

INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION: VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION
AGENCIES AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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by
Damon V. Johnson, Jr.
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Examining Committee Members:

Dr. John Hall, Advisory Chair, Department of Policy, Organizational, and Leadership Studies
Dr. Christopher McGinley, Department of Policy, Organizational, and Leadership Studies
Dr. Allison Gilmour, Department of Teaching and Learning
Dr. Lakeisha Harris, Interim Associate Vice President for Research and Extended
Education and Interim Dean, School of Graduate Studies, University of Maryland Eastern
Shore

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ABSTRACT

Vocational rehabilitation (VR) is one of the services offered to students with disabilities transitioning from secondary education to adulthood. To process the VR system, interagency collaboration is a necessary practice that state vocational rehabilitation agencies and local school districts must establish. While interagency collaboration is an ongoing process, effective collaboration may vary depending on the structure and makeup of the state vocational rehabilitation agency. In this paper, I will examine staff's perception of interagency collaboration with the local school district from the view of the VR staff. I will address the stated problem and provide a narrative inquiry into what staff believe effective collaboration looks like. Key findings of this study are that one office perceives that collaboration is poor and needs revision, whereas another office reported an opposite view of the situation.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my Angels above. I thank my dad Damon V. Johnson, Sr. for continuously watching over me and my cousin/sister Terrika Hopkins (Myrtle) for watching over me. I also thank my little brothers Kwame Johnson and Donta Cook, Sr., for watching over me. I also want to dedicate this dissertation to my mentor, the late Robert Eades. Thank you for believing in me when I did not believe in myself. Thank you for pushing me to be great!

I dedicate this dissertation to my Mom, for giving me life and instilling life lessons and values. Thank you for being my rock. I also dedicate this dissertation to my uncle James Dorsey. Thank you for always being there; thank you for being my voice of reason and one of my biggest supporters. I dedicate this dissertation to my cousin/sister Tiesha Hopkins and my eldest brother Darryl Herbert. Thank you both for being in my corner in times of need. Thank you both for providing words of encouragement at the most opportune times in my life. Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my childhood teacher Ms. Louise Baradel. Thank you for teaching me Braille and other related educational lessons.

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I acknowledge the participants from both the Cobblestone and Flintrock¹ VR offices. Your honest feedback will bring light and enhance the future outcomes of this important research topic.

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¹ Pseudonyms

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Interagency collaboration between governmental agencies is an essential aspect of a student's transition plan when transitioning from secondary education to adulthood. Ideally, governmental agencies would develop such an agreement to discuss transitional services for students in this stage. This study examined state vocational rehabilitation (VR) offices' collaborative engagement with local school districts. In my opinion, services would vary contingent upon agency structure or specific demographics, which would result in services being redirected to appropriate agencies.

The transition from school to work is a complex procedure that requires a collaborative effort among agencies involved in the transitional process (Köhler & Field, 2003; Noonan et al., 2008; Test et al., 2009). However, collaborative agencies including secondary schools and critical providers believe that sustained coordination is not occurring (Agran et al., 2002; Lubber et al., 2008). Interagency collaboration is an important part of governmental structure and systematic processes.

The shortcomings of the collaborative efforts among governmental agencies primarily disadvantage students. State VR offices and other agencies tend to work in a systematic structure to develop collaboration agreements between organizations. This study adds to existing research by helping to bridge the gap in collaboration efforts between state VR offices and local school districts. Moreover, this research enabled me to provide resources to other governmental agencies who are experiencing or presented

difficulties with interagency collaboration. Additionally, this study exposes a need to better service students with disabilities by enhancing interagency collaboration and developing a robust working relationship.

Student Outcomes

According to Benz and Lindstrom (1999) “recent national data suggest that outcomes for youth with disabilities remain very discouraging” (p. 55). Youth and young adults with disabilities typically experience lower rates of employment compared to their peers without disabilities (Newman et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2005). Statistical data demonstrates that the high school graduation rate for disabled youth has remained at 30% over the past ten years (Benz & Lindstrom, 1999). During the first five years after students with disabilities complete high school, they remain far behind their counterparts (Benz & Lindstrom, 1999). For example, students with disabilities have lower participation in postsecondary education than students without disabilities (27% versus 68%, respectively) and a lower percentage of students with disabilities live independently as adults compared to their peers (37% versus 60%, respectively; Benz & Lindstrom, 1999).

Only 21% of working-age people with disabilities were employed full- or part-time, compared to 59% of working-age individuals without disabilities (Riesen et al., 2014). Students with disabilities typically experience lower rates of employment compared to their peers without disabilities (Newman et al. 2011; Wagner et al., 2005). Students with disabilities face many barriers throughout their transition out of high school. Students tend to lack the resources and support, including VR services, that could guide the next

steps after secondary education. Services are mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and carried out by local school districts; however, services are then discontinued after matriculation. Poor outcomes for people with disabilities indicate that such resources should be available to assist students' transitions from secondary education to adulthood (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2016a). Many students receive vocational transition services, including one-on-one and additional supports that are indicated on their individualized education plan (IEP). Typically, transition services begin at the age of 16; however, in some states transition services start at age 14. These services are provided during secondary school up until the age of 22; however, once an individual turns 22, students and their families must seek community and state-funded resources on their own. Many times, families are unaware of what services are available or how to pursue services.

Policy Overview

To address poor outcomes for students with disabilities, policymakers passed legislation intended to support the transition of students from secondary school to postsecondary settings. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975 was developed to ensure that all students with disabilities are given a fair and appropriate education from K-12. IDEA requires that educators and other collaborating agencies implement transition planning to assist transition-aged students and their families. According to IDEA, transition services are defined as a set of services that are coordinated to support the results of the student transitioning from secondary education to independent living, postsecondary education, VR services, or supported employment.

(IDEA, 2004, section 614). IDEA requires that transition plans must be included in a student's IEP by age 16.

To work alongside IDEA, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 was implemented to provide transition supports so that students with disabilities could receive prevocational services prior to either registering for VR services or exiting postsecondary education. Pre-Vocational opportunities may consist of job experiences and preparation related to postsecondary education depending on the interest of the student. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 allows for students with disabilities to receive reasonable accommodations while working in a competitive and integrated setting.

Office of Vocational Rehabilitation

State VR offices are designed to serve individuals with disabilities to seek independence, whether transitioning from secondary education to adulthood or everyday freedom. There are district offices throughout the state, which serve individuals with disabilities in their pursuit of entering the workforce. The mission of this agency is to assist individuals with disabilities to obtain and maintain competitive employment and independence (Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, 2019). In each office the number of staff can range from 30-60 depending on the demographics and location.

This study focuses on two offices in the cities of Cobblestone and Flintrock in the Northeast United States.² Each office has over 60 staff members. VR is structured to assist students who have been identified with disabilities and deemed eligible for

² Pseudonyms.

vocational services to seek employment after graduating from high school. The office's mission is based on the principle of transition services that was included in the federal Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), which was first passed in 1975 and most recently amended in 2015.

Roles of Collaborators

In the VR office, there are two staff positions that are related to facilitating transition services. The first position is the Early Reach Coordinator (ERC). The ERC is a trained social worker whose primary duties revolve around pre-vocational services. This relates to the social and vocational needs of training and implementing education for the purpose of eventually seeking employment upon leaving secondary education. The ERC's position is rooted in communication with outside entities in terms of creating pre-vocational opportunities. Aside from providing pre-vocational opportunities, the ERC offers resources within the community to assist families with other community-related concerns.

The second position related to transition is the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC). This position services students ages 16 to 21. The purpose of this position is to help students seek competitive employment. As such, the VRC has the authority to provide cost-related services to assist individuals with obtaining their vocational goal. These services can include training, job coaching, and other supports that can help students enter the competitive employment market.

Roles of School Staff

Several members of the school staff interact in the transition portion of the IEP process. These members include the special education teacher and the designated local education agency (LEA). The special education teacher is the organizer of the IEP, in terms of composition. In addition to the leveling and modifications, the special education teacher stipulates the proposed transition goals for the student from the academic realm. This includes, but is not limited to, researching careers, interacting with the guidance counselor, and other related initiatives. This teacher is also the go-between for families and other team members. The special education teacher calls the parent and arranges the meeting at their convenience.

The LEA oversees and agrees to the proposed plans of the IEP. The LEA appoints a representative who may be a principal, an assistant principal, or in some cases the head of the special education department. Although the special education teacher organizes the meeting and the OVR staff share their proposed transition plans moving forward, the LEA is the top of the bureaucratic framework. If the transition coordination is a team effort, the LEA is the coach who oversees the team.

The final members of the team are the families. The family consists of the guardians and the students. The guardian is the adult in charge of the child whose support is the subject of the IEP meeting. The guardian gives the final say to whether a proposed transition plan will be put into motion. In essence, the guardian is the customer of the OVR.

The student is the individual on which facilitation of services is centered. The implementation of proper transition services is coordinated to meet their present and future needs. Whether the goal is training, employment, or independence, the student is receiving the benefit of transitional support from all parties involved in the coordination of transition.

In order to understand interagency collaboration, it is essential to learn the different roles of each staff member and the specific duties of each function on the transition team. However, there seems to be a disconnection between VR staff and school personnel. Consequently, students are encouraged to seek VR services through the OVR at least two years prior to leaving high school. In some cases, services may need to be discussed even earlier. In these situations, the OVR would play a role, as transition services are important in the lives of students with disabilities.

Interagency Agreement

The state VR agency has developed a memorandum of understanding in conjunction with the Department of Education to outline specific services that can be provided to youth ages 14–21 during and after high school. The school-to-work memorandum of understanding outlines the services that OVR can provide to students while in high school that may not be offered by the local school districts. Therefore, the memorandum of understanding is a consistent document for the state's VR agency and the Department of Education. While there is a state memorandum of understanding that is the baseline for interagency collaboration, each local office develops internal processes that fit the structure of the office and the direction of the service provision.

Given that VR offices vary in size and makeup, each office has its individualized structure when providing transitional support to students with disabilities. There are processes in place to provide transitional support to students ages 14–21, so it is a best practice to have the VR agency be the payer of last resort unless there is a unique circumstance.

Scope of Problem

Across the state, interagency collaboration seems to be a major issue when discussing partnerships between the VR and the local school districts. From speaking with various staff across the state, it appears that developing relationships are strained. In Cobblestone, there seems to be a disconnect with understanding the transitional process leading to adulthood between the Cobblestone school district and the Cobblestone OVR. Moreover, there seems to be a misunderstanding across disciplines related to credentials. Local schools are reluctant to include the VRC in the transition process. VRCs felt they were not an essential part of transition teams and were not provided with adequate information about students (Riesen et al., 2014). Since there seems to be a strong disconnection across both agencies, the allocation of VR services tends to be supplanted. For example, in a student’s IEP already includes services such as job-shadowing and paid work experiences. Paid work experience is classified as the work-based learning experience to include job shadowing which means including a student in an inclusive work environment to gain a real-life experience (Mazzotti et al., 2016). In the student’s IEP, this experience may be worded like “job readiness training.” This can cause duplication of services.

For quite some time, the Cobblestone OVR and the local Cobblestone school district have had trouble collaborating to provide transitional support to students ages 14–21. This has been a longstanding issue.

Professional Observation

In 2009, I joined the state VR with the purpose of assisting transition-aged youth with disabilities to obtain or maintain employment. I was a member of a collaboration with schools located in the county where the office was headquartered. The purpose of this collaboration was to create an overall goal of facilitation of transition services. Under IDEA (2004), the terms of transition services are stipulated as being:

within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. (Section 300.43, para. 1)

As part of the OVR transition team, I would attend IEP meetings with the purpose of creating relationships to support the vocational vision of the families of children receiving special education services. This collaboration would consist of VR staff providing parents, children, and school employees with information related to the postsecondary employment, education, and support services available upon exiting the high school setting. This collaboration was one of interagency nature, in which two separately run organizations would work in unison towards a common goal.

It has been my professional experience that both school professionals and VR staff are not in conjunction when participating on the transitional team. In many cases,

students with disabilities do not have a set interim plan in place due to the lack of interagency collaboration. Examples of poor collaboration included transition teams prolonging the transitional process, students being unaware of what transition services encompassed, OVR staff not being invited to scheduled IEP meetings, and overall disconnection of expectation from team members. Collaboration across agencies should be one of the main discussions when connecting students with disabilities transitioning out of secondary education to adulthood (Kohler, 1996; Kohler & Field, 2003; Landmark et al., 2010; Noonan et al., 2008; Oertle & Trach, 2007).

While working in various roles in the state OVR, I personally experienced the issue of communication deficits among my staff, school district employees, and families. From experience, staff and families would often become frustrated when trying to establish communication with the Cobblestone school district. Despite our shared vision of servicing students with disabilities, many times IEP meetings, service provision meetings, and other interactions would not come to fruition due to failures in organizing the meetings. Poor conveying of ideas, scheduling, and deadlines would hinder the students' service provisions. From personal experience, I would leave these meetings with unanswered questions and limited understanding of a conceptual timeline for implementation of services. In my capacity as both a counselor and administrator, I would often receive calls from parents, staff members, and school district employees about poorly facilitated communication between the collaboration of the agencies.

In many situations, I felt that the team did not understand the overall vision of the subsequent parties involved at the IEP meeting. There were many occurrences where I

was told a specific vocational goal by the parent, district, and child, and then months later, when I attempted to facilitate this opportunity, I would be met with hostility. This theme of poorly displayed expectations was a recurrence in many facets of the service provision process. In the bureaucratic framework, my superiors would often send mixed messages to me. This would also occur with my subordinates when I became a figure of authority. The families and schools would become frustrated because of inconsistent messaging. In the end, a relatively simple process would become compromised, resulting in poor distribution of services. As OVR is an entity based on the satisfaction of customers, it became apparent that this negligence in mutual understanding across interagency systems was an issue impeding the positive trajectory of customer service. Consequently, I decided to conduct an analysis of practice and perception.

In my experience, although the complaints varied in nature, most of them related to an overarching theme of poor communication. I was often displeased by the fact that despite correspondence, mutual agreements, and hours of work, expectations were not always met. The dissatisfaction of the parents, the school district, and myself were often rooted in failure to meet expectations that had been generated in prior meetings. Goals, timelines, and executions of processes, despite being agreed upon, would often be changed or disputed. I would start a project with a clear trajectory; however, despite the facilitation of an agreed upon outcome, disappointment and resentment of the mutual parties would take effect.

As I reviewed this experience as a counselor and moved into a position of administrative capacity, I began to discover similar patterns emerging. Hostility with

coworkers and collaborating bodies, was still a frequent occurrence. When reviewing the complaints, there seemed to be a shared phenomenon of communication deficit.

Expectations were often a point of contention. When one party would argue that the other had not followed directions to their satisfaction, the other party would justify their actions by stating that the expectations had not been thoroughly outlined.

A pattern began to emerge, showcasing an underlying problem that needed to be analyzed. Communication seemed to be the cause of contention among collaborating parties in the Cobblestone office. However, I needed to know whether perceptions were a mutual phenomenon or an occurrence isolated to my experience. I also had to determine whether the issue occurring in Cobblestone was also a situation in Flintrock.

Purpose

The purpose of this research study was to make a more in-depth examination of the interagency collaboration between the Cobblestone school district and the local Cobblestone OVR. This issue was examined from the perspectives of the front-line staff by exploring the daily experiences of the VRC and ERC. Although other vocational offices, including the Flintrock OVR office, were examined, Cobblestone was the focus of this study. Data from the Flintrock OVR office were used to determine effective collaborative endeavors that could be implemented in the Cobblestone office. This study adds to the body of knowledge pertaining to interagency collaboration among local school districts and state VR agencies.

Summary

Governmental agencies can interact together to develop effective interagency collaboration. The importance of interagency collaboration is to establish a working relationship to ensure that service delivery is carried out. It is important to be able to identify collaborative interagency partners such as the OVR and local entities to ensure that students with disabilities are being serviced and that they have formalized support plans upon leaving high school.

Research Questions

The research questions developed will take a more in-depth look into the interagency collaboration between both the OVR agency and the local school districts, specifically in Cobblestone and Flintrock.

1. What are the perceptions of interagency collaboration within offices of vocational rehabilitation?
2. Do the staff of these separate offices view these collaborations as supporting the outcomes of the transition-aged youth with whom the agencies work?

Methodology Overview

Within the public domain of the VR website, the *Act 26 Quarterly Reports* provide statistical data related to performances by counties (Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, 2019). The appendices of these reports include tables showcasing the reported data in Cobblestone and Flintrock for the months leading up to this study.

When reviewing the numbers of outcome success for transition-aged students, the Flintrock shows a positive performance metric. Based on this, I would like to determine

whether perceptions of interagency collaboration were positive or negative among OVR staff in the Cobblestone Office.

Design

I chose to utilize a qualitative design implementing both a questionnaire and narrative inquiry method. The narrative inquiry allows for in-depth interviews to be performed to better understand an individual's experience. The questionnaire is a baseline survey that gives a preliminary understanding of how to set forward the anticipated interview. As one of the major goals of this study was to understand perceptions, this design was useful in discovering personal feelings and opinions. From these opinions, I was able to better understand whether perceptions were individual or mutual. The data allowed the researcher to correlate different factors in defining the breakdown in successful and unsuccessful collaboration between school districts and OVR.

Significance of the Study

In any program or organization, cost is the primary factor measuring success or failure. Whether measured financially, emotionally, or in time, every organization's success and failure is emphasized in the measuring of production. It is for this reason that proper forms of practice and conveyance of technique are essential in the promotion of thorough intervention of service provision. In my present experience as an administrator, former counselor, and advocate of disability accommodations, there is a perceived negligence in the implementation of service provision. Being on the OVR side of the table, In phone calls and emails, parents and school districts have showcased a feeling of

frustration with how the Cobblestone Office implements its practices and complies with policy. This is further showcased in the poor results of the quarterly reported data.

By understanding a trend or identifying a problem, agencies can find incentives to promote awareness and utilization of proper practice. Through this study, it was my goal to explore the theme of inadequate communication and the overall toll that it takes on the workers in my organization. By exploring and identifying trends across both Cobblestone and Flintrock, it is my hope to learn and provide answers for questions regarding morale, performance, and competence.

