

Research & Best Practice Briefs

Secondary Special Educators' Perceptions of Transition Collaboration With Vocational Rehabilitation

Michelle McKnight^{1 a}, Andrew R. Scheef², Allison Levine³, Faith Thomas¹, Brian N. Phillips¹

¹ Utah State University, ² University of Idaho, ³ University of Iowa

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Although interagency collaboration is one of the most recognized and recommended practices for improving the transition outcomes of students with disabilities (SWD), it remains challenging to understand in both research and practice. This study utilizes the theory of planned behavior to understand better secondary special educators' beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors related to their collaboration with vocational rehabilitation (VR). Eighty-seven secondary special educators from across the U.S. participated in a survey using both quantitative and qualitative questions. Quantitative results indicate that more familiarity with VR lends itself to more behaviors that promote VR to SWD. Qualitative data describe how participants have created effective collaborative systems, as well as the barriers to working with VR in the transition process. Recommendations are provided at both the practitioner level and the systemic policy level to potentially address barriers to collaborations between these two groups of professionals in supporting post-school goals for SWD.

Decades of federal legislation (e.g., the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), 2004; the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), 2014) and advocacy have been dedicated to improving postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities (SWD) in the United States (Brinck et al., 2021). However, significant disparities in post-school outcomes (e.g., postsecondary education, employment) persist for SWD, demonstrating that there remain layers of barriers, systemic oppression, and ableism that can counteract many efforts to improve these outcomes (Erickson et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2011; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). The transition from high school to adulthood has been noted as a critical period for SWD in establishing their next steps and long-term outcomes. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the intersection of entitlement-based systems (e.g., special education in public schools) with eligibility-based adult systems (e.g., vocational rehabilitation; Kester et al., 2021).

One factor directly related to the post-school outcomes of SWD is the collaboration of vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies and local educational agencies (LEAs), where two distinct state and federal agencies must come together to facilitate successful outcomes. Legislatively, these agencies are mandated to collaborate intentionally: IDEA stipulates that transition plans be set in place by LEAs by the time a student is 16 years old, and WIOA requires VR agen-

cies use 15% of their budget to create and implement Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) to support SWD in obtaining competitive integrated employment. However, the logistics of weaving together the services of two agencies that have historically operated independently of each other is not straightforward. As succinctly stated by David Hoff of the Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE, 2014):

...simply assuming that the details will be worked out at the local level between VR offices and local school districts in terms of delivery and funding of the transition services required under WIOA, will likely result in a lack of consistent implementation, to the detriment of students with disabilities. Also, in general, just because Congress passes a law, does not mean that it will automatically be properly implemented, without effective advocacy. (pp. 1-2)

Although these laws have been put in place at the macro or systemic level, the day-to-day implementation of their functioning (and related success or failure) falls to those working at the individual level – special educators and VR counselors. Thus, the nature of collaboration between professionals must be brought to the forefront of research and policy recommendations (Oertle et al., 2017, 2021).

The Urgency of Collaboration

Teamwork between VR and LEAs is essential to carry out the missions and mandates of legislation supporting SWD. It is also the primary avenue by which SWD can achieve their goals for adulthood (Oertle et al., 2021; Test et al., 2009). Collaboration across VR agencies and LEAs allows professionals to leverage their respective areas of expertise to create and facilitate successful transition plans, which researchers in both areas have noted. Plotner and colleagues (2012) identified collaborative partnerships as one of seven transition-related domains necessary for VR professionals. Similarly, researchers identified interagency collaboration as one of five primary practice domains used by schools to support the achievement of individualized student post-school goals (Kohler et al., 2016).

Although support for SWD may involve collaboration with any number of entities, partnerships between special education and VR are a critical practice in the existing literature (Oertle & Trach, 2007; Taylor et al., 2016). Successful outcomes for SWD are a product of effective collaboration across VR personnel and LEAs (Poppen et al., 2017). VR counselors' participation in interagency teams that focus on individual student outcomes has been identified as a critical component of a seamless transition from secondary education to successful employment (Luecking et al., 2018; Poppen et al., 2017). Finally, experts in transition have identified research specific to the integration and interactions between educational and adult service systems (e.g., VR) as an area requiring further research (Oertle et al., 2021; Trainor et al., 2020).

