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SPECIAL EDUCATION AND REHABILITATION POLICIES FOR THE SCHOOL TO COMMUNITY TRANSITION OF STUDENTS WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENTS

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“Transition” is the link, or bridge, between the secondary educational experience and integration into the adult community for students with disabilities (Will, 1984). This subject area has assumed a major national profile, and has been the object of extensive inquiry and discussion in special education and rehabilitation (Rusch & Phelps, 1987). Unfortunately, to date, little research on transition has been conducted on persons with hearing impairments (Bullis, Bull, Sendelbaugh & Freeburg, 1987). Recently the Teaching Research Division of the Oregon State System of Higher Education has begun to examine the school to community transition of students with hearing impairments (Bullis, 1986). A component of this project was designed to examine the status of state level transition agreements between special education and vocational rehabilitation agencies, as well as local service delivery procedures. Logically, cooperation between education and rehabilitation is a necessary prerequisite in quality transition programs (Will, 1984). It is generally agreed, however, that synergistic arrangements of this type are not the norm (Corthell & VanBoskirk, 1984).

A national survey of all special education and vocational rehabilitation agencies in the 50 states and the District of Columbia was conducted to address four questions: What state-level transition provisions between special education and rehabilitation are in place currently for students with hearing impairment? How congruent are the views of special education and vocational rehabilitation agencies in regard to these services? What types of transition services are offered at the LEA (local education agency) by rehabilitation practitioners? and, How congruent are the

views of special education and vocational rehabilitation agencies in regard to these services?

Method

Survey Instrument

An initial survey form to gather information on the transition process for students with hearing impairments was developed, critiqued by three state-level agency staff, and revised. The final draft of the survey consisted of 10 questions relating to accepted definitions of hearing loss, requirements for the development of an Individualized Transition Plan for exiting students, personnel responsible for transition programming at the state and local level, and the role of vocational rehabilitation staff in the transition process in both residential and mainstreamed school programs. The instrument and a description of the study was submitted to the Research Committee of the Commission of State Vocational Rehabilitation Administrators for review and eventual approval.

Sample

A list of all coordinators for services to persons with hearing impairments in vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs in the 50 states and the District of Columbia was constructed. Also, a list of the 51 directors of special education (SE) programs in all states and the District of Columbia was compiled. A cover letter explaining the project was attached to each survey. Contact personnel were asked to respond directly to the survey or to give the form to the staff person in charge of transition services for persons with hearing impairments. Four weeks after the initial mailing a follow-up letter and a second survey

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was mailed to all nonrespondents.

A total of 86 of the 102 VR and SE agencies responded to the survey, for a response rate of 84%. Thirty-four pairs of responses were received, i.e. in 34 cases surveys were completed by representatives of both the vocational rehabilitation and special education agencies. Thus, a response rate of 67% (34 of 51) was achieved for paired respondents.

Analysis and Results

The data supplied by the 34 paired respondents provide the foundation for this manuscript. Statistical analysis of the responses made by VR and SE representatives on individual items (e.g., chi-square analysis) was not possible due to major violations of statistical assumptions (e.g., empty cells in a contingency table) (Siegel, 1956). Therefore, information from the two groups are presented at a descriptive level only.

State Level Transition Agreements

Respondents were asked if state level agreements were in place for students with disabilities and, specifically, for students with hearing impairments. For agencies with such arrangements, inquiry was made regarding the requirement for an Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) to be developed for students while in school.

Of the 34 VR agencies responding to this survey, 41% (n=14) reported that state level transition agreements have been developed. Ten of the

fourteen agencies have made the development of an ITP mandatory for clients identified while in the educational setting. Only 27% (n=9) of the SE respondents reported having a state-level transition plan in place. The requirement for an ITP was indicated by six of these states. In reviewing the total list of both VR and SE agencies having transitions plans, all nine SE programs were in states where VR had also developed a plan, implying a high level of interagency communication.

For programs that replied affirmatively to the existence of state level plans, only one VR agency stated that a special transition agreement governing students with deafness was in place. No SE respondents mentioned that such a mechanism existed. However, all other respondents indicated that students with hearing impairments were served under the umbrella of the general agreements.

Definition of Client/Student Hearing Loss

Six measurable items most often used in defining hearing loss were listed on the survey form (Moore, 1978). Respondents were asked to check those items that are part of the agency's "official" definition of hearing loss. Table 1 provides a summary of the responses from both groups.