Through this investigation, data can be provided. From examination of this data, policy makers and organizational administrators can focus on training to address strategies in patience, listening, tolerance, and mutual understanding. With effective communication practices, an increase in production of positivity in both morale and performance will occur. From this, a cost-effective method of performance distribution will lead to profit in terms of organizational output.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, I will examine the literature related to interagency collaboration across both VR and local partners. I will also examine relevant legislation related to transition-aged youth and students with disabilities. Finally, I will discuss a relevant research gap and the effectiveness this research has on the outcomes of students moving from secondary education to adulthood.

Transition from Secondary Education to Adulthood

The number of youths enrolled in special education in high school has steadily increased. Meanwhile, many people with disabilities struggle after graduating from high school (Fairweather & Shaver, 1990). The results from Fairweather and Shaver (1990)'s study showed that "youth with disabilities participate in postsecondary programs at only one-quarter the rate attained by their counterparts without disabilities and at only one-third the rate attained by economically disadvantaged youth" (p. 264). Fairweather and Shaver (1990) also argued that this increase is due to the number of programs created to assist individuals with making such efforts to pursue their aspirations and dreams. Consequently, transition is something students with disabilities must consider prior to leaving high school if they are to achieve independence.

Outcomes for Students Leaving High School

To understand the reality of moving from entitlement in secondary education to eligibility in adulthood can be baffling to students, most importantly students with disabilities (Benz & Halpern, 1987; Knott & Asselin, 1999; Test et al. , 2006). In high school, students are entitled to education and services based on specific laws. For example, IDEA mandates students are entitled to a free and public education. In adulthood, these same students must be deemed eligible for certain services, such as those provided by VR, as they transition from high school into their next phase of postsecondary education, seeking employment, or obtaining independence.

Transitioning from high school to adulthood can be a difficult task for individuals with varying disabilities (deFur & Patton, 1999; Schall & Wehman, 2008; Sitlington & Clark, 2006). Many students with disabilities tend to look forward to the next phase of life, which is transitioning out of high school to adulthood. However, literature has demonstrated poor outcomes for students with disabilities seeking employment compared to students without disabilities. Research on postsecondary outcomes indicated that minority students have a more difficult time with seeking employment than their counterparts (Fabian, 2007). This highlights that students who lack vocational training need opportunities for hands-on experience (Geenen et al., 2003). These programs are emerging. For example, one employment partner program is the Marriott Bridges program (Fabian 2007). The Marriott Bridges program is a school-to-work program that assists students with seeking competitive employment alongside their peers in an

integrated work setting. While this program may have sparked positive outcomes, the importance of interagency collaboration remains.

White and Wiener (2004) determined that integration with peers was significantly correlated with young adults obtaining post-school employment. In a study conducted by Mazzotti et al. (2016), researchers investigated correlational research in relation to youth with disabilities and their post-graduation employment outcomes and found that even though a plethora of correlational studies had been conducted, there was a lack of research examining in-school secondary transition predictors of success. The premise of their research was to examine prediction studies. Researchers stated that the results of these studies would be beneficial in apprising school administrators, teachers, counselors, and employers to implement decision making to assist with program improvement, instructional planning, and individualized planning (Gay et al., 2012).

Test et al. (2009) indicated that before 2009, there was not a systematic review of secondary transition correlational studies that identified evidence-based in-school success predictors for post-graduate youth with disabilities. Test et al. (2009) conducted a systematic review of such correlational research since 1984 to ascertain in-school transition experiences that were predictors of post-graduate outcomes for this population. Thompson et al. (2005), conducted research and determined that there were 16 secondary transition in-school predictors of positive post-graduation success outcomes. Examples included work study, community-based instruction, self-determination, and inclusion in general education. Haber et al. (2015) enhanced the research of Test et al. (2009) and conducted a meta-analysis to substantiate the research base for predictors on post-

graduate employment, education, and independent living outcomes. Haber et al. (2015) also determined that transition programs and inclusion in general educational setting had a more profound effect than other predictors. Such examples included interagency collaboration and vocational education.

Mazzotti et al. (2016), conducted a systematic review of the literature from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2). The NLTS2 was originally funded in 2000 by the Department of Education's Special Education Programs. It was inclusive of more than 11,000 youth with disabilities aged 13–16 in 2000. The data were compiled for a duration of eight years, 2001–2009. It was representative of parents, youth, and schools and provided a panoramic view of the experiences and achievements of youth that had a disability as they were transitioning to post-graduate life. The NLTS2 measured and defined demographic characteristics, secondary school experiences such as programs, related services, and extracurricular activities, post-graduate involvements with disabled youth, and contextual factors such as types of communities, interagency collaboration, service agencies, and additional programs. Additional multivariate analysis was utilized due to the massive descriptive results across the disabled student population. This allowed a more in-depth investigation into the findings of the data such as variables germane to different disability categories and special transitional topics, making the NLTS2 a vital database to conduct correlational studies on the in-school and post-graduate outcomes of students with disabilities. Since newer and more emerging studies were being conducted, the researchers wanted to determine if any new predictors had emerged since Test et al.'s (2009) review. Thus, the purpose of Mazzotti et al.'s (2016)

study was to review relevant research to identify NLTS2 secondary analysis articles published since 2009 that met the categorization of quality indicators for correlational research (Test et al., 2009; Thompson et al., 2005). Additionally, researchers wanted to extend the findings of Test et al. (2009) by recognizing additional evidence to substantiate the current in-school predictors of post-graduate success and to recognize any new in-school predictors of post-graduate success with disabled youth.

Researchers requested NLTS2 secondary analysis articles from authors that were members of the National NLTS2 Community of Practice. They also examined publications between 2009 and 2014 that utilized the NLTS2 data set (Waves 1-5) to conduct correlational research. Researchers were investigating articles that demonstrated correlates between in-school predictors and post-graduate outcome variables. Their goal was to examine secondary transition predictors of post-graduate accomplishment. Eleven articles met the criteria for correlational studies. Of the 11 studies, three were *a priori* and eight were exploratory. All 11 studies reported disability types represented in the sample population. The total sample population consisted of 21,093 across the 11 studies.

According to Mazzotti et al. (2016) the sample was comprised of the following: 27.1% ($n = 5,724$) were identified as having autism, 10.0% ($n = 2,112$) a learning disability, 6.9% ($n = 1,450$) an intellectual disability, 5.4% ($n = 1,145$) an emotional disturbance, 5.3% ($n = 1,127$) a vision impairment, 4.7% ($n = 1,007$) an orthopedic impairment, 4.0% ($n = 840$) had other health impairments, 3.9% ($n = 830$) a hearing impairment, 3.7% ($n = 790$) had multiple disabilities, 2.9% ($n = 620$) a speech impairment, 1.4% ($n = 300$) a traumatic brain injury, and <1% ($n = 150$) were deaf/blind. Results indicated that there were 55

significant positive effects among the 11 studies. The effect size ranged from $r = .019$ (small) to $r = .934$ (large), with a median effect size of $r = .355$ (medium) and mean of $r = .378$ (medium). Significance levels for all correlations ranged from $p < .0001$ to $p \leq .05$. Results of this study were consistent with Test et al.'s (2009) predictor variables to include: career awareness, exit exam/high school diploma status, inclusion in general education, paid employment, work experience, parental involvement, self-care/independent living skills, social skills, vocational education, and work study. Four new predictors were identified within this study: parent expectations, youth autonomy, goal setting, and travel skills. Within this study, there was a negative correlation between interagency involvement in high school and postsecondary education 4 years after high school ($r = -.293$; medium effect; $p < .0125$) (Paypay & Bambara, 2014).

Mazzotti et al. (2016) stated that negative findings should be further investigated to determine how they can contribute to evidenced-based research. Even though some of the findings were negative, they still supported the need for additional programs to focus on specific skill instruction which may be a new potential predictor. Additionally, researchers indicated that there was a need to examine specific subpopulations to include: autism, intellectual disability, and emotional disturbance. Researchers indicated that this may lead to positive post-graduate outcomes for students in these populations. The study recommended future research on the following variables: travel skills, goal settings, youth autonomy, and decision making. The OVR could serve as vital entity to provide the interagency collaboration to teach such skills to the disabled population. This will foster the possibility of correlates to be established between interagency collaboration and post-

graduate employment outcomes. Additional examination of the research is needed to determine such correlates.

Student Outcomes Related to Disabilities

Research argues that students with disabilities tend to have lower outcomes of employment as opposed to their counterparts as identified in multiple studies. A disability diagnosis may play a role in the low outcomes for employment. In this section, the literature will be examined related to specific disabilities and the outcomes that are coupled with employment. It is mentioned that individuals identified as intellectually and developmentally disabled (IDD) tends to have much lower employment outcomes. According to Rabren et al. (2002), it is noted that individuals with IDD experience unemployment one year after leaving high school. They experience low graduation rates, low training attendance and low income (Wagner et al., 2014). According to Wehman et al. (2014), there is a vital need for intervention methods to be implemented that will assist in the eradication of barriers and to promote successful employment outcomes for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Cimera et al. (2013) reported that there is an increase in evidence that connecting youth with early work experiences results in improved long-term VR outcomes. Certain programmatic interventions such as supported employment can be integral to individuals with disabilities to help attain employment opportunities in a competitive market as well as an integrated work setting (cf. Wehman, 1981; Wehman et al., 2007). Initially, supported employment constituted a support service, allowing individuals with severe IDD to spend their days attending workshops and day centers working with staff. Wehman et al.(1997)

indicated that SE was formulated to exemplify the principles of consumer empowerment and individualized, community-based support. This program has been beneficial in assisting people with significant IDD with positive employment outcomes (Wehman et al., 2007).

Summary

While lower outcomes tend to be present among students with disabilities, this concern is especially common in students who have been diagnosed with IDD. It is noted that students with IDD experience unemployment one year after high school. However, it is argued that such programmatic implementation such as supported employment provides opportunities for trial work experiences in an integrative work environment. Disability plays a significant role in employment outcomes, but supportive opportunities allow students to have an experience equal to that of their counterparts.

The Effects of Students Transitioning After High School

In this section, I will examine the literature discussing some of the effects that may cause difficulty for students with disabilities transitioning from secondary education to postsecondary outcomes. After matriculating from secondary education, it is the hope for those with disabilities that they can attain postsecondary education, independent living, or gainful employment. When transitioning from high school to adulthood, it is important to understand the importance of support from family and how vitally necessary this support is for those that may have trouble with their transition plans.

According to Everson & Moon (1987), family support, namely parental support, is one of the critical factors of student outcomes. The lack of parental involvement may

be due to not having adequate resources to participate in school functions such as back to school nights and IEP meetings. There are many situations that may impede a student's ability to transition adequately. One barrier that may cause a disconnection for students with disabilities transitioning is that students may not be aware of their challenges nor can articulate such challenges well. It may be relevant to understand that students with disabilities understand that they are faced with challenges, but the disability of the student may be far from the conversation. This may result in students not participating in their IEP meetings. Parental and professional collaboration may be a hindrance (Goldberg & Kuriloff, 1991; Thorin & Irvin, 1992; Todis & Singer, 1991; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). Family support is crucial because families seem to know their child/children with disabilities best. While the support of the family has been instituted since the inception of IDEA 1975 (Public Law 94-142), the lack of support from the family, namely parental support, can be disheartening to the students.

Penick & Jepsen (1992) and Whiston & Keller (2004) indicated that families tend to have a greater influence on youth career development than their peers. Whiston and Keller (2004) determined that the career development of adolescents was based upon family contextual factors to include family structural variables and family process variables (Ferguson et al., 1988). Researchers discovered that the education, occupation, socioeconomic status, family relationship dynamic, parental aspirations, and family support and advocacy played a major role in the development of adolescents. Blustein et al. (2002) suggested that youth that came from higher socioeconomic backgrounds sought higher statuses and more prestigious occupations. Additionally, the research indicated

that families from higher SES have the propensity to provide instrumental and emotional support in comparison to those with lower SES that have more relational disruptions, less structure, and less involvement in the career developmental process. Morningstar et al. (1995) reported that parents serving as role models for educational support and employment attainment may be especially beneficial for young adults with disabilities. The researchers examined parental involvement in the planning of their transition and youth with disabilities chose career interests that were similar to those of their family members.

Researchers Young and Friesen (1992) discussed the role of the family in career exploration and planning and determined that variables such as support and expectations may be influential in an adolescent's career development. Lopez (1989) and Penick & Jepsen (1992) stated that complex patterns of family interactions including style and attitudes play a role in adolescent vocational identity development. This is inclusive of goals, interests, and values associated with career planning. In a study conducted by McNair & Rusch (1991), 20 families were interviewed, and it was determined that most parents expressed wishes for their disabled child to live outside of the home, work within the community, and earn minimum wage, which was indicative of the family's expectations for and influence on vocational goals, achievement, and self-efficacy.

In a study conducted by Lindstrom et al. (2007), researchers examined the role that families play in career development and gainful employment for 59 young adults with learning disabilities. Researchers wanted to explore the impact that families have on career exploration and career choice among their children with certain learning

disabilities. They utilized a multi-method and multi-case study design to investigate the influence that family structure, variables associated with career development, and employment after graduation outcomes had on young adults with learning disabilities. Researchers utilized case study research on individual cases. They utilized a multiple-method, multiple case strategy to compile multiple sources of evidence and perspectives, allowing them to utilize a triangulation strategy to enhance the reliability and validity of the finding. (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). Researchers were able to document the influence that family structure and family pattern interactions had on career development and post-graduation outcomes through the utilization of retrospective case studies. For sampling purposes, researchers used a combination of qualitative sampling methods called mixed purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Methods were comprised of criterion and stratified purposeful sampling. Data was collected by methods of semi-structured interviews and developed in descriptive codes. Interviews were coded both independently and then paired before being entered into a qualitative database. The second phase of the analysis involved the use of explanatory methods in which family structure and process variables were examined.

Findings were consistent with previous literature, and it was determined that family process variables and patterns of family interactions had a greater influence on the employment outcomes of young adults seeking post-graduation employment than characteristics of family structure (Whiston & Keller, 2004; Young & Friesen, 1992). Therefore, family relationships, family involvement, family support and advocacy, career aspirations and expectations, and intentional career-related activities were important

factors in post-graduation employment outcomes for young adults with disabilities. The researchers recommended fostering relationships between parents and school professionals as well as educating parents about a myriad of career options and opportunities. This is where the OVR can be impactful. Parents can work in tandem with OVR to explore vocational training programs and services to better assist their young adult with more favorable post-graduation employment opportunities.

Students tend to play an important part in their transitional planning; however, they may be left out of the process. It could be presumed that they may not have an idea of their future goals or that their parents may control the narrative of the student's plan. Because of this, students with disabilities may face a variety of barriers throughout their transition process leading to adulthood. These barriers can range from students not wanting to work, students not knowing the next step in the transition process, a lack of awareness of challenges faced, and/or disconnect across agency collaboration. Student involvement in the transition process is relatively new or is non-existent (Van Reusen & Bos, 1990).

In examining the literature, students with disabilities can be invited to attend IEP meetings starting at the age of 14 in accordance with IDEA (1997) (Field et al., 1998; Johnson et al., 2002; Storms et al., 2000). This study examined students in special education and their involvement in the IEP meeting. The study analyzed several IEP programs where students may or may not have attended meetings, and found differences between when students were present as opposed to not attending meetings. Students appeared to attend meeting less when the meetings were dominated by the special

education teacher (Field et al. 1998; Johnson et al., 2002; Storms et al., 2000). This may be an important factor for the student transition given that student presence at IEP meetings and students knowing the purpose of the meeting may assist with the next direction of the transition process.

Summary

The importance of family support plays a significant role in the transitioning process for students with disabilities ages 14–21. Family involvement in student transition helps to improve understanding of student interests and passion related to the next steps in transitioning from secondary education to postsecondary outcomes. Family support, namely parental support, speaks to the direction of the next steps for students transitioning beyond secondary education. Therefore, the importance of legislation drives the direction of the supports that transition-aged youth receive while in secondary education and beyond.

Policy Context

Under both legislation and policy, it is the assumption that all students with disabilities should successfully transition from high school to adult life. The purpose of the transition policy is to outline needed services that students with disabilities can access and will benefit from in addition to the services they receive from their preexisting educational plan. IDEA is a mandated piece of legislation that requires a transition plan as part of the student's IEP in which secondary schools are held accountable for the implementation of services that have been signed by the IEP team, including the family. Because of IDEA, students and families are afforded opportunities for a free and public

educational experience. In discussing IDEA, there is an understanding that this specific legislation is the driving force for students who have disabilities to receive the necessary and appropriate services when transitioning from high school to adult life. IDEA should ensure that all children with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living (IDEA, 2004; Katsiyannis et al., 2001; Martin et al., 1996).

The legislation mandates that schools provide a transition plan to assist students with their departure from high school to improve postsecondary outcomes. The transition plan is a piece of the IEP written in conjunction with the school staff and the family to outline the specific services that are crucial to student needs and the transitional process. Within the transition plan, goals are discussed and outlined to demonstrate the interests of the student and to provide a model to follow. Transition services are comprehensive and should reflect the interests and abilities of the student (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). The transition plan is multidimensional and may be inclusive of life goals, employment objectives, vocational objectives, vocational evaluations, and independent living objectives (IDEA, 2004).

Transition plans change with the needs of the student. Also, transition planning varies depending on family income, disability, and race/ethnicity (NLTS2, 2004). The amendments to IDEA (1997) indicated that two-thirds of students receiving special education services receive the basic services of transition plans starting at the age of 14 (NLTS2, 2004). Three-fourths of students in special education have special education courses that are specific to their IEP goals (NLTS2, 2004). Approximately 80 percent of

students are in programs that align with their IEP goals (NLTS2, 2004). Nearly 20 percent of students with disabilities have programs that are either suitable or unsuitable for the individual (NLTS2, 2004). While IDEA is legislation that protects students while in secondary education, specific legislation enhances IDEA's mandates to provide students with disabilities such opportunities to obtain work experiences to prepare for adulthood.