Outcome Disparities

Both educators and VR personnel must be aware that poor collaboration at the transition stage can perpetuate the already disparate outcomes experienced by SWD in postsecondary education and beyond. For example, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the employment rate for 16 to 19-year-old SWD in 2019 was 23.5%, while their non-disabled peers' employment rate was 35.8% (BLS, 2020). The employment gap widens as these individuals age; the employment rate for 20 to 24-year-olds with disabilities was 45.4% compared to 73.4% of their non-disabled peers (BLS, 2020). Similarly, while postsecondary education enrollment has increased among students with and without disabilities (Snyder et al., 2016), many SWD are not successfully matriculating through their degree programs. According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NTLS-2), of the 4,810 young adults with disabilities interviewed, 60% had attended postsecondary education during the eight years after completing high school. However, only 23% have completed their programs (Newman et al., 2011).

When comparing wages, workers without disabilities enjoy higher average annual earnings than their peers with disabilities (\$47,000 versus \$40,400) (BLS, 2020). These wage discrepancies contribute to differences in the poverty rate, 10% for people without disabilities and 26% for those with disabilities (Erickson et al., 2019). One factor contributing to the lower earnings is the part-time employ-

ment rate for adults with disabilities at 20.2% (BLS, 2020), which likely translates to many people with disabilities remaining on entitlement programs and living in poverty. In addition, data show that the employment status of people with disabilities is more vulnerable during an economic crisis than people without disabilities. Although unemployment increased unilaterally due to the pandemic, the 2020 unemployment rate demonstrates employment inequalities for people with disabilities, especially those from culturally diverse families (BLS, 2020). The cumulative statistics on employment rates, wages, and hours worked to illustrate the need for continuing research to identify evidence-based practices and strategies to improve postsecondary employment outcomes for SWD.

Collaboration Barriers

While it is noted that collaboration between VR counselors and special educators improves transition outcomes (Luecking & Wittenburg, 2009), research has identified specific factors inhibiting effective collaboration in practice. Collaboration between professionals from differing disciplines having unique philosophical orientations, priorities, and resources is challenging and difficult (Hurlburt et al., 2014). It is well-established that VR counselors and special educators have continued to struggle to understand the role and responsibilities of the other professional in the process (Neubert et al., 2018; Oertle et al., 2013; Plotner et al., 2020; Riesen et al., 2014). Oertle and Trach (2007) found that neither group of professionals felt they had support within their systems to develop and maintain relationships with the other. Noonan et al. (2012) found that special educators can struggle to initiate new collaborative relationships with adult service providers. They may not even know which agencies they need to reach out to. Riesen et al. (2014) found that special education teachers do not fully utilize VR services in transition planning. Although collaboration in the transition process is mandated by law and shown to impact SWD, sustained and effective collaborative practices are still a rarity in practice (Riesen et al., 2014).

Educator Attitudes and Behaviors

The relationship between attitude and behavior has been extensively studied in the psychology literature (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Boysen & Vogel, 2008; Livneh, 1982; Lord et al., 1991) and is particularly important when considering the individual-level behaviors necessary for the successful collaborations between VR counselors and special educators. Special educators have reported not knowing about or not using transition programs in their local communities while noting their importance in the transition process (Sprunger et al., 2017). Formal transition coursework in teacher education programs and a high level of involvement in professional development activities have been shown to increase secondary special education teachers' implementation of transition-specific interventions and collaborations for SWD (Morningstar & Benitez, 2013).

Theory of Planned Behavior

A useful framework for conceptualizing the complex relationship between an individual's attitudes and actual behaviors is the theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991). The TPB incorporates one's attitudes alongside social and intrapersonal factors such as subjective norms and perceived behavioral controls into the overall framework for conceptualizing or predicting behavior. Attitudes and subjective norms are theorized as affecting behavioral intention directly and actual behavior indirectly through intent, while perceived behavioral control influences both intent and behavior (Ajzen, 1991). TPB has been used increasingly in educational research and provides much insight into teacher intentions and behavior regarding inclusivity relative to SWD (e.g., MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Wilson et al., 2016). For example, MacFarlane and Woolfson (2013) identified that perceptions of principal support (e.g., subjective norm) were a significant factor related to inclusive attitudes towards students with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties. In a qualitative exploration using TPB in an Irish educational context, systemic barriers were conceptualized as components of the subjective norms, which were also found as a primary area where teachers prevented inclusive policies and practices (Young et al., 2017).

