

A Window to Research on Transition in Alabama

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Overview

Since the early 1990s, the transition movement in Alabama has generated a flurry of research activities. For this on-line publication, the abstracts of 16 of these data-based studies have been assembled. In all cases, these studies examined some aspect of transition in Alabama (e.g., problems, programs, practices, providers). The investigators all resided in Alabama, as did the subjects. And, all but one of the 16 manuscripts were documented in an Alabama resource, such as (a) the *Alabama Federation Council for Exceptional Children Journal*, (b) unpublished doctoral dissertations from Auburn University and the University of Alabama, or (c) published documents from the Auburn Transition Leadership Institute. In essence, the research reported here reflects the focus of this special issue, which is – Transition in Alabama!

Three statewide studies have been conducted to describe the nature and status of transition in Alabama.² In 1992, Browning, Brown, and Dunn (2001) surveyed a representative sample of 79 of Alabama's special education coordinators and 302 of its secondary special education teachers to determine the status of the state's high school programs for students with disabilities. Published from this study were the state's practices in vocational preparation and interagency cooperation (Browning, Brown, & Dunn, 1993; 2001). Eight years later a similar yet far more comprehensive statewide study was conducted (Browning, Rabren, & Hall, 2001). A total of 985 surveyed stakeholders responded, with an average return rate of 64% across the seven targeted groups: special education coordinators (92), secondary special education teachers (369), career technical education teachers (357), job coaches (36), rehabilitation counselors (48), rehabilitation supervisors (11), and parents (72). In the online article entitled, *A Statewide Study on Transition in Alabama*, results are highlighted for such areas as (a) Alabama's high school transition programs, (b) Alabama's Occupational Diploma Program Option, (c) best practices, (d) stakeholders, and (e) student success. Finally, a statewide study was conducted on 76 of Alabama's school-affiliated rehabilitation transition counselors to examine their opinions and practices with respect to client/parent participation in transition planning, assessment, vocational preparation, and transition outcomes (Browning & Brechin, 1993; 2001).

The transition area most frequently examined has been post-school outcomes of Alabama's former special education students. In 1996, the Alabama Student Tracking System was initiated and, by August of 2002, the program had systematically obtained both in-school (11th grade) and post school (one year out) data on over 8,300 of Alabama's youth and young adults with disabilities. This research program, which is housed in the Auburn Transition Leadership Institute, is intended to provide its users (e.g., local school

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² All citations refer to the subsequent listing of annotated studies (alphabetized by author)

systems) with both a data supported, decision-making base for program improvement in transition, and a normative gauge for evaluating educational accountability. In other words, the student tracking program is intended to help us answer the questions: “*How can we best improve our transition programs and services?*” and “*How well are we preparing our high school students with disabilities for a successful transition from school to work and community life?*”

A blueprint for the Alabama Student Tracking System was initially articulated in the *Alabama Federation Council for Exceptional Children Journal* (Browning, Whetstone, Rabren, & Dunn, 1995). Two years later, the first study was conducted reporting a post-school outcome employment rate of 72% and 81% respectively, for a small sample of former transition students from rural and urban school systems. (Dunn & Schumaker, 1997). Several years thereafter, Austin (1999) reported the outcomes of 378 former students who exited Alabama’s high schools during the 1996-1997 school year, examining the relationship between the types of transition services and support offered and their impact on post-school outcomes. Next, using both quantitative and qualitative data, Holder (2001) critically examined the outcomes of 433 former students to assess transition practice effectiveness. Subsequently, Rabren, Dunn, and Chambers (2002) investigated the employment status of 1,383 former students and found that 73% were employed one year out of high school. Finally, Whetstone (2002) investigated the relationship between best practices, as reported by secondary special education teachers, and the outcomes of 1,162 former students. He too found a 72% employment rate of former special education students from 41 Alabama transition demonstration sites.

