School Counselors’ Perceptions Regarding Importance of and Ability to Implement Transition Services for Students With Disabilities

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to investigate school counselors’ perception of and ability to implement the 20 predictors of post-school success for students with disabilities. Results indicated statistical differences between grade levels in their perceived ability to implement transition services. We offer specific recommendations for how school counselors can provide support in alignment with the 20 special education predictors of improved postschool success for students with disabilities.

Keywords
special education, transition process, college and career readiness, school counselors, evidence-based

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that makes available a free, appropriate, public education to eligible children with disabilities and ensures special education and related services to those children. In 1990, IDEA mandated the addition of transition services in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for students 16 years and older. The act was reauthorized in 1997, requiring schools to begin postschool transition planning when students turned 14. Further, the plan required schools to include a statement of transition services that focused on the student’s course of study that must be present in the student’s IEP and added related services (including school counselors) to the list of possible transition services. The latest reauthorization, which occurred in 2004, mandated transition planning to begin by age 16 and emphasized that services must be provided within a results-oriented process designed to improve academic and functional achievement (Test et al., 2006). Despite this focus, according to the National Longitudinal Transition Survey 2 (Newman et al., 2011), students identified as having a disability continue to demonstrate poor postschool outcomes in the areas of independent living, employment, postsecondary education opportunities, and overall long-term life experiences when compared to their peers without disabilities.

Given the poor postschool outcomes, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), then the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), and now GovTrack.us (2022) called for the use of education interventions derived from scientifically based research. For the field of secondary transition, the U.-S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs charged the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC, known after 2015 as the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition [NTACT]) with identifying and disseminating research-based strategies for improving postschool outcomes for students with disabilities.

To do this, NSTTAC conducted a comprehensive literature review of correlational research published between 1984 and March 2009 to identify predictors (i.e., or macro-level variables that influence systems, programs, and general practices and skills students need to be successful after high school) that correlated with improved postschool outcomes for students with disabilities (Test et al., 2009). Although Test et al.’s (2009) original search identified 162 potential studies, only 28 met inclusion criteria (see Test et al., 2009, for specific details on review methods). Of the 28 studies reviewed using a quality indicators checklist based on Thompson et al. (2005), 22 met the quality requirements to be included in the final review. From

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these 22 high-quality correlational studies, 16 evidence-based predictors were identified.

More recently, Mazzotti et al. (2016) conducted a second comprehensive literature review of correlational research published between 2009 and July 2014 to identify additional predictors. Using the same research procedures and inclusion criteria as Test et al. (2009), 14 articles were initially identified, but only 11 met the inclusion criteria to be coded for quality. Based on this review, Mazzotti et al. identified four new predictors, bringing the total to 20. These 20 predictors identified in special education research have implications for the school counseling profession. First, they provide school counselors with concrete strategies to incorporate into comprehensive school counseling programs. Second, they provide specific transition strategies school counselor educators can incorporate into course content.

**School Counselors and Transition Practices**

Due to their expertise in academic advising and career counseling, school counselors are one of the best resources for assisting students with disabilities in the transition process (Taub, 2006). According to the American School Counselor Association (American School Counselor Association, 2016), school counselors “are committed to helping all students realize their potential and meet or exceed academic standards with consideration for both the strengths and challenges resulting from disabilities and other special needs” (p. 55) and, when appropriate, assist in developing transition and postsecondary plans for students with IEPs. To adequately support all students, ASCA recommends a student-to-school counselor ratio of 250:1, although the national average ratio is closer to 464:1 (American School Counselor Association, 2019).

