

CHARACTERISTICS AND PRACTICES OF  
EXEMPLARY LOCAL LEVEL INTERAGENCY TRANSITION TEAMS

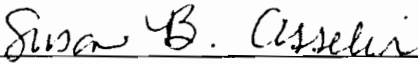
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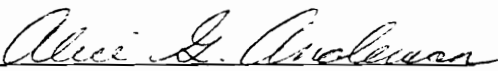
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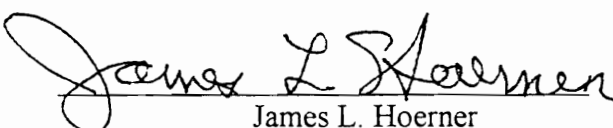
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in  
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# CHARACTERISTICS AND PRACTICES OF EXEMPLARY LOCAL-LEVEL INTERAGENCY TRANSITION TEAMS

by

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(ABSTRACT)

The purpose of this study was to identify those factors which make local-level interagency transition teams effective in facilitating the transition from the secondary school setting to successful adult opportunities for youths with disabilities. The objective was accomplished using a naturalistic qualitative research approach with interviews as the primary information gathering instrument.

Two questions were posed to guide, but not constrain the study:

1. What are the characteristics, including the composition, procedure, and context, of exemplary local-level interagency transition teams?
2. What are the effective practices used by exemplary local-level interagency transition teams, as perceived by team members, to facilitate the transition process for students with disabilities?

Four teams from the northern, central, eastern, and southwestern regions of Virginia were nominated by regional transition coordinators as being exemplary in working together to successfully promote the transition process for students with

disabilities. A total of 12 team members, representing special education, rehabilitation, and the parent and family, were selected to be interviewed.

Interviews with team members were audio-tape recorded, transcribed, and coded and analyzed using Ethnograph. Characteristics and practices which emerged as facilitating effectiveness were (a) composition, (b) procedures, (c) context, (d) personal interaction, (e) futures planning, (f) support system, and (g) inter-community partnerships. These factors were analyzed across teams and member roles.

As a result of the themes derived from the analysis, an explanatory model was developed. The model gives consideration to a systems view and illustrates the framework of exemplary interagency transition teams in facilitating successful transitions for youths with disabilities.

## DEDICATION

To

My niece Anna

&

My parents, Paul and Myrna Thuli

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere gratitude is extended to all the individuals who supported me in this journey.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Development of the Problem

Imagine floating with a life jacket for 12 years and then suddenly having the jacket jerked off, being left to sink or swim. Ward's (1993) analogy best describes what transition from high school to adult life is like for a number of students who receive special education services. Many young people exit high school without a plan for the future or ability to take control of their own lives. Chadsey-Rusch and O'Reilly (1992) concluded that many youths with disabilities are not employed, not living on their own, not integrated into the community, nor are they satisfied with their lives. Improved transition planning and interagency cooperation is one strategy for improving the life outcomes of young adults with disabilities (Roessler, 1994; Wehman, 1992).

For nearly 16 years, federal legislation addressed the complexities of preparing the nation's youths for adult life. During this time, policy makers, parents, and educators sought to include transition in educational reform (Rusch, Chadsey-Rusch & Szymanski, 1992). Madeline Will, Assistant Secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, made transition services a government priority for students with disabilities (Bullock, Maddy-Bernstein, & Matias, 1994; Simpson, Huebner, & Roberts,

1985). Will described transition as “a bridge between the security and structure offered by school and the many responsibilities and choices of adult life” (Berkell & Brown, 1988, p.3). She posited that the transition process is an important part of life.

The concept of transition evolved from school to work into a complex process targeting an array of outcomes including independent living, post-secondary education and training, and personal independence. Such outcomes impact the way states fund, administer, and evaluate school and adult services (Everson & McNulty, 1992). In 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) made transition a top priority. The IDEA mandates formal and systematic transition planning and services for students with disabilities by requiring statements of needed transition services in students’ Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The IDEA challenges how local school districts prepare students with disabilities and also how adult service agencies support young adults (Lombard, 1994). An interagency team can be a highly effective strategy for bringing about multifaceted and long-range system change.

It is the purpose of local-level interagency transition teams to demonstrate the application of policies mandated by federal legislation (IDEA), collect and monitor local data, and communicate legislative policy and funding needs to state and local level policy makers. Specifically, IDEA requires a sharing of transition programming responsibilities among special, vocational, and general educators, employment specialists, rehabilitation, post-secondary education, social services, and mental health specialists. An interagency transition team assists youths with disabilities in transitioning to adult opportunities

(Lombard, 1994; Everson & McNulty, 1992; Springfield, 1991). The team is designed to help circumvent barriers common to students such as high un- and underemployment, low quality of life, high dropout rates, inappropriate education programs, and inadequate adult services (Browning, 1995). Thus, the local interagency transition team provides a mechanism for the school to utilize available community resources (Wehman, 1992). These teams have been described as appropriate vehicles for planning and implementing transition planning and services for youth with disabilities (Everson & McNulty, 1992).

### Team Development

Teams have existed for hundreds of years, and most people recognize their importance and capabilities. A group of individuals becomes a team when they develop a sense of shared commitment and strive for synergy among members (Guzzo & Dickson, 1996). Teams outperform individuals acting alone or in larger organizational groups, especially when performance requires multiple skills, judgments, and experiences. When working on certain kinds of tasks, small groups can perform at a level beyond the group's best member's capabilities. This phenomenon is referred to as an assembly bonus effect (Hill, 1982). Thus, a group of individuals with varying knowledge and expertise achieves greater decision-making power than an individual can achieve alone. The adage "two minds are better than one" reflects this concept.

Abelson and Woodman (1983) found decisions made by teams to be superior to those made by individuals acting alone. There are several widely accepted reasons for

this: (a) because a greater sum total of knowledge and experience exists within a group, (b) because a team offers a greater number of possible approaches to a problem, (c) because participation increases acceptance, and (d) because group problem solving offers better communication of decisions, and thus better comprehension of decisions (Abelson & Woodman, 1983). A primary objective of any team is to effectively use resources brought to the group by each member.

There is no singular, uniform measure of effectiveness for teams (Guzzo & Dickson, 1996). Yet, there are several long-standing issues relevant to team effectiveness stated in the literature, including team membership, team performance, team cohesiveness, leadership, structure, motivation, and team context (e.g. Abelson & Woodman, 1983; Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; Jewel & Reitz, 1981; Johnson & Johnson, 1991). These general issues pertain to almost all kinds of teams in almost all settings. This investigation built a framework on several theories and studies of teams and group effectiveness. Taking a rather generic approach, this study described team effectiveness within a set of categories that include: team composition, team procedure, and team context.

Team composition includes specifications of membership, member roles, and methods of their coordination (Abelson & Woodman, 1993; Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; Everson & McNulty, 1992). Among the characteristics of team membership is an expectation for attendance and participation. In order to be part of the team, one needs to be with the team and be an active team member. "Active membership" may be defined

from different perspectives, but every member of the team must perceive that no member is marginal, or unimportant (Harvey & Drolet, 1994).

Another category of team effectiveness consists of team procedures. These procedures are the rules of task performance. To be a cohesive team, groups need a common task. A vision for the team describes a common task for all its members giving the team members a sense of direction. When individuals hold a common idea of where they are heading, they acquire a greater awareness of being a team. Team goals or a vision provides such a collective consciousness.

A third category is team context. This refers to the conditions and the environment in which the team performs. For example, do individual team members feel a level of trust among the group? A periodic “time-out” at the end of each meeting to debrief action steps and confirm member responsibility is a strategy for a positive climate (Harvey & Drolet, 1994). Leadership is also viewed as part of the team context and proves to influence team effectiveness (Everson, 1996; Guzzo & Dickson, 1996, Harvey & Drolet, 1994). Drawing from the literature, team composition, procedure, and context are described as primary points of leverage to enhance team effectiveness. This investigation served as a starting point for identifying indicators of effective local-level interagency transition teams and provided a knowledge base for further research.

Interagency transition teams orchestrate and implement coordinated transition planning by developing strategies to address barriers faced by youth as they exit school. Yet, little research has focused on quality characteristics and practices of functioning



local-level interagency teams, and even less has been conducted to assess the effectiveness of these presumed team characteristics. For comprehensive planning to occur for youths with disabilities, school personnel, rehabilitation counselors, parents, human service providers, and the student must communicate in a systematic manner. Most often, members have been asked to participate because they are leaders in their organizations and agencies. Their common mission is a concern for improving the lives of youths with disabilities by reducing barriers through collaborative planning, commitment of resources, and exchange of information. Members of these teams work together to coordinate services by being creative and flexible in transition planning and delivery, which results in improved student outcomes.

### Rationale

Any major transition in life can present barriers, leaving individuals with feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Likewise, many young people with disabilities encounter difficulty when they leave the structured environment of the school and enter a maze of public and private services in the community. Planning for transition prior to exiting high school helps these youths to sort out this maze of resources, overcome the gaps in services, and start on a path of productivity. Coordinated transition planning by a local-level interagency transition team can serve as a link to successful adult roles for youth with disabilities.

Data documenting effectiveness of individualized transition planning and successful outcomes are just beginning to emerge along with the body of literature that underscores the complexity of the transition process (Everson & McNulty, 1992; Rusch, Chadsey-Rusch & Szymanski, 1992). This literature recognizes collaborative interagency planning and services as a quality characteristic of comprehensive transition programming and provides evidence that interagency transition teams help individuals with disabilities adjust to adult life (Everson, 1996; Wehman, 1992). Moreover, exemplary teams can effect change in systems as well as change in the lives of students with disabilities (Everson & McNulty, 1992). The outcome of this research has the potential to impact the field of transition and to lend support to the development of a model for interagency transition team effectiveness. Further, the identification of those factors of effective local-level interagency transition teams could add continuity and consistency to the development of these teams.

### Purpose of the Study

In many school systems across the country youths with disabilities are not receiving the systematic planning and guidance necessary to make a smooth transition into appropriate adult opportunities. One way to facilitate a positive transition experience for youths with disabilities is with a local-level interagency transition team. These teams work toward cooperative and rational programs to help smooth the transition process for young people with disabilities (Berkell & Brown, 1989; Everson, 1990; Everson & McNulty,

1992; Wehman, 1992). However, little is known about what constitutes an effective local-level interagency transition team.

Empirical research is lacking regarding the characteristics and practices of local-level interagency transition teams. Therefore, the primary objective of this study was to identify those factors that make local-level interagency transition teams effective in facilitating the transition from high school to successful post-school outcomes for youths with disabilities. More specifically this research study sought to:

1. Describe the characteristics, including the composition, procedure, and context, of exemplary local-level interagency transition teams.
2. Describe the effective practices used by exemplary local-level interagency transition teams, as perceived by team members, to facilitate the transition process for students with disabilities.

#### Limitations of this Study

The study included the following limitations:

1. The study was limited to interview information gathered from members of local-level interagency transition teams representing special education, rehabilitation, and family in the Commonwealth of Virginia.
2. The issues described in the results of this study are limited by the interview questions. Although several sources were utilized in developing the interview questions, there

may be other relevant questions which were not included and therefore were not addressed by this study.

### Definitions of Terms

The following terms are defined as they apply to this study:

#### *Team*

“any group of people who need each other to accomplish results” (Senge, 1994, p. 354).

#### *Team effectiveness*

The effectiveness of a team can be evaluated in terms of its goal attainment because the team’s purpose for existence is to achieve the common goal of its members (Friend & Cook, 1992).

#### *Transition*

“A coordinated set of activities for a student, 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 education, adult services, independent living, or community participation” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments, 1990, Section 602 [A], 20 U.S.C. 1401 [A]).

### *Transition Specialist*

This individual is the primary catalyst for proposing and implementing the necessary local policies to ensure transition services for youths with disabilities at the local or district. This person interacts and supports all the transition participants--students, parents, teachers, agency representatives, etc.--in the transition planning process. The specialist must be committed to creating an effective transition program and be concerned with creating comprehensive, quality transition services.

### *Transition Team or Interagency Team*

Interagency teams at the local-level, composed of key representatives from school and adult service agencies, including family representation, are described “as an appropriate vehicle for planning and implementing transition services for youths with disabilities” (Everson & McNulty, 1992, p. 343).

### Summary

This chapter described the obstacles faced by youth with disabilities and the subsequent need for transition planning and services. Improved transition outcomes can be achieved through collaborative efforts among education and human service agencies. The complementary skills and resources brought to the team by different individuals

working toward a common mission proves the value of teamwork. Local-level interagency transition teams are powerful resources to implement effective transition planning and services for youth with disabilities. This study investigated the effective factors of exemplary local-level interagency transition teams in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of Literature

This chapter provides a theoretical framework for understanding the characteristics and practices of effective teams that are critical for conceptualizing this study. More specifically, research in the following areas are synthesized: transition and key legislation, characteristics of interagency transition teams, and team effectiveness models.

#### Transition

In the early 1980s the concept of transition in special education appeared for the first time in federal and state legislation. Almost overnight, it seemed, transition was being described as the remedy for a long history of miscommunication, misinformation, and misunderstanding between special education and adult services providers. This section highlights legislation and policy addressing transition issues and the evolution of transition teams. First, a discussion of post-school outcomes for youths with disabilities is presented as the impetus for transitional services and programs.

## Background on Transition Outcomes

For an understanding of transition as it relates to the study of team effectiveness, it is important to examine relevant research on student outcomes in employment, post-secondary education and training, and personal independence. Employment statistics show that young adults with disabilities are dramatically unemployed or under-employed. Furthermore, this population often experiences additional difficulties with community adjustment, inappropriate living conditions, and restricted opportunities for postsecondary education. Each year 300,000 students with disabilities leave the public school system; many of these students become part of the 69% of adults with disabilities not working even though they desire to do so (United States General Accounting Office, 1993). Such evidence is convincing that transition efforts must be put into place to help facilitate students' movement from high school to successful adult roles.

The National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education provided further evidence of poor post-school outcomes for youths with disabilities and reported a significant number of these students dropout of school. Nationally, only 29% of youths with disabilities who dropout of school for more than one year were employed full time (Wagner, 1989a). In comparison, these rates were generally less than half the employment rate for youths without disabilities. A follow-up study of special education graduates in Vermont reported a 46% unemployment rate (Hasazi, Gordon, and Roe, 1985). Likewise, an Iowa study found a 33.2% unemployment rate for students with disabilities. In the



Commonwealth of Virginia, of the 3,801 special education students who left school in 1991, 64% were not employed (Asselin, et al., 1994).

In addition to low employment rates, wages of youth with disabilities working full time were usually around the minimum wage level, with few individuals earning more than \$6 per hour (Wagner, 1989a, 1989b). An employee earning this amount and working 40 hours per week for 52 weeks (2,080 hours) will earn \$12,400 annually. This figure falls far below the poverty level for a family of four. Moreover, the majority who work do so on a part-time basis, and a strong majority of these individuals earn less than \$6.00 per hour (Wagner, 1991). These findings warrant concern for the economic welfare of this population.

Dropout and graduation rates among youth with disabilities are also significant as compared to their nondisabled peers. Wagner (1989a) reported an overall dropout rate of 36.4% among youths with disabilities, with variations for specific disability classifications. This rate is slightly higher than the national average of 24% to 35% (Sklarz, 1994). The graduation rate for youths with disabilities was reported at 56%. This rate is noticeably lower than the estimated graduation rate of 75% reported for all students (Center for Education Statistics, 1986).

