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Effective Transition to College: Perspectives from Transition Specialists

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Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication, and behavioral challenges. Students with ASD face unique challenges in accessing postsecondary education (PSE). The increasing number of students with ASD entering PSE necessitates the identification of evidence-based transition practices to support these students. Given the limited literature base, researchers gathered data from the perspective of two transition specialists, district-level transition experts. Findings from this case study indicated the need to explicitly teach transition skills, provide early support to teachers and students, and encourage collaborative programs that include family engagement.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorders, transition, postsecondary education

Effective Transition to College: Perspectives from Transition Specialists

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2012) identified autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as the fastest growing developmental disability category. ASD can cost up to \$60,000 a year per family (CDC, 2012). Currently, 1 in 68 American children has an ASD diagnosis (CDC, 2014). ASD refers to a spectrum of neurodevelopmental disorders characterized by abnormal language, learning difficulties, and often a low intelligence quotient; however, there are individuals with ASD who demonstrate average to above-average intelligence and do not present with language or learning impairments (Tebartz van Elst, Pick, Biscaldi, Fangmeier, & Riedel, 2013). The term high-functioning autism (HFA) is often used to describe individuals with ASD who have scored within the normal limits on standardized intelligence tests (VanBergeijk, Klin, & Volkmar, 2008). In the most recent Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), HFA was included with other autism subtypes into the category of ASD (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). In this study, the term ASD was utilized in accordance with the DSM-5 with the focus on the subpopulation of students with ASD (i.e., those with HFA) who do not have an intellectual disability.

Many students with high-functioning ASD aspire to attend college after high school graduation (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009). One study found that 57.4% of young adults with ASD surveyed for the study were focused primarily on PSE during the 6 years following their high school graduation (Wei, Wagner, Hudson, Yu, & Shattuck, 2015) but these students may struggle with post-secondary education (PSE) due to some characteristics of their disability. For example, students with ASD may lack skills related to (a) recognition and acceptance of the views of others; (b) sensory integration, graphomotor, and emotional behavior; (c) executive functioning and organization; (d) navigation of social interactions (e.g., managing accommodations, managing coursework, changing schedules, developing and maintaining social relationships); and (e) making living arrangements (Grynszpan et

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al., 2011; Krell & Perusse, 2012; Wolf, Thierfeld Brown, & Kukiela Bork, 2009). PSE institutions often provide academic supports for students (e.g., study skills, writing workshops), but services that address the unique social difficulties students with ASD experience are limited (Morrison, Sansosti, & Hadley, 2009). Moreover, PSE institutions may have a one-size-fits-all approach to disability services, accommodating students with ASD in the same way they accommodate students with other types of disabilities (Smith, 2007). In order to stay in college and graduate, students with ASD require individualized supports that begin in high school and continue during the transition to college to help address the unique academic, social, and institutional barriers students with ASD will face in PSE (Dente & Coles, 2012; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Krell & Perusse, 2012).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) mandates transition services for students with disabilities (IDEA, 2004). These services should facilitate students' movement from secondary school to post-school environment and incorporate individual strengths, preferences and interests. Although there is a need to identify evidence-based practices for transition to PSE for students with ASD (Roberts, 2010), limited research exists. Available data suggest that the fit between the student and institution is an important consideration (VanBergeijk, Klin, & Volkmar, 2008). Other considerations include: (a) assessment and instruction on necessary independent living and social skills, including adjusting to the college environment; (b) instruction on advocacy skills, including when and how to disclose a disability and identifying appropriate academic supports and accommodations; (c) exposure to college curricula and college settings; (d) supports for families and students related to decision-making about "fit" issues such as type and size of college and student living arrangements; and (e) instruction on how to navigate disability-related services in college and how to use social supports like family, friends, and roommates (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Dente & Coles, 2012; Dillon, 2007; VanBergeijk et al., 2008; Wenzel & Rowley, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to investigate how transition specialists perceive the services and supports in secondary school intended to help students with ASD in transitioning to PSE settings. Other researchers have investigated the perceptions of transition stakeholders including teachers, transition professionals and vocational program specialists with focus on transition barriers, professional development, and interagency collaboration (Lubbers, Repetto, & McGorray, 2008; Oertle, Trach, & Plotner, 2013; Plotner, Mazzotti, Rose, & Carlson-Britting, 2016) and other stakeholders, such as students (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009; Fleming-Castalay & Bauck Horning, 2013; Griffin, Taylor, Urbano, & Hodapp, 2014; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007), parents (Ankeny, Wilkins, & Spain, 2009; Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009; Goupil, Tasse, Garcin, & Dore, 2002), and college personnel (Glennon, 2016). However, unlike most members of the transition plan team, transition specialists have valuable specialized knowledge related to policy considerations within the education systems (K-12 and postsecondary) and adult disability service systems at the federal, state, and local levels. Additionally, transition specialists provide the link between students, their families, and special education services, and postsecondary settings. Transition specialists may also become familiar with supports in the community that facilitate students' transition to adulthood by building relationships with local businesses and professionals within postsecondary programs, contributing to their "on the ground" experience with transition practices. Therefore, asking transition specialists to identify practices that can facilitate transition for students with ASD contributes to the larger body of research on improving PSE outcomes for students with disabilities.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What services are available to target college readiness and attainment of PSE in high school students with ASD?
2. What services and supports foster self-determination and independence in students with

