

Possible Selves: The Benefits of Interprofessional, Interagency Collaboration

Pamela A. Viggiani, Ellen Contopidis, Dawn Vogler Elias, Jennie I. Schaff, and Nuala S. Boyle

Abstract: This article presents a discussion of interprofessional and interagency collaborative teams that formed to create and implement a post-secondary campus based transition program (CBTP) for individuals with developmental disabilities. The article examines the collaboration and highlights the benefits for stakeholders. It explores the non-summativity and the synergy that resulted from participation in a collaborative team. The article suggests that the collaborative model and the CBTP program allow for the imagining of possible selves for all collaborative partners and program participants.

Keywords: interprofessional collaboration; interagency collaboration; possible selves

“The criteria for a happy life are to set goals, have control, contribute to something bigger than yourself, and to have hopes and dreams.” (Weir, 2004)

The Beginnings

This is a story of collaboration both interprofessional and interagency. The interprofessional partnerships formed are characteristic of collaborations that are strength based. The value added by the work reflects the non-summativity of collaborative efforts such that the gains for the various players are larger than any could have achieved on their own as the learning for all is over and above what the original and planned goals of the actual project were.

What started as an interprofessional conversation on a college campus evolved into an interagency discussion and program planning that was actualized into a post-secondary campus based transition program (CBTP). The mission of the program is, “to provide a learning community that allows for the transformation of individuals with developmental disabilities from students to self-determined contributors in our society” (CBTP*, 2011). The program evolution is a result of ground up interprofessional work. The gathering of the interprofessional group was initiated by a faculty member from the School of Education. She had included individuals with developmental disabilities in her college classes in the past and wanted to explore the possibility of a college wide inclusion program.

Strategically, she gathered a group that provided the power of expertise, a position of support on campus and that had the potential to envision the unseen. The group included a faculty from each of the following professional programs at the college: social work, communication sciences and disorders, education technology, inclusive education, and it also included the director of the college’s Office of Civic Engagement. The Office of Civic Engagement positioned the possible CBTP program in a college wide office protecting it from the siloed ownership of one department on campus. The four faculty members brought prior experience of working with individuals with disabilities, each with an expertise from a different professional perspective. Together this group began to generate possible designs of what a campus based transition program might look like. The collective professional experiences provided authentic designs all pointing to the need to collaborate beyond the college campus. Thus, the group identified and invited partners from local school districts and local social service agencies serving adults. These agencies were brought to a brainstorming table.

The college faculty members and the invited community members began a conversation related to a potential collaboration. Through the conversation, three agencies emerged into a partnership to design and develop the CBTP. The identification of the three agencies reflects the immediate needs of each organization and a philosophical alignment as to what is meant by inclusion. These three agencies identified needs, within the individual communities they served, that

could be addressed with the establishment of the CBTP. The challenge of addressing these needs is well noted in the CBTP vision statement that includes influencing the collaborative communities by providing...

opportunities for individuals with (developmental) disabilities to continue in their education and development with peers on a college campus, raising the level of expectation for individuals with (developmental) disabilities, broadening the construct of diversity to include ability, and preparing each participant to obtain meaningful employment (CBTP, 2011, para. 1-4).

At the college, the broadening of the diversity of the student population was line with one of the college's goals to increase diversity. For the partnering school district, the collaboration reflected its commitment to inclusive education. The CBTP program would allow district students in the 18-21 year age range to be in a less restrictive and more appropriate environment with same age peers for their final years of the education they receive under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). For the community agency serving adults with developmental disabilities, the CBTP program afforded their clients the opportunity to work and develop vocational skills in a post-secondary educational environment with same age peers.