Data pertaining to the degree of independent living indicated that youths with disabilities also experience unsuccessful transitions to adult roles in their communities. Of youths with disabilities who had been out of secondary school less than two years, 13.4% were living independently (this includes living alone, with a spouse or roommate, in a

college dormitory, or military housing), compared to 33.2% of the youths in the general population. Furthermore, the majority of out-of-school youths with disabilities were not economically independent. Wagner (1991) reported fewer than one in 10 youths with disabilities had checking accounts or credit cards in their own names.

Another outcome of the transition process for youths with disabilities may be the movement from high school to postsecondary education. Wagner (1989b) reported that 14% of all youths with disabilities attended postsecondary institutions, compared to 56% of their nondisabled peers. In Virginia, only 241 of the 3,801 students surveyed in a 1991 study were currently enrolled in a postsecondary education or training programs (Asselin, et al., 1995). Page and Rusch (1995) offer an explanation for the low participation rates in postsecondary educational and training for students with disabilities. They found that expectations to attend colleges were higher for students without disabilities than for those with disabilities.

When compared to their nondisabled peers, students with disabilities are not achieving successful adult outcomes. These findings make it imperative for policy makers in a wide variety of human service fields to identify effective educational processes and programs that lead to desirable student and programmatic outcomes.

### The Federal Initiative

Despite efforts to individualize instruction, to maximize integration, and to teach functional skills, youths with disabilities were not faring well upon exiting high school.

High dropout and unemployment rates, restricted opportunities for postsecondary education, and dependence upon families were commonly cited problems with this population. Therefore, in 1983, Congress took action to directly address the transition issues faced by youths with disabilities. The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) was authorized to spend \$6.6 million dollars annually in grants and contracts to strengthen and coordinate education, training, and related services. A major objective of this initiative was to strengthen and coordinate education, training, and related services so that youths with disabilities could make a smooth transition to post-secondary education, vocational training, competitive employment, continuing education, or adult services (Rusch, Hughes, & Kohler, 1991). Since 1983 over 300 model demonstration projects have been funded, helping youths with disabilities transition to successful adult opportunities (Rusch & Phelps, 1987).

The implementation and evaluation of these model demonstration projects, individually and collectively, stimulated Congress to address transition policy and funding. In turn, the Amendments to the Education of the Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 98-199) were passed in 1987, being the first piece of legislation to use the term “transition”. This action brought about the need for states and localities to focus on the scope and quality of transition services. In turn, OSERS defined the critical components of transition planning and demonstration programs as: (a) effective high school programs that prepare students to work and live in the community, (b) a broad range of adult service programs that can meet the various support needs of individuals with disabilities in employment and

community settings, and (c) comprehensive and cooperative transition planning between education and adult agencies for the purpose of developing services (Halloran & Simon, 1995). Several programs across the country conceptualized and adapted these components so that they could develop services and planning for transition in their localities.

Although the term transition was used in legislation and programs were being funded, there still was no definition of transition, no mandate for providing service, and no mechanism for funding other than model demonstration projects. Despite the lack of a federal prescription, some states focused on the anticipated service needs of youths with disabilities upon exiting high school and aimed to increase resources and reduce barriers. Yet, other states did little or nothing to create a system of transition service delivery, thus, creating a national pattern of transition service characterized by pockets of excellence and pockets of great need (Halloran & Simon, 1995).

It was not until 1990 that transition services were mandated. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was reauthorized and renamed as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (P. L. 101-476). IDEA defined transition as:

a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed with 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 adult education, adult services,

independent living, and/or community participation (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments, 1990, Section 602 [A], 20 U.S.C. 1401 [A]).

The law required that all students age 16 and older (age 14 or younger if appropriate) receiving special education to have transition services addressed in their individual educational program, including a statement of interagency responsibilities or linkages.

Transition evolved from a relatively simple concept of individualized planning to a multifaceted systems change movement. No longer is transition seen as a “buzz word” or passing fad. Today, the concept of transition is firmly entrenched in special education and adult service program policies, personnel preparation, and the parent and consumer empowerment movements (Everson, 1993). It is a movement that brings people together to better prepare youths with disabilities to enter the adult world. Local interagency teams are described in the literature as an appropriate vehicle for planning and implementing transition services (Everson & McNulty, 1992). These teams work together to plan and implement desired adult outcomes and supports necessary for success in adult life. The local interagency process is outcome-focused.

In order to provide effective transition services, to improve student outcomes, and to eliminate barriers, a mandate for interagency cooperation was written into key pieces of federal legislation including the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990, the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990. IDEA addressed interagency cooperation by requiring “. . . a statement of interagency responsibilities or linkages (or

both) before the student leaves the school setting . . . ” (Sec. 602[a] [20]). This statement must be included in the student’s individual education program.

The Rehabilitation Amendments Act of 1992 reflected Congress’ intention to strengthen transition services by using similar language to that of the IDEA. Both acts employed the same definition of transition and required interagency collaboration. Similarly, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990 stated that vocational education planning for individuals with disabilities must be coordinated between appropriate representatives of vocational education, special education, and state vocational rehabilitation agencies. Issues faced by students as they transition from secondary education to post-school opportunities and education was addressed by the School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA) of 1994. The focus of the STWOA was to build tightly integrated partnerships aimed at helping students move into successful adult roles regardless of their gender, race, or disability. This triad of legislative initiatives echoed the necessity to promote a smooth movement from the secondary education setting to successful adult outcomes including employment, independent living, and training for individuals with disabilities as well as cross-referencing the intent of IDEA.

### History of Transition in Virginia

Virginia has been a national leader in statewide collaborative efforts to help youths with disabilities achieve productive adult lives (Anderson, 1992). As early as the 1980s,

efforts focused on providing services and planning that promoted successful movement from high school to postsecondary education and training, employment, and independent living. In 1983, an Interagency Coordinating Council was established to develop a state plan to meet related service requirements for young adults with disabilities. This council set the stage for cooperation between human services agencies and educational entities. The role of this council was expanded in 1986 by the General Assembly to develop policies for the inclusion of transition planning in each student's IEP. Their vision was to promote the efficacy of transition in-services throughout the state by promoting and coordinating best practices.

Progress toward transition planning continued in the state. In February of 1990, 13 agencies, parents, consumers, and employers came together to form Virginia's Transition Task Force. The purpose of the task force was to direct the implementation of the Plan of Coordinated Transitional Services for Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities. This plan promoted both individual planning for transition from school to adult responsibilities and the provision of services, as needed, for all youths and young adults with disabilities in Virginia. This task force has been instrumental in increasing the awareness of transition services for students, families, employers, and service providers. A shared vision and common beliefs allowed the task force to embark on a strategic planning process to define a vigorous mission. The commitment from the task force was evident. The task force diligently worked on the development of policies and the identification of resources that foster the implementation of quality transition services and

planning statewide. The task force served as a model for localities in their efforts to develop and coordinate transition services for individuals with disabilities.

In the spring of 1993, state policy makers asked where Virginia schools stood in the implementation of policies integrating transition planning and services into the IEPs. These questions emerged with the initiation of Project UNITE (UNified Intercommunity Transition and Empowerment). Project UNITE is a federally funded transition systems change grant for the Commonwealth of Virginia. UNITE developed an approach to transition programming across the commonwealth that integrates services among educational systems, adult and human service agencies, communities, families, and consumers with disabilities who are involved in the transition process. Resources are directed to the local level through regional technical assistance centers that provide information, training, coordination, and consultation based on regional needs. The long-term goal of the Project UNITE is collaboration at the local level yielding self-sufficiency in coordinating and developing transition (Asselin, Anderson & Thuli, 1995).

The Southwest Virginia Transition Center within the Division of Vocational and Technical Education at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University was funded by the State Department of Education, Special Education Programs Division, in 1989. It was established as a field test of a comprehensive transition model for technical assistance to education and adult service agencies. The center was the first of its kind in the state and is now funded in concert with a federal systems change grant, Project UNITE. Currently, the center provides technical assistance to 40 of the 135 public school division in the



Commonwealth, as well as postsecondary institutions, adult service providers, and families.

### Transition Teams

The federal impetus for transition planning and the coordination of service delivery across agencies was met with a myriad of approaches at the state and local level. Interagency collaboration allows schools and community agencies to focus their collective expertise and combined resources on barriers faced by youths with disabilities. A rationale for developing teams such as an interagency transition team is the belief that group decisions provide a safeguard against individual errors in judgment (Friend & Cook, 1992). Moreover, teams are advantageous because they draw on the many resources and expertise brought by each individual member. Abelson and Woodman (1983) further defended the use of teams and supported the following notions: (a) a group offers a greater amount of knowledge and experience, (b) a greater number of possible approaches to a problem exist within a group, (c) participation in decision making increases acceptance of the decision, and (d) problem solving in a group involves greater communication and understanding of the decision. These advantages to teams are capitalized upon across educational settings.

## Multidisciplinary Teams

Over twenty years ago, Public Law 94-142 (The Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975) established as a federal requirement that multidisciplinary teams implement evaluation and placement procedures for children in special education programs. This requirement was based on the premise that no one person can diagnose and treat a child with a disability. Yet, it was felt that the skills from various professionals could be utilized to plan for students with different disabilities and characteristics. Therefore, a team approach was adapted. This landmark legislation required special education professionals, school personnel (e.g., psychologist, administrators, speech and language clinicians), and parents to work together to make decisions regarding the student's classification, placement, and development of the individualized educational program. These teams became the primary structure for planning and coordinating the delivery of special education and related services in the public school (Friend & Cook, 1992).

Multidisciplinary teams were envisioned as having the potential to enhance school-based services for students with disabilities by limiting the decision-making authority of one professional. However, research identified problems with the use of these teams. For instance, teams' functioning are adversely affected by several problem areas including: (a) use of unsystematic approaches to collecting and analyzing diagnostic information, (b) minimal parent or regular educator participation on the teams, (c) use of a loosely construed decision-making/planning process, (d) lack of interdisciplinary collaboration and

trust, (e) territoriality, (f) ambiguous role definition and accountability, and (g) lack of experience and training for professionals to work together (Friend & Cook, 1992; Kaiser & Woodman, 1985).

Multidisciplinary teams frequently referred to and used the regulations of the federal and state governments to impart their wisdom. Nevertheless, this created a political environment that was something less than appreciated by various school personnel. The field recognized the shortcomings of the multidisciplinary team concept and moved toward corrective measures. Among the problems most frequently cited as needing attention was the lack of preparation in effective collaboration and team participation. The teams moved away from combative approaches of telling their colleagues what to do and adopted an approach that adapted equal responsibility. Training resources and team development activities were developed in response to this need and addressed the problem areas. However, research needs to continue to study team interactions and effectiveness (Everson, 1993; Friend & Cook, 1992).

### Interagency Teams

More comprehensive and sophisticated approaches to transition planning have evolved since the introduction of multidisciplinary teams. Virginia was among the first states to recognize that transition planning entails more than just the administrative transfer of responsibility for program monitoring or case coordination from the public schools to adult services. Thus, precedents were set for individual planning, community

organization, and state-level interagency coordination which is reflected in IDEA. This collaborative approach has a vested interest in meeting individual transition needs of students. Interagency collaboration allows systems to be more effective and improves the quality of transition planning and services. These teams have proven “to be a viable forum for promoting cooperative activities and affirming the commitment of multiple agencies toward a common goal” (Bates, Bronkema, Ames, & Hess, 1992, p. 124).

Interagency teams operate at the individual student, state, and local levels within effective transition programs. The purpose of these planning teams varies, yet they all share the simple goal of improving the lives of persons with disabilities. Individual student planning teams meet annually to develop and implement a transition component as part of the IEP team for specific students. The purpose of a state-level task force is to shape policy and regulations, to provide a framework for local planning activities, to advocate for state appropriations, and to demonstrate interagency cooperation through state interagency agreements. At the local level, the purpose of the team is to assess, plan, change, monitor, and evaluate local efforts within a framework established by the state task force. These teams can be a powerful tool in improving the capacity for delivering effective transition programs and services, as well as bringing about multifaceted and long-range system change.

In the past, agencies primarily responsible for serving individuals with disabilities operated in isolation or from uncoordinated agendas. Local-level interagency transition committees enable service providers to work together to identify future clients; project

plans for appropriate service needs; share resources and personnel; share in evaluation procedures; provide follow-up on grades; and develop creative support alternatives when traditional service options are unavailable (Elliott, et al., 1991). Such teams are necessary to:

- provide an exchange of information about local, regional, and statewide agencies services and organizations that serve students with disabilities,
- fill in the service gaps and avoid duplication of transition services,
- identify strategies to improve transition for all students in the locality,
- help to increase awareness about disability issues in the community, and
- clarify the role of agencies in the transition process (Critchlow, 1996).

The establishment of interagency transition teams allows for more collaborative agency planning and service provisions for youths with disabilities. No one agency has the fiscal or personnel resources, the knowledge, or the legislative mandate to plan, deliver, and evaluate the multitude of individual student and client services and systems change needs necessary for comprehensive and effective transition planning. In fact, effective transition planning and service provisions depend upon functional linkages between school, rehabilitation services, and other adult service agencies. Organized, productive, and resourceful local interagency transition teams are key to the foundation of effective and cohesive transition programming. Although the movement for interagency collaboration has strengthened, empirical investigations are just beginning to emerge.

Anderson (1992) examined the impact of formal interagency transition teams on the delivery of transition services. She surveyed the primary person responsible for transition services (e.g., special education director, transition specialist, special education teacher) in all 135 school divisions in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Data showed only half the school divisions in Virginia had teams in place and the impact was limited. The data may have been more meaningful had it asked more specific questions regarding the composition and practices of the team.

In 1994 Virginia's UNified Intercommunity Transition and Empowerment for Youth with Disabilities (Project UNITE) conducted a follow-up to this study. The respondents were asked to indicate the level of implementation in four categories of transition services including coordinated planning, integration, support services, and administrative support. The data was then examined to determine the frequencies of positive and negative responses with the identified transition services. The findings indicated the majority of school divisions had a local level interagency transition team. Further, this 1994 follow-up study showed the percentage of school districts with formal interagency teams increased by approximately 10 % over the past three years. Although data from this study is noteworthy, it also did not ask respondents about their team's characteristics and practices. Therefore, little is known about the specific makeup, characteristics, and practices of these teams (Anderson, 1992; Asselin, Anderson, & Thuli, 1995).

### Characteristics of Effective Teams

Different characteristics of teams stressed in the social sciences literature can be used to further clarify the definition of a team. A team is “any group of people who need each other to accomplish results” (Senge, 1992, p.354). Perceiving oneself as part of a team and feeling others are forming a team are defining characteristics (Friend & Cook, 1992). Individuals cannot be part of a team unless they perceive themselves to be valued members of that team. Moreover, team members must also be perceived by others as participating in a team. Individuals become a team when their behavior is regulated by a common set of norms or values (Abelson & Woodman, 1983). This defining characteristic of team behavior motivates individuals to participate in team activities and establish a set of roles for members. Another defining characteristic is interdependency among team members. In other words, an event that affects one member is likely to affect the rest of the team, and team results will affect each individual member (Friend & Cook, 1992).

The effectiveness of a team can be viewed as an end state rather than a process. Team effectiveness depends on the level of effort team members devote to the team’s tasks, the level of knowledge and skills within the team, and the strategies the team uses to accomplish its work. The purpose of a team is to achieve a common goal held by its members. A common philosophy provides the basic foundation on which the interagency

transition team can build its goals, and thereby identify appropriate activities. People talk about “team building” because it takes time and energy to turn a group of people into a team. Forming a team is different from feeling and acting like a team. There are certain techniques that can help members really become a team. This section will discuss team characteristics which make a team effective and present team models.

