Transition From School to Work: Where Are We and Where Do We Need to Go?
Paul Wehman
Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals 2013 36: 58
DOI: 10.1177/2165143413482137

The online version of this article can be found at: http://cde.sagepub.com/content/36/1/58

Published by:
Hammill Institute on Disabilities
Division on Career Development and Transition

http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://cde.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://cde.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - Apr 19, 2013

What is This?
Transition From School to Work: Where Are We and Where Do We Need to Go?

Paul Wehman, PhD

Abstract
As children become teenagers and move into early adulthood, there are many transitions they face. For young people with disabilities, this is no different except that there are invariably additional complex challenges that must be overcome. Evidence-based research is the foundation for best transition practices, but too many studies seem abstract, distant, and far removed from their classroom or school world. This article seeks to overcome the abstract by describing evidence-based transition research and recent findings. Teachers’ classroom needs are highlighted with special emphasis on how research can be useful for them on a day-to-day basis. Finally, we highlight six guidelines for helping implement best practices in transition.

Keywords
special education, transition, disability, research, employment

A student’s transition from school to adulthood is one of the most critical times in special education and rehabilitation. This is a time when everyone involved can reflect back on what has been accomplished to help a student take the next steps to successfully venture out to a life beyond the classroom. This rite of passage is an exciting time indeed.

Through the years as children become teen and teens become adults, there are many transitions they face. However, young people with disabilities will invariably face more complex challenges, than their nondisabled peers, that must be overcome. Successfully rising above these challenge is what ignites the passion to succeed and generates happiness in the minds of students, family members, teachers, and others involved in transitioning youth with disabilities to adulthood. Over the past 30 years, tremendous progress has been made in this area, and today, there are many reasons for a positive outlook as we move forward. To begin, let us take a look at Josh’s story.

Josh

Josh is an 18-year-old young man with significant autism who is in secondary school. One of the greatest challenges he has faced over the years is his ability to manage his very challenging behaviors. Fast forward 1 year, Josh has completed three rotations at a local hospital through Project SEARCH, a 9-month business-based internship program (Daston, Richle, & Rutkowski, 2012), and he has been been hired to work in the supply room. His job duties include stocking floor carts, stocking supplies in the supply room, delivering stocked carts throughout the hospital, among other things. Positive behavior supports have been used to teach him how to accept feedback from others without verbal outbursts.

The use of an Apple iPod© has helped him navigate the complexity of the tasks. In addition, his coworkers have learned how to routinely assess his mood and concerns during his shift. This allows Josh to remain in tune with his feelings. But Project SEARCH has taught Josh more than job skills; his mother has seen his social skills blossom, and he has developed friendships. She never thought this would happen. However, through a well-thought-out plan for transition and array of supports across his daily environments, this young man is on the road to creating an independent life. And the best thing that happened is at the end of the 9-month internship—Josh was offered a job at the hospital for US$9.25 per hour.

What can we take away from Josh’s experience? We know that positive behavior supports were essential due to his long history of behavior problems (Wehman, Schall, et al., 2012). His behavioral challenges could have led to an abrupt end to his internship or a job termination; this is why experienced behavioral help is critical. Second, the internship has three 12-week rotations; without these opportunities to show his potential, he would not have been hired.

Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, USA

Corresponding Author:
Paul Wehman, Medical Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1314 West Main St., Box 842011, Richmond, VA 23284, USA.
Email: pwehman@vcu.org
after the internship. Third, technology was important and will play and increasing role (Gentry, Lau, Molinelli, Fallen, & Kriner, 2012). Finally, Josh’s mother believed early on that his future success could be heightened through ongoing participation in community activities. Therefore, she made sure these opportunities were available to him at a young age and continued as he grew up. These experiences served him at work and contributed to his ability to adjust to the fast-paced hospital environment and work with many different staff and patients. There are now thousands of success stories like Josh. So how can we replicate such positive outcomes? Answering this question requires a closer look at the evidence-based transition research that lays the foundation for best practices.

