

Transition Planning Process: Giving Deaf Students a Voice

Suzette V. Garay

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Abstract

Adolescents with disabilities and their families face many challenges, especially at critical transition points in their lives. Such transitions include moving from middle school to high school, moving from high school to employment, entering a postsecondary education program, and/or deciding to live independently in the community. The success of each transition is contingent upon the coordination of several factors such as services, experience, and programs that assist individuals in selecting and achieving goals. Due to the diversity of goals, various professionals including special educators, vocational support personnel, employers and community/adult service providers may participate in the transition assessment process. However, success of this process depends on the active involvement of the adolescent and his or her family.

This research investigated perceptions of deaf students to identify key services and experiences that facilitated their successful transition from secondary and post-secondary education into adult life and employment. The investigation considered students' participation in the planning process and what effect it had upon their decisions regarding directions or goals they chose to pursue. Implications for teachers and administrators who work with these students are also included.

Current Practice

The student with a disability should be at the core of transition planning. Ward and Halloran (1993) stated "the ultimate goal of education must be to increase the responsibility of all students for managing their own affairs" (p.4). The reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 has made it clear that secondary special educators are responsible for inviting students and their families to IEP meetings when transition goals are discussed, and for inviting personnel from other agencies to ensure that transition services are coordinated. Thus, IDEA '97 reinforces the need and importance of teaching self-determination and providing choices for students with disabilities to the greatest extent possible including students with hearing impairments (Sitlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000).

Although the development of a concrete transition plan is an important and tangible outcome, it is not the most critical outcome. When a transition plan is successful, students may experience changes in the way they view themselves as well as the way in which they interact with others. Students during the transition process should experience a variety of opportunities in which they are able to take charge of important life decisions in a manner reinforced by their teachers and parents. These opportunities facilitate a growing sense of empowerment and a reduction in feelings of helplessness. This sense of empowerment is fortified by a new set of skills; students learn planning and problem-solving processes that can be used throughout their lives (LeNard, 2001).

Despite the importance of student-centered transition planning for deaf students, several issues impede success in the transition planning process:

A steep decline in the enrollment of deaf students in residential schools has occurred over the past 20 years. The President's Commission on Education of the Deaf estimated in 1987 that the drop-out rates for deaf students was at 79% for AA degree programs and 71% for BA degree programs (Fernandes, 1997).

Over the past 20 years, the educational system has seen the largest increase of deaf minority students. In a recent article on the diversity revolution in deaf education, the most recent Annual Survey report indicates that about 44% of deaf and hard of hearing children and youth enrolled in educational programs are from diverse multicultural backgrounds. However, these students continue to significantly lag behind their white peers on nearly all national and regional studies of educational and occupational attainments (Anderson, 2001).

Deaf students, by virtue of the communication difficulties have uneven academic development when compared to their hearing peers (Allen, 1992).

Participation in vocational programs was neither necessarily helpful nor predictive of future employment or career planning. The

impact of family influence appears to be the strongest predictor for determining employment outcome, not work experiences or training (Schildroth, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000).

Employment opportunities in the future will require higher levels of literacy and mathematics. Deaf students often are placed in vocational tracks where reading and mathematics are de-emphasized which will impose barriers to employment (Steward & Kluwin, 2001).

Deaf students often lack instruction in advocating for themselves during transitioning planning which limits their opportunities for additional academic and vocational training (Garay, 2000).

Communication and language concerns are central to many employment and transition issues for deaf students. Lower academic achievement levels and reduced mastery of literacy skills coupled with poor self-advocacy skills documented in the literature as is the case for many students with disabilities can result in a lack of successful transition planning.

The outcome for future employment for students with disabilities in general is lower than their non-disabled peers. Since the 1990s passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as well as the recent reauthorization of IDEA 1997, there has been a flurry of activity in the area of transition planning. This Act now requires transition planning be addressed within the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process for all special education students beginning at age 14. Since the reauthorization of IDEA, attempts have been made to develop new and more successful approaches for transition planning.

Researching about deaf students' accomplishments has long been a tool used by administrators for reporting program outcomes and their program's accountability. Typically, a written survey is used to ask questions about their education, place of residence, employment, and other aspects of their lives that fit into predetermined categories. This author's study of deaf students was different in that the purpose was to give a voice to this population. The author, who is deaf, wanted the participants to share how and why the deaf participants made decisions about transitioning from high school to adult life.

