the goal to create a successful transition is the same, how transition services occur varies across sites.

Furthermore, service providers are required to individualize a transition plan to fit each student with an IEP. Since populations of students differ within a site, no one service methodology will likely have the ability to meet the needs of all the individualized plans for students with disabilities. In other words, even if uniformity occurred at a bureaucratic level, it would not be able to occur at a site level when population (i.e. disability, age, etc.) is taken into account. Consequently, each site is charged with the responsibility of meeting transition service requirements while adjusting for the site’s unique needs and diversity. District size, graduation requirements, funding, other available resources, location, leadership, etc. all play roles in how service delivery evolves. The result at a given school site can be a variety of ever-changing, contextually based practices operating in apparent isolation.

The variable, responsive nature of transition service delivery and the importance of connected long-term outcomes make examination of transition practices necessary, but quite challenging to do. In order to create action plans that guide necessary changes in response to legal requirements and best practice recommendations, existing transition services need to be examined. Due to the unique, site-based factors previously described, the examination of current service delivery needs to occur first at a site level, rather than a district, SELPA, or state level.
Statement of the Problem

At one northern California high school, transition services have experienced unexpected changes within the past four years. This site’s 2004 Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation report called for more inclusive special education service delivery models. Additionally, a form of Response to Intervention (RtI) has been implemented since 2005. Both RtI and the WASC adjustments, each in their own way, have caused changes in transition service delivery at this site. While adjusting to the above policies, the site simultaneously has incorporated the relatively new changes in transition mandates imparted by IDEA 2004. An examination of current transition practices was warranted at this site to make informed, purposeful adjustments to transition practice in response to these federal, state and local special education service delivery model changes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine one northern California high school’s transition service practice from the perspectives of those charged with implementing transition services at the site. A case study approach was used to examine transition services at this site through stakeholder perspectives and document analysis of ITPs including transition assessments, agency linkages, and incorporated transition goals. Grounded theory practices were employed to analyze data and develop a framework that describes how this school provided transition services. Factors that impacted transition for this site’s special education population were outlined. The following questions were explored:
What were the goals of transition service delivery according to service delivery providers, and how did they compare across various service delivery groups?

What made up the current transition service practice and what rationale guided these practices?

What challenges existed for the high school to match best practice and legal mandates in the area of transition?

How was success in transition defined and assessed?

What was working and not working to deliver transition services for students and under what conditions?

The responses to these questions were incorporated into a framework that helped to explain how transition practices at this northern California high school operated in preparation for planning improvements in transition service delivery.

Research Framework

Grounded theory research methodology was utilized to collect and analyze qualitative data such as subject interview responses and information gained through document analysis. Grounded theory is often used to create a cogent framework where no current working theory can appropriately be applied (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is a qualitative approach that has evolved over decades. The original process of grounded theory, started by Glasser and Strauss in 1967, was used to explain the interactions of patients with terminal illnesses (Moore, 2009). Glasser and Strauss intended to add more merit to qualitative methods with their addition of systematic,
logical coding and diagramming of data when quantitative data alone would not accurately encapsulate a phenomenon.

Using a grounded theory approach, qualitative data is compared across subgroups in an ongoing process called constant-comparison (Ghezelijeh & Emami, 2009). Open coding is used to describe each singular bit of data and create large, abstract categories that describe components of the phenomena. Selective coding involves returning to these large codes to create ones with meaning that is more precise. The researcher records thoughts and questions throughout the constant comparison process to aid in the identification of relationships and theory (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Although the coding is systematic, additional sampling and returning to gather further data occurs as needed to test the validity of the theory and make adjustments as needed. Because of the distinctive contextual factors in operation at individual high schools, grounded theory was fitting for this research study because it offered the opportunity to explain the unique process utilized by service providers for transitioning students from a particular high school to post-secondary settings.

Definition of Terms

Agency Linkage

An agency linkage is a cooperative partnership between a school site and an outside agency, such as the Department of Mental Health or the Department of Rehabilitation, to provide services that are documented in a student’s IEP.
California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE)

A summative, standardized examination used in the state of California to determine graduation status of all high school students receiving public education. Passage of this examination is one component of the requirements necessary to receive a diploma.

Career Pathway

A graduation requirement specific to the school site being studied consisting of two consecutive, vocationally specific classes. A total of eight different career pathways exist for students to choose from.

Certificate of Completion

A graduation document that acts as an alternative to a diploma in the state of California. This document certifies a student’s completion of district credit requirements or the completion of all a student’s IEP goals. A student is not required to pass the CAHSEE to receive this document.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, is a law created in 1990 that first mandated the documentation of transition services in a student’s IEP by the age of 16. Reauthorizations of the law occurred in 1997 and 2004. This study will refer to IDEA 2004 unless otherwise stated.

Individualized Education Plan

An Individualized Education Plan, or IEP, is a collaboratively created legal document mandated by IDEA to record the needs and goals of a student with a disability, and the
services that will be provided to him/her in order to gain educational benefit in the least restrictive environment.

*Individualized Transition Plan*

An Individualized Transition Plan, or ITP, is a written component of an IEP that outlines a student’s transition needs and post-secondary goals in the areas of employment, independent living, post-secondary education, and community experiences, as well as the services that will be provided to help meet those goals and needs.

*Post-secondary settings*

Post-secondary settings are any educational, employment, living, or community setting a student with a transition plan may encounter following the completion of high school.

*Resource Service Provider (RSP)*

A term utilized to describe a special education provider that services students in either partially mixed special education and general education settings or all general education settings. *Education Code* Section 56362(a)(1) states that these pupils are assigned to regular classroom teachers for a majority of the school day, meaning 50% or more of the instructional day. It is considered a mild form of support relative to Special Day Class. At this site it is used to describe a population of students with mild special education service needs.

*Response to Intervention*

Response to Intervention, or RtI, is a systematic structuring of intervention services used in an educational site to target populations of students at-risk in the areas of behavior or academics.
Special Day Class (SDC)

This is a placement that provides intensive instruction to students by a special education teacher when the needs of the student preclude his/her participation in a resource or general education setting for the majority of the day. At the focus site, this term is used to refer both to the placement where students were taught as well as a descriptor referring to the population of students in that setting.

Special Education Local Plan Area

A Special Education Local Plan Area, or SELPA, is an agency within the state of California that is charged with providing services to and assisting educational agencies in providing services to public school students with disabilities in that designated area.

Transition

Transition is a planned process through which a student with a disability moves from a high school to post-secondary educational, employment, social, or living settings.

Transition Partnership Program (TPP)

A community based partnership between schools and the Department of Rehabilitation that provides employment training, life skills training, and job placement services to students with special needs who are transitioning between school and work.

Transition service

A transition service is any provision of a resource, including instruction, by an agency that is intended to benefit a student in a post-secondary setting.
Transition service delivery

Transition service delivery is a set of methods a school site or agency uses to provide any transitional service outlined in a student’s Individualized Transition Plan.

Assumptions

For the purpose of this study, all participants took part voluntarily, and all are knowledgeable about some component of this site’s transition service delivery model. Participants’ statements are accurate reflections of individual perspectives and opinions based on their own experiences in providing transition services to students. The researcher played the role of a participant observer. The researcher’s interpretations of data through coding were used to determine when and where further data was to be collected. Consistent with constructivist grounded-theory tenets, the perspectives of the researcher, participants, and environmental contexts had a direct impact on the resulting data coding and developed theory. However, all efforts were made by the researcher to avoid biases overly impacting the data through data collection and analysis processes.

Justification

Incoming longitudinal research data at a national level offered new information regarding the transition outcomes of students years after receiving transition services in high school. Specifically, this research showed correlations between service provided in high school and outcomes in post-secondary settings, thereby suggesting what services could be provided in high school to make a positive outcome more likely for a student (Cameto et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2005). If a site is to adjust its transition service delivery methods to fit the incoming best practice data, it must first analyze its own
practice to find any deficiencies. This study offered one site the ability to find its current strengths and weaknesses relative to this best practice research.

In addition to site benefits, local districts, the SELPA, and linked agencies could gain from the study. Transition practices requiring collaboration were operating effectively were highlighted, while those with problematic attributes were exposed. Because collaboration between the site and the SELPA or between the site and local agencies is a shared goal, all parties benefit from an exploration of practice at this site. Processes that were working well can be shared with neighboring districts, which may be providing services in similar contexts.

Moreover, this study has the ability to inform larger political and methodological movements in high school transition. The direction of policy information typically flows from the top down, usually influencing sites at a service delivery level. Site examination such as this one has the ability to inform policy makers about the practicality of putting developed theories into practice. As service delivery were examined, difficulties, conflicts, and overlap of services were illuminated. If this information were to be added to other sites’ examinations, chronic problems could be exposed to policy makers, resulting in corrective measures being taken at a legislative and recommendation level.

Limitations

Limitations to this study included the small sample size and limited amount of time to gather data. Sampling a single site may restrict the generalizability of this study. However, as a case study, the sampling was appropriate and commensurate with the purpose of the study as an exploration of transition practices at a school site. This study
could gain additional validity through future expansion of this research and comparison with studies done at other sites.

Another limitation rested in the researcher’s role as a participant observer. While this role allowed the researcher to gain better insights into the workings of the transition process, it also incorporated a degree of bias throughout the research. However, this bias was reduced through the use of member checking of interview responses and triangulation of data across subgroups from interviews and document analysis (Creswell, 2008). Reduction of bias also occurred through the employment of grounded theory techniques during data collection and analysis.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Interactions between theory, legislation, and practice occur through evaluation of outcomes and are chronicled in the literature as it describes the passage of students with disabilities from school age to adult settings. Decades of research beginning in the late 1960’s have played a role in the evolution of legislative mandates with the goal of improving long-term outcomes for adults with disabilities (Kochhar-Bryant, Bassett, & Webb, 2009; McDonnell & Hardman, 2010; Stilington & Clark, 2006). Despite improvements, adults with disabilities continue to lag behind their peers without disabilities in key life areas, such as stability of employment and independent living (Newman, L., Wagner, M., Cameto, R., & Knokey, 2009). This discrepancy warrants the continued investigation of practices used to prepare those with disabilities for adult life.

In order to inform the current study of site based transition practices, this literature review will summarize the following: a) the legal and research foundations of transition best practice in the adult service system; b) the frameworks that currently underlie best practices and serve as quality indicators in transition for service providers designing and implementing transition; c) current transition legislation; d) subsequent changes in transition practices in high school programs; and e) the current successes and challenges to transition implementation in high school settings.

Foundations of Transition in Adult Services

Predominant models of support for people with disabilities between the 1960’s and 1970’s often occurred in restricted settings. For example, the primary employment
settings for adults with disabilities were sheltered workshops (Rusch & Braddock, 2004; Wehman & Kregel, 1995; West, Revell, & Wehman, 1998). These settings offered clients a chance to gain work skills in locations separate from those of the general workforce. However, the model had negative outcomes including infrequent moves into competitive work settings, lower than typical wages, and little to no interaction with peers without disabilities (Flexer, Simmons, Luft, & Baer, 2001; Rusch & Braddock, 2004). In 1989, Schalock, McGaughey, and Kiernan found clients of sheltered workshops to be making only a third of minimum wage; a problem that persisted throughout the decade with little improvement. Additional impacts of sheltered workshops were explored by Kober and Eggleton (2005). When examining 117 adults with intellectual disabilities, they found that patterns of work correlated with patterns of living. Participants engaged in sheltered workshops rather than open employment were more likely to be living in group homes, rather than with family or independently. As sheltered workshops were found to offer atypical outcomes, restrictive environments, and poor outcomes when compared to peers without disabilities, the literature in the 1980’s called for a move to more inclusive models of employment used today, termed supported employment (Whitehead, 1986; Brooke, Revell, & Wehman, 2009).

In 1986, the legislature responded to the research community’s cry for increased integration of people with disabilities in the competitive workforce with the implementation of Title III Act C of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments. This directive offered funding for all states to modify their disability support services and incorporate supported employment in natural work settings. Despite such a monumental initiative
pushing for inclusion, the change of systems was slow and difficult at the agency level.

Conflicting figures existed regarding the success of competitive employment placements reported by agencies. Data from the Rehabilitation Services Database indicated that by 1997 83% of their successful employment placements occurred in competitive settings (Gilmore & Butterworth, 1997). On the other hand, Rusch and Braddock (2004) examined participation in settings of supported employment from 1988 to 2002 by collecting data from all 50 of the state agencies responsible for supporting adults with disabilities in the United States. Their findings showed an increase in participation in supported employment for participants with mental retardation and developmental disabilities from 9% to 24%. However, 76% were still shown to remain in segregated settings, symptomatic of a clustering of clients based on disability.