Research Support for Best Practices

Since early 2000, there has been a more intense effort to study factors associated with successful transition outcomes, led notably by authors such as Test, Fowler, White, Richter, and Walker (2009) and Test (2011). Kohler (1993), in her original taxonomy of transition, indicated that since 1985, there has been an enhanced emphasis on improving transition education and services for youth with disabilities. Three specific initiatives exemplify this progress:

1. Federal special education and disability legislation;
2. Federal, state, and local investment in transition services development; and
3. Effective transition practices research.

These initiatives have led to (a) an expanded outlook on transition education and services and (b) recognition of practices that apply this perspective to individual student needs.

Kohler and Field (2003) categorized transition practices into the following five areas:

1. Student-focused planning
2. Student development
3. Interagency collaboration
4. Family involvement
5. Program structures

Developing specific interventions and service arrays for individual students within each of these areas is vital for a student’s postschool success. Obviously, if we are going to be successful helping young persons with disabilities succeed in the workplace, in the community, or at home, we must understand which practices are effective and which are not (Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011). There needs to be credible evidence that can be measured, replicated, and evaluated on the major factors that make up the process that leads to a successful transition from school to adulthood (Taylor et al., 2012). There also needs to be significantly better coordination between agencies to promote successful transition (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012).

We are fortunate that there have been positive developments in this area over the past decade (Eaves, Rabren, & Hall, 2012; Shattuck, Wagner, Narendorf, Sterzing, & Hensley, 2011). Kohler and Field (2003); Test, Fowler, Richter, et al. (2009); and Landmark, Ju, and Zhang (2010) have provided leadership in organizing the explosion of research that has been published in transition (Alwell & Cobb, 2009a, 2009b; Cobb & Alwell, 2009; Cobb, Rabren, & Eaves, 2011). They have begun evaluating practices to determine which ones have limited, moderate, or strong evidence of working; this is invaluable to teachers, parents, and administrators who are struggling to identify best practices.

So how does this apply to educators? Consider the teacher who has a student like Josh in her classroom. Remember, Josh has significant autism with significant social and cognitive issues (e.g., Bishop-Fitzpatrick, Minshew, & Eack, 2013). The teacher has been instructed to spend the majority of time focusing on teaching developmental reading and writing in classroom activities. Yet, Landmark et al. (2010) reported paid and unpaid work experiences are absolutely among the highest, most credible evidence for successful transition. Now, this teacher has a justification to transform her practice and infuse opportunities for work into the school year (Wehman, Inge, Revell, & Brooke, 2007). Recall at the start of the article the importance of work for Josh: Community participation, internships, and competitive employment helped promote a seamless transition. The emphasis is on real work, competitive employment, not sheltered work (Cimera, Wehman, West, & Burgess, 2012).

Evidence-based transition research also helps the school principal decide how much to promote general education inclusion (Halle & Dymond, 2009). For instance, participation in general education classrooms and earning a diploma increase the likelihood of better outcomes for many students with disabilities (Williams-Diehm & Benz, 2008).

For some educators and administrators, research may seem distant and far removed from their classroom or school; yet without embracing this fundamental knowledge, we are just guessing at the answers to these important questions:

- Where should students learn?
- How much time should be spent in the classroom and in the community?
- What should the curriculum be, functional or literacy based, or both?
The field of transition has evolved rapidly under the impetus of federal and state initiatives, federal legislation, an array of research and demonstration activities, and practitioner-initiated practices (Landmark et al., 2010). Transition services were guaranteed by the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in its subsequent reauthorizations in 1997 and 2004. The most current reauthorization (i.e., Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004) requires that transition services be in effect by the time the student with a disability is 16 years old. It is also aligned with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) in that states hold school districts accountable for how well students with disabilities perform on standards-based assessments and postschool outcomes. Recent federal mandates set more specific goals for transition services and require these to be a central part of a student’s Individualized Education Program. These legal updates have influenced policy making and led to a greater emphasis on research in transition.

