
The Role of the School-Based Occupational Therapist in Secondary Education Transition Planning: A Pilot Survey Study

Margaret Kardos,
Barbara Prudhomme White

OBJECTIVE. The purpose of this study was to investigate school-based occupational therapists' knowledge of transition planning, their degree of participation in assessment and intervention of students requiring transition services, and to identify potential barriers limiting therapists' participation in transition services.

METHOD. Using survey methods, a questionnaire was mailed to a random sample of therapists listed as members of the School System Special Interest Section of the American Occupational Therapy Association. Eighty therapists from all geographical regions within the continental United States and who identified themselves as working with students 13–21 years of age in an educational setting, participated in the study. The response rate was 20%.

RESULTS. The majority of participants reported that they understood the terminology associated with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 and the 1997 IDEA amendments definitions of transition planning at the secondary level, but were less likely to apply that knowledge to the transition planning process. The majority of therapists reported minimal participation in secondary education transition planning assessment and intervention for students with disabilities. Most respondents believed that they were not contributing to the transition planning process in a manner that maximized their skills, and identified several barriers that they believed hindered greater participation.

CONCLUSION. This pilot study suggests that occupational therapists may not be participating in transition services to their fullest potential. While the low response rate in this study precludes generalization, this information is important to guide further study as well as to shape efforts to increase occupational therapy's role in this important service area within school-based practice.

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Margaret Kardos, MS, OTR/L, is Doctoral Student, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut.

Barbara Prudhomme White, PhD, OTR/L, is Assistant Professor, School of Health and Human Services, 117 Hewitt, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire 03824; bpwhite@cisunix.unh.edu

Introduction

For students requiring special education, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] of 1990; IDEA of 1997, Pub. L. 105–17) describes and provides a series of activities surrounding two periods of transition. The first period of transition described in the law takes place when a child receiving early intervention (EI) services transitions from an EI service model into the public schools, typically at 3 years of age (IDEA, 1997, 34 C.F.R., Part 303). The second period of transition found in IDEA refers to the time in which a special education student is assessed and provided training or intervention for the transition from public education to “adult” life. This mandate, covered under Part B of IDEA, is the focus of this research study and is referred to in this paper as “secondary transition” (History of the IDEA, n.d.).

Specifically, under IDEA, transition services are a coordinated set of activities for a student with special needs that (a) are designed within an outcome-oriented process that promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including

supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation, (b) are based on the individual student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests, and (c) includes instruction, provision of related services, inclusion in community experiences, preparation for employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation (IDEA, 1997; Pub. L. 105-17, Section 602:30). Transition services under this mandate include any related services in addition to special education that are deemed necessary for optimizing an educational program.

In 1990, IDEA mandated transition planning for students receiving special education services. In this reform of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Pub. L. 94-142, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.*, Congress placed the responsibility for transition services on the state and local education agencies. The age of 16 was established as the point for requiring planning of transition services; earlier planning, if deemed necessary, was not only allowed but encouraged. In 1997, IDEA Amendments (Pub. L. 105-17) made by Congress changed the 1990 law to include students from the age of 14 in the transition planning process. This change to begin planning earlier was invoked in an attempt to reduce the high dropout rate among students with disabilities. IDEA legislation relating to transition services is supported by mandates in the fields of vocational-technical education, rehabilitation and civil rights legislation and work force training legislation (Frank & Sitlington, 2000).

In 1996, Sitlington stated that transition services did not appear to be adequately addressing all areas of need in students with disabilities, and that comprehensive transition programming particularly in areas other than employment and post-secondary education to students with disabilities was needed. Specifically, she noted the need for systematic instruction in the basic concepts of maintaining a home, participating appropriately in the community and experiencing satisfactory personal and social relationships. Consistent with this view, others noted that post-school outcomes for students with disabilities suggested continued dependence on family members or service providers and isolation from participation in community activities (Getzel & deFur, 1997; Johnson, McGrew, Bloomberg, Bruininks, & Lin, 1996). Moreover, others noted that the transition experiences for students with special needs were bleak, particularly in preparation for community and social participation after high school, for gainful employment, and for independent living skills (Hughes et al., 1997; Ianacone & Kochlar, 1996; Seventeenth Annual Report to Congress on the

Implementation of IDEA; Twenty-fourth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA; Rice, 1999).

