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Assessment to Guide Individualized Transition Plans from School to Post-School for Children Ages 14+ with Moderate Disabilities

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Assessment to Guide Individualized Transition Plans from School to Post-School for Children

Ages 14+ with Moderate Disabilities

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

School of Education and Counseling Psychology

Dominican University of California

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Signature Sheet

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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Date May 1, 2014

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Date May 1, 2014

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Abstract

As a part of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), special education teachers work along with their student with special needs and their parent(s)/guardian(s) to create and implement Individualized Transition Plans (ITP) to assist the student with their transition to the post-school environment. As mandated by Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), ITPs are a component of the IEP for students 16 years old and over, who are eligible for special education services. Many special education teachers start the process at 14 years of age to better serve the student. At the non-public school setting of this study, it is considered best practice to do so. The problem is that assessments concerning transition to post-school environments do not appear to be geared towards students with moderate disabilities or to be readily available. The purpose of this study is to create a new assessment and present the findings of this assessment.

Literary sources stressed the importance of an inclusive transition assessment, but gave little information concerning the questions. A few articles referenced the Transition Planning Inventory (TPI) assessment which addresses nine domains of transition and will provide information pertaining to the student's strengths and areas of need. However, from my own experience, this questionnaire is generalized and the moderate special needs population does not understand many of the questions. The authors described the importance of multidisciplinary approach, between the teacher/specialist(s), parent(s)/guardian(s), and student. This assists in the creation of the ITP that is based on the strengths and needs of the individual student. In most cases the creation and implementation of the transition assessment was designed by the special education teacher or specialist based on informal observation or was simply provided by the school district. This was a qualitative study using a pre-created assessment. The assessment was used to gather data pertaining to effective individual transition plans for students with moderate disabilities ages 14+ years of age.

In this study all of the student participants were students in special education with moderate disabilities. The four students and their parent(s)/guardian(s) were interviewed to assess the present levels of the students in regards to their preparation for the transition to the post-school environment.

This survey focused on daily living, functional skills, behavior, and general ideas concerning the post-school environment. The survey that was created will help to guide the ITPs of each of the students. Further collaboration between the teacher and the specialist(s) and therapist(s) is advised to create a more comprehensive list of questions for the individual student and the parent(s)/guardian(s) to assist in the transition process.

Chapter 1 Introduction

The special needs population has academic, vocational, functional, communication, and regulatory needs that are above and beyond those of the typical population. Many of these needs are assessed and addressed through the IEP and ITP processes. The majority of the students with whom I interact are not going to be following the typical college preparatory route. It is my job to better prepare them and their parent(s)/guardian(s) for the post-school environment.

I have been a lead special education teacher since 2008 and I have found it difficult to effectively assess the individual needs of many my students with moderate disabilities who are beginning their process of transitioning to the post-school environment. I informally assess my students while in the classroom and in the community to determine their level of functioning. In my classroom I attempt to instruct my students in self-regulation and functional skills to help prepare them for life post-school, but I wondered if there were assessments that have been already created that could better assist my instruction and curriculum goals.

Transition assessment "is the ongoing process of collecting data on the individual's needs, preferences, and interests as they relate to the demands of current and future working, educational, living, and personal and social environments. Assessment data serves as the common thread in the transition process and form the basis for defining goals and services to be included in the Individualized Education Program", (Sitlington, Neubert, & Leconte as cited in Walker, Kortering, Fowler, Rowe, & Bethune, 2013).

ITPs have been a mandatory section of the IEP process since 1990. IDEA requires all students aged 16 and over who are receiving special education services to have a plan to assist with their transition to the post-school environment (IDEA, 2004). At my current educational setting we begin to focus on transitioning to the post-school environment at 14 years of age. I know that

more effective formal assessment tools would be helpful to guide instruction in the classroom as well as in the community to help guide my students towards their lives post-school.