### Transition Research

Test, Fowler, Richter, et al. (2009) and Landmark et al. (2010) have done an excellent job at summarizing the transition research to date. Their extensive work has identified studies that fit specific criteria that allow their inclusion in the Kohler and Field (2003) taxonomy for transition research. Inclusion criteria are used to determine which studies have the merit to be included, and the taxonomy is important to synthesize the different works.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss all of the studies and their implications. However, we can take a look at areas that are undergirded by good quality research. Table 1 summarizes those practices from most to least substantiated.

### Table 1. NSTTAC-Identified Evidence-Based Transition Research Practices in Secondary Transition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice by taxonomy category</th>
<th>Evidence-based practices (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student-focused planning</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student development</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family involvement</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program structure</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interagency collaboration</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source. NSTTAC (2010).  
Note. NSTTAC = National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center. The 33 practices have been categorized using Kohler’s Taxonomy for Transition Programming.

- What kind of planning is required for a successful transition process?
- How much should the parents be involved, and what is their role?
- What instructional procedures are most effective?

Research indicates that unpaid and paid work experiences are by far the most important practice associated with good transition outcomes (Benz, 2002; Carter, Swedeen, & Trainor, 2009; L. Lindstrom, Doren, & Miesch, 2011; McDonnell & Cruden, 2009; Williams-Diehm & Benz, 2008). This includes 16 studies and supports the comments made by Wehman in 2002 in public page testimony to President George Bush’s Summit on Education Reform, and calls by Rusch and Braddock (2004), and more recently Certo et al. (2008) for “seamless transition.” Employment preparation, general education inclusion, parent involvement, social skills training, and self-determination training also contribute to outcomes and should be considered during transition planning.

In Test, Fowler, Richter, et al.’s (2009) exhaustive review of the transition research, each study design was evaluated to determine its level of evidence (limited, moderate, strong). This revealed strong evidence for life skills training, but many of the other transition practices were moderate (22 total) and others minimal. For a full review, the reader is encouraged to read this article.

### Implications for Educators

This synthesis of research should be used by the teacher and administrators when making decisions about what to teach, where to teach, and how much emphasis to place on different topical areas (Hughes & Carter, 2012; Wehman, 2011). With that said, it is important to note that the number of quality studies is limited. Few would rise to a multicenter Phase 3 trial used to determine whether a drug can enter the market. Furthermore, it is also important to understand that just because, for example, Landmark et al. (2010) only showed two studies supporting community/agency planning, this does not mean this information is not important and useful. It simply means that to date, only a limited number of reliable studies exist in this area. Test, Fowler, Richter, et al. (2009) aptly described the implications for educators as follows:

The current list provides practitioners with a starting point for implementing evidence-based practices. Are they guaranteed to work? No, but practitioners can be confident that practices with strong and moderate levels of evidence will produce similar effects with their students. Practitioners will still need to use their professional judgment to select practices for their students. To help them with this process, further information about each practice can be found at http://www.nsttac.org under “Evidence based Practices.” At this website, each practice is described in terms of the supporting evidence, with whom it was implemented (i.e., disability labels, gender, ethnicity if provided), what the practice is, how and where it has been implemented, how the practice relates to State Performance Plan Part B Indicator 13 and national standards, where the best place to find out how to do the practice is, and references used to establish the current evidence base. (p. 123)
There are not a lot of prospectively designed large-scale transition studies that look at outcomes from school to work either. This is a huge problem that needs to be resolved. But it will not be easy. Part of the problem with implementation of such studies relates to the inherent difficulties in designing and maintaining the controls necessary over a long time to measure employment changes for students. The identification of appropriate community living and adjustment variables is also problematic (Wehman & Kregel, 2012).

