Transition-Focused Education:

Foundation for the Future

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In response to information regarding students' postschool outcomes, the past 15 years have reflected an increased focus on improving transition education and services for youth with disabilities. Three specific initiatives characterize this development: (a) federal special education and disability legislation; (b) federal, state, and local investment in transition services development; and (c) effective transition practices research. Outcomes of these initiatives include (a) an expanded perspective concerning transition education and services and (b) identification of practices that apply this perspective to individual student needs. The authors describe effective transition practices in five areas: student-focused planning, student development, interagency collaboration, family involvement, and program structures. Developing specific interventions and service arrays for individual students within each of the transition practice areas is essential for postschool success.

Most articles regarding transition education and services begin with information about poor postschool outcomes of individuals with disabilities, which were well-documented in the late 1980s and early 1990s (e.g., Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; Mithaug, Horiuchi, & Fanning, 1985). Although the frequency of comprehensive follow-up studies of students with disabilities has diminished in recent years, surveys of adults with disabilities conducted by the National Council on Disability have indicated that individuals with disabilities continue to lag far behind individuals without disabilities in employment and other aspects of community engagement (Taylor, 1998, 2000). Over the years, the information regarding student outcomes has caused advocates, families, and educators to seriously question both the content and the process of special education programming. Public recognition that youths with disabilities were not achieving high levels of quality full-time employment, independent living, success in postsecondary education, or community engagement resulted in an increased, changing focus on transition education and services.

During the past 15 years, this increased focus on transition education and services has been characterized by three specific initiatives: (a) federal special education and disability legislation; (b) federal, state, and local investment in transition services development; and (c) effective transition practices research. In this article, we present a summary of these initiatives and an overview of the changing perspective. Using this perspective, we then describe and recommend specific transition-focused practices supported by current research. Finally, we address the extent and fidelity of the implementation of transition practices and synthesize aspects of transition-focused education that are unique to special education.

Historical Initiatives

Federal Special Education and Disability Legislation

Since 1983, federal special education policy regarding transition services for students with disabilities has expanded significantly. The 1983 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) authorized spending for transition-focused research and model demonstration grants and contracts. The 1990 amendments, while continuing federal support for transition-related activities, defined *transition services* and required students' interests, preferences, and needs be considered in their development. Furthermore, IDEA required that the Individualized Education Program (IEP) for students ages 16 and older include specific transition components, such as a statement of needed transition services and agency linkages. In one of the most important mandates related to special education, the 1997 amendments expanded the transition requirements regarding a student's IEP to begin including transition service needs related to the student's course of study when the student reaches age 14. For the first time, federal policy communicated that the content of a student's education should be focused on his or her postschool aspirations.

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The 1990 and 1997 IDEA amendments also mandated a more participatory approach to education and service planning for individuals who have disabilities. IDEA required that students be involved in transition planning and that students' preferences and interests be taken into account when transition services are planned. As conceptualized in the 1990 and 1997 IDEA amendments, transition planning focuses on postschool outcomes and consists of a variety of activities, coordinated in a meaningful way, that inform educational planning and decision making.

Federal, State, and Local Investment in Transition Services Development

Since 1983, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has funded more than 500 projects focused on transition education and services for students with disabilities in secondary and postsecondary education. Federal funding has supported transition system change in 46 states, as well as transition-related professional development for beginning and continuing educators. Federal resources have also provided technical assistance to support transition efforts by establishing national transition technical assistance and research centers. Projects supported by federal dollars have ranged from family-focused and interagency collaboration initiatives to drop-out identification and retrieval to transition from high school to employment. Through investment in transition services development, the field gained a much better understanding of the many aspects of transition services and ways to implement transition in local contexts. Reviews of project outcomes indicated that the impact of these initiatives on program development and student skills and outcomes has been significant (Kohler & Rusch, 1995; Rusch, Kohler, & Hughes, 1992).

