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Interventions to Assist Students with Disabilities Through School Transitions

School personnel are mandated to provide transition planning services to students with disabilities as they prepare for postsecondary activities. A variety of student skill and knowledge areas have been recommended as important during this process. Students with disabilities encounter a variety of additional transitions throughout their schooling, however, and school counselors can play integral roles in facilitating those transitions. Recommendations are presented for school counselor interventions to address the various transition needs of students with disabilities.

Since 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 101-476; IDEA) has mandated that school personnel develop formal transition planning services to assist students with disabilities as they prepare for postsecondary activities. Whether they transition to school, jobs, or supported living environments, students with disabilities can benefit from coordinated efforts among school counselors, teachers, and parents to help them develop requisite skills and knowledge that will allow them to successfully adapt to and even thrive in their new environments. Formal planning for other school transitions (e.g., building to building) is not specifically mandated by IDEA. However, a yearly Individualized Education Program (IEP), in which goals (i.e., academic, social) and methods for achieving those goals are to be outlined, is mandated. When any school transition is anticipated, relevant goals should be built into a student's IEP.

Rosenkoetter, Whaley, Hains, and Pierce (2001) described transitions as either vertical (sequential and occurring over time) or horizontal (occurring at the same time). All students experience vertical transitions from grade to grade and from school to school (e.g., elementary to middle school). During those transitions they must adapt to new environments that include different teachers and instructional styles, different sets of rules and expectations, and different schedules (e.g., changing classes rather than spending all day in one room). In many instances, new skill sets (e.g., organization, self-dis-

cipline) also are required (Lillie & Vakil, 2002). In addition to the grade-level and building-level transitions experienced by all students, horizontal transitions between regular education classrooms and special education placements (e.g., resource rooms, self-contained classrooms) can create additional challenges for students with disabilities.

The following includes a brief overview of three important school transitions encountered by students with disabilities: transitioning from elementary to middle school, transitioning from secondary education to postsecondary activities, and transitioning to and from regular education classrooms. A theoretical framework for conceptualizing transition planning interventions also is presented, followed by a discussion of school counseling interventions to address student transition needs.

COMMON SCHOOL TRANSITIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities experience many grade-to-grade and building-to-building transitions, but the transition from elementary to middle school is probably one of the most significant transitions most students with disabilities encounter. Many researchers (e.g., Akos & Galassi, 2004) have discussed the negative impact of this particular transition on students' academic and social development in general, but only a small amount of research has been conducted to examine the impact of this transition specifically on students with disabilities. In one disability-related study, Anderman (1998), using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study, found students experienced decreased achievement and motivation with the transition from elementary to middle school. He also reported achievement gaps in math and science between students with and without learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities made fewer gains in these areas. Anderman suggested that the shift to a more impersonal middle school environment might be particularly difficult for students with disabilities. Additional social

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supports as well as assistance with organizational and study skills would be beneficial to students with disabilities during this transition.

Unlike other transitions, postsecondary transitions for students with disabilities have been widely researched. All students with disabilities can anticipate some sort of postsecondary transition, and their needs during that time revolve around making informed career/lifespan decisions and developing essential skills that will enable them to be as independent as possible. Most importantly, students with disabilities should be provided with opportunities to develop self-awareness and self-determination skills in order to be able to advocate for themselves in postsecondary settings (Cummings, Maddux, & Casey, 2000; Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Leuckling, & Mack, 2002). In order to receive necessary accommodations and services after high school, according to the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-336), students with disabilities must personally request those services and accommodations. Thus, assertiveness skills are essential (Brinckerhoff, 1994). Students with disabilities also must develop daily living, occupational, communication, and decision-making skills well in advance of postsecondary transitions (Cummings et al.; Sitlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000).