- ASD in order to prepare them for PSE?
3. How can transition planning services for high school students with ASD be improved to help ensure PSE entrance and attainment?

Method

Qualitative research methodology of the present study is suitable for exploring educational issues and gathering information regarding individuals and their attitudes, values, and concerns (Ereaut, 2007). This qualitative study used a case study research approach to understand the perspectives of transition specialists about services and supports intended to assist students with ASD in transitioning to PSE environments. The case study approach allowed to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context (Yin, 2014), and involved the use of the semi-structured interview as the primary method.

Sampling Procedures and Participant Characteristics

This study utilized a purposive sampling technique (Tongco, 2007). Specifically, critical case sampling allowed for selecting participants because of their uniqueness and importance to the investigated issue (Boudah, 2011). The researchers contacted the executive director of special education programs in one suburban Texas school district serving over 50,000 students, more than 5,000 of whom receive special education services. The director provided a letter of support; subsequently, researchers applied for and received approval from the Institutional Review Board at their university. The researchers then contacted the transition specialists in the district ($n=2$) through e-mail; both agreed to participate and selected pseudonyms for themselves. Hereafter, they are referred to as Nicole and Sue. Both participants were females and Caucasian (non-Hispanic).

Data Collection

The researchers used a semi-structured interview protocol to investigate participants' perspectives on the following issues related to high school students with ASD: (a) available services targeting college readiness and attainment of PSE; (b) strategies for fostering self-determination and independence; and (c) recommendations for improving transition planning services. A semi-structured interview allowed the researchers to discuss the topics in details and gave freedom to probe for elaboration on original responses and follow a line of inquiry introduced by the interviewee. The participants were asked the following questions:

1. What are some available service targeting college-readiness and attainment of PSE in high school students on the higher end of ASD you know?
2. What do you do in order to foster self-determination and independence in the identified student population?
3. How could transition planning services for high school students with ASD be improved?

The researchers interviewed participants individually in a face-to-face setting. Participants chose the site for their interview. Each specialist participated in one interview that lasted approximately 1 hour. The interviews were audio-recorded to provide complete data for analysis and could be referred to as needed. In addition, the researchers maintained a journal with a running record of the interview process and general reflections about the study.

Due to the researchers' knowledge and training in special education, steps were taken to guard

against researcher bias. The semi-structured interview as the primary method used in this study was chosen to find factual information and allow for more standardization and reduction of bias. The participants answered the same questions in the same sequence, thus increasing comparability of responses and reducing researcher effects and bias (Patton, 2002). Through journaling, researchers kept a running record of experiences and ideas during the fieldwork, including their own reflections of subjectivity, which also allowed to reduce researcher bias.

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for the purposes of data analysis. Additional data included the journal notes from the field. Data were analyzed using a multilevel, ongoing process. Initial data analysis procedures included examining the data for patterns, which were identified as codes. These codes were further refined through multiple readings of the transcripts to establish a codebook, which allowed for the development of larger categories emerging from the codes (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). Themes were developed by combining identified categories. The process of content analysis was used to revisit the data and review the categorization of data until the researchers were sure that the categories used to summarize and describe the findings were a truthful and accurate reflection of the data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Comparison is at the center of the analysis process, and the constant comparative method is “a purposeful way [that] increases both the traceability and credibility of researchers’ analysis in their qualitative studies” (Boeiji, 2002, p. 406). The constant comparative method of simultaneous coding and analysis of data in order to develop concepts allowed the researchers to increase the credibility of this study.