The remaining annotated studies presented below mainly address curriculum and intervention strategies for effective transition outcomes. The research design of these investigations is more sophisticated than that of the survey studies. Four of these studies examined student-directed practices, focusing on (a) the effects of training on student-directed planning (Chambers, 1999); (b) self-determination and the effects of a goal attainment curriculum (Ripple, 2001); (c) the effects of problem-solving training for young people with mental retardation (Crites, 2001); and (d) the effects of a skills advocacy training program for high school students with disabilities (Brown, 2000). The final two studies were conducted by Shippen (2001), who investigated the perceptions of secondary general education teachers (grades 6-12) serving students with disabilities in the general classroom, and Curtis (1997), who investigated values and the roles they play in transition.

The next important step is to translate the findings of these and future Alabama studies into recommended practices and policy considerations. One recurring finding across the above post-school studies, for example, is that paid work experience during high school is one of the more significant predictors of employment one year out of school. This finding is also being increasingly supported by similar post-school research reported in the literature. Obviously, results such as this have real implications for practice and policy-making.

Annotated Studies³

Austin, P. E. (1999). **Post-school outcomes of Alabama students with disabilities**. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama, and in *Transition in Alabama: Service, training, research* (2001). (pp.230-237). Auburn, AL: Auburn University, Transition Leadership Institute. (available from Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, 1228 Haley Center, Auburn University, AL 36849)

The purpose of this study was to examine the Alabama Post-School Tracking System for Students with Disabilities in order to appraise the outcomes and address the effectiveness of transition services in the state. The study acquired information about the current transition services available to students with disabilities to determine the relationships between the types of transition services and supports offered, and the impact of these services on the post-school outcomes of former students with disabilities. The subjects of this study consisted of three groups of individuals: (a) former students with disabilities, (b) special education coordinators, and (c) school-based job coaches. Information was collected through the use of three survey instruments in order to gather the needed data from each group. Post-school outcome information was collected on 378 former students who exited school during the 1996-97 school year. Information about the current status of transition services available in Alabama's public schools was gained from 89 special education coordinators and 23 school-based job coaches. The data were subjected to a variety of statistical tests to determine the relationships between the variables. Results of the data analyses found three relationships to be significant.

Brown, H. A. (2000). **An assessment of a self-advocacy skills training program for secondary students with disabilities**. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Auburn University.

Self-advocacy is a skill that is becoming increasingly important for individuals with disabilities who are striving to be independent, successful, and contributing members of society. Self-advocacy can be defined as speaking up for one's self and effectively communicating one's interests, preferences, and needs to others. The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the effectiveness of a self-advocacy training program for secondary students in transition from high school to postsecondary settings. Parents and teachers have historically advocated for individuals with disabilities, but with the self-advocacy movement of the 1970's, individuals with disabilities have decided that they can and should advocate for themselves. There has recently been an emphasis on teaching these skills prior to entering postsecondary settings where these skills are crucial for independence and survival. Self-advocacy skills are generally taught in a classroom or group setting. Studies examining various methods of teaching self-advocacy skills were discussed, including specific curricula designed to introduce and improve these skills. Empirical studies related to training self-advocacy skills to adolescents and adults with disabilities were also examined. Finally, the future direction of research in the area of self-advocacy skill development has been discussed.

³ The abstract narrative for each study retains the precise wording in which it appeared in its original source (e.g., journal article, unpublished dissertation abstract).

Browning, P., & Brechin, C. (1993). **Alabama's rehabilitation transition counselors: A statewide study**. *Alabama Council for Exceptional Children Journal*, 10 (2), 3-9, and in *Transition in Alabama: Service, training, research* (2001). (pp.247-254). Auburn, AL: Auburn University, Transition Leadership Institute. (available from Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, 1228 Haley Center, Auburn University, AL 36849)

The purpose of this study was to examine the opinions and practices of Alabama's rehabilitation counselors who are assigned to serve secondary students with disabilities. A questionnaire, which consisted of 60 items clustered into seven categories, was sent to all counselors serving transition clients (students with disabilities from ages 15-25). Fifty-nine of the 76 counselors serving transition clients completed their survey for a return rate of 78%. The results and their implications for either training, research, and policy making are discussed within the areas of (a) Individualized Transition Program: IEP/IWRP, (b) Student/Parent Participation in Transition, (c) Assessment, (d) Vocational Preparation, (e) Service Coordination, and (f) Transition Outcome. Results from this study are integrated with findings from a previous study published in the last issue of the AFCEC Journal.