Statement of Problem

ITPs are a mandatory section of the IEP because of IDEA when the special needs student is 16 years of age or older. In my experience, there are not any set guidelines to assist in their creation, other than they should be based on age-appropriate transition assessments. The problem is that I do not know what formal assessments to give my students at the middle to high school levels. I have a general idea how to instruct them and I attempt to teach my students self-regulation, communication, vocational, and functional skills that will assist them in their post-school lives. It would be helpful if there were effective formal assessments to guide the creation of ITPs and to assist in the instruction of functional and academic skills.

Theoretical Rationale

The Civil Rights movement affected the rights of US citizens based on race, religion, sex, and nation of origin. This led to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which promoted the education of children with special needs. In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibited the discrimination based on physical or mental impairments. IDEA promoted the individual rather than focusing on the disability and defined the rights of services for the student in the public school system and provided for a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and a Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Transition Planning should begin at the earliest age appropriate as determined by the IEP team, but must begin at the age of 16. The ITP is to address the needs of the student that will assist the student with their transition to the post-school environment.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to create and examine a transition plan assessment that is designed for students with moderate disabilities to assist in their transition to the post-school environment. This may also provide an insight the process of creating an effective comprehensive transition plan assessment.

Research Question

Transition Plans for special needs population are federally mandated. However adequate models that serve the moderate population are not readily available. What effective assessment tools or information pertaining to ITPs for children with moderate disabilities are available?

Assumptions

Effective assessment tools guide the ITP process. Classroom activities and curriculum can be enhanced by more effective assessments. Currently there is no ITP preparation and implementation of ITP assessment. It either varies from district to district or is not defined at all.

Background and Need

Carter, Trainor, Sun, and Owens (2009) examined nine domains of transition assessment: community participation, further education, employment, communication, self-determination, relationships, daily living, health, and leisure activities. The researchers implemented the TPI assessment to assess the strengths and needs of the students.

Carter, Brock, and Trainor (2009) examined the role of transition planning and the importance of effective assessment. The problem that the authors identified is presented as a

guideline on how to create transitional goals that respond to the needs of a student and the aim of the paper was to inform the reader to the law surrounding transition for students with special needs, including the domains of education/training, employment, and independent living skills.

Summary

Through the examination of the created interviews, the researcher examined and assessed the created transition assessments to better inform further modifications. It was my hope that the assessment will better inform the teacher in creating a transition plan that focuses on education/training, employment, independent/daily living skills, relationships, health, and leisure activities.

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

Introduction

This section is an examination of the research literature on transition planning and assessment. Information was gathered from academic library searches using online resources. Research information is organized in the following categories: Historical Context, Review of the Academic Research, Statistical Information, and Internet Sources.

Historical Context

Wright (2014) and U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (2000), summarized the history of special education law from 1954 to the present. The following are key federal decisions that affect special education practice and policy today.

Brown vs. Board of Education (1954)

The Supreme Court found that African-American children had the right to equal educational opportunities under the law. After this decision, parents of children with disabilities began to bring lawsuits against their school districts for excluding and segregating children with disabilities. The parents argued that by excluding these children, schools were discriminating against the children because of their disabilities.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965)

Congress enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 to address the inequality of educational opportunity for underprivileged children. In 1966, Congress

amended the ESEA to establish a grant program to help states in the education of special needs children.

Public Law 91-230: Education of the Handicapped Act (1970)

Congress enacted the Education of the Handicapped Act in an effort to encourage states to develop educational programs for individuals with disabilities.

Public Law 94-142(1975)

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 stated that all children with disabilities would have a right to education. State and local educational agencies may be held accountable for providing educational services for all children with special needs.

Public Law 101-476 (1990)

In 1990, IDEA was passed. It mandated that IEPs for all students aged 16 and over contain transition language for the explicit purpose of assisting a student to meet his/her post-secondary school adult living objectives.

Public Law 101-376 (1990)

In 1990, the ADA became law. This guaranteed equal access for all Americans with disabilities.

Public Law 105-17 (1997)

In 1997, IDEA is reauthorized. It mandated that transition planning be implemented in the IEPs for students with special needs aged 14 and above.

Public Law 108-446 (2004)

In 2004, IDEA was reauthorized and mandated that transition planning be implemented in the IEPs of all students with special needs aged 16 and above. These IEPs must have measurable post-secondary goals that are based upon age appropriate assessments and must address post-secondary education and/or training, employment, and independent living skills.