Soon after the supported employment movement, comparative research allowed outcomes to be examined relative to type of employment supports. Rusch and Braddock’s (2004) review of literature from 1996 to 2006 identified key components that facilitated increased community involvement for adults with disabilities. These included providing individuals with disabilities opportunities to make choices, vocational training, varying settings for involvement, family inclusion, and situations for the individual to be independent. These relatively new concepts in employment support began to influence other areas of post-secondary life, such as independent living (Kober & Eggleton, 2005).

Similar to the changes seen in the supported employment movement, models of support for individuals with disabilities in their long-term living situations became a focus for change. In 1967, state run intuitions housed 195,650 persons with disabilities.
By 1968, the institutionalized population dropped each year until institutions were operating below capacity (Anderson, Lakin, Mangan, & Prouty, 1998). As segregated living in large institutions became less popular, the fiscal impact initiated the closure of many state institutions. The choice to live in a more “normalized” setting for some forced the decision for those who could no longer remain or be placed in closing segregated facilities. By the 1980’s, funding was available to states for alternative supported living centers such as group homes, which offered smaller service settings more in line with typical living situations (Anderson, Lakin, Mangan, & Prouty, 1998). This occurred, in part, because of legislative support in the form of incentives provided under Medicaid requiring a reduction in the size of housing facilities. This inclusive approach within the community, now termed supported living, offered more typical outcomes embraced by the adult service industry as positive and desirable (Anderson, Lakin, Mangan, & Prouty, 1998).

Not surprisingly, initiatives in education paralleled concerns for equal access and integration of people with disabilities in employment and living settings. In 1973, Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act ensured reasonable accommodations would be provided to those with disabilities in educational settings. This included supports such as offering note takers to the visually impaired, allowing the taping of lectures, etc. Bolstering the intention of Section 504, equal access to education for students with disabilities was guaranteed with the landmark legislation of PL 94-142. This law, named the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, ensured students with disabilities the right to receive a public education. Today’s transition
requirements for students with disabilities take root in the policies developed in PL 94-142 including the use of short and long term goals, team decisions about a child’s education, and documentation of necessary supports that allow access to education. Although transition was not yet explicitly mentioned, PL 94-142 set the foundation for transition mandates soon to come. The implementation of PL 94-142 prompted an examination and rough imitation of models and practices developing simultaneously in the adult service industry that would soon extend into public school settings.

Frameworks for Best Practice in Transition

The previously discussed movements toward inclusion in employment, independent living, and education offered opportunities for new models in transition to emerge. One such model, Bridges, developed by Madeline Will, was three-tiered model of supported employment sponsored by the US Department of Education in 1985. This model categorized students according to their degree of anticipated support need. Three levels emerged as no support, limited support, or ongoing support (Flexer, Simmons, Luft, & Baer, 2001; McDonnell & Hardman, 2010; Will, 1985). Additionally, Halpern’s model (1985) was one of the first to emphasize a holistic approach to transition. Incorporating not just employment, but community living and social relationships as tenants of successful transition, Halpern created a model outlining transition domains coupled with levels of service support (McDonnell & Hardman, 2010). This shift to a holistic approach including all life domains prompted those providing service delivery to consider inclusion in all life areas. Other models to emerge took longitudinal approaches when considering the needs of an individual across a
lifespan. One example is Kohler’s (1996) model that considered any activities in secondary education collectively equating to transition content. Kohler reasoned that since all education was given with the intent to prepare students for life after high school, all educational activities were considered transitional. Kohler’s model capitalized on the use sequential, longitudinal planning that created a set of tasks that would begin while in school in preparation for transitioning out of school to adult settings. All three transition perspectives, Will’s, Halpern’s, and Kohler’s, have since been conceptualized in the law outlined later in this chapter.

Within any transition service model, be it singly focused or multifaceted, particular descriptors help to qualify a transition plan as high quality and evidenced-based. These descriptors, utilized as quality indicators of successful implementation of transition supports and programs, highlight a process that is outcome oriented, person-centered, collaborative, and self-determined while being delivered in an inclusive setting. Although overlapping and codependent upon one another, each quality indicator makes its own distinct contribution to the foundations of best practice.

**Outcome-Oriented**

The nature of transition is longitudinal, and the degree of support and instructional needs change across time. Therefore, planning for transition should consider any anticipated changes and keep long-term outcomes in mind when adjusting support and instruction services for an individual. Outcome-oriented planning, sometimes called backwards planning, is a theoretical approach to transition that involves taking into account the long-term goals of an individual and establishing benchmarks that
would lead to the eventual achievement of each long-term goal. Outcome-oriented planning is supported by many authors (McMahan & Baer, 2001). As the scope of an individual’s lifetime is incremented into increasingly smaller, sequenced segments, goal benchmarks and necessary supports are placed along a timeline. Working sequentially from an individual’s ultimate goal in a domain area down to the individual’s current level of functioning in that area, outcome-oriented planning creates a systematic plan for goal achievement.

**Person-Centered**

Person-centered planning is a philosophical approach as well as an explicit process that places the student at the center of all outcome-oriented planning. It is through a person-centered approach that the long-term goals and outcomes for an individual are determined. In this approach, team members consist of any person who knows or interacts with the individual in a significant way such as family, friends, and service providers. Each member provides input toward a long-term plan with the understanding that each contributor knows the person in unique ways, and that each piece of contributed information about the individual is necessary to accurately formulate the best plan for an individual. An individual’s goals, desires, strengths, and interests are taken into account as first priority while being shaped by what information other members of the team have to offer.

The theory of person centered planning has been captured in several prescribed approaches. Personal Futures Planning (Mount & Zwernick, 1988) and McGill Action Planning System (MAPS) (Vandercook, York, & Forest, 1989) are examples of specific,
facilitated processes of transition planning that exemplify person-centered approaches (Flexer, et al. 2001). Stilington and Clark (2006) described the process as building “support circles” that facilitate the involvement of an individual in community and family environments. Brooke, Revell, and Wehman (2009) referred to person centered planning a key quality indicator in employment planning. Positive outcomes of a person-centered planning approach include buy in and support from all members of the team and a truly unique plan for long-term success for the individual.

**Collaborative**

To provide person-centered planning in an effective way, collaboration must be facilitated amongst all members of the transition team. In addition to the student, family, and friends, the agencies existing to support transition and provide services are numerous and overlapping. Supporting agencies and services that a student may need to access include, but are not limited to, the Social Security Administration, the Department of Rehabilitation, Medicaid, school districts, mental health supports, post-secondary education institutions, transportation providers, living centers, day programs, and employment providers and supporters. Coordinating these services in a meaningful and organized way is often difficult and requires careful collaboration. Collaboration between agencies and other team members is deemed necessary for transition success (McMahan & Baer, 2001; Morningstar, Kim, & Clark, 2008). Benefits of successful interagency collaboration are discussed by Noonan, Morningstar, and Erikson (2008). These authors highlight increased attendance in post-secondary education settings,
Successful servicing of students by multitudes of agencies, and opportunities for career assessment when collaboration is effectively implemented.

*Self-Determined*

For an individual with a disability to access person-centered planning and be an active member of a collaborative team, that person must be able to determine individual preferences and goals while self-advocating. Following decades of clustering people with disabilities for ease of providing support rather than by acknowledging the preferences of the individual themselves, self-determination has since become an inherent component in individualizing transition and making person-centered planning effective. Self-determination involves allowing an individual to guide his or her own future, independent of the influences of others. Several skills can be developed to improve an individual’s ability to be self-determined including self-awareness, self-advocacy, and self-regulation (Wehmeyer, Gragoudas, & Shogren, 2006).

The positive impacts of allowing for and facilitating self-determination have been well documented in the literature. Studies show improved quality of life outcomes for those able to successfully practice self-determination (Nota, Ferrari, Soresi, Wehmeyer, 2007). Nota et al. (2007) also found self determination to be correlated with living and working environments. Those in the least restrictive living and working environments of five or less persons with disabilities were found to have the greatest degrees of self-determination. This research offered the field insight into the next best practice.
As previously described, support service for people with disabilities has encountered the paradigm shift from restrictive supports provided to whole groups to individualized, inclusive approaches. A common gauge of successful transition is often the degree to which the goals of an individual have been actualized. However, a more accurate judgment of success would consider the level of integration and normalization an individual experiences in environments relative to peers without disabilities (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004). It is hoped that a successful transition that is self-determined, person-centered, and outcome-oriented would naturally occur in typical environments with peers with and without disabilities. However, collaborative teams must sometimes keep inclusion as an explicit goal while developing outcome oriented transition plans.

One way to impart inclusion in a transition plan is to consider the use of natural supports. Natural supports was a term first utilized in the 1980’s when research on supported employment showed that the use of supports already in existence in work environments were found to decrease the cost of supporting individuals in inclusive settings (Cimera, 2007; Kregel, Wehman, Revell, Hill, & Cimera, 2000). Natural supports refers to a person utilizing services available to all in a given environment such as the use of a public bus system for transportation or utilizing peers and co-workers for assistance. This approach values the effective use of typical support services rather than those designed specifically for persons with disabilities. The use of natural supports as a primary level of assistance results in an individual included in community, living, work, and educational environments (Unger, Parent, Gibson, Kane-Johnson, & Kregel, 1998).
Current Transition Legislation

In 1990, PL 94-142, discussed earlier as landmark educational legislation for students with disabilities, was reauthorized and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This piece of legislation brought transition accountability to teachers of transition age youth with explicit mandates to plan for a student’s transition before leaving the public education system. IDEA required statements to be included in the IEPs of students 16 years or older that describe a student’s transition needs. Since its initiation in 1990, reauthorizations to IDEA have occurred in 1997 and again in 2004, making slight adjustments to the definition of transition services over time. The U.S. Department of Education currently defines transition services as:

A coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that—

(A) is designed to be a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child’s movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation;

(B) is based on the individual child’s needs, taking into account the child’s strengths, preferences, and interests; and

(C) includes instruction, related services, 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. (Sec.300.43[a])

All three transition models discussed previously, including those that address transition domains, degrees of support and longitudinal planning, are referenced in IDEA 2004. The definition specifically outlines which domains should be considered by IEP teams including areas of instruction and education, employment, community experiences, and daily living skills. As in PL 94-142, IDEA mandates the structured use of annual goals and long-term outcomes planning that resonate with chronologically determined support service models. IDEA states:

Beginning not later than the first IEP to be in effect when the child turns 16, or younger if determined appropriate by the IEP Team, and updated annually, thereafter, the IEP must include—

(1) Appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills.

(300.320[b]).

In addition to these specified goals, the level of services and specific providers are required to be documented. Just as in Will’s level of support transition model (1985), IDEA requires that the IEP document outlines specific services and the degree to which support will be offered in each domain.

IDEA mandates helped to further advance already accepted best practices in the adult service field by extending their reaches into high schools and requiring LEAs not
previously utilizing these approaches to incorporate them into service plans for students with disabilities. Echoes of best practice components from the adult service realm can be seen throughout the law as well. The use of “results-oriented” phraseology in IDEA indicates that teams determining services must plan for long term scenarios and develop measurable goals for the student. This long term planning roughly incorporates the foundations of backwards planning and longitudinal models of transition. As mentioned earlier, self-determination became a driving force for individualized transitions. Under IDEA, IEP teams are compelled to incorporate student and family opinions within transition statements and goals, indicating a level of individualization not seen historically in previously legislated disability support models. The nature of the IEP team, comprising of interdisciplinary team members, gathering to discuss a single individual parallels person-centered planning transition ideology. Further, documentation of interagency collaboration is mandated to ensure linkages between high school settings and the already existing support agencies established by earlier legislation.

Transition Curricula in Secondary Programs

The transition mandates of IDEA 1990 and its reauthorizations in 1997 and 2004 prompted the identification of specific skill sets to be taught while keeping in mind the indicators of quality transition practice developed in the adult service realm. Components of best practice mentioned earlier, such as backwards planning, self-determination, person-centered planning, collaboration, and inclusion, were molded into practices appropriate for the earliest receivers of transition services. Working backwards from these foundations, the question of instructional input arose. What do students need
to be taught during public schooling years in order for them to access a transition upon exiting and remain successful throughout a lifetime? Several transition related instructional and curricular practices emerged in answer to this question.