Possible Selves

The interprofessional interagency collaborative team provided an opportunity to explore possible selves in many realms. The term possible selves are what Markus and Nurius (1986) refer to as the link between one's self concept and the future. Our experiences can either limit or expand our possible selves. The experience of many individuals with developmental disabilities has been one that has narrowed their broad imaging of possible selves or possible futures. Often after individuals with disabilities complete or age out of high school, they are presented with limited options. It is not typical that these individuals are able to experience college and oftentimes their job prospects are limited or nonexistent. The delimited number of options presented to individuals with disabilities may result in a predictable contraction of imagined future

selves and prevent many from reaching for their dreams and realizing their fullest potential as both individuals and contributing members to the community. The creation of a CBTP facilitates an exponential expansion of the possible selves of individuals with developmental disabilities.

The cooperative approach also led to an unexpected expansion of the possible selves of faculty, college students, and agencies participating in the collaboration. Faculty accustomed to residing within their discipline can fail to fully understand multiple perspectives and approaches to work. Participation in collaborations expands the faculty's vision of possible selves in previously unanticipated ways that resulted in richer classroom content and delivery as well as further collaborative work. College students too benefit and have their possible selves expanded as they experience interaction with the CBTP students. College students presented solely with similar peers may have difficulty in fully understanding diversity. However when diverse students with developmental disabilities become peers, college students understanding of themselves, diversity and capability are expanded. Like individual faculty and college students, agencies working in the community may lack the capacity to see anything beyond what they currently do, however in collaboration the agencies' possible selves are enhanced.

Benefits of Interprofessional and Interagency Collaboration

The program that exists today reflects months of interprofessional planning at the college campus and a year of interagency planning before implementation. The program has been in place for three years now and the benefits truly are above the goals of the actual project. The gains of working as interprofessional and interagency teams are myriad. Teasing out the benefits becomes difficult in that rather than a cause and effect relationship the benefits are a ripple effect phenomenon. In an attempt to organize our story we will reflect on the benefits to stakeholders first. This would include the CBTP students themselves, the college students, and the faculty and campus personnel. Further, the discussion will include the benefits to the interprofessional and interagency teams as well as the synergy created by the collaborations.

Benefits for CBTP Students

The expertise gathered from each professional perspective and from each community agency partner led to the creation of a holistic, college-base transition program. The CBTP is one that views each student as a whole and looks to further the academic, vocational, social, emotional, and physical goals for CBTP students while tending simultaneously to the desire of students to participate as included, valued parts of the larger college campus. Thus, the CBTP provides opportunities to attend and fully participate in college classes, participate in vocational internships both on and off campus, participate in health and wellness classes, work one-on-one with college student mentors, attend campus wide academic, artistic, and social events and have access to the same resources as other college students. Students' full inclusion on campus is realized through the issuance of college identification tags to all CBTP students. The college identification tag is a tangible manifestation of membership and inclusion. Access to the campus library, recreation facilities, the bookstore and dining halls combined with the freedom to independently navigate the college campus provides CBTP students the opportunity to join in many aspects of college life.

As we look back on both anecdotal information and the actual voice of CBTP students, we have come to realize that this interprofessional program is more powerful than anticipated as these young adults develop in the construct of possible selves. For example, during the first year orientation to the college campus, the faculty liaison welcomed the first cohort of CBTP students to campus asking "What will it mean to come to a college campus?" The expected answers of more independence and free time were heard. What was most telling though was the comment from one student who said, "We will be official adults." The physical positioning of these students on a college campus had a significant influence on their social positioning. This one comment caused all of us to realize that the program benefits were more encompassing than anyone had originally articulated.

As the CBTP students acclimated to campus, the college community began to recognize the "expertise" they brought. The college has many

professional service programs (e.g., social work, physical therapy, education, communication sciences and disorders) that educate and train future professionals to work with various populations including those with developmental disabilities. As a result of the interprofessional work that occurred an awareness of the CBTP program was widespread. Thus, CBTP students have been invited into professional service program undergraduate and graduate classes. For instance, one CBTP student who entered the program using a DynaVox (an augmentative communication device) was reluctant to use it as it was clumsy and no one else on campus used one. With support from campus faculty and CBTP program personnel, he transitioned to an iPad to support his communication. Recently, he was invited to speak in a class for college students in the communication sciences and disorders program.