It seems that no common eligibility criterion is used by the respondents to this study. Therefore, judgment on the part of both SE and VR must

Table 1

Criteria Included in the Official Definition of Hearing Loss

	Vocational Rehabilitation	Special Education
1. Degree of hearing loss as measured in decibels (units of loudness, dB)	88% (n=30)	52% (n=18)
2. Age at onset of the hearing loss	59% (n=20)	15% (n=5)
3. Ability to discriminate words in quiet environments (speech discrimination scores)	47% (n=16)	18% (n=6)
4. Ability to discriminate words in noisy situations	24% (n=8)	18% (n=6)
5. Ability of the client/student to speech read as measured on standardized tests	21% (n=7)	15% (n=5)
6. Ability of the client/student to communicate orally with non-hearing impaired persons	32% (n=11)	27% (n=9)

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come into play in classifying and determining the service eligibility of persons with hearing impairments. Three items (Item 1: Degree of hearing loss; Item 2: Age at onset; and Item 3: Ability to discriminate spoken words) show divergence between the two groups. Some measure of hearing loss stated in decibels is found in most definitions of hearing loss, but rarely is it ever used as the single determiner for placement or services. There also is some discrepancy between respondents concerning speech discrimination measures. Overall, SE respondents do not seem to have preference for discrimination scores done in a quiet situation (18%, $n=6$) as compared to discrimination measures taken in noise (18%, $n=6$). VR agencies more often required speech discrimination scores (e.g., part of their criteria for acceptance unlike their SE counterparts) and tended to gather measurements in quiet setting (48%, $n=16$) more often than in noisy environments (24%, $n=8$). Other eligibility criteria did not show much variation between respondent groups.

Educational Personnel Involved in Transition

Respondents were asked if specific persons in the state SE agency and local educational agencies (LEAs) were identified formally to coordinate transition activities for students with hearing impairments. In affirmative cases, the titles of these individuals were provided.

Interestingly, 35% ($n=12$) of the VR respondents indicated that such a staff person was identified and only 18% ($n=6$) of the SE respondents answered that such a person was in place. In other words, VR may tend to look upon individuals in SE as having authority in transition issues, when in fact they have not been given such authority from their own agency.

At the LEA level 97% ($n=33$) of the SE respondents and 85% ($n=29$) of the VR respondents indicated that there was no formal provision for a transition coordinator to be specified in particular school districts. In the few instances where respondents answered positively the Career Education Coordinator, General School Counselor, and Teacher for the Deaf were listed as the persons most likely to be in charge of transition planning.

Rehabilitation Personnel Involved in Transition

Questions were posed to ascertain if a specific

person at the state VR level was identified formally to coordinate VR transition services for clients with hearing impairment. Another question asked if there is a formal planning mechanism between VR personnel and LEA staff, and the most common title of the VR person responsible for such planning. Finally, inquiry was made on informal contacts between VR and LEAs, the participation of VR in participating in transition plans in these arrangements, and the most common title of the VR person involved in informal planning.

At the state level 35% ($n=12$) of the VR respondents indicated that a specific staff person in the rehabilitation agency had been identified to be in charge of transition planning. Conversely, 63% ($n=22$) of the SE respondents stated that a person in the rehabilitation agency had been designated for this role. The person identified by 28% ($n=10$) of the respondents in the VR and SE groups was the State Coordinator for the Deaf; the remaining respondents did not list the specified title and/or person.

For the second question, 47% ($n=16$) of the VR respondents and 52% ($n=18$) of the SE respondents stated that a formal agreement was in place that required VR counselors to work with LEAs to provide services to students with deafness. In these cases, 32% ($n=11$) of the VR respondents and 21% ($n=7$) of the SE respondents indicated that VR counselors are required to work with educational personnel to plan the students' transition from schools. Interestingly, only two of those SE responding to the question indicated that the VR staff person in this role was a Rehabilitation Counselor for the Deaf (RCD). Conversely, eight of the VR respondents identified the RCD as the individual to carry out these functions.

Finally, there is general agreement that informal contact with schools is maintained by VR personnel. All of the VR respondents (100%, $n=34$) and 94% ($n=32$) of the SE respondents indicated that such linkages exist. In these arrangements 11 of the 34 VR respondents and seven of the 32 of the SE respondents stated that VR counselors regularly assisted in transition planning. When asked about ITP development, the VR respondents identified the RCD as the most appropriate person to work with students having hearing impairments. The SE respondents identified the general VR counselor as the most appropriate contact.

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Cooperative Planning in Residential and Mainstreamed Settings

The purpose of this part of the survey was to gain an idea of the percentage of students in either residential or mainstreamed settings for whom VR and LEA personnel met at least once to plan transition services. Accordingly, two grids, one for residential settings and a second for mainstreamed settings, were developed. Each consisted of two dimensions. The first dimension of each grid was composed of three subgroups of

students: Hard of Hearing, Deaf, and Multiply Handicapped/Hearing Impaired. The second dimension consisted of percentage range (0-25%, 26-50%, 51-75%, 76-100%). Respondents were asked to give their best guess as to the percentage range of each subgroup of students, in both residential and mainstreamed settings, for whom VR and LEA personnel met at least once to develop plans for transition services. The results for the residential settings are presented in Table 2. The results for mainstreamed settings are presented in Table 3.