Effective Transition Practices Research

Important information regarding effective practices emerged from state and national follow-up studies of students with disabilities. These studies not only generated data regarding students' poor postschool outcomes, as mentioned previously, but also added significantly to knowledge about potential ways to improve student outcomes. In general, studies indicated that vocational education, paid work experience, parent involvement, and/or interagency collaboration had a positive impact on student outcomes (Hasazi et al., 1985; Mithaug et al., 1985; Sitlington, Frank, & Carson, 1993). The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) extended these findings and provided additional information regarding school performance. The NLTS findings indicated that in general vocational education, work experience, tutoring, extracurricular group activities, and parental support positively contributed to school performance and postschool outcomes (e.g, Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

In addition to the follow-up studies, the field has investigated transition practices at both the individual student and the program levels. For example, several studies that used students as the unit of analysis found that students who are more involved in setting their educational goals are more likely to achieve those goals (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilhardi, 1997). Furthermore, Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) found that 1 year after school completion, graduates of special education programs were more likely to be employed and have higher earnings if they had higher self-determination scores during their final year of high school. Other researchers have sought to make sense of transition-related research across studies, in efforts to develop some general models or principles and/or generate information useful for program development (e.g., Hughes et al., 1997; Kohler, 1993; Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997). This work was important in synthesizing findings from the specific intervention and follow-up studies and organizing and disseminating information in a way that would be meaningful to those developing local transition services and programs. This work also provided an important link between initial theoretical models regarding transition services and the intervention studies.

The research initiative resulted in increased recognition that transition to adult roles is a complex process all youths must negotiate and that a myriad of factors work together to influence students' lives after school completion (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Kohler, 1993; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). The field learned that successful transition requires the development of a student's abilities through education and other experiences, specific supports that enhance or facilitate those abilities, and opportunities through which one can apply those abilities. Furthermore, research supported the importance of students' playing a central role in planning and preparing for postschool outcomes. Research and evaluation also indicated that educational and service systems in some cases facilitate this process and in others leave it to chance or actually impede the process by establishing barriers, wasting instructional time, or limiting access.

With the convergence of these three initiatives—federal legislation, investment in transition services development, and effective practices research—the emphasis on transition-focused education and services grew stronger and broader. Each initiative influenced the other in important ways, and it is imperative to recognize the interaction and interrelationships among them, as well as the importance of parent and advocate influence across them. Through these initiatives, the perspective of "transition services" also changed, and thus so did the investigation and implementation of effective transition practices.

Changing Perspective of Transition Services

The changed perspective of transition services is an important outcome of the three initiatives, as well as an important consideration when interpreting the transition practices research.

When transition services were originally conceptualized, many in the field focused on the transition of students with disabilities from one service system to another—that is, from the educational system to the adult community service system. For example, Will's (1984) original conceptualization of transition emphasized three bridges, which represented levels of community services that she theorized students with disabilities used to achieve postschool employment. The emphasis on services as the process of transition planning and on employment as the outcome represented a somewhat narrow interpretation of the concept.

With growing knowledge of the complexity of effective transition practices, many researchers adopted a much broader conceptualization of transition planning and services (see Bates, 1990; Halpern, 1985; Wehman, 1992a), what Kohler (1998) referred to as *transition-focused education*. This perspective views transition planning not as an add-on activity for students with disabilities once they reach age 14 or 16 but rather as a fundamental basis of education that guides the development of all educational programs. Transition-focused education is directed toward adult outcomes and consists of academic, career, and extracurricular instruction and activities, delivered through a variety of instructional and transition approaches and services, depending on the local context and students' learning and support needs. The concept of transition-focused education represents a shift from disability-focused, deficit-driven programs to an education and service-delivery approach based on abilities, options, and self-determination (Kohler & Rusch, 1996; Szymanski, Hanley-Maxwell, & Parker, 1990; Wehman, 1992b).This approach incorporates Halpern's (1993) quality-of-life issues, Syzmanski's (1994) life span and life space considerations, and Repetto and Correa's (1996) suggestions for seamless transition approaches.