TPB is an ideal theoretical concept for exploring the VR-related behaviors and beliefs of special education teachers in the United States. Current literature has established known barriers to collaboration between special educators/LEAs and VR counselors and agencies; notably that many obstacles are external to those at the individual level, such as policies or laws governing their behaviors (Neubert et al., 2018; Oertle et al., 2021; Oertle & Trach, 2007; Riesen et al., 2014). TPB allows for new insights into what other factors may be involved when collaboration between a special educator and VR counselor must occur. If both VR agencies and LEAs seek to engage in practices that are not only consistent but are adequate for facilitating the success of students with disabilities, it is necessary to understand the day-to-day predictors and inhibitors to successful partnerships across agencies.

Purpose

Although VR professionals and special educators have overlapping ideologies, evidence indicates that most U.S. states recognize transition planning as integral to students' postsecondary success (Taylor et al., 2016), there is still a gap in the seamless application of transition services between VR and LEAs. This study aims to use the theory of planned behavior as a lens for understanding special educators' beliefs and behaviors related to VR and explore their collaborative relationships in a mixed-methods study. Therefore, the following research questions were addressed in the exploration of special educators' beliefs and behaviors related to VR:

1. How familiar are secondary special educators with VR services?

2. What behaviors do special educators engage in to promote or facilitate SWD participation in VR?
3. What is the association between special educator age, time in the field, and measures of VR beliefs and behaviors?
4. What is the association between familiarity with VR and secondary special educator VR behaviors?

Method

Participant Population

Eighty-seven secondary special educators from across the U.S. participated in this study. The participants included 76 (87.4%) women, 10 (11.5%) men, and one person identifying as non-binary (1.1%), ranging in age from 23 to 68 years ($M = 47.5$, $SD = 12.2$). In terms of race-ethnicity, 79 participants (90.8%) indicated White, 4 (4.6%) indicated Black, 1 (1.1%) indicated Hispanic or Latino, and 3 (3.4%) opted not to say. A total of 20 participants (23.0%) had a bachelor's degree, 57 (65.5%) had a master's degree, 10 (4.6%) had a degree or certification beyond the master's degree, and two (2.3%) reported another level of education. The vast majority reported working in a public school ($n = 76$; 87.4%), with the rest working in charter schools and other private institutions. Respondents' average time teaching in special education was 14.31 years, ranging from 1 to 39 years ($SD = 9.41$).

Procedures

Following study approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were identified through national- and state-level professional special educator associations. Initial recruitment took place by emailing the directors of these associations and requesting that each director disseminate the survey to their members. Each director employed their method of dissemination, such as posting it to the organization's Facebook page, emailing it directly to members, or including a link to the survey in their monthly newsletter. In addition, the researchers of this study regularly posted a survey link to a national organization's open forum, in which they have a membership. Due to the variations in recruiting methods, it is unclear how many secondary special educators received an invitation to participate. Thus, the response rate cannot be calculated. Eligible participants were currently employed as 9-12 grade special educators in a secondary education setting in the United States.

Instruments

This study used a cross-sectional survey design. A questionnaire was modified from related research targeted at school counselors (Currier Kipping et al., 2021), with demographic items such as age, gender, race, level of education, and years of practice. Two open-ended questions were included at the end of the survey to elicit information about what has facilitated collaboration with VR and the barriers they have experienced when collaborating with VR coun-

selors. Finally, three scales were included to assess special educators' perceptions of VR, as described below.

Special Educator Beliefs

The beliefs of special educators about VR were measured using a 7-item scale, the Special Educator Beliefs About VR Scale (VR Beliefs Scale). Example items include "VR services are beneficial to my transitioning students" and "It is important to let my students know about VR services available to them both during and after high school." Items are rated on a 6-point Likert-type rating scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 6 = *Strongly Agree*). Higher scores indicate more positive beliefs about VR. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the VR Beliefs Scale was .86.