*Functional Life Skills Instruction*

Baer, Flexer, and Dennis (2007) pointed out the “curricular shift” that IDEA 1990 brought by introducing transition to a classroom setting. In other words, teachers must teach the skills necessary to complete a transition. This study (2007) showed that the type of curricular input, such as functional skills, is correlated with the development of long-term goals and academic and employment placements. Students needing skills that would allow them to function independently as adults may have goals in the areas of functional life skills. The teaching of functional life skills includes instruction in daily math skills like budgeting and money management, and daily reading skills such as reading medicine labels, signs, etc, as well as task performance such as doing laundry or cooking. Any skill that a student does not currently possess to perform the daily life activities that he/she is anticipated to need encompasses functional skill instruction. A market for prescribed curricula directed at addressing functional life skills in the classroom has since opened. SEACO, Life School 2000, and Life Skills Practice are some examples of curricula that can be purchased to address functional needs. However, no single curriculum stands out above the rest as most effective (Baer, Flexer, & Dennis, 2007). This may be, in part, due to the ever present requirement to individualize curricula for student need and learning style.
**Academic Curricula**

Research shows that students who are included and have access to instruction in general education classrooms have better exit outcomes, including graduating, receiving a diploma, and going on to post-secondary education (Benz, Lindstrom, Unruh, & Waintrup, 2004; Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000). Inclusive education is directly supported by IDEA 2004 as it describes the IEP team’s obligation to identify the least restrictive environment (LRE) in which the student can access services. Including students in the general curriculum involves teaching the effective use of natural supports available to all students, such as after school tutoring programs, guidance counseling, peer support, etc. The concept that an individual with a disability should first take advantage of supports available to all before requesting further adaptations or supports is an inherent focus in the inclusive education movement. Inclusive classrooms and the use of natural supports is the educational model used for peers without disabilities, and therefore, is the goal of educational placement for all.

**Vocational Instruction**

In addition to life skills and academic instruction, vocational instruction exists as a third skill which should be provided in secondary education settings. Providing students with direct instruction in an occupation specific or skill specific vocational program has been positively correlated with employment and post-secondary educational outcomes. For example, the research showed (Benz, et al., 2004; Benz, et al., 2000) that when provided with training in the last two years of high school, students were more likely to sustain work. Vocational training can take place within the general education
setting, within a special education setting, or a community setting and may sometimes overlap with life skills objectives.

The same studies supporting vocational training also showed that students participating in paid work experience were twice as likely to be engaged in work and schooling upon exiting high school (Benz, et al., 2004; Benz, et al., 2000). Teachers are offered a range of choices for providing work experience. There are unpaid positions, on site work, and off site work. All have been proven to be beneficial to students upon exit of public schooling. Government supported programs have been created to link students needing support in work environments with state agencies. This connection often happens through participation in vocationally specific classes in the last years of high school (Baer, et al., 2007; Fabian, 2007).

Self-Determination Curricula

Because of the desire to individualize and be person-centered, students are sometimes taught an explicit skill set in self-advocacy that fosters the ability to share wants and desires in a way that contributes to their own long-term transition outcomes. Self-determination forms the crux of a successful, high-quality transition. Teaching self-determination skills can include a wide variety of smaller skill sets including learning how to set goals and benchmarks, make decisions, and solve problems (Wehmeyer, Gragoudas, & Shogren, 2006). The explicit teaching of these skills often happens in the educational environments determined by the IEP. For effective teaching of self-determination skills, it is helpful for the student to be in an inclusive environment that
best approximates the settings in which student will problem solve and advocate in as an adult (Landmark, Ju, & Zhang, 2010).

As seen in research in adult settings, levels of self-determination are correlated with living and working environments (Nota, Ferrari, Soresi, & Wehmeyer, 2007). More inclusive environments fostered the development of these skills. Teachers may be able to provide explicit teaching for development of these skills during school age years. Several studies (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997) showed the teaching of self-advocacy and goal setting and the direct involvement of the student in the transition process as part of a successful program with long-term engagement in post-secondary placements.

**Degrees of Instruction and Settings Considerations**

IEP teams have the unique challenge of individualizing instruction to meet the needs of each individual. Every student requires a different degree of instruction in each of the curricular transition areas: functional, academic, vocational, and self-determination. As teams consider the extent to which each type of instruction should be provided, they must sometimes prioritize which skills are to be taught during the remaining public schooling years and which are to be handled by adult agencies upon exit.

In addition to curricula decisions, the team must also determine the settings in which students are to be provided with instruction. Students with disabilities have been shown to better develop and retain skills when they are taught in the setting in which they are to be performed (Walker, Uphold, Richter, & Test, 2010). The teaching of life skills
to address all adult roles prompted a need to find settings in which life skills could be taught. Teachers found themselves limited when teaching purchasing, banking, social skills, etc. because of confinement in a high school classroom. Programs similar to adult day programs began to develop in high schools, which included a portion of the day spent in community contexts. Now entitled community-based instruction (CBI), this context-based curriculum is considered an effective setting for teaching life skills (Walker, Uphold, Richter, & Test, 2010). Nevertheless, not all schools have direct access to CBI because of location, transportation, or time. When unable to implement CBI, approximations may include community-referenced instruction and simulations in a classroom (i.e. instruction in the use of a phone book to gain community information, simulated shopping, and role playing interactions that would take place at a bank) (Stilington & Clark, 2006).

Academic instruction also has its ideal in terms of setting and content for students with disabilities. Inclusion in general education classes and full participation in academic curricula with accommodations or modifications is the desired placement for students when providing academic instruction (McKenzie, 2009). Challenges to inclusion include collaborative difficulties amongst teachers and unique support needs or behavioral concerns that teachers feel they may be unable to address in a general education setting. School wide ideology and past practice can also be a barrier to allowing students to fully access general education settings (Brandes, 2009). Despite challenges, teams are required to choose the most inclusive placements that allow for the provision of services and instruction deemed appropriate by the IEP team.
Challenges to Implementation of Transition in Secondary Settings

As with transition approaches and curricular content, the barriers to implementing effective transition practices are interrelated and complex. IEP teams must plan for a self-determined, results-oriented, collaborative transition while determining the levels of specific academic domains, placements, and support services necessary to make that plan successful. Several studies have been conducted to analyze what teachers are doing to address transition and with what components of transition still present a challenge (Asselin, Todd-Allen, & deFur, 1998; Condorman & Katsiyannis, 2002).

Multiple Roles

In 2002, Condorman and Katsiyannis published the results of a survey of 132 secondary special education teachers in Wisconsin. Their results coincided with similar teacher surveys done in other states (Asselin, Todd-Allen, & deFur 1998), finding special education teachers carry an ever increasing work load through the addition of multiple roles and responsibilities. Aside from direct classroom instruction, teachers listed other time consuming roles such as writing IEPs, writing lesson plans, conducting assessments, and scheduling and conducting IEPs. The setting in which a teacher taught correlated with a teacher’s effectiveness in teaching unique content areas. When teachers spent more time in self-contained classrooms, their effectiveness with learning strategies decreased just as those spending time in resource rooms had less effective practices with functional instruction (Condorman & Katsiyannis, 2002).

Within this same study, when given a choice of six categorized competencies demonstrated by secondary teachers (content instruction, learning strategies, academic
remediation, transition instruction, functional living skills, and social/emotional instruction), teachers rated satisfaction with transition last. A third of responding teachers reported difficulty in designing and maintaining transition programs for students with more significant needs. Teachers reported more time as a need to satisfactorily address both the planning for and the carrying out of transition service delivery. Those who reported positive perceptions of transition outcomes for students cited the use of portfolios, job searching support, sequenced options in vocational coursework, and effective coordination with agencies and the community as contributing factors in those positive outcomes.

Teacher Training in Transition Practices

Teachers’ level of confidence in providing transition services was found to vary significantly (Benitz, Morningstar, & Frey, 2009; Knott & Asselin, 1999). In surveys of teachers, those who rated themselves high in their transition knowledge and competencies were found to be most likely to be documenting and implementing transition practices when compared to those who rated themselves lower. However, more experience in the teaching field did not result in higher ratings, perhaps because transition mandates, agencies and paperwork have changed over time. Many teachers feel that they lack the training needed to be successful in transition plan development and rate their frequencies of transition practice implementation as low (Knott & Asselin, 1999). Knott and Asselin (1999) found when surveying 217 teachers in Virginia that those who gained transition information through attending conferences were most likely to rate themselves as
confident in their background knowledge above those who participated in transition related college courses.

Ten years later Benitez, Morningstar, and Frey (2009) surveyed 557 teachers across 31 states looking for their perceptions of transition knowledge and levels of implementation. Despite a decade to become familiar with transition practices, Benitez, Morningstar, and Frey (2009) showed results similar to Knott and Asselin (1999). Both studies found that teachers of students with mental retardation or multiple disabilities were most likely to feel confident in implementing transition practices compared to teachers of student with learning disabilities. Each study also pointed to teacher apprehension when collaborating with outside service agencies. Despite interagency collaboration being listed as the fourth most important factor in creating successful transitions by teachers, Knott and Asselin (1999) found it ranked 25th out of 31 total competencies implemented by those same teachers. Ten years later, out of six domains of transition competency, teachers report collaboration as fifth with regards to levels of preparation and frequency of implementation (Benitez, Morningstar, & Frey, 2009). These two studies, done ten years apart, present similar findings that suggest improvements in transition may need more than just time.

Curriculum Decisions

In addition to training needs, teachers report many frustrations with programming and service delivery (Asselin, Todd-Allen, & deFur, 1998; Condorman & Katsiyannis, 2002; Wasburn-Moses, 2006). When discussing content to be taught, teachers find themselves straddling a divide between college-prep classes, and those offering direct
vocational skills and life skill training. Of 378 randomly selected high school special education teachers surveyed in Michigan, 56% reported rarely teaching functional skills (Wasburn-Moses, 2006). When attempting to fit functional instruction in amongst academic content, Stilington and Clark (2006) describe the problematic nature of designing instruction, “Only so much can be taught through incidental learning in integrated academic classes; the rest must be taught systematically and with direct accountability of outcomes to objectives (p. 235).” Teachers are challenged with finding a way to fit in direct instruction in both academic and functional skill areas while within an inclusive, rigorous curriculum. Teachers listed credit completion and lack of collaboration with guidance counseling as limitations in engaging students in vocational training (Wasburn-Moses, 2006).

Within each curricular domain, difficulties exist in service delivery. For example, nearly a third of the teachers reported a need for more vocational training options that consider the needs of a broader audience (Wasburn-Moses, 2006). However, those satisfied with vocational training cited effective collaborative relationships with the community and agencies and classes that offered support in the areas of job searching and job exploration. Teachers cited the elimination of vocational based classes and little relevancy to workplace settings as barriers. (Wasburn-Moses, 2006).

Collaboration Difficulties

The required negotiation between the two worlds of public schooling and adult service is frustrating for families experiencing transition and for teachers required to plan for it. Effective collaboration is required to allow for a seamless transition and is often
difficult to achieve (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997). One reason for the discrepancy between planning and outcomes may be the result of documentation procedures for service providers of transition age youth. Public school representatives follow guidelines set out in IDEA while adult agencies, employers, and postsecondary educational institutions are guided by an entirely different set of standards. Upon exiting public schooling, a person with disabilities is no longer considered entitled to services with documentation of a disability under IDEA. Individuals are required to prove themselves eligible for services under varying criteria determined by each organization. A report from the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (2007) points to the IEP as a document with limited power in these post-secondary settings. Of 100 postsecondary institutions assessed, only 39% utilized an IEP in determining eligibility for services, and none reported it being adequate as a stand alone document to make eligibility decisions. The authors of this report (2007) speak to differences in assessment and validation of service need following exit from public schooling. Recommendations included informing families and students with disabilities of the differences they will encounter upon exiting public schooling.

Collaboration is intended to help mediate some of these discrepancies in service provision. Some of the most effective districts show the use of a transition team led by a transition coordinator (McMahan & Baer, 2001; Noonan, et al., 2008). The coordinator was responsible for organizing transition services and team members involved in the transition of a student. However, 60% of 185 teachers surveyed by McMahan and Baer in 2001 report not having any team in place or access to a transition coordinator.
Measuring the Success of Transition Instruction

Compliance

States and school districts must track their rates of success when transitioning students out of high school. The difficulty in measuring success stems from the longitudinal nature of transition that does not allow professionals to immediately assess their success rates. Therefore, other proximal measures of success were identified that offer foresight in potential long term outcomes.