Effective Transition Practices Framework

Kohler and her colleagues (e.g., Kohler, 1993, 1996; Kohler, DeStefano, Wermuth, Grayson, & McGinty, 1994; Rusch et al., 1992) developed a Taxonomy for Transition Programming, which presents a comprehensive, conceptual organization of practices through which transition-focused education and services are developed and delivered. This taxonomy emerged from several investigations that reviewed research literature (Kohler, 1993), evaluation studies (Kohler et al., 1994), and model transition project outcomes (Rusch et al., 1992). Through a three-phased research process, effective practices identified through each of these investigations were synthesized and organized into five categories:

1. student-focused planning,
2. student development,
3. interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration,
4. family involvement, and
5. program structure and attributes (Kohler, 1996).

The practices included in the model were evaluated using criteria proposed by Peters and Heron (1993) to determine best practices. They are associated with positive student outcomes, have a sound basis in theory, are supported in the literature, and were socially validated by a national group of transition experts. More recently, Kohler and Chapman (1999) reviewed the transition literature to investigate the efficacy of an extended taxonomy model and to identify if the model might need expanding to remain consistent with current literature. They found that the practices reviewed in the current literature generally paralleled the practices in the model.

The practices represented and described in the taxonomy represent concrete strategies that operationalize the transition perspective and represent a consumer-oriented paradigm built on student and family involvement and students' self-determination. In the following sections, we use the taxonomy as an organizing heuristic to describe general transition practices synthesized from the research and to summarize recent research regarding these practices.

Student-Focused Planning

Student-focused planning practices emerging from the research include the development of student goals using relevant assessment information as a basis for planning, student participation in planning and decision making, and student evaluation of their progress in meeting their goals (e.g., Martin, Marshall, & Maxson, 1993; Ward & Kohler, 1996). Through student-focused planning activities, students develop and strengthen self-determination skills through practice and application. In the elementary and early secondary education years, educators may need to guide students through the process, with the subsequent expectation that students become increasingly proficient as they progress through high school.

An important aspect of student-focused planning is that educational decisions are based on students' goals, visions, and interests; thus, it is important to facilitate development of the student's self-awareness and use this information to set short- and long-term goals. An important strategy for helping students identify their interests and preferences is to provide cross-curricula opportunities for students to collect and reflect on information about themselves and then use that information to set goals (Powers, Singer, & Sowers, 1996; Sands & Wehmeyer, 1996). Based on these goals, an appropriate IEP is developed in partnership with the student and his or her family. The process is continuous and cyclical: Help the student reflect on his or her experiences, derive meaning particular to his or her context, use that information for future action, and begin the cycle anew.

Transition best practices, as well as IDEA mandates, require students work with a variety of people during the educational planning process—school psychologists, general ed-

ucators, special educators, school administrators, agency personnel, and their parents/guardians. To participate actively in this context, students must exercise self-advocacy skills to express their self-awareness to others—important behaviors that are often challenging to develop and/or apply. Effective student-focused planning also includes students' reflecting on their progress, or lack thereof, during the preceding year. These behaviors—self-advocacy within a group setting and self-reflection—are considered fundamental aspects of self-determination, and their application is an important component of student-focused planning (Hoffman & Field, 1995; Wehmeyer, 1992).

A variety of strategies have been shown to be effective in increasing students' participation in their transition planning. Through an 11-step process aligned with typical IEP meeting components (e.g., identification of participants, introductions, evaluation of previous goals) and multiple opportunities for practice, the Self-Directed IEP Model was effective for teaching students to participate in and/or lead their transition planning (see Allen, Smith, Test, Flowers, & Wood, 2001; Cross, Cooke, Wood, & Test, 1999; German, Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2000). Students instructed to use the Self-Advocacy Strategy (take an inventory, provide inventory information, ask questions, respond to questions, and summarize IEP goals) identified more IEP goals and provided more information during their IEP meetings than did members of a contrast group (Van Reusen & Bos, 1994). Through student coaching, peer mentorships, parent support, and in-service education of transition staff members, the Take Charge for the Future intervention model resulted in significant increases in the level of student involvement in transition planning activities and meetings, empowerment, and transition awareness (Powers et al., 2001).

Student Development

The practices included in the category of student development emphasize life, employment, and occupational skill development through school-based and work-based learning experiences. They also include student assessment and accommodations, which provide a foundation for determining and evaluating these learning experiences so they result in successful transition.