Special Educator Behaviors

The behaviors of special educators that promote or facilitate student engagement in VR were measured using a scale modified from a previous project (Currier Kipping et al., 2021), the Special Educator VR Behaviors Scale (VR Behaviors Scale). The scale consists of 8 items, including "I take time to explain what VR is to my students regarding VR" and "I provide written information to my students regarding VR," which are rated on a 5-point Likert-type rating scale (1 = *Never* to 5 = *Always*). Higher scores indicate more behaviors that facilitate VR engagement. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the VR Behaviors Scale was .93.

Special Educator Alliance

A final scale created for this study was used to measure the working alliance between the special educator and VR services providers, the VR Alliance Scale. The scale consists of 9 items, including "VR counselor(s), and I have built a mutual trust," and "VR counselor(s) and I tend to be on the same page with where we hope for students to be in their transition once they graduate." Items are rated on a 6-point Likert-type rating scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 6 = *Strongly Agree*), with higher scores indicating a stronger perceived alliance between special educators and the VR counselor(s) with whom they work. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the VR Alliance Scale for this study was .97.

Quantitative Analysis

All data were collected through Qualtrics, a secure online data collection platform, with data analysis completed using SPSS v 26. This analysis included the analysis of descriptive information (e.g., frequencies and measures of central tendency) to identify current beliefs and behaviors among special educators. Factor and reliability analyses were used for scale development related to special educator beliefs, behaviors, and perceived alliance. T-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to determine whether years in practice influence the knowledge and practice patterns of referring students to VR services.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative aspect of this survey included two open-ended qualitative questions, (1) "Please describe any challenges or barriers you have experienced related to collaboration experience with VR counselors," and (2) "Please describe any practices that have facilitated your collaboration with VR counselors." Seventy-two participants responded to the first qualitative question regarding challenges or barriers to collaboration, and 70 participants responded to the qualitative questions regarding facilitators of collaboration with VR. Three researchers reviewed and coded the qualitative data independently to identify emerging themes and subthemes utilizing thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). They then met several times to ensure an accurate interpretation of the data and come to a consensus on the findings and themes. Having multiple reviewers allows for analyst triangulation and attempts to minimize biased interpretations of the qualitative findings (Patton, 2015).

Results

Quantitative Results

In Research Question 1, we sought to understand the percentage of special educators in the sample familiar with VR services. Most respondents reported being very ($n = 33$; 37.9%) or extremely ($n = 18$; 20.7%) familiar with VR services. That said, 30 (34.5%) participants reported being only moderately familiar, and six (6.9%) reported being slightly familiar. To address Research Question 2, assessing the beliefs of special educators about VR, we explored the means and frequencies across the seven items making up the VR Beliefs Scale. The results for individual belief items can be found in [Table 1](#). The table, organized in order of descending mean scores, suggests that the majority of special educators in the sample hold positive beliefs about VR services.

To address Research Question 3, assessing the behaviors of special educators relevant to VR, we explored the means and frequencies across the eight items making up the VR Behaviors Scale. The results for individual items can be found in [Table 2](#). The table, organized in order of descending mean scores, suggests behaviors promoting VR were common across the board, with 6 of the 8 items having an average score between *Often* and *Always*.

Multiple regression analysis was used to address Research Question 4, identifying variables that predict VR-promoting behaviors among special educators. Familiarity with VR was entered into the model alongside the VR beliefs and VR alliance variables. Based on a preliminary analysis of correlations between collected demographics and VR promoting behaviors, only years employed as a secondary education teacher was included in the model. Analysis was conducted using bootstrapping to increase confidence in the output while using a relatively small sample. [Table 3](#) shows the correlations between included variables along with the means and standard deviations for each. Mean imputation was used for missing items due to the limited omitted data in the survey responses and to allow for the retention of the sample. Prior to the analysis,

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviations of Secondary Special Educator Beliefs About VR in Descending Order (n = 87)

Item	Issue	M	SD
4.	It is important to let my students know about VR services available to them both during and after high school.	5.52	0.90
3.	As a special educator, I play a vital role in connecting students with disabilities to VR.	5.40	0.92
5.	It is important for me to be closely connected with someone from my local VR office.	5.24	1.03
1.	VR services are beneficial to my students.	4.93	1.21
6.	I am comfortable reaching out to VR for assistance planning my student's post-high transition.	4.75	1.42
2.	My students rarely need VR services to be successful post high school.*	4.71	1.28
7.	My students generally benefit a great deal from VR services.	4.54	1.36

*Negatively worded item that was reverse scored for inclusion in the table.

