

SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER TRANSITION-RELATED COMPETENCIES AND PREPARATION IN SAUDI ARABIA

Ghaleb Alnahdi

Salman bin Abdulaziz University

Preparing special education teachers to engage in transition services is a critical part of their preparation. This study examined how special education teachers perceive their preparation for transition services in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. A total of 350 teachers participated in this study. Data were analyzed using a two-way ANOVA. The findings indicated that teachers reported having negative perceptions of the transition service aspect of their preparation programs. No differences according to gender or educational background were observed. Implications and recommendations for teacher in-service and pre-service programs are discussed.

Introduction

Many studies have emphasized the particular knowledge and competencies that special education teachers who deliver transition services are required to obtain to succeed in their mission (Anderson et al., 2003; DeFur & Taymans, 1995). Transition services are defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), Section 300.18, as:

a coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability that—(a) is designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation; (b) is based upon the individual student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests; and (c) includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. (IDEA 20 U.S.C. § 1401 118)

Teachers' preparation for transition services and their impressions of the sufficiency of that preparation play a vital role in the success of transition services (Wolfe, Boone, & Blanchett, 1998). Research has demonstrated a significant relationship among teachers' level of preparation, their satisfaction, and the frequency of implementation of transition activities (Benitez, Morningstar, & Frey, 2009). Additionally, educators often rely on teacher preparation programs to acquire the knowledge that is necessary for transition services (Lubbers, Repetto, & McGorray, 2008).

Benitez et al. (2009) examined 557 middle and high school special education teachers in 31 states, and they found that teachers ranked their experience of preparation for transition services more favorably than their satisfaction with their training. The authors concluded that there is a strong relationship between teachers' level of preparation and the frequency of providing transition services; thus, teachers who feel more prepared to deliver transition services provide such services more frequently.

Blanchett (2001) examined regular and special education teachers' perceptions of transition competencies to identify and validate the perceived level of importance of 30 transition service competencies identified in the literature. The results indicated that the top six competencies rated by teachers were assessing social skills, teaching social skills, teaching job-seeking skills, teaching daily living skills, involving employers, and providing career education and exploration. At least 30% of the teachers in this study rated the following competencies as less important: "(a) providing sexuality training/education (30%);

(b) providing case management (30%); (c) providing medication, care, and scheduling training (36%); (d) assessing family-supported recreation/leisure activities (37%); and (e) establishing a plan for student participation in recreation/leisure activities (37%)" (p. 7).

More than half the teachers in the study reported that they received training related to transition services in the following areas: participating in a multidisciplinary team (80%), assessing vocational preferences (82%), managing maladaptive behaviors (86%), writing IEPs/ITPs (92%), teaching daily living skills (84%), and teaching money management (81%).

The study also examined teachers' satisfaction with the transition training that they received in higher education prior to working with students with disabilities. The results showed that 9% of teachers indicated that they felt highly prepared, 39% were somewhat prepared, 24% were somewhat unprepared, and 21% were highly unprepared. Half (50%) the respondents reported that the special education teacher was the person responsible for implementing transition activities.

DeFur and Taymans (1995) surveyed 134 education specialists in special education, vocational rehabilitation, and vocational special education to identify important competencies for transition specialists. The respondents rated the competencies as follows:

- 1) knowledge of agencies and systems changes;
- 2) development and management of individualized transition plans;
- 3) working with others in the transition process;
- 4) vocational assessment and job development;
- 5) professionalism, advocacy, and legal issues;
- 6) job training and support; and
- 7) assessment (general). (p. 48)

Knott and Asselin (1999) examined 204 special education teachers working with students with different types of disabilities; 106 teachers had students with learning disabilities, 51 teachers had students with intellectual disabilities, 30 teachers had students with emotional disturbances, 15 teachers had students with a combination of learning disabilities and emotional disturbances, and 12 teachers had students identified as belonging to other categories. However, the other category was not defined. The researchers found that the teachers in the study believed that professionals who provide transition services must have related knowledge in addition to the necessary skills and abilities to ensure successful transitions. Family and student involvement was rated by the teachers as the most important element in the transition process. These results show a relationship between the level of knowledge and involvement in transition services and perceptions of the importance of such services. Interestingly, there was little difference in the teachers' knowledge, involvement, and importance based on their years of experience, which ranged from zero to 30 years of teaching experience.