This study investigated perceptions of deaf students to identify key services and experiences that facilitated their successful transition from secondary and post-secondary education into adult life and employment. Only those who graduated from high school in a midwestern state were surveyed (either residential or

mainstream) and who completed the transition process. This investigation considered students' participation in the planning process and what effect it had upon their decisions regarding directions or goals they chose to pursue.

This study was conducted through in-depth face-to-face interviews, and an online survey. It provided a unique perspective from the author's own experiences as a deaf graduate and the deaf students themselves who participated in this study.

The deaf participants used the mode of communication that was most comfortable to tell their stories in their own words. It is from these stories that the author hopes to make suggestions to classroom teachers related to students who are deaf and the transition process. In addition, the author hopes their reflections on strategies for participating, making decisions, and solving problems will help administrators and teachers think about the real-world needs that deaf students face after graduation.

Of the 69 students participating in this study, 26 took the survey online. Those who chose not to take the online version of the Transition Assessment Questionnaire (TAQ) had an additional option: they could answer the questions through in-depth interviews, or they could have a TAQ administrator translate the survey into American Sign Language (ASL). This option allowed those who were uncomfortable reading or understanding printed English the ability to participate by taking the survey in their primary language.

Emerging Themes Related to Transition

An analysis of information related to various supports available for deaf students is important for teachers and administrators to consider. The themes that emerged from the data gathered from these 69 students leads to the following recommendations that are supported in the literature:

1. Student participation is crucial. Deaf students must be more than observers at their IEP meetings; they must be provided with tools to be effective participants. For the most part, activities are the same for all students. However, the unique communication needs of deaf students and especially students from minority cultures must be taken into consideration related to participation. Teachers must understand that transition planning today is a complex process requiring intensive evaluation of each deaf student, including the coordination of a variety of educational and employment (Stewart, & Kluwin, 2001).

2. Efforts must be made to involve families in the transition process. School personnel need to be sensitive to family values, communication needs, and per-

sonal situations. Families should be encouraged to participate to whatever degree possible identifying transition needs related to the deaf culture.

3. *Teachers need to be aware of the feelings of parents of deaf children.* They must understand the different views related to cultural attitudes, language barriers, and social status associated with being deaf. There are many unique obstacles facing deaf and hard of hearing students in transitioning from school to work (Starnes, 2001). Some of these obstacles include:

- *Language.* The use of colloquial expressions is sometimes misperceived by both the deaf and hard of hearing student and their employer, creating confusion on both sides.
- *Role expectations and work ethic.* Sometimes, students are naïve about the rules and behavioral expectations that govern the workplace because they spend their lives exclusively in a school environment and are not prepared for the outside workplace.
- *Parental expectations.* For those students who have grown up in homes where communication is problematic, they may find that their parents have unrealistic expectations of what they can or cannot accomplish. Often times, the parents relegate some of the work traditionally handled at home to the school. As time goes on and schools and professionals take over their children's lives, the parents become used to being "out of the loop." Thus, the parents don't learn about academic and vocational training options or job skills and careers available to their children.
- *Life skills.* The incidental learning that occurs as hearing children watch and listen to their own hearing parents becomes essential to a successful transition. This learning often lacking is in homes where there have been communication barriers. Students need to gain independent functional experience. They need to know how to write a check, shop at the grocery store and balance their bank account. They need to learn how to budget, pay their rent, and how ATM cards work.
- *Uneducated public.* There is still much apprehension and misperception about deaf and hard of hearing people among employers. For some business leaders, the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act only increases their anxiety that interpreter services for employees will greatly affect their profit margins.

4. *Transition planning should start in middle school.* Many aspects of the transition planning process take place in senior year or prior to graduation, disallowing appropriate time for the student to participate in activities recommended in their IEPs. A discussion regarding how to participate in transition planning should be delivered to the student within their middle school program, teaching life skills and career education options. Families and students should be introduced to the major areas of transition planning when they begin coursework. They should also be made aware of areas crucial to the student's successful future (i.e., how to go to college, how to use interpreters, and finding accurate information for obtaining assistance with independent living or college life).