He discussed his experiences regarding the use of Augmentative Communication Devices (ACDs). In his sharing, he conveyed his intense dislike for the DynaVox stating the iPad was his preferred choice of assistive technology. The course professor, an expert in assistive technology, easily lectures on ACDs. However, this college student from the CBTP program passionately and effectively communicated the issues of frustration with ACDs from a user's perspective. His presentation drew attention to the need for professionals to respect each individual's desire for self-determination. This CBTP student was empowered and as a result of being asked to guest speak in a class. The message he spoke was powerful as he presented to the class as a college peer rather than guest speaker from outside the campus setting.

This example of personal perspective expertise is not limited to one story, the stories are abundant across campus. Another particularly powerful story comes from an assignment in the CBTP core curriculum. As part of coursework, the special education teacher for the CBTP required her students to research and prepare a PowerPoint on their disability. This activity empowered the students as they were able to both know and speak to their disability rather than have a professional or parent tell them or not tell them about their disability. The CBTP students were further empowered as they shared their expertise in a graduate course on diverse learners. The ability to

speak to other students and to be the expert was a powerful experience for CBTP students who are often not given a voice. Further, the authenticity of CBTP student presentations and personal perspectives influenced the professional dispositions and perspectives of college students in professional programs that no textbook or lecture could ever provide. After the first CBTP student was invited and presented in the graduate class, he reported back to the others about his experience. This planted a seed of possibility to the other CBTP students, who could now picture themselves as guest speakers in college classes. This resulted in CBTP students approaching the diverse learner's faculty member and offering their expertise to come and speak in her class. This example is a powerful representation of how the collaborative program has provided spaces for all participants to expand their thinking regarding possible selves.

Benefits to College Students

The college students who have had the opportunity to experience CBTP students in their courses have felt enriched by their experiences. The incorporation of a truly diverse group of learners has pushed the college students to understand themselves, diversity, and disability in a powerful and immediate fashion. When asked to provide feedback and comment on the experience of having a CBTP student in their classes the college students have almost universally expressed profound appreciation for the presence of the CBTP students while further expressing a different and more complete understanding of disability and ability. Appreciation for the program was reflected in students' statements. For example, one student said the following, "In high school there were numerous students with developmental disabilities but they were separate from me. I look forward to being able to more fully interact with students who are different than me." This statement illustrates both the student's disappointment at not having been able to interact with students with disabilities in high school and her excitement for having students with disabilities learning side-by-side with her. (Viggiani, 2012). Other students expressed similar thoughts and feelings regarding the program. This was articulated by statements like, "I think the idea of the program at the college is a wonderful idea and I would love for it to become bigger – expanding our student body," and, "make sure the

program is open to all student with disabilities." Students expressed their burgeoning understanding of disability in statements such as, "interacting with the CBTP students has taught me a lot about myself."

The CBTP peer mentoring program provides further opportunity for college students to be involved with the CBTP. The peer mentoring program involves students who volunteer or apply through work study opportunities to engage with the CBTP students in one of five roles: class ambassador, social buddy, study partner, classroom aide or vocational coach. Mentoring relationships generally focus on the growth and accomplishment of an individual, assisting in professional and career development, role modeling, psychological support, and the development of personal and reciprocal relationships (as cited in Crisp & Cruz, 2009). This conceptualization of mentoring guided the design of the peer mentorship component of the CBTP. The reciprocity in the mentoring relationship is evident in conversation with mentors who have indicated to faculty involved in the CBTP that their work and relationships with CBTP students have enriched them both personally and professionally. One college mentor exclaimed that it represented "one of the defining experiences in her college career."

Mentor comments about the benefits of the mentorship were supported by statements taken from a recent survey. The survey asked students: How has being a CBTP mentor influenced you? Some of the most salient responses included: "It amazes me how motivated, determined and ambitious they (the CBTP students) are" and "I take a CBTP student to work and seeing him take care of his responsibilities, working as a team with co-workers is fulfilling," and "CBTP has taught me patience, sincerity and acceptance of all people." These reflections are indicative of college students benefitting from the inclusion of CBTP students in campus life. The students' comments illustrate how they are enriched in a multitude of ways through the CBTP program.