Occupational therapists have the professional skills and training to collaborate in the area of transition planning, particularly in areas of daily living skills, work, and leisure, and community participation (Brollier, Shepherd, & Markley, 1994; Clark, 2001; Niehues, Bundy, Mattingly, & Lawlor, 1991). However, a number of recent papers and unpublished theses suggest that occupational therapists are not addressing secondary transition services in schools as much as might be expected (Arnold, 1999; Beaman, 1999; Clark, 2001; Inge, 1995; Orentlicher & Michaels, 2000a, 2000b).

For example, Inge (1995) conducted a national survey (unpublished dissertation) of occupational therapists ($N = 755$) working with students with severe disabilities who were of transition age. Thirty-eight percent of respondents reported working with students 14-22 years of age and reported most often working with students with multiple disabilities, mental retardation, orthopedic impairment, and specific learning disability, respectively. Participants were asked if they assessed students in their homes completing activities of daily living and in the community participating in activities. Sixty percent responded that they never assessed students in their homes; 40% responded that they never assessed students in the community. A majority of therapists (67%) responded that occupational therapy was not identified in students' transition plans as a needed service to promote functional outcomes. Therapists felt this was due to the following reasons: (a) School administrators did not value occupational therapy's role in transition services, (b) School administrators refused to increase the role of occupational therapy for financial reasons, (c) Parents did not demand occupational therapy for older students, and (d) Therapists thought special educators were addressing transition issues (p. 164). Inge's summary of findings concluded that nationally, only a minority of school based therapists worked with students of transition age; that students from birth to 13 years of age were the primary recipients of school-based occupational therapy services; that as students moved through the transition process, occupational therapy services decreased; that occupational therapists' involvement in community-based instruction for students 14-22 years of age was minimal; and that occupational therapists who worked with transition age youth had limited training in transition planning.

School-based practice has traditionally been heavily focused on early intervention and the development of sensorimotor skills (Powell, 1994). In addition, the core of transition planning, with its focus on real life activities practiced in context, may be a departure from the way in which

some occupational therapists have traditionally practiced in the school setting (Brollier et al., 1994). Thus, the paucity of occupational therapy literature pertaining to secondary transition practice and the possibility that school-based therapists have focused their energies in other areas, bring to question how extensively occupational therapists are participating in secondary transition services in schools and whether they are aware of the potential opportunities.

The purposes of this study were to determine the extent to which occupational therapists across the country were engaged in secondary transition services and to gather information that described their level of participation. Questions were included to identify whether any barriers were perceived that limited respondents' contributions to secondary transition education.

Method

Design

A survey research method using a questionnaire designed for the study was employed. The School System Special Interest Section (SSSIS) of the American Occupational Therapy Association reported 890 member therapists working with students of secondary transition age (13–21 years of age), representing 44 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. From this member list, 400 therapists were randomly selected to receive the mailed questionnaire. A random survey sampling of 400 was conducted because budget limitations precluded sending the survey to the entire population of therapists in SSSIS. Study procedures were reviewed by the authors' institutional review board, human subjects committee with permission granted to conduct the study.

Participants

Eighty participants returned questionnaires, representing all geographical regions within the continental United States, and constituting a 20% response rate. All participants were registered occupational therapists who reported working with students 13–21 years of age in an educational setting. Refer to Table 1 for participant demographic information.

Instrument

The primary author, currently specializing in school-based transition services and identified as a state resource in special education law, developed the questionnaire used in the study as part of her master's thesis, following a review of IDEA content, definitions and requirements relevant to occupational therapy practice in the schools. The questionnaire was reviewed by a variety of faculty members familiar

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information (N = 80)

Personal	Mean	Range	
Age	45–55	25–65+	
Years in practice	20 yrs	3–42	
Years in school practice	13 yrs		
Practice Settings	Percent		
Public Schools	81%		
Private Schools	5%		
Residential	5%		
Combination	9%		
Caseload Description	Mean	Range	
Total # of students	33	6–120	
Transition age students per caseload	16	1–120	
Most frequently served IDEA categories	Specific Learning Disability (1st)	Developmental Delay/Multiple Disability (2nd)	Autism (3rd)
Assessments completed			
# of assessments conducted in past 12 months of students for the purpose of transition planning			N = 6

with school-based practice and transition mandates. The purposes of the questionnaire were: (a) to identify the extent to which occupational therapists currently practicing in a school setting understood the terms related to secondary transition services as outlined by IDEA; (b) to identify the degree of participation of occupational therapists in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) of students requiring secondary transition services; (c) to gather therapist perceptions regarding the degree to which they believed that they were contributing to the IEPs of students requiring secondary transition services in a manner that maximized their professional skills and abilities; and (d) to gather perceptions from therapists regarding potential barriers that may affect their participation in secondary transition services.

