# Transition Planning: Keeping Cultural Competence in Mind

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## Abstract

Transition planning must consider all aspects of the student's postsecondary goals. Although the makeup of personnel in educational settings are predominantly White, the number of students from culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (CELD) backgrounds continues to grow. This article promotes personal reflection on cultural competence, suggests how to incorporate cultural responsiveness into transition planning, and recommends how special educators can develop strong, compliant transition goals for students from CELD backgrounds.

## Keywords

culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse, CELD, transition planning, transition goals

*Ms. Bloom co-taught English for 11th and 12th graders in Arizona. She was distraught and reached out to Mr. Lopez, a colleague, in the teachers' lunchroom. Ms. Bloom shared that she helped Alejandra complete applications to colleges for months, and she assisted Alejandra in writing personal essays for scholarships. Alejandra is a bright student, and as her case manager, Ms. Bloom knew Alejandra wanted to obtain a college degree in equine science. From previous conversations, Ms. Bloom understood Alejandra's family was not able to financially support Alejandra through college. Additionally, Alejandra was worried having a job during college would negatively affect her ability to immerse herself in her coursework. For these reasons, Ms. Bloom enthusiastically helped Alejandra apply for scholarships and grants. This morning, Alejandra brought in an acceptance letter to one of her top college choices with promissory scholarship funds. Alejandra shared she would be turning down the opportunity because her family is counting on her ability to financially contribute to the family funds; therefore, they needed her to stay home and work for the family. Ms. Bloom was concerned for Alejandra and wanted more for her. She wondered why a family would deny such an amazing opportunity for their daughter—an opportunity that could substantially change the trajectory of her life. Ms. Bloom shared with Mr. Lopez her plans to work with Alejandra to reinforce her self—determination and advocacy skills. Ms. Bloom told her colleague, "Why not? Alejandra is 18, and she can do this—with or without her family!" Mr. Lopez explained to Ms. Bloom she may not fully understand and respect Alejandra's cultural, personal, and family expectations. Furthermore, he stated that she should consider Alejandra's family's role in the transition process and their influence in her decisions.*

Addressing the needs of students with disabilities can be arduous for some educators, but meeting the needs of students with disabilities who are also from diverse backgrounds can be even more complex. Although a disproportionate number of students with disabilities are from culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (CELD) backgrounds (DeMatthews et al., 2014; Hosp, 2008; U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2018), the percent breakdown of these students remains consistent, despite the growing number of students (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Hosp & Reschly, 2002; National Research Council et al., 2002). During the 2013–2014 school year, 73% of students with disabilities served under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004) were from diverse backgrounds (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Although 13% of White students are identified with a disability, Musu-Gillette et al. (2017) cited identification of students from diverse backgrounds disproportionally; American Indian/Alaskan Native students at 17%, African American students at 15%, Hispanic students at 12%, and Pacific Islander students at 11%. Furthermore, 12% of students served by IDEA identified as being two or more races. The

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disproportionality continues in 2018, as shown through the 40th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the IDEA (2004) risk ratios. As reported, American Indian or Alaska Natives are 1.7 times more likely than other groups to receive special education services (USDOE, 2018). Furthermore, Black/African American (1.4 times) and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (1.5 times) are also more likely to receive special education services (USDOE, 2018). In addition, students from diverse backgrounds experienced lower postsecondary outcomes when compared to White students (Becton et al., 2016; Madaus & Shaw, 2006).

With increases in school enrollment, it is no surprise school populations continue to become more diverse. The landscape of diversity is vast and distinct across racial, ethnic, and cultural lines—so much so that within educational literature, consensus for an overall definition of diversity is not clear. The National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET; 2005) defined *culturally and linguistically diverse* (CLD) as "people of color who are not White, but it can include people who are White yet outside the mainstream of American culture" (p. 1). Rossetti et al. (2017) highlighted the linguistic nature of CLD as those "whose primary language is not English or who are not European American" (p. 329). Bal (2018) focused on "racially minoritized communities" (p. 144). Finally, Achola (2019) defined *culturally and ethnically diverse* (CED) students as individuals "from nonmainstream cultural and ethnic backgrounds" (p. 1). We propose an inclusive definition of diversity across racial, ethnic, and cultural modalities: *culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse* (CELD). This allows for the incorporation of all the above definitions regarding diverse backgrounds.

To further complicate matters, educators are required to teach all students in their classrooms, but many educators continue to face challenges on adequately addressing the needs of students from diverse backgrounds (NCSET, 2005). The cultural background of educators stands in stark contrast to the extensive diversity of student populations—including those served under IDEA (2004) and those not receiving special education or related services. As reported by the USDOE (2016), 82% of public school educators are White. This difference illuminates the cultural disconnect between educational professionals (teachers) and the population of students served from CELD backgrounds.