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviations of Secondary Special Educator Behaviors Promoting VR in Descending Order (n = 87)

Item	Issue	M	SD
6.	I provide verbal information to my student's parents regarding VR.	4.23	0.80
1.	I provide verbal information to my students regarding VR.	4.16	0.86
8.	I take time to explain what VR is to my student's parents.	4.15	0.96
7.	I provide written information to my student's parents regarding VR.	4.11	0.99
2.	I provide written information to my students regarding VR.	4.11	1.04
3.	I take time to explain what VR is to my students.	4.09	0.96
5.	I follow up with my students after referring them to VR.	3.86	1.07
4.	I provide online resources to my students regarding VR	3.68	1.11

Table 3. Correlation Matrix of Scales

Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1 Years in practice	14.30 (9.41)	--				
2 Familiarity with VR	3.72 (0.87)	.293**	--			
3 VR beliefs	35.09 (6.04)	.067	.323**	--		
4 VR alliance	42.99 (9.93)	.072	.269*	.549***	--	
5 VR behaviors	32.40 (6.34)	.296**	.530***	.396***	.354***	--

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were tested and met.

The model predicted 34.2% of the total variance in VR-promoting behaviors using the adjusted R^2 . Familiarity with VR was the only variable in the model to significantly predict VR-promoting behaviors when entered into the model simultaneously ($B = 2.81$, $p < .001$). Notably, all included variables correlated significantly with the outcome variable VR Beliefs approximated significance ($B = .21$, $p = .055$). See Table 3 for the full results of the regression analysis.

Exploratory analysis of the influence of familiarity with VR was conducted after conducting the planned research questions due to the results indicating that familiarity with VR had a preeminent effect on VR-promoting behaviors

in the context of time practicing, VR beliefs, and VR alliance. A series of independent sample t-tests were conducted to understand better the influence of familiarity with VR on special educators' VR beliefs, alliance, and behavior. This was accomplished by recategorizing the VR familiarity scores into a dichotomy, with those reporting being extremely or very familiar placed in the high familiarity category and those reporting moderate or slight familiarity placed in the low familiarity category. High familiarity corresponded with higher scores across all comparisons. VR beliefs were elevated for the high familiarity group ($M = 36.60$, $SE = 0.86$) compared to the low familiarity group ($M = 33.74$, $SE = 0.89$). This difference, 2.87, 95% CI [-5.27, -0.41], was significant, $t(75) = -2.296$ ($p = .024$). For VR alliance, the high familiarity group ($M = 45.21$, $SE = 1.46$) also

exceeded the low familiarity group ($M = 39.62$, $SE = 1.68$). This difference, 5.59, 95% CI [-10.02, -1.16], was significant, $t(75) = -2.514$ ($p = .014$). Finally, regarding VR-promoting behaviors, the high familiarity group ($M = 35.05$, $SE = 0.69$) also exceeded the low familiarity group ($M = 29.09$, $SE = 1.15$). This difference, 5.96, 95% CI [-8.65, -3.26], was significant, $t(75) = -4.43$ ($p < .001$).

Qualitative Results

Survey respondents were asked to describe any challenges or barriers they experienced related to collaboration experiences with VR counselors, as well as facilitators of effective collaboration they have experienced. Seventy-two participants responded to the question about barriers, and 70 participants provided qualitative responses regarding facilitators of collaboration. Within "Barriers to Collaboration," three primary themes emerged from the thematic analysis coding, including (a) VR Systems Issues, (b) VR Counselor-Dependent Concerns, and (c) Barriers Related to the Coordination of Services. Within "Facilitators to Collaboration," three themes were identified: (a) Consistent Communication, (b) Understanding Roles and Responsibilities, and (c) Interagency Teams. Within primary themes, sub-themes were identified and explored, and include participant quotes to illustrate wording and context.