The eight-page questionnaire totaled 50 items, composed of both short answer questions and rating statements, and used a Likert scale ranging in degrees of disagreement, neutrality, and agreement to document therapists' responses. The questionnaire was organized by the four transition areas specified under IDEA (1997): (a) post-secondary education; refers to any type of educational setting a student may transition to after high school including college, trade, or vocational school, (b) community participation; refers to accessing and participating in one's community and includes instrumental activities of daily living (shopping, transportation, conducting personal business, etc.) social, religious and civic activities, (c) post-secondary employment; refers to participation in competitive or supported employment, and (d) residential outcomes; refers to preparing a student to live with some level of independence from current living arrangements. Therapists were also asked to

write in the names of any assessment tools that they used for transition planning. While an in-depth description of the questionnaire is beyond the scope of this report, copies are available from the authors.

Data Analysis

Data were collected from October through December 2002. Descriptive statistical analyses were completed using SPSS 11.0 statistical software.

Results

As expected, the majority of respondents reported working in public schools; 81% reported working there exclusively. The remainder of respondents reported working in private schools (5%), residential facilities (5%), or a combination of settings (9%). Respondents reported an average caseload of 33 students at any time within the past 12 months. Of these, therapist's caseloads averaged 16 students who were within secondary transition planning age (13–21+ years). Therapists reported conducting an average of 10 assessments in the past 12 months with their secondary transition aged students; of these, half of the assessments were conducted for the purpose of transition planning. The most frequently served eligibility category was specific learning disability (15% total caseload). (See Table 1.)

The data regarding participants' understanding of the terms associated with secondary transition planning under IDEA are presented in Table 2. Therapist's agreement to knowing the terms associated with transition services ranged from 50% (*outcome oriented process*) to 88% (*daily living skills*). Only 47% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the overall intent of transition services as mandated under IDEA. Only 30% of

therapists responded that they believed they were participating in a manner that maximized their professional skills and abilities in any of the transition areas.

Data regarding how therapists participated in the assessment of students requiring secondary transition services are presented in Table 3. Overall, fewer than half of the therapists surveyed reported that they were conducting assessments that contributed information to the development of transition goals/objectives across the four transition areas (range of 16%, *residential outcomes* to 45%, *post-secondary education*). When they were participating, therapists were more likely involved with students who were planning on attending post-secondary education (45%). When asked what assessment tools were used for secondary transition planning, therapists reported using informal or observational methods of assessment primarily. Table 3 also includes the list of formal assessment tools that therapists reported using.

Most therapists reported providing intervention services more often than assessment in secondary transition services, and they reported that they most frequently worked with students with special education needs who planned on pursuing some level of education after graduation (64%). Following post-secondary education, therapists provided intervention in community participation and post-secondary education (45% each). Therapists provided intervention in the area of residential outcomes least of all (25%).

Data presenting a breakdown of both assessment and intervention services provided, by occupational therapy domain, appear in Table 4. Therapists most frequently assessed and treated within the domains of occupation and

Table 2. Understanding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Transition Planning Terms/Overall Intent (N = 80)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Terms	% Disagree Knowing Term	% Neither Agree/Disagree Knowing Term	
		% Disagree Knowing Term	% Agree Knowing Term
Outcome-oriented process	23%	25%	50%
Continuing Education	14%	19%	65%
Adult Education	7%	20%	60%
Post-secondary Education	15%	13%	71%
Adult Services	16%	21%	61%
Independent Living	8%	8%	82%
Vocational Training	6%	10%	82%
Community Participation	8%	15%	78%
Integrated Employment	19%	26%	53%
Daily Living Skills	4%	5%	88%
Supported Employment	11%	8%	81%
Functional Vocational Evaluation	15%	23%	61%
Overall Intent of IDEA	24%	29%	47%

Table 3. Assessment in Secondary Transition (N = 80)