## Reflecting on Cultural Competence

Before practicing cultural responsiveness, it is important for educators to reflect on their own cultural values and beliefs (Baumgartner et al., 2015). This is a foundation to implementing culturally responsive transition planning. It is expected that educators may have different cultural values and beliefs than their students. However, in the identification of differences, educators can fully address the needs of the students and families served. When planning for annual Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, and especially for transition planning, educators must consider and respect students' cultural values and beliefs. Table 1 provides a list of questions to facilitate direct reflection on personal beliefs and values, as well as how students and families from CELD backgrounds may differ from oneself. When planning educational meetings with students and families, who may hold different expectations for postsecondary goals outside traditional outcomes, educators must consider the hopes and dreams of all stakeholders—especially students with disabilities (Trainor, 2005).

## Culturally Responsive Transition Practices and Planning

As described by Halley and Trujillo (2013), federal education mandates and IDEA (2004) transition elements are grounded in White cultural beliefs. An example of this is the notion that Indicator 14 of the State Performance Plan (i.e., documentation of postschool outcomes of students with disabilities) is based on students gaining either competitive, integrated employment, entering postsecondary education, or both—all outcomes highly correlated with White cultural norms. This leaves out options such as staying home to care for family responsibilities, which is often highly correlated with diverse cultures (i.e., Native American, Hispanic; Konstantopoulos, 2009). In addition, IDEA (2004) detailed the need for transition planning within the lens of independent living. However, many diverse cultural values focus around family units, not personal independence, regardless of ability or disability (Chiu & Chow, 2015). When planning for transition, educators are required to consider students' needs, interests, and preferences (IDEA, 2004). To practice cultural responsiveness in transition planning, one must be introspective about personal beliefs and assumptions, while also being intentional in considering other cultures (Baumgartner et al., 2015). Table 2 provides suggestions for promoting personal understanding and developing culturally responsive transition practices. These practices can be infused into everyday instruction, professional development activities, personal growth opportunities, and within communication with students and families from a CELD background.

*Ms. Bloom reached out to Mr. Lopez and asked him to help her better understand Alejandra's culture. Through a respectful, interactive conversation, she realized how little she knew about Alejandra's cultural and family expectations. Ms. Bloom also identified her own culture, her individualistic beliefs, and how this may be influencing the transition planning process. Ms. Bloom completed multiple cultural surveys and questionnaires to help her articulate her own beliefs and how these may not be in alignment to*

**Table 1.** Questions to Reflect on Cultural Competence.

| Area to consider | Questions to ask |
| --- | --- |
| Personal culture | • What are characteristics of my personal culture?<br>• What is the history of my family and in what ways has my family experienced diversity or interacted with others from diverse backgrounds?<br>• How does my culture influence my expectations of students?<br>• How does my culture impact how I view students?<br>• Is my personal background more individualistic (individual goals and achievements) or collectivist (family/community/group goals and achievement) in nature?<br>• Is my personal background focused more on young people becoming independent and self-sufficient or on becoming interdependent and contributing to a group cohesion?<br>Free resources:<br>www.projectimplicit.net<br>www.lookdifferent.org<br>Diversity Self-Assessment at http://www.ride.ri.gov/<br>How Do You Relate to Various Groups of People in Society at http://www.pacwrc.pitt.edu/ |
| Communicating with students and families | • Is assertiveness viewed as a personality strength or seen as impolite?<br>• How is personal touch viewed (e.g., handshakes or pats on the back)?<br>• Is direct eye contact expected? Is it socially acceptable?<br>• Is there a patriarchy or matriarchy inherent to the family?<br>• Is there an expectation of adherence to time schedules?<br>• What words or phrases might be misinterpreted?<br>• How are misunderstandings or conflict addressed?<br>• Is there a deference to school/teacher as an authority figure?<br>• Do I seek input from my students and their families regarding cultural understanding?<br>Free resource:<br>https://www.cntraveler.com/story/the-complete-guide-to-global-etiquette |
| Transition planning | • Am I imposing my personal beliefs on my students when discussing postsecondary expectations?<br>• Am I creating transition plans prior to gathering direct input from my students and families?<br>• Are student needs and desires driving the transition planning process?<br>• Do I have access to resources/personnel to support my students' goals (e.g., mentors within the community)?<br>• Do I respect and promote my students' goals even if they do not align with my personal beliefs? |