Once such proximal measure of success comes through ensuring the accurate implementation of IDEA by evaluating compliance with IDEA through the evaluation of IEP documents. The difficulty in creating IEPs is evident in studies that scrutinize IEPs and measure their effectiveness based on compliance with the law. In 1997, a study of 94 transition plans in IEPs revealed vague statements of goals, lack of revision to the plan done annually, and little evidence of best practice implementation (Grigal, Test, & Beattie, 1997). Additionally, Finn and Kohler (2009) studied the effectiveness of the Transition Outcomes Project. This model, used in 21 states, was designed to improve compliance with transition law. The authors used IEP compliance as evidence of effectiveness and found a variety of changes, both positive and negative, from pre to post teacher training. Following training, improvements were made in the inclusion of students’ long-term goal statements. In contrast, compliance on certain components such as proper notice given to parents remained low. The degree of variability in compliance improvement and absence of compliance items following the training suggest that other
factors beyond simple knowledge of legal components contribute to well developed transition plans.

Finn and Kohler (2009) also show improvements in compliance to be significantly different when analyzed by region, but not by disability category, supporting the idea that localized variables impact a team’s ability to develop proper IEPs. This study makes the important note that although compliance is a valued outcome of transition scrutiny, it is not necessarily synonymous with positive, long-term transition outcomes for students. Reducing evaluations of success to the examination of checked boxes within a legal document has significant limitations. Considerations of the quality of services and the degree to which they are implemented holds most of the evaluative weight when compared to mere paperwork checking (Finn & Kohler, 2009).

**Long-Term Outcomes**

Many argue that long-term outcomes are better measures of success. The US government prompted one of the largest longitudinal studies seeking data in changes over time in long-term outcomes of students with disabilities following graduation from high school. The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2) began with funding from the U.S. Department of Education in 2001 to analyze the experiences and outcomes of transition age youth over time (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). The NLTS2 collected information on 5,222 participants in two cohort groups at an age range between 16 to 18. Data on social, educational, and disability related factors, and family background were collected and analyzed with respect to various longitudinally analyzed independent variables.
Findings of the NLTS2 (2006) showed improving outcomes for youth with disabilities but still demonstrated a need for improvement. Former high schoolers with disabilities averaged scores of 43 to 57 on ratings of functional skills such as personal living and community living skills in relation to peers without disabilities, who averaged scores of 100. Positive findings showed that 80% of the students followed were participating in post-secondary education, employment, or employment training. However, rates of employment and post-secondary education alone remained below the general population. Only 1 in 10 students with disabilities were participating in government benefit programs, and engagement in community activities for graduates with disabilities dropped 28% in comparison to two years ago. Of particular interest to teachers are the differences noted when outcomes were looked at across disability groups. For example, students with emotional disturbances were most likely to leave the home following high school while students with mental retardation were least likely to be involved in community activities following high school. Such information has potential to be utilized by teachers to strategically improve statistical outcome gaps by providing instruction to counter these anticipated outcomes.

As information about policy implementation and outcomes continues to be published, the educational field is charged with the responsibility of creating effective transition practices. The field is now rich with data on specific approaches and curricular input that have been shown to work with students. The question now is what will work for teachers? Adapting best practices to particular implementation sites is difficult due to the interrelated nature of best practice implementation and the contextual variables
associated with each site. A global statement of best practice is insufficient to create site-based change. Transition improvement at sites not only requires a solid knowledge base of best practice and policy, but also a deeper understanding of the contextual variables driving the school site and its staff. This study will examine the practices at one school site from the perspectives of its service providers in an attempt to understand how transition practices occur at the site and how they can be improved.
Chapter 3

METHODS

Setting and Participants

The focus site for this study was a high school in a small district situated between the Bay Area and Sacramento in northern California. The high school had an enrollment of 1,548 students in the 2009-2010 school year. It was a ninth through twelfth grade comprehensive school with major ethnic student subgroups of Caucasian (42.4%), African American (18.5%), Hispanic/Latino (14.2%), and Filipino (11.1%). The Caucasian subgroup has decreased slightly over the past four school years as the Hispanic/Latino population has increased. General enrollment increased by approximately one hundred students over the past four years.

The special education population consisted of 129 students served at the high school, making up 8.3% of the population. The largest disability subgroup qualified under Specific Learning Disability as 61% of those being served with IEPs. All other disability subgroups consisted of less than 9% of the population served with IEPs. These disability categories included Other Health Impairment followed by Autism, Speech and Language, Emotional Disturbance, and Mental Retardation.

Special education teachers in the school included four resource level teachers, one of which had part time release as the Transition Partnership Program Coordinator. Two of these resource teachers spent a portion of the day co-teaching with general educators in the area of English. Two additional special education teachers served as special day class teachers and spent a portion of the day co-teaching with general educators in the areas of
math and science. Special educators previously made up approximately 8% of the teaching population. However, general education teacher layoffs during the year of this study have adjusted that figure to 11% of the teaching staff.

Purposeful sampling was used to select data sources for this study. This sampling method seeks participants that will be most likely to lend rich information related to the desired topic (Creswell, 2008). Both participants and documents were selected to allow for the creation of a framework outlining relationships in transition service delivery at the high school. Additional sampling of documents took place in accordance with theoretical sampling used in grounded theory studies (Glasser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This sampling allowed the researcher to seek additional data-rich sources as analysis and coding progressed and included specific IEPs not randomly selected, but representative of small populations of students identified during participant interviews.

Participants were chosen from three stake-holding groups: administrators, Designate Instruction and Service (DIS) personnel, and special education teachers. These subgroups were chosen because they were the direct service providers of secondary transition services. Special education teachers were the sole participant group that also fulfilled the roles of case managers. They were referred to in this study as either Case Manager A, B, C, D, E, or F. Purposeful sampling of administrators was done to interview two of the four current administrators. They were chosen based on their knowledge of and level of participation in service delivery from the 2006-2007 to the 2009-2010 school years. Additionally, the Director of Special Education for the district
was interviewed. Administrators, including the Director of Special Education, were referred to in this study as either Administrator A, B, or C.

DIS service providers included all significant providers that provide both direct and consultative services related to transition for students. This included the speech and language therapist, school psychologist, and occupational therapist. These participants were referred to as either Service Provider A, B, or C in this study. Behavior specialists and adaptive PE specialists were omitted because their services were not being utilized in any IEPs at the high school site at the time of the study.

As previously mentioned, there were a total of six special education teachers at the site. These teachers acted as case managers for the students undergoing transition and were charged with the documentation and maintenance of IEPs and ITPs. All case managers were interviewed for the study. Confidentiality was maintained through the removal of participant names and replacement of their names with a letter code.

Procedure and Data Collection

*Interviews*

This study included qualitative data gathered through individual, semi-structured interviews. Permission to conduct the study was requested in writing from the participating district. Following acquisition of consent from all interview participants, individual interviews were scheduled on the school site after school hours. These interviews were tape recorded to allow for coding at a later time. General interview questions focused on the participants’ understanding of the transition process and how it was actualized at this site. Participants’ perceptions of strengths and need areas in terms
of the transition process, levels of success of transition, and future goals for the transition program were documented.

In addition, each stake-holder group was asked supplementary interview questions based on the provider’s function in transition. For example, administrators were asked about their role regarding the tracking of the site’s long-term transition outcomes, and case managers were asked about paperwork management. Utilizing grounded-theory techniques, interviews included later follow up questions as data was analyzed to gain clarification and further detail (Glasser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Any notes taken by the researcher during interviews were verified through member checking with each participant to ensure that accurate understanding and recording was achieved. (See Appendix B)

**Records Review**

Individualized Transition Plans, or ITPs, were sampled for document analysis and acted as evidence of how the transition process operated at this site. Of the 129 active ITPs at the site at the time of the study, 25% were randomly sampled for a total of 32 ITPs. All identifying information was first removed and documents and replaced with a numerical coded. Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected from these sampled ITPs. Quantitative data collected included percentages of outside agency involvement, roles of participants at the IEP meeting, quantities and types of transition goals relative to academic ones, and demographic information such as disability type and grade level.
Qualitative data gathered from the records review looked at connections between assessments and transition goals, sequencing of transition goals, statements of desired long term outcomes, and levels of student involvement in the development of the ITP. Additional relevant data was recorded from ITPs following indications in participant interview data that such sampling would yield relevant supplementary information.

Data Analysis

As data was collected, grounded-theory guidelines guided the data analysis process. Unlike most experimental designs where data is first collected and then analyzed, grounded-theorists rely on constant comparison, a process whereby ongoing interchange between data collection and data processing occurs (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). During the process of interviewing participants and analyzing documents, the data was coded using open-coding. This process called for data to be dissected into bits of information and given a code that represented that information in a word or two. In this process, Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe data as being “broken down, conceptualized, and put back together in new ways” (p. 57). As these codes formed patterns, categories were developed that incorporated the codes. Codes that appeared relevant sometimes prompted the researcher to seek additional data from participants or data sources.

As categories were developed, meaningful relationships amongst categories were outlined in the axial coding process (Ghezeljeh & Emami, 2009). In this process, the focus was on the phenomena of transitioning a high school student from this school site. All relevant categories were described in relation to this event and were coded as causal factors, consequences, etc. The relationships between categories and the phenomena of
transitioning were diagramed in a framework. Following the creation of a graphic
description of the transition process, a cohesive written account with descriptions of
linking themes was written. Ultimately, a grounded theory described the transition
process at this site from the perspectives of its service providers.
Chapter 4

FINDINGS

This chapter will discuss the results following the collection and analysis of data from participant interviews and IEP document analysis. Transition service delivery at this site could be broken down into three large interacting categories: current practices seen in classrooms and in IEP documentation, influences on the service delivery process by transition team members, and outcomes of students who transitioned out of this high school. A series of descriptors helped to elaborate on the connections between the categories and highlight the degree of diversity necessary in transition service delivery.

Contextual Dimensions

Among the first trends found resulting from data analysis was the need for contextualized descriptions and situational referencing as participants responded to questions about current and improving practices. Service providers relied heavily on setting the parameters within which their answers would apply. For example, when asked about settings in which students were served with transition services, most service providers qualified their answers with descriptions of specific populations. When asked what would the site need to successfully transition a student, Case Manager C responded with the question, “Which student, which family? Is this a student with a learning disability or functional life needs?” Another example occurred when participants were asked about future directions for service provision. Most service providers held their answers contingent upon the availability of resources. While describing possible programming solutions, Service Provider A qualified her answer by saying, “I don’t
know how we would do it, you know, where the money is, but I think it’s a great idea.”

Further analysis of transcripts revealed participants’ consistent need for setting contextual contingencies before they felt comfortable responding in depth to an interview question.

A series of descriptors emerged that qualified and gave contextual meaning to participant responses. Called dimensions in grounded theory research (Glasser & Strauss, 1967), these descriptors were scales, or ranges, of a particular aspect of transition service provision. For instance, the level of instruction dimension involved teachers describing a range of material and objectives taught to students and fell anywhere between the parameters of standards-based, academic instruction to transitional, community-based instruction. In other words, this dimension described the content that was taught to students. Service providers often set the context of their answer somewhere within this range before elaborating on their responses. The five dimensions identified included: descriptions of level of instruction offered, peer groupings, level of individualization, level of skill development, and student need. (See Figure 1). Multiple dimensions correlated with one another and helped to identify patterns within transition service delivery at this site.

Three broader dimensions also seemed to apply throughout participant responses. These dimensions included level of interdependency, temporal context, and level of permanency. The descriptions below elaborate on the dimensions that will later be discussed within the context of participant responses and the components of an emerging theory of transition service delivery at this school site.
Figure 1: Dimensions

**DIMENSIONS DESCRIBING CURRENT PRACTICES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of Instruction Offered</strong></td>
<td>Standards-based Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-standards based Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peer Groupings</strong></td>
<td>Students without IEPs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students with IEPs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of Individualization</strong></td>
<td>Standard Classroom Practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unique Classroom Expectations and Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of Skill Development</strong></td>
<td>Skill Mastery and Application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Skill Exposure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Need</strong></td>
<td>Intensive Support Need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimal Support Need</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BROADLY APPLICABLE DIMENSIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interdependency</strong></td>
<td>Highly Interdependent on Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Temporal</strong></td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Permanency</strong></td>
<td>Fixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fluxuating</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Level of Instruction Offered

This dimension described the type of educational content taught to a particular group of students by service providers. It ranged from the extremes of standards-based, college preparation academics exclusively to community-based, transition skills only. This dimension was used when discussing educational settings, specific populations, the development of goals, and other instruction related responses.

Peer Groupings

This dimension described the peer grouping of a given setting in which services were provided from classrooms only with students without IEPs to classrooms where all students had an IEP. It allowed for a description of the level of inclusion a particular student experienced. The size of the peer grouping correlated with whether or not students had IEPs. Larger classes had fewer students with IEPs and averaged approximately 35 students per class. Classes in which every student had an IEP averaged eight students per class.

Level of Individualization

Level of individualization encompassed the degree to which a student's educational instruction and/or curricular material was adjusted from the standard. This dimension ranged from standard classroom expectations to heavily modified systems designed for individual students.