Regarding horizontal transitions, students with disabilities participate in a variety of educational placements ranging from total inclusion in the regular education curriculum to self-contained classrooms. Many students transition back and forth from regular education classrooms to special education placements through the school day. Mathes, Fuchs, Roberts, and Fuchs (1998) reported that the purpose of removing students with disabilities from regular education classes was to provide intensive, individualized instruction in deficit areas. They indicated, however, that once students are removed from regular education classrooms they rarely return. Inclusion has its own critics, but “recent literature has shown that children with disabilities in inclusive settings make greater developmental gains when compared with children with disabilities in segregated settings” (Lillie & Vakil, 2002, p. 53). Tarver-Behring, Spagna, and Sullivan (1998) discussed inclusion as a challenge for students, with the greatest challenge being their personal/social adjustment. Students with disabilities who attend regular education classes often possess poor self-concepts, difficulty communicating, low motivation, and frustration (Tarver-Behring et al.). These students often also lack age-appropriate social skills, and some students struggle to fit in as they become aware of how their disability may set them apart from peers.

A brief examination of the transition needs of stu-

dents with disabilities reveals commonalities across transitions. Skills to effectively navigate social situations, communicate one’s needs, and make informed decisions carry over into many situations, ranging from integrating into a new classroom to requesting accommodations. Self-awareness and positive self-concept also may play important roles in helping students with disabilities adapt to new environments. Knowledgeable teachers and other professionals who work collaboratively to provide academic and social support can help create the environmental conditions necessary to facilitate successful transitions for students with disabilities.

A THEORETICAL BASIS FOR APPROACHING TRANSITION INTERVENTION

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2002; Meece, 2002) is helpful in examining the importance of environment on transitions. Bronfenbrenner refers to students’ individual social relationships (e.g., family, school) as microsystems, and the interaction of those microsystems as mesosystems (Meece). All microsystems operate within the context of broader systems (e.g., neighborhoods, societal trends) that indirectly impact students. Harmony among various microsystems can lead to positive outcomes for students. For example, students whose parents and teachers engage in regular communication and who are in agreement about expectations for those students are more likely to succeed in school than students whose parents and teachers do not communicate. Relating this concept to special education transitions, Diamond, Spiegel-McGill, and Hanrahan (1988) indicated that “the transition process can be seen as one of expanding the child’s immediate environments, which in turn results in a greater number of environments which must relate to each other within the mesosystem” (pp. 245–246).

A starting point in helping to facilitate successful transitions for students with disabilities is examining the relationships that exist between relevant microsystems (including individual expectations of and attitudes toward students with disabilities) prior to the transition. For example, examining communication between the elementary school special education teachers and middle school teachers regarding curriculum content (e.g., prerequisite knowledge and study/organizational skills necessary for success in regular education science in Grade 6) may reveal a need for more frequent or formal interactions among those individuals. Considering which additional microsystems may become involved in the future is a second step in preparing these various systems to work together for the benefit of the student.

Another way to think about this relationship is to consider the skill sets required to successfully navigate within each microsystem. In theory, transitioning into an environment (microsystem) that requires familiar skills sets should be less challenging than transitioning into an environment in which new and possibly more advanced skill sets are needed.

While some students with disabilities may transition suddenly, such as when they move to a new school unexpectedly, most school transitions are known in advance. Students do better if they are prepared for a new environment, and viewing transition as a process instead of an event that occurs at a single point in time is critical (Lillie & Vakil, 2002). Thus, transitions need to be carefully planned in order to “minimize the stress involved for children and their families and in order to maximize the chances of the child being successful in the new environment” (Kemp & Carter, 2000, p. 393).

Considering the potential differences that exist between environments, as understood in relation to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model, school counselors should initially work with personnel in both the current and the future environments to conduct a needs assessment and then design relevant intervention plans (Monda-Amaya, Dieker, & Reed, 1998). By first gathering information regarding skills, knowledge, and behaviors expected in the new environment, school counselors can assist individuals in the current environment (including the student and his or her parents) in assessing areas of student strength and weakness. Intervention plans then can be developed to address unique student needs, and future expectations can be discussed with students and parents in advance. For students with disabilities who qualify for services under IDEA, discussing these concerns within the context of their IEP meeting will help formalize the process.

A CASE EXAMPLE

To illustrate, a school counselor is working with Derek, a second-grade student with a learning disability who has participated in self-contained instruction for all academic courses and regular education for physical education, art, and music. His main weakness is in reading. Derek has difficulty socializing with grade-level peers and also has difficulty with organization. He frequently loses his lunch tickets and forgets to take notes home to his parents. The school counselor has informally worked with Derek a little on these concerns. At Derek’s annual IEP team meeting in February, the team decided that Derek is likely capable of participating in a regular education math course and plans to have him start at the beginning of third grade.