Review of Academic Research

Sabbatino and Macrine (2007) examined a model for instructing students to better enhance their skills for more independent lives in the post-school environment. The article examines the Start on Success (SOS) model. The authors describe that for many students in special education; schools are not adequately teaching skills to promote independence and are not likely to become employed in our society. The purpose was to examine the model and to determine the effectiveness of the SOS model. The participants of the study were students at high schools located in low-income neighborhoods with a significant number of students with special needs. Collaboration between the school district, the student and parent(s)/guardian(s), service providers, and employers was essential to the success of the program. For this study, a partnership between a Philadelphia high school and local university placed 20 students between the ages of 17-20 years old in the SOS program and employed the students at a local hospital. The researchers collected data through observation and interviews of the student mentors pertaining to job performance. The authors reported on the various aspects of the SOS program, the social and transitional benefits for the students, and the importance of collaboration among all those involved. The authors reported on the successes of the study through qualitative information, reporting that the students involved in the study made improvements in their self esteem, vocational skills, and independent skills, but concluded that a longer study would better

inform the long term effects of the program in the post-school environment. This study emphasizes the importance of community based vocational education for students with disabilities to increase students' independence in the post-school environment.

Carter, Trainor, Sun, and Owens (2009) examined nine domains of transition assessment: community participation, further education, employment, communication, self-determination, relationships, daily living, health, and leisure activities. The questions that the authors examined were:

1. How do educators assess the transition-related strengths and needs of youth with emotional and/or behavioral disorders (EBD) and learning disorders (LD)?
2. To what extent do educators, parents, and youth share similar or have divergent perspectives on the strengths and needs of students across these nine domains?
3. To what extent do educators, parents, and youth consider these nine domains to not represent appropriate areas of transition?
4. To what extent do educators, parents, and youth differ in their need for additional information across transition domains?

The participants of the study, spanning 29 high schools, were 160 high school students with EBD or LD, 13.8-20.7 years old, their parent(s)/guardian(s), and 99 teachers with bachelors or masters degrees and primarily with credentials in special education. The researchers implemented the TPI assessment to assess the strengths and needs of the students. The researchers compiled the data from the TPI assessments and the results were calculated into averages to assess the differences between the teacher, parent, and student responses. The authors organized the data using charts to depict quantitative data of the average scores in response to the nine domains of transition. The major findings were:

1. Teachers found that when using the TPI assessment students had moderate to high strengths across the nine transition domains with the highest ability in leisure domains and the lowest rating in the domain of community participation.
2. When analyzing the perspectives of the teachers, parents, and students the researchers found that their perspectives differed in the areas of strengths and needs of the student. The students reported their strengths to be higher in all nine categories when compared to the results reported by the teacher and the parents.
3. Teachers reported that inappropriate areas of transition planning were the areas of further education and training, communication, and daily living. Parents and students reported on that inappropriate areas of transition planning were in the areas of further education and training, community participation, and daily living.
4. Teachers most frequently reported that they had insufficient information to evaluate students in the areas of daily living, community participation, and leisure activities. Parents and students most frequently reported that they had insufficient information to evaluate students in the areas of further education and training, community participation, and employment.

Teachers rated their students with lower scores in comparison to the student and parent(s)/guardian(s) assessments and hypothesized that there were varied roles teachers play in the lives of their students with varying degrees of time spent with the student. The importance of the role of parent and student involvement was emphasized in the creation of effective transition planning as well. The study emphasizes the importance of collaboration between the teacher, the parent(s)/guardian(s), and the student when creating ITPs to the post-school environment.

Mazzotti, Rowe, Kelly, Test, Fowler, Kohler, and Kortering (2009) examined the role of transition planning and the importance of effective assessment. The problem that the authors identified is presented as a guideline on how to create transitional goals that respond to the needs of a student. The aim of the paper is to inform the reader about the law surrounding transition for students with special needs including the domains of education/training, employment, and independent living skills. The authors presented charts and questionnaires to assist in the transitional goal creating process, and supplied guiding questions based on the student's strengths, preferences, and needs. This article relates to my research in that I will attempt to create an assessment that addresses issues pertaining to strengths and possible areas of need of my students.