Table 2

Cooperative Transition Planning between VR and Educational Personnel in Residential School Settings as Indicated by VR and SE Respondents

		0-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%	No Opinion
Hard of Hearing	VR	27% (n=9)	6% (n=2)	18% (n=6)	41% (n=14)	9% (n=3)
	SE	29% (n=10)	6% (n=2)	12% (n=4)	35% (n=12)	18% (n=6)
Deaf	VR	12% (n=4)	0% (n=0)	21% (n=7)	62% (n=21)	6% (n=2)
	SE	15% (n=5)	0% (n=0)	29% (n=10)	41% (n=14)	15% (n=5)
Multiply Handicapped/ Hearing Impaired	VR	15% (n=5)	15% (n=5)	9% (n=3)	50% (n=17)	12% (n=4)
	SE	18% (n=6)	3% (n=1)	21% (n=7)	44% (n=15)	15% (n=5)

*NOTE: Respondents were asked to mark one choice for each subgroup of students. In some cases this was not done, hence some of the raw totals do not sum to 100%.

Table 3

Cooperative Transition Planning between VR and Educational Personnel in Mainstream School Settings as Indicated by VR and SE Respondents

		0-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%	No Opinion
Hard of Hearing	VR	35% (n=12)	27% (n=9)	29% (n=10)	9% (n=3)	0% (n=0)
	SE	38% (n=13)	18% (n=6)	18% (n=6)	9% (n=3)	18% (n=6)
Deaf	VR	18% (n=6)	21% (n=7)	35% (n=12)	27% (n=9)	0% (n=0)
	SE	27% (n=9)	24% (n=8)	18% (n=6)	15% (n=5)	18% (n=6)
Multiply Handicapped/ Hearing Impaired	VR	24% (n=8)	18% (n=6)	44% (n=15)	12% (n=4)	3% (n=1)
	SE	35% (n=12)	18% (n=6)	15% (n=5)	15% (n=5)	18% (n=6)

*NOTE: Respondents were asked to mark one choice for each subgroup of students. In some cases this was not done, hence some of the raw totals do not sum to 100%.

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It is clear that the impression of respondents to this survey is that more transition planning with VR occurs in residential schools than in mainstreamed programs. There is also discrepancy between the perceptions of VR and SE respondents in terms of the percentage of students with deafness in residential settings who receive coordinated services. Also, in mainstreamed settings the general impression is that many students classified as either Hard of Hearing or Multiply Handicapped/Hearing Impaired receive little in the way of joint transition planning.

Summary and Discussion

Slightly less than half of the VR agencies and less than one-fourth of the SE agencies responding to this survey have a formal state-level transition plan in place. In the majority of cases, however, it appears that transition planning is conducted on an informal basis between VR and LEA staff.

In addition, several difficulties in providing transition planning for persons with hearing impairments were identified in this survey. First, there is a lack of a uniform definition of hearing impairment even within individual states. In analyzing the matched pairs of respondents it was found that only eight pairs shared a similar definition. Such differences could affect referral and involvement, thus limiting the service options for some individuals.

Second, in the majority of instances a coordinator to oversee transition activities for students with hearing impairments is not clearly specified at the state level in VR or SE. Even in states where transition services have been formalized, specific persons at the state level have not always been identified. And, in general, personnel to coordinate transition services at the LEA level have not been named. The lack of staff in such positions at the state level is important, as these

individuals would influence services for large areas and many individuals. As the LEA is where education and VR interface for individual students, the absence of coordinators for transition planning is notable.

Third, some respondents reported that VR personnel are required to work with schools in developing services for their students with disabilities. SE programs tended to identify a general VR counselor as the most logical person to develop transition planning for students with hearing impairments, whereas VR identified the RCD to perform such a role. This seems to indicate that SE personnel are not always aware of Rehabilitation Counselors for the Deaf, specialists in working with individuals with hearing impairments.

Finally, there is significant variation in opinion on the presence of transition planning in residential and mainstreamed settings. Both VR and SE personnel viewed residential programs as more apt to provide transition planning for their students. As many students with hearing impairments are educated in the public school setting (Karchmer, 1985), this finding is important.

To conclude, the concept of transition for students with disabilities, including those students with hearing impairments, is new. The idea is laudable and, logically, there is much to be gained by coordinating service programs between VR and SE personnel. One would expect that a cohesive array of services would be afforded to students through such a model, a structure that would ultimately lead the individual to improved living and work experiences in the community. The results of this survey, however, suggest that there is much work to do in developing transition mechanisms for students with hearing impairments. Such work must be initiated to improve educational and rehabilitation services, and to foster success in society for these individuals.

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