

# Inclusion

## An Investigation of the Collaborations between Educators and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors in Providing Pre-Employment Transition Services --Manuscript Draft--

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<b>Abstract:</b>	<p>Employment has historically provided a person with value and the ability to live a self-determined and independent life. Interagency collaborations have been found to play a key role in promoting employment for those with special needs. However, there is little research on identifying the needs of the field for collaborations between vocational rehabilitation and educational agencies. We conducted a series of 8 focus groups in a large state in the United States and identified needs from educators and vocational rehabilitation counselors. Participants regularly noted that they needed increased collaboration and a need for additional training and education for all stakeholders. They also identified many barriers to this increased collaboration and training, including access to the community that they served, limitations on time for training, collaboration, and access, challenges in communication, including language limitations and trust, and limitations around the support that they received. On the other hand, they often felt supported by their administration, and, when collaboration was possible, their co-workers and external providers served as great resources.</p>

# An Investigation of the Collaborations between Educators and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors in Providing Pre-Employment Transition Services

## **An Investigation of the Collaborations between Educators and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors in Providing Pre-Employment Transition Services**

Employment has historically provided a person with value and the ability to live a self-determined and independent life. One of the desired outcomes for individuals with disabilities is competitive and integrated employment (Siperstein, Heyman, & Stokes, 2014) because it is a way to support their inclusion in the community (Tucker, Williams, Roncoroni, & Heesacker, 2017). However, the current state of employment revealed that individuals with disabilities face a variety of challenges when pursuing employment. For example, people with disabilities have experienced significantly lower employment rates than those without a disability. According to findings from the NLTS2 (Newman, Wagner, Knokey, Marder, Nagle, Shaver, & Wei, 2011), the approximate rate of employment, at the time of the study, for individuals with disabilities ages 18-24 was 63% and was impacted heavily by the identified disability label and level of training/education. Further, the NLTS2 demonstrated that individuals with intellectual disabilities, autism, multiple disabilities, and deaf-blindness were employed at rates lower than 40%. Another recent report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics also demonstrated the significant employment challenge for individuals with disabilities, showing that in 2021 19.1% of individuals with disabilities were employed, which was far below the employment rate of 63.7% for individuals without disabilities in the same year (Department of Labor, 2022).

When focusing on the employment rate at the state level, the Texas Workforce Investment Council (TWIC, 2016) found that individuals with disabilities represented only 6.0% of people employed in the state of Texas. These employment rates were also impacted by disability labels and ages. The TWIC (2016) further stated that 43.9% of individuals with cognitive disabilities and 41.5% of those with hearing disabilities were not participating in the

Labor Force. These statistics showed that both nationally and within Texas, individuals with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed immediately after graduating from high school or in the long run (Newman et al., 2011; TWIC, 2016; Department of Labor, 2022).

Although employment provides a pathway to reach financial stability and personal growth for individuals with disabilities, long-term career outcomes for individuals with disabilities can drop to rates of 17.2% (Baker, Lowrey, & Wennerlind, 2018). The lower employment rate indicated that there were many barriers to individuals with disabilities for achieving successful employment outcomes. Among the barriers to employment include the perceptions of potential employers about the abilities of the individuals, concerns around the possible costs associated with employing individuals with disabilities, proper collaboration with potential employers and training programs, and opportunities for training and support to transitioning to employment opportunities after school (Baker et al., 2018; Lindstrom, Doren, & Miesch, 2011). In order to remove these barriers, training opportunities that include collaboration with communities and agency resources can help shift employers' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Among these training opportunities, postsecondary education programs provide varying training experiences for individuals with disabilities. Newman and colleagues (2011) also showed that those who completed some levels of postsecondary education/training were employed at higher rates than those who did not have any postsecondary education training.

### **Evidence Based Practices Around Employment and Planning**

Current research around evidence-based practices that can be implemented to prepare for the transition to employment focuses heavily on early experiences, supported internships, and collaboration, among other skills and training supports (Bellman, Burgstahler, & Ladner, 2014; Lee & Carter, 2012). Early experiences and work internships can each be delivered while

participants are still in high school, whether in school or in community settings. During these internships, students can gain a variety of experiences and work to develop their employment skills (Bellman et al., 2014). In addition, these practices are grounded in the understanding that schools and vocational rehabilitation work together to support students while they are participating in early work experiences. These experiences have been identified as having a statistically significant correlation with future employment outcomes (Mamu, Carter, & Fraker, 2018).