Peterson, Burden, Sedaghat, Gothberg, Kohler, and Coyle (2013) examined how to triangulate transition goals, state content standards, and industry standards based on the interests, needs, and strengths of the individual student. The authors provided a 7-step guideline to the goal creation process:

1. Conduct and review transition related assessments
2. Write the postsecondary goals
3. Identify postsecondary goal skills and knowledge
4. Identify student skill and knowledge baseline
5. Conduct a gap analysis
6. Identify state standards
7. Write triangulated annual goal(s)

The author provided examples of mock students to provide the reader with examples of how the student is assessed and how the transitional goals are created. This article relates to my research

in that I will attempt to create an assessment that addresses issues pertaining to strengths and possible areas of need of my students.

Carter, Brock, and Trainer (2014) examined the assessment process for students with severe disabilities and the perspectives of student strengths and needs in relation to the transition process. The three problems that the authors identified were:

1. What are the transition-related strengths and needs, according to teachers, of high school students with severe disabilities?
2. To what extent do transition-related profiles vary across individual students with severe disabilities?
3. To what extent do parents and teachers share similar perspectives of the transition-related strengths and needs of students with severe disabilities?

The participants of the study, spanning across 26 high schools, were 134 students with severe disabilities ranging in age from 14-22 years of age, 90 parent(s)/guardian(s) of the students, and 61 special education teachers. The authors used the TPI to assess the strengths and needs of the students in the domains of employment, further education/training, daily living, leisure activities, community participation, health, self-determination, communication, and interpersonal relationships. This assessment has a scoring system of 1-6, and includes responses of not appropriate and “don’t know”. The assessments were filled out by the participants, gathered by the examiners, and were calculated to find average responses. The data was presented as quantitative data in tables and addressed in detail in the article. The key findings from the article were that:

1. Teachers found that when using the TPI assessment students scored highest on the domains of leisure activities, interpersonal relationships, and communication and rated

lowest in the domain of community participation and further education/training. Many of the domains were commonly reported as “not appropriate”, including the domains of further education/training, community participation, daily living, employment, and health.

2. Based on the responses of the TPI assessment, 107 of the 134 students with severe disabilities had unique strengths and needs profiles.
3. Across the nine domains, parent and teacher perspectives about the students’ strengths and needs aligned between 41.1-55.2%.

This study shows that students with severe disabilities have defined strengths and needs that can be drawn on in the transition process. The discrepancy between the perceived strengths and needs as viewed by the teacher and the parent should lead into more open communication between the teacher and the parent to create more effective transition plans for the student.

Summary

Literary sources stressed the importance of an inclusive transition assessment, but gave little information concerning the specific questions. Several authors referenced the TPI assessment, which addresses nine domains of transition and will provide information pertaining to students’ strengths and areas of need. Though from my own experience, this questionnaire is generalized and many of the questions are not understood by the moderate special needs population. The authors described the importance of multidisciplinary approach, between the teacher/specialist(s), parent(s)/guardian(s), and student to assist in the creation of the assessment based on the strengths and needs of the individual student. In most cases the creation and implementation of the transition assessment was to be designed by the special education teacher or specialist based on informal observation or was simply provided by the school district.

Chapter 3 Method

Research Approach

This is a qualitative study using a pre-created assessment. The assessment is used to gather data pertaining to effective individual transition plans for students with moderate disabilities ages 14+ years of age.

Ethical Standards

This paper adheres to the ethical standards for protection of human subjects of the American Psychological Association (2010). Additionally a research proposal was submitted and reviewed by my advisor and approved.

Sample and Site

The interviewed participants were students ages 14 years of age and above, with moderate disabilities, and their respective parent(s)/guardian(s) at a non-public school site in Petaluma, California. Four students were selected based on their cognitive level and age. These students have varied primary disabilities and communication abilities.