*student and family beliefs. Furthermore, she reflected that her previous transition planning attempt did not include any direct input from Alejandra's family and acknowledged family is a critical component to transition success. Ms. Bloom requested a meeting with the family to revisit the transition planning process with careful consideration of the whole family's needs and wants. During the meeting, Ms. Bloom avoided metaphors and jargon. She promoted a collaborative meeting by seeking active input from Alejandra, Alejandra's parents, and Alejandra's uncle by asking questions and listening.*

## Culturally Responsive Postsecondary Goals

Postsecondary goals are written to provide schools and educators a future direction and indicator of success for a student. Simply stated, these goals will establish where a student will work, be educated or trained, and live after completing high school (Mazzotti et al., 2009). These goals

are established through two main avenues—interviewing students and their families and utilizing transition assessments. As with other IEP goals, these goals must also be measurable and observable (Mazzotti et al., 2009). Requirements of having measurable postsecondary goals are the same for all students, regardless of CELD status. For example, a measurable postsecondary goal may include "Upon graduation, student will work at a pet supply store as a cashier." After completion of high school, anyone could clearly indicate if this goal had been met or not. Nonexamples would include "Upon graduation, student will hopefully work at a store," "Upon graduation, student will become job ready," and "Upon graduation, student will do something they like." The use of the word *hopefully* in a goal is unnecessary and negates the transition planning process, while the words *job* and *like* do not provide enough information and specificity for types of jobs. Through coursework, coordinated sets of activities, transition experiences, and transition activities, educators should be confident students are prepared to transition. All three nonexamples are vague,

**Table 2.** Suggestions of Culturally Responsive Practices.

Culturally responsive practices

- Be a role model for students and other colleagues by demonstrating the importance of diversity, tackling instances of insensitivities, and embracing considerations for diverse cultures.
- Reach out to potential mentors, community role models, and other resources from CELD groups or business owners (e.g., guest speakers, job shadowing, internships, paid work experiences, mock interviewing).
- Seek out leadership opportunities for students within cultural organizations, immigrant-serving groups, and chambers of commerce.
- Promote cultural reciprocity with students in employment settings (e.g., provide scenarios to address how to deal with differences and negativity surrounding cultural biases).
- Learn about and show consideration for cultural and religious events, holidays, and taboos.
- Promote an environment of trust in your classroom, invite family members into your classroom, and seek active input.
- Avoid metaphors or jargon in communications.
- Be flexible with parent participation in IEP meetings (e.g., phone or video conference).
- Provide child care as needed during meetings to help facilitate family engagement.
- Initiate opportunities to immerse oneself, other staff, and students in diverse cultural settings/activities outside of the school environment.
- Promote inclusion of students and their cultures in school activities.
- Provide information regarding special education laws in plain and native language.
- During meetings, talk *with* students and families—not *at* them.
- Provide knowledge about technology, including assistive technology, in employment or postsecondary settings.

CELD = Culturally, Ethnically, and Linguistically Diverse; IEP = Individualized Education Program.

difficult to measure, and do not meet the IDEA (2004) requirements. IEP teams must clearly understand the vision for the student's future, so they can appropriately prepare the student for this environment.

*As the team met, Ms. Bloom reminded herself to respect the family's expectations for their daughter. She brainstormed aloud ways to merge Alejandra's personal desires with the family's expectations. Ms. Bloom shared results from transition assessments and anecdotal observations and listened to the family's experiences and observations of Alejandra in various environments. Ms. Bloom revised Alejandra's postsecondary goals to not only ensure all stakeholders in the IEP felt valued but to make a plan they all supported, including Alejandra. Using a more collaborative approach, the resulting IEP addressed the concerns, needs, and wants of Alejandra and her family.*

Table 3 includes examples of how to transform traditional postsecondary goals created for Alejandra to culturally responsive postsecondary goals in the areas of education, employment, and independent living.

## Culturally Responsive Annual Transition Goals

In addition to creating culturally responsive postsecondary goals, teachers must also plan for culturally responsive annual transition goals and coordinated activities. Annual goals are identified based on areas of student need, as related to what skills and knowledge a student requires to be successful in postsecondary environments. A coordinated set of activities refers to strategies, events, milestones, and activities to assist the student in a successful transition. See

Table 4 for examples of culturally responsive annual goals and coordinated set of activities.