In one large national study, Wittenburg and Maag (2002) examined data sources that looked at economic outcomes of youth with disabilities. They drew on multiple databases from Social Security, vocational rehabilitation, and special education. Many of the conclusions drawn from this work provided information on the transition planning and practices discussed here.

Aiming for Successful Transition

When a success story like the one about Josh is shared with teachers and parents, some in the audience inquire, “Why was this student so successful or why can’t my child also have this kind of success?” The reality is each day, we are moving closer to being able to provide answers to these questions. We have some evidence-based research and multiple clinical demonstrations in addition to accounts of reports on best practices to help pave the way.

Schools are not exclusively preparatory in nature. Schools need to help students develop competencies needed as adults at work, colleges, and the community by providing meaningful learning experiences. The implementation of the concept of “seamless transition” is long overdue and must be put into practice in school systems throughout the United States. Every student in every school district must have a plan that will move them into work and adult life.

Although there are many things that contribute to a student’s success, we must remain mindful of both research and effective clinical practice that frequently support the critical themes associated with best practices in the transition process. These include employment preparation and going to work, developing self-determination and social skills, inclusion in school and the community, parent involvement, and going to college when appropriate.

Living a successful life means different things to different people. When it comes to work, it does not necessarily mean working in the highest paid profession, or fame. The meaning of work is personal and often relates to how happy someone feels about himself and the impact of his life on others. To help students’ strive toward independence and creating a positive future, let us take a closer look at six major themes: self-determination and self-advocacy, social skills, work competence, general education, parent and family participation and postsecondary education.

Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy

Self-determination involves the capacity to choose and to act on the basis of those choices (e.g., Wehmeyer et al., 2012; Wehmeyer, Lance, & Bashinski, 2002). Most people develop self-determination skills in childhood and adolescence as they take on more responsibility in life (Mithaug, Mithaug, Agran, Martin, & Wehmeyer, 2003). Some youth with disabilities will learn these skills as they grow up, and others will need help. A person must develop self-determination skills to become a self-advocate (Shogren, Palmer, Wehmeyer, Williams-Diehm, & Little, 2011). Because self-advocacy will, ultimately, be the way for many young people with disabilities to be heard and overcome the challenges they will face in life, learning these skills is critical.

Students must learn to be self-determined by having opportunities to exercise freedom of choice in ways that are meaningful to him or her. It is a fact that those who are self-directed are ambitious, take initiative, and display a work ethic that results in a better life for them than for those who do not (Cobb, Lehmann, Newman-Gonchar, & Alwell, 2009). Although most agree on the importance of developing such skills, there is disagreement about how much the schools are able to impart these vital skills (Hagner et al., 2012; Lee, Palmer, & Wehmeyer, 2009). The self-advocacy program “Whose Future Is It Anyway?” developed by Wehmeyer and Kelchner (1995), which is described in The Transition Handbook, developed by Hughes and Carter (2012), is a good resource to assist educators with teaching these critical skills. In addition, excellent works by Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, and Algozzine (2004) and Test, Browder, Karvonen, Wood, and Algozzine (2002) guided teachers and students on ways to develop these skills while planning, developing, and implementing Individual Education Programs (IEPs). Self-determination impacts personal attributes too (Carter, Owens, Trainor, Sun, & Swedeen, 2009). This is true whether a person has an intellectual disability requiring extensive support and works in the back of a kitchen or whether the individual is recovering from a spinal cord injury and is considering a career in computer engineering.

Social Skills

Many agree that social competence such as getting along with others and good interpersonal skills are critical to a successful life (Hillier, Fish, Siegel, & Beversdorf, 2011). Unfortunately, many young people with disabilities are unable to achieve acceptable levels of social competence. Displaying appropriate social skills and behavior in an array of social situations can make the difference in successful outcomes in the workplace, at home, and in the community, especially when peer buddies can be involved (Carter & Hughes, 2013). Young people who provoke fights will not
make friends. Young people who are verbally abusive will not develop healthy relationships. Many of the precipitating factors that lead to violence or disruptive classroom behavior are founded on a lack of social skills. Schools attempt to combat this issue with a tighter administrative structure, but much of the problem is that some students simply do not have the appropriate skill set. Role-playing, counseling, and targeted instruction on certain social skills can help students develop appropriate skills.

