

**PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF TRANSITION
SERVICES EFFECTIVENESS FOR STUDENTS
WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES**

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ABSTRACT *Current research suggests that the perceptions of parents about the effectiveness of transition services influence their involvement in the transition process and outcomes [1,2]. This paper explores the perceptions of parents of adolescent students with intellectual disabilities regarding their use of transition services and key elements of effective transition programs. Case studies were developed to examine experiences with transition services of parents of adolescent children with ID. Four case studies yielded three dominant themes as follows: (a) barriers to obtaining transition services, (b) key objectives of transition services, and (c) key elements of effective transition programs. Results are interpreted in light of best practices in transition [3,4,5,6].*

KEYWORDS: *transition services, adolescent intellectual disability, exceptional children, parental perceptions, outcomes, postsecondary*

I. INTRODUCTION

Parents' Perceptions of Post-Secondary Transition Services for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Adolescent students with ID encounter numerous obstacles as they transition from the school environment into semi-independent living. As students move from high school settings, they must make adjustments in various areas to fit into post-secondary learning institutions, to integrate into employment successfully, and to participate with the broader community. Transition services that are offered in school to prepare adolescents to integrate more smoothly into the post-school phase target various crucial areas, including preparation for employment, participation in community activities, and daily living experiences [7,8,9,10].

Studies have consistently indicated that education and employment outcomes for students with ID fall short when compared to those of other students, and programs frequently reflect low expectations [11,12,13,14,15]. This gap occurs in terms of both post-secondary education and competitive employment. As such, transition services play a crucial role in supporting adolescents with ID in transitioning successfully into post-secondary phase of life. Additionally, parental perceptions about and involvement in the transition process can strongly influence education and employment outcomes [1,2,7,14,16,17,18,19,20]. Given the importance of parental involvement and expectations as influences on transition outcomes, this study is concerned with parents' perceptions about post-secondary transition services for their older adolescent children with (ID). The implications of these perceptions as they relate to substantiating best practices in transition planning as suggested by Kohler

[3,4] and further developed by Landmark, Ju, & Zhang [5] is a second area of consideration. Kohler [3,4] developed an implied taxonomy of best practices for transitions services. The key elements of best practices that were presented include student-focused planning, student development, family involvement, program structure, and interagency collaboration. Landmark et. al. [5] conducted a study in order to determine which of these element received empirical substantiation in more recent studies.

After a comprehensive review of the literature, Landmark et. al. [5] indicated that studies substantiating best practices for transition planning as suggested by Kohler [4] are limited. The resulting order of most- to least-substantiated practices based on this review was work experience, preparation for employment, family involvement, inclusion in general education, social skills training, daily living skills training, self-determination skills training, and interagency or community collaboration. Best practices reviewed by Landmark et. al. [5] also reflected areas of student development in more detail by specifying specific skill training areas.

The current investigation used interpretive case study research (Merriam, [21]; Yin, [22]) to examine the perceptions of four parents of adolescent students with ID regarding their experiences with transition services, their use of transition services, and their involvement in the transition process. Results are discussed in light of substantiating best practices in transition services. The following research questions were addressed:

Research Question 1: How do parents work with transition services?

Research Question 2: What are parent's perceptions about their experiences with transition services?

Research Question 3: What do parents perceive to be the key elements of effective transition planning?

II. Method

This study applied interpretive case study methodology, whereby narrative analysis (Creswell, [23]; Riessman, [24]) was applied to conduct an in-depth analysis of the perceptions, behaviours, and actual experiences of parent participants. Grounded theory provided the methodological framework for the data analysis. (Glaser & Strauss [25]; Merriam [21]; Strauss & Corbin, [26]), and semi-structured interviews were developed to collect data.

Participants and Settings

The study was conducted in a small city in the Rocky

Mountain region of the United States. The city provides transition services for students diagnosed with ID. The researcher obtained ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Northern Colorado and permission from school districts for all aspects of this study. Participation in the interviews and answering all questions was voluntary. A letter inviting potential participants and explaining the purpose and general procedures of the study was sent to qualifying parents in the school district. This letter contained a consent form, to be returned to the researcher, and it also contained procedures for protection of anonymity. Upon receipt of signed consent forms, parents were contacted to set up a schedule at a convenient time and place for an interview with the participants. After we reviewed the consent form with signed consents, the interview was completed. Interviews were conducted in person with the students' mothers in the parents' homes. The researcher both voice recorded interviews and took written notes. The interview was conducted face-to-face and took approximately 45 to 60 minutes for each participant to complete. After all interviews with all participants were completed, the interviews were transcribed and data analysis was completed. All of the data including the voice recordings of the interviews will be destroyed at the end of three years. The study was conducted with a sample of four parents of students with ID who were eligible for transition services.