*Ms. Bloom and Alejandra are really excited about the creation of her new postsecondary goals. Alejandra shared ideas she has for her annual transition goals with the members of the meeting. With feedback from all stakeholders, the team created annual goals and accompanying coordinated activities that were truly reflective of Alejandra's culture.*

## Looking Forward

Ms. Bloom is a great example of an educator who originally viewed her role as an agent of change by attempting to assist Alejandra in leaving her family unit. However, through Ms. Bloom's own education of cultural differences and deep respect for her students and their families, she became a guide who respectfully offered transition options in which the whole family, including Alejandra, felt supported. Fundamental to transition planning, educators must remain focused on the individual student, considering all aspects of the person—from their cultural backgrounds to their academic achievements, personal aspirations, and future goals. Critical to best practices in transition planning, Lamorey (2002) suggested,

> Practitioners may want to see their roles not as service brokers or agents of change, but as interpreters or translators of Westernized approaches and resources available within the special education community, and as guides who respectfully offer services that families may or may not choose to embrace. (p. 71)

At the heart of the IEP remains the individual student. Incorporating the unique aspects of a student's background

**Table 3.** Transforming Typical, Traditional Postsecondary Goals Into Culturally Responsive Ones.

| Postsecondary area | Postsecondary goal |
| --- | --- |
| Education | Old goal: After graduation from high school, Alejandra will attend college of choice to obtain a degree in equine science. |
| | New goal: After graduation from high school, Alejandra will participate in training at her cousin's ranch to care for horses and equipment used at livestock auctions. In addition, Alejandra will take online courses to obtain a certificate in equine welfare. |
| Employment | Old goal: After graduation from high school, Alejandra will obtain a required, paid internship in the equine field as college course requirements dictate. Alejandra will be competitively employed in equine management field after college graduation. |
| | New goal: After graduation from high school, Alejandra will be competitively employed at her family ranch to assist with her family's business. |
| Independent living | Old goal: After graduation from high school, Alejandra will live with roommates on or near the college campus and will share living expenses. |
| | New goal: After graduation from high school, Alejandra will contribute towards bills based on a family agreement to share portions of bills. |
| | Note: Example goals were created based on NTACT training for the State of Alaska (Personal communication from J. Gothberg, October 25, 2018). |

**Table 4.** Culturally Responsive Annual Transition Goals and Coordinated Activities.

| Postsecondary area | Annual transition goal and coordinated activity |
| --- | --- |
| Education | 1. Within one academic year, Alejandra will identify and verbally state three criteria required for acceptance to online equine welfare certificate program with case manager with 100% accuracy. |
| | 2. Within one academic year, Alejandra will complete the application for the equine welfare certificate program with 100% accuracy. |
| | Coordinated activity 1: With support of her family, Alejandra will create a weekly calendar with days/times she can attend training through an online certificate program (while ensuring she does not conflict with family responsibilities). |
| | Coordinated activity 2: Alejandra will take a driver's education course to assist with safe operation of equipment on family ranch while also obtaining her license. |
| Employment | 1. Within one academic year, using O*Net, Alejandra will identify two jobs related to equine management and describe two ways the jobs are similar and two ways the jobs are different from the family business, with 100% accuracy, in writing to case manager. |
| | 2. Within one academic year, Alejandra will identify and verbally communicate to her case manager three criteria required for more responsibility or other jobs within the family business with 100% accuracy. |
| | Coordinated activity 1: Alejandra will meet with her local Workforce Employment Specialist to navigate O*Net and investigate equine management and related jobs. |
| | Coordinated activity 2: Alejandra and her family will learn about the voucher for Ticket to Work and determine if her family business can be a provider. |
| Independent living | 1. Within one academic year, Alejandra will create a monthly calendar showing dates/times for all work auction events with 100% accuracy. |
| | 2. Within one academic year, Alejandra will identify how paycheck funds will be accessed by her family (e.g., deposit check into family account, give cashed check funds to family, and specific bills be placed in Alejandra's name) and communicate with case manager and family with 100% accuracy. |
| | Coordinated activity 1: Alejandra and family will identify at least 10 living expenses the family has and decide if and how Alejandra will be responsible for set number of bills (e.g., student will pay water and gas bill) or just contribute a percentage toward all bills. |
| | Coordinated activity 2: Alejandra will attend the quarterly financial literacy workshops offered through Vocational Rehabilitation. |

during the planning process is a best practice in special education (Trainor et al., 2008). Finally, just because certain ideals are associated with particular CELD populations does not mean generalization to all members of a group should occur (Halley & Trujillo, 2013).

The strategies presented are intended to help guide educators through a self-reflective process to ensure a student's culture is considered throughout transition planning. By providing examples of how to incorporate a student's culture within the transition planning process, especially

within goal writing, we highlighted how this process is unique for each student and family. It is important for team members to value the viewpoints of all stakeholders and to understand how culture and family may impact the typical IEP meeting, transition planning process, and development of postsecondary goals.

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