Upon gathering input from the future math

teacher, the team learns that Derek will be expected to complete and return homework three times per week, have a pencil each day, and work in cooperative groups with his classmates. To this point, Derek has completed all math assignments in class with assistance from his teacher and also worked independently in class due to the individualized instruction required by all students. Derek likes math and expressed excitement about the switch. The team members feel confident he will be able to handle the academic work and they also believe the math teacher will be supportive and patient. Given Derek’s deficits in social skills and organization, however, the team has concerns about how well he will fit in and whether he will remember his homework and pencil. They are concerned that Derek might struggle academically because of his difficulty working cooperatively with peers.

As a result, the team members decide they should develop and implement a plan to start preparing Derek for the new math class. They identify his strengths as enthusiasm, math ability, and parental involvement (his mother is willing to help with homework). Target areas for intervention include helping Derek effectively interact in a group setting (social skills) and assisting him in developing organizational skills. Derek’s current teacher and his parents develop a plan for helping him work on organizational skills, and the school counselor develops interventions to target social skills. The team decides these interventions should be implemented during the remainder of the school year in an attempt to allow Derek time to practice the new skills. Given practice time, support, and follow-up, it is likely that Derek might be able to make progress in the skill areas identified above, and his chances of success in the third-grade math class may increase. Had the team not been able to identify the future math teacher or had that teacher not been able to identify clear expectations, Derek may have entered his new math environment unprepared.

SCHOOL COUNSELING INTERVENTIONS

In adhering to the ASCA National Model® (American School Counselor Association, 2005), school counselors must take a systematic, developmental, and comprehensive approach to ensure that students with disabilities transition as smoothly as possible from one environment to another. Collaboration with other school personnel, parents, and postsecondary agencies is crucial. In addition to collaborating with others to develop and implement individualized interventions (as in the case example), school counselors should develop programs targeting general skills, knowledge, and behaviors that seem to be helpful across a variety of transitions

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(e.g., social skills, organizational skills, communication skills, self-awareness). Data collected from students who have successfully transitioned into new settings can be used to generate a list of common transition competencies. In a primary prevention approach, important transition skills, knowledge, and behaviors can be addressed through a variety of direct service activities delivered to the entire school population. Students who need additional time or training can be targeted through secondary prevention activities such as small groups or individual counseling sessions.

Psychoeducational activities and behavioral training must occur well in advance of the transition if students are to effectively learn as well as confidently and successfully exhibit new skills, knowledge, and/or behavior. This is particularly true for students with disabilities who may require more time, repetition, or practice than students without disabilities. Using a developmental approach, school counselors can create learning opportunities for students with disabilities starting in elementary school by using the academic, career, and personal/social competencies outlined in the ASCA National Model (2005) as a starting point. Many of those competencies, including self-awareness (Milsom & Hartley, 2005; Sitlington et al., 2000), communication, and coping skills (Kemp & Carter, 2000; Tarver-Behring et al. 1998) to name a few, are important during transition. If students participate in a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program that adheres to the ASCA National Model, over the course of their education they would have received opportunities to work on most of the common skills and knowledge required for successful transition.

Direct Service Interventions

Activities addressing relevant transition competency areas can be integrated into the general classroom guidance curriculum (Bruce, Shade, & Cossairt, 1996; Fox, Wandry, Pruitt, & Anderson, 1998). In fact, some researchers have found the use of classroom guidance sessions involving students with and without disabilities to be an effective method of enhancing skill development. Ciechalski and Schmidt (1995) conducted a study in which they taught social skills to students with disabilities through classroom guidance. They found that role play was an effective method for allowing students to observe and practice desirable social skills. They also found that students (with and without disabilities) interacted more after participating in cooperative learning activities. More recently, Fennick (2001) used classroom guidance units to teach students with and without disabilities skills for survival after high school. Topics included résumé writing, job seeking, interviewing, budgeting, and preparing

meals. Results suggested that all students not only benefited from working together on these activities but also demonstrated gains in knowledge and skills.