Although Milsom & Hartley (2005) and Milsom & Dietz (2009) have offered suggestions to school counselors for promoting college and career readiness for students with disabilities and components for effective college transition planning, their recommendations were not based on research. Accordingly, knowledge of research-based predictors from the special education literature could allow school counselors to strengthen their impact. Despite the potentially positive role school counselors could play in providing transition services, research has found that school counselors’ involvement in the transition process has been inconsistent (Kosine, 2007) and suggested that school counselors do not feel prepared to provide transition services to students with disabilities (Milsom, 2002). Other research has indicated that school counselors may have limited knowledge and/or training of how to best support students with disabilities (Alvarez et al., 2020; Dipeolu et al., 2014; Leggett et al., 2011; Rawlings & Longhurst, 2011). The research-based predictors have recently begun to demonstrate an impact the field of special education (Sprunger et al., 2018); thus, if school counselors and special educators are going to work collaboratively to provide transition services, determining school counselors’ knowledge of transition practices for postschool success among students with disabilities is important.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate school counselors’ perception of and ability to implement the predictors of postschool success for students with disabilities. The specific research questions were:

1. How do school counselors perceive the importance of the transition practices?
2. How do school counselors perceive their ability to implement the transition practices?
3. What is the relationship between the amount of training and student caseload size and school counselors’ perceived ability to implement the transition practices?

**Method**

**Procedure**

Participants in this study were practicing school counselors working at elementary, middle, or high schools in the southeast region of the United States. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board and district-level partners, the research team asked approximately 370 individuals to participate. We mailed the surveys to a school district to distribute at a school counselor meeting and send back to us with the completed survey packets. The first page of the survey packet opened with a letter informing participants about the purpose of the study, the contact information of the researcher and the university’s Institutional Review Board to address any possible concerns or questions, and a signature for consent. After hearing the script read from the liaison and reading the informed consent, individuals who were willing to participate were asked to sign the consent form and continue to the next page of the survey. Once the participants turned to the second page, the liaison read aloud the first set of transition questions. Demographic questions about the participants were at the end of the survey. Data was collected for a period of 1 month. The total number of participants was 144, with a response rate of 39%.

**Research Design**

The research design for this study utilized a quantitative approach using survey research to investigate school counselors’ sense of the importance of and their ability to provide transition services to students with disabilities. Data were gathered using paper and pencil surveys administered to the participants. We
computed descriptive statistics on all survey items and performed analyses using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to determine possible associations between the variables in each research question. The significance level was set at .05 or lower and power was .80 or higher as a mechanism to prevent Type II errors (Garson, 2012). Based on the characteristics of probability sampling and G*Power analysis, the total sample size was sufficient for statistical power.

**Survey Instrument**

The survey used for this study, Importance and Ability of Transition Services, originally developed by Parikh Foxx et al., 2018 was designed to investigate school counselors’ perceptions regarding the importance of and their ability to implement transition services. The survey instrument consists of 20 items (see Appendix 1) that are aligned to predictors of successful transition. For each of the transition practice questions, participants were asked to rate their belief in the importance of providing the transition service and their belief in their ability to implement the service using a scale from 0 (not at all important or unable) to 4 (extremely important or extremely able). The instrument developers identified four domains of transition practices: (a) career development, (b) student skills, (c) policies and procedures, and (d) collaboration.

Regarding career development, five items asked about career awareness, career and technical education, occupational courses, paid employment/work experiences, and work-study (Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5). The student skills domain included goal-setting, self-care/independent living, self-determination/self-advocacy, social skills, travel skills, and youth autonomy items (Questions 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12). Policies and procedures items addressed community experiences, exit exam requirements/high school diploma status, inclusion in general education, and program of study (Questions 6, 18, 19, and 20). Collaboration, the last domain, included questions on interagency collaboration, parent expectations, parent involvement, student support, and transition program (Questions 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17). Each domain has two scores, one for importance and one for ability. The reliability for career development was .87 for importance and .86 for ability. Reliability measures for student skills were .85 and .85, respectively. Policies and procedures had a reliability coefficient of .77 for importance and .73 for ability. Finally, the domain of collaboration had a reliability of .84 for both importance and ability.

For this study, Cronbach’s alpha for all 20 items was .87. Thirteen additional items requested participant demographic information, which included race/ethnicity, gender, age, type of school setting, years of experience, the size of student caseload, size of caseload of students with disabilities, the school’s free and reduced lunch percentage, school region, instances of collaboration, and level of training in regard to transition services. The complete survey included a combined total of 33 items.

**Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of practicing school counselors from the southeast region of the United States. We used purposeful sampling to recruit participants and asked them to complete the survey during their district-level school counselor meetings. A script was provided to district-level leaders when a research team member could not be present at the meeting to collect surveys. A total of 144 surveys were completed and returned to the lead researcher. Out of the 144 participants, 112 identified as female (77.8%) and 14 identified as male (9.7%), with two participants preferring not to answer (1.4%) and 16 missing entries. Twenty of the participants were in the age range of 21–30 years (13.9%), 33 participants were 31–40 (22.9%), 44 were 41–50 (30.6%), 32 participants were over the age of 50 (22.2%), and 15 participants chose not to answer. In terms of race/ethnicity, 33 of the participants (22.9%) identified as Black, 2 (1.4%) identified as Hispanic/Latinx, four participants (2.8%) were multi-racial, 1 (0.7%) identified as Native American, 5 (3.5%) identified as other, and 84 participants (58.3%) identified as White.

Concerning participants’ years of experience serving as a school counselor, the largest portion of the participants had 15 or more years of experience, with 38 (26.4%) identifying as such. Twenty-six participants (18.1%) had less than 3 years of experience, 34 (23.6%) had 4–7 years, 14 (9.7%) indicated 8–11 years, and 17 participants (11.8%) had 11–14 years of experience. In regard to school setting, 33 participants (22.9%) worked in a rural setting, 58 (40.3%) worked in a suburban setting, and 36 (25%) worked in an urban school setting. The number of students with disabilities on participants’ caseloads varied, with 75 participants (52.1%) reporting that students with disabilities made up less than 25% of their caseload. Forty-four participants (30.6%) had caseloads with 25%–50% students with disabilities, while three participants (2.1%) had 51%–75% and 5 (3.5%) had 76% or more students with disabilities on their caseloads. See Table 1 for a complete list of demographic frequencies and percentages.

**Data Analysis**

For Research Questions 1 and 2, we used descriptive statistics to examine school counselors’ perceived importance and ability to implement the four transition practices domains. Multivariate analyses of variance were used to examine differences between grade levels (elementary, middle, and high school) on school counselors’ perceived importance of and ability to implement the four transition practices domains. For Research Question 3, we used four multiple regressions (one for each domain) to analyze the relationship between school counselors’ amount of training and caseload and their perceived ability to implement the transition practices.
Results

Research Question 1

How do school counselors perceive the importance of the transition practices?

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations disaggregated by school level for the importance of and ability to implement the four domains of transition practices. Our descriptive analysis revealed participant self-rating scores of perceived importance to be between 3.47 and 3.77 out of 4, indicating that, on average, school counselors seemed to find career development, student skills, policies and procedures, and collaboration important factors when providing transition services for students with disabilities. With further analysis, the results indicated no differences by school level (elementary, middle, or high school) for the perceived importance of any of the transition domains, Wilk’s Lambda = .01; $F = 1.21 \ (8, \ 228), \ p = .238.$

Research Question 2

How do school counselors perceive their ability to implement the transition practices?

The descriptive analysis conducted revealed that participant self-rating scores of perceived abilities to implement the transition practices ranged between 2.24 and 3.16 on a 4-point scale and tended to be lower than the perceived importance of the transition practices (see Table 2). We found a statistical difference between grade levels in their perceived ability to implement transition services, Wilk’s Lambda = .69, $F = 5.90 \ (8, \ 228), \ p < .01.$
To find the pattern of differences in perceived ability among the various school counselor grade levels, we performed post hoc comparisons using Tukey’s Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) procedure (see Table 3). Statistically significant differences did not occur between the grade levels on career development, but we found differences on the ability to implement student skills, policy and procedures, and collaboration practices.