Browning, P., Brown, C., & Dunn, C. (2001). **An Alabama statewide study in transition 1992**. In P. Browning, C. Cox, K. Rabren, & T. Tew-Washburn (Eds.). *Transition in Alabama: Service, training, research* (pp.213-220). Auburn, AL: Auburn University, Transition Leadership Institute. (available from Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, 1228 Haley Center, Auburn University, AL 36849)

The study was a replication of a statewide examination conducted in Oregon. Its purpose was to examine the status of Alabama's secondary programs and services for students with disabilities. The areas examined were (a) Curriculum and Instruction, (b) Vocational/Occupational Opportunities, (c) Vocational Education, (d) Independent Living, (e) Transition, (f) Interagency Participation, (g) Program Improvement, and (h) Post School Considerations. The results were intended to provide a decision-making base for program planning and improvement in Alabama's city and county secondary schools serving students with disabilities.

Browning, P., Brown, C., & Dunn, C. (1993). **Vocational preparation and interagency cooperation with Alabama's secondary special education programs**. *Alabama Council for Exceptional Children Journal*. 10 (1). 3-12, and in *Transition in Alabama: Service, training, research* (2001). (pp.255-263). Auburn, AL: Auburn University, Transition Leadership Institute. (available from Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, 1228 Haley Center, Auburn University, AL 36849)

This study, which is part of a larger statewide examination of Alabama's secondary programs for students with disabilities, reports selected findings pertaining to two important components of transition: vocational preparation and interagency cooperation. The results are based on a stratified random sample of secondary special education coordinators and secondary teachers serving the state's city and county schools across

its 12 educational regions. Included in the analysis are the responses from 79 and 302 coordinator and teacher survey forms that represent a respective return rate of 60% and 45%. In addition to reporting the results, vocational and interagency considerations are discussed in terms of their importance, progressive steps the state has taken with respect to them, and recommendations for further addressing their current needs in order to improve the transitional outcomes of students with disabilities.

Browning, P., Rabren, K., & Hall, G. (2001). **The status of transition in Alabama: A statewide study.** Auburn, AL: Auburn University, Transition Leadership Institute. (available from Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, 1228 Haley Center, Auburn University, AL 36849)

What do Alabama's transition stakeholders think about their programs and services? How similar (or different) are the opinions and best practices of special education teachers, career-technical education teachers, job coaches, and rehabilitation counselors? What are the parents' viewpoints about transition? Have positive changes occurred over the past several years? Are there positive change differences between small and large public schools, rural and urban public schools, and schools with and without transition demonstration sites? And, how successful are our students once they leave school?

These are but a few of the many questions answered in a recent statewide study involving the responses of 985 Alabama stakeholders, including 92 special education coordinators, 369 special education teachers, 357 career technical teachers, 36 job coaches, 48 rehabilitation counselors, 11 rehabilitation supervisors, and 72 parents. Further, these survey participants represent 102 of Alabama's 128 city and county school systems serving a total of 20,100 special education high school students.

This 159 page document provides an introduction to the nature of the study and over 100 easy-to-read summary statements as they pertain to such areas as Alabama's high school transition programs, the Alabama Occupational Diploma, the Alabama Transition Initiative, and student success. Bar graphs accompany many of the summary statements. The entire second section is devoted to narrative summaries pertaining to each of 94 data-based tables presented. Practically speaking, local school systems can use this information to evaluate the nature and progress of their own programs and services. As well, they can learn how the opinions and practices of their own stakeholders compare to those across the state.