Level of Skill Development

The level to which a student was expected to master a certain concept, determined by the IEP team and by teachers providing the instruction, was described in the
dimension of level of skill development. This dimension had a scale anywhere from skill acquisition and simple exposure to a concept to skill application and generalization of skills and concepts.

**Student Need**

This unique dimension describes how students were categorized. Service providers discussed the intensity and extent of students’ special education service need. This range rated student needs from most intensive to least intensive. Despite descriptions of individualization, service providers also grouped these same students as falling into two distinct categories of SDC and RSP. Whether a participant used descriptive ranges or the two distinct categories to describe population was dependent upon other dimensions framing the conversation. For example, when discussing setting and population, SDC or RSP was often used. However, when discussing content and population, the specific level of the student need were described.

**Interdependency**

Interdependency was a broader dimension referring to how decisions and services were provided. Some aspects of service provision were done in isolation while others were done cooperatively. The level of interdependency can refer to how a process should be done according to best practice research or how it is done in practice.

**Temporal**

This broad dimension applied to almost every response. Planning student transitions naturally included references to current and future expectations. However, suggestions improve practice and discussions about content also relied upon setting a
time reference before further elaboration could be made by the participant. Interestingly, the range for this dimension included periods from the present to future settings. Very few participants made mention of past practices, students, histories, etc.

**Permanency**

The final broad dimension was closely related to the temporal dimension. Participants often qualified their answers with references and contingencies upon resources, settings, and populations as either remaining the same or changing. Participants viewed components of service provision as being fixed or in flux. Coupled with the temporal dimension, these two ranges helped to account for the variety of responses given by participants, as so many answers referred to fluctuating and future contexts.

**Depiction of the Transitioning Process Theory**

The data gathered from participant interviews, participation at the site, and document analysis were analyzed and during analysis, a cohesive theory explaining the process of transitioning out of high school for students with IEPs emerged. Three primary interacting categories, current practice, influences, and outcomes, were identified as the driving forces that created a particular transition experience for each student. The most frequently and extensively described category referenced during participant interviews was that of current practices. This category described what one would see happening in classrooms, IEP meetings, and other interactions with students and members of the IEP team. Current practice was composed of smaller sub-components including student population, setting of instruction, content taught, and method of service
delivery. These sub-components interacted with one another and when examined holistically resulted in current practice. In other words, the sub-components created current practice and could be used to describe a student’s experience with transition at any given moment in his or her education.

Another category, influences, described what individual factors were brought into the service delivery process by participants (i.e., teachers, administrators, and service delivery providers). These influences included participants’ preferences for transition service delivery, their experiences with transition services, and their perceptions of efficacy of the transition process. Similar to the subcomponents of current practice, all service providers’ preferences, experiences, and perceptions were interconnected. Each subcomponent of influences held notable trends in very specific areas of the transition process. Preferences for transition service delivery determined the provider’s individual goals for the transition process. In addition, when service providers perceived a contribution in transition practice as efficacious and leading to positive outcomes, this element of transition was desired and deemed a necessary resource for transition.

The components of influences mutually interacted with the components of current practice, creating a relationship between the two categories. For example, as participants delivered transition services current practice, they evaluated their experiences and shaped their expectations for future practice. These changing perceptions and preferences, in turn, shaped how current practice was implemented and explained how much of the diversity found within current practice was related to individual service provider’s contributions.
Interestingly, the third category discovered was found through the absence of data. As pointed out by some service providers, data on student outcomes following transition were deficient or nonexistent. Clearly, there were student outcomes, but they were not examined by the participants. Though both current practice and influences would have created particular student outcomes, there was no process to connect this information back to practices and the shaping of perceptions, leaving practices in service delivery with limited evidence to support their efficacy.

The detailed connections amongst categories of current practices, influences, and outcomes, and their sub-components made the individual sub-components difficult to isolate. As IEP teams focused on a given sub-component, content, for example, all other sub-components were impacted. A change in one area ultimately led to the adjustment of all other areas. For the purposes of this paper, it is necessary to describe these interactions in a linear format. However, Figure 2 depicts the cyclical nature of the theory in operation as interactions amongst categories and sub-categories took place. The complexities of these interactions are detailed below.

**Current Practice**

The category of current practice accounted for the majority of data presented directly within the transcripts and supported by the evidence found in analyzed IEPs. Current practice described what was seen and experienced by participants undergoing the transition process at this site. The interactions between its components of setting, population, content, and methodology were complex and dependent upon one another. Sub-components are described separately, but in relation to one another. The service that
Figure 2: Depiction of Transitioning Process Theory

The above figure represents the interactions between three categories, current practices, influences of service providers, and outcomes. Both current practices and influences are made up of smaller, interacting sub-components. The category of outcomes indicates an unexamined link to current practice and influences due to a lack of outcome data.
a student receives represents decisions made by the IEP team in terms of each sub-component, sometimes emphasizing or placing precedence on particular components over others. These interactions, described below, were further defined by the dimensions discussed previously.

*Placement in Relation to Content, Methodology, and Population*

Three different settings for providing students with transition information were identified at this site, each presenting patterns in population, content, and methodology. The settings included classes entitled “career pathways” in the general education setting, the provision of transition content embedded within general education and special education academic courses, and a transition-specific, special education course. Service provider responses indicated the transition specific class as the most desirable setting, but found a need to improve all three settings as well as establish new ones.

*Career pathways.* Included in the district’s graduation requirements was a consecutive, two year block of career oriented classes. The CTE (Career and Technical Education) department offered these content specific elective classes as a foundation in a given career field chosen by the student. This class requirement fulfilled one of the best practice recommendations discussed in the literature. Though recognized in the current literature as an effective method of providing transition service (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997), many service providers at this site were unsatisfied with the level of involvement students had in their career pathway courses, deeming them ineffective in delivery of transition content.
Case managers pointed to problems in accessing career pathways through the focus site’s scheduling process. Ten different career pathways existed for students to choose. Each student listed six elective choices when filling out their course request forms in order to place them in a career pathway. Of the ten career pathways, four contained some explicit transition related content. The remainder provided an arts or music foundation. Related Service Provider B pointed out the inadequacies of relying on career pathways as a setting for transition content. She described how the schedule forced some career pathway choices of students:

A lot of times the career pathways are just whatever’s available according to the schedule. And here’s what they were placed into, and let’s continue on with that, and so it’s not always a choice that was made by the student, it’s a circumstance.

Case managers discussed their efforts to encourage students to take career pathways that offered transition content. Another case manager pointed out that despite efforts to ensure students have access to these pathways, there were barriers to following through in a meaningful way. Students were not usually given their top choices or were placed in a class where the content was taught at too high a level to be accessible in a meaningful way. Case Manager B said:

I had a student in the Business class. She was struggling with it. I mean the reading level was way over her head. They did like two weeks on check booking and then went into business book keeping and accounting, and I was still working with her on the steps of checking. That’s just one kid out of thirty on my caseload
while I’m teaching five classes of my own and trying to support everyone in their own career pathway classes.

A third case manager pointed to how difficulties in supporting students through the material offered in career pathways shaped case manager preferences. Case Manager D said, “Sometimes I’m happier when they get an art class. I don’t have to worry about getting them through that, and then there’s more time to get them through the tough stuff like English.”

Although the two career specific vocational training courses taken consecutively is best practice, this site struggled with the implementation of the practice. The result was a need for additional settings to prepare students for their exits from high school General and special education academic classes. Service providers recognized the value in having classes in which transition content could be provided within academic curriculum. For example, a requirement of all freshmen English classes is a report involving research on a career of interest. Several service providers pointed out the transition teams often missed opportunities to provide additional transition content through currently offered general education courses, rather than through a special education, transition specific course. Case Manager A stated:

And in our own classrooms we’ve also got hooked on that idea that it’s all about academics, but getting our own teachers to actually integrate, well, work readiness skills, making that connection with government and jobs, independent living. Making that connection and making it clear that this is important. They all think
"well, oh, we have to put them in the Voc Prep [a transition specific special education] class,’ when actually we can service them across the board.”

Another case manager supported the general feeling that not enough was being done to address embedded transition content within academic classes. Case Manager D described the process of explicitly identifying embedded transition content as a responsibility of special education case managers:

And I think it’s our job to be looking at how we can incorporate more transition pieces into our academic programs and be cognicent of that when we’re teaching these students, and more at their IEPs. That’s something that we’re not doing very well right now, myself included. I don’t have a large transitional piece in my math program designed to get them through the Exit Exam, so I’m guilty of that too, like anyone else.

Other service providers saw opportunities to document transition instruction following some collaborative work teachers of general education elective courses offered within the Career and Technical Education (CTE) department. Case Manager C described accounting for transition components within a home economics class while supplementing similar content in her special education class:

Through the CTE people have given me a scope and sequence and the standards which they use. So if a kid has been in Consumer Living I can actually check off some of these things [transition requirements], but you have to know what’s going on in the classrooms. [Teacher’s name] does a lot of simulation activities. In some ways I parallel her, and then we break off.
Much of the integrated transition content is provided in elective classes in a general education setting. Nevertheless, additional difficulties for students accessing integrated transitional content within have presented themselves in the 2010 school year. In March of 2010, the school board announced cuts to the CTE department. The classes cut included those with the most direct and explicit transitional content referenced above in the quote from Case Manager C. Independent Living, Consumer Life Sciences, Foods, and Advanced Foods classes all offered content related to living as an adult after high school within a general education setting. The content taught in CTE classes fulfilled the best practice of providing evidenced-based instruction for students with functional curricula needs (Baer, Flexer, & Simmons, 2007). In the previous year, the site endured cuts to the Work Experience program that had offered students two periods of community-based work experience in businesses of student choice, another best practice in transition. The elimination of these programs leaves additional challenges in providing transition content within general education settings. These future challenges have yet to be evaluated by the special education service team.

*Vocational Preparation class.* The Vocational Preparation class offered solely to students with disabilities in their senior year for those whose schedules allow for it acted as the foundation for transitional content. There was much satisfaction and reliance from service providers on the existence of the Vocational Preparation program at this site. Any overlap in transition content with other classes was seen as valuable reinforcement of concepts by the service provision team, and direct instruction in this setting was
described by participants as necessary for students to attain transition skills and knowledge.

The Vocational Preparation class offered direct instruction in job development skills and was supported and partially funded through the Transition Partnership Program (TPP). As part of the curriculum, students completed applications to the Department of Rehabilitation and were visited weekly in their second semester by a Transition Coordinator from the SELPA. This class followed the best practice of collaboration, and was the only educational setting in which students were connected to outside agencies through the activities done in the class.

The content of the class was transition specific, rather than integrated within academic content standards. Transition skills were taught through direct instruction, practice, and repetition. Case Manager E pointed to the need for such explicit teaching that occurs in this transition specific class when she pointed out, “There’s much research on the need for direct instruction in the academic areas, and I think that that follows suit in the transition areas as well. They’re not just going to pick it up like other students.”

The teacher of the Vocational Preparation class described some of the benefits of encountering the same material through career pathways and once again in the Vocational Preparation class in more detail: “The kids in my class got a double dose which was fine. Oh yeah, that’s good for students.”

Despite the reliance on the Vocational Preparation class, there was a consensus for the need to begin the class earlier in the high school years and offer it to more students. Service Provider A said, “I think there’s a need to start them in their junior
year. To start them…maybe to give them more time to develop working habits…working
with others.” Service Provider B echoed the call to provide direct transition instruction
earlier:

Yeah, the schedule thing is a huge issue. And I’m sorry, we’re special education
and we’re going to allow one year of them to learn these skills. That’s not
sufficient. We need a class like that every year.

Vocational Preparation’s use of direct instruction and explicit teaching of work-
related skills as well as its facilitation of adult agency connections made it the best
evidence based practice recommendations operating at this site. However,
the limitations on the population that may access the class, only some special education
students, and its ability to service only seniors demonstrated practices counter to best
practice and indicated room for improvement.

*Population in Relation to Content, Placement, and Methodology*

A second interacting component of current practice involved the individual
students within a population and how they were grouped to allow for providing services.
Service providers’ recognized the existence of a continuum of student needs from most
intense to least intense in any given skill area. Despite the recognition of each individual
within the population, all special education students were clustered into two groups of
SDC (special day class) and RSP (resource). For instance, when asked about the goal of
special education transition services Administrator A asked for clarification: “Well which
special ed kids? You have your resource kids. You have your special day class.”
Language such as SDC and RSP originate from an old model of credentialing and classification that was intended to describe a placement for students. The use of these terms has since been removed from credentialing language (CCTC, 2010). Following the original intended meaning of the definitions, students in special day classes received the majority of their instruction in a classroom with all special education students and a special education teacher. Resource students were typically offered general education curriculum in either general education with a mixed group of general education and special education students. Support was generally provided by a special education teacher in a “learning center” for the period of time specified in the IEP or through collaboration with a general education teacher.