In a study by Wandry et al. (2008), the participants included 196 teacher candidates at the graduate ($n = 67$) and undergraduate ($n = 129$) levels in five special education teacher preparation programs in five different American universities. The participants completed pre-semester and post-semester surveys after taking a transition course during the semester. The pre-test showed that the participants believed the most important facilitators in the transition process were parental involvement and student involvement. The participants rated educators' knowledge of transition services as a significant factor for successful transition services, followed by educators' interest in transition services, student involvement, and parental involvement. Furthermore, the authors noted that participants from special education majors (graduate and undergraduate) ranked preparation as higher than their general education peers did. The study also showed that the transition course led to greater perceptions and greater confidence in the abilities of the participants to implement effective transition practices. The participants also reported that more training is needed beyond the transition course that they completed. They also expressed concern regarding the lack of preparation of their peers and administrators in schools.

Trainor, Carter, Owens, and Swedeen (2008) interviewed 14 teachers working in 10 high schools and identified two of the problems during the summer: employment opportunities are more limited compared with other times of the year, and there is an additional lack of community involvement. The teachers in that study were supportive of the development of summer programs; in particular, they were supportive of paid work experiences. The teachers emphasized the importance of developing self-determination for youth during transition planning and instruction, which was also supported in other studies as a critical aspect to be considered in transition program planning (Appelquist, Mears, & Loyless, 2009; LaCava, 2005; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Garner, & Lawrence, 2007).

In summary, special education teachers must obtain necessary knowledge and competencies to deliver transition services; the teacher preparation for transition programs is challenging; and there are significant relationships among teachers' level of preparation, their satisfaction, and the frequency of implementation of transition activities. The following section focuses on teacher preparation in Saudi Arabia for transition planning.

Teacher Preparation in Saudi Arabia for Transition Planning

Although, there are attempts to reform Saudi Arabian education in general (Alnahdi, 2014a) and special education as a part of this education system, special education teachers in Saudi Arabia are still prepared to work only in elementary schools with students of young ages (Almuaqel, 2008). In addition, in Saudi Arabia, there is no cumulative experience with the transition process to assist students in making the move from school to the work environment (Alnahdi, 2013, 2014b). Without experience, teachers cannot be expected to have a major effect on transitions unless they receive assistance from specialist agencies or outside professionals.

Althabet (2002) examined teachers' perceptions of their preparation in the Special Education Program at King Saud University in Saudi Arabia with a focus on teachers who specialized in teaching students with mental retardation only. He surveyed 255 teachers who graduated between 1992 and 2000. Of the participants, 180 were male, and 75 were female; 72% of the sample had one to four years of experience, whereas 28% had five or more years of experience. The teachers in the study were working either in special education programs in regular education schools (40.39%) or in special education institutes (59.61%). Overall, the teachers reported feeling neutral about the effectiveness of their preparation in the Special Education Program at King Saud University. The results showed significant differences between male teachers and female teachers: the male teachers were more positive about the effectiveness of their preparation program than the female teachers were. There were no significant differences between recently graduated special education teachers (those with one to four years of teaching experience) and more experienced special education teachers (those with at least five years of teaching experience) with respect to their perceptions of the effectiveness of their preparation program.

In the abovementioned study, the teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the coursework that they completed during their preparation were approximately in the middle range of the scale, which signaled neither positivity nor negativity with respect to the effectiveness of the coursework. The results show significant differences between male teachers and female teachers in that male teachers were more positive about the effectiveness of the coursework. There were no significant differences between recently graduated special education teachers and more experienced special education teachers with respect to the effectiveness of the coursework (Althabet, 2002).