Browning, P., Whetstone, M., Rabren, K., & Dunn, C. (1995). **An Alabama tracking system for youth and young adults with disabilities.** *Alabama Council for Exceptional Children Journal*, 8(1)1-7, and in *Transition in Alabama: Service, training, research* (2001). (pp.221-229). Auburn, AL: Auburn University, Transition Leadership Institute. (available from Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, 1228 Haley Center, Auburn University, AL 36849)

The authors introduce Alabama's Initiative to develop and implement a student tracking system for its youth and young adults with disabilities. This paper includes (a) an overview of the need for and importance of documenting student performance, (b) a description of Alabama's follow-along (in-school/post-school)

tracking system, and (c) the implications of this system for program improvement, accountability, and policy formation.

Chambers, D., (1999). **The effect of training on student-directed planning practices.** Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Auburn University, and in *Transition in Alabama: Service, training, research* (2001). (pp.271-282). Auburn, AL: Auburn University, Transition Leadership Institute. (available from Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, 1228 Haley Center, Auburn University, AL 36849)

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effect of transition planning training on student-directed planning practices in association with Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. The *Next S.T.E.P.* (Halpern, et al., 1997) training program was implemented with secondary students with mild mental retardation over a four-week period. This student-directed transition program helped develop the transition planning skills of students with mild mental retardation by teaching self-evaluation, goal-setting, and self-directing a planning meeting. The development of transition planning skills was evidenced through the significant differences in the number of self-directed behaviors exhibited at the IEP meeting and the scores on the transition planning knowledge questionnaire for the students in the experimental compared to the students in the control group.

Results indicate students who were trained using the *Next S.T.E.P.* training program were more likely to help lead their IEP meeting by introducing participants and stating a goal they had set for themselves. They were also more likely to define transition planning and list areas to consider for transition planning. Although satisfaction with the IEP meeting was the same for students in the two groups, there did seem to be qualitative differences among specific satisfaction responses.

Crites, S.A. (2001). **The effect of social problem-solving training for individuals with mental retardation.** Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Auburn University.

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of a problem-solving curriculum for transition-age students with mental retardation. The interactive training program *Solving Your Problems* (Browning, ND) was used to teach a five-step process for solving problems. The training lasted one-hour per day for ten days. There was a treatment group and a control group.

Research has indicated that individuals with mental retardation often lose their jobs in the community due to social incompetence. Increasing social competence may, in turn, increase job tenure. Social problem-solving has emerged as a promising method for increasing the social competence of individuals with mental retardation.

Results indicate participants in the training group were able to use the five-step problem solving process to solve problem situations. Additionally, members of the training group scored higher than those in the control group on problem-solving curriculum measure and were able to generate more alternative solutions

to novel problem situations. There was some evidence of generalization of the five-step process to novel problem situations. Participant feedback on the training was positive.

Curtis, R.S. (1997). **Assessing school-to-work transition values: The transition values questionnaire.** Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Auburn University.

As the postsecondary outcomes of adolescents and young adults with disabilities continue to be explored, service providers and other stakeholders in transition are faced with identifying what is valued in terms of goals and outcomes for consumers of transition services. The role that values play in the school-to-work transition process is minimally understood. As such, it is difficult for service providers, consumers, family members, and others to maintain an open dialogue in this area and come to a greater understanding of the way that values pertinent to transition affect its process and outcomes. This study examines the construct of transition values and serves as an exploration into the role that values play in transition. Nine distinct transition values were proposed: assimilation, disability, growing-up, consumer empowerment, multiple transition goals, outcome performance, partnership, change, and knowledge-based. Using these proposed values, the Transition Values Questionnaire (TVQ) was developed. Methodological considerations included in the construction of this instrument were theory construction, item development, scaling format, social desirability of responses, and claims for reliability and validity of the instrument. Preliminary sample administrations of the TVQ were made for paired-comparisons and Likert scale formats. The final sample administration of the TVQ was based on a Likert scale format given to a group of respondents including transition service providers, consumers, and family members. Factor analyses indicated four factors, interpreted and named Transition Worker Expectations, Disability Rights, Consumer Empowerment, and Innovation. Therefore, while the TVQ exhibited reliability it did not exhibit construct validity based on the nine originally proposed transition values. Results, based on this sample, pointed to the underlying construct of transition values found within the TVQ.