Through student development activities, students develop and apply self-determination skills, as well as academic, living, social, and occupational skills; career awareness; and work-related behaviors—characteristics and behaviors associated with positive postschool outcomes (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Heal & Rusch, 1995; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). To help students achieve the maximum benefit and generalize their skills to multiple environments, these experiences are provided in both school-based and community-based settings, including work-based situations. An important part of this process is to identify the accommodations or supports a student needs to participate and achieve success in educational and community settings. Effective student development practices increase students' knowledge, develop students' skills, and provide guidance for applying those skills and opportunities to do so.

Research continues to support the importance of student development practices in preparing individuals with disabilities to assume independent adult roles. Benz, Yovanoff, and Doren (1997) found that work experience, academic skills, social skills, and job search skills, in addition to continuing postschool support, improved employment outcomes. Benz, Lindstrom, and Yovanoff (2000) found that career-related work experience and completion of student-identified transition goals were strongly associated with graduation and employment. Colley and Jamison (1998) found that work experience, occupational education, and mainstreamed academics contributed to employment. Farley and Johnson (1999) described specific strategies for improving students' decision-making confidence, career decisiveness, and job-seeking skills, which are all important to student's vocational preparedness. Kohler and Troesken (1999) and Kohler and Hood (2000) identified a variety of programs that resulted in increased student skills and/or postschool outcomes and described specific examples for providing occupational training, work experience, academic development, and other aspects of student development. For example, occupational skill development and work experiences (with appropriate supports) consistently resulted in private-sector employment for students with disabilities (see Kohler & Hood, 2000). Similarly, Leuking and Fabian (2000) illustrated the positive effects of paid internships on student employment.

A number of interventions have also been shown to be effective in developing some aspect of a student's self-determination. Use of the *Steps to Self-Determination* (Field & Hoffman, 1996), an experiential curriculum consisting of five major components (Know Yourself, Value Yourself, Plan, Act, Experience Outcomes and Learn), resulted in significant increases in behaviors considered correlated to of self-determination (Hoffman & Field, 1995). The *Next S.T.E.P.* curriculum (Halpern et al., 1997), which includes teacher and student demonstrations and field-related and hands-on activities focused on preparing students to participate in their transition planning, resulted in increases in students' skills related to autonomy, psychological empowerment, self-realization, and self-regulation (Zhang, 2001). Students participating in the *Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction* (a three-phased curriculum model that teaches self-regulated problem-solving strategies) attained goals, exhibited increased levels of self-determination, and communicated their satisfaction (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000). (For a complete review of research regarding self-determination interventions, see Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001.)

Collaborative Service Delivery

The collaborative practices synthesized through the taxonomy facilitate involvement of community businesses, organizations,

and agencies in all aspects of transition-focused education. Collaborative service delivery is fostered by interagency agreements that clearly articulate roles, responsibilities, communication strategies, and other collaborative actions that enhance curriculum and program development and service delivery (Benz, Lindstrom, & Halpern, 1995; Blalock, 1996; Kohler 1996, 1998). Through collaborative practices, educational and adult service providers address opportunities for individual students, as well as community issues that influence opportunities and services for students in general. The purpose of these collaborative activities is to implement an integrated system that addresses the lifelong learning and support needs of a community's members.

Devlieger and Trach (1999) found that interagency collaboration and support for individual students in transition and their families is a factor so important that when done well, it facilitates achievement of transition goals, and when done poorly, it limits or impedes those goals. Benz, Lindstrom, and Halpern (1995) found that the Community Transition Team Model was effective in building school and community capacity to better serve students' transition service needs. Collet-Klingenberg (1998) also found that school-based and community-based transition teams were instrumental in introducing and implementing student-focused planning and student development practices, such as work experiences and student involvement in planning. In Benz, Johnson, Mikkelsen, and Lindstrom's (1995) study, various stakeholders, including students and their families, identified specific barriers to effective collaboration, including ineffective use of transition planning meetings, intimidating language, and complexity of agency procedures. Thus, addressing such issues would be an important goal of initial collaborative efforts.