Researcher Positionality

It is acknowledged that subjectivity cannot be completely controlled in qualitative studies [27]. Researcher positionality refers to awareness on the part of the researchers of the potential influence of their own racial or cultural awareness on the research process [28]. As such, several techniques were employed in order to minimize these influences in this study. As suggested by Merriam [21], the researcher clearly described her own philosophies, positions, assumptions, and beliefs in order to become more aware of these, and constantly worked at limiting the influence of her personal beliefs during all research activities. The researcher employed a bracketing procedure for note-taking to identify possible biases. Several procedures helped in establishing triangulation. The researcher conducted member checks with participants in order to verify the observations and conclusions made. In addition the researcher kept a journal

as an audit trail, detailing and describing all the steps taken in collecting and analysing the data. Finally, the researcher used peer review, seeking input from colleagues regarding the findings [21].

The researcher assumed a transcendental phenomenological stance in order to conduct an in-depth investigation into the actual experiences and interpretations of teacher participants [23]. The researcher is viewed as having an active role, interacting with the participants, while still attempting to restrain personal bias in the interaction. This perspective is based on assumptions that teacher and coordinators experience phenomena in their everyday life, observe how others experience phenomena, and are able to verbalize their impressions of their students' experience.

Data collection procedures

The researcher developed a semi-structured interview protocol to obtain in-depth information about parents' perceptions of existing transition services in the area. The interview questions created by the researcher were specifically related to students with ID. The interview questions addressed the following areas: (a) awareness of available services, (b) experiences using services, (c) barriers to obtaining services, (d) advantages and disadvantages of services, (e) characteristics of effective services, and (f) parents' involvement in transition and transition services. Individual identity was not disclosed, and participants were referred to by a pseudonym of their choice.

Data Analysis Procedures

The constant comparative analysis process (Strauss & Corbin, [26]) was used to code all of the interview data. The initial coding organization consisted of the interview questions, and axial codes were created by linking open codes. Selective coding compared and generated themes and categories that were comprehensive and mutually exclusive. A second researcher reviewed the original coding to confirm themes.

III. Results

Three general themes relating to parents' perceptions of transition services for their adolescent child with ID emerged from the interviews: obstacles to transition service programs, key objectives of transition services, and elements of effective transition programs. These three themes along with subthemes are illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1
Themes and Subthemes from Interviews**

Themes	Subthemes
Barriers to transition programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Lack of Information · Lack of time and energy · Lack of financial support and other resources · Programs are often a poor fit with student needs
Key Objectives of transition services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Independent living · Appropriated guardianship · Community integration
Elements of effective programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Post-secondary education and employment · Individual vocational assessment

- Tailored development plans
- Effective training for service providers
- Interagency and community collaboration
- Parental Involvement

Theme One: Barriers to Obtaining Transition Services

Parents consistently expressed several barriers to obtaining transition services, including lack of information, lack of time and energy, a lack of financial support and other resources, and programs that are a poor fit for student needs. First, a strong need on the part of parents for information regarding how to transition children with ID to independent living was a dominant theme of the interviews. Parents need detailed information about available programs, living arrangements, support groups, and potential employment for young adults. In addition, they need clear guidelines for contacts and procedures to obtain transition services as indicated in the following excerpt:

... I do not have the answers as to: is Envision gonna help me at this point, or is the school just gonna keep on going until he's twenty-one, and then I deal with the transition? [The greatest need is]... information for me. What are some barriers to existing transition? – Lack of information. Simple. (Parent 01).

Another barrier that parents expressed was a lack of the time and energy needed to pursue information and services that they need. Parents with ID children are often overwhelmed with the physical and financial demands of care giving. As a result, they often miss opportunities for information or programs that are available. For example:

“...there are a few flyers and we as parents are very busy taking care of these folks...[the flyers say] please show up at this day for this meeting which is at five o'clock at night ... and I'm taking care of a kid who can't take care of himself. I can't 3make it to that” (P01).

Parents also reported that a lack of financial support and resources for transition programs serves as an obstacle to obtaining appropriate assistance. For example, “A disadvantage again is the lack of money.” (P02) When asked about possible improvements to services another participant responded, “Always more money. They're so underfunded” (P01).