Transition Area	Frequency of Assessment		
	Informal	Formal	
Post-secondary Education	45%	87%	13%
Community Participation	36%	93%	7%
Post-secondary Employment	30%	85%	15%
Residential Outcomes	16%	95%	5%
Assessment Tools Used			
Motor Free Visual Perceptual Test–4th edition			
Scoreable Self-Care Evaluation			
Test of Visual Motor Integration–4th edition			
Transition Planning Inventory			
Sensory Profile			
Quick Neurological Screening Tool-2			
Evaluation Tool of Children's Handwriting			
School Functional Assessment			
Street Survival Skills Questionnaire			
Lowenstein Occupational Therapy Cognitive Assessment			
Bruininks Osteretsky Test of Motor Proficiency			
Assessment of Motor and Process Skills			
Test of Visual Perceptual Skills Revised			
Test of Visual Motor Skills Revised			

Table 4. Assessment and Intervention Services Breakdown, by Occupational Therapy Domain, Provided by Occupational Therapists (N = 80)

Domain	Post-secondary Education %	Post-secondary Employment %	Community Participation %	Residential Outcomes %
Areas of Occupation Assessment	43%	46%	61%	40%
Performance Skills Assessment	12%	12%	11%	14%
Client Factors Assessment	8%	8%	7%	10%
Contexts (includes accessibility) Assessment	9%	9%	8%	15%
Activity Demands Assessment	8%	9%	8%	10%
*Other: Assessment	20%	16%	5%	11%
Areas of Occupation Intervention	48%	48%	53%	46%
Performance Skills Intervention	12%	12%	10%	12%
Client Factors Intervention	6%	7%	6%	8%
Contexts (includes accessibility) Intervention	9%	9%	10%	13%
Activity Demands Intervention	7%	7%	7%	10%
*Other: Intervention	18%	17%	14%	11%

*Assistive technology needs; physical assistance; assistance with ADA (American with Disabilities Act) accommodations.

**Percentages do not total 100% because categories were not mutually exclusive.

performance skills, followed by client factors, contexts, and activity demands respectively in each of the secondary transition areas. The areas of occupation most frequently assessed and treated across the four transition areas were activities of daily living, appearing in the majority of responses for each transition area. Additional areas of occupation that were assessed and treated appeared specific to individual transition areas (e.g., work skills to determine post-secondary employment needs or play or leisure skills, and social participation as part of community integration).

Therapists identified several barriers to optimal participation in transition planning within the educational setting (Table 5). Only 30% of the respondents believed that they were participating effectively in the secondary transition process. Only 9% of responding therapists believed that their skills were utilized to potential in the transition area of residential outcomes, followed by community participation (13%), post-secondary employment (16%), and post-secondary education (20%).

Discussion

The majority of therapists participating in this study felt that they understood most of the terminology associated with transition planning described in IDEA. This is not surprising, since the terms are consistent with the *Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process* (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2002) and are assumed to be well-known to practitioners. Fewer therapists, however, indicated that they understood the intent of transition planning as mandated by IDEA. This contrast between a strong understanding of transition planning terminology and a weaker understanding of the purposes of secondary transition highlights a potential gap in current school-based practice and may help to explain why so few therapists reported practicing more broadly in this area.

The majority of participants responded that they were not conducting assessments in any of the four transition areas that contributed information to the development of transition IEPs. The minority of respondents who reported conducting assessments stated that they evaluated student needs in the transition area of post-secondary educational outcomes most often, followed by community participation, post-secondary employment needs and residential outcomes respectively. Most therapists reported providing intervention services more commonly than assessment in secondary transition services, and they reported that they

Table 5. Perceived Barriers To Participation in Secondary Transition Services (N = 68)

1.	Transition services are primarily handled by another professional (i.e., special education teacher, guidance counselor, transition coordinator, etc.)	74%
2.	Lack of understanding of the role of occupational therapy on the part of transition team members	47%
3.	Lack of funds on the part of the school system to utilize occupational therapy services to the maximum potential	44%
4.	Lack of information regarding proper assessment tools for occupational therapists to evaluate these areas	40%
5.	My caseload is too large to devote time to transition planning services to the fullest extent	39%
6.	Lack of awareness in the occupational therapy profession of the specifics of transition planning	34%
7.	I have only minimal involvement with high school population	34%
8.	Most students are discharged from occupational therapy services before age 14 when transition planning begins	32%
9.	Transition planning services was not taught/addressed in my occupational therapy program	32%
10.	Lack of knowledge about transition services on my part as an occupational therapist	25%
11.	There is a perception of occupational therapists as "motor therapists" by transition team members	19%
12.	Lack of skill on my part to provide these types of services	19%
13.	Lack of transition program at the high school where I work	13%
14.	Occupational therapy is no longer an effective related service with students this age	3%

most often worked with special education students who planned on pursuing some level of education after graduation. Following post-secondary education, therapists provided intervention in community participation and post-secondary education (tied), providing intervention in the area of residential outcomes least of all. Regarding the nature of their involvement in transition services, only 30% of therapists responded that they believed they were participating in a manner that maximized their professional skills and abilities in any of the transition areas.