An example of these early work experience opportunities is Project SEARCH, which is a program that prepares individuals with significant disabilities for future employment and provides a model example of developing relationships with community resources to create competitive integrated employment opportunities and experiences (Bellman et al, 2014). The community partners can also benefit from the collaboration with Project SEARCH, such as increased positive perceptions of individuals with disabilities and employment. Other programs like Project SEARCH are able to cultivate community partnerships, foster jobs skills, and support the employment of individuals with disabilities through exposure and job skill development. Both schools and postsecondary education programs have developed programs that provide employment experiences. As noted with Project SEARCH, these programs are also reliant on collaboration with community participants, which has been noted as an area of concern in employment outcomes.

In order for a student to be employed in the community or even the school, a partnership between the service provider and the employer is required. Methods for creating these opportunities require collaboration between organizations and community providers. These can be supported through interagency collaborations among teachers, schools, vocational

rehabilitation (VR) counselors, and transition coordinators (Taylor, Morgan, & Callow-Heusser, 2016). These stakeholders can work with local businesses to establish relationships and create paid and unpaid employment experiences. One article dedicated to this topic (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010) focused on the methods for increasing collaboration through early planning, student-led and focused IEP meetings, getting parents involved early, developing opportunities for vocational experiences, and implementing community-based instruction. These recommendations would allow the team to increase collaboration with the families while also creating more meaningful and student-focused planning opportunities. Through effective and early collaboration, these opportunities provide exposure-based experiences that have been found to be effective in increasing post-secondary employment outcomes (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010; Mamun, Carter, & Fraker 2018).

#### *Benefit of Interagency collaboration*

The importance of interagency collaboration has been reflected in the Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 (Kohler, Gothberg, Fowler, & Coyle, 2016). The Taxonomy identifies five areas for creating more effective transition plans: (1) program structure, (2) student-focused planning, (3) student development, (4) family engagement, and (5) interagency collaboration. Each of these areas focuses on the needs of the individual, with the overarching goal being to create a plan that meets the long-term goals/objectives and needs of the individual. Particularly, interagency collaboration plays an important role in connecting to the other areas, involving relevant frontline practitioners to provide services for individuals with disabilities. Noonan, Morningstar, and Erickson (2008) defined interagency collaboration as “a broad concept that encompasses formal and informal relationships between schools and adult agencies in which resources are shared to achieve common transition goals”. Kohler et al. (2016)

demonstrated that interagency collaboration could include post-secondary programs (vocational training, college/universities, and other post-secondary education/care institutions), possible employers, community partners, vocational rehabilitation centers and coordinators, and any other necessary agencies, depending on the needs of the individual. These agencies can support transition across various areas, such as independent living needs, employment, and education after the student graduates. By developing these supports early, a more effective plan can be developed, and the individual can gain valuable training and experience in job skills (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010).

The benefit of interagency collaboration is that it allows the team to work with agencies outside of the school, local support providers, and training programs. By inviting these participants to the early planning process, the plan can be better structured and tailored to meet the needs of the individual, which is also highlighted in the taxonomy. The agencies' presence at these meetings can also help create more meaningful employment exploration opportunities. Agencies such as VR want to participate and see themselves as essential services that want to collaborate (Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2018; Taylor, Morgan, & Callow-Heusser, 2016; Steere & DiPipi-Hoy, 2013). By increasing interagency collaboration, a more holistic and supportive transition plan can be developed, which focuses on the individual's goals and long-term needs, especially for employment.

