

Supporting Families in the Transition Process: Developing a Resource Tool through the National Clearinghouse

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Introduction

Transition from special education services marks a developmental stage to independence through employment or additional education leading to employment (Blacher, 2001; Ferguson, Ferguson, & Jones, 1988). This stage of transition prepares students for life beyond mandatory schooling (Rueda, Monzo, Gomez, Blacher, 2005) by assisting with career choices, future social relationships, living arrangements, and in some instances medical services for adults. The goals of transition focus on productive, independent life (Rusch & Menchetti, 1988). Transition is legislated through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and all subsequent reauthorizations, and the Rehabilitation Act. In addition, URLEND, maintains transition as a main agenda. Yet, transition issues have been minimally addressed by trainees in URLEND. This lack may be due to a) competing goals in URLEND b) difficulties of negotiating adult programs and c) and the difficulty in disseminating the issues of transition to families. The issues of transition have been the focus of a previous project, therefore it seems appropriate to consider the findings of past leadership projects and build upon previous project recommendations.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the implementation of leadership project that addresses transition. First, the conceptual basis of transition is discussed including relevant legislation. Second, review the leadership project from the previous year that identified needs for families and youth in transition. Third, defining the program, including the implementation of a project addressing transition needs. Finally, a discussion on how this leadership projects complements the goals of URLEND is presented.

Transition

Conceptual Basis of Transition

Students engaged in the transition process are encouraged to make choices and decisions regarding their lives with the same freedom of choice as people without disabilities (Wehmeyer, 1995). The ideas of independence, choice, self-determination are central to the goals of the transition process. Indeed, the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998 PL105-220 strengthened the concept of empowerment for people with disabilities and emphasis was placed on informed choice. Students are encouraged to exercise choice, engage in the decision-making process, and set and achieve goals, enroll in postsecondary education programs, and achieve residential independence (Wehmeyer, 2004; Trainor, 2002 and 2005). Students are also encouraged to act on decisions, and learn from experiences through self-evaluation and self-regulation (Wehmeyer, 2004; Trainor, 2005).

Legislation

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) Amendments of 2004 (Public Law 108-446) mandates that transition services begin prior to the first IEP meeting at

age 16. The mandates also emphasize involving the family and student in transition activities. The transition plan must also include the collaboration of student, family, and community. The Rehabilitation Act recommends that counselors facilitate the coordination of services, referral procedures, eligibility determination, and assessment. Despite the legal provisions that encourage professional collaboration, transition is a difficult process for families to engage. A wide array of adult services and specific issues for disabilities such as work status, independence, completing paperwork for federal support (SSI and Medicaid) and continuation of medical care encumber families in the process.

Program Overview

The manuscript by Pelletier and Wootton for URLEND (2006-2007) addressed transition for youth with disabilities from Special Education to Post High School Life. The project involved collecting data from two focus groups. A thematic analysis conducted suggested a need for a) increasing communication with families and professionals, b) providing information on community resources, c) providing a checklist for transition activities, and d) creating a central information portal through a national clearinghouse. After review, it was determined that the results could be implemented in a continued project.

The themes from the focus groups conducted in 2006-2007 are consistent with the transition literature specifically desire for families to participate in the process, the need for increased communication, information on services, and access to information. Researchers have investigated family involvement and determine that it is critical to successful transition outcomes (Schalock, 1988). Shapiro, Monzo, Rueda, Gomez, and Blacher (2004) provided Latina mother's perspectives on transition including an increased need for communication and relationships with service providers. Focus groups conducted by Rueda, et al, 2005, verify the need for transition issues to be addressed with Hispanic families. The results indicated a desire of Latina mothers to have additional information regarding transition issues, services, and access to useful services relevant to their children's needs, and the availability of information in Spanish. Thus the goals of the leadership project were to 1) address the concerns from the focus groups conducted last year and 2) support the URLEND project by presenting information to Hispanic families served by a clinic in Salt Lake City, Utah. The presentation incorporated information on transition and community resources and was provided in Spanish with the assistance of an interpreter.

Program

The leadership project for supporting families in the transition process was conducted in two phases the first, through a community presentation, the second, through the development of a website through the National Clearinghouse for Rehabilitation Training Materials (NCRTM). The thematic analysis from the previous year revealed that families desire more information on community resources. Trainees presented information to Hispanic families at the South Main Clinic in Salt Lake City, Utah. This presentation provided a method for providing information to families, particularly Hispanic families.