Dunn, C., & Schumaker, L. (1997). **A follow-up study of former special education students from a rural and urban county school system.** *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 20 (1), Spring 1997, 43-54, and in *Transition in Alabama: Service, training, research* (2001). (pp.238-246). Auburn, AL: Auburn University, Transition Leadership Institute. (available from Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education, 1228 Haley Center, Auburn University, AL 36849)

This study examined the employment status of young adults with mental retardation, behavior disorders, or learning disabilities who had exited a rural (n = 25) or urban (n = 43) county school system within the past year. Additionally, the relationship between employment and demographic and secondary school variables were evaluated. The employment rate for students from the rural school system was 72%, while the employment rate for students from the urban school system was 81.4%. Subjects in rural settings were employed primarily in trade and industry (43.5%), whereas the subjects in the urban area were employed almost equally in service occupations (23.3%), and trade and industry (27.9%). The results of Chi-square

analyses were significant for employment status and gender, employment status and disability, and employment status and paid employment during school.

Holder, C. B. (2001). **A critical analysis of student outcomes and “best practices” for Alabama’s secondary special education transition-to-work initiative: Implications for policy and practice.** Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama.

The purpose of this study was to critically examine the student outcomes for Alabama’s secondary special education transition-to-work initiative (the Alabama Transition Initiative). This study analyzed and interpreted factors that support and constrain effective transition practices and their interrelationships with student and school characteristics, including gender, race, and disability biases, by using both quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain and study data.

The participants in this study consisted of 433 former students who had participated in the 1999 Post-School Transition Survey, telephone interview data collected by the state one year after students with disabilities had exited high school. In addition, 15 of these former students were interviewed by this researcher concerning their perceptions of the effectiveness of their high school transition program toward their desired post-school outcomes.

The findings revealed significant associations between number of hours per week in special education, graduating with the Alabama High School Diploma, employment at the exit of high school, and poor/small and poor/large community status with post-school outcomes. In addition, significant associations were found for females, minorities, students with mental retardation and no employment/training one year after high school. Significant associations were also found for more hours per week in special education and participants of minority status as well as participants with mental retardation. The number of participants graduating with the Alabama High School Diploma was significantly less for minority participants and participants with mental retardation. No employment at exit from high school was significantly associated with no employment/training one year later for females, minorities, and students with mental retardation. Based on these findings including student interviews, the researcher concludes that schools need to improve in providing students with the career guidance and counseling needed to choose coursework in high school leading to career pathways that are matched to their interests and abilities.

Rabren, K., Dunn, C. & Chambers D. (2002). **Predictors of post high school employment among young adults with disabilities,** *Journal of Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 25, 25-40.

This study examines the employment status of 1,393 former students who received special education services and who exited from 37 of Alabama’s 128 school systems between 1996-2000. These 37 school systems served as demonstration sites through the state’s transition systems change grant. Follow-up telephone interviews revealed that 73% ($n=1,013$) of these former students were employed one year after exit. Using a hierarchical logistic regression analysis, there was an 87% probability that these students

would be employed one year after high school if they held a job at the time they exited school. Other significant findings include the relationship between employment status and student gender, disability, and urban or rural setting. The probability of the student having a job one year after high school, for example, was greater if the student was male, had a learning disability, was from an urban school, and had a job at the time of school exit. In contrast, the probability of employment was less likely for females with a disability other than a learning disability, from rural schools, and without a job at the end of high school. These findings suggest that students with disabilities can benefit from participating in paid work experiences during high school and that females in rural settings need more aggressive transition planning and programs.

Ripple, J. D. (2001). **Self-determination and the mildly disabled child: The effects of a goal attainment curriculum in establishing effective goal attainment strategies.** Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Auburn University.