#### *Collaboration with Vocational Rehabilitation*

Collaboration with VR services has been emphasized in the literature and under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (Lee, Schochet, & Berk, 2018). In a review of best practices for effective VR service delivery, interagency collaboration was the most mentioned best practice when it comes to pooling funding sources, sharing expertise, and

coordinating service delivery (Fleming, Del Valle, & Leahy, 2012). WIOA has also highlighted the connection to and collaboration with VR at both the school and the post-secondary levels (Lee et al., 2018). VR services are available to assist with job seeking, employment counseling, work-based experiences, and continued support after the individual has transitioned out of school. The successes of employment-focused programs, such as Project SEARCH and the PROMISE Project, highlight the benefits of interagency collaborations, including the collaboration between schools and VR counselors, in increasing post-secondary employment outcomes (Bellman et al., 2014; Hartman, Schlegelmilch, Roskowski, Anderson, & Tansey, 2019).

Although the benefits are clear and the methods of collaboration have been identified, the collaboration has not always been effective. Taylor et al. (2016) used two questionnaires to investigate collaboration between VR counselors and transition teachers. They found that limitations to collaboration between educators and VR counselors often include the perceptions of the participants, levels of access to services, and knowledge of services by team members (Taylor et al., 2016). On the basis of the limitations, it is important to explore the lived experience of how educators and VR counselors collaborate with each other. Using qualitative views, Hesse-Biber (2017) described that the subjective meaning each individual experience in an event constructs the social reality. In other words, how educators and VR counselors “experience” the collaboration should be examined. Analyzing the data through a qualitative coding process, Povenmire-Kirk and colleagues revealed challenges in the collaboration experience. For example, VR counselors and educators may identify one another as an important service provider, but educators do not always place high enough value on this collaboration as VR counselors, partially because of their limited knowledge about the services offered by VR



counselors. Better understanding could be achieved by more intentional collaborations and training across service providers (Taylor et al., 2016). VR counselors have repeatedly noted that they are often not invited to IEP meetings or planning sessions, which limits both their access to students and the quality of services delivered (Taylor et al., 2016, Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2018).

Based on the *Taxonomy for Transition Programming*, additional VR transition models have been developed that emphasize the need for collaboration with VR services (Oertle & O’Leary, 2017). Collaboration among agencies, especially between VR and educators, is essential for the delivery of effective services. However, there is a lack of understanding and communication between VR and educators and, therefore, a lack of effective collaborations between these essential transition professionals. Although existing literature has offered advice for both transition professionals, family members, and students regarding the process of transition planning development (Mamun et al., 2018; Kellems & Morningstar, 2010), using a qualitative research method to explore the collaboration experience with educators and VR counselors is needed. This present study aimed to understand how educators and VR counselors consciously experience the collaboration, and how they process the experience in their daily work. By employing a qualitative approach, we attempted to better understand the experiences of stakeholders and aim to identify perceived barriers to collaboration between educators and VR counselors and methods for supporting collaboration between educators and VR counselors. Specifically, the following questions guided the study:

1. What do transition professionals perceive as needs throughout the transition of students with disabilities to employment?
2. How do transition professionals describe their lived experiences during the transition process for students with disabilities?

3. How do transition professionals interpret supports that enable them to navigate the complexity of the transition process for students with disabilities?

### **Method**

*Background.* As stated elsewhere, transition professionals are concerned with the low employment rate and postsecondary attendance of students with disabilities following high school graduation (Newman et al., 2011; TWIC, 2016; Department of Labor, 2022). It is suggested that some students with disabilities tend to face several challenges once they reach graduation in relation to acquiring and maintaining a job (Baker et al., 2018; Lindstrom et al., 2011). In an effort to increase students with disabilities' success following high school, Texas A&M University, with funding support from Texas Workforce Commission's vocational rehabilitation services, implemented a Capacity Building Project, which was developed to enhance collaboration between Texas transition professionals in schools and vocational rehabilitation counselors. The aim of the project is to offer innovative support and learning experiences to enhance transition professionals' collaborative capacity, decision-making skills, and increase communication among the transition team. An emphasis was to address various systematic and historical issues in transition, such as the lack of adequate programming following high school, levels of understanding of the complexity and rigor of developing transition plans, and the roles the transition professionals, family members, and student play in the transition process. The project's initial task was to assess the current state of collaborations between educators and VR counselors so that interventions and training would be more relevant to the state's needs.