Al-Wabli (1982) surveyed 188 secondary teachers to evaluate the secondary teacher preparation program at Umm Al-Qura University in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. The teachers in the study felt well prepared in less than 50% (six out of 15) of the teaching skills covered by the study: (1) the ability to use teaching materials effectively, (2) skill in evaluating the academic progress of students, (3) the ability to work effectively with the school administration, (4) the ability to communicate with students with different levels of abilities, (5) the ability to construct appropriate tests, and (6) the ability to construct appropriate lessons.

The teachers indicated that they felt ill prepared in two of the skills (the ability to use school sources and the ability to use school library resources). In the remaining seven skills, they rated their preparation as average: (1) the use of audiovisual aids, (2) the ability to use the Arabic language effectively, (3) the use of a variety of teaching methods, (4) the maintenance of official records, (5) the ability to handle discipline problems in the classroom, (6) time management skills in the classroom, and (7) the ability to motivate students who are not interested in learning (Al-Wabli, 1982).

Next, six education courses were rated highly by teachers in the abovementioned study: (1) Teaching Methods 2, (2) Teaching Methods 1, (3) Developmental Psychology, (4) Educational Media, (5) Introduction to Education and Psychology, and (6) Curriculum Principles. Only one course was rated as below average (Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education). By contrast, five education courses were ranked as having average effectiveness: (1) Curriculum Development, (2) Introduction to Counseling and Mental Hygiene, (3) Education in Saudi Arabia and the Arab World, (4) Educational Administration, and (5) Development of Educational Thought (Al-Wabli, 1982).

Female teachers rated teaching skills and student-teaching experiences in their preparation program less positively than did male teachers. Finally, there were no significant differences among respondents based on their teaching field, type of degree, or years of experience (Al-Wabli, 1982).

Perceptions of Special and General Education Teachers

Wolfe et al. (1998) compared the responses of 39 regular secondary teachers to previously collected data from special education teachers. These authors found differences between special education teachers and regular teachers in their perceptions of the importance of the competencies that are needed by teachers in transition services (Wolfe et al., 1998).

The following competencies were rated as important by at least 90% of regular education teachers: (a) employment concerns, (b) communication concerns, (c) student/interpersonal skills, and (d) residential concerns (Wolfe et al., 1998). Across all competencies, special education teachers gave higher ratings of importance than regular teachers, except in the ability to assess adaptive behavior, which they rated with low importance. Similarly, Stewart (1998) found that special education teachers and vocational specialists rate the important transition to work competencies differently. Wandry et al. (2008) also found that participants with special education backgrounds at both the graduate and undergraduate levels ranked their preparation for providing transition services higher than their peers from general education backgrounds. In short, there are differences between the perceptions of teachers with special education backgrounds and those with other educational backgrounds.