Finally, programming that parents perceive to be a poor fit for their child's needs was stated to be a barrier to obtaining transition services. One parent stated that “...they are presenting [an IEP based on] what they feel is a 2:57.2, [and this] is absolutely not what I as the parent or what his current school or what his report cards are showing [that it] should be (3:07).” (P04) A lack of choice and number of options can also present barriers as indicated by the same participant's stating that “I don't think I am ever going to get these employment options because ... [I feel] if you don't accept our placement we are not going to offer you any options.” (P04) Another participated expressed that “I think I would like choice ... if there were more programs available for my son that met

his needs better” (P03).

Theme Two: Key Objectives of Transition Services

The key objectives expressed by participants consistently occurred in the following areas: independent living, appropriate guardianship, community integration, and post-secondary education and employment.

Parents of children with ID are most concerned with basic life skills, such as hygiene, safety, making money transactions, and communicating. Skills that will allow the child to live independently are more important to many parents than strictly academic progress, as was expressed by one parent:

I guess the only thing I can tell you is that we try at school during our IEP's to focus on things like toileting, which is a huge one. I guess if you want to call that a transition. [The issue is] that we're not worried about the quadratic equation we're worried about toileting. I don't believe he's getting enough of those transitions ... I put in the IEP every time [that]I want him to brush his own teeth, wash his own face, comb his own hair. Life skill.

Another participant stated that “When [he] graduated from high school ... my husband and I ... didn't know what the next step was We didn't want him staying at home.” (P02)

Parents also expressed concern with guardianship, decisions and responsibilities for children with ID as they transition to independent living. Again, the greatest need is for information regarding resources that can relieve parents of full-time care-giving and decision-making responsibilities, as one participant stated that “... an effective transition would be a program or programs that help me not worry about day care every day. Another parent expressed that [her son's enrolment in an appropriate living situation] “ would give me a supreme amount of confidence should I pass away, ... so that I know that [he] can take care of himself.”

Another key objective of transition services expressed by parents was that of helping students become integrated into the surrounding community in addition to basic life skills training. Teaching students with ID how to use and access community resources, such as recreation centers, libraries, and community events, was of primary concern to participants. For example, one parent stated that:

“We wanted him to learn to be in different areas of the community, not just school and the store. We wanted him to go to the gym. We wanted him to go to many places out in the community and feel comfortable. We wanted him to be in a group. (P03)

Finally, post-secondary education or employment emerged clearly as a primary objective of participation in transition services. For example, one parent stated:

So the main features of effective transition program for

me are first to educate the child, you know, what are the steps up to graduation and what happens after graduation. ... Do you want to go to another four years of school? Do you want to go to two years of school? Should we do a school work study program? (P04)

All of the participants were interested in identifying suitable employment and education options that were best suited to the needs of the child.

Theme Three: Elements of Effective Programs

Discussions with parents regarding elements of effective programs revealed many of their perceptions regarding best practices in transition. Remarks regarding program effectiveness were focused in four areas: individual vocational assessment, tailored development plans, effective training for service providers, and interagency and community collaboration.

The need for accurate individual vocational assessments tailored development plans for students with ID was strongly emphasized. In fact, appropriate vocational assessment and developmental planning is perceived to be a key element in effective transition service programs, as indicated by one parent:

Well, for one there should be a mixture ... at the age of sixteen, there should be some programming put in place to find out what his strengths and weaknesses are and what he ... would be of interest to him from a vocational stand point. (P01)

Another parent expressed a similar viewpoint by saying:

What jobs are you potentially good at? What jobs would you enjoy? I mean just having those exploratory conversations and testing so that you know how to put a program together that hits the individual needs of that child (P04)

Similarly, another statement about the main features of effective transition programming was as follows:

Planning. I think really knowing the student first of all, and really knowing what he likes and what he doesn't like ... really knowing what his strengths are and what his weaknesses could be, and really tailoring something toward those. (P03).

Another prominent subtheme relative to effective programming is that adequate training for service providers is essential. The presence of service providers with specialized training that is tailored to specific disabilities strongly contributes to the perceived effectiveness of programming. One of the parents expressed this quite clearly by stating the following regarding the main features of an effective transition program:

I would say first and foremost would be either the job coach or ... teacher in that position. Someone who has experience ... in our son's case with this disorder of autism we initially found that people weren't very familiar with it, but now that it has become almost the diagnosis de jour, people are more aware of it. They're educated about

it and so I would say the prerequisite is you need an effective job coach and someone who knows how to work with the individuals with disabilities. (P02)

Other participants also expressed concern about the competency of teachers involved in transition services. For example, one parent stated, "The instructors ... have good teachers, but I just don't know how well-versed they were with transition services or what to do." (p03)