The terms SDC and RSP at this site were misused to refer to specific populations rather than settings where students received services. The result was a system entrenched with terminology utilized incorrectly to describe groupings of student population rather than settings of service provision. Caseloads and hiring practices drove the treatment of students in these two specific groups depending upon the case manager assigned. The district contract limited caseload maximums based on the labels of SDC and RSP and hired teachers according to those labels. SDC caseloads were capped lower than RSP caseloads with the rationale that students in SDC placements needed more intensive support. The overgeneralization of rationale led to the practice of placing those students in settings as a group regardless of any particular strengths in specific skill or subject areas. In other words, the terms were generalized to place a student in either group based
on his/her level of perceived need across all skill groups as either higher need (SDC) or lower need (RSP).

*Content in Relation to Placement, Population, and Methodology*

*Changing content.* The type of transition content taught was highly related to the placement settings in which it was taught. As discussed earlier, transition content could be provided directly within special education and certain career pathway classes or embedded within academic curricula in special or general education placements. At one time, SDC classes serving students with the greatest overall need were assumed to offer modified content that did not correspond to state standards. RSP classes were to offer standards-based academic content with support from a special education teacher. General education classes offered standards-based, academic content and were taught by a general education teacher. The ability of special education teachers in SDC classes to create curriculum not in line with standards, but rather in line with IEP goals, allowed for them to impart a greater amount of transition content within these special education settings. Therefore, SDC students traditionally received more direct transition instruction.

The small population of the school district, the push towards the best practice of inclusion, and reduced funding for career pathway classes increased the number of participants in general education, thereby reducing the number of students taught directly by special education teachers. For example, an SDC (non-standards based) World History class, RSP (standards based and supported) World History class, and general education World History class were all offered at the same time. As co-teaching was
adopted in general education classes, it was thought appropriate by many IEP teams to place students into these co-taught class that offered support in a more inclusive setting.

The result left only a few students remaining in the SDC and RSP classes. It was deemed fiscally inappropriate to run two small classes, each with a credentialed teacher. Therefore, these two classes were combined. The impact on content was a reduced ability to provide direct transition content in a class that now needed to provide both standards and non-standards based content in order to address the mixed needs of this combined population. Over the last five years, different groups of student populations, each with its own unique collective of need across its individual members, has prompted the grouping and separation of classes across the curriculum, resulting in an ever-changing array of placements options. These changing placement options caused the amount of transition content offered to change year after year. Service Provider C expressed concern over the current state of content and class offerings with the anticipation of a population change in the near future.

Provider: In two year’s, because I know what the forthcoming population is at the middle school, it’s gonna be a different ball game.

Laurel: What do you think we’re going to need for that group?

Provider: Those people are going to need to know signage. They’re gonna need to know more safety issues.

Laurel: Are we equipped to provide that?

Provider: Not at this particular time. I think we have teaching staff that is capable. Will they be here in two years, who knows? Because of budget cuts or sanity.
And is the district willing to reinitiate a program that was let go because of student population. So that’s gotta go before the board. You gotta go through all this homework in order to create a program for students that are coming up the road.

In short, the struggle to provide both academic standards and transitional content with limited resources, at times, created competition amongst the two types of content. Case Manager B evaluated the team’s current ability to provide transition content:

I think that we are attempting to do it [provide transition content] in bits and pieces, but I wouldn’t say that we’re doing it well. Mostly due to the constraints placed upon us regarding requirements set forth by the district, because there is a certain academic component that they must meet. There’s only six and a half hours each day that you have these kids, and they’re working so hard towards the academic components that I don’t feel that we do have the opportunity to give them enough time to deal with the transitional pieces.

Documentation of content. In addition to finding balance between academic and transitional content, a challenge for the service provision team included how to document the type of content each student received in this fluxuating system of class offerings. It was largely left to the teacher to document whether a given class had provided standards based instruction or not. This accountability of content directly impacted the type of exit document, either a diploma or a Certificate of Completion, a student was to receive.

Diplomas are viewed as one indicator of successful transition (Benz, et al., 2004; Benz, et al., 2000) and document the provision of a standard-based level of content
throughout a student’s high school career. The increase in placements of special education students in standards-based classes through inclusion offered the opportunity for more exposure to grade-level, standards-based content and a greater number of students expected to earn diplomas. To earn a diploma, students were at one time required to pass the CAHSEE (California High School Exit Examination) in addition to acquiring the standards-based content. The state of California suspended the CAHSEE requirement for students with IEPs temporarily, allowing them to earn diplomas if they met state and district standards. Furthermore, additional SDC students became eligible to earn a diploma regardless of placement if it could be shown that standards were met within the classes provided. Where transition content traditionally had been more prevalent in SDC classes, the new opportunity to offer heavily accommodated, standards-based instruction for diplomas to students with significant support needs stressed the competition between the provision of direct transition content and academic content in a special education setting.

Although a diploma was desirable, it did not allow for students to access additional community-based transition instruction. Students earning a Certificate of Completion had the advantage of continued public education services until the age of twenty-two or until the IEP team and district deemed that they had met the requirements for a diploma. Specifically, students continuing beyond high school with a Certificate of Completion had the option of placement in a community-based, transitioning class that connected with the Department of Rehabilitation and Office of Social Security. Because this option for placement was only available to students receiving non-standards based
instruction, IEP teams for students with the most significant needs had to choose between community-based transition training or a diploma, both considered to be best practices in transition.

Methodology in Relation to Placement, Population, and Content

Increasing emphasis on methodology. The degree to which transition content was provided and mastered was heavily related to above described fluctuating system of changing class offerings. Non-standards based SDC classes allowed the most time for direct instruction in transition. For example, one adopted English text for an SDC level class was *English for the World of Work* (Knox, 2003). This text was used in English classes at one time to provide work related English skills to students needing explicit explanation of the content in order to gain mastery of these skills. However, with the combination of students accessing standards and those requiring modifications of academic content placed in a single classroom, the amount of this direct transition instruction has decreased. Therefore, an increased reliance was created on transition content integrated into academic curricula rather than on direct instruction.

This integration of transition content required IEP teams to pay greater attention to prioritizing which transition skills needed to be taught and how teaching would have to adapt to allow for their provision within an academic context. Teams also needed to consider what levels of mastery of transition skills were required for each individual student. A student may have only needed exposure to one transition skill while requiring repetitive application based activities to master another. These determinations had the ability to impact the type of classes offered. If a large enough population of students
were determined by IEP teams to need direct transition instruction, a separate SDC class may have been created in that year. If the population needing that type of instruction was small, then a reliance on integration within academic settings with great consideration for teaching methodology would be made.

In determining what placements and content made the appropriate fit for a student, IEP teams acknowledged that service offerings could not be perfect for every student. Remediating any deficiencies in setting and content occurred through the specifications of methodology outlined in IEP documents. For example, IEPs specified goals and modifications specific to altered content expectations for students with the most need included in general education classes. IEP teams relied heavily on methodological approaches within classrooms to make transition content accessible, and yet documentation of these methods and a team’s approach to transition were perceived as poor by service providers and will be discussed further below.

**Documentation of Methodology.** Service providers point to weaknesses in the documentation of transition service within IEPs. When asked who does the documenting, the response amongst all service groups was the case manager. The DIS providers discussed collaboration with case managers to cooperatively design portions of the IEP. Nearly all service providers who wrote the IEPs viewed their ability to capture a team vision of service provision as weak. In contrast, those asked only to utilize the documents, but who did not have a heavy role in the development of the document, namely administrators, viewed the IEPs as adequate and useful for service provision. This discrepancy in satisfaction of IEP paperwork illustrated a disconnect in the team’s
vision of methodological approaches to transition and their ability to document those approaches.

Three of six teachers took part in the SELPA’s training on completing ITP forms within the IEP. The ITP forms have changed four times in the past five years. ITP document analysis revealed that all six case managers completed the forms in different ways including where transition assessments, activities, and goals were recorded within the ITP. Moreover, case managers did not accurately document the degree to which they were providing transition instruction.

The majority of IEPs had two to three goals that were supportive in transitional areas based on evidence based practices discussed in Chapter 2 (Test, et al., 2009). For example, 60% of IEPs included a goal about career exploration and the identification of career areas of interest. Other examples of goals included those of self-regulatory behaviors, such as utilizing daily planner systems and self-advocacy goals like asking to use accommodations. All 32 IEPs sampled included at least one of these goals. However, of these IEPs, only 30% of the IEPs marked these goals as a transition goal in the accurate location within the ITP and on state compliance reporting forms. The confusion with ITP paperwork and the lack of understanding of what creates a transition goal may be producing lower state compliance scores for transition than what actually existed in practice at this site. Though many IEPs had transition goals, not all participants recognized them as such.

The interactions amongst teaching methodology, settings, student population, and content are difficult to separate into individually analyzed subcomponents. A change in
one component usually triggered shifting in another, making the rationale of transition
service practices for a given student difficult to trace. Each rationale was created through
the collective decision making process of an IEP team.

To understand how transition services practices came to exist in their current
state at this site, one must also understand the driving influences and pressures
experienced by each member of those IEP teams. Beyond the components of practice
listed above, existed a set of influences that helped to drive the decision making process
and impact current practice. These influences were not what was seen by an individual
looking at IEPs or walking through the site, but found when examining the service
 provision team’s responses in a broader scope.

Influences of Service Providers

The category of influences describes attitudes and approaches each service
 provision team member brought to an IEP team and how individual experiences,
perceptions, and preferences with transition service delivery impacted current practice as
a whole. Influences of service providers is a category that explains how service providers
have interacted with transition service, thereby affecting the current practices students
experienced.

Preferences for Transition

Each participant was asked about his or her own views guiding individual
transition practices. When asked about the goals of transition, Case Manager E was very
specific in her response, “I believe we need to create a literate group of students who
understand major conceptual issues in math, science, history, English. They understand
at least the overall concept.” Case Manager D responded with, “They need diplomas. They need to graduate so they can move on to college.” Case Manager A pointed to the temporal nature of a team’s goal in light of population and programming changes:

I think our biggest goal is also the academics just because of the constraints and the need and the desire to get the kids to pass the Exit Exam. That’s what we’ve been pushing for the last two years, and our programming represents that need. Our classes represent that need.

Other service providers were less specific when asked about their transition objectives. One service provider included the statement, “I don’t know exactly what transition looks like.” Case Manager C, when asked about the goal of transition, delineated different goals for different levels of students. Seniors were determined to need connections with outside support agencies versus freshmen, who were described as needing career exploration. Of note, a common goal across service providers did not exist.

The lack of a common goal from the service provision team as a whole offered an opportunity for individuals to define and establish their own set of purposes for transition service provision. The result was a series of “individual twists” on standard IEP procedures and specific services given to students correlating with the case manager or service team. For example, one case manager who made transition a priority stated that she focused on ensuring a student’s participation in a career pathway with direct transition instruction, while a different case manager who valued the CAHSEE ensured that students were entered into preparation courses for the examination. A teacher focusing on reading had direct instruction reading goals within her IEPs. Consequently,
IEPs reflected the individual preferences of the members on the team through the types of goals, services, and methodology documented in the paperwork.

*Experiences with Transition Service Delivery*

*Experiences with role development.* Just as individual preferences influenced IEP team decision making, experiences creating those preferences impacted the roles developed and played by service providers. As seen earlier in the section on the Vocational Preparation class, individuals inadvertently became “experts” in particular roles as service practices were repeated and became engrained. For instance, the reliance on the vocational preparation teacher as the direct transition instructor created a situation in which other service providers were not as pressed to seek out transition opportunities within their own curriculum.

Another example of role development was that of the inclusion or co-teaching specialist. This provider, through working with administration on the implementation of the practice, possessed a set of knowledge that was not shared by others, including how to access classes and scheduling systems related to co-taught classes. Students on this provider’s caseload were more likely to be placed in co-taught classes, and this service provider became the resource for other case managers wishing to access the co-taught classes.

Individualized roles developed through the implementation of individual initiatives which were driven by personal preferences. Many of these initiatives, such as inclusion, work experience, and direct reading instruction, were positive steps towards best practice as a whole for the service provision team. However, they lacked a common
direction or framework within which all initiatives were assessed for cohesion within service provision in its entirety. Interactions amongst the initiatives were not evaluated. For example, the push to include students in CAHSEE preparation classes eliminated their ability to participate in work experience due to a scheduling conflict. Though both initiatives were valued, their design was such that they conflicted in practice. This conflict created competition amongst various transition practices, limiting the extent to which a given student could access transition best practices.