Access and Permissions

I am the credentialed lead teacher of record and have the permission of the Director of Education at the school site to give the interviews. Each parent/guardian who agrees to participate in this study will be provided with an informed consent form concerning the assessment questionnaire. They will be provided with the questionnaire in advance in order to become familiar of the nature and focus of the interview with the researcher.

Each student will be asked to participate in an interview. The focus of the interview questions is designed to inform the researcher of the students currently level of understanding of the nature of a transition plan and post school employment options.

Data Gathering Procedures

Individual interviewed assessments were given to the students and parent(s)/guardian(s). Parent(s)/guardian(s) and students participated in an interview with the researcher. The questions pertained to the individualized transition plan from the school to post-school environment. Parent/guardian and student responses will be analyzed for common themes.

Parent Questionnaire

Self-help / home activities:

Yes / No Can your child wash hands with independence?

If no explain:

Yes / No Can your child brush teeth with independence?

If no explain:

Yes / No Can your child shower with independence?

If no explain:

Yes / No Can your child urinate in the toilet with independence?

If no explain:

Yes / No Can your child make a bowel movement in the toilet with independence?

If no explain:

Yes / No Can your child dress him/herself with independence?

If no explain:

- Yes / No Can your child follow daily routines with independence?
If no explain:
- Yes / No Does your child recognize his/her own regulative state?
If no explain:
- Yes / No Can your child fold clothing with independence?
If no explain:
- Yes / No Can your child put away clothing with independence?
If no explain:
- Yes / No Can your child wash dishes with independence?
If no explain:
- Yes / No Does your child eat with appropriate silverware with independence?
If no explain:
- Yes / No Can your child set the table with independence?
If no explain:
- Yes / No Can your child put away dishes with independence?
If no explain:
- Yes / No Can your child clean his/her room with independence?
If no explain:
- Yes / No Can your child interact on the telephone with independence?
If no explain:
- Yes / No Can your child cook/produce any meals with independence?
If no explain:
If yes, which meals?

Are there any additional self-help skills that you would like your child to focus on?

Community skills:

Yes / No Can your child cross the street with independence?

If no explain:

Yes / No Can your child walk on the sidewalk with independence?

If no explain:

Yes / No Can your child walk with a group with independence?

If no explain:

Yes / No Can your child identify safety signs in the community with independence?

If no explain:

Yes / No Can your child take public transportation with independence?

If no explain:

Are there any community skills that you would like your child to focus on?

What job do you foresee for your child in the future?

Where do you foresee your child living in the future?

Does the student have friends outside of the school environment?

Reinforcing activities:

What are reinforcing activities for your child?

What community activities does your child engage in? Where does your child enjoy going

Problem behaviors:

Yes / No Does your child engage in assaultive behaviors at home?

If "yes", please explain (behaviors/duration):

Yes / No Does your child engage in non-compliant behaviors at home?

If “yes”, please explain (behaviors/duration):

Student Questionnaire

1. What is your name?
2. What is your address?
3. What is your phone number?
4. Who do you currently live with?
5. Do you have any older brothers/sisters?
6. What are your brother(s)/sister(s) names?
7. What do you like to do, during academic times at school?
8. What do you like to do, during leisure times at school?
9. What do you like to do at home?
10. Do you have friends outside of school?
11. Is there anything you'd like to learn about?
12. Do you want a job when you are older?
13. Where do you want to live when you are older?

Data Analysis Approach

The participant observer collected data based on the culture of the non-public school classroom. The interviews were given and notes were taken on the positive and negative aspects of each interview assessment based on the outcomes of the interviews. Accommodations that are made to the interviews were noted as well.

Chapter 4 Findings

Description of Site, Individuals, Data

The school is a nonpublic school for children with special needs such as cerebral palsy, autism, and emotional disability. Students are transported from around the Bay Area to the nonpublic school and receive services as determined by the IEP team. The ratio of students to instructor is on average 2:1. The classroom operates on a weekly schedule that does not deviate very much from week to week. The students engage in daily activities according to the weekly schedule so the students are aware of their activities and are able to work on their ability to become more independent. The school primarily focuses on functional, vocational, behavioral, and communication skills through classroom activities and community outings. The students stay with assigned classrooms during the school day, typically for the school year, and are placed with other students around the same age and functioning level. Most of the students are given therapeutic supports during the school week and receive at least one hour of speech therapy and thirty minutes of occupational therapy. The therapists work together along with the lead teachers and the paraprofessionals to provide the appropriate supports for each of the students.