We employed an exploratory qualitative research method, which can be defined as a "systematic approach to understanding qualities, or the essential nature, of a phenomenon within

a particular context” (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 196). The purpose of qualitative research is to examine the way in which “individuals and groups experience the world, construct knowledge, and make meaning of their experience” (Paul, Kleinhammer-Tramill, & Fowler, 2009, p. 6). Stebbins (2011) described exploration as a process to exam a thing or idea for a purpose in a systematical way. In other words, exploratory qualitative research used a systematical method to explores questions that have not been fully investigated previously. In the present study, we used exploratory qualitative research to explore participants’ perceptions of collaboration. Participants’ subjective views matter (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). We attempted to identify, categorize, and make meaning of the lived experiences as described by research participants; that is, to understand how these transition professionals described their lived experiences of the transition process instead of generalizing their experiences.

Participants in this study were purposefully selected (Maxwell, 2005) based on three specific criteria for selection (Mertens, 2007): (1) identified as a transition professional employed by the state or local education agency or the vocational rehabilitation agency, (2) availability to participate in a one-day focus group, and (3) belonged to the Region in which the focus group was held. Further, participants either self-selected or were nominated to participate in the study. Because the purpose of the study was to obtain data from secondary transition educators and vocational rehabilitation counselors about supports and needs for providing employment related transition service to students with disabilities across the state of Texas, we conducted a series of focus groups in 8 different regions of the state. In each region, 20 educators and 20 vocational rehabilitation counselors were identified as potential participants. We targeted a larger than typical focus group size because we needed to have enough representations from

the regional demographics. A total of 243 participants eventually participated in one of 8 regional focus groups. Among them, 37 were males, and 193 were females; 35 identified themselves as African American, 78 as Hispanic, 2 as Native American, 3 as Asian, 113 as White Non-Hispanic, 5 as multiple ethnicities, and 12 as not disclosed.

In attempt to promote an atmosphere of free information sharing, we held two separate 2-hour focus groups in the morning and two in the afternoon. In the morning, all educators participated in one focus group and all vocational rehabilitation counselors participated in the other focus group. In the afternoon, half of the educators and half of the rehabilitation counselors were randomly selected to be in focus group and the remaining half participated in the other focus group. The separation in the morning allowed participants to freely talk about what works and what did not work, particularly when things did not work with the other agency. In the afternoon, the mix of the two professional groups stimulated rich discussions about what may work and provided opportunity for them to learn about each other. To gather data, we used open-ended semi-structured focus group questions, field notes, and relevant documents. All participants were asked to respond to 8 questions, which included demographic information and their role as transition professionals at the time of the study. It also included questions related to the description of the transition team, existing supports within and outside of their respective agencies, and where they seek additional training and support.

Verbal, written data analysis was completed following an inductive approach (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998). Each researcher examined and grouped the data independently, employing constant comparison and axial coding. Such analysis “relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category and reassembles the data you have fractured during initial to give coherence to the merging analysis” (Charmaz, 2009, p. 60). Once

initial categories were identified, the researchers collectively conducted a comparative examination of the emerging topics and grouped the data into categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, emerging themes were defined, and descriptive statements from the respondents were identified to address the study purpose and the two areas of focus (i.e., perceived barriers and effective strategies).

Interrater reliability was achieved through an iterative process. Initial reviews were used to identify posteriori categories and then reviewed for reliability. This included discussing the items and identifying discrepancies, as well as creating a definition for each category. With an initial reliability score of .84 achieved, items were coded at a rate of 500 items per iteration. After each iteration, the reliability was assessed. Iterations of reliability ranged from .82 to .94, with an overall interrater reliability score of .905 for the identified primary and secondary categories, as well as the voice of the categories.

## **Results**

Throughout data collection and analysis, three categories emerged from the data as important to the successful delivery of transition services and support to transition-aged students enrolled in secondary schools. These included: (1) Collaboration; (2) Knowledge of the System: Policies, Services, Roles, and Responsibilities; and (3) Attention Paid to Remove Barriers to Collaboration and Knowledge Among the Transition Professionals within Their Networks.

