



PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to explore that contribute to the successful transition of an American Indian student with a learning disability.

SUMMARY

The focal student's attitude and behavior were shaped by his culture and his success was positively influenced by informal supports from his family and community, and formal supports from educational settings. The resources and supports he received as an athlete contributed to his success in significant ways.

IMPLICATIONS

Family, culture, and community and educational supports impact transition outcomes for American Indian students with disabilities. Collaborative goal setting, mentoring, and promoting self-advocacy and self-determination are important. A system of supports for these students that is similar to those available to student athletes is recommended.

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About the Author

Dr. Applequist is a professor in the College of Education at NAU coordinating the curriculum in early childhood special education and she serves as the Pre-Service Training Coordinator for the IHD. Her research focuses on early intervention, special education practices, and transitional services for American Indian students. Dr. Applequist also serves as clinical faculty under the Arizona LEND through the College of Medicine, Department of Pediatrics at the University of Arizona.

Case Study: An American Indian Student with a Learning Disability

By Karen L. Applequist, Ph.D.

The unemployment rate for persons with disabilities continues to be high (U. S. Department of Labor, 2012). The literature on transition planning for students with disabilities has intensified dramatically in recent years resulting in models believed to promote positive transition outcomes through person-centered planning, self-determination, and self advocacy. Despite the utility of models to guide transition planning, individualization is crucial. Individualization is particularly important for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students with disabilities who are transitioning from high school to employment settings. Many current transition practices revolve around self-determination, a construct shaped by cultural beliefs and practices (Shogren, 2011).

American Indian students, particularly those who grew up in reservation communities, often face significant challenges during transition (Lee, Donlan and Brown, 2010.) In a recent study, American Indian students with mild disabilities reported that they did not see themselves as active participants in the process and they did not receive the needed accommodations to ensure successful transition (Applequist, Mears & Loyless, 2010). Little is known about factors that lead to successful or unsuccessful transition, especially for CLD students.

Featured Study

We conducted a case study of an American Indian student with a learning disability who successfully transitioned from high school to community college and university. Procedures involved interviews with the focal student and four individuals identified as playing important roles in his successful transition, including personnel from both the secondary and post-secondary settings. Responses were analyzed to identify themes from the interviews and to determine the factors that contributed to his successful transition. The focal student possessed very deep emotional and spiritual roots to his family and tribal community, and he embodied the four elements of self-determination (autonomy, self-regulation, psychological-empowerment and self-realization) described by Wehmeyer (1999). Although he effectively advocated for his own goals, support from his family, teachers and coaches was essential to his successful transition. He struggled academically before and after transition, but thrived in sports. The case study revealed that the supports offered to athletes in high school and in college played a significant role in his successful transition. As a student athlete, coaches and teachers closely monitored his progress, offered encouragement and worked closely with Disability Resources to assure that he had the necessary accommodations and could access other instructional supports. Although he was very motivated to succeed in school, ongoing contact with caring adults made a significant impact on his success. Both secondary and postsecondary personnel promoted self-advocacy and self-determination, and worked collaboratively with the student to develop goals. Through their mentoring, he gained further confidence to reach those goals.

Implications for Practice

The results of this case study underscore important considerations for successful transition. Cultural beliefs and practices are interwoven into daily life for many American Indian students and should be respected and considered throughout the transition process. Students should be encouraged to actively participate in their IEP and Transition Plans and learn to advocate for themselves. Teachers, coaches, or other American Indian students who left the reservation to attend college can provide positive mentorship to transitioning students. Mentors should recognize students' strengths and not focus exclusively on their disability. Students might be more successful if they begin their postsecondary education at a community college, rather than a large university, making the transition easier, particularly those who transition from smaller reservation communities. Colleges and universities should consider approaches that mimic those used for student athletes, as the importance of establishing strong support systems for students is critical. Postsecondary personnel who are in regular contact with students are able to monitor their progress, offer encouragement and provide needed assistance.

Best Available Evidence

Based on their work at the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, Test and colleagues (2009) reported evidence supporting 28 transition practices in student-focused planning, student development, interagency collaboration, family involvement and program structure. Moderate evidence was found for the following practices: Teaching students self-advocacy and self-determination, involving students in IEP meetings, and promoting self-directed IEPs. For other practices, the evidence was limited to a very small number of high quality studies with a few additional

ones ranked as "acceptable". Similarly, the literature is limited with regard to postsecondary practices for students with disabilities. Preliminary evidence suggests limited, but positive, support of person-centered planning (Claes, Van Hove, Vandeveld, van Loon, & Schalock, 2010), mentoring (Brown, Takahashi & Roberts, 2010), and self-determination (Heller et al., 2011). The featured study does not constitute evidence due to the case study design. Additional high quality studies need to be conducted to more rigorously examine the effects of these practices with culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities.

Professional Judgment, Client, and Context

Since the evidence pertaining to transition practices for American Indian students is so limited, practitioners must rely extensively on professional judgment. There is some indication that certain transition practices are effective with the larger population and should be considered for American Indian students; however, application of those practices require careful consideration of individual student characteristics, culture, and preferences. Even though the case study was exploratory in nature, it expands our understanding of personal and contextual factors influencing the transition process. In many ways, case studies are perfectly suitable to explore the impact of an evidence-based practice decision for an individual because the factors under consideration are those with direct relevance to the student and the outcome.



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P.O. Box 5630
Flagstaff, AZ 86011-5630
ihd@nau.edu
Phone: 928-523-4791
TTY: 928-523-1695
Fax: 928-523-9127

