

INTRODUCING AND REFLECTING ON TRANSITION SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN TAIWAN

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Abstract

As a special education construct, transition services for children and students with disabilities have been included in Taiwan's Special Education Act since 1997. For the past 20 years, by law, education, labor, health care, and social welfare agencies have been involved in supporting students with disabilities moving on in the school system and from school to community (Ministry of Education, 1997). In addition to introducing how transition is being implemented in Taiwan, it is about time to reflect on what has been done and what we can do more or differently in terms of providing transition services for students with disabilities at various levels of the school system.

To provide a general idea of how transition services are implemented in Taiwan, we will start with a discussion of laws that define transition and stipulate what is to be done to fulfill legal requirements for transition. We will then move on to describe how teachers practically carried out tasks related to and their concerns about transition. After that, to bring in parents' perspectives about transition services, we want to introduce research on parents' views about transition of their children with disabilities in Taiwan at different stages of their lives. The last part of this article is a reflection on what has been done and what we can do differently when providing transition services in Taiwan.

Keywords: transition services, students with disabilities, Taiwan

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF TAIWAN'S SPECIAL EDUCATION LAWS

Speaking of transition, we have to start with a very brief history lesson. Like many new political entities formed after World War II in formal colonial territories, Taiwan has been heavily influenced by the United States (US) and/or United Nation (UN)-led global development of political thoughts and rights language for minority groups, including people with disabilities. Special education scholars returning from the US and parent groups who researched advanced practices in special education borrowed special education theories and concepts from the “developed worlds” and learned from their laws and practices in serving people with disabilities (Chang, 2007; Cheng, 2012).

On top of that, even though Taiwan is not a UN member, it has wanted to show the world that it can be and is a responsible global citizen by following the UN conventions. The Special Education Act (Ministry of Education, 2013a) is one such example. It follows Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the US in many ways and shares with the IDEA these following core concepts: Individualized Education Program (IEP), free and appropriate public education, least restrictive environment, appropriate evaluation, parent participation and transition services (Kuo, 2015). IEP has become a standard term in our special education services and least restrictive environment has morphed into “zero rejection” which means schools cannot reject a child on the ground of his or her disability. Transition of course started out as a legal concept borrowed from the US and the practice of transition also followed the US model stipulated in IDEA.

INTRODUCING TAIWAN'S SPECIAL EDUCATION REGULATIONS

In Taiwan, the laws and regulations related to transition in the education system include the following: Special Education Act (Ministry of Education, 2013a), Enforcement Rules for the Special Education Act (Ministry of Education, 2013b), and Regulations for Implementing Transition Services for Students with Disabilities in All Education Levels (Ministry of Education, 2010). The Special Education Act governs education for students with disabilities. It defines what disability is, categories of disability, responsibilities of schools and parents, and how special education is to be implemented. Enforcement Rules for the Special Education Act provide more details and steps of special education implementation, identification, evaluation, and placement of students. Regulations for Implementing Transition Services for Students with Disabilities in K-12 Schools state the procedure, steps, and people involved in transition services. The following are some examples.

Article 24 of the Special Education Act calls for an interdisciplinary approach to special education. It states;

“Institutions at all levels shall undertake the assessment, teaching, and counseling of special needs students on the basis of an interdisciplinary team approach, and if required may combine the services of professionals in the fields of health and medical

treatment, education, social work, independent living, and vocational rehabilitation to provide assistance in the form of guidance and services encompassing learning, living, psychological, rehabilitation training, occupational guidance, assessment, and transitions.”

Article 31 of the Special Education Act indicates schools are in charge of the transition services and states “for easy transition of service needs by students with disabilities, schools should offer complete and continuous transition counseling services, with the measures set by the Ministry of Education.”

The Enforcement Rules for the Special Education Act are intended to give more specific instructions as to how the Special Education Act is supposed to be carried out. Article 9 of the Enforcement Rules specifies types of transition services to be provided by the school. It includes student’s transition counseling and services delivered in academic, daily living, career, psychological, welfare and other related professional services.

Regulations for Implementing Transition Services for Students with Disabilities in All Education Levels offer some concrete steps and tasks. For example,

“Children with developmental delays should be reported to and placed in preschools or early childhood centers by local government agencies upon receiving information from the reporting and referral center for children with developmental delays. The reporting and referral center for children with developmental delays shall hold transition meetings attended by preschool personnel and parents a month before the child reports to preschool. The information of the children and meeting minutes will be entered into Special Education Transmit Net (SET), a government-run online reporting network. Once the placement is determined, the child’s information will be sent to the preschool or early childhood centers in 2 weeks of time. After the child reports to the school, IEP meeting shall be convened within 1 month of time.”

This long quote demonstrates that the transition process has been regulated to the minimalist detail. Special education teachers might have to scramble to prepare for these meetings and materials and upload information onto the SET, which will be discussed in detail in the next section. Transition has become a set of tasks that need to be completed by a certain deadline. For elementary and junior high schools, same steps are followed as the ones for transition to preschool from home. As elementary and junior high schools are compulsory education, students who fail to report to school two weeks after school starts will be followed up by local government’s educational offices. Again, the steps for transition are the same from junior high to senior high school.

SPECIAL EDUCATION TRANSMIT NET (SET)

All through the school years, the Ministry of Education requires schools at all levels to enter student information into the SET. It plays a very important role in transition services in Taiwan.

It is a nation-wide reporting and notification system officially started in 1998 and has been collecting and accumulating data about students in special education system for the past 20 years. As a special education database, it allows the Ministry of Education to track the statistical information of students in special education and their placements. The information is used as a basis for future planning of new special education classes, hiring of special education teachers, transition management, and appropriate placement for the students (Ministry of Education, 2018).