### ***Collaboration***

Most of these transition professionals perceived challenges to collaboratively implementing transition services and practices as originating from outside of themselves and their respective positions. To this group of transition professionals, the school administration, district- and state-level leadership, vocational rehabilitation (VR) offices, parents, and even the

students themselves were seen as “challenges” to collaboration. As presented in Table 1, topics around collaboration were referenced most frequently by participants, both as an area of need and an area of strength. Participants often identified collaboration as something to work to achieve but also struggled to achieve. For example, they discussed the inability to collaborate due to stumbling blocks with communication, limited capacity, and perceptions of the transition plan.

*The Stumbling Blocks: Communication.* Throughout data collection, the participants spoke a different “Transition Language” from each other. Several of the transition professionals noted that it was difficult to share data between the two respective agencies. One transition counselor noted, “lack of knowledge is second to systemic barriers,” when sharing about the lack of knowledge the teachers and the counselor had with the paperwork required by both agencies. Further, another counselor mentioned that “we don’t know who is on the caseload” and others commented that they, too, struggled with communicating student information with the school staff.

*What worked.* Those participants who were able to communicate effectively shared what they referred to as a “grassroots approach” in that they invited the VR counselor to Open House events at the school, attached consent contact forms to new student paperwork, and regularly invited the VR counselor to the school campus once a week. This was all done without direct instructions, or mandates, from the middle managers or supervisors; hence the “grassroots” approach the transition professionals described. Some of the transition professionals felt that this was the only way to “get their job done.”

*Agency terminology conflicted.* Similarly, a lack of knowledge was also identified in the terminology used throughout the transition process. This was identified not only in the parent-

professional and the student-professional relationships but also between and among the transition professionals themselves. This resulted in “missing the boat” on the types of services provided and thus missing out on potential promising practices that support employment. It also resulted in a lack of understanding of roles and responsibilities. For example, the Capacity Building participants jokingly began to search for the “TED in the room” because all transition professionals, regardless of agency affiliation, struggled to identify who the school district TED (transition and employment services designee) was and what their roles were in their respective district.

*The Stumbling Blocks: Limited Capacity.* During data collection, the transition professionals frequently mentioned they were inundated with additional roles and responsibilities (i.e., wearing “too many hats”) and that their upper leadership/management provided limited resources and support. The Department of Vocational Rehabilitation had just experienced a major merger under the umbrella of a new agency. According to the focus group participants, this merger further compounded the confusion with the development of organizational leadership charts, staff roles responsibilities, and consolidation of historically separate units within the agency. Many of the vocational rehabilitation counselors pointed to this move as the reason for the confusion of roles, limited capacity to “do” their job, and staff turnover. One counselor shared that the Vocational Rehabilitation Agency had had managers who knew how to ensure that the “vocational services were where the rubber hit the road... but not anymore,” indicating middle management had been failing at managing vocational rehabilitation services and were confused about services and procedures in general. Another counselor commented that the former and new agencies in which vocational rehabilitation resided were “two different monsters,” and several

mentioned a decrease in referrals, lack of understanding of procedures under new agency leadership, and limited opportunities to connect with customers as effects of the merger.

The school transition professionals also experienced confusion in their roles and responsibilities, specifically when assigned as the Transition and Employment Services Designee (TED). Many had “been told” that they would assume the role of TED for the district and were given no formal training or explanation as to what their roles and responsibilities would entail. The majority had been given the role of TED in addition to their current roles and responsibilities, thus creating less capacity to accomplish expectations and more confusion regarding the management of the two (or three) roles they already accumulated in their job function. An educational transition professional went further to explain, “I have nine school districts” and am “limited in the things I/we can do... I’m just trying to keep my head above water.” There were also areas of need identified within collaboration around resource limitations and the ability to plan together. Limitations in resources included inadequate time, staff, and inability to access more rural communities, which effectively produced needs in the ability to work together to plan and implement plans.

*The Stumbling Blocks: Perceptions of the transition plan.* Throughout data collection, there was an emphasis on conflicting ideas of “appropriate” between vocational rehabilitation and school staff throughout transition planning. Decisions regarding transition planning at school are made by the IEP team, of which the vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselor is a member. Throughout the development of the IEP, the team must address the specifics of what is appropriate for each student in terms of transition goals, related services, supplementary aids and resources, and educational placement. How the IEP member(s) construct their understanding of “appropriate”



could have a significant impact on the final outcomes of a student's IEP in relation to their employment goals and related services.