For the student skills transition domain, middle school counselors ($M = 3.08, SD = .51$) had a higher mean than elementary school counselors ($M = 2.59, SD = .87$). For the policy and procedures domain, middle ($M = 2.86, SD = .82$) and high school counselors ($M = 3.16, SD = .59$) had higher means than elementary school counselors ($M = 2.29, SD = .99$). For the last domain, collaboration, middle ($M = 2.88, SD = .81$) and high school counselors ($M = 2.58, SD = .74$) had a higher mean than elementary school counselors ($M = 2.24, SD = .99$).

**Research Question 3**

What is the relationship between the amount of training (no training, low training, and medium/high training) and student caseload size (low = 250 fewer; medium = 251–500; high = more than 500) and school counselors’ perceived ability to implement the four transition practices?

The results from the multiple regressions are reported in Table 4. Training and caseload variables were dummy coded. For training, we used two dummy variables (no training and low training) with the medium/high training counselors serving as the reference group. For caseload, we also used two dummy variables (low and medium caseload) with 501 or more students as the reference group.

**Career Development.** When examining the influence of the amount of training and school size on school counselors’ perceived ability in career development practices, the analysis suggests statistically significant results, $F(3, 96) = 16.02, p < .01$, accounting for 17% of the variation in this practice. The no training and low training groups had significantly lower career development ability scores than the medium/high training group, with unstandardized regression weights of $-.61$ and $-.56$, respectively. The low caseload group tended to have a higher career development ability score than the high caseload group, with an unstandardized regression weight of .70. There was no difference between the medium caseload group and the high caseload group.

**Student Skills.** When examining the influence of the amount of training and caseload size on school counselors’ perceived student skills ability, the analysis suggests statistically significant results, $F(4, 121) = 5.22, p < .01$, accounting for 15% of the variation in student skills ability. The no training group had
significantly lower student skills ability scores than the high training group, with unstandardized regression weights of -.55 and -.54, respectively. The medium caseload group tended to have higher student ability scores than the low and high caseload groups, with an unstandardized regression weight of .35. There was no difference between the low caseload group and the high caseload group.

**Policies and Procedures.** When examining the influence of the amount of training and caseload size on policies and procedures ability scores, the analysis suggests statistically significant results, \( F(4, 125) = 6.53, p < .01 \), accounting for 18% of the variation in policies and procedures ability. The no training and low training groups had significantly lower policies and procedures scores than the high training group, with an unstandardized regression weight of -.78 and -.54, respectively. The low caseload group tended to have higher policies and procedures scores than the medium caseload group, with an unstandardized regression weight of .50 and .40 respectively.

**Collaboration.** Finally, when examining the influence of the amount of training and caseload size on school counselors’ perceived collaboration ability, the analysis suggests statistically significant results, \( F(4, 125) = 5.30, p < .01 \), accounting for 15% of the variation in collaboration ability. The no training and low training groups had significantly lower collaboration scores than the high training group, with unstandardized regression weights of -.72 and -.52, respectively. The low caseload group tended to have higher collaboration scores than the medium caseload group, with an unstandardized regression weight of .47.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate school counselors’ perceived abilities to implement the transition practices of postschool success for students with disabilities. The results of our data analysis suggest the need for additional school counselor training related to transition services and highlight the potential negative impact of student caseload on school counselors’ ability to provide services. Although ASCA recommends a student-to-school counselor ratio of 250:1, the fact that more than 100 of the participants indicated a caseload size greater than 250 is not surprising. Higher than recommended caseload sizes and lack of access to training can impact the transition services provided to students with disabilities, aligning with Milsom’s (2002) findings that school counselors may not feel adequately prepared to provide transition services to this population of students. The results of the current study also support previous findings that, despite their duty to support all students, school counselors do not fully engage with students with disabilities due to a lack of training and limited knowledge about disabilities (Alvarez et al., 2020; Dipeolu et al., 2014; Leggett et al., 2011; Rawlings & Longhurst, 2011).