<p><b>Purpose</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Common identity and tenets</li><li>Common tasks</li><li>Sense of potency/success</li></ul>
<p><b>Composition</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Clear definition of team membership</li><li>Recognition of individual contributions</li><li>Balanced roles</li></ul>
<p><b>Interaction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Mutual trust</li><li>Sense of relationship</li><li>Open/direct conflict</li><li>Common base of information</li><li>High-level questions-asking and listening</li><li>Healthy level of stress</li><li>Toleration of errors</li><li>Flexibility and responsiveness</li></ul>
<p><b>Structure and Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Clear understanding/acceptance of group structure</li><li>Periodic attention to group maintenance</li><li>Recognition/mitigation of outside forces</li></ul>

*Figure 1: Characteristics of Effective Teams*

Harvey and Drolet (1994) identified 17 characteristics of effective teams. These characteristics are divided into four categories. The categories focus on the (a) purpose, (b) composition, (c) interaction, and (d) structure and context of the team (See Figure 1).



These 17 characteristics help teams to measure their effectiveness. Teams with high levels of implementation of these characteristics are effective; those without are weak (Harvey & Drolet, 1994). Team building is the result of attending to these characteristics that demarcate effective teamwork. Teams that are purpose driven are strong cohesive groups with a sense of who they are and a clear, definable identity. When individuals hold a common sense of where they are heading, they acquire a greater sense of being a team.

The composition is an important function as discussed by Harvey and Drolet (1994) as contributing to a team's effectiveness. This characteristic simply is knowing the persons who are and are not part of the group. Unclear boundaries occur when individuals are sometimes in, sometimes out, thus, making the group less of a team and more of an arena for discussion. Team composition has an expectation for consistent attendance and membership. Effective teams have members who are there and who are active.

Team interaction focuses on mutual trust and the basis for that trust. Interdependence, consistency, honesty, affability and extension of trust are five conditions that account for mutual trust within a team. Interdependency among team members demonstrates a need for each other's expertise, skill, and trust. By establishing two-way interactions--pairs of people who say they need each other--the capacity of trust in the team is increased. Hence, resulting in a more effective team. Teams also need to have a sense of relationship. When individuals understand each other as people and have the opportunity to enter into relationships, they feel more like colleagues and team members.

Access to a common base of information helps team members gain a sense of importance and inclusion within the team. Further, teams must manage stress. This concept is a commonly misunderstood reality of productive teams. Allowing for levels of stress that range neither too high nor too low induces creative, productive teamwork (Harvey & Drolet, 1994).

There is no right way to structure a team. What is important is that members value this structure, and understand and accept their role within the team. If members are committed, effective teamwork can be accomplished. Yet, an occasional “time out” may be necessary to maintain a positive team climate. During these pauses the team turns its tasks to attend to group function, and to debrief feelings and misunderstandings among members. Effective leaders also play a role within the team’s structure and context. To be effective this leader must find a middle ground. Team leaders need to be realistic about the team possibilities. They cannot be too limiting nor too “easy going.” Effective teams make careful and honest assessments of their environment. They know and understand their limitations and are realistic about their potential achievements (Friend & Cook, 1992).

The literature on cooperative learning and field experiences in school restructuring delineated other essential elements of effective teams (Thousand & Villa, 1992). These essential elements are described as follows:

- positive interdependence: a mutual feeling that “we are all in this together;”
- frequent opportunities for face-to-face interaction among all team members;

- development of small group interpersonal skills that facilitate collaboration; and
- group processing: regular discussion of the team's functioning and the setting of goals for improving the relationships and effectively completing tasks.

Thousand and Villa (1992) posited that a team is a set of interpersonal relationships structured to achieve established goals. Teams function as individual members interact. The effectiveness and productivity of the team is a function of its members' expertise and task abilities.

Johnson and Johnson (1991) conceptualized an effective team as accomplishing its goals, maintaining itself internally, and developing and changing in a way that improves effectiveness. An effective group has the ability to integrate these activities in their interactions. Within these core activities there are several characteristics which together make up a model to evaluate the effectiveness of a group. Thus, an effective team would have (a) clear, cooperative goals to which every member is committed, (b) accurate and effective communication of ideas and feelings, (c) distributed participation and leadership, (d) appropriate and effective decision-making procedures, (e) productive controversy, (f) high levels of trust, acceptance, and support among its members and a high level of cohesion, (g) constructive management of power and conflict, and (h) adequate problem-solving procedures.

## Characteristics Affecting Teams

The process of reviewing the literature provided the basis for choosing tentative characteristics that might influence the effectiveness of interagency transition teams in successfully facilitating the transition process for young adults with disabilities. These characteristics were chosen as prompts for the researcher's initial guidance. The nature of the research meant that these characteristics could prove to be irrelevant and be changed throughout the study. These characteristics include the team (1) composition, (2) procedure, and (3) context.

Composition. Group composition refers to the nature and attributes of group members. A clear definition of team membership includes specifying group tasks and member roles, group size, balanced roles, and methods of their coordination. The group composition is one of the most frequently studied variables of teams. Typically, research studies have assessed the performance of teams and related that performance to measure aspects of group composition. One study that related team effectiveness to composition and other potential design variables was reported by Campion, Medsker, and Higgs (1993). This study examined 80 work groups in a financial service firm. The results showed broad evidence of relationships between effectiveness and 19 design variables clustered into five categories: team design, interdependence among team members, composition, intra-group process, and contextual factors. The researchers concluded that the team size was positively related to the effectiveness of the team. Further, a study

conducted by Magjuka and Baldwin (1991) found that larger team size, greater with-in heterogeneity, and greater access to information was positively related to team effectiveness. Familiarity among members is another aspect of group composition studied for its relationship to team performance. Results indicated that lower levels of familiarity were associated with lower levels of productivity (Watson, Krumar, & Michaelsen, 1991). Thus, teams that are composed of individuals who are familiar with one another carry out their work with greater effectiveness than teams composed of strangers.

Procedures. Procedures may affect the effectiveness and efficiency of individual team members within the team as well as the team as a whole. If the team's processes and procedures used in carrying out team tasks allow for collaborative work efforts then the team will be effective (Abelson & Woodman, 1983). Teams need a structure or framework in which to operate. Operational principles and a vision provide direction for the team's plans, tasks, and activities. Commitment from individual members transpires through team identity with clearly defined, worthwhile goals.

Group goals, goal setting, and a common vision relate to group motivation. Goals help to raise member effort, leading to increased group performance (Weingart & Weldon, 1991). Goals for group performance often exist simultaneously with goals for individual performance. Given the amount of work that the teams want to undertake, it is suggested that teams establish and follow meeting procedures early in the process. Suggested procedures include (a) a written agenda that is distributed to members prior to each

meeting, (b) an annual calendar of meeting times to allow an appointed person to run the meeting and help people to remain on task, and, (c) a person to take minutes that are distributed along with the agenda prior to the next meeting.

Context. Researchers described team effectiveness as dynamically interdependent with organizational context, boundaries, and team development (Sundstrom, De Meuse, Futrell, 1990). The organizational context is composed of features external to the team such as a reward systems and training resources. Such factors can augment team effectiveness by providing resources needed for performance and continued viability as a work unit. After a review of several studies, Guzzo and Dickson (1996) found the power of context influenced the effectiveness of the team. The context shapes the dynamics between individual team members as well as the team as a whole. Trust among team members is vital to the team context and must be developed and maintained. Team members need to feel they can be innovative in developing and implementing new ideas. A team climate that establishes and recognizes high performance standards generates respect among its members. These concepts are seen as contributing factors of the effective teams.

Team leadership is considered another part of the context which influences team effectiveness. The team leader is responsible for sustaining the team's vision, keeping team members energized, and moving forward on the group tasks. In order for leaders to be effective they must have a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of team

members. Eden (1990) studied the effects of leader expectations on group performance. The purpose of the field experiment was to raise group leaders' expectations of their group performance in a training setting. The groups were platoons in the Israeli Defense Forces in training that lasted 11 weeks. The research indicated platoons training under leaders who held high expectations performed better on physical and cognitive tests at the end of training than did comparison platoons.

Finch, Gregson, and Faulkner (1991) examined the leadership behaviors exhibited by successful vocational education administrators. They interviewed administrators from seven states, as well as instructors who worked with them, to identify descriptions of vocational administrative leadership roles. Results of the study showed that successful vocational administrators draw from a range of attributes to accomplish something. These seven attribute areas include: physical, intellectual, personal, ethical, human relations, management, and cognitive. This study built on an earlier study conducted by Moss and Liang (1990). Their work examined thousands of leadership-related studies and publications produced over a 40-year period. Consequently, they prepared both a definition and an explanatory model on leadership roles of vocational education administrators. To accompany the model a literature-based list of 35 attributes was prepared.

### Team Effectiveness Models

Progress in studying and managing teams depends on having a well-accepted, measurable criterion of effectiveness. Although many experts agree that effectiveness includes more than performance, the “more” remains an issue (Sundstrom, De Meuse, & Futrell, 1990). In organizational sciences, as in many other disciplines, effectiveness always refers to goal attainment. Beyond this primary definition, the effectiveness of teams in organizations implies multiple criteria. Abelson & Woodman (1983) found a team to be effective when:

- its productive output exceeded or met organizational standards for quality and quantity,
- the group experience satisfied, more than frustrated, the personal needs of team members, and
- the group process used in carrying out team tasks increased, or at least maintained, the team’s capability to work collaboratively on future tasks.

Other models attempt to show an understanding of team effectiveness by building a conceptual framework based on current research, theory, and applied literature on teams. The models that follow discuss how team effectiveness can be measured.



### Process-Gain/ Process-Loss

Two major approaches differ in their assessment of team effectiveness. The first approach measures group effectiveness using a process loss model. In this model, group process is considered only as a negative effect on group production. The other approach emphasizes productivity gains due to group process (Guilar, 1991; Hill, 1982).

The process loss model serves as a foundation for the development of training techniques designed to improve group process. Research has shown that reduction of process loss will improve team effectiveness. Such interventions strive to limit the amount of non-task interaction among members. The Delphi Technique is an example of reducing status and unnecessary interaction among members. This technique is used in a group whose task is to confront novel or unusual problems. The process aims at providing members with each other's ideas and evaluative feedback while avoiding the face-to-face interaction. This technique removes the usual group restraints of commitment and allows for the full experience, expertise, and critical abilities of the participants to solve problems. Participants of the Delphi Technique are only given access to summaries of data on which to comment, and are not made aware of the status of other respondents. The process continues until consensus is reached.

A study conducted by Steiner (1972) found that most groups fail to accomplish their potential because of a faulty process. An objective of teamwork is to minimize the losses due to unnecessary interaction so actual productivity can be as close as possible to the actual group productivity as possible. Potential productivity is achieved when an

individual or group of individuals uses its resources to meet the demands of the task. This process makes the team effective. For example, if one member knows the solution to a group's problem, potential productivity would result from the that person communicating the solution and the team accepting it. However, if the individual's solution is not communicated to or not accepted by other members of the team, then actual productivity falls below potential productivity due to a faulty process. Therefore, poor communication can lead to loss due to a faulty process. Other intra-group problems which lead to loss due to a faulty process include the group's lack of knowledge about each other's resources, failure to understand how each member can contribute to the overall effort, competition or rivalry between members, and a lack of interest in group success. The important factors in group performance are task demands, member resources, and intra-group processes. The more resources relevant to the task possessed by group members, the greater the potential productivity (Jewel & Reitz, 1981).

Other studies found that groups can achieve process gains and perform better than individuals acting alone. Miner (1984) conducted a study typical of small group research in this area. In this study, 69 four-person groups solved specified problems. In his sample, group performance was significantly better than the performance of the best selected individual. Brainstorming is an example of a group dynamic designed primarily to increase process gains. In this technique, participants use a predetermined format to induce creativity and a large number of ideas through group discussion. In the early stages of discussion, participants avoid evaluation to encourage the spontaneous and creative

generation of many ideas. The assumption is that group discussion enhances creative output.

Group process gain and group process loss continues to be a controversy in the study of group effectiveness. Hill (1982) concluded that evidence is mixed supporting these two models and further research is need to describe group process and to compare group process and productivity with their potential.

### Group Synergy

Hackman (1987) proposed a model of group effectiveness by studying the group process or group synergy. Synergism, as defined in the Webster dictionary, is the “interaction of elements that when combined produce a total effect that is greater than the sum of the individual elements, contributions, etc.” (Costello et. al., 1995, p.1355). In essence, a group achieves greater effectiveness than the group’s best member could achieve working alone. The intent of any group work is essentially synergy. After all, if the combined output of the group does not exceed individual outputs of group members working independently, why bother with a group? According to Hackman (1987), group synergy is founded in group interaction process and cannot be preprogrammed by organizational planners or managers. The following are synergistic factors in group process proposed by Hackman (1987):

- Group cohesiveness and “spirit” develop and lead to higher levels of effort.

- Members learn from one another, which results in greater short- and long-term performance.
- Shared knowledge among members leads to creative and higher-quality performance strategies, decisions, and performance.
- Effective coordination and integration result in high performance.

Little theoretical development or field research has been done in the area of synergy and group interaction process (Guilar, 1991). However, Hill (1982) concluded after a review of nearly 140 articles related to group process that two perspectives contribute to group synergy: the assembly bonus effect and heterogeneity within the group. The assembly bonus effect refers to the effective interaction that occurs when groups combine member knowledge and produce higher quality decision than would be made by the group's best member. Michaelsen, Watson, and Black (1989) reported on assembly bonus effect. Their data were drawn from 222 team-learning groups who participated in organizational behavior courses for a five-year period. Each group remained intact for the duration of the course and worked on a variety of group tasks, including a series of multiple choice tests, completed first by individual group members and then by the group as a whole. Michaelsen et al. found that the average individual answered 74.2% of the items correctly, the best members of the group averaged 82.6% correct, and the groups averaged 89.9% correct. The researchers concluded that groups outperform the best individual group member, thus yielding an assembly bonus effect.

Another perspective for group synergy comes from the heterogeneity within the group. Synergy involves the mixing of resources such as members' expertise, information, and material or financial resources. Heterogeneity is a direct function of the team composition. Heterogeneity of group composition is the extent to which members differ from each other on certain individual characteristics such as sex, age, race, abilities, or other traits. In terms of external outcomes of the team, heterogeneous groups tend to have certain advantages. When overall group ability is held constant, groups whose members differ in skills and personality profiles perform more effectively than groups whose members have similar skills and profiles (Jewel & Reitz, 1981). Therefore, in setting up a team to deal with a problem, this research suggests bringing together component individuals with a range of experience, backgrounds, and perspectives.

### Task Elements of Team Effectiveness

The study of team effectiveness would not be complete without considering the group's tasks. The nature of the task is of prime importance in the design of effective teams, or even in the decision to have a team rather than individual work. For example, independent and creative tasks are best executed by experts in that area, while interdependent functions and goal setting are suitable for groups or teams (Sherwood & Hoylman, 1978). Teams represent the best design when requirements include interdependence and widely spread acceptance of the solution. For highly motivated group performance, teams should conform to three criteria: (a) the task should be

meaningful to group members, (b) members should take personal responsibility for the task, and (c) members should receive knowledge of the results of their work on the task (Hackman, 1986). Success in accomplishing the group's task is a source of member satisfaction with the group. And if a member is satisfied, the team is effective.

### Summary

The research presented in this section provided several models to measure effectiveness within a team. The current literature selected for this review points to several differing features salient to team effectiveness. It is evident from this review that there is not a consensus on a model for team effectiveness.