*Perception of the Role in Transition Planning: "Dream makers" vs. "Dream Breakers."*

Throughout data collection, the vocational rehabilitation counselors referred to education professionals as "dream makers" and themselves as the "dream breakers." For example, one VR counselor commented, "teachers don't want to do a reality check. They don't want to be dream breakers." Others went on to say that transition professionals have a "false sense of reality" and are "dream makers" when developing the student's transition IEP goals. Throughout data collection, the VR professionals used terms such as "dream breakers," "dream crushers," and "dream killers" when describing themselves during planning meetings in which a student in transition comes to the meeting with their IEP goals that were "unrealistic." An example of this was shared when a VR counselor mentioned she had to be the one to tell a student he had a disability, and the student didn't believe her because he had "passed all his classes." Another mentioned that "they [teacher] handed us the paperwork [IEP] and said 'here, VR!' and the student with an intellectual disability had 'doctor' as their career goal." An inference was made that the school staff never spoke to the student about his disability or graduation plan, thereby placing the responsibility of the "dream breaking" on the VR counselor.

*Support of supervisor.* Supervisors referred to principals, district leaders for education transition professionals, and regional directors for vocational rehabilitation transition professionals. Participants repeatedly noted the need for collaboration to be supported and organized within the systems. However, it was commonly reported that such support was hard to find from school, the district, or service providers. In cases where such support existed, it was not very effective.

*What Worked.* Participants within the school district setting and from more urban areas identified significantly more strengths in collaboration overall, specifically within systems/organizations. Participants within the school system were also noted as being the ones who would organize and plan meetings, which may have impacted their perceptions of how often they collaborated. The kinds of support they referenced as areas of strength included postsecondary programs that assisted in creating employment opportunities and supports that they received from team members such as LEA leadership and families. Furthermore, participants discussed how an increase in knowledge of services improved collaboration. Specific items noted were the effects of parent networks and transition fairs. Participants in more rural districts did note a decreased level of collaboration, with service providers referencing more concerns around their ability to collaborate and access the schools, which were also noted under barriers around transition planning.

### ***Knowledge of Services***

The primary category of knowledge of services revolved around topics within organization/system and planning. Knowledge of organization/system procedures was discussed as a strength and a need. Repeatedly participants identified that administrators, teachers, case managers, and many others within the system need additional training and support on the procedures of organizations that support transition. These participants noted that while their administrators were supportive of them, the caseload and limited training on the topic made it extremely difficult to know their roles and responsibilities. One participant mentioned that they “needed handholding” due to the loss of a mentor. Some participants felt unsupported by their current supervisor, which resulted in a lack of understanding of their roles and responsibilities. A major discussion topic was the VR terminology of “potentially eligible.” Neither group had an

understanding of the term and who it encompassed other than a handful of VR managers and a very smaller group of VR counselors. Some teachers admitted that they were “making promises” to students and families about being identified as potentially eligible, but only to find later that those services were “unable to be provided” by VR Counselors.

*What Worked.* Participants shared that when they received relevant training, the collaboration did increase because of the training. Furthermore, the participants indicated that training was necessary for their organization to support and best plan collaborations, simply because many people who work in transition lack adequate knowledge about the basics of transition. Examples of support and training that were employed to gain more knowledge included co-worker support, conferences, and parent-to-parent networks for families. Support and resources from other agencies were also useful, which further highlighted the need for collaboration. The problem or limitation to this support, however, was the lack of knowledge about other providers, which made it difficult to identify the right contacts to reach out to for support. Knowledge of services was heavily impacted by collaborative opportunities and resource limitations for both case managers and families. Limited access and language barriers would make it even harder for families to learn what they needed or to even know what they did not know. But these limitations could be mitigated by utilizing effective collaborative teams.

*“A Poor Map:” Lack of Knowledge of the system.* The participants also shared the challenges they faced to navigate and balance a complex system of legal requirements against the needs of the students. This challenge was further complicated by fears and worries of involvement in litigation when navigating between unknown systems and uncertainty about what roles each should assume when collaborating. In addition, transition professionals from both agencies struggled to understand and make sense of policy and guidelines that governed their

work. They also expressed the belief that conflicting policy messages existed and the policies that governed them did not match “real life.”