It is an essential step in transition and the task of entering information online is often regarded as a major part of transition task. How do teachers think of this task? In 2018, the second author of this article Yun-ju Huang informally interviewed with three teachers who were required to enter student information into the SET. They expressed some common issues.

First, when completing the form, the teachers were not sure to what extent the information needed to be entered. For example, when asking to fill in level of severity of the student's disability, teachers wondered if mild, moderate, or severe would do, or they needed to explain more? And how much more? Second, the content of information needed by SET appeared to be understood differently from teacher to teacher. For instance, when entering information under a category called current state of learning, teachers were not sure what it meant exactly and entered information they thought might match the term of "current state of learning." Third, the auditing agencies such as government education offices wanted to ensure the required information has been present in the system. However, the accuracy, content, and quality of the information were not necessarily important to these people who monitored the SET.

Maintaining a special education data base is extremely beneficial to transition and pitfalls should be addressed through training and communication. However, transition should not only be about entering student data. Other aspects of transition services such as laws and regulations, school responsibilities, teacher tasks and meeting schedules deserve some more of our critical attention and reflection so students and their families can benefit from what transition services are meant to be.

TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO COMMUNITY

For students navigating the structured education system, transition appears to be focused on moving the students up to the next level of schools. It is about transmitting and communicating information about the student from one school to the other. However, transition receives the most attention when the students are graduating from high schools. High school students have the following options after graduation: enter post-secondary education institutions, stay at home or enter institutions, or find employment opportunities. Transition at this point is no longer solely school's responsibility. Many coordination efforts need to be put in by educational, health care, labor, and social welfare sectors.

By law, what the school needs to do for high school students include:

“High schools should conduct occupational evaluation for the first-year students. Two years before graduation, schools should work with government agencies in charge of labor affairs on developing vocational education curriculum, employment skills, and work site practicum.

If in the last year in school, students are not able to find an employment interest and a place to work after examining their learning outcomes, behavioral observation, and employment consultations, schools should refer the students to labor affairs agency to continue employment training and consultation” (Ministry of Education, 2010).

REFLECTION ON THE CURRENT STATE OF TRANSITION

We want to start from reflecting on our special education laws and regulations. Borrowing laws from the US has its own advantages. Taiwan is a global citizen and we are eager to do our part as a law abiding citizen would and the laws are clearly advocating the services for people with disabilities. Most people appreciated these humanitarian ideas and concepts of special education and transition when they were introduced to us. The laws also are an expedient way for Taiwan’s special education sector to develop and build necessary infrastructure for the special education system to grow. The laws also provide a wakeup call that raises people’s awareness in realizing there is a lot yet to be done. However, these laws are ideas not born out of debates and deliberation of philosophical underpinnings and current situations in Taiwan. Often teachers felt they were the passive followers of laws and regulations, rather than initiators of something they advocated for.

The debates and interrogations we propose we can do as lawmakers are deliberating in the Legislation Yuan (Taiwan’s parliament) should be focused on Taiwan’s cultural and social contexts, such as: What is education for? Teachers’ roles? Parents’ roles? And most importantly, the relationships between individual and family and society need to be further examined to reflect Taiwan’s uniqueness and areas that the current legal and rights languages were inadequate of covering (Cheng, 2012). Individual’s relationships with family and community in Taiwan need to be understood and possibly transformed to make transition from school to community successful as the current participation of people with disabilities in Taiwan continued to be limited by their age, severity of disability, and a lack of supportive social environment (Hwang et al., 2015).

Missing Parents’ Voice in Transition Process

As schools are in charge of transition but might reduce it to meetings and completing the information on the SET and regard transition more seriously only in high school, usually the last year of high school, students’ parents and families appeared less influential in the transition process. Yun-ju Huang interviewed four parents in 2018. Parents interviewed told her that within the education system, transition process did help ease children’s entering a new environment but it was not enough just to have a transition meeting and nothing else. Moreover, in the transition meeting, parents, on one hand, were not sure if they should tell teachers everything about their children as they were afraid that teachers might form a negative impression of their children. On the other hand, parents also thought if they did not share all the information about their children,

their children might not benefit from this transition meeting. These concerns made parents felt awkward and uneasy about attending the transition meetings.

In terms of IEP which transition is part of, parents were not sure the information included in the IEP about their children's strengths and learning needs were really what their children needed, reflecting limited participation in the IEP planning on the parent's part.

Research on parents' views on transition showed parents' concerns about transition within the education system and over transition from school to community. Wu and Sun (2014) surveyed 173 parents with children entering first grade in Taichung, Taiwan. Parents expressed worries about their own lack of ability and skills to teach their children and were not sure if teachers in the elementary schools would accept their children with disabilities, reflecting a common fear of Taiwan's not so friendly social views towards people with disability.

For transition from special education school to community, Hsu and Chiu (2010) interviewed parents about their children's transition experiences. They found it was parents who decided their children's placement. Many parents did not pay attention to transition until the last year of school when school held transition related activities or after their children graduated from school when their children stayed at home. Only then did parents go back to schools to seek related information and resources about transition.

Taiwanese parents have their own concerns for their children with disabilities. The interviews and studies about parents' views on transition urged us special education practitioners and researchers to listen to what parents have in mind regarding their children's future. Besides completing the legally required transition tasks, taking the initiatives to encourage parents to be part of the planning process and finding out what they think of their children's future should be equally, if not more important when we try to do a good job in transition.

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