To increase the validity and reliability of this study, triangulation, member checking, and journaling were employed. Triangulation is a strategy that helps enhance the credibility and rigorousness of a qualitative study by using multiple sources of data, multiple points in time, or a variety of methods (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). In addition, each participant was asked to review and verify the accuracy of her interview transcript to increase validity for the study. Member checking “is a potent way to establish credibility” (Boudah, 2011, p. 79). To address the issue of applicability, the researchers provided detailed descriptions of every aspect of the study. Finally, a fieldwork journal was used to keep a running record of experiences and ideas during the fieldwork and to guard against potential researcher bias. Because visual representation of the data is important in qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the researchers presented the study results in a table.

Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate how transition specialists perceive the services and supports in secondary school intended to help students with ASD in transitioning to PSE settings. Interview results were reported according to the themes that emerged from the analysis: (a) critical skills, (b) school services and supports, (c) college collaboration, and (d) family engagement. Table 1 lists the resulting four themes and their major elements.

Critical Skills

Results from this study identified the following four critical skills necessary for students with ASD to transition to PSE: self-determination, self-awareness, self-advocacy, and social skills. Self-determination includes skills related to setting goals, learning how to manage time, and using problem

Table 1

Essential Elements of High-Quality Transition and Recommendations for Secondary Schools

Theme	Theme Elements	Recommendations
Critical Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-determination • Self-awareness • Self-advocacy • Social skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address the development and improvement of self-awareness, self-determination, self-advocacy, and communication • Incorporate social skills into the instruction
School Services and Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early transition services • Individualized planning • Critical skills promotion • Understanding college environment • Teacher training • Counseling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess students' interests and preferences • Review students' postsecondary goal • Help develop a plan to achieve the goal • Include introduction to college curriculum • Explain differences between high school and college environments • Maximize student involvement in the IEP process • Foster interagency collaboration • High school staff development • Teach students how to handle a variety of social situations
College Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College-school collaboration • College-student collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop partnerships with local PSE institutions • Assist students with PSE planning
Family Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent-school collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the student's abilities and parents' concerns • Encourage and promote family engagement

solving strategies (Thoma & Getzel, 2005). Regarding self-determination, Nicole said, "Helping students practice that self-determination in high school is very important." Sue reported that during transition process, "the power shifts back to the student."

Self-awareness was also identified in the present study as critical to successful transition. Self-awareness skills include understanding of one's abilities, learning styles, support needs, and limitations. Sue recommended promoting self-awareness in students with ASD and helping them understand their strengths and weaknesses:

It is going back to promoting what are their strength and weaknesses, focusing on their

strengths and skill set, and not on their weakness or disability. How can you fight for what is going to help you to be successful if you don't even know what your needs are?

In addition, Nicole and Sue emphasized the students' need to learn how to self-advocate. Besides learning how to advocate for one's own needs and ask for help, self-advocacy includes knowing how to disclose personal disabilities (Roberts, 2010). Nicole stated that self-advocacy is important to prevent learned helplessness, a sense of powerlessness that results from persistent failure to succeed. She said, "Definitely understand how to advocate and ask for support they need. This is the biggest one." Sue suggested parents and teachers begin to work with students "at an early age to promote self-advocacy."

Both participants indicated that social skill training was a necessary component of the transition process. Social skills include understanding and interpreting social clues, sharing of interests, emotions, or affections, and initiating and responding to social interactions (Lopata et al., 2015). Sue said, "The focus is more on academics, and we leave behind all the social skills." In like manner, Nicole identified social skills training as "a big piece" in transitioning students with ASD into PSE environments.

School Services and Support

In terms of transition services available at the high school level, the two participants indicated that school services should include helping students with ASD find local and national programs designed to support them. Nicole emphasized student-centered services and stated that transition should be viewed as a "person-centered planning process."

Student involvement was regarded as highly important. Nicole said students need to "have a voice in their [IEP] meeting." When asked how transition services could be improved, participants indicated that transition planning should begin earlier than at the age of 14. Nicole said:

I think it needs to be happening earlier. That is one of our goals in our transition program, to start in elementary school. Even in elementary school, there are pieces that they can start building in and aligning with their IEP goals early on.

Similarly, Sue stated, "The earlier they start, I think, the better."

Both participants regarded professional development for teachers as an essential component of effective transition services. Nicole highlighted the importance of educating teachers:

I think part of it is that there is a lack of professional development for teachers and lack of understanding how to align those goals so that they all work toward the same thing. I think professional development is a key issue.