Although we found no statistical difference in the perceived importance of providing services, the descriptive analysis revealed participant self-rating scores for importance between 3.47 and 3.77 out of 5, indicating that, on average, school counselors seem to find career development, student skills, policies and procedures, and collaboration important factors when providing transition services. However, with participant self-rating scores for ability between 2.28 and 3.16 out of 5, school counselors seem to have a lower perceived ability to implement transition services compared to those services’ perceived importance. This is critical information to understand because school counselors may not have the self-efficacy or confidence in their ability to provide these services to students with disabilities despite the importance.

Grade level seemed to be a factor in school counselors’ perceived ability to implement transition services for students with disabilities. Elementary school counselors tended to have lower mean scores regarding their ability to provide transition services, especially services related to skills, policy, and collaboration. Given the role of school counselors to assist in developing transition and postsecondary plans for students with IEPs (American School Counselor Association, 2016), elementary school counselors may feel less prepared as they tend to focus less on postsecondary plans compared to middle and high school counselors. Further, the work of Milsom & Dietz (2009) and Milsom & Hartley (2005) with suggestions to school counselors to promote college and career readiness for effective college transition planning may not be inclusive of the unique work of elementary school counselors in supporting students with disabilities.

**Implications for School Counselors**

As school counselors navigate their role as advocates and leaders within the school building, the need for continued training related to transition services and supporting students with disabilities is clear. School counselors can take proactive steps to understand the importance of providing transition services to these students. By seeking professional development on this topic, school counselors can expand their awareness and knowledge of the unique needs of students with disabilities and how effective transition services can positively impact students’ postsecondary plans and future attainment. This can be especially important for elementary school counselors, because the results of this study show that elementary school counselors tend to have lower perceived ability to implement transition services.

School counselors can also take additional steps to recognize the specific needs of these students using appropriate and relevant assessment tools. These strategies align with the ASCA National Model (American School Counselor Association, 2019) and multitiered systems of support to use data to create school-wide, group, and individual programming and interventions. School counselors can also work closely with the special education coordinator and collaborate on how to effectively assess the various transition needs of their students. The collaboration between school counselors, special education coordinators, and teachers is essential to student development and growth.
Related to the four specific practice domains, (a) career development, (b) student skills, (c) policies and procedures, and (d) collaboration, school counselors can employ specific strategies to provide direct services. For example, to support career development, school counselors can partner with local work-study programs where students spend a part of their day taking traditional courses on campus and the remaining part of the day at a job site, working for pay or credit hours. These work-study experiences may be organized in partnership with local vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs, so school counselors should become familiar and form working relationships with the local VR counselors who serve school-aged children with disabilities. To support student skills, school counselors can teach social skills. First, school counselors can promote inclusiveness by partnering students who are in regular educational classrooms to serve as mentors and classroom or lunch room buddies. When appropriate, students with disabilities can be assigned to the office as aides, providing them the opportunity to interact with office staff, teachers, and regular education students.

Related to policies and procedures, school counselors should be familiar with the exit exams such as standardized state tests, assessing single or multiple skills areas (e.g., algebra, English) with specified levels of proficiency that students must pass to obtain a high school diploma. Diploma status is achieved by completing the requirements of the state awarding the diploma (Rowe et al., 2015) and multiple diploma pathways (e.g., scholar’s diploma, traditional diploma, occupational diploma, standard diploma, alternative diploma) can align with students’ specific plans for entering postschool life.

Collaboration is an integral aspect of school counseling. Thus, school counselors can collaborate with families and ensure they are included and knowledgeable participants in all aspects of transition planning (e.g., decision-making, providing support, attending meetings, advocating for their child). School counselors can use advocacy skills to ensure that parents/guardians are informed of their rights, the laws, and what opportunities exist for their child. Parents can be invited to career fairs, field trips, and classrooms to learn alongside their children.

Finally, although school counselors are becoming more involved with providing special education services, counselor education programs may not be adequately training future school counselors to understand the expectations and responsibilities in serving students with disabilities (Geddes Hall, 2015) and there is a need to align training with practice. Counselor educators should reflect on how they provide educational opportunities and exposure related to the school counselor’s role in supporting the various needs of students with disabilities. This can be addressed in practicum or internship experiences, where school counselors in training can deliver direct academic, career, and social/emotional support to students with disabilities and receive supervision and training from their site supervisor or instructor on how to best provide transition services.