Barriers to VR and Special Educator Collaboration

VR System Issues. VR system issues comprised two sub-themes: (a) staffing and (b) VR counselor turnover.

Staffing. Respondents identified concerns and barriers that relate specifically to VR systems. Most prominent of these system issues were comments describing low staffing levels, which respondents described directly and indirectly. One wrote, "My challenges have been VR staff shortages. Too many students assigned to just one counselor." One respondent simply said, "Capacity. The need for services is greater than they are able to provide." As a result of understaffing, VR counselors may have limited time to support school-aged students. A respondent explained that low staffing levels mean that VR counselors "don't always have the time to be as involved with the students as they would like."

VR Counselor Turnover. Another prominent concern identified by respondents related to VR systems involved high rates of counselor turnover. Participants expressed frustration around dedicating time to developing relationships with new VR counselors, only to see them leave their positions after a short time. One respondent said, "the VR [counselor] in my area seems to change every year," and another explained, "by the time I respond, someone else is in that position." The high levels of turnover can dismantle productive relationships that have been built over years of collaboration. One teacher wrote, "Turnover with VR is a problem in relationship building," while another explained, "I have been in my current position for more than 20 years. Eighteen of those years, a strong relationship was cultivated. Currently, the staff changeover with differing ideas has been difficult."

VR Counselor-Dependent Concerns. In addition to concerns related to VR systems, participants identified concerns that may be more specific to the VR counselor. This was stated directly by one respondent who wrote that service delivery is "totally dependent on who the VR counselor is-some are much better collaborators than others." Another participant explained, "we have 3 High Schools, so each school has a different VR counselor. One attends almost every IEP conference to which he is invited. The other does not attend the conferences."

Many teachers described a lack of involvement from VR counselors. Although this could potentially be related to understaffing, respondent comments (such as the ones above) may suggest that this may vary between counselors. Teachers expressed the frustration of limited involvement by writing statements like "we never see them," "they do not return phone calls," "they do not follow up with the students and getting services is nearly impossible," and "the counselor is often unavailable for IEP meetings." Another teacher explained, "they seem to be very 'hands-off'...so the 'bridge' that we try to establish at the HS level is rarely formed for the student." Teachers also expressed concerns about VR counselors' poor communication and limited involvement with families. One teacher wrote, "many times parents will say that the VR counselor did not call them back." At the same time, another explained, "our VR counselor has a difficult time effectively communicating with parents, and thus parents come to me with their questions and concerns."

Teachers also identified concerns relating to the skill set of specific counselors. For example, respondents explained that VR counselors are not always aware of resources. One teacher wrote, "In some cases, she does not know what services VR can provide for our students, which can be frustrating." Others express concerns about the VR counselor's ability to provide direct services to students effectively. Some of these barriers identified by teachers included: "the counselors I currently work with are uncomfortable speaking with small groups of students," and "sometimes they do not understand the capabilities of the student."

Barriers Related to Coordination of Services. In addition to expressing concerns related to VR systems and those specific to individual VR counselors, participants identified barriers to the coordination of services. Teachers noted that differences between WIOA and IDEA could create barriers to collaboration. One respondent wrote that the "education system is set up very differently than VR." The coordination of VR eligibility counselors was also identified as a potential barrier, with participants expressing confusion about which transition students are eligible to receive VR services. For example, one participant wrote, "my students are often [functioning] too low for VR." At the same time, another explained, "VR services are often geared to meet the needs of intellectually disabled people rather than autism." Other participants also expressed concerns about how service coordination is dependent on the age of the students. One respondent explained,

I know the teachers at my school who work mostly with 11th and 12th grades work more with VR counselors. I

think it would be great to involve the lower grades more. The earlier we can expose our students to VR services, I feel the better.

all there is to know about successful transition, waiver programs, and navigating SSI while establishing competitive employment, there was an air of humble leadership amongst our transition team.