Family Involvement

The practices represented in the category of family involvement are associated with parent and family participation in planning and delivering education and transition services, including practices that facilitate family participation. These practices focus on three aspects of family involvement: (a) participation and roles, (b) empowerment, and (c) training (Kohler, 1996, 1998). Participation practices focus on a wide array of roles through which families might be involved in planning and delivering individual- and community-level transition education and services, such as assessment, decision making, policy development, and as trainers. Empowerment strategies include practices that facilitate meaningful family involvement in transition-focused activities, such as specific methods to identify family needs. Family-focused training increases family members' abilities to work effectively with educators and other service providers and vice versa.

Family involvement has been shown to improve school attendance, increase higher education attendance and assessment scores, improve students' self-esteem and confidence, and reduce drop-out rates (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Flaxman & Inger, 1991; Newman & Cameto, 1993). Ryan and colleagues (Ryan & Lynch, 1989; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994) found a positive link between relatedness to parents and autonomy in adolescents, a key component of self-determination. Morningstar, Turnbull, and Turnbull (1995) found that students view their family members as playing important roles in the development of their self-determination and their visions for the future. Thus, the student-focused planning and student development practices described previously are supported and extended through family involvement.

Whitney-Thomas and Hanley-Maxwell (1996) described specific parental concerns regarding their children's transition needs, such as economic self-sufficiency, expanding social networks, and vocational and residential options, as well as the importance of school personnel in assisting them in addressing these concerns. Geenen, Powers, and Lopez-Vasquez (2001) identified a variety of roles that both culturally and linguistically diverse and European American parents assume, such as teaching their children cultural values, helping with their employment, and teaching them to care for their disability. These authors cautioned that our assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors often alienate parents who are key participants in supporting their children's transitions, thus increasing, rather than decreasing, their concerns.

McCarney (cited in Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990) found that direct, routine communication strategies, such as face-to-face conferences, telephone contacts, open house events, teacher notes, and classroom visits, improved educator and family interactions. Regarding planning, Hutchins and Renzaglia (1998) effectively engaged families in selecting work experiences and developing long-term job placements for students with moderate and severe disabilities through a comprehensive family vocational interview. Through the interview, educators integrated family concerns and issues into a long-term educational planning process focused on employment outcomes. Flannery et al. (2000) found that students and parents were more satisfied with IEP transition goals and teacher interactions after personal futures planning strategies were used.

Suggestions generated directly from families regarding effective involvement strategies have also been identified. In a study focused on improving collaboration, conducted by Benz, Johnson, et al. (1995), parents suggested that better informational materials; joint training for vocational rehabilitation and school staff members, parents, and students; resource fairs; a single, knowledgeable contact person; and support groups and networking opportunities would improve the transition planning process and the quality of parent involvement. Further, deFur, Todd-Allen, and Getzel (2001) found parent-identified factors that improved their participation in transition planning were based on the development of personal, rather than bureaucratic, relationships. These families identified professionals who made a difference in their participation in transition planning as those who communicated effectively and shared information, developed collaborative partnerships,

connected them with other families, and illustrated genuine care for and recognition of their children.

Program Structure

Program structures are features that relate to efficient and effective delivery of transition-focused education and services, including philosophy, planning, policy, evaluation, and resource development (Kohler, 1996, 1998). The structures and attributes of a school provide the framework for implementing transition-focused education. Practices that promote outcome- based education and expanded curricular options include community-level strategic planning, cultural and ethnic sensitivity, a clearly articulated mission and values, qualified staff members, and sufficient allocation of resources (Kohler, 1996). Transition-oriented schools focus also on systematic community involvement in the development of educational options, community-based learning opportunities, systematic inclusion of students in the social life of the school, and increased expectations related to skills, values, and outcomes for all students (Edgar & Polloway, 1994).