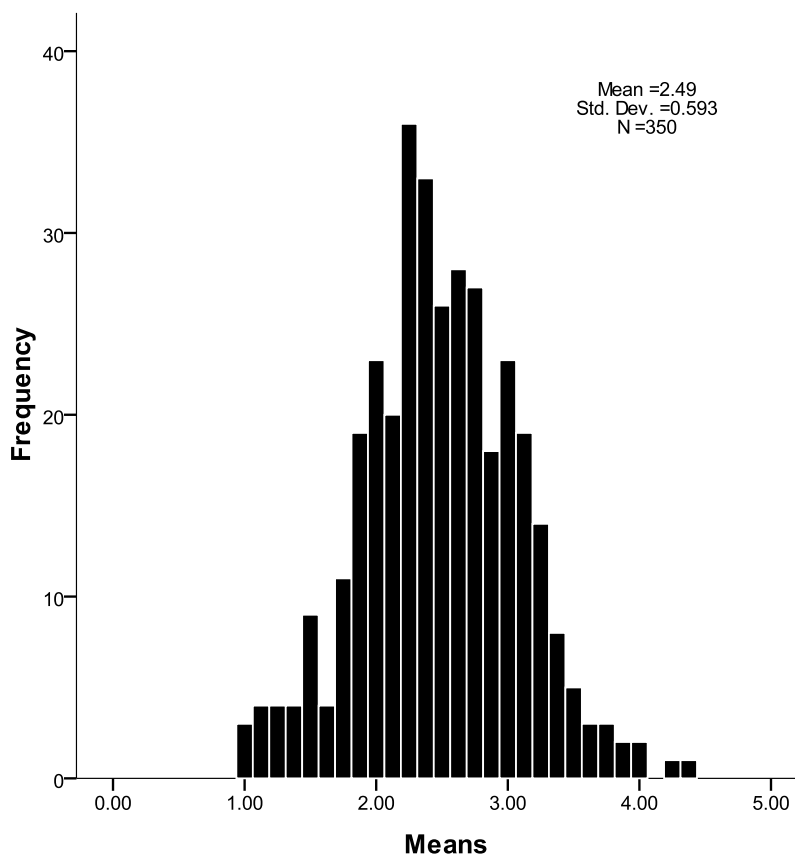


Figure 1. The distribution of teachers' means regarding their preparation.

Methodology

The study survey was distributed to approximately 600 teachers working in special education programs for students with intellectual disabilities, and 350 completed surveys used for this study. The teachers were from 30 schools in the city of Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. The schools are located in all regions of Riyadh to ensure representation to the greatest extent possible. Mediators distributed surveys and return it within a week. Teachers were asked to voluntary participate.

In the study instrument, which was developed by the researcher for this purpose, teachers rated items describing their perceptions of how prepared they felt to plan and deliver transition services. A high mean for the items on the survey indicated that teachers felt well prepared to plan and implement transition services. Cronbach's alpha was .7, which indicates acceptable reliability.

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the mean differences between the teachers by gender and educational background and to determine whether there was a significant interaction between gender and educational background. The following question was posed: are there statistically significant mean differences by gender or by educational background (major)? In addition, an ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant mean differences according to the number of years of experience.

Results

Teachers' perceptions of their preparation

The teachers in this study responded to eight items regarding their preparation to provide transition services. The teachers responded to these items using a Likert scale (with options including strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree). The items were coded as follows: strongly agree = 5; agree = 4; neutral = 3; disagree = 2; and strongly disagree = 1. For negatively phrased items, the coding was reversed. A high mean score on this scale indicated that teachers felt well prepared to plan and deliver transition services (see Figure 1). In general, the teacher responses resulted in an overall mean of 2.49, as shown in Table 1, which indicates that the teachers felt unprepared to plan and deliver transition services.

Furthermore, Table 1 shows teachers' perceptions of their preparation to provide transition services sorted according to five demographic variables: gender, educational background, the level of school taught, the level of education, and the number of years teaching experience. This study sample consisted of 212 male teachers and 138 female teachers. The majority of teachers in this study (304) possess special education degrees, whereas 39 teachers hold degrees in a different major. Most of the teachers in this study (274) work in elementary schools, and the remainder (64) work in middle or high schools. Approximately half of the participants (138) who reported their years of experience possessed more than 10 years of teaching experience, compared with 142 teachers with fewer than 10 years of teaching experience.

Table 1. Mean Perceptions of Preparation by Demographic Variables

		M	N	SD
Overall		2.4976	350	.59331
Gender	Male	2.5284	212	.60934
	Female	2.4504	138	.56677
Educational background	Special education	2.4765	304	.59273
	Other majors	2.6116	39	.59393
School level	Elementary school	2.5094	274	.59689
	Middle and high school	2.4014	64	.59481
Level of education	Bachelor's degree	2.4924	316	.58640
	Master's degree	2.4750	25	.58741
	Other	2.6000	5	.84502
Years of experience	1 to 4	2.5332	48	.74117
	5 to 9	2.5035	94	.53136
	10 to 15	2.4236	102	.57679
	More than 15	2.4862	36	.58937

Descriptive Statistics

More than 75% (271) of the participants reported that there is a significant shortcoming in teacher preparation with respect to transition services. However, 58% (204) of the participants believed that the university courses are sufficient to prepare special education teachers to provide transition services.