Students with disabilities also can learn critical transition skills through small psychoeducational group formats or individual counseling provided by school counselors. For example, research has shown that a psychoeducational group can successfully be used to help students with learning disabilities increase awareness of their own disabilities as well as of postsecondary school expectations (Milsom, Akos, & Thompson, 2004). Also, Thompson and Littrell (1998) found the use of individual brief counseling sessions effective in helping students with learning disabilities improve academic and organizational concerns such as homework completion.

Finally, behavioral approaches can be effective in helping students with disabilities acquire skills for transition. For example, assertiveness skills critical for self-advocacy for students with disabilities can be developed through role play followed by formal practice (Brinckerhoff, 1994). Also, practice with assistive technology (e.g., screen readers, talking calculators) prior to transition will enable students with disabilities to successfully use those items later in life (Mull & Sitlington, 2003).

Environmental Considerations

Perhaps more important than individual skill and knowledge areas is the need to prepare the environment for the transitioning student. Social transitions can be complicated not only if the student has social skills deficits, but also if classmates are not welcoming of the student. In that sense it becomes necessary to prepare the regular education classroom (Dugger-Wadsworth & Knight, 1999). Classroom guidance activities and small groups can be used by school counselors to help students learn and appreciate diversity (Phillips-Hershey & Ridley, 1996; Tarver-Behring et al., 1998). Transitioning from a supportive environment into an equally supportive environment, where students are accepted and feel a part of the group, can help students with disabilities be successful (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2002; Meece, 2002).

In addition to preparing students, preparing teachers (both special and regular education) for their roles throughout the transition is important. Teachers must be prepared to address both the academic and social needs of students with disabilities (Mathes et al., 1998). Helping the students' future teachers develop a clear understanding of the student and his or her needs is also important. Portfolios (i.e., student profiles) also can be used to demonstrate to future teachers the types of accommodations, learning styles, environmental influences, and positive behavioral support plans that

have been successful for students (Demchak & Greenfield, 2002).

For many transitions, collaboration between school and non-school agencies is required. For other transitions, collaboration among school personnel and parents is sufficient. Collaboration has been described as “one of the most important strategies in helping youth with disabilities move successfully from school into employment and adult life” (Leucking & Crane, 2002, p. 1). Blanchett (2001) believed that for transitions to be successful, relevant personnel must be adequately prepared to collaborate with others. School counselors can take an active role in providing professional development opportunities in relation to effective collaboration (Fox et al., 1998).

One final piece to successful transitioning for students with disabilities is to ensure that students have a voice. Not only should all decisions “be made in the context of how that decision may affect the child’s future school or post-school experiences” (deFur, 2000, p. 1), but also, students should be involved to the greatest extent possible in those decisions (Thoma, Held, & Saddler, 2002). Person-centered planning (i.e., consideration of student goals and desires) can help students learn to make decisions and take responsibility for their education. Using techniques such as Talking Mats (a series of pictures that students can place in various categories such as work or living arrangement, to express their preferences) will allow school counselors to effectively involve students with disabilities who might have difficulty verbally participating in IEP meetings or other transition-related meetings (Cameron & Murphy, 2002).

CONCLUSION

School counselors should realize that while many of the skill and knowledge areas necessary for successful transition for students with disabilities are similar, the individual needs of each student must be taken into consideration when planning interventions. Not only are all students unique, but the manifestation of disabilities will vary, even among students with the same disability. For this reason, addressing transition planning within the context of a student’s IEP will help ensure that school personnel tailor interventions to meet each student’s areas of strength and weakness.

With their understanding of student development and the importance of system support, school counselors are important advocates for the development and implementation of transition planning services for students with disabilities. Through direct service activities, school counselors can help facilitate successful transitions for students with disabilities.

Whether advocating for support services, coordinating the efforts of others, or directly providing services to students with disabilities through classroom guidance, small group, and individual counseling sessions, they possess the skills and knowledge to make a difference. School counselors can bring to the attention of educators and parents the importance of early prevention and intervention activities during times of transition. ■

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