**Work Competence**

Vocational capacity, employment, and career advancement are major underpinnings of success in American society (Burkhauser & Daly, 2011; Wehman et al., 2007; Wehman, Lau, et al., 2012). As a capitalist society, the United States is a country where people who work hard can expect to achieve success. Today’s workers have been empowered by the use of the Internet, automation, and technology, and it has led to greater productivity and efficiency in the workplace. To become a valued member of the workforce, like others, individuals with disabilities must be competent. They must receive the right education and training, have a plan in place for ongoing self-improvement, and be persistent in pursuing their employment goals. Schools must emphasize skills and competencies related to employment rather than continuing to focus on isolated academic skills. This change will help individuals with disabilities take their rightful place in America’s workforce and society (Butterworth, Smith, Hall, Migliore, & Winsor, 2010; Callahan, 2010; Shattuck et al., 2012; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). Lysaght, Cobigo, and Hamilton (2012) examined inclusion as an important focus of employment-related research in a literature review over 10 years from 2000 to 2010. They note the following, which are implications for rehabilitation: Work is an important social and financial involvement for persons with disabilities and provides a potentially rich venue for social inclusion; supported employment has become an accepted best practice in employment of persons with intellectual and other disabilities; and although past research has focused on outcomes related to social integration, studies that examine and promote central features of social inclusion are important to move practice forward.

Students who work while enrolled in school are known to have a much higher likelihood of employment after they age out of school at age 21 (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2011); so this needs to be a goal. Carter et al. (2011) examined the early work experiences of a nationally representative sample of youth with severe disabilities (i.e., intellectual disabilities, autism, multiple disabilities). Drawing on data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study–2, they explored the extent to which various student, family, school, and community-level factors were associated with paid work experiences during high school. They found that although early work experiences for many youth with severe disabilities were hard to pin down, they were able to report on factors that seem to influence success at work in secondary school. These recommendations for research and practice are highlighted.

**General Education**

One of the most useful applications of the original school “mainstreaming” concept has been collaborative teaching (Snell & Janney, 2005). During collaborative teaching, a special education teacher or paraprofessional is in the general education classroom with the regular education teacher. This arrangement may include a tutoring mode, a team teaching mode, or any other that benefit the students with disabilities, or collaborative teaching.

Although challenges persist, the important fact is that collaborative teaching opens up the doors for students with disabilities to have more and higher quality interactions with nondisabled peers and general education teachers (Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2009; Ryndak, Moore, & Orlando, 2009). This is a good thing—it means higher expectations of students with disabilities among teachers and themselves, higher aspirations of parents of students with disabilities, greater access to activities for students with disabilities, and in general, much richer opportunities to enhance one’s self-esteem and adjustment (Murawski & Dieker, 2004).

Helping students with disabilities be successful in the general education classrooms is a proven best practice (Landmark et al., 2010). Young people with disabilities cannot feel part of their high school if they do not have access to the general curriculum, opportunities to get to know and develop friendships with their peers, or chances to participate in extracurricular activities. Inclusion helps lay the foundation for students with disabilities to learn important adult life skills like how to budget and shop for groceries and other necessities, be a responsible citizen, and gain and maintain employment. Students will not develop competency in these and other areas when excluded. So, how is this accomplished?

**Parent and Family Participation**

One of the most important factors influencing the transition outcomes for students is parent involvement (Grigal & Neubert, 2004; L. Lindstrom et al., 2011). Involvement means parents know what school and employment options are available and have the disposition to deal with any opposition or uncooperative behavior they may face along the way. This is a reason why many students, including Josh, do so well. Throughout the years, their parents played a major role. They knew their rights, they knew the options,
they facilitated decisions and advocated for their sons and daughters, and they stayed the course and refused to give up, even when the going got really tough. In one word, they are “awesome.” There is no doubt parents do make a pronounced difference with their values and their contacts in the community and workplace.