Therapists' participation reported to be most frequent in the area of post-secondary education reflects the literature's findings that it is the most frequently addressed area of transition planning (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Frank & Sitlington, 2000). Therapists' reporting of less-extensive involvement in areas of post-secondary employment, community participation and residential outcomes also reflects findings that these are the most underserved areas in transition planning (Sitlington, 1996; Sitlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 1999; Frank &

Sitlington). Occupational therapists in public schools are well-placed and trained to address these areas, and should be exploring ways in which they can collaborate with special education transition teams to augment services that have been well documented nationally as needing improvement.

Therapists in this survey reported that when they did assess and intervene, they targeted areas of occupation more frequently than specific performance skills. This trend suggests a shift in the assessment and intervention practices of participants' in this study from those in Powell's (1994) study who reported that therapists tended to address performance skills most often in school-based occupational therapy practice. However, few therapists in this study used a standardized tool to assess occupational performance, relying primarily on informal observation methods. When formal assessment tools were used (7% of respondents), therapists most often reported using tools designed to test skills such as visual motor integration, visual perceptual skills, gross and fine motor skills. This finding suggests that therapists may lack familiarity with the application of standardized assessment tools that measure functional occupational performance to the educational setting, as well as tools designed to assess transition planning areas. Instead, therapists' reported relying heavily on informal methods or component-based assessments that would likely yield information of limited value toward developing functional transition outcomes. An additional concern that this data suggests is that therapists are intervening without standardized assessment strategies. This practice does not lend itself to

outcomes-based documentation of services and does not provide the field with any data to support the efficacy of therapy services to support educational objectives in secondary schools. Both sources of information are critical to the profession.

The three most frequently identified barriers preventing therapists from fully participating in transition planning were the belief that transition services were being handled by another member of the high school team, the perceived lack of understanding of the role of occupational therapists by other transition team members, and the lack of funds on the part of the school system to utilize occupational therapy services to the maximum potential. Therapists also identified the lack of knowledge regarding assessment tools appropriate for use in transition planning, large caseloads, and student discharge from occupational therapy services before 14 years of age as barriers. This information can be used by therapists to focus their continuing education efforts in learning appropriate transition planning assessment practices and expanding their scope of practice to include enhancing services to adolescents and young adults in public school. School-based therapists should also be considering ways in which they can offer their skills and knowledge to secondary transition teams, as well as developing methods for evaluating the effectiveness of these services in student outcomes.

Limitations

The low response rate presents a major limitation to generalizing the findings beyond this pilot study. Limited resources precluded measures to increase the response rate, including follow-up mailings and more extensive sampling. In addition, the survey was somewhat lengthy and the researchers did not provide incentives for completion. Future studies should seek to identify an easier, shorter version of the survey, perhaps using an online survey method, as well as provide an incentive for participation. Both strategies may serve to increase return rates in future studies.

It is also possible, however, that the low response rate attained in this study represents further support for findings that therapists are not extensively engaged in transition services. Only therapists working in transition services within the schools with students 13–21 years of age were asked to reply. It is possible that our response rate represents, validly, a small percentage of therapists in school-based practice who work in secondary transition services. Further study of this important practice area is important to enhancing our understanding and growth of occupational therapists' roles in educational settings.

Conclusion and Areas for Further Research

This survey identified several areas that can inform practice as well as continued research. Since this survey was limited exclusively to occupational therapists, future studies might include the role of the COTA (certified occupational therapy assistant) working in this venue to determine their knowledge and experience with secondary transition education. Further, it is important that psychometrically stronger assessment tools be identified for this area of practice in order to better determine transition needs relative to occupational therapy domains as well as to document outcomes following intervention. Therapists should use standardized occupational-based, functional assessments that give relevant information regarding levels of support needed for living skills and gainful employment as well as tools to assess family priorities in social and community participation. Finally, studies designed to determine the impact of occupational therapy intervention on transition outcomes are imperative in order to establish a continued presence on the transition planning team, and to highlight the unique role of the occupational therapist in secondary transition planning.▲

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