IDEA was amended in 2004 to include a State Performance Plan (SPP) which is sent to the department of educational annually (IDEA, 2004). Three of the most important components of the plan are indicator 13, indicator 14, and the summary of performance (SOP). Indicator 13 and indicator 14 are used to monitor the service provision to students. Moreover, indicator 13 is a checklist to ensure that compliance is being followed in accordance with the transitional IEP plan (Gaumer-Erickson et al., 2013). Indicator 14 is a measurement of the adults after high school and is used to measure training and employment one year after high school (Gaumer-Erickson et al., 2013) Indicators 13 and 14 were established to ensure a smooth and seamless transition from high school with public schools to postsecondary opportunities. Consequently, for students to have a smooth and seamless transition leaving high school, each student should have an SOP reviewed and discussed by qualified staff. The purpose of the SOP is to outline the next steps such as career planning, postsecondary education, and independent living goals (IDEA, 2004). While IDEA has played a significant role in the development and implementation of transition services for students with disabilities, the

legislation passed in 2016 adds to the specific transition services to assist students with gaining such experience leading to employment.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), signed into law July 26, 1990 by President Bush and amended in 2008, was designed to prevent discrimination against individuals with disabilities in the workplace. The focus of the ADA is to allow individuals with disabilities a fair chance at work provided that the individual discloses their documented disability. Students transitioning from high school under IDEA are moved to ADA when they seek employment opportunities. Also, the focus of the ADA is to provide a non-segregated working environment for individuals with disabilities and their counterparts. This “enables individuals with disabilities to interact with nondisabled persons to the fullest extent possible” (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990).

Under the ADA, the employer has an obligation to provide reasonable accommodations to an employee with a disability unless shown undue hardship. This is important for students leaving secondary education because they leave IDEA, which provides a sense of protection, and transition to ADA, which focuses on reasonable accommodations. Legislation is important, as it provides individuals with disabilities, especially students, a voice to advocate for equal opportunities.

The Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA)

WIOA is a newly developed legislation for transition-aged youth designed to provide each student with a chance to explore career opportunities for low-income, at-risk, and disadvantaged populations (WIOA, 2014). WIOA was signed into law on July 22, 2014, to increase the provision of vocational and educational support between the

Department of Education and the local VR agencies. The WIOA provides funding for both VR agencies and local school districts, to provide transitional support services to students ages 14–21. The allocation of funds at 15% of the dollars are distributed to each state to carry out these services. Transition services are broken down as follows:

Job exploration counseling; work-based learning experiences, which may include in-school or after school opportunities, or experience outside the traditional school setting (including internships), that is provided in an integrated environment to the highest extent possible; counseling on opportunities for enrollment in comprehensive transition or postsecondary educational programs institutions of higher education; workplace readiness training to develop social skills and independent living; and instruction in self-advocacy, which may include peer mentoring. (29 U.S.C. § 733, p. 1658)

WIOA (2014) requires that the school system and VR work in collaboration in planning and delivering Pre-Employment Transitional Services (Pre-ETS) to students with disabilities at least two years prior to exiting high school. The goal of collaboration between VR and the school district and the coordination of delivering Pre-ETS is to improve employment outcomes for students with disabilities (29 U.S.C. § 414, p. 1655). The discussion of employment outcomes for students with disabilities cannot be undervalued since Pre-ETS allows for students to have an experience they may not have had previously. The collaboration between IDEA and WIOA may allow for life changing opportunities and experiences. WIOA serves varying factors when discussing the needs of students ages 14–21 but the primary goal is

To provide workforce investment activities, through statewide and local workforce development systems, that increase the employment, retention, and earnings of participants, and increase attainment of recognized postsecondary credentials by participants, and as a result, improve the quality of the workforce, reduce welfare dependency, increase economic self-sufficiency, meet the skill requirements of employers, and enhance

the productivity and competitiveness of the Nation. (29 U.S.C. § 2, p. 1429)

WIOA was implemented to provide students ages 14–21 opportunities prior to exiting secondary education, challenges seem to hold precedence. Given that the previous two pieces of legislation are vital in setting up students for adulthood to include employment, the ADA plays an equally important role, allowing individuals with disabilities to receive reasonable workplace accommodations and providing them with enhancements that enable them to perform their assigned jobs in the same setting with their counterparts.

Summary

Policies are in place to provide structure and direction to assist students with disabilities. It is noted that while students are in secondary education, they are covered under the IDEA legislation (2004). However, when exiting secondary education, they are covered under the ADA (2008). When students are enrolled in secondary education it is the duty of the school to provide the best and most appropriate transition support services. The Workforce and Innovation Opportunities act of 2014 provides enhancement to the collaboration between both the VR agency and the local schools. By enhancing the collaboration abilities, WIOA allows for pre-employment services for students prior to signing up for the VR program. By the time students are ready to exit high school, they should relate to outside agencies such as their local VR. The policies examined above provides a thorough analysis of information related to IDEA, transition, and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity act. With these policies in place, both OVR and local partners are cooperating in accordance with the law.

Vocational Rehabilitation Program

The VR program is a primary system designed to provide services to individuals, including students with disabilities, to secure and maintain competitive employment or independent living (Benz & Lindstrom, 1999). IDEA of 2004 and WIOA of 2014 encourages effective collaboration to provide quality services. With that, cross agency collaboration between VR and other agencies like the local school district is an essential resource to be provided during the transition process when interacting with transition-aged youth. In understanding collaboration, it is essential to learn the different roles of each staff member and the specific duties of each function on the transition team when interagency collaboration is involved. On the other hand, there tends to be difficulty across disciplines due to not understanding the workflow of each professional involved (Hurlburt et al., 2014).

Plotner et al. (2012) examined such literature and noted that transition-aged students receive transition support opportunities through community rehabilitation providers (CRPs). These are agencies that provide agreed upon services, which are identified through a contract between the VR agency and the specific provider; services are provided in a community setting. Oertle et al. (2013) noted that CRPs has little to no involvement in the student's transition process as opposed to VRCs. One of the issues is that all parties involved are on different pages. Oertle et al. (2013) stated, "It appears that educators, youth and their parents/guardians may not be making contact with rehabilitation professionals as early or frequently as necessary, and that rehabilitation professionals lack suitable information to be effective once they are involved" (p. 32).

Comprehensive transition services require input from the VRC, not just school officials (Plotner et al., 2012). Noonan et al. (2012) suggested that professional development for stakeholders involved in the transition process is vital. It is evident that VR providers needs further training related to secondary education to provide clear and quality service.

According to Martin et al. (2010), the state–federal VR program is the oldest and most impactful public program that supports individuals with disabilities. This program plays a widespread role in assisting people with a diverse range of disabilities in achieving their employment goals. This includes the transition-aged youth population (Martin et al., 2010; U.S. Government Accountability).

Because of limited financial resources, state VR entities must develop selection plans to prioritize services for individuals with more significant disabilities. This has changed over time, and most VR organizations have migrated towards consumers with intellectual disabilities, brain injuries, and mental illness (Hayward & Schmidt-Davis, 2002). Ditchman et al. (2013) indicated that VR agencies within and across states adhere to a standard rehabilitation process to include eligibility determination, a developmental plan to include rehabilitation, service provision, and job placement. This is where VR can implement supported employment services.

There has been an interest in determining how effective supported employment is as a VR service and what population it has the most impact on. Wehman et al. (2014) conducted a study to examine the effectiveness of SE interventions on employment outcomes in a population of transition-aged youth with IDD who were being serviced by local VR agencies. Researchers utilized a case-control study design, and data was

extrapolated from the 2009 Rehabilitation Services Administration Case Service Report (RSA- 911). The sample was comprised of 23,398 youth with varying intellectual and developmental disabilities between the ages of 16 and 25 at the time of application. The classification and regression tree method was utilized to approximate propensity scores and to regulate any potential selection bias based on protuberant covariates pertinent to the dependent variable, which was competitive employment. Six homogeneous subgroups were established, and results indicated that supported employment was determined to increase employment rates across all of the subgroups. Findings suggested that supported employment was effective for improving VR outcomes of young adults, which provides service insight for policy makers, healthcare providers, rehabilitation counselors, and educators (Wehman et al. 2014).

Dutta et al. (2008), conducted a study to determine the effect that VR services had on employment outcomes. Researchers examined a sample of individuals with sensory/communicative, physical, and mental impairments in the US. The sample was comprised of 5,000 clients for each of the disability groups, yielding a total of 15,000 participants whose cases were finalized as either rehabilitated or not by stated VR agencies in the fiscal year of 2005. Researchers examined the dependent variable of employment outcome and analyzed predictor variables including personal history and VR rehabilitation services. Results indicated that 62% of clients had successful employment outcomes after receiving services from VR. Success rates were higher for those with sensory/communicative impairments (75%). Logistic regression analyses were performed on the data and identified job placement, on-the-job support, maintenance, and additional

services as substantial predictors of employment success among the impairment groups examined. Findings from this study support the notion that state VR services are correlated with positive employment outcomes; thus, they are of great value to the populations that they serve. VR has been deemed as a “pull factor” type of therapy in which it “pulls” the participant in a particular direction. A successful vocational outcome is probable when all therapeutic services are related to work and the reciprocal. Dutta et al. (2008) indicated that a great percentage of persons with disabilities are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and can benefit from VR services, both at the beginning and discharge phases.

In a literature review conducted by Fleming et al. (2013), researchers reviewed empirical studies of current VR services at the state level published in the last 25 years. Active services were constituted as delivery practices that were considered as “best practices” resulting in competitive employment outcomes for disabled individuals receiving VR services through VR agencies. Effective VR service delivery across four states were examined by methods of multiple case studies. (Leahy et al., 2012). Participants were comprised of administrators, mid-level managers, and counselors from Texas, Mississippi, Maryland, and Utah’s VR programs. One hundred fifty-eight participants, including 56 mid-level managers, four directors, 25 VR leaders, and 73 VR counselors, engaged in the study. The researchers contacted agency leaders who were responsible for the coordination of efforts from participants. Subjective sampling was utilized to select participants with specific characteristics (Coyne, 1997; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Sixty-minute interviews were conducted with agency leaders including

state administrators and directors, and ninety-minute focus groups were conducted with mid-level managers including regional and district directors. Additionally, ninety-minute focus groups with 10 participants each were conducted with counselors and staff in training for specialized positions. Data was comprised from semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups, and mixed-method approaches. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. A consensual qualitative research analysis was conducted on the data. Results identified 29 practices that were identified as being supportive of successful employment outcomes for persons with disabilities receiving VR services. Best practices for traditional rehabilitation, the role of the counselor, and new methods of delivering services were suggested.

Summary

The VR program was designed to assist individuals with disabilities in seeking competitive employment or independent outcomes. Over time, such data has been formulated to track the outcomes of individuals with disabilities seeking competitive and integrative employment. The RSA 911 is one of the leading data elements to track such information for both students ages 14–21 and the adult population.

Interagency Collaboration as a Critical Practice between Governmental Agencies

Interagency collaboration is an essential systematic structure that is mandated under Barden-LaFollette Amendments of 1943 (Benz & Lindstrom, 1999). In the world of interagency collaboration, it is the understanding that multiple agencies typically come together to discuss ways to work in partnership to develop processes to improve the agency. In VR, it seems to be the practice that the VR agency fosters collaboration with

outside agencies to develop effective partnerships systematically. Meanwhile, the pragmatic structure of interagency collaboration across agencies is inconsistent (Agran et al., 2002; Mazzotti, 2009; Oertle & Trach, 2007). Collaboration is a way to assess agency leaders and coordinators, funders, and policymakers on addressing pressing issues of collaboration policy (Huxham, 2003). Interagency collaboration can cover a variety of agreements to effectively seek outcomes.

A review of the literature suggested that interagency collaboration can assist with positive outcomes for students with disabilities (Balcazar et al., 2012; Noonan et al., 2008; Riesen et al., 2014). This section examines barriers within interagency collaboration. To understand interagency and the transition formalities, interagency collaboration must be defined. Interagency collaboration is classified as two stakeholders working together towards a common goal (Mattessich et al., 2001). Interagency collaboration takes time to develop. According to Noonan (2014), interagency collaboration is broken into five steps: networking, cooperation, coordination, coalition, and collaboration. In reviewing the literature related to collaboration, Landmark et al. (2010) identified best practices for effective transition service delivery over several articles. Research has suggested that interagency collaboration is vital for students with disabilities transitioning from secondary education to adulthood (Landmark et al., 2010).

While interagency collaboration plays an important roles as the force driving student outcomes, research indicates that evidence-based practice (EBPs) are the solution for interagency collaboration and supported employment practices (Strauser & Wong,

2010). Testing the evidence-based practices is the most appropriate way to determine what works and what does not work.

Petrich, Hendrie & Robinson (2013), stated that interagency collaboration is a method of enhancing mental health care. One reason for this is that interagency collaboration can be integral in improving access to services as well as helping in the reduction of service gaps. Tseng et al. (2011) stated that interagency collaboration also assists in reducing the cost of healthcare by utilizing prevailing resources and the minimization of service duplication. Cooper et al. (2016) agreed that interagency collaboration could enhance equity among service provision of clients. The quality of life and health, as well as the overall well-being of people with intricate needs, can be improved through the utilization of interagency collaboration (Cameron et al., 2014). There is a need to focus on collaborative delivery of service for special populations such as those who may have trouble accessing services.

Fabian et al. (2016) indicated that collaborative service coordination among school systems, VR, adult employment providers, and other community entities had demonstrated positive employment outcomes. When the focus is on youth achieving positive outcomes from such collaboration, it is even more beneficial (Fabian et al., 2016). Honeycutt et al. (2014) stated that VR services provided to transition-aged youth in a timely manner and prior to transition contributes to successful VR case closures for transition-aged VR service participants.

Previous studies by Trach (2012) and Noonan et al. (2012), suggested that interagency collaboration endeavors to enhance transition outcomes is a systemic

construct in nature, meaning that participants share equally beneficial goals and outcomes which require joint commitment and accountability. In a study conducted by Fabian et al. (2016) researchers aimed to analyze the effects of perceptions of interagency collaboration on individual student VR outcomes. Researchers controlled for effects that demographic variables such as gender, race, and disability had on outcomes. Researchers utilized the Maryland Seamless Transition Collaborative (MSTC) multi-site model demonstration project. This project incorporated best practices in transition to determine the impact that certain practices had on fluid transition outcomes for youth in special education programs during their secondary school years. This project was funded by means of a five-year grant provided by the U.S. Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) that was awarded to the Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) in 2007. DORS also worked in tandem with TransCen, Inc., a local non-profit community-based entity located in Rockville, Maryland. The MSTC collaborative was implemented at 11 of 24 school districts in the state of Maryland and was comprised of local education agencies (LEAS) that competed for \$150,000 over three years in grants for the implementation of this model in their school system.

There were seven key components of the MSTC model that were based on the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disabilities' Guidepost of Success for transition. The components are as follows: (1) individualized student planning and career development; (2) student empowerment including self-determination training; (3) work-based experiences; (4) family support and participation; (5) early engagement with VR; (6) individualized paid, inclusive employment experience; and (7) interagency

coordination to achieve seamless transition (Luecking & Luecking, 2015). TranCen, Inc. received monthly progress reports from established project management teams (PMT). Each PMT met monthly and was responsible for ensuring that the model was implemented with the required seven elements and that there was appropriate follow-up and monitoring. Participants were referred to the programs that were transitioning from high school in two years. Additionally, these participants were also referred to state VR agencies prior to graduating; thus, they were conjoined with both entities.

Student data was extrapolated from the DORS case management system that included: a MSTC site location; demographic and background information; service implementation and interval; and case closure outcomes. Throughout the duration of the study, DORS compiled data from 144 out of 394 youth participants across eight sites whose cases were to be terminated by the cut-off date for the study. The Questionnaire on Collaboration (QoC; Spath, et al., 2008) and the Levels of Collaboration Survey (LoCS; Frey et al., 2006) were utilized to determine perceptions of collaboration. Data was aggregated for individual respondents within project management teams; therefore, the unit of analysis is the whole PMT, rather than individual members of the team. One hundred forty-three surveys were collected across eight sites. Most survey respondents were comprised from adult service providers. The breakdown was as follows: 39% were from a community-based rehabilitation program; 26% from special education/transition personnel employed by local schools; 16% were from the Division of Rehabilitation Services; 12% were from county-level mental health or DD administrative programs; and

7% were from family members, local workforce developmental center staff and post-education personnel.

Respondents were administered the QoC, developed by Weiss et al. (2002). This instrument assessed perceptions of partner relationship among health-related entities. The QoC was created to measure perceptions of the collaborative process to determine the extent to which partnerships are synergistic. The foundational model defined synergy among six dimensions (1) leadership; (2) administration; (3) efficiency; (4) non-financial resources; (5) partner involvement challenges; and (6) community-related challenges. Reliability of the instrument resulted in four subscales: leadership (.97); administration (.94); efficiency (.82) and non-financial resources (.84) and 29 Likert-scale items (Weiss et al., 2002). Questions were administered in a Likert-like manner on a 5-point scale from “excellent” to “poor.” Questionnaire examples included statements such as “My MSTC project management team does the following: (1) motivates people involved in the collaborative, (2) empowers people involved in the collaborative, (3) resolves conflict, (4) facilitates inter-agency communication, (5) creatively problem-solves, (6) communicates a vision of the partnership, (7) develops a common language, (8) organizes team activities.” Sample reliability of the QoC was 97.5%, which was significant at the .05 level.

Researchers also utilized Frey et al.’s (2006) LoCS. This scale was based on stages of collaboration, operationally defining collaborations as “a variety of parties coming together to reach a shared goal” (p. 386), thus signifying that the focus of the collaborative process is outcome-oriented. Their six-stage model includes: (0) no

integration at all, (1) networking, (2) cooperation, (3) coordination, (4) coalition, and (5) collaboration. The scale utilizes a 6-point scale to assess the level of evaluation that the PMT experiences with the other entity involved. The test-retest reliabilities for the LoCs ranged from .81 to .87 (Frey et al., 2006). Results indicated significant correlations between three major independent variables: team scores on LoCs, team scores on QoC, and team reports of average meetings attended. All correlations among the three major independent variables were significant. QoC and LoCS were also significantly correlated with mean number of meetings. Results from this study determined that instrumental or task-oriented perceptions of collaboration had a positive impact on VR outcomes. This is consistent with the research that supports that the collaborative endeavor between agencies yields a positive outcome for transition-aged youth.