Hasazi, DeStefano, and Furney (i.e., Furney, Hasazi, & DeStefano, 1997; Hasazi, Furney, & DeStefano, 1999) conducted several policy studies that investigated implementation of IDEA mandates and effective transition practices at both state and local levels. Their findings reaffirmed the importance of program policies and philosophies as a foundation through which transition-focused education occurs. Through case studies of three states considered exemplary in their implementation of transition policies and services, Furney et al. (1997) found that shared values and beliefs regarding transition services, direct policy approaches, collaborative structures for systemic change, basing change on research and evaluation, and capacity-building activities were characteristic of these states. Hasazi, Furney, and DeStefano (1999) also conducted case studies of nine local sites across the United States, five of which were considered model sites with national reputations for effectiveness and four of which were considered representative sites demonstrating both progress and challenges. The authors found substantive differences between the two types of sites and described the following factors as characteristics of the effective sites:

> (a) incorporation of systemwide, student- and family-centered strategies; (b) fostering of effective and substantive interagency collaboration; (c) facilitation of systemic professional development; (d) a visionary, supportive, and inclusive form of leadership; (e) coordination of an integrated set of reform efforts; and (f) emergence of connections among a variety of local and federal transition initiatives. (Hasazi et al., 1999, p. 558)

Again, these findings support the conclusion that program policy and philosophy provide the context within which transition-focused education is possible.

Extent of Effective Practices Implementation

Implementation of effective transition practices has progressed over the past 15 years, and individuals who have been identifying exemplary transition practices and programs have discovered pockets of excellence scattered across the country (National Council on Disability, 2000). Although widespread systems change has not been documented, activities within states have been successful in raising stakeholder awareness, increasing parent and student participation, enhancing collaborative relationships, and establishing transition-related policies to better support services (Guy & Schriner, 1997). Furthermore, the extent to which organizations are evaluating their transition services and students' outcomes—a fundamental requirement for identifying effective practices—seems to be increasing (see Kohler & Hood, 2000; Kohler & Troesken, 1999; Kohler & Van Beaver, 1996).

The extent to which particular transition practices have been implemented varies widely. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998) examined the transition goals of 136 students with mental retardation or developmental disabilities and found that none of the goals targeted instruction related to a specific self-determination skill. In their research on student involvement in transition planning, Lehmann, Bassett, Sands, Spencer, and Gliner (1999) concluded that "ironically, many basic transition elements, often presumed in our field already to exist (e.g., transition teams, student-focused planning, and basic curricula), were selected by schools participating in this study as targeted interventions" (p. 16). In their investigation of policy compliance and best practices implementation in Ohio, McMahan and Baer (2001) determined that policy compliance was occurring with regularity but best practice use was not. Everson, Zhang, and Guillory (2001) found similar results when they reviewed 329 individual transition plans in Louisiana.

Investigations of compliance with the basic IDEA transition mandates also indicate that the field has much work to do before achieving wide-scale implementation, even when using the most minimal of indicators. Williams and O'Leary (2001) analyzed OSEP monitoring reports for compliance with the 1990 IDEA transition mandates. The monitoring reports of 44 of the 54 states and entities (81.5%) monitored between 1993 and 1997 included findings regarding the transition mandates. For example, one third of the states or entities had not invited students to their IEP meeting, and about half of the IEPs reviewed by OSEP during the monitoring process did not address instruction, community experiences, and/or post-school objectives within the statement of transition services (Williams & O'Leary, 2001). In preparation of this article, we reviewed the OSEP monitoring reports posted at their Web site (www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/ Monitoring/) in October 2001. Only 2 of the 39 states or entities whose reports appeared on the site were *not* cited for noncompliance regard-

ing some aspect of IDEA's transition requirements. These findings included monitoring visits that occurred between 1993 and 2000.

What Is Special About Transition-Focused Education?

The concept of normalization has been a central construct in special education and disability services for many years. According to Nirje (1972), normalization involves "making available to [persons with disabilities] the patterns and conditions of everyday life which are as close as possible to the norms and patterns of mainstream society" (p. 363). The normalization principle has been the driving force behind the least restrictive environment provisions of special education legislation and the resulting focus on mainstreaming in the 1980s and inclusion in the 1990s. Due to the unique needs of individuals with disabilities, it was also clear that in order for persons with disabilities to participate in typical communities, individualized instruction, accommodations, and supports would be necessary. Thus, two central and enduring tenets of special education have been *normalization* and *individualization*.