Utah State University hosts the National Clearinghouse for Rehabilitation Training Materials (NCRTM). The Clearinghouse seeks to advocate for the profession of rehabilitation through development, collection, dissemination, and utilization of professional information. The Clearinghouse fulfills the need for a centralized location for transition information for families and professionals. NCRTM approved the creation of a "portal" of transition information thus providing the mechanism to implement the outcomes of the focus group. The URLEND trainee had the responsibility of creating the portal, gathering information, and posting the resources for transition.

Evaluation

Obtaining formal evaluation post presentation at the clinic was determined by the trainee and advisor as beyond the scope of this project particularly given the availability of translation resources and the desire from the clinic coordinator to focus on presenting information. However, feedback provided from the attendees was positive stating that the information was novel and will assist in obtaining early intervention services, nutrition services, housing, and eventually transition and employment services. In addition, the South Main clinic coordinator expressed positive feedback and noted that the recording of the presentation would be made available to other families.

Specific procedures for evaluating the portal on the NCRTM website were not developed. However, the NCRTM is reviewed for content by program administrators, students, nonaffiliated faculty, consumers, and counselors. In addition, the NCRTM website is reviewed by WebAim to ensure access for individuals with disabilities.

Procedures

The leadership project was implemented by the s rehabilitation trainee with support from other trainees. The community resources portion of the project involved trainees from physical therapy, nutrition, as well as the parent trainee. The presentation developed addressed early intervention, nutrition programs (WIC, EFNP, and food stamp program), housing information, and vocational rehabilitation services. Trainees presented the information with the assistance of a Spanish translator for powerpoint presentations and to facilitate question and answer discussions. The presentation was given on January 8, 2008 and is posted on the NCRTM website in English and Spanish.

A section titled "Resources for Transition" on the NCRTM was created with a section for youth, families, and professionals. The portal did not exist and therefore the foundation for the site was created. Website information includes a checklist of transition activities, professional presentations, website links, postsecondary education information, areas of interest including recreation, guardianship, sexuality, and social security, work incentive information as well as social and recreation resources. The checklist of transition activities by age group was reviewed by trainees from psychology, social work, and parent trainees. Additional information was collected from the URLEND clinic experiences. Attention was given to accessibility. Documents included in the website are available in text format or in portable document format (pdf). Many of the documents listed were recreated to eliminate graphics (pictures, bulleted items, and tables) in order to enhance web accessibility. Some presentations posted were recorded using *Articulate* software that provides a transcript in addition to the audio format of the presentation to assist in accessibility.

Discussion

The leadership project complements the goals of URLEND by addressing the needs of families and youth in transition. The project sought to implement findings from a focus group conducted by previous trainees. The presentation and website assists in the dissemination of information. The NCRTM To assist in dissemination efforts, the Technology, Research, and Implementation for Special Education (TRI-Sped) at Utah State University maintains a list serve of approximately 3,500 special educators in the nation and information concerning the website will be distributed to these professionals. The legislation for transition encourages collaboration between Special Education and Rehabilitation and perhaps the NCRTM can assist in the collaboration of these professionals in the transition process. NCRTM is accessed by rehabilitation professionals and the checklist can be a resource with professionals to enhance collaboration. In addition, the rehabilitation trainee is presenting at a conference on effective practices for counselors and special educators and the portal on the NCRTM will be discussed in the presentation.

Limitations

Dissemination of information is primarily through the NCRTM information portal. Youth and families may not have internet access to view the information. However, internet access is available through public schools and libraries. Schools encourage the use of technology and information access through technology is increasing. Another limitation might be the NCRTM website itself. The information contained on the NCRTM website is vast and individuals may have difficulty accessing the information and determining the navigation to find the resources available. As a result of discussions with the NCRTM staff, plans for redesigning the website have been made including the concept for a section for consumers, families, and professionals. The implementation of the redesign will require resources and time however, the Clearinghouse staff is committed to providing a resource that is useful and easily accessed by the rehabilitation community. An additional limitation is the availability of information in Spanish. Only the community resources presentation is available in Spanish. As the information portal evolves, it is hoped that resources will be available to translate the information thus enabling cultural/linguistic diverse families an opportunity to review transition information.

Although the presentation on community resources was given to only one group at one location, certainly providing information to families is the first step. Parents wish to have community information to make decisions about transition (Rueda et al, 2005). Additional presentations should be given to more groups. Consideration should also be given to accessibility including alternative format, sign language interpretation, and more print accessibility (large print, Braille, and Spanish).

Future Implications

Through NCRTM opportunity also exists for discussion boards, recording of presentations and forums to engage families and professionals in the transition process. Research should be conducted on methods for assisting youth and families in the transition process specifically, ways in which professionals and families can collaborate. Further formal evaluation of presentations at the South Main Clinic can also be conducted through focus groups to determine presentations that are of interest to families rather than issues trainees feel are important to families.

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