Factors That Facilitate VR Collaboration

Consistent Communication. Participants noted communication being a primary method to improve the collaborative relationship between themselves and their local VR counselor/office. One participant stated, "We make communication and collaboration a priority." A common way communication was mentioned to improve collaboration was through regularly scheduled and consistent meetings. For some participants, consistent meant weekly and for others, monthly; yet, participants indicated having set meeting times greatly improved the relationship between secondary special educators and VR counselors.

The consistency of communication and having consistent email and phone contact between the professionals were noted as being impactful. For example, one participant noted, "We [special educators] regularly email and call her [VR counselor] with our questions." Another explained, "Just keeping them [VR counselors] in the loop all the time about what the students' needs are" was an essential part of establishing consistent communication. Several participants noted that they, as special educators, work to coordinate as many meetings in one day as they can so the VR counselors are not going back and forth for one meeting at a time.

Participants shared actionable strategies they utilize to keep the lines of communication with VR open. Strategies include the use of virtual meetings with Zoom and Google Meets. A participant explained that the move to online meetings due to COVID-19 "have actually made it much easier to collaborate." The use of online resources was also beneficial for the two types of professionals to share resources. Participants explained they would keep a spreadsheet that both they and the VR counselor could work from to be on the same page regarding the needs and challenges of individual students.

Understanding of Roles and Responsibilities. A typical participant response related to factors impacting collaboration was for all stakeholders involved in the transition planning process to be aware of the roles and responsibilities of each professional involved. One participant explained that it was very beneficial to have a VR counselor come to the high school each year to explain to all the staff and teachers what VR is and what their role is in the transition planning in the lives of SWD. One participant explained in detail how she came to understand the collaborative process as it evolved due to legislation and funding:

Because of this unprecedented interagency collaboration, collaborative relationships really began from the bottom, beginning with building rapport and asking questions. Asking questions was huge for me as there were some components of transition planning that my educational background did not lend itself to support. This created an openness amongst the team, ensuring that the VR counselor knew that I had respect for her position, training, and experience. By acknowledging that I did not know

Some participants noted they had been given time to go off-site with the VR counselor to better understand VR's work setting, services, and role in the transition planning process. One participant explained, "Last year, the transition teachers went on a tour of all the transition work sites; that was awesome."

Interagency Teams and Training. One reoccurring theme in the data was the benefit of combined training between VR counselors and special education teachers. These pieces of training were explained in various ways; for some participants, it was having VR come to the school and provide training about their roles and responsibilities in the transition process. For example, "The VR Counselors present information to our group of 30 transition coordinators (one per school) every August." Other participants described being asked to provide VR training on how special educators work with transition students as they complete high school.

Participants described the tools, strategies, and techniques they utilize to effectively collaborate with VR as "cogs" in the more extensive process of an interagency transition team. A participant noted that special educators must work with other community resources in the transition process, "[there is a] state requirement to invite outside agencies when students turn 16" to IEP meetings. These outside agencies should include VR and can consist of other community resource providers, but are very dependent on the resources of each community. Such teams can combine their resources and hold events, such as a transition fair, to expose most students and parents to the resources available to them at one time and place.

Discussion

The current study results illuminate how special educators perceive and behave concerning VR counselors and services. While the relationship between special education and VR is undoubtedly essential to the successful transition of SWD, much remains uncertain in terms of the specifics necessary to facilitate successful collaborations between the VR agency and the school system. Applying the theory of planned behavior to such a complex issue provides insight advantageous to vocational rehabilitation counselors, special educators, and administrative leaders in both settings. The qualitative findings in this study regarding the barriers and facilitators of effective transition collaboration between secondary special educators and VR counselors are reminiscent of existing literature on the topic (Argan et al., 2002; Oertle et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2016); however, when looked at in concert with the quantitative results and through the lens of TPB, these findings become transformed.

The quantitative results of the current study demonstrate that the sample studied had generally positive beliefs about VR and reported that they often promoted VR ser-

vices to their students in ways that would encourage student use of VR services. Study participants also indicated a salient awareness that they have a significant role in connecting SWD to VR services. However, when taken together with the results of the qualitative data, which can be interpreted as the norms experienced by the sample, we reveal a potential confounding factor in the relationship between attitudes and behavioral outcomes.