Nicole indicated a need for "clear training on how the entire IEP functions together." Both participants agreed that secondary schools should be responsible for providing teachers with resources and professional development in order to promote independence skills in students with ASD. According to Sue, in addition to a formal training, districts should make resources available to the teachers through the district's website and provide "tools so that high schools can start fading those supports for students, especially those high functioning kids." Regarding promoting independence, both participants agreed that gradual fading of services would be beneficial to students with ASD who seek PSE.

Both participants said students with ASD do not receive the same level of support in PSE as secondary school students without disabilities. Nicole stated that secondary schools should help students understand the difference between high school and college. Sue identified assistance with recognizing the difference between high school and college as a way to improve the transition process.

She stated that learning college expectations while in high school would better prepare students with ASD for college and added, “Students need to know what is available in college, and see the difference.”

Both participants stated that outside service agencies are important when students with disabilities transition to PSE. Sue recognized the importance of locating outside agencies that provide services to students with ASD; these services can range from basic living skills to study skills. When asked if secondary schools should help students identify those agencies before their graduation, Sue replied, “The more information we can provide when students are still here, the better choices they can make.”

Furthermore, secondary schools must provide assistance with PSE planning. Sue stated that students “are not just looking for a [post-secondary] school that is going to provide the best education.” She said that students search for a school with “the best supports that will help them be successful.”

College Collaboration

Both participants recognized the need for the continued support of young adults with ASD beyond high school and described the need for collaboration between PSE institutions and secondary schools. Furthermore, both participants recommended that colleges and universities should develop collaborative relationships with outside adult service agencies to ensure the provision of adequate support and services to identified student population. Nicole indicated the importance of providing students with ASD social skills training and supportive living environment in college:

Soft skills training, especially for students with autism, appropriate social interactions, how to interact with your professor, how to ask for help, how to navigate the college system...it is a big piece.

Family Engagement

Another theme that emerged in the analysis of the two participants’ responses was family engagement. Both participants regarded parental involvement as important. Sue said that parents and teachers should work together in promoting self-advocacy and self-determination skills in students with ASD. She recommended that schools encourage parents to attend transition-oriented events offered by their districts such as an Open House. Nicole stated that parental involvement was one of the key issues in the transition process.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how transition specialists perceive the services and supports in secondary school intended to help students with ASD in transitioning to PSE settings. The four themes that emerged from the data analysis are similar to those reported in current transition literature: (a) critical skills, (b) school support and services, (c) college collaboration, and (d) family engagement. This study addressed the perspective of transition specialists, but the findings were similar to perspectives of others (e.g., parents, students) already identified in the literature. The first major theme that emerged was the need for critical skills, including self-determination, self-awareness, self-advocacy, and social skills. The transition specialists reported that students with ASD need to develop a set of skills in order to successfully navigate the transition to PSE setting.

Other researchers have identified self-determination skills as essential in post-school settings

for students with disabilities (Morningstar et al., 2010). Berry, Ward, and Caplan (2012) examined the relationships among Wehmeyer's (1996) three components of self-determination (i.e., autonomy, empowerment, and self-realization) and reported higher levels of empowerment and autonomy were associated with a higher likelihood of PSE participation. Field, Sarver, and Shaw (2003) argued that an IEP and specialized supports are not provided in PSE setting, and students must rely more on their self-determination in PSE than they did in secondary school. According to Lee and Carter (2012), teaching of self-determination skills must begin prior to transition age (i.e., prior to age 16) and continue to support the development and use of those skills during transition planning.

Both participants in this study emphasized the importance of teaching self-advocacy in order to prevent learned helplessness. These findings align with existing professional literature, which indicates that students with ASD must learn how to advocate for themselves, including how to disclose their disabilities once in college (Roberts, 2010). Since self-advocacy is an area of need and challenge among college-bound students with ASD (Morrison et al., 2009), early development of self-advocacy, along with social and organizational skills, is important to prepare for PSE environments (Ciccantelli, 2011). Smith (2007) also noted that self-advocacy skills are critical because colleges and universities may provide similar accommodations to all students with disabilities rather than addressing the specific needs of students with ASD.

The results of this study indicate that self-awareness is a critical component of transition process. One participant suggested that parents and teachers work with the students "at the early age to promote self-advocacy," helping students understand their strengths and weaknesses. These findings support research that highlights the importance of understanding one's disability, abilities, learning styles, support needs, and limitations that contribute to a successful transition to PSE (Thoma & Getzel, 2005). Students acquire self-awareness skills by interacting with their environment (Wehmeyer, Shogren, Zager, Smith, & Simpson, 2010).