### Chapter Summary

This chapter presented several studies and theories on team effectiveness and served as a starting point for examining the characteristics and practices of effective interagency transition teams. It is evident from this review that empirical research on interagency transition teams is lacking. Therefore, the proposed study attempts to fill this gap by seeking data regarding characteristics and practices of exemplary local-level transition teams in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

This literature review provided an outline for defining the characteristics and practices of exemplary local-level interagency transition teams. The first section explored

the concept of transition and an overview of the various transition teams. Next, a review of current literature examining characteristics and practices of effective teams was presented. A discussion of theories for measuring team effectiveness concluded the review of literature. Chapter three describes the methodology of this study in detail.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Research Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify those factors which make local-level interagency transition teams effective in facilitating the transition from high school to successful post-school outcomes for youths with disabilities. This chapter describes the (a) research design, (b) participant selection, (c) instrumentation, (d) research procedures, and (e) treatment of data. The following questions guided the research:

1. What are the characteristics, including the composition, procedure, and context, of exemplary local-level interagency transition teams?
2. What are the effective practices used by exemplary local-level interagency transition teams, as perceived by team members, to facilitate the transition process for students with disabilities?

#### Research Design

A qualitative method of research was used for this study. The qualitative paradigm can be characterized by the belief that to fully understand phenomenon, it needs to be experienced in its natural context. Unlike quantitative research, methods of qualitative research move away from simplifying the complexity of reality. Rather, qualitative studies



delve into the complexities through in-depth information and avenues of inquiry discovered by the researcher during the data collection process (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). In qualitative research, people, settings, and the phenomenon of interest are examined holistically. To understand the phenomenon, the qualitative researcher listens to the participants' experiences and builds a theory through themes and patterns reoccurring in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Qualitative research does not settle on predefined constructs, definitions, and hypotheses, but isolates and defines themes throughout the research process (McCracken, 1988). Qualitative modes of analysis have “shown the promise of effectivity in fulfilling the need for initiating more subtle and responsive ways through which to explore contemporary socio-cultural contexts of pedagogy” (Trifonas, 1995, p. 97). Qualitative methods are most useful and powerful when used to see the respondent's world by giving them a “voice” (Lather, 1992; McCracken, 1988; Rubin & Rubin, 1994; Silverman, 1995). This study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and practices of interagency transition teams from the perspective of its members. Therefore, a qualitative investigation was appropriate for this study because of the descriptive nature.

A qualitative interview served as the research method for this study. McCracken (1988) promotes the interview as a qualitative method of choice when “cultural categories, assumptions, and themes are objects of investigation . . .” (p. 5). Qualitative interviewing was practical for this study because the research sought to learn more about the characteristics and practices of exemplary interagency transition teams. McCracken

suggested that qualitative research mines the terrain rather than surveying it. Hence, the interview schedule was designed such that participants were allowed to voice their experience in their own words.

The interview seeks information “from the person who has a singular view because of his expertise, position, or insight; the respondent with special information, and/or the interviewee who is central to a situation or otherwise holds a unique position” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 157). Marshall and Rossman (1989) stated that participants should be selected for interviewing not only because they have an overall view of the “culture,” but also because they are knowledgeable about the “culture’s” policies, past history, and future plans. Rubin and Rubin (1995) supported this statement. They added that interviewees are individuals who know the culture well and take responsibility to explain what it all means.

### Participants

In the Commonwealth of Virginia, transition teams developed as early as the mid 1980s to meet mandates of the IDEA legislation. In 1995, 67 school divisions reported having a functioning interagency team (Asselin, Anderson, & Thuli, 1995). Two types of interagency teams operate in the commonwealth, the individual team at the building level and the local level team. The goal of the individual team is to assist youths with disabilities to move from school to adult life through the development of an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The IEP is different for each student depending on their interests,

strengths, and personal goals. The individual transition team changes from student to student. The information generated from the student's interests, strengths, and personal goals determines who should be part of the team. Having all potential direct service providers, family and community members, and teachers of the student on the team is critical if the team is to develop a successful, realistic, and practical transition plan.

An interagency transition team at the local level is the other type of team. The purpose of this team is broader than the individual team. The local level interagency team works to coordinate, improve, and change the system serving all people with disabilities in their communities. Members of this team vary from locality to locality and may include representatives from secondary schools, human services agencies, consumers, parents, postsecondary institutes, social security, independent living centers, and job training councils. These members meet on a regular basis to promote collaboration, build trust, promote teamwork, exchange information, and address barriers to interagency work. The ultimate focus of any interagency transition team is to improve the support and advocacy services that are provided to individuals with disabilities in order to enhance the quality of their lives. This study was concerned with investigating local-level interagency teams.

For this study, I interviewed a transition specialist, a Department of Rehabilitative Services school counselor, and a family representative or advocate from each nominated team. The literature states that the special educator (e.g. transition specialist) and the rehabilitation counselor are the pivotal people in the transition process (Everson, 1993). The transition specialist has a mandated responsibility to provide "appropriate"

educational and transitional services for students. By the age of 14, a student should be targeted for interagency transition services. At this time, the local rehabilitation counselor is contacted to provide additional services. Some of the services provided by rehabilitation include guidance and counseling, vocational evaluation, medical services, vocational training, transportation, equipment and supplies, job placement services, and follow-up services. Systematic planning of services between the school and the Department of Rehabilitative Services is an important step in the transition process for students with disabilities. For these reasons, the transition specialist and the Department of Rehabilitative Services school counselor were two of the team members interviewed for this study.

A family representative or advocate from each team was interviewed as well. These members are important to the transition team because they have a unique perspective on the transition process. Typically, the family representative or advocate has had experience assisting a child through the entire transition process.

A range of 12 to 24 respondents were identified for this study. McCracken (1988) suggested that selection of respondents must be made accordingly--"less is more" (p.17). He stated that "it is more important to work longer, and with greater care, with a few people than more superficially with many of them" (McCracken, 1988, p.17). I interviewed respondents until little new information was learned from subsequent interviews. Ely (1991) posited the point at which the researcher is not learning any more new material is called saturation. Therefore, I continued to interview team members until

the narratives started to repeat the same events and I arrived at the same variety of interpretations.

The nature of the inquiry and homogeneity of the research group make it inappropriate to generalize findings to any other group. In qualitative research the issue is not one of generalizability. Thus, the participants of this study were selected to give me an opportunity to delve into the complicated characteristics and practices of team culture.

### Instrumentation

The interview schedule was designed to identify and describe the perceived characteristics and practices of exemplary interagency transition teams. Questions were open-ended and included probes to gain further understanding of the characteristics and practices of interagency transition teams. The purpose of the interview was to gain rich and diverse data from the perspective of the participants that were pertinent to the research questions. As a method of inquiry, interviewing “is a powerful way to gain insight into educational issues” (Seidman, 1991, p.7). Rubin and Rubin (1995) stated that interviewing is appropriate when the purpose of the research is to unravel complicated relationships and slowly evolving events. The interview approach is appropriate for this study because of its practicality and flexibility as a research tool (Kerlinger, 1986).

The Behavioral Event Interview (BEI), as developed by McClland at McBer and Company, guided the interview process. In this study I used the BEI to learn more about critical incidents experienced by the interviewees while they served as exemplary

interagency transition team members. This element was advantageous because it allowed me to gain access to behaviors, thoughts, and feelings relevant only to the study. A copy of the interview schedule can be found in Appendix A.

A four-part interview schedule was developed to obtain information regarding the characteristics and practices of exemplary interagency transition teams. The first part of the interview asked interviewees to describe why they believed they were nominated as an exemplary team in facilitating transition services and planning for students with disabilities by providing the researcher with examples. Part two asked for background information regarding their team. Questions focused on the frequency in which the team met, number of members, length of time served on the team, and their specific roles. The third part asked the respondents to identify team characteristics. Specifically, interviewees were asked to provide information about the composition, procedures, and context of their team. The final part of the interview asked the respondents to describe one event or situation in which they believed they were most effective in facilitating the transition success for students with disabilities.

### Procedure

The Commonwealth of Virginia is divided into four Department of Rehabilitative Services regions (northern, central, eastern, and southwestern) to serve the technical assistance needs of education and agency personnel. A regional transition coordinator in each region assists education and human services agencies in conducting assessments of

the availability, access, and quality of transition services for students with disabilities.

Three of these coordinators are housed in a regional department of rehabilitative services and one in a university technical assistance center. Each coordinator serves 15 to 40 school divisions.

Regional transition coordinators were asked to nominate two local interagency transition teams in their region that they perceived as being most successful in facilitating transition services for students with disabilities. The transition coordinators were asked to identify the most- and second-most successful interagency transition team in their region as well as to provide examples of why they perceived these teams they nominated to be exemplary (See Appendix B). The second team served as a back-up in the event that: (1) members from the top-ranked team were unavailable to participate in the study, or (2) saturation was not achieved with 12 members. From each local team the transition specialist, the rehabilitation counselor, and the family representative or advocate were selected to be interviewed. These members are identified in the literature and the IDEA as active members of the team, and therefore were chosen to be interviewed for this investigation.

The transition coordinator for each region served as the initial contact person. Transition coordinators provided the researcher with a list of all members from the team they nominated. The list included the phone numbers and addresses of the team members. I contacted each of the nominated team member by telephone to ask for permission to interview them. After consent from the individual was given, an interview date was

scheduled. Next, a letter of describing the study in more detail and congratulating them on their nomination was sent to each participant (See Appendix C).

Due to the extensive travel and time constraints of this study, I chose to conduct the interviews by telephone. The interview methodology was particularly effective in this design because it is “a sharply focused, rapid, highly intensive process” (McCracken, 1993, p.7). Consequently, telephone interviews proved to be compatible with the design of this study. Each interview was completed within a 30 to 45 minute time frame.

During each interview, I asked the interviewee background questions specific to their involvement on the interagency transition team. I then asked the interviewee to describe their role on the team. After gaining this information, the interviewee was asked to recall a specific situation when they or others on their team were particularly effective in facilitating transition planning and services for students with disabilities. The interviewee was asked to give attention to team procedure or context in this situation.

The interview sessions were designed to last approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed in preparation for the last stage of the data analysis process. Taping allowed for information otherwise missed due to the interviewer’s lack of experience or preoccupation with the myriad of tasks associated with interviewing (Yin, 1989). Further, McCracken (1988) expressed that interviews must be on tape because note taking created an unnecessary and dangerous distraction.



### Preparation for Fieldwork

Interview skills were developed by conducting two trial interviews. The practice interviews were taped so they could be evaluated and critiqued by an individual with expertise in qualitative research. This process was repeated until interview skills were deemed satisfactory by the evaluator. Further, the practice interview provided information to help perfect the interview schedule and the process.

### Treatment of Data

This section describes the procedures utilized to analyze data collected from the interviews. After interviews were conducted, I completed a summary of each event. The purposes of the summary were to organize the meaningful information gained from the interviews as well as to provide a mechanism for the researcher to better facilitate the analysis and coding of the transcripts.

Constant comparative analysis was used to systematically guide the research and analysis procedure. Marshall and Rossman (1989) suggested that in qualitative research, data collection and analysis go hand in hand. The tapes from the interviews were transcribed to hard copy (Microsoft Word) and computer files. Using the Ethnograph computer program incidents and words were coded. I reviewed the data and looked for similar items to be organized into categories or themes. Throughout this process, notes

were written on prevalent and new ideas to uncover properties of the category. In this research, an incident was defined as a word, activity, or event.

As the process was repeated, the categories became “saturated,” in terms of incidents becoming repetitive. Saturation “is the point at which the interviewees repeat the same events . . .” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 73). As the process of interviewing and cooperative analysis continued, more patterns became evident. The patterns and repeated occurrences led to the formation of themes. Themes emerge as statements of meaning running through all or most of the pertinent data (Ely, 1991).

### Interview Analysis

A step-by-step description is included to enable replication of the research.

1. Interview the informant.
2. Summarize individual interviews.
3. Transcribe each interview.
4. Convert transcriptions to ASCII and copy to Ethnograph.
5. Type in identifiers.
6. Enter necessary information beside interview data.
7. Code potential investigative words, phrases, or sentences and attach to code words.
8. Search and reflect.
9. Develop categories.

10. Place words within categories.
11. Develop themes.
12. Using Ethnograph, query each record about theme and note context of use.
13. Repeat the process and look for patterns.

The above process allowed me to systematically analyze the data. This analysis consisted of examining, categorizing, combining, and recombining the information which addressed the questions of this study.

Validity and reliability criteria are products of quantitative research to determine credibility. In qualitative research a credible, trustworthy study is one that offers a correct interpretation of the data (Ely, 1991; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The minimum requirement for assessing validity in qualitative research should enlist the techniques of triangulation, reflexivity, and member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Triangulation is critical in establishing trustworthiness. This idea expands beyond the psychometric definition of multiple measures to include multiple data sources, methods, and theoretical schemes (Lather, 1991). The following measures were implemented to increase the credibility of this study. First, the data collected came closer to reality by having interagency transition team members describe how their team's functions contributed to students' transition success rather than asking them to rate the frequency in which they engaged in such practices. The research also gained credibility by having team members provide specific examples (through the use of the BEI) of how they and other members were most

successful in assisting students with disabilities in their transition from school to adult roles.

The credibility of those responding can become a matter of perspective. Hearing from more than one source provided information from differing perspectives and contributed to the triangulation of data. I achieved a degree of triangulation by asking each transition coordinator to nominate the interagency transition team they perceived as being most effective. Triangulation of findings means “watching for the convergence of at least two pieces of data” (Ely, 1991, p. 97). The nomination process as well as interviewing more than one member per team added further information from multiple sources, thus contributing to triangulation. The convergence of data across interviews with the three team members provided the most significant claim to study credibility. Further, authenticity of the study was protected by having only one researcher perform all interviews from a standard interview schedule (Silverman, 1993).

### Summary

A qualitative design was selected to frame the research procedures for this study. The central purpose of the investigation was to uncover effective characteristics and practices of exemplary interagency transition teams. The chapter outlined the qualitative approach to research and justified its use for this study.

Exemplary interagency transition teams were nominated. Twelve team members were interviewed to gain a better understanding of how interagency transition teams facilitate successful transition outcomes for students with disabilities.

Procedures for data collection and treatment of data are explained in depth. Additionally, the methodology is explained to show how the reliability and validity was established in this study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Findings

#### Introduction

The primary objective of the study was to identify those factors which make local-level interagency transition teams effective in facilitating the transition from high school to successful post-school outcomes for youths with disabilities. More specifically this research study sought to:

1. Describe the characteristics, including the composition, procedure, and context, of local-level exemplary interagency transition teams.
2. Describe the effective practices used by exemplary local-level interagency transition teams, as perceived by team members, to facilitate the transition process for students with disabilities.

#### Methodology

To identify and describe the characteristics and practices utilized by exemplary local-level interagency transition teams in the facilitation of effective transition planning and services, the four regional transition coordinators in the Commonwealth of Virginia were asked to nominate the most exemplary team and second most exemplary team in

their service area (northern, central, eastern, and southwestern). There were no specific criteria given to guide the selection. Instead, the coordinators were asked to provide examples of why they perceived the teams they nominated were exemplary in facilitating the transition from high school to successful post-school outcomes for young people with disabilities. From the teams nominated as most exemplary, the special education, rehabilitation, and parent members were selected for interviews.

The interview schedule used for this study consisted of four parts. The first part asked the interviewees to describe why they believed their team was nominated as being exemplary in facilitating transition and planning for students with disabilities. Part two focused on the logistic of the team. For example, interviewees were asked questions about the number of team members and how often the team met. The third part centered around the team characteristics. Specifically, the interviewee was asked what characteristics and practices a team needed in order to be successful in facilitating the movement from high school to post-school outcomes for young adults with disabilities. The final part of the interview asked the interviewees to describe one event or situation in which they believed their team to be most effective in contributing to transition success for students with disabilities.