*What Worked.* To negate the “restrictions” of the policy, some school transition professionals bypassed state and local policies and “got things done” with a “grassroots” approach to their work. Comments like, “we created 18+ programs before anyone knew what they were” and “we took a grassroots approach and went out to find a job for them [students] ourselves” showcased their efforts to be creative and “find a different path” to meet the needs of the students.

### *Barriers*

Participants often discussed barriers or blocks to providing services and reasons why services were not used. These barriers were most often around organizations/systems and resource limitations. Within the topic of organization/system, procedures and structures were often cited as barriers. Procedures added constraints to collaboration by overburdening transition personnel with required forms, deadlines, and confidentiality policies. Equally, structure within organizations unintentionally added barriers. Personnel were given multiple roles, often ones that they were not trained for, which prevented them from focusing on transition. The administration did not always understand transition and therefore was not supportive. At times collaboration was invited only to meet requirements but seemingly without genuine intention to collaborate. Two critical themes within resource limitations were the turnover rates of team members and the limitation of time. Teacher/VR turnover impacted the consistency of the plan and the delivery of services. The problem was so common that many participants identified it as having a significant impact on the ability to properly serve students. Limitation of time posed a challenge to the team's ability to travel to service locations, support their large caseloads, and attend all the

meetings that they were invited to/should attend. These limitations were further compounded by the inability of transition team members from external agencies, despite being a necessary part of interagency collaboration, to access more rural communities. Expressly, it was noted by these members that in some communities, it would take up to two hours to travel to the location for a meeting. These concerns were echoed by district personnel who noted not only difficulty collaborating with these agencies due to the location and number of available representatives but also limitations within their ability to support their students with transportation to or from work.

Additional barriers included difficulties around accessibility, capacity, and fear. Providing transition services and planning were inhibited by transition personnel's need for more funding for additional staff, support with transportation, and adding services. Families' capacity to meet their own basic needs acted as barriers to them seeing transition as a priority, and lack of transportation prohibited them from participating in transition planning and other beneficial opportunities. With regards to capacity, participants noted concerns around the ability of families to properly understand the transition planning process, as well as properly advocate for these rights, which was further compounded by language limitations for some families. Furthermore, families' fears arose as barriers when they were concerned about the possible loss of SSI funding and distrusted the available organizations because of past experiences when working with them during the transition planning and collaboration process. While there were things such as family advocacy networks, external providers, and effective collaboration that mitigated these barriers, the problem persisted. Therefore, many service providers repeatedly noted that they needed to work through these barriers in order to be effective in transition planning.

## **Discussion**

Participants of this study identified many areas as needs and as strengths. They regularly noted that they needed increased collaboration; but also noted the need for additional training and education for all stakeholders. These findings seemed to be conflicting with each other, yet they truly reflected the dilemma faced by frontline transition professionals, especially those who were hired quickly into the job due to turnovers. These newly hired people often do not have proper training in what they do and are often left out with limited or no support. Naturally, they understand the value and need for support and collaboration with someone to get the job done. On the other hand, due to the lack of training and knowledge, they face the harsh reality of not knowing whom to go to and what to ask. Some basic training would help them jump start. Ironically, participants also reported many barriers to increased collaboration and training, including access to the community that they served, limitations on time for training, collaboration, and access; challenges in communication, including language limitations and trust; and limitations around the support that they received. It was likely that these transition professionals were on their own in trying to find collaborations and training without adequate support from the system or organization and met with various barriers or challenges. These barriers or challenges may be removed if there is organized training provided by the system or collaborations facilitated by interagency teams. The experiences of the participants call for organized, professional training and the creation of interagency transition teams.

As a reinforcement of this idea, those who reported some success in finding collaborations noted that they often felt supported by their administration, co-workers, and external providers. This finding further illustrated that support is essential for increased collaboration. Schools and rehabilitation agencies and their university partners should work together to provide knowledge of services and resources to facilitate the development of better

transition networks and more effective transition teams. Putting efforts to build strengths in these areas will likely increase collaboration among transition professionals and other stakeholders.