Leucking et al. (2018) examined outcome differences between disabled youth who were receiving services from VR. Youth participating in a model transition intervention were compared with youth with disabilities that did not participate in the model transition intervention. These researchers utilized the MSTC model as well. Researchers aimed to answer two research questions: Were there differences in VR service patterns and costs for youth who participated in the service model compared to a matched sample of youth who did not? Were there differences in VR closure outcomes for youth who participated in the service model compared to a matched sample of youth who did not?

Select DORS participants provided administrative data for analytic purposes. The entities provided files for all MSTC youth and all non-MSTC youth younger than 22 at

the time of application that were determined to be eligible for participation between July 1, 2007 and June 30, 2013. Two groups were identified: the treatment group, VR applicants who were participants of the MSTC program, and a comparison group, VR applicants who resided in the 11 participating MSTC counties but did not participate in MSTC. Sample DORS provided the administrative data for the analysis. The final sample yielded 377 MSTC youth participants and 6,111 non-MTSC youth participants.

Several variables for demographic characteristics, VR service provision and VR outcomes, were included in the administrative records (Luecking et al., 2018) Demographic variables such as age, sex, race, disability type, SSDI enrollment at time of application, and SSI enrollment at time of application were examined. Researchers took into consideration a varied set of VR process measures related to assessment, timing, receipt of services, and closure outcomes. Researchers tested the hypothesis that there would be a difference between MSTC participants and nonparticipants in the VR application, service, and outcome measures of interest by means of weighted two-tailed t-tests. The direction of differences could not be predicted for most measures. Results included the following dimensions: application and assessment time between application and eligibility determination, attainment of an Individual Plan for Employment (IPE), and time between eligibility determination and IPE. Participants in the MSTC program experienced a shorter time for eligibility determination in comparison to non-MSTC participants. Ninety-one percent (91%) of the MSTC participants obtained an IPE compared with less than 74% of the non-MSTC participants. Differences were statistically significant at the .001 level. Both differences are significant at the .001 level.

Additionally, MSTC participants experienced a shorter duration between eligibility determination and IPE (132 days vs. 238 days). There was no statistically significant difference in percentage of each group receiving VR services; however, there were significant differences in the types of service received. MSTC participants had a higher percentage for job search assistance (37.1% vs. 30.2%), and on-the-job supports (45.9% vs. 21.4%). Forty-two percent of MSTC participants were employed at closure compared to non-MSTC participants (24%). MSTC participants also yielded more income while working fewer hours than non-MSTC participants (\$218.92 vs. \$182.86).

There appeared to be more descriptive statistics that were supportive rather than those that were deemed statistically significant. Researchers determined that interagency collaboration is a critical rehabilitation practice that is much needed. One of the major components of the MSTC model was the engagement from VR counselors with interagency teams. The role of VRCs needs to be expanded due to the level of interagency coordination and collaboration at the state, local, and private levels as they progress with the implementation of regulations and improvements to transition-related services. Again, these determinants are consistent with the research that states that interagency collaboration is an effective tool to ensure more positive employment and overall outcomes for transition-aged youth that are receiving VR services. Because there is sometimes a need to engage with a myriad of different agencies or even the educational system that the youth is in, effective communication and strengthened partnership is necessary for the overall success of the participant.

Noonan et al. (2008), conducted a phenomenological study investigating 29 high performing districts and state-level transition coordinators across five diverse states. They identified 11 key strategies that high-performing districts established at local levels in relation to interagency collaboration to include the following: flexible scheduling and staffing, post-transition follow-up, administrative support, a myriad of funding sources, state-supported technical assistance, ability to build relationships, agency meetings with students and families, training of students and families, joint training of school and agency staff, meetings with agency staff and transition councils, and dissemination of information to a wide-range audience. Results from their study yielded a need for a more systematic approach to local community readiness and a commitment of stakeholders to include special educators, transition coordinators, administrators, families, and agency staff. Most of these strategies involved a conjoined effort of school administrators and staff, community agencies and entities, and families.

In a study conducted by Benz et al. (2004), researchers determined that sustainability of transition innovations was positively correlated with programs that involved the support of at least one key administrator, produced positive student outcomes that were upheld by school and community stakeholders, and created a clear and distinctive role for their services that met identified needs of their district. Additional research studies indicated that collaboration with adult agencies were predictors of successful outcomes for young transition-aged adults with disabilities (Agran et al., 2002; Benz, Johnson, et al., 1995; Kleinhammer, et al., 1994; Wehman, 1996).

For over two decades, community transition teams worked to identify needs, plan and implement new programs, and assess the efforts made by team members to modify and enhance services for youth with disabilities (Noonan et al., 2013). Benz, Lindstrom, et al. (1995) indicated that systematic change is contingent upon vital components of the following: (a) active participation of diverse stakeholders, (b) viewing change as a process and not as an event, and (c) local community partnerships that are supported by a larger structure that sustains and validates efforts. Although there has been a plethora of information regarding community transition teams, there has been only a modicum of data that evaluates the effectiveness of interagency collaboration and its impact on youth with disabilities.

Researchers have extrapolated data from the Teaching All Students Skills for Employment and Life (TASSEL) model (Aspel et al., 1999), Project RENEW (Rehabilitation for Empowerment, Natural supports, Education, and Work) (Malloy et al., 1998), and the community transition team model (Benz, Lindstrom, et al., 1995). Aspel et al. (1999) reported that within the TASSEL model of transition planning, an increase in perception of participation on the parts of students, adult service providers, and school system personnel was evident. Participants indicated feeling as though they played more of a role in their transition process and that they were working in tandem with their service providers. Within Project RENEW, community transition teams were tasked to work with youth that were diagnosed with emotional disabilities. Teams were noted as being exceptional in the areas of: (a) service delivery, (b) receiving assistance from state

agencies, (c) working together to achieve common goals, and (d) coordination of services (Malloy et al., 1998).

Within a study of the community transitions team model, participants indicated being able to secure diverse team members but an inability to maintain active participation of parents and community members over a period of time. Teams that provided tiers of participants and offered the ability to be reevaluated annually were deemed to be successful. Benz, Lindstrom, et al. (1995) stated that successes were recognized in the areas of developing transition planning procedures and increasing perceived gain of program participants. What was not assessed in the research of the 1990s was pre/post collaboration data.

Noonan et al. (2013) conducted a study to examine changes in indicators associated with high-quality interagency collaboration for school and agency participants of a one-year community transition team. Researchers wanted to elaborate on the research base of the effectiveness of community transition teams in improving collaboration among school and agency staff. Researchers wanted to address two questions: (1) Is there a significant change in indicators of high-quality interagency collaboration after the first year of establishing a community transition team? (2) Is there a significant difference between school and adult agency staff regarding their change in levels of collaboration? Participants were comprised of 73 community transition team members of educators (41) and adult agency staff (28). The community transition team members participated in one of two training cohorts from 2009 to 2011. Training was provided for a duration of one year to help develop the community transition teams. The

project was competitive in nature to secure funding. Team members had to attend three 2-day mandatory trainings and were comprised of a school administrator, a secondary special educator/transition specialist, and a VR representative. The other three members were chosen per the needs of the community.

Throughout the trainings, teams assessed group needs, implemented a group vision, analyzed, and extended membership, conducted resource mapping, implemented action plans, and received a plethora of content related to adult agency services through the state. The training series encompassed four key stages of collaboration: information sharing, cooperation, coordination, and collaboration (Frey et al., 2006). Teams learned strategies and skills to progress towards higher levels of collaboration. They were also educated on how to prepare goals for community transition team meetings. The teams also had an opportunity to share challenges that they faced and to develop more effective retention strategies. The Transition Collaboration Survey (Noonan et al. 2008), was administered to assess levels of intra- and interagency collaboration. The survey is a 15 item survey that is directly related to evidenced-based indicators of high-quality collaboration to include the following: flexible scheduling and staffing, follow-up after transition, administrative support, variety of funding sources, state-supported technical assistance, ability to build relationships, agency meetings with students and families, training students and families, joint training of staff, meetings with agency staff and transition councils, and dissemination of information to a broad audience. Five domains were established from these areas to include: shared vision, variety of partnerships, time together, joint planning, and shared teams. Nonparametric tests were utilized. Data was

assessed by methods of descriptive analysis. Results indicated that for every indicator of transition collaboration, improvements were significant.

Summary

The literature suggests that high-quality collaboration can yield positive outcomes for transition-aged youth with disabilities. Additionally, it provides a plethora of information that suggests that these engagements require more formalized planning to be effective in nature and outcome.

Research Gap

While extant data has been used to understand the successes and failures of OVR regarding current interagency collaboration, as seen in the appendices under the *Act 26 Quarterly Reports*, there has not been an in-depth analysis of what staff feel are the major issues. By overlooking the personal qualities of qualitative research, administrators are missing the human element involved in collaborations. Communication is a key component in driving the effectiveness of service provision for transition-aged youth. As such, from the lens of state VR as an agency, it is important to listen to VR staff and try to understand their perceived frustrations.

Time is a commodity that cannot be replaced. The numbers show that we are wasting time in our current process of collaboration. Therefore, through this study, we can find a new model of collaboration that can be implemented.

Conceptual Framework

Within the context of collaboration between the Department of Education and state VR it is the understanding that all parties will work together with a collective goal to service students with disabilities. According to the memorandum of understanding, the state VR is the partnering agency to provide services to students with disabilities that schools are unable to provide. As such, it is imperative that the collaboration be of benefit for the student. All parties must work collaboratively and share a mutual understanding that anticipated goals are meant for the positive outcomes of the student being served.

This study is rooted in the idea of determining whether VR staff find the collaboration with school districts to be a positive one that produces adequate results based on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the methodological practice of communication. Collaborations are heavily entrenched in the process of communication. It is for this reason that the communication process was examined as a conceptual framework for this dissertation. Within each part of the process, I found an ingrained category that aligned with the theme of the study.

Communication drives the direction of dialogue and is the determining factor of positive or negative outcomes (Mortensen, 1972). The communications model or process was developed by Shannon and Weaver (1949) to facilitate the communication between agencies using a transmission process (Mortensen, 1972).

The communication process is facilitated under the coordination of six primary elements. Source, encoding, message, receiver, decoding, and feedback, are necessary aspects of correspondence of ideas between parties. As the communication model is the

underlying theme of this examination, I will follow a conceptual framework that analyzes and outlines each component of the communication model. Within this framework, hypotheses, results, and overall perpetuation of the theme will emerge within the research.

Within the framework of this study, the source of communication can be defined as the school district, the VR staff, parents, or students. Whoever is conveying the initial message of the communication process is the source of communication. In relation to the purpose of this study, understanding the source allows me to dissect where the disconnection of information transference is initiating. In relation to the proposed research question, this precursor connects with the underlying theme of inefficient and ineffective communication.

To encode within communication is to establish a method of delivery for the information being distributed. Within the problems of practice with communication is the ignorance of effective methodology of distribution. Often in personal experience, I had families dispute receiving mailed letters. The method of distribution of a message can affect the level of ability to properly convey an idea. If an individual does not receive the idea, due to an ineffective distribution process, this can cause resentment and hostility. Meanwhile, this connects with the overarching theme of poor distribution of information as a problem that must be investigated with more scrutiny.

The message is the intended information for the prospective audience. The message is the root of the problem being investigated. Proper correspondence of messaging is the perceived issue within the collaboration between VR State agency and

the local school districts and the families they serve. Therefore, the investigation of proper message distribution is of relevance because it shows the negligence or improper practice among collaborating constituents.

The receiver is the intended party that is receiving the distributed message. Within this study, the receiver plays an intricate role in determining the effectiveness of communication. At the basic premise, if a receiver is understanding a message, then it is a promotion of the idea of effective communication among parties. As this study is an examination of the perception of fluid communication between state VR and outside entities with whom they collaborate, this category of the communication element list is integral to better solving the problem of practice.

Decoding is the process of translating a distributed message. Whether or not proper decoding occurs is a precursor to effective communication. If a message is articulated correctly, then the research suggests that the office staff is not having communication issues. This is of relevance because I was attempting to see whether the understanding and conveying of messages is a cause of contention among coworkers.

Feedback is the process of reception. This is the consequence of the exchange of information. Feedback tells the source, the perception and understanding, of the messaging being transferred. In this study, the feedback is a motivator of the data since the interactions between the staff and others is the highlight of the study.

Collaboration utilizes communication as a medium of conveying both ideas but also trust. As such, the perceptions of collaboration have a correlation with communication. Since this study is ingrained in the perceptions of successful or negative

components of collaboration, having the communication as an underlying motif to the study is a conceptual framework of relevance.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter explains the steps of my study. In this chapter I go into detail about the methodology and why I chose to implement it. I also discuss my population and sample, the procedures to gather data, the instruments utilized, and the analysis techniques I used to obtain my corresponding results.

Identification of and Justification for the Research Design

I have chosen to use a multi-part qualitative research design that includes a narrative inquiry and questionnaire. The purpose of this design is to offer the reader the opportunity to hear participants' personal perceptions of their experiences. As my research primarily focuses on the opinions of VR staff for the purpose of understanding the challenges of currently implemented processes, it is a justified design choice. By bringing together participants' voices, a pattern of themes can be explored and further developed.

Setting and Participants

The study took place in both the Cobblestone and Flintrock state OVRs. Certain choices within this study were made for convenience as well as to provide rich results. One such choice was to utilize the staff from Cobblestone and Flintrock. There are several reasons why these sites were chosen. They are in the same state, and thus subject to the same legislative and regulatory environment, yet they serve different populations.

In addition, initial research indicated that the staff at these two locations perceived collaboration differently.

These observations provided me with motivation to have both sets of participants as members of the sample. By reviewing the data, I viewed discrepancies across locations, and realized that the analysis of both offices could be beneficial based on their previously published performance metrics.

The VR agency is comprised of an executive director who oversees the entire agency with one deputy executive director who assists with running the agency. Depending on the location in the state, in each VR office there is one district administrator and one or two assistant district administrators. All district offices have a host of supervisors who provide supervision and technical support to the field staff to assist with the oversight and delivery of service provision.

In the Cobblestone office, all staff are assigned schools; however, a team individually works with transition-aged youth and provides a significant amount of pre-Employment Transition services (Pre-ETS). While there are a few VRCs who specifically provide transition services, the Cobblestone District office currently has two Early Reach Coordinators, who are trained social workers. Both Early Reach Coordinators provide resources and group services to students ages 14–21. Group services can include self-advocacy, disability awareness, and other related topics requested by the school staff or developed by the Early Reach Coordinator. Two supervisors deal explicitly with the transition specialization, one supervisor supervises the Early Reach Coordinators, and the other supervisor supervises the other staff providing Pre-ETS. The supervisor who

oversees the Early Reach Coordinators provides supervision related to the Early Reach activities while participating in the statewide Early Reach calls.

The supervisor who oversees the other transition staff supports transition activities including policy and updates related to transition activities. This supervisor organizes transition-related events such as career fairs and other WIOA related activities to provide students with information and real-life experiences after high school. Also, in the Cobblestone office, the Assistant District Administrator oversees the transition implementation of services.

The Cobblestone office works explicitly with the personnel within the school to which the staff is assigned. Each staff who works with transition-aged youth has several schools assigned to them. The number of schools can range from a few schools to many depending on the assigned or the staff's interests.

While the Flintrock office collaborates with one school district, the staff collaborates with specific schools in multiple counties to provide services. The Flintrock office is recognized statewide for the processes and systems implemented related to transition and other related initiatives. The office implements different strategies in different counties.

In the Flintrock office, there is a slightly different staffing and assignments compared to the Cobblestone Office. The Flintrock office has a total of eight to nine units of staff with different specializations. From speaking with a few staff in the Flintrock office, there are four supervisors who supervise and participate in the creating and implementing of transition services in that office. These four supervisors oversee the day-

to-day operation of how transition services are implemented in Flintrock. The management staff also plays a small role in ensuring that transition services are shared and distributed among the field staff and local providers. As at Cobblestone, the assistant manager oversees the creation and implementation of transition and Pre-ETS services.

Both VR offices work with transition-age youth 14–21. Each office has its own approach to determining staff assignments to schools.

Meanwhile, there are differences related to office size and counties served. Although both offices are the largest offices across the state, the number of staff varies. The Cobblestone office currently has 60 professional staff, while the Flintrock office currently has 65–75. Regardless of the differences in each office's structure and makeup, the agency's concept and mission are most important. OVR's agency's mission is to "To secure and maintain competitive employment and independent living (Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, 2019).

Sample and Population

My sample consisted of two groups of five participants. One group was in the Cobblestone Office and the other in Flintrock office (see Table 1). The distribution of staff consisted of two Early Reach Coordinators and three VRCs at each location. The experience distribution was between one and 19 years. The demographic and age range were eclectic. Each participant brought some level of experience to the study. It was a diverse sample including three African American females, three White males, and four White females. The Early Reach Coordinators do not have a caseload of students that are tracked. When they provide services like group services, the information is tracked on a

student roster form. Regarding the VRCs, each individual staff member has a specific number of students to which they are assigned based on the number of schools assigned. VR staff provides cost services that include but are not limited to training opportunities, restoration services, and supported employment. VR staff are chosen because these individuals are trained to work with students with disabilities 14–21. The Early Reach Coordinators were selected because they also are trained to work with transition students ages 14–21.

Table 1***Interview Subjects***

Name	Office	Role	Years in Office	Gender	Race
Karen	Cobblestone	Early Reach Coordinator	6	Female	White
Jamie	Cobblestone	Vocational Counselor	6	Female	White
Kira	Cobblestone	Vocational Counselor	1	Female	Black
Nicole	Cobblestone	Early Reach Coordinator	2	Female	Black
Ivan	Cobblestone	Vocational Counselor	9	Male	White
Bobbie	Flintrock	Early Reach Coordinator	5	Male	White
Annie	Flintrock	Early Reach Coordinator	1	Female	White
Joy	Flintrock	Vocational Counselor	1	Female	Black
Marvin	Flintrock	Vocational Counselor	9	Male	White
Sara	Flintrock	Vocational Counselor	19	Female	White

Note. Pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants.