The length of the interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes and they were tape recorded. Prompts were used throughout the interview to further explore interviewees' meanings of data. The audio tapes were transcribed, then coded and analyzed with the assistance of the computer software program Ethnograph. Next, the responses were

examined within the teams and across different teams. This process identified patterns within the responses. An analysis of the patterns led to the verification of characteristics and practices that influenced the effectiveness of local-level interagency transition teams' involvement in transitioning young adults with disabilities into adult roles.

### Description of the Participants

Teams were nominated from each of the four Department of Rehabilitative Services regions in the Commonwealth of Virginia. These regions included the areas of northern, central, eastern, and southwestern Virginia. The first and second-ranked exemplary teams in each of these regions were nominated by the regional transition coordinator. The second-ranked team was nominated for this study in the event that the members from the first-ranked exemplary team could not participate or saturation was not achieved with the first 12 members. The regional transition coordinators provided names of the transition specialist, Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) school counselor, and parent representative from each of these teams.

The transition specialist and DRS school counselor were selected because the literature states that these individuals are pivotal in the transition process (Everson, 1993). The transition specialist has a mandated responsibility to provide "appropriate" educational and transition services for students. Generally, the transition specialist establishes its strongest linkage with local DRS school counselors who provide additional services a young person may need in making a successful transition. In Virginia, DRS



school counselors are the initial contact for all individuals with disabilities who require additional adult services or referral to other agencies. Parent representatives were selected to participate in this study because of the unique perspective they bring to the team. Typically, this member has a lifelong interest and involvement in their child's transition to adulthood. For these reasons, from each of the four teams, the transition specialist, the Department of Rehabilitative Services school counselor, and a parent representative were interviewed.

All 12 of the top-ranked exemplary teams' members nominated by the regional transition coordinators agreed to be interviewed. Ten of the 12 interviewees were female, two were male. The time of service on teams by the interviewees ranged from six months to six years. The average length of time as members of interagency transition team was four years for all 12 interviewees. In addition, many of the interviewees were active players in the original development of their teams. Interviewees described how they were involved in enlisting the original membership and mission of the team which they now serve.

The exemplary interagency transition team from southwestern Virginia was in existence the longest. This team was established in 1985. The central Virginia team started six years ago, while the eastern team began just over four years ago. The newest team was the team from northern Virginia. They have been operating for only two years. The teams reported an average of 25 members as serving on their teams. However, all the interagency teams nominated as being exemplary had what they called a "core team"

consisting of eight to 12 members. Representation for the core team included individuals representing education, rehabilitation, families, and adult human services agencies. The core team referred to as those members who were active in regards to attendance at meetings and completing team tasks. In looking beyond the core members, others who routinely served on the teams came from agencies representing mental retardation and mental health, social security, transportation, business and industry, and postsecondary education.

Three of the teams nominated as being exemplary reported meeting as a team four times during the school year. The one exception was the team from central Virginia. Members from this team said that they met on a monthly basis.

#### Basis for Exemplary Status

The following section presents the reasons teams were nominated as exemplary. This information lends support to the effectiveness of each team nominated as well as their inclusion in the study. The basis for a team's exemplary status was provided by the transition coordinators and team members. Each coordinator and interviewee was asked to provide examples of why they perceived their team to be exemplary in helping young people with disabilities make a successful transition from high school to adult roles. The coordinators were asked to provide explanations for nominating the teams they did. Several reasons were given to support their selections. Transition coordinators from each site stated that exemplary interagency transition teams were committed to improving the

transition services for students with disabilities. They indicated the improvement of transition planning and services emerged from: (a) active membership, (b) community representation on the team, (c) strong leadership, (d) fulfillment of the mission statement and team goals, (e) identification of service gaps, and (e) a focus on activities and plans which extend to all students with disabilities. Transition coordinators, in all instances, noted that exemplary interagency transition teams focused their efforts on providing improved transition planning and services for students with disabilities.

Within the interview process, each of the 12 interviewees, likewise, was asked why they believed their team was nominated as being exemplary. This question was asked in an attempt to prove triangulation with the transition coordinators' responses. Reasons given by the interviewees included: (a) a competent leader, (b) a common vision among team members, (c) diversity among members, (d) a commitment among members to improve the lives of youths with disabilities, and (e) a collaborative effort. Furthermore, a cooperative spirit existed among the participants. This spirit set a positive tone for the interviews and was reflected in all the interviews. The perceptions of exemplary status of the transition coordinators and team members of exemplary local-level interagency transition teams were similar in nature. Both the transition coordinators and the interagency transition team members referred to composition, leadership, and commitments as reasons for their team's nomination of as an effective system.

## The Roles of Team Members

Transition specialists, DRS school counselors, and parent representatives were interviewed from each of the four special education regions in the Commonwealth of Virginia, making a total of 12 participants in this study. Each interviewee was asked about their personal role and involvement with the local interagency transition team on which they served. The following sections highlight their responses.

### Transition Specialists

All four of the transition specialists who participated in this study described themselves as the team leader or team facilitator. The transition specialists perceived their primary responsibility as coordinating the whole team effort. As explained by the transition specialist from the southwestern team, “I kind of look at it as being the facilitator, or team leader.” Respondents reported that they ran the meetings, recruited new members, generated the minutes, and disseminated important information to the community. The transition specialist’s role is best captured by one respondent.

What I am, I guess, is the team leader. I organize all the meetings and I facilitate the meetings. I also seek new members based on input from the other members--like who they think should be part of our team, or not. I send out all communications about anything that is going on. If there is any type of activity or conference a committee member might want to

know about, I will send the information. I also get minutes out after the meetings.

In meetings and team activities, the transition specialists all demonstrated a sense of responsibility and leadership. Each displayed competence, assurance, and a belief in working to better the adult outcomes of youths with disabilities.

#### Department of Rehabilitative Services Counselor

The role of the Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) school counselors varied between teams. Respondents saw themselves as a “resource of great information,” a “representative of the adult side of the transition process,” and a “liaison.” One respondent felt an important responsibility was to bring new and different ideas back to her team. She did this by visiting with interagency transition teams in other counties. Members of this team felt that the networking and sharing of ideas with other teams allowed her team to broaden the transition planning and services they provided to young adults. All the DRS school counselors believed it was their responsibility to represent the adult-service perspective of transition and identify services youths might need after they exit high school.

## Parent Representatives

The parents' roles tended to be less structured in nature. The respondents did not describe their role with a title such as facilitator, liaison, or leader. Instead parents talked more about what they could offer the team. For example, one parent described her role as a "watchdog." She felt it was her responsibility to make sure that students with disabilities learned the skills and received the services they needed to successfully transition from high school into adult roles.

Another parent felt it was her responsibility to bring the team "back down to reality." She felt that the school and agency representatives sometimes get too caught up in the technical aspects of transition. This parent felt that she sometimes needed to remind the team why they were there by putting a name and a face on the discussion of transition.

All the parents who participated in the study felt that an important part of their responsibility on the team was to be an advocate for all students with disabilities. They gave a "voice" to kids and communicated their needs in the transition process to the team. One parent further explained her role as motivator. She described this role as being nice yet diplomatic in directing the team to timely and efficient results.

## Themes

The interviewee text was examined to determine the extent to which themes related to characteristics and practices of exemplary local-level interagency transition teams. The analysis resulted in seven themes: (a) composition, (b) procedures, (c) context, (d) futures planning, (e) support system, (f) inter-community partnerships, and (g) personal interaction. Each of the themes together with examples from interviewees' statements are presented below.

### Composition

Analysis of the text revealed that composition contributed to team effectiveness. The interviewees spent time talking about who needed to serve on the local-level interagency transition team. Most of the respondents commented that a wide array of members must serve on the interagency transition team. A parent said "teams need to be diverse." This diversity allowed for a range of expertise from both the education and human services fields represented by the team members. The interviewees agreed that each member brings a different light to the team's discussions. A DRS school counselor supported this notion, "...you don't want a homogeneous team. You'd never get anywhere."

Further, interviewees discussed who needed to serve on the team. Members necessary for successful teams mentioned by interviewees included representatives from

special, vocational, and regular education; Department of Rehabilitative Services; parents and family; community services board; business and education; social security; community college; mental health and mental retardation; and local businesses. A transition specialist also stressed the importance of having an administrator serve on the team. This interviewee shared the following comment:

If you are going to set up any kind of group that is going to be working toward specific goals within any system, you need someone there who can make decisions for that system. I started just last month meeting with the special education administrator. Hopefully, this year I can work out a cooperative agreement with the school district because I think that is important. This task force is great. We do a lot of things at the student level, but you also need a component in there at some point where there is someone who can actually make a decision for the school system.

Students also were mentioned as being important players to include on interagency transition teams. It was expressed by interviewees that the students receive the transition services, therefore they know what does and does not work for them. A parent remarked:

The student, too, has to be heard and respected and felt an equal part of the team. This way he or she feels comfortable enough to speak up and say “this is what I want, or don’t want, or I’m not really sure what I want.”

Within the discussion of the team composition, respondents described the number of members who served on their teams. Respondents identified their teams as having an



average core of 10 to 12 members. The core team was recognized as those members who consistently attend the meetings and serve as sub-committee or team task leaders.

Typically, core members included representation from special education, rehabilitation, parent and family, community service boards, and social services. In addition to the core team, interviewees acknowledged anywhere from 25 to 40 different members on their team roster. These members were still active in discussion of transition planning and services for students with disabilities but they did not consistently attend team meetings.

A cross-section of individuals representing the areas of school, community, family, rehabilitation, and business was mentioned as being important. The team members interviewed concluded that a team composed of diverse members avoided duplication of services. All the interviewees shared the need to have individuals brought together from different areas. It was felt that diversity within the team allowed members access to a broader base of knowledge and expertise from which to make team decisions. In addition, a DRS school counselor commented that there needed to be members on the team who had expertise on the transition process up to the point of graduation and those who had a understanding of the adult service-system after the student exits high school.

### Procedures

Participants of this study confirmed that certain team procedures influenced their team's effectiveness. Team procedures can be described as the tasks performed in making the team function. Talk of mission statements, common goals and objectives, agendas,

regularly scheduled meetings, and other team tasks are defining elements of this theme. At least one member from each of the nominated teams spent time discussing the necessity of having a mission statement or common goal valued by all members. A transition specialist shared her team's mission statement: "... to assist with the development of a coordinated system of individualized transition services, leading to meaningful employment, quality adult life and full community participation." It was explained by the transition specialist that this mission statement guided the team from their first meeting, six years ago. A parent from another team spoke briefly about the development of their mission statement:

We also focused on developing a mission statement. We looked at what our goals and involvement should be in the transition process. This process was done by a committee as a whole and it was interesting how it came together so quickly. And the gist of it was to facilitate, not to micro manage, not to attack or accuse, but to simply provide information to those, particularly school providers, about what we faced outside in terms of placement and what the needs are of the business community.

DRS school counselors spoke at length about team procedures. They said they felt, if everyone had a clear understanding of the team's procedures and their individual responsibilities then they would be more effective as a team. One counselor discussed a referral system they had in place to gain parents' consent so that adult agencies could work with their child. She explained how this system helped the transition process run

smoother and made everyone's jobs a lot easier. This common procedure allowed this team to operate more effectively and efficiently with the logistics of the transition process.

Another counselor shared how her team put ideas generated from brainstorming sessions into action. Specifically, this counselor explained how team members shared the responsibility of writing a grant.

...we got our information through our whole team. Then we appointed some people that would sit down and do some of the nitty gritty--the paper writing and some of those things. We tried to use the main players that would be involved with this process which included the Community Services Board because of their cases managing and their supported employment, DRS because of their vocational rehabilitation role, and then, of course, the school system, and special education coordinators. We used these people because they can relate things to the teachers. We also used some of the input gained from the teachers, what students told us that they wanted. It was amazing how this whole process started from brainstorming.

Although this team did not win any federal dollars for their grant, their goal was met. The school system supported their idea and provided support necessary to carry out its objectives. The determination and cooperation of the particular team members who wrote the grant made this possible. These members worked hard at completing a task and followed through until they achieved their goal--getting support for the grant.

Interviewees also expressed the importance of using an agenda to structure their meetings. “We have an agenda, and we follow it,” commented a parent, and added “our agenda is flexible and the team is not opposed to making last-minute changes.” The transition specialist, another member of this team, explained their procedure:

In our agenda, we have things that we write down that have been brought up by a member that may need to be addressed or things that we see need to happen. So we try to set up our agendas for those meetings and we address those issues throughout the year. At the beginning of the year we prioritize these issues. We do this by voting on what we feel needs to happen immediately and those issues that can wait. And, of course, we may not get through all the things we want to accomplish. So they go on the agenda for the next time or the next year.

### Context

The team context was often cited by interviewees in reference to the location of the teams’ meetings. Several of the interviewees mentioned that the meetings needed to be convenient for all its members. This idea increased membership and attendance at the meetings. All the teams interviewed talked about the importance of changing the location of their meetings on a regular basis. This allowed team members to have the opportunity to see where other people worked and gain a sense of their job. A transition specialist from eastern Virginia had this to say:

We have our meetings, too, at different locations. We don't always have them in the school or in our office building where I work. We try to have them at a college campus or the employment commission or DRS offices.

We try to get each member to host a meeting. This way everyone will know where everyone has to live and get to see how each agency operates.

A counselor in central Virginia said that they rotated their meetings from school to school so that different students had an opportunity to participate. An eastern Virginia transition specialist agreed with the importance of having meetings at different schools for the same reason. Another transition specialist felt rotating meetings to different agencies and different community resources helped team members become more comfortable with each other. This level of comfort, in turn, facilitated more honest communication between team members.

Some of the team members referred to the physical environment in which the meetings must take place. For example, one interviewee thought that it was important to have the meetings in a roundtable fashion. She felt this allowed everyone to look at each other during their discussions and feel they were equals. Interestingly, having food at the meetings was also mentioned by several of the interviewees as a way to increase attendance and participation.

The analysis of interviewee text from all the teams revealed leadership as impacting the team context. This defining element was cited frequently by the interviewees as shaping the environment of the team. Parents, however, seemed more concerned with the

team leadership than transition specialists and DRS school counselors. One parent felt the leader of their team was the primary reason they were nominated as exemplary. She had this to say about their interagency transition team leader.

...[the team leader] is very dedicated, she is very much on the ball. She's well respected. She's well liked. When she says she will do something, she will do it. [She] really follows through with things. She has good organizational skills and good people skills. This, I believe, is one of the reasons our team is so successful.

The leadership characteristics and enthusiasm of the team leaders were mentioned by numerous interviewees as being the most important factor influencing the team's ability to work together successfully. Team leaders were credited with recruiting members to the team, organizing the meetings, disseminating information to the community, and sharing relevant information from the community with the team.

### Futures Planning

Futures planning refers to having a vision for the future of transition and knowing what young people with disabilities require to be successful in adult life. This concept was mentioned by interviewees at all four sites as contributing to a team's effectiveness.

Projecting needed transition services one and five years from now was cited as a principal planning task for interagency transition teams. Common to all sites was the creation of a vision. A transition specialist commented: "...we created a vision in the community. This

vision consists of the skills and knowledge we feel students--all students--should have when they graduate.” Central to the discussion on futures planning was the need for teams to be proactive. Specifically, respondents achieved this task by identifying potential services necessary for successful transition into adult roles. “Not only do we have a sense of what to do today, but what we can do for tomorrow,” was the expectation of one team as explained by the DRS school counselor.

A good example of futures planning was from the central Virginia team. They found it important to plan for the whole year during their first meeting. At the end of the year they make recommendations to the school board regarding transition services in their locality. The parent representative from this exemplary team shared their strategy:

Well, I think what makes our team work is at the first meeting of the year we kind of go over our wish list. We make a wish list. Then we discuss what’s important on that wish list and what we want to work on. There are so many things that you want to do, but you can’t do them all during the year. So what we do is make the wish list and kind of pick an area that we want to work now. And then at the end of the year we write up a proposal, a formal proposal, to tell the school board what we want to do in the future.