Surprisingly, more than half of the study participants (54%, 190 of the 350 participants who responded to this item) agreed or strongly agreed that this survey was the first time that they were exposed to the notion of transition plans for students with disabilities (see Table 4). Although 139 teachers (40%) in this study agreed or strongly agreed that transition services were the focus of at least one course that they studied at the university, more than 50% (177) of the participants reported that transition services were not mentioned in any of the courses in their bachelor's degree program.

Furthermore, 74.5% (261) of the participants believe that there is a shortage of courses on how to determine goals for students with mild disabilities. However, 61% (214) of the participants reported that they have been trained on how to determine the necessary life skills for students after they leave school. Moreover, approximately 30% (137) of the participants feel that they have sufficient knowledge to create a transition plan for students with disabilities.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Responses

	SA	A	N	D	SD
There are significant shortcomings in teacher preparation with respect to transition services.	123 (35.1%)	148 (42.3%)	55 (15.7%)	21 (6%)	3 (0.9%)
Transition services were the focus in one course or more courses that I studied in the university.	39 (11.1%)	100 (28.6%)	105 (30.0%)	85 (24.3%)	21 (6.0%)
Transition services were not mentioned in any of the courses for my bachelor's degree program.	59 (16.9%)	118 (33.7%)	108 (30.9%)	52 (14.9%)	13 (37%)
The university courses are sufficient to prepare special education teachers to participate in transition services.	63 (18%)	141 (40.3%)	76 (21.7%)	54 (15.4%)	16 (5.6%)
There is a shortage of courses on how to determine goals for students with mild disabilities.	95 (27.1%)	166 (47.4%)	54 (15.4%)	26 (7.4%)	9 (2.6%)
I have sufficient knowledge of how to create a transition plan for students with disabilities.	35 (1%)	102 (29%)	135 (38.6%)	66 (18.9%)	12 (3.4%)
This is the first time that I have been exposed to the notion of a transition plan for students with disabilities.	52 (14.9%)	138 (39.4%)	54 (15%)	88 (25%)	18 (5%)
I have been trained on how to determine the necessary life skills for students after they leave school.	55 (15.7%)	159 (45.4%)	51 (14.6%)	71 (20.3%)	14 (4%)

Teacher preparation by gender: As shown in Table 3, there were no statistically significant differences between male and female teachers in their perceptions of their preparation for transition services ($F(1,339) = .439, p = .508$). Therefore, the null hypothesis that there are no significant differences between male and female teachers' perceptions of their preparation for transition services was retained.

Teacher preparation by educational background: There were no statistically significant differences between special education teachers and non-special education teachers in terms of how they perceive their preparation for transition services ($F(1,339) = .058, p = .810$). Therefore, the null hypothesis that educational background causes no significant differences in teachers' perceptions of their preparation for transition services was retained (see Table 3).

Teacher preparation by years of experience: In Table 4, the ANOVA results ($F(3,279) = .496, p = .685$) show that there are no statistically significant mean differences resulting from the participants' years of experience.

Discussion

The results indicated that the teachers generally felt unprepared to plan and deliver transition services. This finding is in part explained by Althabet (2002), who showed that there were no courses related to transition services in special education preparation programs. In addition, the current study found no differences in male and female teachers' perceptions of their preparation for transition services. This

finding contradicts the study results of Althabet (2002) and Al-Wabli (1982), both of whom found that male teachers held more positive perceptions of preparation programs than their female counterparts.

