

**Shannon Simonelli:**

All right. Welcome back to our listeners. I'd like to begin with a second question for Bob. Could you talk a little bit about some of the evidence-based practices that have been applied to the transition process for youth with disabilities and what we're learning and what we see in that regard?

**Robert:**

Sure. Given that this initiative has been around for nearly thirty years, obviously there have been a lot of things tried across the nation in many different states and communities. And there's actually been a lot of data collected on several different practices, so it's one of the fields that we actually know quite a bit about, and what we know is documented with data and information. And that isn't true in a lot of fields in education and special education, so this is actually a very positive sign for the field of transition.

One of the things that we've discovered in our work here at the University of Hawaii,--and we actually work with probably more than twenty states around the country in various demonstration and research projects,--but one of the areas that we focused on is an area referred to as self-determination-- developing self-determination skills in young people with disabilities. The core of the development of this skill is often focused upon the IEP process, because the Individualized Education Planning process is a process where young people with disabilities can have an opportunity to become more aware of themselves, of their needs, their disability needs and their other needs, have an opportunity to explore those needs and the various environments that they are working in, and then have an opportunity to internalize that interaction between their needs, their skills and abilities and interests, and the various environments that they are working in,--school environments as well as home, and maybe employment environments,--and then to actually have an opportunity to practice those needs, or to put them in place. So the IEP process actually provides an opportunity for students to develop those kinds of skills and behaviors and to practice them using real information about themselves, their own real needs, and their own real interests and desires, to discover those things, become aware of them, discover them, have them integrate for them become real for them, and then to actually share them in the IEP process and in their transition planning process.

We've done a lot of work with this process and we've kind of discovered that there are some key things that students need to learn that fit self-determination. One of those is that students need to acquire an understanding of their own disability. That understanding needs to lead to a pretty clear understanding of what services, supports, and accommodations work for them in different environments. Whether it's a classroom environment in school, what types of accommodation, services, and supports work for them in those environments? Or if it's an employment environment, again working in different kinds of employment contexts, what types of services, supports, and accommodations might work for them in that environment?

We've experimented through several projects with the process of teaching young people with disabilities these skills and allowing them the opportunity to become aware, to discover, explore, and then to actually practice those skills through their own IEP and their ITP, or Individualized Transition Process.

The other part of this that we worked a lot with is that once a student does discover and understand their own needs and the support services and accommodations required in different environments to address those needs, it's very important that they're able to communicate and advocate that information to people in various environments that they're going to be in, whether they're adult environments or secondary school environments.

An example is, if a student has a learning disability and they need a specific accommodation to work in a specific environment, like they need a reader, or they need certain assistive technology, are they able to communicate that in a way that different types of people, like an employer, or an admissions counselor, or a professor in postsecondary education (in a way that those people) could understand what this need is, what the service and accommodation is, and why this individual needs it, why it's being requested.

That set of skills is a tremendously valuable set of skills, very much an important set of skills for a young person with a disability to make this transition to and be successful in adult environments.

Sadly, what we've found is that most high schools don't teach these skills. Or they're taught very poorly. And there's also very few opportunities in high school for young people with disabilities to not only learn these skills, but to practice them, which is important. And part of the reason for this is, that in high schools most of these decisions and most of the information that a young person with disabilities needs is kept by the special education teacher. So a special education teacher may know what the disability is that the child has; they may, (from the student's confidential records) know what services and supports that individual needs; and they may speak for that individual in an IEP process. But these may never be shared with the student, so the student might have very little opportunity to actually become aware and understand their own disability, and then be able to relate it to various contexts or environments, much less than to be able to advocate for, or speak to those needs in various contexts.

So this is a problem. We've probably worked close to ten years in various projects working with self-determination, and think we have a very good understanding of it now and what many of the things are that are required. It's just very difficult working these evidence-based practices back in to the system given the way special education services are currently structured and the way schools relate to students. And, probably in general, schools don't promote self-determination skills for students of any type.

**Shannon:**

I would agree. And not only for students with disabilities, but for all kids. I mean, this is a huge gap for all students.

**Robert:**

Yes. So, all students experience somewhat of a shock as they enter the real world or the adult world. For students with disabilities, again, it's just much more of a laden process. Many more skills and a higher level of understanding is actually needed to successfully access and retain in these adult environments, whether it be postsecondary education or employment.

So it's a concern. But the evidence and the practices, numerous books, and obviously we've written dozens of articles on this subject, those things are available. It's just that they don't merge well often with the secondary school environment and particularly special education, the way special education services are structured in secondary schools.