Teams from the other three sites also shared their concepts on being proactive. The transition specialist from eastern Virginia said: “I’d say in the next five years, there

will be another goal and another direction that we're headed. So, you're always looking to the future and how to plan for the future."

Transition specialists from both southwestern and northern Virginia shared similar insights. The transition specialist from the southwestern region spoke about developing a vision with the whole community and how the vision evolves as the system of transition changes. A structure to communicate a similar vision was established within the northern Virginia team. The transition specialist from this region commented that solid communication among members helps to maintain this structure.

### Support System

The analysis of text from the interviews revealed two defining elements related to support system. These two elements were: (a) networking, and (b) sharing of resources. A system of support was mentioned by the interviewees as influencing the team's ability to comfortably interact with one another.

Networking was identified across the teams as a critical element for teams to have if they were to establish a support system. Interviewees stated that effective teams should have continuous contact with each other. Team members of exemplary interagency transition teams spoke at length about the importance of networking and the need to continually communicate. The role of the team, as explained by a transition specialist, was to network.



The team is a network of communication. A network of information to be shared with service providers and then that gets transferred to the students, parents, and other business members in the community. Kind of look at it like we are a hand. The group is the palm and the rest of those who attend the meetings are the fingers. For example, today I was trying to work on something for a student and I had some questions. The first person I called was a board member who has come to the meetings, and [he] was able to help me.

Like this interviewee, other team members said that continuous communication fostered the networking. Networking happened within team meetings and activities as well as within the community. A DRS school counselor responded:

We are always interacting. So that makes it easier. We don't just come together for a meeting. And when we don't see one another for a meeting, we are on the phone, or we are seeing one another out in the community, or at different meetings or things like that.

Later in the interview she expanded on this point when explaining a transition services fair their local-level interagency transition team sponsored.

. . . one good thing that came out of [the transition fair] was a lot of networking went on. We hadn't expected this but it allowed the different agencies and services time to talk and share information. After it was over,

I heard a lot of positive feedback about the opportunity for agencies to network with one another.

The sharing of resources and information among the different agencies and the schools gave teams the ability to make effective decisions for students with disabilities. Many of the interviewees provided examples of the events they were involved with such as transition resource fairs. The purpose of these events was to disseminate necessary transition information to students, parents, teachers, and the community. A transition specialist talked about their resource fair.

So both years our transition fair has gone well. It hasn't been overwhelming where we had too many people there. Actually everyone who attended gained some really good information. And we got some much needed transition information out to the parents and students.

Sharing information was also cited by parents as being a critical component for successful transition. A parent provided the following insights.

. . . [agencies, parents, and teachers] got to network and share information so that was really pretty good. Names and addresses for parents were exchanged. Instead of just gathering information by phone, parents made actual contact. There's something personal in having resource fairs where you can get this kind of information.

She continued by sharing how beneficial resource fairs are for parents.

[the information sharing] was like an added bonus, because as a parent, you are just seeking out information, as much as you can, and trying to find the best thing for your child. And there it was, all under one roof.

Other interviewees felt information sharing was a critical element to team meetings. One parent clarified:

At every meeting we have a new person come or a new agency represented. So, it is more sharing of information. Basically, we update this new person by sharing information on the services different agencies provide. This process helps to develop that partnership.

The transition specialist from the same team illustrated why this process was necessary at the team meetings.

The service people were doing a lot of networking because they didn't have the information about each other's organizations. And I thought that was pretty terrific because they were kind of networking to see how each could help the other. And rather than duplicate services, which is a big waste of funds, we need to concentrate on how to spend the money most wisely to be the most effective for the consumers.

Teams which networked and actively shared information with each other were cited as better able to solve problems and make decisions. One DRS school counselor explained that some educators needed to know more about transition. Therefore, they provided an inservice. At this inservice adult agency representatives spoke for five

minutes about their particular agency and the services they provided. They also gave teachers a name and telephone number of individuals they could contact within their agencies. The transition specialist from the same team described this event as “a little orientation for everybody, sort of Transition 101.” This team had a specific time on their agenda for sharing the good things that happened within their agencies. Another team offered support to its members by putting together a resource directory. They felt this helped to bring their team together as well as to link them with the outside community.

Consensus among the respondents was that the creation of a support system appeared to increase team effectiveness. A DRS school counselor put it best.

Each team member contributes to what we are trying to do with a particular student. Everyone in the group has something valuable to share, therefore, these are resources that should not go to waste.

### Inter-Community Partnerships

Inter-community partnerships entail both the sharing of relevant transition information with the community and actively including members of the community on the interagency transition team. The nature of inter-community partnerships helped transition teams to create partnerships that facilitated the students’ movement from high school to the community. Interviewees commented that, together, both the school and community worked to prepare students. A transition specialist stated:

It needs to be kind of a back and forth thing so the school knows what is going on in the community and the community and business people know what is going on in the schools to prepare these students for life out of high school.

Interviewees stated that involvement of the employment sector allowed students to move easily into the community. A DRS school counselor explained why their team created linkages with the employers.

[Our team establishes linkages] to find out from the employers what they are looking for and what they want from students and also, to let them know what [the interagency transition team] is doing. This makes it easier to walk in when you are trying to find someone a job, even if it is just to do tours to let people know what is available and what is required of a particular job in a community.

The eastern Virginia team had a goal to get students more involved in community activities. The Mayor's Committee for Persons with Disabilities was working with the interagency transition team to involve students in community activities and events they need to be aware of as an adult.

### Personal interaction

The analysis of text gained from all the interviews revealed three dominant ideas related to personal interaction. These themes were: (a) a mutual concern for youths with

disabilities, (b) a collaborative effort, and (c) a common vision. These defining elements were cited by the interviewees as impacting the effectiveness of local-level interagency transition teams.

A mutual concern for youths with disabilities. Using different language but identical ideas, the interviewees declared that the interagency transition teams needed to concentrate on students with disabilities and the skills necessary for them to be successful in adult roles. There was an overwhelming consensus that team members needed to first and foremost be involved with the team because they believed students with disabilities could have improved adult outcomes. A parent stated:

...but I think it is the commitment of the individuals who are truly concerned, who are very knowledgeable based on first-hand experience, and who very much want to see a productive outcome in transitioning young people.

The transition specialist from that same team said that they needed an overall structure where everyone was involved because they wanted to be, not because they were forced to be involved. Other interviewees talked about pooling resources so that young people with disabilities got the best transition planning and services.

The interviewees expressed that a team that works cooperatively and avoids turf issues provides better services. A transition specialist noted:

And boy, when you can share all these resources it is amazing what kids can get. . . We don't have the turf--or don't seem to have the turf issues here. It is kind of like "Well, here's Joe and he needs this." "Oh, well, I can do. . ." and "I think I can do this, let me go and talk to my supervisor." It is more of "well, let's all see how we can better use our system so that the student can get what they need." Everybody's doing what they can do and then it works great and everybody is happy. And Joe is doing great because he gets the best.

Collaborative effort. Interviewees were constantly concerned with the cooperation among team members. Several of the respondents remarked that their teams were effective because they divided up responsibilities and showed respect for one another. A parent from southwestern Virginia expressed why she felt their team was exemplary:

One [feature] is that all the members of the team are willing to be team players. And that means carrying equal loads. Also another important feature is good communication skills. There has to be mutual respect among all the players. There also has to be equality. . . so that the parent's voice is equal to the school's voice and heard.

Collaborative effort means working to get things done and seeing the results. A DRS school counselor said that "it is not just talking about the [team's process] but doing it." This interviewee continued by providing an example.

But we don't spend as much time studying it as we do in doing it. So it is a very proactive group of people who say "let's not wait and study it."

Often times we have found that in looking around by the time somebody studies something and says "yes, this is a good idea," it passes. You just go in there, you develop it, you build it according to the need of whoever you working with. And it all works in the end and everyone is happy.

Teams that avoided getting caught up in the bureaucracy and went the "extra mile" to get things done were also characteristics deemed effective by the interviewees.

Common vision. The team members interviewed were concerned with a common agenda and how they all could work toward the same vision. This sense of "community" among the team influenced their decision-making and actions. As a result, members of effective interagency transition teams interviewed for this study left their personal agendas aside and focused on the needs of young people with disabilities.

They need to be a team--a group of people that can get away from their own, sometimes political agendas, like within a school system, and focus on students and students' needs. . . . So they need be flexible enough to kind of get out of their little box once in a while and see what else is out there and pull in whatever resources they need.

The DRS school counselor who shared the above insights also stated that their team was effective because they had a common vision. Therefore, they "avoided butting heads"



and worked toward pooling their resources so that students with disabilities get the best transition services and planning.

### Effectiveness

This study also sought to better understand the characteristics and practices that lead to effective transition. Effectiveness was a fundamental element of this study; however, the degree or level of effectiveness was not measured. Instead the perceptions of what makes a team effective were examined through interviews with members of exemplary teams. When the interviewees described their team characteristics and practices, effectiveness was implied as an outcome. All members of exemplary interagency transition teams indicated three elements as defining the outcome effectiveness. These elements included: (a) positive adult outcomes, (b) identification of transition needs, and (c) positive change.

Supporting elements of effectiveness indicated that specific characteristics and practices lead to positive adult outcomes for students with disabilities. For instance, a counselor shared a situation where the interagency transition team she served on worked together to develop a transition plan for a particular individual.

. . . everything has fallen into place for the student. She only graduated in June and now she is working full time. That rarely happens and it was all because of the cooperative effort and willingness by the interagency transition team to improve students' lives.

The same counselor was excited about the end result. She felt that transition was all about outcomes like the one she described.

It all fell into place so easily. It makes me glad to come to work. And I think [the other member of the team] feel the same way. . . . What we do is focus on one goal, and, I think, we all see transition as an essential part of education.

Like this interviewee, all persons interviewed agreed that the goals of their teams are to help students move successfully into adult roles. A parent talked about what the team transition process meant to her.

I guess kids realize that they really have a future. That it does not end after school. This is the best part of all the transition planning. [Young people] realize they can live independently, can get a job, be self-sufficient, be a tax payer, and vote.

She noted that her team continuously focused on preparing students for adult outcomes. Their community's transition fair was one such event that directly addressed this issue.

Identification of needs helped teams to identify service gaps and reevaluate their system. A transition specialist and a counselor, each from a different team, expressed that, as a result of writing grants, they identified characteristics of effective transition for students. The identification of transition needs filtered into the final outcome, and resulted in positive change. Team members talked about how, as a result of identifying their needs, they made positive changes within their team's transition process. Both teams that wrote

grants made changes. One team realized there was a gap in services for students over the summer months. Based on their realization, the team modified their program so students could have work experiences all year round. The other team realized that the community was not getting valuable information. Accordingly, they worked diligently to involve segments of the community in transition planning and services. This process ranged from recruiting employers to serve on the team to create awareness and a vision within the community.

### Themes and Roles

The cross-team analysis revealed that transition specialists and DRS school counselors identified similar characteristics and practices leading to the effectiveness of interagency transition teams. Common to these two roles were the structure and logistics of the team. Both the transition specialists and DRS school counselors spoke at length about team procedures and activities. For instance, they provided examples of how they structured and conducted the actual team meetings. They also talked about who specifically served on the team and why diversity among the members was important. The transition specialists and DRS school counselors also spent a lot of time discussing team activities. Many of these interviewees described the process of organizing and running transition resource fairs in their communities. Others talked about how they collaborated and shared the responsibilities of writing grants. Likewise, discussion from this group of

interviewees touched on involving the community in transition planning and services for young people.

Parents, on the other hand, were more concerned with the personal interaction of the team. They spoke extensively to the involvement of the team members. They felt team members should be involved with transition planning and services because of a mutual concern for improving adult outcomes of youths with disabilities. Showing respect and treating other team members as equals was mentioned several times by parents as impacting the effectiveness of the team. As well, parents felt that all members must work toward a common vision.

### Summary

In this chapter, descriptive information has been presented about the teams selected and the roles of interviewees who participated in this study. An analysis of the responses was reported across the selected teams as well as across the roles of the study participants. Also included was a description of major themes which appeared in the analysis of interviewee text from individual teams and roles of the interviewees.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Summary, Interpretations, and Recommendations

This study was designed to identify and describe characteristics and practices of exemplary local-level interagency transition teams. Chapter five presents information concerning this study in three sections. The first section is a summary of the investigation. The second section presents implications. The third and final section presents recommendations for practice and further research.

#### Summary

Improving the transition from school to adult roles for young people with disabilities is not a new issue. Since the early 1970s the fields of special education, rehabilitation, and vocational education devoted considerable attention to improving the adult outcomes of youths with disabilities in employment, further education, independent living, and recreation. However, in the past, agencies responsible for serving individuals with disabilities operated in isolation or from uncoordinated agendas (Everson, 1993). Cooperation and coordinated planning between education and human service agencies was recognized, only in the past decade, as an effective and efficient method to serve youths with disabilities in their transition process. Interagency cooperation at the local-level continues to reduce the gap in service delivery, minimize duplication of services, and

decrease unnecessary expenses. In addition, interagency cooperation remains a crucial component in helping youths with disabilities make a successful transition to adult roles (Everson, 1996; Sarkees-Wircenski & Scott, 1995; Wehman, 1992).

A statement of interagency linkages must be included in each student's Individual Education Program (IEP) plan no later than age 16 under the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990. Parents and professionals quickly realized the benefits of joining together to develop strategies that alleviate the barriers faced by youths with disabilities in the transition from school to adult life. The process of transition planning was described extensively in best practices literature, however, there is little empirical research focusing on what makes local-level interagency transition teams effective in facilitating the transition process for students with disabilities (Berkell & Brown, 1989; Everson, 1990; Everson & McNulty, 1992; Wehman, 1992). This qualitative research study was designed to offer an in-depth view of effective team characteristics and practices of local-level interagency transition teams from the members' perspectives.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify those factors which make local-level interagency transition teams effective in facilitating the transition of youths with disabilities from the secondary school setting to successful adult opportunities. This purpose was accomplished using a naturalistic qualitative research approach with information gathered through personal interviews. More specifically, this research study sought to:

1. Describe the characteristics, including the composition, procedure, and context, of exemplary local-level interagency transition teams.
2. Describe the effective practices used by exemplary local-level interagency transition teams, as perceived by team members, to facilitate the transition process for students with disabilities.

### Method

To have a full understanding of qualitative research the investigator must experience the phenomenon. Themes are derived from the text and can be added or removed throughout the research process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This qualitative study was designed to uncover and share the characteristics and practices of exemplary local-level interagency transition teams. The goal was achieved by interviewing 12 team members representing special education, rehabilitation, and families. The process gave me insight into the salient characteristics and practices influencing the effectiveness of interagency transition teams in facilitating students' movements from secondary school to the adult world.

Participants. The participants of the study included four local-level transition specialists, four Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) school counselors, and four parents of individuals with disabilities. These participants were members of exemplary local-level interagency transition teams representing the northern, central, eastern, and southwestern regions of Virginia. Teams were established from two to 11 years ago. The

average length of time participants served on their particular team was four years.

Through the interview process I sensed that participants were deeply committed to the local-level interagency transition team process regardless of how long the team had existed or the length of time they had served on the team.

Instrument. An interview schedule was used to elicit the team members' perspectives on the characteristics and practices that make interagency transition teams effective. The interview schedule included both open-ended questions and probes. These probes were used to clarify and gain further understanding of the characteristics and practices of interagency transition teams described by the participants. The purpose of the interview was to obtain rich and diverse text from the varied perspectives of the participants.