Results from Camarena and Sarigiani's 2009 study indicated that many young adults with ASD and their parents were concerned about social skills. The present study's findings indicate that social skills training is necessary for effective transition: participants cautioned educators not to focus exclusively on academics but recognize social skills training as "a big piece" in transitioning students with ASD into PSE environments. Students with ASD tend to be isolated because of their poor social skills, and this isolation can continue into adulthood (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2004). This social skill deficit has a direct effect on postsecondary school outcomes, including the ability to succeed in PSE environments. Since students with ASD have difficulties understanding and interpreting social clues, teaching social skills may remediate some social difficulties (Wehmeyer et al., 2010). To improve PSE outcomes, transition services promoting social competencies and skills in students with ASD are needed before entering PSE.

In addition to outlining critical skills, this study's results also indicate the importance of specific school services aimed at supporting a seamless transition to PSE. Both participants suggested that school services should include helping students find local and national programs designed to support students with ASD. In addition, both transition specialists emphasized the significance of student-centered transition services and viewed student involvement as highly important. These data support the findings of previous research that identified successful transition services as individually tailored to the unique needs and interests of each student (VanBergeijk et al., 2008).

Placing the student in the center of the transition process is a crucial component of planning (Hedricks & Wehman, 2009). The present study's findings suggested that students must be involved in their transition planning, which includes having a voice in their IEP meetings. Research indicates that students should be involved in all aspects of the transition process, including leading their IEP

meeting (Test & Grossi, 2011). Hendricks and Wehman (2009) suggested involving students with ASD in transition planning empowers them to become “active change agents in their lives” (p.83). Shogren et al. (2007) examined the impact of multiple individual and ecological factors on students' self-reported levels of self-determination and found that transition empowerment was a significant predictor of self-determination. These findings suggest the importance of involving students in their transition planning and highlight the potential of this involvement to increase students' level of self-determination. As a result, involving students in their IEP process may improve independent decision-making and problem-solving skills and should be regarded as highly important by secondary schools.

Both participants in the present study perceived early transition to be necessary. Because students with ASD may adapt slowly to changes, transition skills should be introduced early and gradually, with plenty of opportunities for practice (Lawrence, Alleckson, & Bjorklund, 2010; Webb, Patterson, Syverud, & Seabrook-Blackmore, 2008). The results of Morrison et al.'s (2009) qualitative study suggest that comprehensive transition programs for students with ASD should be initiated in middle school, with emphasis on teaching skills related to social interactions, self-advocacy, and organization. Sayman and Krutka (2013) argued that “waiting for the IDEA-mandated age of 16 for students to become a part of the IEP process proves far too late” (p. 190).

Both participants suggested teacher training was an essential component of effective transition services and agreed that secondary schools must be responsible for providing teachers with resources and training necessary for development of independence in students with ASD. Since the first step in planning for successful postsecondary transition is to know the student (Morrison et al., 2009; Roberts, 2010), professional development for secondary educators should focus on the awareness of the unique characteristics and specific social, behavioral, and academic needs of individuals with ASD (Morrison et al., 2009). Additionally, training for school personnel should be aimed at improving awareness of methods for successful engagement of students and parents (Hetherington et al., 2010).

Both participants in the present study stressed the importance of understanding the PSE environment. Research suggests that students with disabilities do not have realistic expectations regarding the academic rigor of PSE and are not adequately prepared for it (Field et al., 2003). Many students with ASD are able to excel in academic settings (Dillon, 2007), yet, PSE institutions generally do not have the resources or trained staff to support these students (Smith, 2007). Students with ASD must be prepared to enter PSE and understand the differences between support provided in secondary school and those offered by PSE institutions, and it is the responsibility of secondary school to prepare them for PSE experiences.

In the present study, both participants recognized the role of outside service agencies as essential in transition planning. They suggested secondary schools assist students with ASD locating agencies that provide services to students with ASD. These findings support current research on transitioning students with ASD; continual involvement, planning, and careful coordination between the school and key community agencies are essential to improving outcomes through the transition process (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). According to Roberts (2010), transition plans are most effective when developed by many individuals working together.