**Shannon:**

It almost sounds like there's a gap in the thinking in terms of conceptualizing what the role is, or what the job, the task at hand is, while kids are in high school in terms of the people that are providing supports, the people who are coordinating supports for kids with disabilities in high school in particular. It sounds like they're not conceptualizing that part of their job is to be helping to educate the student about what their challenges are, how they learn best, what they needed to be supported in the world so that the student then can take that over. It's like they're not owning that as part of their responsibility.

**Robert:**

Yes. And typically the structure of the secondary school isn't really supportive of teachers doing this also. Students are often not allowed to self-actualize or to take responsibility for their own learning, to have opinions and to actually discover themselves. There's often, within typical school structures, very little opportunity for those things to happen, much less to be supported by personnel.

**Shannon:**

Right. And that's actually a developmental stage that's appropriate for adolescents, regardless to whether there's a learning disability or not.

**Robert:**

Yes. Very much so. So it's a little bit of a breakdown in our secondary school structure which seriously impacts students with disabilities. It's because this is such an important skill for them to have.

**Shannon:**

Yeah. And I can see how that impact is not only of course during the high school time, but how it ripples throughout. There's sort of an accelerated learning curve once they get out of high school and into the world, whether it's postsecondary ed or the work world, where they have to try to make up for all of that in terms of understanding and learning how to advocate for themselves.

**Robert:**

Yes. There often is very little opportunity to step back and learn these skills without some negative consequences once you enter the adult world. Just because of the way things operate in the adult world, these skills and behaviors are expected.

**Shannon:**

Mm-hmm.

**Robert:**

So it makes it fairly difficult.

**Shannon:**

So a more ideal scenario? Could you maybe paint a picture of what that would be like if we were going to ... I mean, maybe there's the most ideal scenario in a perfect world, and then maybe there's an intermediate wonderful scenario that might be a next step kind of a scenario. If you were going to wave your magic wand and have things be a little bit different, what would you want?

**Robert:**

One of the things we've promoted is to actually train and begin to have students actively involved in decisions within their IEP process very early on in middle school and high school where they actually are a participant in the assessment process of assessing their disability needs and assessing their own performance and attainment, that they be part of that process and they understand how it work, and they also understand the outcomes, like what the true skills are, what their interests are; that that opportunity be provided, and that training actually begins to happen at that point early on so that by the time they're in the ninth and tenth grade, they are actually contributing information about themselves in the IEP process ---like what their skills are, what their interests are, what their knowledge levels are, and what their ambitions or desires are after they leave school. And they participate in and share those with teachers kind of as a peer. And to some extent that's a little bit of what the problem is: I think schools have difficulty accepting that. But that begins to take place, and as students continue to participate in their IEP's, they more and more take on that meeting as their meeting and that it becomes a place for them to express themselves and to learn to advocate for what they need. So by the time they're a junior or senior, the IEP process is an equal process where the student is an active participant, somewhat leads the process; teachers, counselors, and other personnel are there to be helpful and to try to follow through with support services and accommodations that are needed: and also there to assist with the linkages and receiving kinds of things that are needed for the students to move on out in to the adult environments.

So an ideal world might be where that is encouraged early on in the seventh and eighth grade, where the process should begin. And then it's supported and assisted on through high school, where by the eleventh and twelfth grades, students pretty much see the IEP process as their process; they lead the IEP and are somewhat in

charge of their own information and are able to share and advocate that assessment information with educators as well as other people in environments that they might be proceeding toward.

**Shannon:**

So they're really learning how to become experts of their own learning experience.

**Robert:**

Yes. And that's actually almost exactly what is required once you cross that line from high school into the post school world.

**Shannon:**

That's right.

**Robert:**

So when you go to visit an admissions counselor at a postsecondary ed institution, that's almost a required skill, and that knowledge base is required for you to be successful. Otherwise someone else has to speak for you and has to know those things.

**Shannon:**

Mm-hmm. And that's an awfully big jump for students to have to take if they haven't had any opportunity to really do that.

**Robert:**

Yeah. And to practice it and actually participate in the process, you know. To have experience doing it.

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Yeah. And I think some schools that we've worked with sort of feel that it's enough just to teach the skills and then to hope that they're transferred, and that a student will be able to practice or implement the skills once they move on to a post-school environment. But that expectation is probably inappropriate for almost anybody.

**Shannon:**

Exactly.

**Robert:**

There has to be an opportunity to practice with real behaviors and real skills.

**Shannon:**

Yeah. Absolutely. Every learning model kind of supports that.. Application is really part of what makes real learning. Yeah.

Okay. Well, why don't we take another break. We'll end this Part Two, and we'll come back in just a moment with Part Three.

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**Robert:**

Okay. Thanks, Shannon.