Development of effective supports during the transition process is important, and parents can help identify needs and possible solutions. This is especially critical for individuals with significant cognitive disabilities. When considering supports, it is useful to consider what may be needed in relation to the demands of specific environments. For example, these individuals may have support needs across a number of areas like intellectual functioning, adaptive skills, motor development, sensory functioning, health care, or communication, which require finding strategies and supports to assist these individuals in achieving positive outcomes. Again, parents can be valuable consultants.

In sum, the majority of parents want to help and be involved. Their mission is to see their child succeed in life. They are a great resource and must be brought to the table early on, not just because it is the right thing to do but because it is the smart thing to do.

Postsecondary Education

Postsecondary involvement and training is very important (Chiang, Cheung, Hickson, Xiang, & Tsai, 2011; Getzel & Wehman, 2005; Grigal & Hart, 2009; L. Lindstrom et al., 2011; Shattuck et al., 2012). Many individuals with disabilities have difficulty in the workplace throughout their lives. They also have difficulty with social skills and self-esteem. Education can help. Earning an associate’s degree or a bachelor’s degree from a 4-year college may be an asset to a student’s résumé, but being able to take courses and assimilate new information is also important (Fisher & Eskow, 2004).

Learning new skills, identifying new interests, hobbies, and making new friends can happen through postsecondary education and lifelong learning experiences. Opportunities are increasingly available, even to those with significant intellectual disabilities (L. E. Lindstrom, Flannery, Benz, Olszewski, & Slociv, 2009; Schmidt, 2005).

Madaus (2005) noted,

"The transition from high school to college can be a confusing and overwhelming time for students with learning disabilities (LD), their families, and the secondary-level professionals who assist them. In addition to the challenges that all students face when transitioning to college, additional obstacles confront students with LD. Chief among them is the move from the familiar model of special education services at the high school level to very different services at the college level. Not only does the scope of these services change considerably from high school to college, but there can also be a great deal of institutional variation in the way that these services are provided. Additionally, at the college level, significant changes occur in the legal rights of students, and there is a sharp reversal of parental and student responsibility." (p. 32)

Summary

Educators who fully comprehend the importance of transition in the special education curriculum and a responsive adult service system can empower young people with disabilities. Adopting the following principles can help professionals move in the right direction:

1. Listen to the student. Listen to the family. They are often right. What are they saying? What do they want? What do they need? Incorporating their desires are a critical features of a student-oriented transition program.

2. Find out what businesses and industry require of their workforce. This is critical. Teachers must look at the daily curricula and evaluate whether the skills, objectives, and activities they are currently emphasizing relate to what employers need. Teachers must determine whether their curricula are being influenced by what businesses say is required and needed or by objectives generated by bureaucrats.

3. All young people with disabilities should have the opportunity to be included in their communities, in their schools, and in society. Special schools, segregated work activity centers, and other programs that are designed only for people with disabilities must close their doors and become a distant memory as institutions of the past. People with disabilities consistently perform better in typical work environments and natural community environments.

Continual segregation hinders transition. Integration must no longer be viewed as a process. Instead, it should be seen as a critical outcome that can be achieved when educators, other professionals, and parents join together to work for the best interest of the student.

Author’s Note

This article was partially drawn from Life Beyond the Classroom: Transition Strategies for Young People With Disabilities (5th ed.), by Paul Wehman. © 2013 Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
References


Callahan, M. (2010). The productivity fallacy: Why people are worth more than just how fast their hands move. TASH Connections, 36(2), 21–23.


Wehman, P., & Kregel, J. (2012). Functional curriculum for elementary, middle, and secondary age students with special needs (3rd ed.). Austin, TX: PRO-ED.