Transition-focused education, through which specific transition practices are implemented, is a logical outgrowth of these two key principles. Effective transition practices emphasize the development of practical life skills that are geared toward the goals and aspirations of individual students. This emphasis on practical life skills evolved to help ensure meaningful community participation in typical settings. In other words, a primary goal of transition-focused education is to promote and facilitate normalization in postschool life. This end clearly requires that educational goals and the resulting instruction toward those goals be individualized to meet the specific aspirations and needs of students. Special education—in particular, the IEP—provides the means for accomplishing this end.

As illustrated previously, the research regarding effective transition practices has been conducted at both the program level and the individual student level. Follow-up studies, meta-evaluations, and research syntheses have provided aggregate information that supports the importance of such practices as occupational skill development, paid work experience, and family involvement. Thus, these components are elements of effective programs. At the individual student level, specific interventions have been shown to be effective in developing student skills or characteristics. This work provides strategies that are effective in a particular context, again useful for developing transition-focused programs, curricula, or services. Effective providers establish programmatic elements, such as those included in the taxonomy, and through these elements provide *individualized* experiences, supports, and/or services. It is this aspect of individualization that distinguishes services authorized and provided through special education from those typically provided in general education.

For example, Devlieger and Trach (1999) described how individual needs and contexts influenced the way students mediated their transition to employment and reiterated the importance of individualized planning and services attuned to those contexts. Although various individuals with a disability might use community employment services, the why, when, and how of those services will vary. Bullis, Moran, Benz, Todis, and Johnson (2002) found that program flexibility and responsiveness to individual student needs were critical aspects of an effective transition program for students with emotional disturbances. Again, program elements, such as skill assessment, person-centered planning, and job placement, were established but also individualized in response to students' preferences and needs. Case studies (cited in Kohler & Hood, 2000) have illustrated the individual nature and variety of services necessary to assist students in achieving their transition goals, as well as the "ups and downs" and "stops and starts" of students' transitions. These cases also demonstrated how the intensity and timing of transition services vary from individual to individual. Thus, across transition studies, research has illustrated that individual supports and approaches, embedded within transition-focused educational programs, facilitate effective student transitions (e.g., Benz et al., 1997, 2000; Collet-Klingenberg, 1998).

Is effective transition programming peculiar to special education? The answer is both yes and no. In many cases, the context of general education, as organized currently, does not provide for significant individualization or flexibility in student programming, and general education funding does not support the range of services students might require to achieve successful transitions. For example, cooperative education is a typical approach used in vocational education; however, services that some students with disabilities might need to access community-based employment, such as extensive job development, training, and ongoing support, are not typically provided. Special education services, and often community services, are generally necessary to help prepare students with disabilities for their transitions to adult outcomes and to help facilitate these transitions, although many students served by special education require only limited or intermittent supports. As illustrated throughout this special issue of *The Journal of Special Education,* the development of student characteristics and skills, and the provision of special education services, can and should certainly occur within the general education setting in many situations. Furthermore, proven aspects of transition-focused education, such as family involvement, benefit all students.

Conclusion

This examination of the transition literature demonstrates that this work has progressed from the development of theoretical models of transition planning to the identification of generic practices associated with improved student outcomes to the

development of specific interventions that teach transition-related skills. This progression supported a broader perspective of transition planning that recognizes its complexity and the importance of multifaceted approaches. Because of this complexity, research focused on effective transition practices is not as straightforward as one would like. Transition to adult roles can be a complicated process, one that all youths must negotiate, and a myriad of factors work together to affect students' lives after school completion. Transition outcomes are strongly influenced by student and family characteristics, economic conditions, community contexts, and the availability of services. The inability to control many of these variables presents significant challenges for conducting transition practices research.

The transition practices literature recognizes that educators, service providers, and families must help students develop their skills and abilities, provide services and supports that enhance and facilitate these abilities, and develop opportunities through which students can apply those abilities. "One size fits all" and "check the box" transition planning strategies do not effectively prepare students with disabilities—who all have unique needs—for successful, fulfilling adult roles. Through continued attention to establishing effective transition services flexible enough to meet individual student needs, we can arm students with information and opportunities on which they can build their futures.

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