The interview schedule consisted of four parts. The first part of the interview asked respondents to describe why they believed they were nominated as an exemplary team in the facilitation of transition services and planning for students with disabilities. Part two of the interview asked for background information regarding the team. Questions focused on the frequency of team meetings, number of members, length of time served on the team, and specific roles. In the third part of the interview schedule, respondents were asked to provide information about the characteristics of their teams.

The final part of the interview asked the respondents to describe one event or situation in which they believed they were most effective in successfully facilitating the



transition process for students with disabilities. The Behavioral Event Interview (BEI), as developed by McClland (1978), guided this part of the interview process. I used the BEI to learn more about critical incidents experienced by the interviewees who served on exemplary interagency transition team. This element was advantageous because it allowed me to gain access to behaviors, thoughts, and feelings relevant only to the study.

Procedures. Four regional transition coordinators were asked to identify two top-ranked local-level interagency transition teams in their region as well as provide an example of why they perceived the teams they nominated to be exemplary. From each top-ranked local team the transition specialist, the rehabilitation counselor, and parent representative were selected to be interviewed. These members are identified in the literature and in the IDEA legislation as active members of the team, and therefore were chosen to be interviewed for this investigation.

The regional transition coordinators served as the initial contact person. Coordinators provided a list of all members from the team they nominated. The transition specialist, DRS school counselor, and parent representative from each nominated team were contacted by telephone and asked to participate in the study. A letter explaining the study and interview date and time was sent to each of the participants. All the interviews were conducted by telephone and were designed to last approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed into word processor files, then coded and analyzed using Ethnograph, a computer software program.

## Results and Discussion

Interview transcripts were analyzed within teams and across the different roles of the interviewees (i.e. transition specialists, DRS school counselors, and parent and family representatives). Analysis revealed seven themes emerged as characteristics and practices of exemplary local-level interagency transition teams. Three of the four team characteristics found in the literature were indeed themes that arose from the transcripts (Abelson & Woodman, 1993; Everson & McNulty, 1992; Guzzo & Dickson, 1996); these included: (a) composition, (b) procedures, and (c) context. In addition, a fourth characteristic of personal interaction emerged in the analysis. Through the synthesis of the transcripts, three additional themes emerged as team practices, including: (a) futures planning, (b) support system, and (c) inter-community partnerships. The following paragraphs summarize the seven themes identified through the analysis process.

Team characteristics. Team composition, the first characteristic, includes specifications of membership, member roles, and method of their coordination (Abelson & Woodman, 1993; Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; Everson & McNulty, 1992). The local-level interagency transition teams nominated as exemplary were large in number and consisted of a wide variety of members representing education, rehabilitation, parent and family, and human service agencies. The collective knowledge among the members led to better decision-making and problem-solving. As a result, these teams felt they were working toward positive change within the transition system. This substantiates the findings of Harvey and Drolet (1994), Guzzo and Dickson (1996), Magjuka and Baldwin (1991) and

Watson, Krumar, and Michaelsen (1991) who concluded diversity within transition teams allows greater access to information.

Team procedures and context were the two other characteristics identified in the literature as contributing to the effectiveness of teams. Study participants stated that established team procedures offered a structure or framework in which they could operate. The transcripts revealed that all exemplary teams had identifiable goals, mission statements, and agendas. These results support Abelson and Woodman (1983), and Weingart and Weldon (1991) who indicated that identified team goals helped to raise member effort leading to increased group performance.

Context also emerged as a critical factor in determining the effective functioning of exemplary interagency transition teams. A primary indicator of team context was strong leadership. The leadership role on exemplary local-level interagency transition teams was always filled by transition specialists. There are several reasons why this member of the team is the most logical to serve as the leader. First, and most importantly, special education is mandated by IDEA legislation to develop and implement the transition component in students' IEP. Specifically, under this law the school district is the lead agency responsible for initiating the linkages and interagency collaboration for transition services. In most circumstances, the transition specialist has the responsibility of coordinating services and planning for students served by special education within a school or school district. Other members of the transition teams who participated in the

present study recognized the importance of the transition specialist's role in the transition process perhaps, this is why this team member consistently filled the leadership role.

The challenge for interagency transition team leaders interviewed for this study was to move the team toward achievement of agreed-upon goals and objectives. Moreover, team leaders assumed the responsibility to maximize diversity among the team in terms of member experience, expertise, and information. Team leaders also suggested that they were responsible for facilitating the personal interaction among members, as well as maintaining the team's vision and member satisfaction. These findings support characteristics of effective leadership identified by Everson (1993). The characteristics she described, included: (a) the ability to define objectives and maintain goal direction; (b) the provision of means for attaining goals and objectives; (c) the maintenance of team structure; (d) the facilitation of team action and interaction; (e) the facilitation of team task performance; and (f) the maintenance of team cohesiveness and team member satisfaction.

Personal interaction emerged as an unanticipated characteristic associated with exemplary interagency transition teams. Personal interaction characteristics were not mentioned in the business or research-based literature as being salient to a team's effectiveness. However, the social science literature did focus discussion on team interactions stressing the importance of developing mutual trust, gaining a sense of relationship, and managing conflict and stress inside the team (Friend & Cook, 1992; Harvey & Drolet, 1993; Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Thousand & Villa, 1992). Within the

interagency transition team structure, personal interaction was defined, through the analysis of the text, as having: (a) a mutual concern for young people with disabilities, (b) a collaborative effort, and (c) a common vision. Exemplary interagency transition team members who participated in this study shared common beliefs and values; this in turn led to trust in one another.

Perhaps the personal interaction was a dominant characteristic of the exemplary local-level interagency transition teams because the members wanted to participate. The study showed that the majority of the members who served on these teams did so on a voluntary basis. It appeared that educators, human service personnel, and family representatives joined these teams because they were committed and cared about the lives of young people with disabilities. This clearly supports research by Abelson and Woodman (1983) who stated that a common set of norms and values motivates the members to participate in team activities and establish roles for each member which leads to improved adult outcomes for young people with disabilities. The personal interaction characteristic can be viewed as a philosophy held by team members. While these characteristics were present in all exemplary teams, they also laid the groundwork for team practices which led to perceived team effectiveness.

Team practices. Study participants identified the following practices as important to the successful transition process of students with disabilities: (a) futures planning, (b) a support system, and (c) inter-community partnerships. Each practice was discussed in the

special education and transition literature as being a necessary component of service delivery operations (Browning, 1995; Berkell & Brown, 1988; Everson, 1996; Wehman, 1992). However, these practices were not linked to the effective functioning of local-level interagency transition teams. Participants in this study indicated that these practices increased the team's capacity to work collaboratively toward a common goal. Structured futures planning guided by the interagency transition team provided a continuous problem-solving process as well as a systemic method to identify issues and plan for anticipated services.

The results found that local-level interagency transition team members built networks and relationships with one another as they began the planning process. This practice led to the development of a support system for all members of the team and added to the team's information base. Participants felt a sense of security knowing that they could enlist the expertise and resources of the other team members when needed. Such practices are helpful for teams to maintain a working dialogue. Moreover, a system of support helped the local-level interagency transition teams who participated in this study to broaden their range of knowledge and skills required for effective collaboration within the team.

Local-level interagency transition team members stated that they actively involved their communities in transition process. Community members, such as employers, either served on the interagency transition teams or they provided opportunities for students to gain adult experiences, such as employment and recreation. The intent of inter-community

partnerships was to gain the commitment of the community to share in the education and training needs of young people with disabilities. Participants indicated that those teams with community involvement were able to assess the transition service needs and gaps efficiently. Additionally, these teams seemed to raise awareness and articulate transition issues to the community. As a result, students had more opportunities to gain successful adult experiences prior to and after exiting high school.

Team effectiveness framework. Using the themes derived from the analysis, a framework was created to illustrate how exemplary local-level interagency transition teams function. The framework gives consideration to a systems view and illuminates the way in which exemplary interagency transition teams function. A system can be defined as a collection of elements, interacting with each other to achieve a common goal (Stufflebeam, 1971). The systems approach is a way of thinking, a point of view. The first phase of developing a systems approach is to input information gained from the environment into the system. Next, these inputs are processed to yield a desired outcome or product, referred to as system's output. The output then feeds back into the input to determine if the model is valid. The system's feedback identifies any discrepancy between the actual and desired performance of the product or solution. This step is used as the basis for revising the system outcome. Each component of the system builds on the other and serves as a basis for later work (Finch & Crunkilton, 1993).

Using a systems approach, a framework was created to illustrate how exemplary local-level interagency transition teams function (See Figure 2). The seven emergent

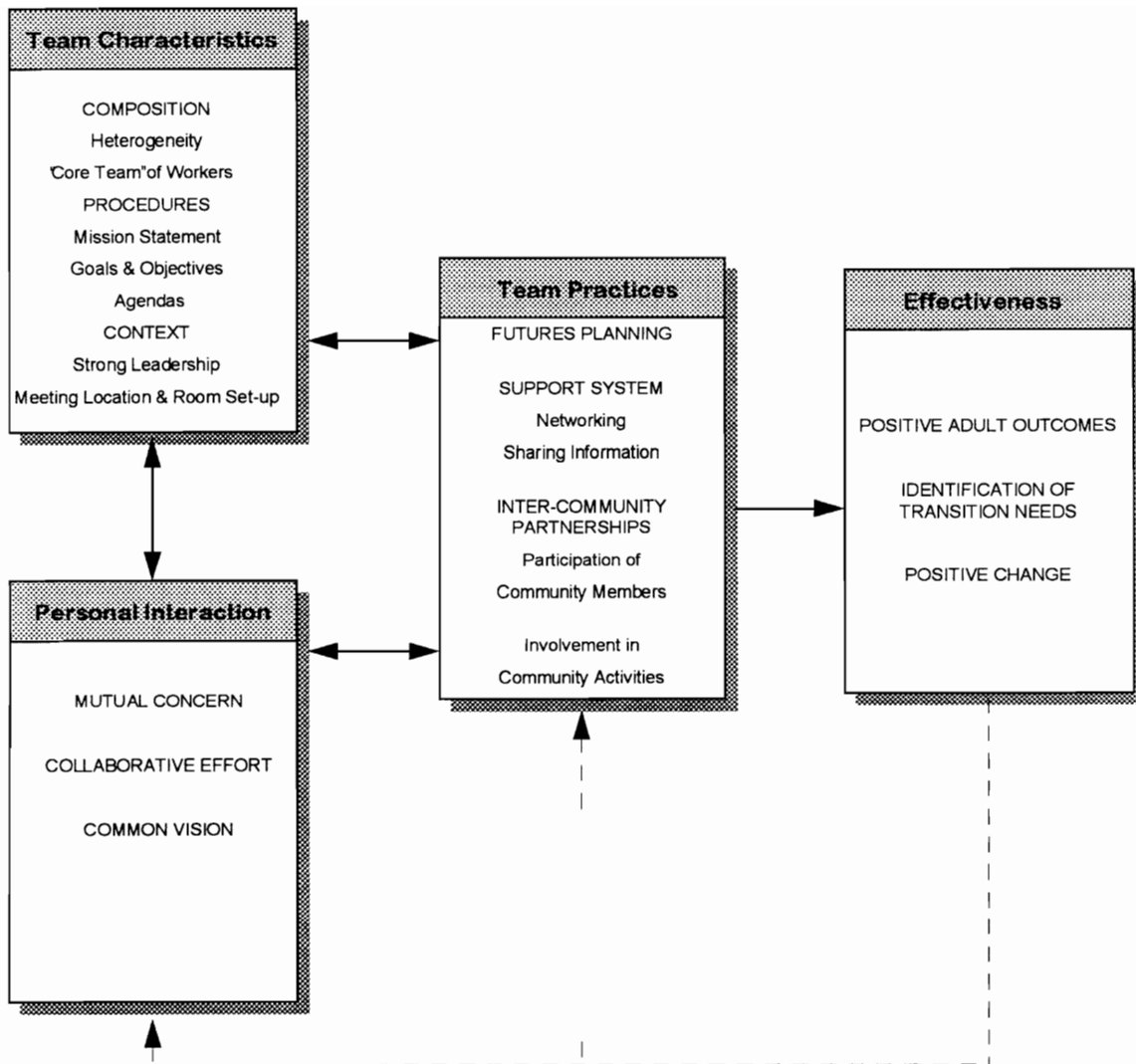


Figure 2: Local-level Interagency Transition Team Effectiveness Framework



themes gained from the analysis of this study are arranged into a conceptual framework. The framework was developed by first exploring and gathering information from exemplary local-level interagency transition teams. The findings from the study were then reviewed so that characteristics and practices that were common to exemplary local-level interagency transition teams in Virginia could be recognized. Finally, relationships among the characteristics and practices were identified and organized into a conceptual scheme. Consequently, a framework was prepared to serve as a basis for future discussions and research on the interagency transition team process.

The framework consists of four parts: team characteristics; team practices; the outcome or team effectiveness; and personal interaction. Illustrated by the framework, the system components build on each other to achieve the desired team outcome or effectiveness. The team characteristics (composition, procedures, and context) are the initial inputs into the system. These inputs serve as the basis or prerequisite for all other components of the framework. Building on the characteristics are the team practices or processes of the system. The defining elements of exemplary team practices include futures planning, support systems, and inter-community partnerships. Team practices are the activities carried out by local-level interagency transition teams. Implementing the identified team practices leads to improved transition services and planning for youths with disabilities. These practices along with the team characteristics bring about the system's desired output of effectiveness. As the system builds on the various components, feedback flows back into the team characteristics (or input). The feedback then

systematically channels through the framework so that necessary adjustments can be made to the team's characteristic, practices, and personal interaction. For instance, feedback may indicate that the team needs to add a new member, such as a representative from the postsecondary sector, to increase the diversity of experience or knowledge in that area of transition.

Although personal interaction emerged as a team characteristic, it stood apart from the team composition, procedure, and context in the framework. Personal interaction is essential to the system and directly impacts the successful development of all the other components. The defining elements of personal interaction--mutual concern, collaborative effort, and common vision--impact each part of the proposed framework strengthening the system. Inclusion of these elements at all points in the development and functioning of the teams improves the system. Consequently, a local-level interagency transition team employing all components of the framework can achieve the identification of transition needs, improved adult outcomes for young people with disabilities, and systemic change in the transition systems.

### Implications

Historically, human service personnel were forced by large numbers of clients and legislative mandates to fit young people with disabilities into existing programs. More often than not, these young people ended up on waiting lists and were placed in dead-end jobs and inappropriate living arrangements. Life outcomes for youths with disabilities can

improve with effective transition planning and interagency cooperation. The primary purpose of a local-level interagency transition team is to establish effective transition programs and services with community-integrated employment, training or education, living, and leisure outcomes. This study sought to identify those factors which make local-level interagency transition teams effective in facilitating the successful transition process of youths with disabilities.

This study found that although interagency transition teams may possess characteristics similar to those found in business, they still stood apart as a unique group. Unlike most business teams, exemplary local-level interagency transition teams operated within a personal dimension, demonstrating a deep commitment to work toward improved transition services and planning for youths with disabilities. Local-level interagency transition teams in this study displayed a mutual concern, common vision, and willingness to collaborate their efforts for more effective life outcomes for youths. These findings support the conclusions made by Hackman (1987) which showed that the group interaction process can not be preprogrammed. In this study, the interaction, combined skills, expertise, and resources among the team members produced more effective transition planning and services for youths with disabilities.