The four students who participated in this interview study are around the Moderate level of ability and range from 14-16 years of age. The following are brief descriptions of student participants 1-4 and their parent/guardian.

Student participant #1 is a 14-year-old Caucasian male with a primary diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. He has attended this school site for 4 years. His father participated in the second part of the interview.

Student participant #2 is a 14-year-old Hispanic male with a primary diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder and a secondary diagnosis of Intellectual Disability. He has attended this school site for 2 years. His mother participated in the second part of the interview.

Student participant #3 is a 16-year-old Caucasian male with a primary diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder and has a secondary diagnosis of Speech and Language Impairments. He has attended this school site for 1 year. His mother participated in the second part of the interview.

Student participant #4 is a 14-year-old Caucasian male with a primary diagnosis of Intellectual Disability and has a secondary diagnosis of Speech and Language Impairments. He has attended this school site for 3 years. His mother participated in the second part of the interview.

Chapter 5 Discussion /Analysis

Summary of Major Findings

All of the student participants provided varying degrees of knowledge about the transition process. All of the parent(s)/guardian(s) participants provided information pertaining to their child that for the most part coincided with the information previously known by the lead teacher/researcher. They also provided information about their child concerning the domains of daily living and vocation. The survey that was created will help to guide the ITPs of each of the students, but further collaboration with specialist, therapists, and parent(s)/guardian(s) is advised. A more extensive list of questions can better assist the teacher in designing a more comprehensive transition plan. The questionnaires were designed a starting point for the teacher to begin the transition process.

Comparison of Findings to the Literature

When creating an effective transitional assessment to the post-school environment, it was important to create an interview that focused on employment, independent living/functional skills, and communication to help guide future education/training. It is viewed as best practice to include the parent(s)/guardian(s), as well as other therapists/specialists who are involved with the student, in the creation of an IEP as well as the ITP.

Limitations/Gaps in the Research

For 3 of the 4 student participants this was the initial interview in the transition process because many of them recently turned 14 years old. The findings of this study are limited by the scope of the participants involved. Only four students and their parent(s)/guardian(s) were

interviewed, and all four go to the same school. Therefore, the study cannot be offered as a representation of the moderate special needs population. Further study concerning transition assessment is recommended to include a larger population and wider range of settings.

Implications for Future Research

This study provides a basic interview for the student with moderate special needs and for their parent(s)/guardian(s). Further collaboration with specialist and therapists should occur to create a more comprehensive list of questions for the student and the parent(s)/guardian(s). Also, a greater formal training about the ITP process is recommended to help teachers to guide their students' transition to the post-school environment. Further research about the transition assessments to the post-school environment is warranted.

Overall Significance of the Study

At the age of 16, ITPs are mandated by law. Assessments pertaining to the transition process are extremely helpful to teachers in the creation of appropriate transition goals. Collaboration between the teacher, therapist(s)/specialist(s), parent(s)/guardian(s) and the student is essential to the creation of an effective and inclusive transition plan.

About the Author

Kevin Skidmore started his career working in special education as an Applied Behavior Analysis tutor in 2000 while attending The Ohio State University. He worked along with the families and other tutors as part of teams that worked in the homes of several families. Kevin went on to receive his Bachelor of Art Education in 2001 and his teaching credential in art education in 2002. After working for one year as an art teacher he moved to California where he worked for next three years as a special education paraprofessional in three locations and with a variety of students with special needs. In 2006 he worked towards his level 1 special education credential at San Diego State University and he worked for two years as an intern instructor at a non-public school. For the past six years Kevin has worked as a lead special education teacher in non-public school environments with children with special needs. In 2012, Kevin attended a workshop to become a Behavior Intervention Case Manager. He completed his Level 2 special education teaching credential and Autism credential in 2013 and will complete his Master of Science in Education in 2014 from the Dominican University of California.

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