Interestingly, a positive consequence of the creation of a series of “experts” each in a given field was the increase in interdependency and need for teamwork amongst the service provision team. When information and practices were shared, current practice improved in its steps towards the best practice of collaboration. Based on document analysis IEP’s with multiple service providers present considered more service options and created individualized plans to allow access to these services. One such document was IEP that included as plan for divided use of time between the CAHSEE preparation classes and work experience with alternating days.

Experiences with outside agencies. In addition to an increased reliance on one another within the site, interdependency between the site as a whole and the service providers outside the high school was also increasing. However, these interactions appeared to be limited to the SDC case managers and Vocational Preparation teacher. Supporting the current body of research (Asselin, Todd-Allen, & deFur, 1998; Condorman & Katsiyannis, 2002) SDC case managers at this site were perceived as more
transitionally equipped than RSP case managers, particularly in the area of working with multiple service providers and agencies.

As seen earlier, SDC caseloads were created at the site with the rationale that students needing the most support were placed with an “SDC case manager.” The SDC case managers were more likely to encounter agency supports such as Department of Rehabilitation, Office of Social Security, Office of County Mental Health, Regional Centers, and SELPA level program specialists as a result of working with students with more significant needs. In addition, they worked more often and more closely with district personnel such as speech and language pathologists, psychologists, behavior specialists, physical therapists, and assistive technology specialists. The role of agency or service “expert” developed through the grouping of students with an SDC case manager and limited the experience of interdependency on outside agencies to only two of six case managers.

Case managers not having experience with agencies did not discuss the desire to do so. However, they did discuss concern over potential future agency access that their students may one day need. Service Provider A expressed the concern over the future stability of agency support in relation to one case when she asked, “Will that state agency be able to support her in two years with all the cutbacks? That’s a definite concern. This person’s gonna need to be monitored her entire life.” Service Provider C confirmed:

And there’s such a barrier now. They’re already having cutbacks and we have students graduating now. Even now there’s cutbacks, and we’re fighting to get
kids qualified. They’ve [County Mental Health Services] been cutback too you know. There’s only so many services that are going to be tapped into.

The difficulty in understanding program access and the interdependence between both site and agency was considered a challenge by service providers. Discussed earlier in Chapter 2, the effective inclusion of adult service agencies typically eludes most sites and is a point of frustration for both site and agency alike (Knott & Asselin, 1999). In contrast to service providers content with little contact with agencies, service providers with greater access to agencies expressed greater confusion. Service Provider B discussed the uncertainty of transition procedures to the 18-22 Adult Transition Program and frustration with the perceived services offered in the program:

County placements? What makes you eligible? I’m not sure. And I have worked a little bit with the 18-22 Program. And them determining who those students are when it would be appropriate for them to go to community college or the way they do things does not seem quite right. It’s based on convenience…the individualization is still not there.

Service Provider C, who had more interactions with outside agencies, expressed the desire to know be educated further. She said:

I think one of the things that I would like to know, because its constantly changing, would be to have someone come in from one of those agencies. If they could come in and just spend twenty minutes, a half an hour, and explain to us what services are available for a student with these needs. Because we have different agencies we work with. I mean it’d be great to have someone come
from the community college just to tell us. Because it’s always changing, the updated service someone can get.

Experiences with families. Although dissatisfaction with agency interactions was limited to only a few case managers, all service providers noted that experiences with families could be improved. In contrast, administrators stated satisfaction with family involvement, citing their presence at almost all IEP meetings as evidence of positive practices. Discussed in Chapter 2 as another indicator of best practice, family inclusion within the process of planning, development, and implementation of an IEP is essential to the creation of successful transition plans (Noonan, Morningstar, & Erikson, 2008). Participants’ responses and IEP documents indicated a strength in ensuring attendance at the IEP meeting, but a weakness in ensuring parental equality in participation in the planning and development process.

Several case managers described an interdependency on families that was viewed as frustrating rather than helpful. Case Manager B pointed out both this frustration and an obligation of the service provision team to improve relations:

I don’t think there’s much prepping of our families going on. And I think sometimes families come with unrealistic goals for our students, and I don’t know that we necessarily do an adequate job of addressing those and maybe steering the parents towards more appropriate goals by the time they graduate. Then they are left with no goals, and that’s something that we can also be working on.

Service Provider B stated simply, “I don’t think we’re doing a very good job with our families at all.” Despite recognition of a problem with involving families, service
providers cited lack of time as the main reason why an effort to improve relations with families was so difficult.

Overall, as service providers reflected on their experiences with transition, a general feeling of interdependence could be seen amongst providers, agencies, and families that was both helpful at times and frustrating at others. The development of specific roles within the service delivery team resulted from past experiences and preferences and contributed to the need for interdependence within the focus site as well.

Perceptions of Effective Resources

A final point of influence identified as a trend in the data was the availability of resources needed to provide transition services effectively. Resources included the standard monetary, tangible items necessary for education including books, computers, and other materials necessary for instruction. Almost all participants interviewed overtly referred to these items. However, resources identified by service providers also encompassed a more elusive, but equally important set of supports including time, energy, knowledge and expertise, buy-in, motivation, involvement, and willingness to participate as a team. Though not typically thought of as resources, all team members expressed the value such contributions had on the provision of transition services. Therefore, these contributions were considered to be resources because their presence helped promote the transition outcomes and practices desired by the service team.

Greatly valued resources were team member buy-in and motivation. These included the attitudes of other service providers, students, parents, and agencies. Participants felt an inability to control or impact others attitudes. However, they were
grateful when buy-in was present and attributed positive outcomes to plans created with buy-in and motivation from other team members. When buy-in and motivation were absent, team members perceived this as a lack of resources creating a barrier to effective transition. Other resources, accountability and involvement amongst team members, were seen as deficient in current practice. One provider explained: “It’d be great if the admin was actually listening during the meeting or holding people accountable for some their actions during the meeting. But some of the admin don’t seem to have a purpose in the meeting, so I wouldn’t be too sad if they weren’t there.” In other words a reliable, accountable transition team was considered a valuable resource that could be improved at the focus site.

A lack of time was mentioned by all service providers as the largest barrier to effective service delivery of transition. As discussed above, transition content most often competed for time with academic content in the classroom. Providers pointed out that not enough time existed for collaboration, documentation, planning, and follow through. Particularly troublesome was the ever-increasing requirement to keep up with legal changes and documentation. Case Manager D pointed out, “I could either write it [plans for transition] or do it, but I don’t have time for both.” The lack of time service providers had to perform all service delivery tasks including, documentation, teaching, and collaborating, caused some case managers to prioritize which tasks would be done according to best practice and which tasks would be addressed if time remained.

In summary, service providers referred to contributions from other team members as having the greatest overall ability to make a transition for a student effective. These
perceptions of valued resources offer new insight into opportunities for improvements in service provision that will allow for the most effective student transitions.

*Outcomes of the Transition Process*

The final category of outcomes was developed due to an absence of confirming data. Several service providers pointed out that long-term outcomes of students who had received transition services were not tracked. Chapter 2 illustrated how many of the evidence based practices were identified by making correlations between desirable outcomes and the practices that were provided during public schooling years. (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004) Without tracking of transition outcomes following high school, the service provision team at this site was unable to evaluate the efficacy of services offered or to adjust those services accordingly.

Nearly all service providers made comments reflecting uncertainty with both short and long-term outcomes of transition for students following high school. One case manager candidly stated, “Is it working? I’m not out there after they leave us, but I don’t have a lot of faith that it’s doing its purpose.” Service Provider C also pointed out the lack of knowledge the team has about the true outcomes of students:

What happens when they walk out that door after graduation we have absolutely no control over. We don’t even ever half the time hear what happens to them. So we really never get any feedback as to how we’re doing. I mean, we think we’re setting them up and preparing them and sending them out there. We never really know how we did. We’re not getting any real feedback. We’re guessing. That’s all we can do is guess.
The uncertainty of actual student outcomes left the transition service team unable to adjust its practices with knowledge of how changes would impact real outcomes. Instead data available during high school years such as state testing and CAHSEE scores were used to guide placement decisions and the direction of the IEP team. However, long-term data is necessary to adjust practices accordingly, and participants recognized the deficiency of information in this area. Perceived barriers to gathering these data included the reliance on the student to supply ongoing correct contact information, legal and confidentiality requirements, and money and time to track such outcomes.

Inevitably, positive outcomes following graduation from high school is the impetus for all the research, literature, laws, and classroom practices related to high school transitioning of students with disabilities. The transition service delivery team at this site acknowledged the importance of the student outcomes following high school, but noted that there were a lack of resources needed to track and connect these outcomes to the transition service inputs that may have caused them. Until long-term transition outcomes are documented, fidelity in implementation of best practices is the only measure of success available to gauge the efficacy of transition service delivery at this site.

These findings demonstrate the complex interactions that took place in one comprehensive high school in order to transition students with disabilities to post-secondary settings. Because current practices are influenced by service providers, several recommendations can be made to improve site level transition implementation. The following chapter will discuss conclusions drawn from these results and highlight
opportunities to expand transition research in order to improve long-term transition outcomes for students leaving high school.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

This study sought to examine the process of transitioning students with disabilities out of a northern California high school from the perspectives of the service providers supporting the transition process. This chapter will explore conclusions drawn from the study’s findings in connection with previous transition theories and research. Finally, recommendations for practice, both at a site level and at a special education service field level, and suggestions for future research are presented.

Discussion and Conclusions

The main findings of this study observed that: (a) current practice in transition at this site was shaped by influences applied by individual service providers; (b) long term student outcomes were unexamined at this site and did not impact fluctuation in service provision in a purposeful way; (c) diversity found in transition service delivery was the result of the specific dimensions or variables in education; and (d) some transition best practices were being implemented, but not in a coordinated way. Conclusions resulting from these finding included: (a) the need to evaluate long-term student outcomes following transition out of high school at this site; (b) the need for service providers to evaluate its current practices in light of student outcome data in order to identify effective patterns of transition practice in the classroom; and (c) the need to identity and adjust prioritization patterns of variables such as content, setting, and methodology to perpetuate specific transitional practices in the classroom that were identified as efficacious.
The transition field currently contains a large body of research on the components of transition and practices that produce positive results in students’ long-term transition outcomes. Nonetheless, the current body of transition research holistically provides a picture of how students with disabilities fare against those without disabilities in long-term living outcomes, revealing continued discrepancies in success after several decades. It also reveals struggles by those charged with providing transition service to implement evidenced based practices. In order to improve long-term outcomes for students with disabilities, the challenges with implementation are important to understand.

The current study supports the findings regarding challenges in implementing researched based practices in transition. The analysis of provider attitudes revealed insecurities when working with agencies, difficulty meeting compliance requirements when filling out IEP paperwork, and challenges related to time and resources. These findings may assist in illuminating how practices, through their implementation within context by individual service providers, can actually become practices that are no longer faithful to the intended evidence based practice. Further explanation of this process is provided below.

*Prioritization of Variables Caused by Contextual Limits at a Site*

Transition law and best practice research dictate the need to individualize an educational experience for a student with a disability in order to address his or her unique transition needs. This mandate produces a variety of options, or variables, that can be determined by service providers to create this individualized experience. In this study, these variables were described as dimensions and included options for service providers
to determine the level of content taught, the peer groupings with whom a student was taught, the level of individualization a student was provided with in the classroom, the level of skill development expected from that student, and the types of needs of the student that service providers addressed. These variables were impacted by contextual limits found at the focus site. These limits included a need for time, knowledge, accountability, buy-in, and stability in the long-term availability of these resources as well as additional limits on monetary and tangible resources. The absence of these resources prevented the service providers from being able to address each variable for ideal individualization for every student. Because of this, prioritization of variables was necessary and intrinsic to the transition process.

Prioritization Creating Gaps between Best Practice and Actual Practice

The examination of this focus site’s prioritization practices lent insight into how differences in theory and practice occurred during the implementation of service delivery in this high school setting. Each variable prioritized over another represented a step away from best practice. Competing variables, such as the dilemma of presenting both academic and transition content with limited time in the high school years, caused certain variables to be set exactly to a student’s need while other variables were approximated as closely to the ideal as possible. For example, a student may have been given direct instruction in academics to allow for mastery of these skills while transition content had to be embedded into some academic assignments. Because not all variables could be set exactly as a service delivery team would want for ideal individualization, some
approximations of variables ultimately resulted in transition practices moving away from best practice recommendations in those particular approximated areas.