The theory of planned behavior establishes independent factors impacting behavioral intention and actual behavior. The qualitative findings of the current study reveal the norms experienced by the surveyed educators, which then inform a perspective as to how self-reports of behaviors and attitudes are not sufficient for understanding what is regularly happening regarding special educators making referrals to and about VR. Qualitatively, participants revealed the norms they have encountered or experienced when working to engage with VR that have impacted their ability to collaborate with VR effectively. The descriptions of collaboration difficulties experienced by secondary special educators provide additional context for understanding why many of the same struggles to bring these two professionals together continue to exist decades after being described (Agran et al., 2002). For example, participants described the difficulty in establishing relationships with the VR counselor assigned to their school due to the consistent turnover of VR counselors. To the knowledge of the authors, there is no existing literature specific to transition that links VR counselor turnover to be detrimental to the transition experiences of SWD. This is a concern, as research in the past decade has indicated that 50% of VR counselors having less than five years on the job planned to leave VR employment within two years (Pitt et al., 2013).

Familiarity and Promotion

In the current study, quantitative data demonstrated that familiarity with VR was a significant factor in promoting VR to SWD by secondary special education teachers. Further, the qualitative data expanded on the concept as both a facilitator and barrier to partnering with VR. Ideally, special educators would initially be introduced to transition and collaboration with VR in their pre-service education and training. Interagency training and combined events were noted as activities that participants in this study found useful and were used to increase their familiarity with VR.

As noted in the results, participants sometimes had incorrect understandings of VR, which likely then directly impacted their VR-promoting behaviors. For example, participants had an inaccurate account of the type of disabilities with which VR would work. Some participants stated that their students would not qualify for services because their intellectual disability was too severe. Others reported their students would not be eligible for services because their disability did not result in significant functional limitations. More education regarding each profession's roles, responsibilities, and systems is still needed (Agran et al., 2002; Neubert et al., 2018; Oertle et al., 2013; Riesen et al., 2014).

Recommendations for Practice

Based on these findings, we present recommendations for VR staff and school-based special educators. VR should work to address some of the concerns identified by special educators. At a national and state level, VR entities should develop plans to address staff shortages and high levels of VR counselor turnover and strategies for recruiting and training transition professionals (Oertle et al., 2021). Maintaining regular communication and a presence within the school may lead to improved collaboration between special educators and VR personnel. It is a behavior to incentivize both teachers and counselors, as they are both groups that have large caseloads and may not prioritize this behavior on their own (Oertle et al., 2021). Organizational systems must create and implement a policy that prioritizes the collaboration of VR and special education.

As familiarity with VR services was correlated with higher satisfaction of collaboration, both parties should work to educate themselves on the roles, responsibilities, and resources of the other. It may be possible for VR counselors and special educators to complete training together to understand the other systems better. Different strategies special educators may use to better connect with VR counselors include: (a) starting with informal connections as a way to get to know a counselor, (b) familiarizing themselves with WIOA to understand better what specific services might be available through Pre-ETS, (c) maintaining regular communication (Plotner et al., 2020), (d) formalizing the relationship through a memorandum of understanding, and (e) seeking to develop local or regional transition councils if they do not already exist (Scheef & McKnight-Lizotte, 2021; Sprunger et al., 2017).

Limitations

The sample size of this study is relatively small, therefore limiting the representation of the data. Response rates to this study were low due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore results may not represent the thoughts and behaviors of practitioners nationally. At least 90% of the participants identified as White, which also impacts the generalizability of the study. Qualitative data are not intended to be representative, only to assist researchers in understanding what drives human behaviors. Additional reflection must be given to the limitations inherent to self-reported participant data, as they cannot be independently verified. Self-reported participant data are subject to the participant's ability to accurately assess themselves and provide truthful responses, even when they may not be socially desirable.

Conclusion

Findings show that although special educators view transition collaboration with VR positively, factors that impact practice feasibility exist. The barriers to collaboration extend beyond individual teachers, LEAs, and VR offices to the systemic issues in each profession. Thus far, the transition research has focused mainly on the experiences of su-

pervisory professionals (Oertle et al., 2017, 2021), specific disability groups, and the outcome data available; there needs to be a greater emphasis on the feasibility of collaboration interventions.

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