Both participants in the present study emphasized the value of providing assistance with PSE planning to students with ASD. As one participant stated, students with ASD “are not just looking for a school that is going to provide the best education”; students search for a school with “the best supports that will help them be successful.” A counselor may help a student learn how to handle a variety of social situations (VanBergeijk et al., 2008) and help sort through the advantages and disadvantages of different colleges. A counselor could explain how to assess a university's

commitment to diversity and make PSE decisions. Increasing communication between counseling services at secondary and postsecondary schools may help students with ASD as they transition to PSE (Pillay & Bhat, 2012).

Both participants recognized the need for continued support of young adults with ASD beyond high school and suggested a need for more collaboration between secondary and postsecondary schools. PSE institutions may want to consider developing collaborative relationships with outside adult service agencies to ensure provision of adequate support and services to identified student population. As one participant indicated, providing social skills training to students with ASD and living in a supportive college environment are highly important. Research suggests college students with ASD may not have positive academic outcomes without services to address their social skills deficits (Dillon, 2007). While there are a few colleges that offer a first year experience course specifically designed for students with ASD (Wenzel & Rowley, 2010), most colleges do not offer such support. Because students with ASD often do not receive accommodations that promote independent living and social skills in college (Morrison et al., 2009), they must enter PSE prepared to seek services from other agencies.

Another theme that emerged in both participants' responses was family engagement. There is a strong relationship between the role the family plays during the transition process and decision-making related to postsecondary outcomes. Morningstar et al. (2010) examined the relationship between student perceptions of the quality of their high school transition programs (school- and family-based) and their levels of self-determination in PSE settings. Their findings suggested a strong correlation between the role the family plays in supporting students during transition and the students' involvement in IEPs, as well as opportunities to make decisions and plan for post-school outcomes. The results of another study about the educators' viewpoint on parental involvement suggested educators equate parent engagement in the transition process with student success in school and after graduation, and believe the level of parent involvement in transition planning is often proportionate to the level of parent involvement in the entire IEP process (Landmark, Roberts, & Zhang, 2013). Families can be engaged earlier and encouraged to play an active role in shaping their children's transition plan. Training focused on student and family rights and information on transition planning and community resources will provide families with opportunities for more effective planning. Parental engagement is essential in transitioning students with ASD (Landmark et al., 2013) and schools should encourage and promote family engagement during transition planning.

Implications

Results from this study indicate that secondary school transition teams should focus on enhancing the transition services for students with ASD. The four key elements of high-quality transition identified in this study (i.e., critical skills, school support and services, college collaboration, and family engagement) could increase the likelihood of students with ASD being successful in PSE. These services might be similar to those recommended for students with other disabilities and should not be interpreted as a complete list for addressing the needs of students with ASD. These four key elements could also be considered for employment training and independent living preparation.

Limitations

The results of this study were limited by several factors. First, the two participants in the present study both were females and Caucasian. Additionally, both participants were employed by the

same school district. Although generalization of the findings was not a goal of this study nor is it the purpose of qualitative research (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), having a larger sample with more diversity in participant and district characteristics would have provided a broader range of perspectives. Another limitation was that data coding was conducted by the principal investigator. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers used the process of triangulation that included member checking and research journaling.

Future Directions

Given the limited research on evidence-based practices to promote successful transition to PSE for students with ASD, the need for additional research remains highly important. The findings from this study do indicate that more research is needed to establish a set of evidence-based transition practices related specifically to students with ASD and college readiness. As a first step in accomplishing this agenda, a research synthesis or meta-analysis examining research linking specific transition practices to PSE outcomes for students with ASD is needed. Second, a large-scale examination of the perspectives of stakeholders (i.e., teachers, transition specialists, parents, students with ASD, administrators) representing a wide range of diversity in participants (e.g., stakeholder diversity, cultural diversity, geographic diversity, etc.) is also needed. The final step in establishing evidence-based transition practices for students with ASD related to college readiness would be conducting a series of quantitative studies that build on the studies previously described in this section. These quantitative studies could determine if there are statistically significant relationships between key variables of transition programs such as those highlighted in the findings of this study (e.g., family engagement, instruction on self-determination) and postsecondary outcomes related to student retention in PSE. Transition programs must employ evidence-based practices and now is the time to begin building that evidence base.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions of transition specialists about services and supports in secondary schools setting intended to assist students with ASD as they transition to PSE settings. Findings indicated that for students with ASD, the transition from high school to college environment is critical stage and should include (a) explicit instruction regarding self-determination, self-awareness, self-advocacy, and social skills; (b) large scale efforts to provide early supports to teachers and students; (c) the establishment of collaborative programs with local colleges; and (d) targeted family engagement practices.

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