In Everson's (1996) examination of interagency transition teams, she stated that positive transition outcomes were more likely to occur if education, rehabilitation, family, and adult agencies collaborated rather than competed. It was found that local-level interagency transition teams made better decisions regarding transition planning and

services when team members combined their knowledge and resources. When asked what made their interagency transition team effective, diversity among the team members in terms of knowledge and expertise was mentioned most often by the interviewees. Results of this study uphold Hill's (1982) proposed assembly bonus effect. His research concluded that an assembly bonus effect occurs when groups combined knowledge produces a higher quality decision than the best member could do alone. Further, the above finding support previous research by Jewel and Reitz (1981) which stated that groups whose members differ in skills and personality profiles perform more effectively than groups whose members have similar skills and profiles. Likewise, Magjuka and Baldwin (1991) found that heterogeneity within teams was positively related to team effectiveness.

### Recommendations for Practice

As school districts develop or reevaluate their local-level interagency transition team, they must encourage and foster elements of personal interaction. Teams were likely to be effective in achieving their shared goals if the team members had a commitment to work collaboratively for the common good of young people with disabilities. Further, interagency transition teams characterized by diversity of members, clear goals, and strong leadership led to improved transition planning and services for young people with disabilities. These three defining characteristics are important to the foundation in which effective practices build on. In addition, opportunities for local-level interagency

transition teams to network with one another and participate in inter-community partnerships must be encouraged. These practices allow the achievement of effective outcomes.

The following recommendations for practice arose from the data and support the development of the characteristics and practices that emerged from this study.

Local-level interagency transition teams should employ a diverse membership. Diversity within the team creates an environment where more effective decisions regarding transition planning and services can be made. Therefore, teams should maximize the use of diverse backgrounds, experiences, expertise, skills, information, and resources of its members. Such action will only strengthen the team's ability to function collaboratively and effectively.

The outcomes of local-level interagency transition teams are shaped by individuals who lead them. Team leaders should be viewed as a valuable resource to the team. This person is responsible for the recruitment of members, the dissemination of information, and the facilitation of team meetings and team interactions. Teams that recognize strong leadership increase their capacity to work collaboratively toward a common goal. Since the team leader typically represents education, schools should make a concerted effort to recognize, recruit, and develop leadership skills of their personnel.

Local-level interagency transition teams should allow time for team members to network with other team members and with others in the community. Such opportunities increase team members' knowledge of transition services and supports available to young

people with disabilities. In addition, these opportunities reinforce the value of the team's goals.

Local-level interagency transition teams should develop or participate in activities that promote successful transition services and programs for young people with disabilities at the community level. Regular community involvement, such as transition fairs, and dissemination of information increases the visibility of transition programs and services and leads to improved transition outcomes.

Local-level interagency transition teams should promote and foster personal interaction among the members of the team. A collaborative effort, common vision, and mutual concern, in conjunction with the aforementioned characteristics and practices, appears critical for the success of interagency transition to facilitate successful transition for youths with disabilities. Team members from the present study displayed a genuine concern for young people with disabilities, respect for one another, and commitment to work as a together toward a common goal or vision. These attributes can be cultivated by a strong, effective leader who facilitates team activities and procedures. Personal interaction can also be strengthen through personnel preparation and participation in professional associations. Other strategies might focus on the implementation of team development exercises with the aid of an outside technical assistance group.

## Recommendations for Research

Limited research has been conducted to identify the quality characteristics of effective and comprehensive transition programs. The majority of transition research has focused on successful employment and community placement of students with disabilities isolated from the totality of comprehensive transition programs and program planning (Everson, 1993). Until this study, no empirical research and no explanatory model of interagency transition team effectiveness existed. This study was designed to identify those factors that make local-level interagency transition teams exemplary in facilitating the transition from high school to post-school outcomes for youths with disabilities. As such, the participants were limited to individuals who served on exemplary local-level interagency transition teams in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

To arrive at a more comprehensive view of local-level interagency team effectiveness, similar studies should be conducted in a broader arena, perhaps looking at teams within several states or settings. For instance, a study could be conducted to compare teams in urban, rural, and suburban communities. Such a study might yield information regarding the influence the environment might have on a team's functioning.

One theme, team composition, repeated itself more than other characteristics in many of the interviews. Perhaps future research could examine this theme more closely. Within composition several elements may be investigated, such as the number of members, representation of members, diversity of members, and personality traits of members. Further, the impact of these factors on the team's decision-making and problem-solving

could be explored. What's more, it can be determined if an assembly bonus effect is the result of the combined knowledge and expertise of local-level interagency transition teams.

Future research should yield data around the personal interaction dimension of teams and how this characteristic does or does not influence a team's effectiveness. Comparing and contrasting teams in human service fields and business will enrich available information on teams. A study could examine whether personal interaction is different within business teams or if it is even consider important to the functioning of a team.

Finally, a study could investigate the leadership styles of local-level interagency transition team leaders. Leaders direct and coordinate the activities of a team toward the accomplishment of goals. Further research might offer insights into the influence of leadership on a team's effectiveness. Further, it could determine if one leadership style is more instrumental to a team's effectiveness than another style.



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## Appendix A

### The Interview Schedule



## Interagency Transition Team Members Interview Schedule

Date and time: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee name: \_\_\_\_\_

Job Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Team Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Local Education Agency Served: \_\_\_\_\_

**(Start)**

Hello Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_. I am Kelli Thuli a research assistant with the Southwest Virginia Transition Center. From our previous communication you are aware that the interviews I am conducting focus on characteristics and practices of exemplary interagency transition teams. With your assistance, this study should help identify a team model for interagency teams to facilitate transition services and planning for youth with disabilities.

The interview should take about 30 minutes to complete, and if it looks like we are going too long, we'll work out a compromise on what to do.

Before we begin the actual interview, I would like to remind you that your responses will be kept completely confidential. Would you mind if we recorded the interview? \_\_\_\_\_ (if yes) If there is anything you don't want me to record, just let me know and I'll turn off the recorder.

Do I have your permission to turn on the recorder now?

### PART I

1. You may recall that you were nominated by the Regional Transition Coordinator, Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_, as a member of an interagency transition team that does an effective job of facilitating transition services and planning for youths with disabilities. Tell me why you think your team was nominated as being exemplary?

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

## PART II

Now, Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_ I would like to ask you some background questions about your team.

2.1. How many members are on your team?

2.2. How often does your team meet?

2.3 How many years have you been part of the team?

3. Now, I would like to learn more about your personal role and involvement with the interagency transition team. Specifically, what is your role on the team, and your team's role working with others outside the team?

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**Great!** That information was really helpful.

## PART III

4. Now, tell me what characteristics or practices a team needs to be successful in facilitating successful transition planning and delivery for students with disabilities. What are the composition, procedures, and context of your team?

<try to get at least one composition, procedure, and context characteristic. Definitions--

- **Composition:** Specific membership, member roles, and method of coordination.
- **Procedure:** The tasks performed (e.g. how your team does its work -- agenda, mission).
- **Context:** The environment which the team works (e.g. intraorganizational factors--feedback, extraorganizational factors--customer needs, physical environment.)>

4.1

4.2

4.3

4.4

## PART IV

### EVENT #1 -- TEAM AS A WHOLE

5. Now, I would like you to think of a specific situation. This is a situation or specific time when you and your team were most effective in facilitating the transition success of one or more students with disabilities.

What particular event would you like to talk about?

PROBES (specific - general)	BEHAVIOR (What you/they did & why)	THOUGHT/FELT (you/others think or feel)	EXAMPLE (specific)
--------------------------------	--	---	-----------------------

- Who was involved and how?
- What led up to the situation?
- Describe the situation?
- What happened?
- How did it all turn out (outcome)?

Thank you for your time in participating in this study.

**Appendix B**

**Cover Letter to the Regional Transition Coordinators,**

**and**

**The Interagency Transition Team Nomination Form**

Date

Transition Coordinator  
Transition Region  
000 Virginia Drive  
Newtown, VA 00000

Dear Transition Coordinator,

I am a doctoral student with the Division of Vocational and Technical Education at Virginia Tech. In collaboration with the Southwest Virginia Transition Center, I am conducting a study to identify those characteristics and activities associated with exemplary interagency transition teams. We know from best practice literature that teams are necessary to facilitate a smooth transition for students with disabilities. This study is important because it will determine standards of interagency teamwork.

My research necessitates interviewing members of interagency transition teams. Particularly those members representing special education, Department of Rehabilitation Services (DRS), and parent representatives. My request to you is to nominate two interagency transition teams in your region who you believe to be exemplary in facilitating transition services and planning. The enclosed form highlights the information I need to begin the data collection. Please complete this form and return it in the envelope provided.

I will arrange a telephone interview with the special education, DRS counselor, and parent representatives. Each interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. All information will be kept confidential. With the interviewee's permission, I will record the interview and transcribe the tapes using fictitious names.

The interviews will be conducted in a professional manner and at times convenient to the interagency transition team members. Please consider this as an opportunity to have input on some meaningful transition research. I will contact you by phone in the next several days to get the sites and names of the interagency transition team members you have nominated for this study and answer any of your questions.

Sincerely,

Kelli Thuli  
Graduate Assistant

cc Dr. Susan B. Asselin  
Dr. Sharon deFur

## INTERAGENCY TRANSITION TEAM NOMINATION FORM

*Read the directions and complete each section.*

**Please name a local level interagency transition team you believe to be MOST exemplary in facilitating transition services and planning for youths with disabilities in your region.**

Team #1 \_\_\_\_\_

Local Education Agency Served \_\_\_\_\_

**Please provide example(s) of why you believe this team to be exemplary.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Please provide the names and addresses of the following team representatives:**

### Special Education/Transition Specialist

Name \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number (work) \_\_\_\_\_ (home) \_\_\_\_\_

### Department of Rehabilitation Representative

Name \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number (work) \_\_\_\_\_ (home) \_\_\_\_\_

### Parent Representative

Name \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number (work) \_\_\_\_\_ (home) \_\_\_\_\_

**(OVER)**

**Please name a local level interagency transition team you believe to be exemplary in facilitating transition services and planning for youths with disabilities in your region.**

Team #2 \_\_\_\_\_

Local Education Agency Served \_\_\_\_\_

**Please provide example(s) of why you believe this team to be exemplary.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Please provide the names and addresses of the following team representatives:**

**Special Education/Transition Specialist**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number (work) \_\_\_\_\_ (home) \_\_\_\_\_

**Department of Rehabilitation Representative**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number (work) \_\_\_\_\_ (home) \_\_\_\_\_

**Parent Representative**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number (work) \_\_\_\_\_ (home) \_\_\_\_\_

**Please return the completed form by JULY 26, 1996:**

Kelli Thuli

Southwest Virginia Transition Center, 311 Lane Hall

Blacksburg, VA 24060



## Appendix C

Cover Letter to Team Members from the Nominated Interagency Transition Teams

Date

Interviewee  
Anywhere  
000 Virginia Drive  
Newtown, VA 24100

Dear Mr./Ms. Transition Team Member,

I greatly appreciate you taking the time from your busy schedule to grant me an interview. As I stated in our recent telephone conversation I am conducting a research study to identify effective characteristics and practices of exemplary interagency transition teams. Ms./Mr. <Transition Coordinator> nominated your Transition Team as being exemplary, therefore you have been asked to participate in this research study.

The telephone interview should take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Whatever is said during the interview will be kept completely confidential. With your permission, I would like to record the interview and transcribe the tapes using fictitious names.

Your interview is schedule for August , 1996 at : a.m. The phone number I will be contacting you at is ( ) - . Please let me know if this is incorrect.

The interview consists of four parts. In the first part you will be asked to describe why you believe your team was nominated as being exemplary in facilitating transition services and planning for students with disabilities. Part two will ask for background information regarding your team. The third part will be looking at your team's characteristics. Specifically, you will be asked to provide information about the composition, procedures, and context of your team. The final part of the interview I will ask you to describe one event or situation in which your team was believe you were most effective in facilitating the transition success for students with disabilities.

Enclosed is a copy of the interview schedule I will be using. Review the form and if you have any questions concerning the study please feel free to call me at 540-231-9284. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Kelli Thuli  
Graduate Assistant

enclosure

## VITA

**KELLI THULI**  
440 Arbor Oaks Lane  
Lancaster, WI 53813  
(608) 723-7777

## **EDUCATION**

**Doctorate of Philosophy**, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University,  
December 1996  
Vocational and Technical Education

**Master of Science**, University of Wisconsin-Madison, August 1992  
Rehabilitation Psychology

**Bachelor of Science**, University of Wisconsin-Stout, May 1991  
Vocational Rehabilitation and Secondary Special Education  
Summa Cum Laude

## **CERTIFICATION**

Certified Rehabilitation Counselor; Special Education Certification (grades 6-12);  
Job Coach Certification

## **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

National Transition Alliance, Academy for Educational Development,  
Washington, DC

*Consultant • Dates: July to December 1996*

Developed several documents focusing on school to work issues. Topics centered on school to work strategies for young adults with disabilities, self-determination, and employer and education partnerships.

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, US Department of  
Education, Washington, DC

*Graduate Intern • Dates: Summer 1996*

Participated in an analysis and synthesis of the data concerning a national project funded by the Department of Education. Activities included reviewing all in-house final reports, products, and articles submitted by the self-determination projects and developing a mechanism for presenting the information.

Southwest Virginia Transition Center, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

**Transition Coordinator Assistant** • Dates: September 1995 - August 1996

Provide technical assistant to transition specialist in southwest Virginia in meeting the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and advancing their services for students with disabilities.

New River Community College, Dublin, Virginia

**Co-Project Director & Research Assistant** • Dates: January 1994 - Present

Research the strategies to better serve students from special populations in Tech Prep programs and develop a manual to help guide educators in this practice.

Center on Education and Work, University of Wisconsin-Madison

**Outreach Specialist** • Dates: December 1992-December 1994

Responsibilities included working with other project staff in building the capacity for research based practice, providing continuous quality improvement in education for work programs, developing training materials, handbooks, brochures, newsletters, and other necessary items to carry out training activities for the education and employment of persons with disabilities, and, providing technical assistance on school-business alliances, the ADA, Tech Prep, school to work transition and other services for persons with disabilities.

## RELATED EXPERIENCE

Journal of Vocational Special Needs Education

**Assistant Managing Editor** • Dates: Summer 1994 to Summer 1997

Manage the financial matters related to advertisement, subscriptions and issue purchases of the journal.

Real World Day

**Coordinator** • Date: April 6, 1995

Coordinator of an event to promote awareness of the transition options available to high school students with disabilities. Over 40 businesses, social service agencies, colleges and universities displayed their services to approximately 400 students and parents in attendance.

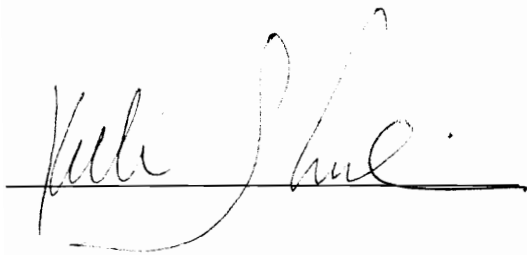
### **SELECTED PUBLICATIONS**

Thuli, K. (1996). *Access to success: Strategies for serving special populations in tech prep programs*. Richmond, VA: Virginia Department of Education.

Thuli, K. J., Phelps, B. R. (Eds.) Gugerty, J. J. & Tindall, L. W. (1994). *ADAlliances to educate and employ people with disabilities: A handbook for employers, instructors, and teacher educators*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, Center on Education and Work.

Thuli, K. J., Phelps, B. R., Gugerty, J. J., & Tindall, L. W. (1994). *Ideas to help solve your ADA problems*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Center on Education and Work.

Lynch, R. T., Thuli, K., & Groombridge, L. (1994). Person-first disability language: A pilot analysis of public perceptions. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 60 (2), 18-22.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Kelli Paul", written over a horizontal line.