Limitations and Future Research

With any research, limitations should be thoroughly addressed. One of the major limitations of this research design is the sample size. With a sample of 144 participants, the ability to generalize to the larger population of school counselors is limited. Further, the surveys were sent only to school counselors in the southeast and may not represent the experiences of school counselors in other geographic regions of the United States. Although the sample size was sufficient for data analysis, future studies could improve upon our limited sample and conduct a larger national study.

Given the study’s results indicating differences in elementary school counselors’ ability to implement transition services, future research should focus on the experiences, training, and preparation of school counselors working with elementary-aged students with disabilities. Also worth exploring are differences in counselor education programs regarding graduate students’ exposure and training related to their preparedness and ability to provide transition services to K–12 students with disabilities.

Conclusion

This quantitative study provided insight on school counselors’ perceptions regarding the importance of and ability to implement transition services for students with disabilities. Participants in this study reported low perceived ability to provide transition support. Although high caseloads and lack of training may contribute to this self-perceived lack of abilities, more research needs to continue in this area to provide greater understanding. Given the alignment with evidence-based predictors identified by the NTACT, we recommend that school counselor educators and districts provide training specifically related to the four factors identified in this study.

Appendix 1

Secondary Transition Predictors

1. Provide information about opportunities, education, and skills needed in various occupational pathways to choose a career that matches one’s strengths and interests.

2. Enable students to explore various career pathways, and develop occupational specific skills through instruction and experiences focused on their desired employment goals.

3. Help students obtain employment/work experience (e.g., work sampling, job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships) and paid employment (e.g., existing
standard jobs in a company/organization; customized work assignments negotiated with the employer).

4. Help students obtain vocational education courses that will prepare them for a specific job or career at various levels from trade or craft positions to technical, business, or professional careers.

5. Help students obtain work skills instruction and experiences designed to develop them with work attitudes and general work behaviors by providing access to mutually supportive and integrated academic and vocational instruction.

6. Help students obtain community experiences outside the school setting, where students apply academic, social, and/or general work behaviors and skills.

7. Help students set goals focused on attending a post-secondary college or university, or postschool education.

8. Foster self-advocacy and self-determination where students can make choices, solve problems, set goals, evaluate options, take initiative to reach one’s goals, and accept consequences of one’s actions.

9. Help students obtain skills necessary for management of one’s personal self-care and daily independent living, including the personal management skills needed to interact with others, daily living skills, financial management skills, and the self-management of health care/wellness need.

10. Help students obtain social skills that facilitate communication and cooperation (e.g., social conventions, social problem solving when engaged in a social interaction, body language, speaking, listening, responding, verbal and written communication).

11. Help students obtain experiences to travel independently outside the home (e.g., school, local store, neighbor’s house).

12. Help students obtain autonomy and decision-making skills.

13. Engage in interagency collaboration to promote cross-agency, cross-program, and cross-disciplinary collaborative efforts leading to tangible transition outcomes for youth.

14. Help parents set high expectations regarding their child with disabilities.

15. Promote involvement so that parents/families/guardians are active and knowledgeable participants in all aspects of transition planning (e.g., decision-making, providing support, attending meetings, and advocating for their child).

16. Help students obtain a support network of people (e.g., family, friends, educators, and adult service providers) who provide services and resources in multiple environments to prepare annual transition and postsecondary goals aligned with their preferences, interests, and needs.

17. Help support a transition program that prepares students to move from a secondary education setting (e.g., middle school/high school) to adult life, utilizing comprehensive transition planning and education that creates individualized opportunities, services, and supports to help achieve their postschool goals in education/training, employment, and independent living.

18. Support students to understand exit and high school diploma requirements.

19. Ensure students have access to general education curriculum and are engaged in regular education classes with peers without disabilities.

20. Develop a program of study that is an individualized set of courses, experiences, and curriculum designed to develop academic and functional achievement to support the attainment of students’ desired postschool goals.

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