Finally, the need for interagency and community collaboration emerged as a subtheme during the interviews. For example, one parent was transferring her child from private school to public transition services and said, "The district brought in two parents whose children have also gone through transition services, and they acted as a liaison between us and the district. So, that was very helpful" (P03) Similarly, another parent said:

"I need ... the community center board or non-profit or somebody in the state school superintendent office to put a roadmap together for these children who are privately placed so that we ... know exactly ... where we need to go to get the services (P04)

Finally, all four of the participants in this study were highly involved in their child's acquisition and use of transition services. Parents expressed that their involvement was needed in order to get the results that they want and need for their child. For example, one parent said, "I'm kind of a helicopter parent. ... I set up an appointment where I met with the teacher before ... services started ... I am always tremendously involved in terms of email ... So yeah, extremely involved (P02). Another participant commented that:

"... when he transitioned over to the new school, we, our role was to let him start learning those things on his own with the school. But we are still very involved with that program and with our son, and what's gonna happen next after he leaves that program. (P03)

Notably, one parent shared her awareness of a relative's child with ID whose parents were not interested in pursuing services, and she expressed that parental involvement can be critical to a child's obtaining services at all. This parent stated that:

There are kids who can fall through the cracks ... who function so well, yet they need help and the parent ... denied that he had a problem. And so now he is at the point where he is not able to hold down a job and he ... has trouble living on his own.

IV. DISCUSSION

This qualitative study explored the perceptions and experiences of four parents of adolescent children with ID who were in the process of acquiring or using transition services. These perceptions and experiences identified important features of best practices, and the results of this study largely concur with other research findings concerning parents' perceptions of barriers to successful transition to post-secondary life as well as elements of

effective transition programs [10,29,30]. Parents expressed three themes consistently throughout the interviews about their experiences with transition services: barriers to transition programs, key objectives of transition programs, and key elements of effective programs. The results served to substantiate the categories of best practices as presented by Landmark et. al. [5]. Support for the relative ranking of best practices relative to substantiation is limited due to the small sample size. However, most of the elements of best practice did emerge throughout the interviews as being important to successful post-secondary transition.

Previous research has indicated that parental attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and involvement significantly influence school and employment outcomes associated with transition services [1,2,14]. A major area of concern in preparing students with ID for adulthood is to equip them with skills, attitudes, and opportunities that allow them to take more active roles in managing their lives independently. Research indicates that parents' perceptions of transition service effectiveness influences their involvement in the process of transitioning ID child to post-secondary life, and parental involvement can be critical to the success of transition services [6].

It was notable that all four of the parents who participated in the study were highly involved in the process of moving their child to post-secondary living, and advocating on behalf of their children was an important part of obtaining services suited to the needs of the student. For example, one parent stated, "I am always tremendously involved ... by email, Miss Thomas ... will tell me how the day went or I will let her know how [he] has been reacting at home" (P02) Another parent said, "We fought for our son, We requested many things and that's when the district brought in the liaisons ... so we could all feel comfortable" (P03).

The current results support the importance of parental involvement in the outcomes of adolescents with disabilities, and they also indicate that school and agency personnel need to provide information to parents enabling them to become better in supporting their adolescents with ID to accomplish both school and post-school outcomes, as reported in other studies [29,31]. Additionally, school and agency personnel should collaborate with families and encourage their involvement in specific activities that foster autonomy development as stated by Doren et al., [2]. Research has also indicated that parents suffer considerable levels of stress about transition [30,32]; however, professionals often overlook this issue, and family involvement is often missing from the transition-planning process [33]. To promote increased parental involvement, educators suggest focusing on areas such as comfort, ongoing communication, partnering with parents, and providing transition training [6].

Participants in this study clearly indicated a strong need for information regarding available transition services and

how to obtain them. Strong outreach efforts on the part of transition service programs are likely to be helpful to parents who are often overwhelmed with care giving and financial responsibilities. Even parents with substantial financial resources often have difficulty getting the information that they need.

Additionally, parents of children with ID need transition services to focus on basic life skills for self-care and independent living, instead of activities that just keep children occupied. Parents were most interested in services that help children with ID to live outside of the parents' homes, support and care for themselves, and use community resources. One of the primary goals of transition services is to prepare children for successful living as adults, and a defining outcome of adulthood is employment. Studies indicate that the majority of adults with ID are either under- or unemployed [14].

Parents were also concerned with issues of guardianship, decision-making, and financing needed services as their children approach post-school living. A guardianship alternative for students with ID is another concern often expressed relative to the ability of these students to make informed decisions. It is important that students and stakeholders understand the guardianship alternatives that apply due to the different policies expressed by education services and judicial systems regarding transition. Even as the different systems fulfil their mandate in supporting individuals with ID, it is important that they coordinate their efforts in ensuring that individuals with ID continue to live as autonomous adults and remain free from unnecessary guardianship throughout their lives [34].