The staff in the Cobblestone office work with a variety public, charter, and private schools. There is no set limit of the number of schools assigned to each staff person. At the Flintrock office, as at the Cobblestone office, the Early Reach Coordinators do not carry a caseload. Meanwhile, the caseload in the Flintrock office varies depending on the number of assigned schools. The staff in the Flintrock office, namely the VRCs, works with a variety of public, charter, and private schools in several different counties.

Cobblestone serves just one main school district, and the charter and private schools are housed in one county, whereas Flintrock has several districts in multiple counties. It was

essential to have the above participants involved to participate in the study because their skills and experience brings value to the result and research.

Research Instruments

My instruments of research consisted of questionnaires that were distributed via email (see Appendix B). I also used guided interview questions during the interview segment (see Appendix C). The platform was one of my own creations. The analysis instrument was through coding distribution. The other instrument was a semi-structured interview protocol, consisting through an informal interview style lasting a duration of 30 minutes.

In the questionnaire provided to the participants, the first section gathered information about participants' backgrounds, including questions about the participant's credentials and number of years in the field. The second section discussed the staff's caseload of transition-aged youth who they assist with providing services. The next section dealt with interagency collaboration between VR and the local school districts. All the interviews were transcribed by a transcription service REV.com. After receiving the transcriptions, I listened to the recordings and reread the electronic documents for accuracy.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process began when I received IRB approval from Temple University in November of 2019. Upon approval I sent out an explanatory email with a confidentiality agreement and participant rights and responsibilities. I sent out 16 emails to the Flintrock office and 19 to the Cobblestone office. By mid-December, I sent out my

questionnaire to be completed by all potential participants to whom emails were sent. In the beginning of January, I had received all questionnaires from both offices. After contacting each participant from each office, five participants from the Cobblestone office and five participants from the Flintrock office participants agreed to proceed with the semi-structured interviews. I started with the interviews in the Cobblestone office due to the accessibility of the staff and the ability to schedule rather quickly. Some of my interviews in Cobblestone were in person and some were via Skype. The Flintrock interviews were over Skype. All the interviews were collected by July 2020. During the data collection process, there was difficulty with scheduling some interviews in both offices given that COVID-19 caused all staff to telework two months after the interviews began. As a result, all staff were focused on settling into the newly design workspace and attempting to adjust to the changes caused by the pandemic.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of qualitative coding techniques. I searched for both negative and positive perceptions of interagency collaboration in both the questionnaires and interviews. I read each transcript from the interviews to find such words like communication, trust, and inconsistency. From this analysis, I tabulated positive and negative trends for each participant. Participants were then tallied by office, thereby creating a count that showed whether each office described more positive or negative perceptions towards the interagency collaboration. Under each category, I was able to narrate each participant's experience. Data on perceived outcomes of service were calculated in a similar manner.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter will explain the findings from the collected data related to the perceptual experiences of interagency collaboration. After individually analyzing each participant's responses, I examined the data from each office using a metric to compare participants' perceptions of collaboration with performance. I reviewed the results of each office, highlighting prominent patterns and exploring underlying themes in order to answer my research questions and test my hypotheses. The research questions were:

1. What are the perceptions of interagency collaboration within offices of vocational rehabilitation?
2. Do the staff of these separate offices view these collaborations as supporting the outcomes of the transition-aged youth with whom the agencies work?

Three members of each office were counselors and two were Early Reach Coordinators. Copies of interview questions and the questionnaire are available in the appendices. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants as well as the selected offices to ensure anonymity and security.

This study focused on the overall perceptual experiences related to interagency collaboration from the view of the staff. In this section, I have narrated a story of collaboration between the OVR and their local partners, namely, school districts. Drawing on the experiences with each participant, four themes emerged from the

conversations: (1) collaboration, (2) key players/seat at the table, (3) communication, and (4) service provision.

The state VR agency is designed to serve individuals with disabilities to seek independence, whether transitioning from secondary education to adulthood or everyday freedom. There are VR offices throughout the state, which serve individuals with disabilities in their pursuit of entering the workforce. The following findings reflect the evidence collected from the staff at the Cobblestone and Flintrock offices.

Cobblestone Office Staff

The Cobblestone office was filled with a diverse group of individuals who serviced all students across the city. Cobblestone was in an urban demographic area within a northeastern state. Cobblestone office staff serviced all students whether they attended schools within or outside of the Cobblestone district. The Cobblestone office was the only office in the county that serviced these students.

Ivan

Ivan, a male counselor, had been working in the VR field for nine years during the time of his interview. Ivan showcased both positive and negative perceptions of the collaboration process between VR and the school district.

In his questionnaire, Ivan noted that he only serviced schools within the school district of Cobblestone. His caseload includes over 120 customers, of whom 60% are out of high school. This meant that close to half of his customers were within the transition demographic. On a scale of one to five with one being the worst and five being the best,

Ivan rated the collaboration between OVR and the schools a two. Ivan reported that students' lack of interest was the greatest detriment to implementing transition services.

In his interview, Ivan made it clear that he thought the staff in the Cobblestone office were supportive of one another and had clearly defined expectations. In Ivan's experience, counselors and supervisors had an open form of communication and seemed to share a common goal and strategy of reaching it. For him, the main purpose of the collaboration was to work with the school district to set up transition services for students who were graduating from high school.

Ivan identified a disconnect in expectations between the districts and the families they serve as a major problem in the collaboration process. He said, "The first thing that gets confused is that we are not an entitlement program, we are an eligibility program." Ivan perceived that parents and school district staff felt that students would automatically get a specific job based on their disability diagnosis because they had a case with OVR. He also perceived that students were thrown at him with little or no preparation. He felt that the biggest frustration was that everyone was not on the same page in terms of expectations, follow through, and policy between Cobblestone OVR and the Cobblestone school district.

While Ivan said that a lot of the issues were rooted in the school district's side of the table, he also perceived issues within OVR's administration. He felt that a set frame and attack plan should be negotiated by the central office and passed down to the district offices for implementation. He felt that if set expectations and agreements were in writing, better service would be given to parents and their children. Ivan's questionnaire

and interview suggested that he held a perception of poor communication practice and disconnected expectations between Cobblestone OVR and the Cobblestone school district.

JL

JL, a female counselor who had been working with the agency for over three years at the time of her interview. provided her experiences while collaborating with her assigned schools. In her questionnaire, JL reported that she worked with the school district of Cobblestone. Her caseload consisted of over 150 customers, of whom the majority are transition-aged youth. On a scale of one to five with one being the worst and five the best, JL stated that the collaboration process was at a two. JL reported that the issues faced by OVR staff working to implement adequate transition services included “lack of family support, student is not being aware of disability status and having limited interest in the process, and poor communication between the State VR agency and the schools.”

During her interview, JL did not seem to have a clear positive or negative stance on interagency collaboration, which presented as mixed feelings towards interagency collaboration. While she kept reiterating that there could be improvements, she felt that the issues were not at the agency-level. To her, the OVR staff at the Cobblestone office were strong, and so were many of the staff members within the schools she services. This indicated that she found the connection built with the schools to be satisfactory. She also made arguments in support of the parents. She perceived that many issues were rooted in things beyond the parent’s control. She acknowledged that parents may not show up to

IEP meetings, but she felt that this was a forgivable offense because many of them had work schedules that did not easily allow them to take time off for meetings.

Overall, JL felt that the big issues within collaboration were at the level of individual schools and their administration. It was her opinion that if everyone worked well together and was respectful, it could be a great collaboration. In her experience, effective collaboration was sometimes the case, but sometimes it was not. For the purpose of analysis, this participant was considered to have a neutral perception.

Kira

Kira had been employed with the agency for one year in the Cobblestone area at the time of her interview. In her questionnaire, on a scale of one to five with one being the worst, Kira reported that the collaboration was at a one. She stated that families gave limited support, students did not care, and few members of the team understood the supports that they could receive.

Kira provided many different insights into her perception of not only the collaboration, but also of the roles of communication and the perceived responsibilities of all parties involved. For Kira, the outreach process seemed to work best when there was a method of communication with in-person delivery. Face-to-face communication seemed to facilitate a better dialogue in her experience. In terms of OVR's duties and responsibilities, it was her opinion that the focus was rooted in transition. It was the job of the staff to provide information about services that could help with post-graduation employment for the students filling out an application to work with OVR.

Kira felt that there were issues with the collaboration between OVR Cobblestone and the schools served. The major issues were in transparency of expectations and provisions. Kira felt that often the school district would withhold necessary information that was needed to properly incorporate the best transition services for the students. In her opinion, collaboration should be rooted in open and honest communication. She felt that the fact that since schools would not always showcase such attributes in the communication process, problematic practices would occur. In her experience, this created a feeling of distrust among involved parties as well as compromised intended goals.

Karen

Karen, an Early Reach Coordinator who had been working out of the Cobblestone Office for more than five years during the time of this interview, provided valuable information related to her perception of interagency collaboration. Karen's role was to facilitate transition services for students with disabilities from ages 14 through 16. In her questionnaire, Karen said she worked within Cobblestone, supporting schools within the Cobblestone school district as well as charters and other forms of education. Karen reported that 85% of her customer population were of transition age. On a scale of one to five with one being the worst, Karen felt that the collaboration was at a two. Karen did not give feedback on why she felt there were issues during her questionnaire; however, she went into detail during her interview.

At the beginning of Karen's collaboration, the experience was very strained. Karen made several attempts to get in contact with Cobblestone school district employees

to no avail. She would either be given last-minute or same-day notice of meetings, which made it difficult to adequately plan and strategize a transition referral. There were also times when she would not be notified that meetings had changed dates. Based on this poor communication, Karen was often showing up to the schools and not getting any work done.

The loss of time and poor performance outcomes made Karen angry. She did not feel valued or respected as a member of the transition team. This breakdown of reciprocal respect created underlying tension. The resentment of both parties was palpable.

Although Karen said that the relations have gotten a bit better, she felt that achieving cohesive collaboration would still require significant work. It was her opinion that the poor team model, was hindering the outcome of servicing families.

Nicole

Nicole had been working in the Cobblestone Office as an Early Reach Coordinator for three years at the time of her interview. All of Nicole's customers were of transition age. In her questionnaire, on a scale of one to five with one being the worst, Nicole said that interagency collaboration was at a two. She felt that the challenges stemmed from student attitudes and students not being properly educated on the supports that they could be provided.

In her interview, Nicole reported a positive day-to-day experience with the schools she served, and she had a generally positive outcome in terms of collaboration. She felt respected because her time was not wasted. She was often notified in advance of

impending deadlines and meetings. If a meeting was going to be canceled and the school knew in advance, she was given prior notice on most occasions.

Despite her experiences, she was aware of the disconnection and lack of collaboration that was faced by her counterparts. When she discussed the collaboration on a systematic level, she felt that training was needed across disciplines. In her opinion, both the OVR and the schools needed training to help them learn better communication practices and expectations. Nicole felt that the performance by the Cobblestone Office had considerable room for improvement.

The examination of the participants' perceptions of networking and effective collaboration suggested that the staff in the Cobblestone office agreed that the overall collaboration is not good. However, individual participants developed their own method of interacting with school partners. In these cases, the messaging at the root of the communication between agencies impacted the effectiveness of the collaboration. Staff also consistently agreed that students were unaware of their disabilities and that family involvement was limited. While there was a consistent display of ineffective collaboration, there was an awareness of needing to improve such efforts. Moreover, the Cobblestone staff, particularly Kira and Karen, expressed distrust related to interactions with local management.

Flintrock Office Staff

The Flintrock district office is the second largest office in the state serving individuals with disabilities in an urban setting. The Flintrock office is staffed by 30–60

employees. The students served in this office attended various schools in Flintrock and the surrounding counties.

Sara

Sara, a counselor, had worked for the Flintrock office for close to 20 years during the time of her interview. Although she mainly worked with transition-aged customers, she also delved into adult cases as appropriate. In terms of her experience with transition, she served in the field for close to five years under the supervision of the same administrator. Throughout her tenure in this role, she has worked with the same schools.

On her questionnaire, Sara voiced that on a scale of one to five, with five being the best, interagency collaboration is at a five. Her biggest issue, in terms of facilitation of transition services, was rooted in schools not providing proper transportation for students.

During her interview, Sara explained that the concept of communication is a dichotomy in distribution of process. Where the Cobblestone office seemed to be the receiver of messages, and provided feedback, Sara reversed the roles. In her schools, she would set up an early meeting of the minds with the team members represented by the districts she serves. She sets a precedent of explaining her role, expectations, and most importantly, how she can serve the needs of both the staff and students. By being the conveyer of the message, she can create an atmosphere of servitude. In her branding, the ideology is that by following her directive, the schools are saving time and money.

With this messaging and her ability to receive and construct feedback, Sara has a bridge of trust. The trust in turn created an environment in which all members felt they

were benefiting. Through the positive performance, there was respect across agencies. This was seen by the families, and as such promoted successful student outcomes.

When asked about the relationship with her schools and families, Sara made it seem as if she was valued. She felt that communication was honest and forward. She also reported that her work was meaningful, and the outcome was satisfying. According to her, all parties felt that the collaboration was a success in servicing students.

Marvin

Marvin, a counselor with five years of transition experience, has worked for the Flintrock Office for close to ten years. On a scale of one to five, Marvin felt that interagency collaboration is at a three. In terms of issues in providing transition, Marvin felt that there was a lack of awareness by all parties of what types of supports were available.

In his interview, Marvin explained that he put forward a schedule influenced by parent availability. He began scheduling very early in the school year to have extra space for last-minute changes. Through this strategic planning, Marvin communicated a demeanor of organization and discipline.

Like Sara, Marvin started his year with a messaging system catered to the needs of both the schools and the families. However, because Marvin was a vocational counselor, he utilized a student-first approach and created relationships based on mutual advancement. As such, there was a great deal of motivation and inspiration for student output. In Marvin's opinion, interagency collaboration with the schools had gone well. He felt the good rapport was resulting in positive student outcomes.

Joy

Joy, a counselor, was new to the Flintrock office during her participation in this study. At the time of the completion of the questionnaire and interview, she had one year of experience with transition. She came to OVR from the realm of special education. Therefore, she was able to conceptualize the perceived expectations from both the minds of school staff and VR staff.

On Joy's questionnaire, she ranked the collaboration process between agencies as a four out of five on a scale where five is the best. The biggest issue Joy saw in terms of facilitating transition services was the follow-up with families. While getting them through the door to the meeting was not an issue, continuing the conversation was sometimes difficult.

Joy's primary caseload was transition-based. Her strategy was centered around her dual experiences in both realms of the transition team. When she displayed a message to either VR or the schools, she attempted to talk to her audience members with language that they understood. Through this approach, she in turn provided messaging that was fluid across disciplines and created a presence of knowledge within the minds of her colleagues and the parties she served.

Joy felt that the collaboration was positive in terms of performance as well as communication. Overall, she perceived value in the presence of both the OVR staff and the school staff. In Joy's opinion, the team functioned collectively, and all were valued and respected. With this positivity in place, there was not a feeling of fear or resentment. Communication could be open and honest. Ideas were shared and explored, and staff

could genuinely be wrong without being stigmatized. Within this environment, the families saw a coalition of power and shared vision that created a comfortable atmosphere. From this perceived comfort came an ability to execute thorough service placement.

Bobbie

Bobbie, an Early Reach Coordinator, had five years of experience in the Flintrock office. In his questionnaire he stated that on a scale of one to five, interagency collaboration was at a three. In his questionnaire, the major issues in terms of facilitation of transition services revolved around lack of student involvement, parent disorganization, and a lack of awareness of what the transition process should look like.

Like many of his coworkers, Bobbie had been servicing the same schools throughout his tenure as an Early Reach Coordinator. Bobbie primarily focused on a student-centered approach. Beyond, just the job, Bobbie tried to create a presence of genuine concern and availability. He described starting out his year by making contacts with his colleagues in the schools, as well as with organizations to which he anticipated introducing students and families.

Bobbie was also open to hearing the thoughts and opinions of the schools and families. He listened attentively to their needs and offered them supports as appropriate. Bobbie, a social worker by training, utilized a resource-based approach. Overall, his perception of collaboration was positive, and he had a similar opinion of performance. He felt that the staff in Flintrock were successful based on the discipline and genuine hard work that they put in.

Annie

Annie, an Early Reach Coordinator, had two years of experience at Flintrock. In her questionnaire, Annie stated that on a scale of one to five, she felt that interagency collaboration was at a three. When responding to the question of what was stopping positive facilitation of services, Annie reported that students did not seem aware of resources, interested in the transition process, or understanding of the fact that they have a disability.

During her interview, Annie revealed she has a hands-off approach. She felt that overstepping would cause discomfort among staff and families she was working with. For this reason, she attempted to reach out early through email and by phone instead of showing up uninvited. When it comes to calling families, she tried to do so only when necessary. By making calls only when important, she showed the family that she was not trying to waste their time and gave them a sense of privacy.

Annie felt that the collaboration was a positive one. Overall, she thought that through mutual respect, boundaries, and a genuine wish to help, the office in Flintrock was creating a program of implementation that services transition-aged students.

When examining the participants and their perceptions on networking and effective collaboration, the staff in the Flintrock office seemed to agree that the collaboration was good overall. Individual participants developed their own method of interacting with individual school partners. While staff agreed that the overall perceptual experiences were positive, staff felt that there were some challenges including that students were not aware of services provided and resources available and that students

were unaware of their disabilities. The disorganization of the parents related to involvement and follow-up played a significant role within the overall perceptual experiences of the Flintrock staff. While there was a consistent display of effective collaboration, there was also an awareness of needing to enhance collaborative efforts related to student and parent involvement. However, the sense of trust shared by the five participants indicated strong partner relationships with the schools served. In this case, the messaging at the root of communication fostered effective interagency collaboration.

Themes

Through the questionnaire and interviews, the ten participants provided insights into their unique view of and approach to the relationships between agencies through their work in the field of vocational rehabilitation. Several themes related to perceptions of interagency collaboration and student outcomes emerged.

Collaboration

Participants were asked to describe the collaboration between their district office and the school district. At Cobblestone, JL, Kira, and Ivan worked out of the same office as counselors but had different school assignments. At the beginning of the interview, JL expressed a sense of dissatisfaction with the collaboration between the VR agency and the local school district, describing it as “a crap shoot,” meaning that the quality of the relationship could vary: “it really depends on what's going on at that time and kind of who's in charge and who the liaison counselor is.”