5. *Transition planning must be sensitive to cultural factors.* Professionals involved in the transition planning must be aware of various cultural factors, including deaf culture that can affect the student and family participation in the transition planning process. Many deaf students have shared that they had no role models and felt no one really understood their needs or interests. More than half stated they discovered and obtained information through the deaf community. Professionals and families need to be cognizant of what the deaf community has to offer.

6. *Transition planning must be comprehensive.* Students, teachers, and parents must be aware of the importance of training students to participate in the transition planning process. The belief that students with disabilities and their families should contribute actively to the decisions and planning processes related to their post-school goals has been clearly documented (Ingraham & Anderson, 2001). Research exploring the extent to which students with hearing disabilities actually engage in the transition process is scarce. Of the few studies published, one recurring concern was evident: students did not report receiving any self-determination training relating to decision-making (Ingraham & Anderson, 2001).

Implications for Teachers

Although there are many factors that affect deaf students' participation in the transition planning process, one that often is acknowledged but seldom addressed directly is motivation. According to the students interviewed, one way to increase deaf students' motivation is by teaching deaf students how to make decisions about their learning and participation in their transition experiences. By teaching students how to make effective decisions and providing them with opportunities to make important learning and career decisions, they can be empowered to become active participants in advocating for and negotiating their own futures. Deaf students shared:

“I did not participate in my transition planning because my parents took care of it for me. Now that I am out in the real world, I am mad because I was not informed of services that could have been helpful to me.” “During my first year at college, I was not informed of community services that could be of help to me. My VR counselor was not of help to me except to pay for tuition and books. It would have been helpful if I knew how to access interpreters and the deaf community.” “Everyone was making decisions for me and I was too angry to say anything during the meetings.”

The idea of teaching deaf students how to make effective learning and career decisions and how to use self-advocacy skills is based on research which has shown that students who have positive self-perceptions and control over their learning abilities are more willing and likely to work successfully with the adults in their environment (Van Reusen, Bos, Schumaker, & Deshler, 1994). According to these authors, self-advocacy refers to an individual’s ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate or assert his or her own interests, desires, needs, and rights. It involves making informed decisions and taking responsibility for those decisions. Providing students who are deaf with opportunities to learn how to communicate effectively and to use decision-making and self-advocacy skills can help prepare them to become full participants in the transition planning process. However, the barrier to this training is that many times people in the business or academic world are still under various misconceptions, such as *“I didn’t know that deaf people would be allowed to drive”* (Starnes, 2001).

What Should Teachers Do?

Teaching deaf students to advocate for themselves will have the greatest impact when they are actively participating in their own transition planning process. There are several ideas and suggestions that students provided that can be incorporated into the transition planning process and meetings with deaf students to ensure that they have the opportunity to share information and ideas.

1. *Define “transition planning.”* Teachers should help deaf students explain the purpose of transition planning in their own words and discuss expectations and/or activities that will occur during these conferences. Deaf students shared: *“I don’t think anyone told me what transition planning meant, I was only told about VR services.” “I don’t think I had this kind of service when I graduated.” “I did go to a meeting but I don’t know if it was called transition.”*

2. *Teach the student how to participate.* Deaf students must know how to influence decisions being made about them. They need to have strategies for what to say and how to act during conferences, and they also need to be prepared to advocate for themselves. Students must have a clear understanding of their own strengths and areas of challenge. They can be their own best advocates as they increasingly participate in the drafting and implementation of their own IEP. However, many deaf students are not prepared to do this, partly because they’re unaware of their own capabilities. Once students are aware of their own capabilities, they begin to build a solid self-advocacy mentality that will carry them throughout their adult lives. Students who are not encouraged to speak up during their high school years might run the risk that these skills will not develop until much later or they may not develop at all (Ingraham & Anderson, 2001). Deaf students shared: *“I was not able to graduate on time. I didn’t know what credits meant in college terms and I felt people were taking advantage of me if I overlooked the rules or did not know what I needed to do in order to plan for college.” “I felt my high school experience at (deaf school) was like prison! They made all the decisions for me and told me what I go do after high school.”*