Self-determination is a key component in developing self-directed, goal-oriented, autonomous behaviors in students with mild mental retardation and learning disabilities, which can lead to the development of several self-determination curriculums. This paper studies the effects of a goal-attainment curriculum and its purported ability to help students with mild disabilities learn goal attainment strategies. Three measures were used to study the effectiveness of this curriculum: pre- and post-test analysis of teacher's observations of students involved in the study; analysis of individual student's progress on goal-related activities during the intervention period; and, qualitative analysis of student's impressions of the effectiveness of the curriculum following the intervention.

Pre- and post-test analysis of teacher's observations of 29 students and their goal-related behaviors indicated significant increases in all four sub-areas rated: student plan, student action, student evaluation, and student adjustment. Teacher observations rated student [self-] evaluation as the weakest area, while remaining a significant increase, and student adjustment as the area of greatest gain.

Analysis of goal-related tasks of individual students using a modified multiple-baseline design indicated that there was some effect from the intervention, but that it was also influenced by outside factors such as attendance and socio-economic status. Data from a total of 17 students were used in this study due to attendance criteria. Students who performed best on goal-related activities also came from goal-related families. Students who performed the poorest were in classes in which attendance was poorest and hence, influenced other students. No student from a low socio-economic background was able to meet the attendance requirements for this part of the study.

Similar data emerged upon individual interviews with students. Students from more goal-oriented households responded more favorably to the curriculum than did those students from households that were more economically depressed.

Results from this study indicated that self-determination curriculums such as the one tested in this study are effective, but are limited in effectiveness to students who have already been influenced by goal-related

behaviors that are likely to be seen in higher socio-economic families. Students from impoverished households are more likely to remain unaffected by such a curriculum.

Shippen, M. E. (2001). **An investigation of secondary educators' perceptions and practices of serving students with disabilities.** Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Auburn University.

The inclusion of students with disabilities has been an evolutionary process that can be attributed to landmark legislation, litigation, and policy shifts in the last half of the 20th century. These policies have articulated the philosophy that students with disabilities belong in general education classrooms with their typical peers. Research has been mixed regarding teachers' perceptions and practices of serving students with disabilities in general education classes. The purpose of this study was to investigate secondary educators' (i.e., teachers in grades 6-12) perceptions and practices of serving students with disabilities in general education classrooms relative to years of teaching experience.

Whetstone, W., Jr. (2002). **Alabama student outcomes and best practices in transition.** Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Auburn University.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between best practices and student outcomes in transition. The study examined the relationship between the perceptions of secondary special education teachers in regard to transition best practices and their former students' success. Also, it investigated the relationship between the post-school outcomes (employment and quality of life) as reported by students through the Alabama Student Tracking System, and the current best practices as reported by the teachers of those former students in the Alabama Statewide Transition Study.

The sample for this study was comprised of 41 (or 32%) of Alabama's public school systems that participated in both the statewide study and the post-school survey study. A total of 197 secondary special education teachers participated in the statewide study, whereas 1,162 of their former students from these 41 school systems participated in the post-school survey study.

Data from these two studies were used to define the independent and dependent variables examined in the four null hypotheses. The three sets of variables examined in terms of their interrelationship were school demographics, best practices, and student outcomes (perceived student success, employment and quality of life). A series of linear regression analyses and a restrictive regression analysis were performed.

Significant relationships were found between the variable of perceived success of former students receiving special education services and the independent variables of (a) quality of life (satisfaction) as reported by former students, and (b) perceived performance of five best practices as reported by secondary special education teachers. Significant relationships were also found between the former students' quality of life (satisfaction) and four of the five best practices in transition. The employment outcome rate of 72% was

not found to have a significant relationship between school system demographics, the perceived importance of best practices, or the performance of best practices.

A major explanation for the fact that there was not more significance among the variables resulted from the study's positive sample bias created from the exemplariness of the transition programs in the 41 school systems. While few statistically significant results were found, significance in terms of practicality may be implied in that (a) the training model employed with the school systems appeared to be effective in unifying the knowledge base of the participants, and (b) the demonstration sites uniformly produced positive outcomes for their former students.