Kira described similar challenges in the relationship between the VR and the local district:

So, I would say my experience as far as collaboration with the Cobblestone office and the school district has been somewhat, it's very interesting, because I realized not a lot of information gets disseminated correctly in order for us to collaborate, I would say collectively or efficiently with the school district, in providing transition age or pre-employment transition services to our students who have disabilities. So, I found a lot that I use my prior knowledge working with students and collaborating with students the best way that I can. And that's just being creative and finding topics, coming up with different ideas to keep the students engaged.

Kira's experience related to collaboration was important within this particular theme as she drew on past experiences to assist her within the collaboration in the Cobblestone office and local partners.

Ivan presented a sense of uncertainty and discomfort while describing his relationship experience between VR and the school district.

I think my overall collaboration is it's okay, but it could be better. Mostly, it's through the way staff collaborates... We got to follow our policies. We got to have policies that actually are in place and work. I want some rules I can follow by.

These three interviews indicated similar feelings about the relationship between the VR agency and the schools each participant served.

Among the Flintrock participants, both Annie and Bobbie presented a sense of comfort when describing their experiences of their relationship with their assigned schools. Annie discussed the Transition Coordinating Council, which allowed VR staff to discuss effective practices with local service providers. Bobbie discussed both positive and concerning aspects in describing his overall perspective on the relationship between the VR agency and the schools:

So, overall, I think, I believe that collaboration is good for those interested in utilizing the full scope of what we can offer. Even the high schools that

might not use me or my initiative, I'm sure they have a good established relationship with their OVR counselor. However, I do know that schools have some frustration with the constant changes that happened at OVR on, typically, an annual basis. And the addition of the high school profile led to some further frustrations as well. So overall, I think collaboration's good when it works well, but I think constant changes, while I understand why they're important and why they're needed, I think they can cause some frustrations for the collaboration as well.

Within both Annie's and Bobbie's interviews, each participant noted a positive experience related to relationship and collaboration. But as Bobbie pointed out, frustration occurred when information constantly changed.

In addition to describing the method of collaboration, participants provided strategies/effective practices of their processes of beginning to build collaboration or developing that relationship. Nicole explained, "I make my collaboration by sending emails, writing letters, or just sitting down talking to the staff." Nicole, who was new to the Cobblestone office at the time of her interview, was enthusiastic as she described her approach to making initial contact with her assigned schools in order to build working relationships with them. She described effective practices that she used to establish a close connection with her assigned schools: "I think it's best to collaborate with them in person through meetings or consultation." JL, who also worked in the Cobblestone office, took a similar approach:

So, for me, the first step that I take when I am assigned a new school, because I work with 10 Cobblestone schools plus the two project search sites...and at the school district as well as, unofficially, the project career launch program at [a local institution]...One of the very first things that I do is I reach out to the liaison or the teacher and discuss with them, tell them who I am, what my role is, and see if we can get a meeting scheduled to sit down and to discuss what their expectations are of OVR and what it is that we can help with. And as things change, I try to be open and up

front with the school so that they can appropriately share the information with the families and with their staff on what changes are happening.

Ivan explained his own process with certainty: “My method is mostly through email. And how I do it is I will either email them or call them and I will meet with the special education liaison (SEL) and any other people who want to meet with me.” This reflected Ivan’s effective practice for developing collaboration with his assigned schools.

Since Kira was new to the Cobblestone office, her approach mirrored the others above, but she took her process a step further.

So, once a school is assigned to me, I immediately will send out an introduction email to whoever the contact person is, or whoever the SEL is, or whoever the case manager is or the transition specialist. I immediately introduce myself as a counselor. What my role is as an OVR counselor. What my role is, is providing pre-employment transition services and how I can better assist. And then request to meet, have a face-to-face meeting, so they just don't always get an email. They at least can put a face to the voice, or to the words written within an email. In Kira’s approach, she describes the services such as Pre-ETS that she can offer to the students to assist with their transitional plan.

At the Flintrock Office, Annie expressed excitement about helping students with disabilities to seek and obtain competitive and integrative employment. “As far as collaboration, I reach out to my school, usually via email and just try to be flexible. If they can only squeeze me in a certain day or time, I just try to make myself available.” In Annie’s approach, flexibility was one of the key points indicated in establishing effective collaboration which showed that she was open and willing to collaborate by any means necessary.

In describing his approach to establishing collaboration, Bobbie acknowledged that the methods used by Early Reach Coordinators have changed over time.

So, to clarify, I am one of four Early Reach Coordinators for the district office, and I am assigned 25 districts in [the county]. I have been an Early Reach Coordinator now for five years, so over time it is changed on how we get into the schools and have our part of the collaboration be established. In the beginning, we just outreached to high schools and then went into whatever ones were open to having us.

Bobbie shared that he enjoyed working with his students and providing Pre-ETS services to them. Bobbie has been at Flintrock for some time, which has allowed him to experience collaboration efforts prior to having a few more staff on board.

The Early Reach staff in the two offices described different methods to connecting to schools, some relying primarily on emails and others on phone calls. In a few cases, the connections were fostered through in-person visits to schools. In the Early Reach program, the ability to bounce ideas off of colleagues helped the service provision to students and families. All the ERCs, regardless of location, provided the same scope of services. Marvin described going out to the schools to meet and greet the staff with whom he was collaborating.

One of the methods I use is having a dedicated day that I go into the schools as a resource and being there to answer questions and work with them one on one, so they know what's going on about OVR and to be kept up to date.

Marvin works with people with disabilities ranging from adults to transition-aged youth who are in high school seeking opportunities thereafter, just like JL another participant in the Cobblestone office.

Joy, who had only worked in the office for a short period of time, described her networking process: “What we did is the initial outreach liaison meeting, we have a school profile meeting weekly and/or biweekly school visits, depending upon the

preference of the school. I do individualized visits by appointment, phone calls, emails.” Joy brought a different background to the agency. She came from the school district side as a Special Education teacher. With Joy’s experience, she was able to provide a perception as both from an educator and a counselor.

Sara’s experience of networking seemed to be a little different than that of her colleagues.

I attend IEP meetings with the students, teachers and families to provide a detailed overview of OVR and what services that OVR provides. I work with a few schools in [the county]. I work with students in an alternative school. These students have ID and Autism. At the beginning of the year go to the schools to contact the transition coordinator or whoever is assigned to transition for that year. Sometimes, teachers wear multiple hats whether it is teaching, running IEP meetings, gathering paperwork. I also attend the Transition Coordinating Counsel meetings. At these meetings, there are a variety of stakeholders, OVR staff including Management. OVR’s Management presents to the counsel about the different changes including policy changes. Sara’s approach to collaboration was vital as she described her involvement within the particular meetings that were beneficial in relation to assisting her students.

As the evidence has displayed, the participants used similar approaches to establish effective interagency collaboration. The participants mutually agreed that this method worked, given the circumstance and resources available. Evidence confirmed the importance of the theme of Collaboration because establishing collaboration occur in order to plan for the next steps for transition-aged youth after secondary education. This theme demonstrated a sense of consistency across the staff in both offices as they described their collaborative experiences while explaining their networking practices before diving into service delivery. Each staff built collaboration similarly; however, how information was disseminated depended on the individual.

Within this theme, source was displayed under the communications process. The VR staff were considered the information source with the understanding that this was a precursor to collaboration. Moreover, encoding and decoding were displayed within this theme as the transmittal factors by which the information was displayed in which the participants indicated. In this case, the school district was the intended party to which the information was transferred. The receiver was the school district in this case; the district received the information received from VR. Messaging was illustrated by the information that was being shared, including email or letters discussing the possibility of meeting. The information displayed illustrated the importance of building relationship.

Key Players/Seat at the Table

The theme of key players/seat at the table plays an important role in the overarching theme of communication because staff's understanding of roles within the relationship both at VR and with school districts was displayed in each interview. During the interviews, the participants discussed their understanding of VR's role on the transition team. Kira expressed a sense of discomfort when understanding the services that service providers offer to students. Kira has worked in VR in several different states; therefore, she brought a different perspective, coupled with her experience, to the Cobblestone team.

I feel like you guys are still in the beginning stages of trying to figure out how to provide pre-employment transition services to transitioning students. I feel like there are still some trying to, I guess, figuring out how the services are supposed to look, how they are supposed to be provided, and then the providers that we utilize, I'm still trying to still figure that part out. What exactly do the providers provide, how do they provide it? So, I say OVR isn't really that far in the implementation of services.

Because Kira was new to the Cobblestone office, she seemed unsure of the role as she was still learning the office dynamics and key players on the transition team.

Ivan described his perception of VR's role as:

I view myself as I am getting them ready to transition out to work. I have general IEPs. And I might say something and find them not extremely helpful from an OVR standpoint. They are not really talking about nothing related to employment. They may have talked about it, but it is more... They're more ready when they're about graduating, junior year and senior year, because I'm not quite sure what they want me to do between then and their senior year.

Ivan's uncertainty about how to work with students prior to their senior year, even after 11 years at OVR, indicated that he does not have a clear understanding of the office's goals and practices. Ivan made it clear that he wanted rules and consistency.

Joy was a newer counselor in the Flintrock office like Kira in the Cobblestone office. Prior to coming to OVR, Joy worked in her local district as a special education teacher. Joy described her interpretation of the role OVR played:

Typically, when it comes to the point where you are to discuss transition, I explain OVR services. It doesn't matter what level they're at, explain what OVR services are and if it's a junior and or a senior, then offer the opportunity to meet to do an intake interview if they're interested in applying... I believe VRC should be invited to participate in all transition team activities, whether that's an individualized transition team or their group meetings and transition team activities they might have.

Karen described challenges in fulfilling her OVR role in IEP meetings:

So, OVR is supposed to be an invited participant, the role of a community provider. Obviously, we are mandated by Act 26 in Pennsylvania to participate in as many IEP meetings as possible. However, that's not possible. I'm going to tell you my role as an ERC, I've been invited to so many IEPs from schools that I've just basically told them, "If you don't hear from me, I'm not coming." Because I just don't have the time to sit and reply to say no and if I'm available, this is what you need to do. And

there's not good communication about how they should provide information to us. They don't always tell us what school they're from, it's hard... But once I accept, then I tell them, "I need more. You need to give me their name. I need to know the grade. I need to know the year of graduation, so that I can tell... And I need to know your school." Which again, they never tell me. So, it's been a struggle for me just to get that basic information. But I only participate in the IEP usually via phone and only for 10, 15 minutes. But as I know you're talking to my ERC colleagues; they tend to go and sit in the entire IEP meeting. So, they may be getting an idea of the youth in a way I'm not. If I have a relationship with the youth, I'd probably be more inclined to do that. But usually, I'm not available when I'm invited to their IEPs.

Annie stated,

I think that OVR should definitely play...I think they should be a strong component on the transition team, definitely. I know for us, we get invited to IEP meetings, but that is when we can talk about OVR and being a part of that transition team. Unfortunately, not all schools invite us to the IEP, so we always say, "Invite us too." I think that OVR should be a major key component on the transition team.

Sara explained,

Overall perception is to provide services to students and adults who is seeking employment. OVR's role with the local school districts is to be there for the school, assist to provide transition support to families and students. Also, OVR's collaboration is to provide a consistent message regarding the changes...VR is to make sure that students are provided with the necessary tools transitioning from high school to adult life. OVR's role is also to assure that students with IEP's are given opportunities in accordance with WIOA...[which was] implemented in 2011 to allow for students to gain experiences while in high school. The experiences can include: Job shadowing, Paid Work Experiences etc. OVR's role is also to stay in constant contact with the Transition Team. OVR's role is to provide realistic opportunities to students. Meaning that if a student has ID and is interested in doing computers, the student more than likely would not have the intellectual ability to fulfill this goal... As the counselor, it would be beneficial to provide the student and family with alternative options that are appropriate utilizing the labor market survey. The labor market survey is a tool to allow for research to understand what the job market entails for the specific career interest. It provides statistical data regarding the percentage of available positions and salaries in that field.

Nicole noted:

So, I think our role is pretty much just providing those resources and services that the families need. Identifying services, educating not just the parents or the students, but also educating the school district and the staff in the schools. Again, collaborating with them about the Pre-employment Transition Services. I know as an early reach coordinator, that is pretty much what we work on, those transition services and ensuring that the students are receiving the transition services that they are required to receive as they're graduating from high school. So, I pretty much think that is the role in placing these students in an integrated competitive employment, ensuring that they have the skills that they need as they transition. Those employable skills that they need to soft skills, the hard skills that they have while they are out in the employment force. So, I pretty much believe that we are preparing them for employment, specifically those that do have a disability.

Joy argued, "I believe VRC should be invited to participate in all transition team activities, whether that's an individualized transition team or their group meetings and transition team activities they might have." Similarly, JL indicated, "...I think that the role that OVR holds is to be there as a support and to let the families and the school know what is out there as far as their child or student is transitioning into being an adult."

Sara, Nicole, and JL agreed that the role of VR is to provide resources and changes to students and their families while attending the IEP meetings. Displayed in this theme, there were similarities as well as differences related to each individual point of expression. Karen expressed that she only attended IEP meetings for at least 10–15 minutes while Sara attended the entire meeting. Evidence indicated that staff had a clear sense of what the role of VR should be at the transition team's table.

Expectation was another point within this theme. Aside from dealing with the different forms of collaboration and understanding the role OVR holds on the transition team, communication was the driving force of keeping the collaboration either positive or

negative. According to the participants, the expectation was that the person in the VR role was to show up to meetings when scheduled and invited. While the evidence displayed showed a sense of understanding of roles, expectation from VR point as well as the schools.

Referencing the communications model, source is being displayed, as both VR staff and school district staff are the agencies sharing information between each other. The receiver is both the VR agency and the school district, as each player on the team is sharing information related to their resources. Thus, this theme stood out as each VR staff member differently understood their place at the table. However, everyone provided some similarities related to having a seat at the table.

Communication

This theme explored staff's perceptual view of communication. The staff at the Flintrock office felt that the office management was consistently involved at their office. This theme was relevant because it described staff's perceptions related to communication with both their local partners and the local office management team.

Participants were asked to describe how involved OVR management, including supervisors, assistant district administrators, and district administrators, was in fostering interagency collaboration. Sara shared,

OVR's management is incredibly involved in the process. The OVR's management go out to make presentation to the providers and schools to explain the purpose of OVR and how OVR can assist the students. Supervisors discuss Pre-ETS services to the schools to include them completing the school profile form.

This is of importance because while communication processes can be difficult given the nature of the information being shared, it is a positive practice that local management is involved.

Marvin also spoke to the effectiveness of communication related to management's involvement in the process of transferring information: "They're very involved. They're involved from the transition councils, which is... in [the county], for the main districts, or the county, and then the city district has their own councils, which I don't have any city schools."

Bobbie explained his perception of the communication and collaboration factor within his office:

Yes. I guess, in my opinion, the district administrators and the assistant district administrators, I'm sure they oversee everything. They oversee and help implement the guidance that comes down from a central office and they meet with the supervisors to talk through that, and then it's dispersed to the direct staff. For me specifically, last year, I recall that the ADA, the DA and the supervisor of the Early Reach Coordinators, as well as the four of us, all met to talk about how things were happening for Early Reach in [the city], if things were going well, which overall was really awesome. And then our supervisor encouraged us to meet with her each month as needed to talk through how things are going. And through that, we can help talk through and they can give us feedback or helpful advice if we're having some issues getting into the school, we can see if we can collaborate with that OVR counselor or with them to help us to get in or not. But this year with the profile, it was limited to the supervisors taking the lead, and the profile and all that either helped collaboration or potentially hindered it.

Karen brought the perception that "I think with [the transition coordinator] as far as management goes, I think they have a very, very good relationship. I do feel that that our district office very much yields to [the transition coordinator] as well in what she wants. I don't feel that they gate keep."

The above perspectives showcased similarities related to the involvement of the management team at the local level. Meanwhile, Karen presented management's involvement differently. Ivan presented a perspective similar to Karen's.

I think a lot of it just depends on what's going on. I think with the supervisors and the counselors they work well. I think a lot of it is handled with the supervisors and the counselors ... When there's something going on that needs help. The collaboration part is sort of strained... In the past, I've had supervisors come out to the school to introduce myself which is helpful. I introduce them to the school staff, And I think once I had someone that was in the field and I just went out and taught them how I did it. That is my point of view. I think they're trying to help. It would just be helpful if they, meaning management, pay close attention to what is being presented regarding issues.

Annie explained, "Okay. As far as, I am doing it for me and my schools. Management is not really involved at all. When I got the job, I was told, okay, this is your case load, and it was basically up to me to foster those relationships."

Meanwhile, staff in the Cobblestone office displayed a different perception. Ivan stated,

I think a lot of it just depends on what's going on. I think with the supervisors and the counselors they work well. I think a lot of it is handled with the supervisors and the counselors...When there's something going on that needs help. The collaboration part is sort of strained... In the past, I've had supervisors come out to the school to introduce myself which is helpful. I introduce them to the school staff, and I think once I had someone that was in the field and I just went out and taught them how I did it. That is my point of view. I think they're trying to help. It would just be helpful if they, meaning management, pay close attention to what is being presented.

The evidence displayed differences related to the involvement of management at the local level. Staff in the Flintrock office indicated that their management team displayed involvement with each staff person, as Bobbie stated, whereas staff in the

Cobblestone office indicated that their local management team had a hands-off approach with the field staff.

Consistency/trust seemed to be an important part of communication when transferring information. Drawing on the process of communication provided staff with the ability to set the standard for consistency. While consistency seemed to be a practice that state VR attempted to follow, staff expressed that there was inconsistency with the messaging from the management team providing such information at the higher level.

Marvin spoke of his perception of documentation.

Yeah, that's one thing I've noticed. There's a lot of...When there's mailers or information passed out, there's a lot of terminology that they don't understand, and there's information that they, policies that they're used to from say a year ago, or two years ago, and so they have to get used to new changes. It's understanding that, and being able to understand that in a school, they are in teacher language rather than in OVR language.”