At this site, prioritization and approximation rationale was often based on each individual provider’s past experiences with transition, personal preferences, and perceptions of transition service at the focus site. As service providers made these decisions both individually and collectively as a service team, these decisions created a degree of individualization for students, but also resulted in discrepancies in service delivery across students when compared to best practice. At this site, patterns developed over time as providers made similar decisions when prioritizing the variables for students with similar needs. For example, providers labeled students with the greatest overall average service need as SDC, causing the group of students to assume the label traditionally given to a placement. In some cases, students labeled SDC were placed in self-contained classes across academic subjects, despite any strengths individual students may have had in a particular area. To the benefit of service delivery, these patterns created groupings that allowed for ease of service delivery and offered a practical way to account for some variability in student need. However, this pattern of practice, having been left unexamined for years, represented practices counter to the value of individualization held by service providers.

Despite a shared national concern for creating positive transition outcomes (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004), variability in transition implementation occurs at local and state levels. Just as individual sites offer opportunities to stray from the initial intent of a best practice or of law through individual influences on the service implementation
process, it is reasonable to expect that the additional interpretations of law and practice imposed by states and SELPAs may also present discrepancies in implementation. In other words, at each level of interpretation (i.e., state, SELPA, district, and school), there are opportunities to move away from intended best practice and the intent of the law. Close examination of decision making at each level of service may offer the transition field a place to start when closing the gap between theory and practice.

_Evaluation of Prioritization Patterns through Proximal Measures of Success_

Service deliverers’ decisions influenced by their own perceptions and actual limits set by the context of each transition service delivery site may be significant when accounting for theory to practice discrepancies. When targeting improvements in transition service delivery, sites have the ability to analyze how service deliverers prioritize and consciously reprioritize in order to create decision patterns that offer positive transition outcomes. This knowledge may offer the field a place to start when investigating the challenges in creating lasting, positive, long-term transition outcomes for students with disabilities.

However, complicating the evaluation of prioritization is the fact that the long-term outcomes and measures of success for transition actually occur in the future after a student’s graduation. Yet, the knowledge of these transition outcomes is necessary for a site to gauge the success of the prioritization decisions that a service team may have made. Because this site did not track long-term outcomes, evaluation of the impact of the service team’s decision making could not be evaluated in this manner. Instead, proximal measures of success were the only gauge of preparation of students for post high school
settings available at this site. These measures included exposure to best practices including community-based instruction, paid work experience, and acquisition of a diploma. Although these proximal measures of success only offer insight into the probability of an intended outcome without guarantee of the actual outcome, they may offer this site a place to start evaluating prioritization patterns. This data would offer awareness of the patterns of prioritizing variables in transition service provision that may lead to proximal measures of success.

Minimizing of Prioritization by Changing Perceptions of Resources

Another approach to improve practice at the current site would be to examine how service providers’ perceptions of available resources impacted rationales and patterns in the prioritization of variables. In other words, one way to target prioritization patterns could be to address service provider perceptions that often determined what limitations (i.e., lack of a valued resource) guided prioritization decisions. At this site, team buy-in, accountability, stability in practice, and transition knowledge were some of the resources perceived as helpful in the transitioning process. Therefore, when a service provider felt a lack of any of these resources, he/she saw this as a barrier to effective transitioning. If a service provider’s perception could be altered through a change in practice, the transition team could become empowered to make moves towards best practice in areas that they may previously have felt were not within their abilities to change. For instance, by offering parents an informative seminar on transitioning, service providers may attain a better sense of family buy-in; thereby, removing a perceived barrier (e.g., lack of family buy-in)
Recommendations for Practice

Clearly, the results and conclusions of this study offer opportunities for advancement in transition practices. While recommendations are being made with this site in mind, these recommendations may be applicable to other comprehensive high schools attempting to provide transition services to students with disabilities.

*Site Level Recommendations for Practice*

- Service providers’ perceptions of barriers could be analyzed to identify limits that are within the team’s control. Previous practices and individual experiences may lend information as to which practices offer solutions to overcoming such barriers.

- Language used to describe practices should be revisited. The service delivery team should ensure fidelity to the law and best practice by utilizing terms such as SDC and RSP, Community Based Instruction, or RTI with the definitions provided in transition best practices literature. Approximations of meaning specific to the site should be reworded so that practices can be analyzed within the context of universal meanings rather than just at a site level with localized meaning.

- Identify transition content offered within current classes to pinpoint gaps in transition content or accessibility. Various service providers have found pockets of transition instruction throughout currently offered general and special education classes. For example, particular career pathway classes covered specific skills such as interviewing. Identifying where transition content is
provided offers the team an opportunity to create overlap in transition instruction in a meaningful way to reinforce desired concepts.

- Following this analysis of transition content, areas of transition content found to be redundant offer the opportunity for restructuring resources in order to remove redundancy and create instruction in areas considered to be lacking. This reallocation of resources should consider ways to offer direct transition content earlier in a student’s high school career.

- Identify barriers to long term tracking of student outcomes. Examine neighboring sites and partnerships between the site and SELPA or Department of Rehabilitation to share tracking responsibilities. Identify which proximal measures of achievement offer data collection opportunities that can be compared to research for predictions on long term outcomes. For example, this site could analyze differences between post-secondary educational outcomes for students receiving a diploma versus a Certificate of Completion.

- Create a transition committee that can perform data collection and share and disseminate information at a site level rather than relying upon a SELPA level or state level of information sharing. Offer the opportunity for role development within this committee and systematic communication techniques that promote shared transition knowledge across the entire site.

- Explicitly track service provider transition knowledge and practices including trainings, trends in IEP service offerings, connections with agencies, and created ITP goals and activities. Change patterns of service to offer opportunities to all
service providers to work with a variety of agencies and practices to promote equal knowledge and experiences across all providers. For example, case managers who do not have experience with outside agencies may benefit from a change in caseload that would offer them an opportunity to develop these skills.

- Systemic procedures such as paperwork completion, communication protocol within and outside of the site, and an evaluation of service offerings should be solidified and sustained to offer service providers time to develop the necessary skills in implementing these procedures.

**Recommendations for Practice as a Service Field**

Many of the limits imposed on a site such as lack of time, multitudes of teaching requirements, communication barriers, and the inability to track student outcomes stems from requirements and policies put in place as common practice in the teaching field and in comprehensive high schools. A second look at some of these practices may open opportunities to remove barriers systemically found in many sites and service providers’ experiences.

- The amount of differentiation in transition service practice found throughout levels of service delivery (ie: national, state, and local), though initially appearing to have a negative impact on service, offers the field a unique opportunity to explore patterns across states at various levels in order to identify which methods of differentiation yield the best long-term student outcomes.

- Similar limits and barriers found across settings from the type of examination mentioned above can be addressed. A knowledge of common barriers shared
across a majority of sites provides the law and researchers opportunities to incorporate and adjust for such limits, thereby helping to bridge the transition theory-transition practice gap from a research and legislative end.

- Reevaluate the teaching content standards set by individual states. Identify which standards can contribute to desired transition outcomes and which were assumed to be proximal measures of success in post-secondary settings. Creating more direct applications of transition content within the academic standards could help to reduce the impact of having too much content to cover in four years of high school.

- Create public awareness of the various exiting documents (e.g., diploma or certificate of completion) being issued to students. Create uniformity to the greatest extent possible across states. Public understanding of the value of these currently unfamiliar documents will lessen the burden of service delivery teams when making choices about which exit documents will promote the greatest positive, long-term outcomes for a student.

- Identify systematic tracking systems with procedures that span across states to allow for more accurate tracking of students’ long-term outcomes and make connections as to which proximal measures of success predicted these long-term outcomes.

- Identify areas of overlap in transition services at a high school level and at a post-secondary or agency level. Identify which level of service is best equipped to cover specific areas of transition education and service. Streamline procedures to
prevent redundancy in assessment and allocate funding resources for both levels in a holistic way.

Questions for Future Research

Similar qualitative studies at additional sites could expand upon the findings of the current study. By contributing knowledge of other variables or highlighting other connections amongst categories, additional site studies can help to expand the current theory of the transitioning process. Successful transition practices could then be shared across sites and offer an opportunity to reduce variability in implementation in a given area, be it state, county, etc. The benefits of less variability transition procedures include generalized familiarity with transition for agencies, families, service providers, and communities.

Many larger research questions stem from the implications of this study. These questions offer the transition service field room to grow and improve services with the knowledge of how these findings would impact site levels of service implementation. These questions include:

- How should secondary content standards be adjusted to better connect students to the outcomes desired post high school?
- What understanding do the public and communities currently have of a certificate of completion or other alternative graduation document? Are these perceptions accurate? How might community awareness be increased to allow these documents to be viewed as valuable?
• How might the IEP be developed into a useful document for agencies? What components are missing that currently make the document of limited use? Does this represent a significant gap in the purposes of K-12 instruction and long-term outcomes for individuals with disabilities?

• Which proximal measures create long-term success for students and why they do so?

• How often should practices be reevaluated to check for fidelity in use of terminology and correct overgeneralization of service patterns that are inherent in local service delivery systems?

The greatest contribution of this study is an introduction to the significance of the service provider impact on seemingly established requirements of IDEA. The gap between theory and practice is an elusive one to track as the transition field struggles with poor results in long-term outcomes of students with disabilities. This study accounts, in part, for how this gap could be created at a site or local level and highlights the emphasized role service providers may have in promoting differences in practice. These differences are created out of the necessity of service providers to prioritize educational variables due to limits characteristic in site based practices. This study lends some insight into why the body of research on particular best practices is not fully supported by large amounts of success in transition service practice. Fidelity to the law and long-term transition outcomes may be improved by examining and making considerations for prioritization in practice that is ultimately done by transition service providers at a local level.
APPENDIX A

Participant Consent Form
Consent to Participate in Research

Transitioning Students to Post-Secondary Settings:
A Grounded-Theory Study of Service Providers’ Perspectives at a Northern California High School

You are being asked to participate in research which will be conducted by Laurel Schrader, a graduate student in the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, School of Psychology, and Deaf Studies at California State University, Sacramento. She is conducting her master’s thesis with faculty sponsorship from Dr. Jean Gonsier-Gerdin. The purpose of this study is to explore the process of transitioning high school special education students to post-secondary settings at a northern California high school. This information will assist in the development of plans to improve transition practices at this site.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked questions during an individual interview with the researcher. This interview will be tape recorded to allow for future transcription of the conversation during data processing. Questions will address your current role in the transition process, what goals you feel should be accomplished throughout the process, what barriers currently exist to reaching those goals, and any suggested improvements.

There is no risk in participating in this interview. You will be debriefed following the interview to verify the accuracy of any notes taken by the researcher during the interview. Following completion of the research, the results will be shared with you.

Your responses will remain completely anonymous. They will be coded so that any identifying information cannot be traced back to you, your students, or your school site. Following completion of the study, your interview tape will be destroyed, though coded responses without any identifying information will be kept by the researcher for records purposes.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact Laurel Schrader at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or via email at lcs88@csus.edu and/or Dr. Jean Gonsier-Gerdin at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or via email at jgonsier@csus.edu.

By signing below, you indicate your consent to participate in the research described above. You may decline to participate in this study without any consequences.

________________________________  _____________________________
Signature of the Participant    Date
APPENDIX B

Participant Interview Questions
Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Participant:      Researcher:
Date and time of interview:    Location:

1. IDEA states that IEP teams must plan for students with IEPs to transition out of high school settings. What does it look like to have a successful transition for a student?

2. What information do you think is needed to create an IEP/ITP? How is this information obtained? Who determines transition needs and through what means?

3. What services might be included as part of transition at this site? What is the aim in providing each of these services? Are there services/resources not currently available at this site that you would like to see?

4. What settings are available for your students to transition into? How are these settings determined? Which are the more common settings?

5. Which people are involved in the transitioning process? What roles do they play in the process?

6. How does the transition service delivery process change as a student gets closer to exiting? How do roles of the participants change?

7. How do individual contributions and roles differ from that of the IEP team as a whole when undergoing transition processes? What interactions take place between members of the team? How is the ITP addressed during the IEP meeting?

8. How is the process documented for legal purposes? How does this documentation impact service delivery or vise versa?

9. What components of the transition process are working well here? What makes those things work so well?

10. What components need improvement? Why are these things problematic? What resources would the site need or what actions would have to be taken to make these improvements?

11. What components of transition do you feel confident in your abilities to carry out? Which components do you feel you could benefit from having more information, training, or support in?
REFERENCES


Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), 34 C.F.R. §300.320(b) (2004).


the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2). NCSER 2009-3017.

*National Center for Special Education Research.*