3. *Create opportunities to practice.* Without any prior systematic practices, students who are deaf often are not able to internalize the skills needed for asking the right questions at the appropriate time. How is this unique to deaf students? Deaf students shared: *“I think there was only one meeting that my parents told me I had to come to and I went with my parents, but I just sat there.” “The teachers and deaf counselors were supportive about my goals but didn’t teach me how to prepare for them.”*

4. *Allow time to respond.* Deaf students need a longer “wait time” to think about what needs to be said, remembering how to communicate their responses, and what type of questions to ask. One deaf student shared: *“Everyone was talking so fast and I couldn’t understand the questions, so I didn’t say anything.”*

5. *Teach how to make eye contact.* Since students who are deaf often rely on interpreters for effective communication when parents and other adults are in the meeting, they tend to look more at the interpreter than at the other members. If eye contact with the student is infrequent, the student may assume that his or her participation is not valued or important. Another deaf student shared: *“I didn’t know what was going on and what they were saying about me, because I was busy watching the interpreter.”*

6. *Teach how to share opinions.* A good way to encourage deaf students to participate is to ask them to share their own opinions. Teaching them the importance of eye contact, self-cueing strategies, and making comments on their opinions will likely increase the student's motivation to participate in the transition process. One deaf student shared: *"I wanted them to tell me more information on different options, and add it into learning how to problem-solve and how to fight for your rights."*

7. *Teach how to pay attention.* Deaf students need to know how to pay attention to what is being said and how to think about the information being used for planning. Most importantly, they need to know how to respond positively about the information being discussed and how to ask for clarification to help them better advocate for themselves. A deaf student shared: *"I did go to the meeting but it was really boring, and I didn't get anything good out of it."*

8. *Teach how to use interpreters.* Deaf students need to know how to effectively use interpreters. They need to know how to let the interpreters know when they do not understand, or how to interrupt the conversations appropriately so that they can participate and answer questions correctly. Deaf students shared: *"I couldn't understand the interpreter. I needed a better interpreter."* *"People were talking and not signing; and when I say something, no one really understands what I say because they didn't know ASL."*

Questions for Students to Consider

- Questions related to their abilities and limitations. *"I wish I learned more about being deaf and how hearing people can work better with us."*
- Questions that help them understand about their strengths and weaknesses. *"I felt like my teachers lied to me about how bad my English, and I can't write."*
- Questions that help them demonstrate their knowledge about locating and using community resources. *"I need to know more about deaf community and how I can get help with finding an apartment."*
- Questions that help determine their communication needs, requesting interpreters, getting telecommunication devices, and strategies for enhancing better communication with people who may not fully understand their language or preferred mode of communicating. *"I need help with technology skills requirements for work."*
- Questions that help identify their social and family-living situations. *"I wish they taught me better social*

skills, ability to stand up for yourself, and wish my parents helped me practice skills on my goals and interest."

Although these types of questions are not exhaustive, they do provide the basis for preparing students who are deaf for other types of conferences, meetings, or settings where they need to advocate for themselves. The goal of asking and practicing specific questions is to have the student initiate and conduct a meeting in which they advocate for themselves regarding issues or problems prior to participating in the actual transition planning process.

The preparation of transition planning with deaf students is just beginning to be recognized as important. The need for greater student involvement is essential to the deaf student's success in the post-high school environment. We know that the current outcomes for students with disabilities who do not benefit from their transition planning process tend to move from one institution to another. They often live at home for longer periods and express greater frustration with isolation and lack of social relationships in their lives (Sitlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000). Therefore, teaching deaf students how to advocate for their needs to pursue their goals is essential. If teachers can motivate deaf students to take proactive roles in their transition planning, they will develop the confidence and self-determination skills necessary for achieving their goals and interests in life.

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Author's Note:

I am a deaf Hispanic faculty member and am familiar with the stigma placed on deaf individuals who are not from the mainstream. As a deaf student, I was not involved in transition from school to life for many of the same reasons given by the participants of this study. If you are a teacher who works with deaf students, I hope you will gain an understanding from an insider's point of view. Although the issues raised in this article remain unresolved, it is my hope that these deaf students' stories will provide direction and a foundation to ensure that your deaf students are heard in the transition process.