Having documentation in the specific language is of importance to have everyone on the same page. Sara shared,

Incomplete, inconsistent, or late guidance on policy changes.
Inconsistencies with the change in policy. The messaging changes depending on who is delivering it. Policy changes are passed down from Central Office to the management team. As a result, the management team passes the messaging down to the supervisors, and the supervisors pass it to the staff. Somewhere in transition, something gets lost.

Sara spoke about the loss of information from the top down to the field staff, which seemed to cause confusion among staff and outside providers like the local school districts. Ivan discussed that he had difficulty with keeping up with the changes and trying to understand the direction of where the agency was going: “Yeah. Yeah. Give me rules. Give me some structure. If they are not going to get me structure, I'm going to be

confused.” Sara’s view spoke to the point of having that consistent message between both VR and the local schools at the state level,

Having a consistent message to both schools and families and the staff. Providing a clear message of what is going on. Being timely with the messaging. Be sure to send out messaging sooner than later. Providing consistent meetings to both school staff and OVR staff so that everyone is on the same page.

JL pointed out,

I think that to support an agency collaboration, there has to be a level of trust...I am not sure how we build that trust. I am not sure how fast we can build that trust, but there has to be a trust there and there needs to be a level of understanding amongst the field staff that because of the population that we work with and because of where we're located in an inner-city area, there are going to be times where you're going to get stood up in meetings. Trust on both parts, whether it is OVR’s staff or the local school district staff. Developing trust between agencies can provide some level of comfort between staff.

While Kira presented a sense of uncertainty related to OVR’s role, she described her experience when dealing with communication within the Cobblestone office.

As an agency I think the ineffective communication where it's like things are being left out. For management, where it is like, Oh, we can't share this information. But you got to realize the information that you are not willing to share really affects the counselors, because we really are that direct line between the customers. So, when you do not tell us certain pertinent information that's needed, we are left figuring out on our own what to do. Sometimes that is not right.

Kira seemed frustrated by the inconsistency of the different changes and the lack of transparency among the local management team in the Cobblestone office. Karen discussed how she had witnessed lack of communication within the Cobblestone office:

You have to go through the 1-900 number, which nobody ever picks up. That's a problem. We change our methodologies on a dime, and meanwhile people are... And we act like everyone's supposed to understand that we change our methodologies. We're very insular, so we

don't really explain our services in my opinion and user-friendly ways. We talk about is your case open. Nobody knows what open case is. I don't know what an open case is if I'm your customer, I don't care. Are you status two? I don't care. The customer doesn't care. That's a worker concern. So, I don't think we communicate in a user-friendly way. I don't think we definitely aren't good to our customers. We're certainly not good to our providers, we basically pull the rug right out of them or ask them to increase capacity and then we shut it all down.

Within this theme, the participants in the Cobblestone office displayed a sense of consistent agreement when discussing inconsistency related to the effectiveness of the messaging and lack of trust. Similarly, staff agreed that there was not a consistent message being displayed across the state namely within Cobblestone and Flintrock. Moreover, in the Cobblestone office, trust seemed to be an issue related to the staff and management with the display of sharing information to the staff. Also, there seemed to be a poor display of information to the community.

Within the communications process, feedback is displayed as the perception of information being transmitted to staff, which differs from office to office. Also, participants indicated a disconnect within the messaging in the Cobblestone office related to the distribution of information beginning at the local management level. However, the information source is a higher level of VR.

Service Provision

In discussion with staff between both offices, it has been noted that funding is controlled by the office's local management team. Messaging played an important part of the service delivery and provision of services because effective messaging allowed for open communication between both VR and the local school districts involved.

Karen made the point that during collaboration between agencies, there was a lack of gate keeping with the funds: “OVR does not do a good job with taking control of the specific providers within the schools.” There could be multiple providers in the same school providing similar services. Therefore, OVR would be spending an abundance of money, despite the fact that the agency was in a financial crisis. Karen further explained the problem with resource distribution:

But then, so basically you had a provider like a CIS, let's say. Usually, it's the CIS a lot that was in a particular school providing this one-on-one, work-based paid learning experience. But then they would be at capacity, so they might be using other schools that wouldn't have that access to CIS. So, it was really CIS-driven or provider-driven with a relationship to a particular school. A particular school might have multiple providers in them. And even though our management said, "Oh, we didn't really want that." They never actively tried to redirect the provision of those services. And again, I didn't know that one school had like 16 one-on-ones, when those providers didn't necessarily have the capacity. They couldn't have gone into multiple schools and done 16 kids. It was just a poor distribution of resources.

Karen and other participants from the Cobblestone office shared that the Cobblestone office spent a lot of their funding on organizations that provided multiple services in the same school, potentially leading to a duplication of efforts. Karen stated, “We allow the providers of group services that we contract and pay for, we're basically the ones leading them.” Karen discussed an example of the possibility of services being duplicated based on the lack of communication:

Prior to our order selection, basically a school would pick all the providers that went in the school. We really didn't determine that, it was provided, directed and a times provided, generated, even before, according to my VR people, they even got their paperwork in and they didn't make the approval. The providers made the approval. There are schools that had multiple providers paid, or those on paid contracted providers in them. As I'm going around now doing the school profiles, because of the order of

selection, I didn't realize that spend that was in a lot of the schools. They were in schools weekly. I did not understand that they were doing a weekly service. So, they were in multiple schools every week. That's an awful lot of money that we just generated from one organization. And with the paid work experience where we basically had one-on-one job coaching as well, how I understand it. That there was one school that they might've had like 16 kids get that one-on-one service, when all the kids didn't really need it.

From Karen's perception of this process, she felt that students who already receive services should allow for other students to have the same opportunity.

According to Sara,

The school profile form is a document that allows for schools to request services such as pre-employment transitional services, or Pre-its, services from the OVR agency. The purpose for the form is not to request for duplicate services. Students ages 14–21 are eligible to receive these services whether they have applied for VR services or not. In cases where students do not open a VR case now, they would be considered as potentially eligible. Potentially eligible just refers to the student not being determined eligible for cost services. However, the student can still receive some type of service. In these cases, students can participate in a group service depending on what is being offered. In such cases, these students work with the Early Reach Coordinator. The Early Reach Coordinator is a Social Worker who is assigned to students ages 14–21 to provide resources to students and their families about OVR and other resources in the community.

Sara's take on the purpose of the form revealed that while she understood the significance of the form, she felt that completing this form could slow down the provision of group services. Nicole, on the other hand, was in favor of the form because it provided some structure for understanding the specific services that needed to be provided. Karen seemed to have mixed feelings about interacting with the form. Marvin provided his interpretation of what the school profile provided for him.

Yeah, the school profile is a form where we sent to the contacts within the schools, so we can really learn what they are already providing. OVR does

not supplement the services, but really can help a school provide services that they are already not providing, or really expand upon them. We would look and ask you what they would need in different categories under pre-employment transition services, such as advocacy, post-secondary counseling, job exploration, and workplace readiness training, independent living skills, work-based learning general transition events or OVR information.

Understanding the significance of the form helped to explain the services the VR agency could offer outside the already established services within the schools. In the Flintrock office, the Early Reach Coordinator and the VR counselors worked together in completing the form alongside the school staff. Meanwhile, within the Cobblestone office, Karen described a different procedure.

Because of the school profile process, to me while it's helpful, it's very time consuming. And the ability to actually get out into the schools to start the services when you have to figure out what do they want? What can I do? Because initially I just said yes to everything, because I didn't know. I can't really do anything without releases.

Bobbie added to the conversation related to the service delivery structure:

Challenges I face, I guess, are the increased paperwork requirements, as I talked about before. High schools and families don't always do well with getting Pre ES releases returned, and the school profile cost further disruption for me in particular, this academic year. So overall, the updated requirements and the process aren't without its challenges, and at times it could lead me to collaborate less with my high schools than I have been before.

Bobbie's perception of service delivery is consistent with Karen's, as both must provide the same types of services but for a different group of individuals. Their perceptions indicated that inconsistent messaging was a big part of communication and collaboration. Because of inconsistency in messaging, students and families lost out on the opportunity to receive services to move forward to adulthood. As noted, it was evident that the staff in

the Flintrock office worked closely together with school staff to complete the necessary forms to prevent the possibility of duplication of services. But the staff in the Cobblestone office allowed the school staff to complete such documentation.

In this theme, evidence showed that staff was aware of service provision and the expectation of service delivery. But the evidence displayed also showed that staff had difficulty gathering the necessary information from students and families to move forward with services. This theme played a significant part within the aforementioned themes because service provision is the driving force to allow for students and families to obtain vocational experiences to assist with the transitional process to adulthood.

From examining the 4 themes listed above—Collaboration, Key Players/Seat at the Table, Communication, and Service Provision—the evidence shows that there are both positive and negative perceptions related to each. Most importantly, staff's perception of each theme helped to draw a picture of the daily experiences of State VR when interacting with local providers such as school districts. Each theme allowed for ability to show case staff's methodological approaches to interacting with both students, families as well as school personnel.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

There has been a genuine issue with the quality of services in the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation in the Cobblestone region. Transition-aged youth ages 14–21, who are supposed to be receiving transition services, have been failing to meet adequate service placement. However, the next biggest region served is Flintrock, and they have a substantially different set of numbers in terms of performance. This evidence suggests that there is a difference in terms of service delivery. An investigation was needed to further understand the disconnect within the interagency collaboration in Cobblestone.

Time is a commodity that cannot be replaced. Parents, children, district members, and VR staff can all find value in saving time. As such, it was apparent that the investigation in communication disconnect could help define the underlying nature of the problems with service. It is for this reason a study in perception was utilized to explore the trends from the eyes of the VR employees in an office of success (Flintrock) and disappointment (Cobblestone).

Social Relationships and Collaboration

According to Nkhata, Breen, & Freimund (2008), there is an increasing appreciation of the significance of collaboration; minimal attention has been given to long-term social relationships that undergird collaborative schemes in the management of social ecological systems or SESs. A lot of studies have not examined the ever-changing

nature of social relationships. Axelrod (1984) & Ostrom (1998) indicated that relationships are categorized based upon the processes through which collaborative individuals impact each other's behaviors over a duration of time to enhance individual and shared goals. This involves understanding the behavioral component through which collaborative schemes develop over time. According to Wood & Gray (1991), advanced collaborative efforts result in reduced transactional costs. Additionally, other benefits of advanced collaborative efforts include greater social-ecological resilience (Walker et al. 2002), enhanced performance (Imperial 2004), and improved governance (Imperial 2005). All of these results are much needed for the success of service provision. In order to foster and hone collaborative relationships, there must be some initial social relationship that is developed. This relationship is often the result of two-way communication that is consistent in nature and that develops over time. These relationships have to happen from the top down. VR staff have to communicate effectively with school and district officials and in a reciprocal format. The same has to happen with management. If such a dynamic exists, it becomes easier to have more fluid processes and stronger collaborative relationships as evidenced by the Flintrock staff. The major research questions were in relation to the perceptions of the relationships within the interagency collaboration, the strengths and weaknesses of the bond, and the overall perspective of performance by all parties. To better answer these questions, a qualitative approach was taken. A questionnaire of basic perceptions and attitudes was implemented to start a baseline understanding of feelings. From this, semi-structured

interviews were conducted across both offices to gain individual insight through the medium of narrative inquiry.

Collaboration

The evidence displayed that a consensus of building relationships across both offices is something that must be established before service provision takes place. A few staff within the Cobblestone office agreed that while networking is the first step in building collaborative efforts, three participants felt that the initial step was challenging.

Meanwhile, the participants in the Flintrock office took a different approach. Staff presented a positive feeling when interacting with the districts for the first time. Staff in the Flintrock office agreed that face-to-face contact is an effective practice. When looking at both offices, the Flintrock office staff presented a sense of uniformity related to networking and establishing connection. Evidence confirmed the importance of this theme because establishing collaboration must begin at some point. Fabian et al. (2016) indicated that collaborative service coordination among school systems, vocational rehabilitation (VR), adult employment providers, and other community entities had demonstrated positive employment outcomes.

Drawing from the communications model, source is displayed within this theme the VR staff is considered the information source with the understanding that this is a precursor to collaboration. Moreover, encoding and decoding is displayed within this theme as the transmittal factor in which the information is displayed in which the participants indicated. In this case, the school district is the intended party for which the information is transferred. The receiver is the school district in this case. The receiver is

receiving the information received from VR. Messaging in this case speaks to the information that is being discussed which is email or letters discussing the possibility of meeting. The information displayed illustrates the importance of building relationship.

Key Players/Seat at the Table

Within the basic findings of this theme, staff illustrated their understanding of the role VR plays on the transition team. Staff agreed that the role of VR is to be a resource and to provide updates in relation to policy changes and information to enhance the VR service provision for the students.

Interpretation of Roles/Confusion in Communication

There appeared to be a misinterpretation of the role that OVR plays. There has been a history of expectation that OVR handles multiple facets of the customer's needs; however, this is incorrect. OVR is supposed to specifically help people with disabilities who are seeking employment opportunities with gaining and maintaining employment. The problem lies in how the services are communicated. OVR communicates the services that they can provide, and sometimes this information may not be thoroughly explained. An example would be "OVR can assist the customer with funding." This may be interpreted as "OVR provides scholarships for customers." Therefore, the misinterpretation can be shared on both ends. Families may interpret that OVR can provide certain needs for the customer based upon the communication they receive, which really may not be what OVR is saying. OVR services are eligibility-based services that involve a process of assessment and require a timeframe. Families sometimes have the expectation of immediate services if they apply for services for which they are

eligible, and this may not be how services are provided. Based upon this, customers may or may not receive services and OVR may lose potential customers due to them being disinterested in engaging in the process.

For example, Cobblestone's staff attend such meetings as the IEP meetings for a short period of time. In contrast, staff from the Flintrock office attend such meetings in their entirety as appropriate. Referencing the communications model, source is being displayed as both VR staff and school District staff are the agencies sharing information between each other. The receiver is both the VR agency and the school district as each player on the team is sharing information related to their resources. Thus, this theme stood out as there are different perceptions of each VR staff in understanding their place at the table. However, everyone provided some similarities related to having a seat at the table.

Communication

At the basic level, it was evident that the collaborations between the Flintrock Office and the school districts they serve were substantially positive compared to those of the Cobblestone Office. Organization, trust, and respect were overarching themes that resonated at Flintrock. Open communication, expectation, and teamwork were mentioned in many interviews. An overarching mutual understanding of roles was another common characteristic of the collaboration according to those interviewed.

Referencing the conceptual framework, it appeared that in terms of the communication process, both the speaker and receiver of messages were within a mutual state of understanding. Feedback was channeled and taken with respect from both parties.

As such, families, district members, and VR staff felt that they were valued and appreciated. From this positivity emanated a feeling of confidence. In essence, there was a common trend of employees feeling that they were doing a good job.

Within the Cobblestone Office, there was an underlying theme of poor understanding within the designation of roles as participants alluded to during the interviews. From several members of the Cobblestone Office, complaints were made regarding poor designation of duties by superiors and district. Many of the employees reported feeling at odds with the districts. They felt that the expectations of both parties were not within the same ideology. There were also reports of distrust among both parties. A common theme was a feeling that the right hand and left hand were working against one another. With this, there was a feeling that nobody was doing a good job, and the performance (although not fault of the VR staff according to many) was a poor one. Within the communication process, there seemed to be a poor balance of messaging, reciprocation of feedback, and overall understanding. Motivation, expectation, and planning all seemed to be issues that were of relevance to staff.

Within the Flintrock office, staff provided a positive perception of communication among staff and the districts served. The overall consensus of communication presented was open and honest among staff including their management team at the local level.

Service Provision

The Early Reach Coordinators from both offices described their experiences with interacting and completing the school profile form, which is a part of the service delivery theme. As mentioned within the data, the school profile form was designed to assist with

minimizing the duplication of services within the schools in which they were assigned. While the particular form was designed to assist with the implementation of services, staff described the challenges faced when gathering information from students and families. The Flintrock office staff works closely with the school staff to complete the form, but there is difficulty with students and family follow up. The staff in the Cobblestone office also described the difficulty with gathering such information from students and families to proceed with service provision. Referencing the communication's process, the messaging is lacking in both offices related to the distribution of information relating to the approach to receiving information from students and families needed to proceed with service provision.

Similarities of Themes Present at Cobblestone Location

When examining the themes exhibited in the Cobblestone location, two primary themes are evident: collaboration and communication. Several of the Cobblestone interviewees asserted that networking and communication work in tandem and can impact the ability to foster collaborations. Based on the evaluations from the conversations of those from the Cobblestone location, several of the interviewees expressed issues with networking which impacted communication. Consistent with the research, if there are issues present when determining roles and responsibilities, then ultimately there may be issues with communicating with certain entities. Collaboration is often impacted when one is unaware of who is responsible for what particular assignment. Thus, with the Cobblestone interviewees, it was evident that because of an inability to understand who was responsible for certain roles, the collaborative endeavors

with these individuals were impacted. Poor communication was also a prevalent theme for those in the Cobblestone location. The majority of the interviewees expressed that poor communication resulted in a lack of information being given to the customers. If there was something important to disseminate, the customers may not have been instructed properly as the initial message was not constructed properly or not even at all.

Similarities of Themes Present at Flintrock Location

Flintrock interviewees' themes differed from the Cobblestone location and included positive communication and collaboration. The majority of their feedback was quite positive in nature. They rated collaboration and communication with high marks within both the interviews and surveys. The interviewees provided an overview of their networking/collaborative endeavors that assisted with building trust and the ability to both foster and hone great working relationships with their constituents. From their dialogue, it was evident how all of the themes interrelated. The positive experiences that they shared were a result from clear and concise roles and responsibilities, their ability to intrusively connect with their partners, and effective communication that led to fluid service provision.

Contrast of Cobblestone and Flintrock

There was an apparent difference between the Cobblestone and Flintrock locations in reference to the culture of their locations as well as their communication flow. To begin, there were geographical differences in the locations, as the Cobblestone office was a heavily urban location servicing a larger area. Although Flintrock was also in an urban area, it operated on a smaller scale and serviced fewer customers. The

Flintrock location had been designated as the “training” office and tasked with providing training to Cobblestone to enhance service provision to transition-aged youth. Another difference was each office’s available funding. The Flintrock location appeared to have more financial resources; however, it had fewer customers to service. The Cobblestone location had fewer financial resources with more customers to service. This difference in resources may be a reason why Flintrock is able to provide a more “tailored” or “intrusive” experience to their customers.