As expected, the information that the participants shared throughout data collection was influenced by their respective situations, especially their histories as transition professionals. Interestingly, these transition professionals chose to share similar terms in relation to the delivery of and barriers to transition services for students with disabilities; however, the specific problems and identified solutions to addressing the barrier correlated with their perceptions of the membership of the transition team and what were their natural supports. For example, almost all focus group participants identified “transportation” as a barrier when delivering transition services. However, the participants in an urban setting (i.e., Houston) identified the use of Uber or taxis “outside of the loop” as public transportation options, and the more rural (or “frontier” as one area self-defined) identified local community members or teacher as ones who would help students get to job sites.

Based on findings from the focus groups, the Capacity Building Project provided training to transition professionals from education and vocational rehabilitation through regional conferences and a statewide conference. By the end of the regional conferences, both agencies grappled with varying ways to educate each other on their respective terminologies. Some regional teams began to share documents with each other and joined forces to create a quarterly newsletter. There was even an idea for all the TEDs to wear a red “I am a TED” button while attending the statewide conference. This was a playful way to recognize that there was a problem with identifying the TEDs and that the terminology was beginning to be merged and recognized by transition professionals at both agencies.

Providing transition services is a complex task involving many agencies, professionals, and families. The two most involved agencies in providing pre-employment transition services and planning transition to employment are secondary schools and vocational rehabilitation services. Adequate knowledge about policies and effective practices is essential for the transition professionals from these two agencies. Their collaborations are even more important for planning and carrying out transition services for students with disabilities in their movement from school to post-school employment. Therefore, it is essential for middle managers and administrators within these two agencies to provide capacity, space, and time for transition teams to meet along with identified goals and outcome statements. In addition, because of the time needed to provide pre-employment transition services to students and prepare them for the transition to employment, beginning the process of developing a transition team early seems to be a key for success. Based on information shared by the focus group participants, vocational rehabilitation services need to begin offering Pre-employment transition services when students become 14 years old. Consequently, collaborations between the two agencies need to start for students at the age of 14.

### *Limitations*

Within qualitative research, data collection is a selective process in which the instrument that is used as the primary source for data collection will selectively determine the data and its meaning. Because researchers often view themselves as “the instrument” throughout data collection and analysis, opinions regarding objectivity and subjectivity are one of the most controversial topics within qualitative research (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Rather than believing the researcher can be neutral or distant, he or she needs to explain how his or her values and expectations influenced the reported findings and conclusions of the study (Maxwell, 2005). For



this study, our biases impacted the following components of the study: categories that were identified and the interpretation of participant experiences. As all researchers already had prior education experience and knowledge of *The Taxonomy of Transition Planning*, as well as having worked in transition, the category development stage and level of the agreement would likely have been impacted by research bias.

According to Maxwell (2005), the researcher's presence might also impact the setting or individuals studied, or "reactivity" (p. 108). Therefore, it is important to note that the researcher might influence what an informant says and how conclusions can be drawn from that data. It is not the intent of qualitative research to provide findings that are widely generalizable; rather, findings are to be used to "produce evidence based on the exploration of specific contexts and particular individuals" (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 2003). Qualitative findings, by their very nature, are "highly contextual and case dependent" (Patton, 2011, p. 563). Maxwell (2005) highlights the potential for qualitative research to enhance internal generalizability, which refers to the "generalizability of a conclusion within the setting or group studied" (p. 115). The descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical validity of conclusions depends on internal generalizability. The results and conclusions included in this study were intended to inform rather than to create universal knowledge regarding the experiences of the study participants, teachers, and vocational rehabilitation counselors. Future research can build upon the findings of this study and focus on one or more areas of the funding with a larger sample size that is suitable for quantitative research and possible generalizations. A particular area that needs further investigation is effective strategies for increasing interagency collaborations and the long-term student employment outcomes as a result of the increased collaborations.

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Table 1:

*Frequency rates of discussion themes*

Categories	Frequency
Needs Around Barriers	1149
Needs Around Collaboration	1081
Needs Around Knowledge of Services	419
Strengths in Collaboration	1109
Strengths in Knowledge of Services	164