Table 3. ANOVA for the Main Effect and the Interaction for Gender and Educational Backgrounds

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	.677a	3	.226	.640	.589
Intercept	721.792	1	721.792	2049.457	.000
Gender	.155	1	.155	.439	.508
Education	.253	1	.253	.718	.397
Gender * Education	.020	1	.020	.058	.810
Error	119.391	339	.352		
Total	2236.406	343			
Corrected Total	120.068	342			

$p < .05$

Table 4. ANOVA for the Main Effect of Years of Experience

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.526	3	.175	.496	.685
Within Groups	97.663	276	.354		
Total	98.189	279			

However, this finding is consistent with the results obtained by Hussain (2010), who found that there were no differences in male and female teachers' perceptions of their preparation program for those with a minor in learning disabilities at King Saud University. Hussain (2010) argued that the findings of Althabet (2002) regarding the differences between male and female teacher preparation programs may no longer be relevant because of improvements in the female section of the special education department at King Saud University and because of the increasing number of female professors who have graduated from universities in the United States. Furthermore, based on this researcher's experience as an undergraduate and graduate student at King Saud University, which is the university from which the teachers in this study graduated, this finding seems predictable because of the absence of transition service-related courses for both male and female teachers. Because the preparation programs for male and female teachers are similar and because they work in the same educational environment, it may be expected that no statistically significant differences exist in their perceptions of content-related issues.

This study found no differences in perceptions based on educational background, which may indicate that special education programs are lacking in the transition service aspect of their preparation programs and may remove any potential differences that could favor teachers from special education backgrounds. In addition, no differences were found based on years of experience, which may indicate that special education programs have not considered transition services to be an essential part of the preparation of special education teachers even in recent years.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study was the first Saudi study that explored teachers' perceptions of the preparation they receive to offer transition services for students with intellectual disabilities. The findings indicated that teachers have negative impressions of the transition service training that is provided in their preparation programs. There were no differences in how teachers' perceived their preparation based on gender, educational background, or experience.

This study found that teachers felt unprepared to plan or deliver transition services; thus, transition-related knowledge and training should be incorporated into special education programs in universities. Programs should embed this coursework within all special education preparation programs in all minors.

Such departments should also establish new minors within special education programs that qualify special education teachers to be transition specialists to facilitate their supportive role in implementing transition services. These transition specialist programs should be offered as undergraduate and graduate programs.

Initially, universities should study the various types of transition programs that are already available in some universities and establish new local programs. Teachers who graduated from these programs will earn a transition certificate. Then, they should be able to support teachers and train them to be engaged in transition planning services.

There are number of universities in the US that offer transition specialist programs. For example, the University of North Texas offers a transition specialist certificate in the area of emotional (E) and behavioral disorders (BD). This certificate requires the following four courses: Educational Programming for Children with E/BD (3 hours), Transition of Youth with E/BD: Issues and Practices (3 hours), Advanced Transition Planning for Students with E/BD (3 hours), and Seminar on Traumatic Brain Injury (3 hours). This program is limited to those with a special education bachelor's degree, while some programs are open to all those with relevant degrees in education, such as the program offered by the University of Wisconsin Whitewater. A total of 15 hours is required to finish this program: Career-Vocational Programming (3 Hours), Transition Planning & Programming (3 Hours), Transition Assessment (3 Hours), Collaborative Leadership (3 Hours), Reflective Practice and Action Research (3 Hours), and Applied Action Research (3 Hours).

Universities in general, in Saudi Arabia in particular, should combine some of ideas and policies of these programs and a local program should be developed. For instance, they can adapt the policy to limit these programs to special education teachers, as at the University of North Texas, because they are already working in special education programs, which will help to quickly improve their programs. Until there are adequate numbers of transition specialists, then any program should be open for all graduates from relevant education majors. Another reference is the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) Professional Standards that classifies the knowledge and skills required for a transition specialist. Finally, special education preparation programs should work on training special education teachers (teachers in-service) on the basic skills to create a transition plan. They should give the priority to middle and high school teachers. Then, they can expand the training to all teachers working in special education programs.

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