It is also worth noting that there are slight differences in demographic populations between the two offices’ service areas. When speaking to staff at both offices, those from the Cobblestone location indicated serving more diverse populations such as Asians and Indians. The Flintrock staff stated that they serve less of these ethnic groups. Cobblestone staff indicated that the needs of these populations vary. For example, most of the office literature is printed in English or Spanish. This is not very helpful for those who cannot read in English or Spanish. This also contributes to the communication barriers that were previously mentioned. It may be counterintuitive to have materials as resources that are not understandable to populations being served. Another issue brought up by Cobblestone staff was that they heavily rely on translation services that can potentially serve as communication and service barriers. An example would be when a youth needs translation services but the process is delayed while the school official tries to link the family to the translator. For the sake of time, the school official may request a later follow-up, which delays the time of providing services on the OVR end. These are

some of the comments made by the Cobblestone staff that were not identified by the Flintrock staff.

Management and Communication

The evidence suggested that the Cobblestone location had different management and communication styles than the Flintrock location. When examining staff complaints at Cobblestone, it appeared that a lot of the communication issues resulted from feelings of distrust, misperception of roles, and an inability to collaborate. Because so many of the interviewees shared these feelings, it would require an examination to be made in the type of management or leadership directives that they were receiving. On the other hand, the Flintrock location praised their management with providing support, effective communication, ample guidance, and a fluid process of collaboration. These were the assertions of the majority of the interviewees. This also led to positive comments about the work that was being done. Flintrock staff appeared to have the ability to be more intrusive in their workspace. This could have been a direct result of the makeup of their office and the fact that they had fewer demands than the Cobblestone location. This could also be because they had adequate funding, resources, support, and structure to ensure the fluidity of service provision.

Since they had better communication and had been able to establish collaborative relationships with the school districts, the Flintrock outcomes were better. It should not be assumed that the Cobblestone location does a poor job of providing services; however, the barriers to service provision should be examined. Barriers such as misinterpretation of services, a lack of staff and district support and communication, funding, and numerous

caseloads could have a direct impact on service provision. Analysis indicated that there was more turnover at the Cobblestone location versus the Flintrock location in OVR. For those that were transitioning to another place of employment, the following reasons were given: there was a lack of support from management; feelings of disorganization; feelings of being treated like case managers instead of counselors; a lack of personal relationships with customers; carrying too many cases; having an overload of cases; and not being heard and taken seriously by management regarding recommendations. These reasons had a direct impact on relationship-building. It would be difficult to both foster and hone relationships with customers, district officials, and staff if there was a lack of support that led to poor communication that ultimately impacted service provision.

The *Act 26 Quarterly Reports* (Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, 2019) showed trends of poor performance in the Cobblestone office and positive outcomes in the Flintrock office. Between this evidence and my overall experience interacting with both offices, I hypothesized that the overall perception of the collaboration for Flintrock was going to be significantly better than that of Cobblestone. Based on my experience working in the Cobblestone district office, I was able to witness such organization within the local office. Consequently, I experienced dissatisfaction among staff. My perception was proven to be correct. Not only did the Cobblestone Office almost unanimously have a negative opinion of the collaboration, but there was also very little they felt was going correctly in servicing the students. Overall, this office felt that much needed to be done to make the experience better.

The Flintrock office had a much different approach. Beyond their numbers, they seemed genuinely excited to be working alongside their districts. Trust, communication, and mutual goals were all themes in the collaboration. There was also a positive feeling of not only performance but purpose among the staff members. Based upon previous interactions with staff from the Flintrock office, structure tended to be the driving force for the positive outcomes for both the staff and students in which they serve. It seemed that they felt that their work was relevant on a personal level. A difference was being made, and as such, a reason for working hard was implemented.

My conceptual framework revolved around the communication process. This was due to the parallelism of collaboration and communication. As one encompasses the other, it was a relevant motif for my study.

I looked at the data and saw many places that the process must be changed in the Cobblestone Office. The message needs to be clearer from the sender to the OVR staff. Whether the sender is the administrators of OVR, the school district, or the parents, there needs to be a better distribution of the message overall. Also, the messaging needs to be clearer. Expectation as well as implementation of the transition services is a necessity for making better interagency collaboration.

The consideration of feedback from VR staff must be more thorough as well. VR staff do not feel they are being heard. There is a disconnect in reciprocation of information. Families need to be more open to the true nature of transition. The district also needs to provide more availability and flexibility for meeting and discussing the process with staff of VR.

Limitations

The limitations of my study were rooted in the fact that collaboration is among two parties. Albeit, we now understand one side of the communication, however we do not have the whole picture. However, it can also be argued that this opens an opportunity for future research.

The first limitation of my study is in relation to my sample. When it came to selection of participants, I had an uneven distribution of gender. Female participants outnumbered male participants. As such, one could argue that perceptions based on negative or positive experiences in communication could be attributed to gender roles in society. Nonetheless, I chose to stay with this sample, as they were relevant members of the organization and I felt that their opinions were of importance for improving our understanding of the communication issues or strengths within the interagency collaboration.

Related to survey responses, both participants and non-participants rated that there is a lack of student and family involvement. A total of 35 surveys were distributed between both offices 19 from the Cobblestone office and 16 from the Flintrock office. Out of the 19 surveys in the Cobblestone office, 14 were provided. Out of the 16 surveys distributed from the Flintrock office, only 10 came back.

Feelings of Mistrust

According to Mayer and Gavin (2005), it is important to establish trust among employees about the functioning of management and guaranteeing that there is clarity among organizational goals.

I did not involve the school district or families in the communication for several reasons. To begin, I did not feel it was appropriate to be working outside of an agency that they represented when gathering data pertaining to practices regarding communication. I felt that answers could in turn cause resentment feared negative reactions would cause contention within interagency collaborations. This was also decided because I did not have the ability or relationship to request that the Flintrock schools and families consent to participate. I would need to display both parties in a parallel format. It was not convenient to engage the Cobblestone schools and the families they served without the ability to also engage the same population from Flintrock.

The sample size was small due to staff member's comfort in participating in a study that would be published. When surveying potential candidates for consent, I was often turned down because of fear of retaliation by the higher-level figures of authority within the agency's bureaucracy. Within my office, there is a managerial hierarchy in which employees are ranked. As many of the individuals that I asked to participate were at the lowest level of the organizational system, they did not feel comfortable with the possible outcome of their honesty in the intended project.

Another limitation was the absence of management at the supervisory level and upper manager level. I reviewed communication practices in terms of perception in the

office, but I reviewed this at the field level. One could argue that the perceptions of higher-ranking members of the bureaucracy could be different and as such could provide a different outcome to the study. However, as I was a member of this rank, I felt that in order to maintain the integrity of the study, it was not appropriate to interview my direct peers, as they would possibly expect me to skew the data.

Despite these limitations, I feel that the data collected is still relevant to addressing the problem of practice. It provides key details and offers a place to begin conversations between the agencies. From these conversations, perhaps positive changes can be incorporated in terms of communication and collaboration.

Future Research and Significance of the Study

When looking at both offices, I see a lot of changes that can be implemented in the Cobblestone location. The first is the topic of trust. Flintrock has trust and they have an unofficial friendship in their collaboration. I do not feel that this is the case in Cobblestone. In Cobblestone, OVR employees are strangers at best, by both the districts they serve and the families. Communication is based in trust, so while we do not need friendships per say, at the very least we should try to build a positive relationship of mutual respect.

Another theme that occurred was the understanding of expectation. It seems that Cobblestone staff and their district are not on the same page in terms of expectations. If this is the case, perhaps all parties should sit down and work through this. I feel that meeting at least twice throughout the academic year may help clarify the expectations of

both parties involved. If everyone is on the same page, there will be better communication and greater implementation of services.

Within the context of performance is the idea of saving money and time. From this study I hope that we can create better practices to do just that. However, there are still questions that can be better served by research.

I feel that this study should probably be conducted across all offices. From a bigger sample size, perhaps more trends can be unraveled, and from them, a better understanding of both positives and negatives in the collaboration can be illuminated. Moreover, exploring the Bureau of Blindness division to understand their perception of interagency collaboration may provide a different outcome given that their population is smaller and focuses on one disability, namely, blindness.

Also, we must implement a similar study among the districts being serviced. Communication and collaboration are among multiple party members; consequently, to truly understand what everyone feels, we must include all party members. Gathering information at the district level can possibly bring the study full circle, given that both sets of participants had the opportunity to share their experiences. Finally, it would be interesting to understand the collaboration from the perception of the family. Families play an integral part in the lives of students with disabilities. Understanding the perceptions of the family may provide a better understanding of specified needs and service provision.

Recommendations for Practice

The literature suggests that interagency collaboration can assist with positive outcomes for students with disabilities (Balcazar et al., 2012; Noonan et al., 2008; Riesen et al., 2014). Staff provided thoughts related to enhancing collaboration within the Cobblestone office. Nicole suggested,

I think management should be more involved and more hands on. Because I think they're delivering the information to us, it's getting handed down, it's like a chain effect. So, it's getting delivered to us, to them, not sure how they're delivering it. Sometimes we get the information, which I find this an issue, we will get the information later. And sometimes the school district or school district staff will already have information that we supposed to have at OVR before we even have that information. So, if it's upcoming information just provide us with what the possibility may be.

This point illustrated the importance of clarity and understanding when providing information. Bobbie also provided a recommendation on how to enhance communication and collaboration:

Honestly, I think it's just making sure that information flows down in a consistent manner, and to make sure that things are done in a consistent way, especially for people like Early Reach coordinators. We're working with various OVR counselors, various preemployment transition supervisors, and we need to know what their processes are, and the way certain people do things may affect us or not in a good way. So, I guess just maybe consistency in the messaging, consistency with some specific things that can help allow us to work with our high schools in a consistent way.

Kira provided input related to what may enhance the collaboration at the Cobblestone office.

So, I would say a lot of the resources out there, whatever youth program or whatever providers, again, having a resource guy, that really goes back to providing both the agency and the school district we want so we can all... Even if we provide the same services, at least we all know, you know what I mean? This is the best service for the student. It is really helping them at

the end of the day. The idea is for the student to be successful once they graduate from high school. OVR and the school district provides them with the resources and the skills necessary to become successful. So, whether that be, helping them apply to secondary school, or a trade, providing them with workplace readiness training, job readiness training. Giving them supports within the workplace.”

Finally, Marvin added to the recommendations listed above:

I really think that is one of the keys, is being in the school, and in there over time, rather than having a different person every year, or every little bit of time, and the school districts not knowing who the counselor is, the person to outreach to, but always having, know who to connect with, and having that communication between OVR and the school district, so that they can continue over time... I really think that having more consistency with the changes, and so the ... Better communications going out to the school districts, and so they can understand what the changes mean to them, what the processes mean to their students and their families. Maybe more trainings for the school districts themselves, the teachers. Maybe they'll provide some trainings for that during them at 80 days. That could be an option. Being able to do something on that end.

Based on the comments of four of the OVR counselors, it appears that effective communication is key in establishing interagency collaboration. With that, transparency among the staff of higher authority is prevalent in effective practices in the local offices. I have experienced this myself at work. Therefore, I recommend that local management provide updates to staff regardless of whether the change happens immediately or later. I also recommend that materials are tailored to fit the individuals with whom they serve. For example, VR's documentation should be in such language so that school staff are clear about what is being displayed. Based on my experience, in-person meetings may be an effective practice for effective interagency collaboration. Such meetings should occur at least twice yearly, once in the fall and once in the spring, to provide updates related to the agencies policies. Also, to have student and family involvement, VR staff and school

staff should collaborate on the best way to have students and families take part in the collaboration process, whether by having a back-to-school night or multiple informational sessions. Finally, while VR can attend such meetings either in-person or virtually, families should be strongly encouraged to attend such meetings to take part in the transition process.

When looking at both offices I conclude that there is a lot of changes that can be implemented in Cobblestone. The first is the idea of trust. Flintrock has trust, they have an unofficial friendship in their collaboration. I do not feel that this is the case in Cobblestone. In Cobblestone employees are strangers at best, by both the districts they serve and the families. Communication is based in trust, so while we do not need friendship *per se*, at the very least we should try to build positive relationships of mutual respect.

Staff mentioned the lack of resources at least for the Cobblestone office. In this case, an analysis of resources should be examined between both offices to see what resources the Flintrock office has that the Cobblestone office can adopt. Ditchman et al. (2013) indicated that VR agencies within and across states should adhere to a standard rehabilitation process that includes eligibility determination, a developmental plan to include rehabilitation, service provision, and job placement. This is where vocational rehabilitation can implement supported employment services. There has been an interest in determining how effective supported employment is as a VR service and what population it has the most impact on.

It is the hope that if the above recommendations are considered, services can be better distributed and staff in the Cobblestone office can continue to provide the best in customer service and service provision. It may be beneficial for Cobblestone office to connect with staff in the Flintrock office to learn the different strategies that will allow them to devise a plan that will enhance communication and service delivery. If possible, the management team and staff in the Cobblestone office could develop specialty units that could assist with focusing specifically on transitional-aged youth and their needs. Having a designated transitional unit will provide a sense of clarity and collaboration between the Cobblestone VR office and the Cobblestone school district.

In addition to these recommendations, school district staff must understand that the state VR office is separate from the school district. The rules and policies set by the district do not apply to VR staff. Finally, biannual or quarterly follow-up can enhance the collaboration.

Conclusion

It is my sincere hope that this study has brought forward a better understanding of both the triumphs and failures in the current interagency collaboration between OVR and the school districts they serve. In my professional opinion, interagency collaboration, the driving force of this study, is the source of motivation that inspires both OVR and the districts—a genuine wish to service and better the lives of individuals with disabilities. As such, I genuinely hope that from reflecting on the perceptions of the OVR employees, collaboration within OVR as well as between OVR and schools can become stronger. From this, more students can be served and in turn all parties will reach their ultimate

goal. Together, both OVR and the local school districts can service the needs of transition-aged youth through a concrete understanding of mission and vision. Given that I am an individual with a disability, I can relate to the effectiveness of interagency collaboration among VR and its local partners. Interagency collaboration can bring forth positive outcomes through the effectiveness of the parties involved.

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APPENDIX A

KEY TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Office of Vocational Rehabilitation: OVR

Assistant District Administrator: ADA

Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation: BVRS

Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services: BBVS

District Administrator: DA

Early Reach Coordinator: ERC

Pennsylvania Department of Education: PDE

Rehabilitation Services Administration: RSA

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor: VRC

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE

This is a questionnaire to assist with participating in the study of collaboration among VR and the local school districts. Please place a check or a star next to the answer that best fits questions 1 and 2.

Background

1. What is your current job title?
 - Early Reach Coordinator
 - Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor

2. How long have you worked for the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation?
 - 1-5 years
 - 5-10 years
 - 10 or more years

For the following 3 questions, please type your answers.

3. What school districts do you work with?

4. How many individuals are on your caseload?

5. What proportion of the individuals with whom you work are out of school?

Inter-Agency Collaboration

6. In general, how do you perceive the quality of collaboration between the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and the school district?
Please check: 1 Not Good, 2 Somewhat Good, 3 Good, 4 Very Good, 5 Excellent

7. What are challenges faced by staff when implementing transitional support services in collaboration with the local school district? Please choose the answer that is most appropriate with question 7.
 - Lack of family support
 - Family unaware of disability
 - Student unaware of disability
 - Family unaware of supports available.

- Student unaware of supports available.
- Lack of student interest
- Other (Please specify):

APPENDIX C

GUIDED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What district or districts do you work with?
 - Cobblestone District
 - Flintrock District
2. What is your method of establishing collaboration between OVR and your assigned district (or districts)?
 - How involved is OVR management, including supervisors, assistant district administrators, or district administrators, in fostering interagency collaboration?
3. What is your overall perception of collaboration between The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) and your local partners?
4. What role do you think the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation should play in the transition team based on your day-to-day experiences with your local district or districts?
5. What are day-to-day challenges you face with developing collaboration with your district or districts?
 - How can OVR improve on establishing and maintaining collaboration with school districts?
6. How do you perceive interagency collaboration to be effective on students and their families?

APPENDIX D
DATA SET

Table 1

IEP Meetings Attended by OVR Staff

Time Period	Cobblestone BVRS	Flintrock BVRS
Q1 PY2018	0	13
Q2 PY2018	9	49
Q3 PY2018	5	43
Q4 PY2018	29	46
Q1 PY2019	12	25
Q2 PY2019	76	58
Totals	131	234

Note. Data represents the number of meetings attended.

Table 2

Job Referrals Made to Employers on Behalf of Students with Disabilities while Still in High School

Time Period	Cobblestone BVRS	Flintrock BVRS
Q1 PY2018	42	68
Q2 PY2018	46	129
Q3 PY2018	49	86
Q4 PY2018	78	140
Q1 PY2019	83	121
Q2 PY2019	61	125
Totals	359	669

Note. Data represents the number of unique students served.

Table 3

High School Students (Unique) with Disabilities Working in Part-Time or Summer Jobs as a Result of Referrals Made by OVR Staff

Time Period	Cobblestone BVRS	Flintrock BVRS
Q1 PY2018	3	183
Q2 PY2018	16	59
Q3 PY2018	28	62
Q4 PY2018	22	64
Q1 PY2019	62	102
Q2 PY2019	32	245
Totals	163	715

Table 4

High School Students (Unique) with Disabilities Who Entered into CIE Within Three Months of Graduation

Time Period	Cobblestone BVRS	Flintrock BVRS
Q1 PY2018	0	2
Q2 PY2018	1	2
Q3 PY2018	3	2
Q4 PY2018	0	0
Q1 PY2019	1	1
Q2 PY2019	2	2
Totals	7	9

Table 5

People with Disabilities Who Entered Competitive Integrated Employment and Had Been Students While OVR Customers

Time Period	Cobblestone BVRS	Flintrock BVRS
Q1 PY2018	10	68
Q2 PY2018	33	72
Q3 PY2018	37	126
Q4 PY2018	37	144
Q1 PY2019	26	86
Q2 PY2019	29	65
Totals	172	561

Note. "Student OVR Customer" is defined as an individual with a case beginning before the individual's 22nd birthday.