Vocational assessment and developmental planning was perceived by study participants to be a vital part of the transition process. Identifying students' skills, abilities, and interests and using a vocational assessment to develop suitable individual goals was consistently perceived to be a critical characteristic of effective transition services. In addition, effective training for service providers strongly impacts the perceived usefulness of transition programs.

Other research findings reinforce an oft-expressed sentiment; namely, it is important that students with disabilities are not saddled with group-based stereotypical low academic expectations and low post-school expectations. In order to improve employment and post-secondary education outcomes, it is vital that students' post-high school goals reflect an expectation for post-secondary education as well as integrated paid employment, irrespective of the disability labels attached to them. There is need for change in practice related to transition services and planning for students with ID. It is necessary to invest in professional development for secondary and transition personnel, so they are better equipped with the skills and abilities to support successful post-secondary experience for students with ID [14].

Because of the lack of presumption that students with ID will benefit from college, it is important to recognize the strengths of young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Identifying the strengths of transition-age students from the vantage point of parents has vital implications for fostering community inclusion and relationships during the transitory phase. Emphasizing the strengths of ID adolescents holds great promise with regards to making successful connections to community activities [35]. It is also important that parents are made aware of the difference between the various employment options such as competitive employment, supported employment and sheltered workshops. Furthermore, teachers can give their students greater control and choice in their adult years by facilitating interconnectivity between local community rehabilitation providers, and provide students and their families with the means to determine who appears best poised to provide the best quality of service [36].

Participants in the current study consistently expressed the importance of identifying specific strengths, limitations, interests, and abilities as student's transition to post-secondary living. Carter et al., [1] stress that if preparation programs are to bear much fruit, there is need for post-high school transition programs to specifically target the skills that are deemed as most crucial for students to succeed in post-secondary educational and employment settings. In this regard, it is important that students with autism and ID are taught the range of self-determination, self-management, problem solving, and self-awareness skills that are considered to be vital in contributing to success in college or in the workplace. Given the importance that parents place their children's learning self-determination skills, it is necessary to identify ways in which parents can be better resourced in supporting the development of these skills at home, and within the community.

Finally, it is important that teacher preparation receives sustained emphasis as teachers must be well versed and remain current in the provision of transition services. Teacher preparation involves both pre-service and ongoing in-service training if teachers are to keep up with the ever-changing adult service systems. The current study supports the importance of ongoing training, and the results also highlight the changing nature of transition services. Parents are interested in more options relative to programming, and transition services providers are presented with a broad range of diagnosed disabilities to address.

In summary, the results of this study are consistent with research substantiating best practices in transition services [2,5,37,38]. Specifically, preparation for employment, family involvement, social skills training, daily living skills training, and community and agency

collaboration were all emphasized as key elements of effective transition service programming.

The three general themes that emerged from the interviews were barriers to obtaining service, key objectives of transition services, and key elements of effective services. The barriers that were expressed are consistent with those well-represented in the literature, including a need for information, limited resources, and a lack of time and energy [29,31,32]. The key objectives of transition services expressed by participants are also consistent with other research [14] in that post-secondary employment or education, independent living, community integration, and appropriated guardianship were clear subthemes within this category. Finally, parents perceived vocational assessment, tailored development plans, service provider training, and interagency and community collaboration to be key elements of effective transition programs

An important implication of the study is that as service providers continue to work with an increasing array of complex disabilities, specialized provider training on an ongoing basis will become a prominent area of need. Study participants consistently expressed a need for more options for services that meet specific student needs.

One method of increasing rates of employment for students with ID is to provide transition services early, by age 14. The provision of transition services to children by age 14 produces better vocational outcomes for young adults with ID. Cimera, Burgess and Bedesen [39] compared two groups of states requiring transition services be addressed in individualized educational programs by age 14 and by age 16. The study results indicated that in states where transition services were provided early, by age 14, individuals were more likely to be employed by the time their cases were closed, compared to their peers in states where transition services were provided later, at age 16. In the current study, one participant started special intervention with her autistic child at age 18 months, and her child is currently engaged in discussions regarding his choices to get a job or to pursue additional education.

V. Limitations

The small number of participants limits conclusions that can be drawn from this study. Another limitation was the small geographical area from which participants were chosen. Including a wider geographical area for selection of participants might have identified more parents of students with ID in transition services and have provided a more representative sample. Finally, transition service outcomes are not yet available for these students, so the actual effectiveness of the services used has not been assessed.

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