In general, mentors felt that they developed close relationships through their mentoring connection as indicated by quotes like, "I have really bonded with Paul** this semester, and seeing him smiling and cheering at the first hockey game was one of my

favorite moments of the semester.” Moreover, the mentors felt grateful and enriched by their experiences. One mentor says the CBTP, “has been a great experience for me and a huge part of my college experience.” Her statement does a wonderful job at expressing the overarching nature of the benefits college students can experience with the inclusion of CBTP students on their campus.

Benefits to Faculty and Professionals

As with any interprofessional experience faculty and professionals were enriched by the disciplines that surrounded them. The interprofessional collaboration that began in the planning and implementation of the CBTP has mushroomed into ongoing collaboration. An example of this collaboration is illustrated in the co-writing of this article. It also includes many other collaborative endeavors from presentations to academic articles to collaborating with other colleges and programs. For instance, a presentation was given at a professional conference by physical therapy faculty, and three graduate students. The presentation discussed the positive effects of a physical therapist (PT) designed wellness program using modified yoga-based exercises on selected aspects of physical, emotional, and psychosocial performance in young adults with developmental disabilities. Those young adults were CBTP students taking a wellness class. Another example includes a social work professor and education professor collaborating with colleagues working within a Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (LEND) program to conduct a case study on CBTP student growth as it relates to self-advocacy, independence, and the ability to gain competitive employment. This work was presented at the annual conference focusing on disability and is being submitted to a journal.

Aside from the continued academic and professional collaborative endeavors, the collaboration allowed faculty across the campus to be exposed to different ways of thinking and different ways of seeing the CBTP students and others with disabilities. One faculty member wrote,

Seeing Adam** in my biology class this past Tuesday made me happy and grateful. He continues to be astute and friendly, and he struck me as having a pleasant and

affable poise for the more formal classroom environment. Thinking about my first impression of Adam when CBTP began at the college, and my impression of Adam this week in class, I have to conclude that Adam and CBTP are an excellent example of a win-win situation, where each party has brought the best out of the other. I look forward to this semester with Adam and I congratulate you and the CBTP staff for your vision, tenacity and hard work. And I thank you for asking if I would take a CBTP student into my class - in Adam’s case, I think this will be an honor.

This faculty member had not previously had interactions with individuals with developmental disabilities that allowed him to develop relationships revealing the abilities of individuals labeled as disabled. His powerful comments are mirrored by faculty across campus who welcomed CBTP students into their courses. Faculty members in all departments, from math to physical therapy, discuss the enrichment they experienced as a result of the presence of CBTP students.

As mentioned, it is difficult to isolate the benefits of the CBTP to one group of stakeholders. This next account related to student voice is a perfect example of the ripple effect of influence that the CBTP has had on the campus community.

The national day for *Stopping the “R” Word* takes place during the spring semester at the college. The CBTP students took a leadership role on campus promoting the awareness of the day and the cause of stopping the use of the “R” word. Posters were made and hung around campus, T-shirts were worn and a table was stationed in the cafeteria where all community members could sign a pledge. The faculty liaison was thrilled to see the CBTP students take on this leadership role, though she did have a moment of hesitation when seeing a sign that said “Flip the Bird, at the Word.” Thinking it through, she recognized that this hesitation was no different than when seeing other campus posters that abutted up against her language sensitivity lines. Taking in the generational differences on language use and the campus context, her hesitations were put to rest. That evening she received an e-mail from another

faculty member who spoke of the inappropriateness of the poster. This reopened the internal consideration of her hesitation and brought her to a deeper level of understanding. If a goal of the program is to strengthen the self-advocacy of the CBTP students and their ability to find voice, then censorship of student voices is both counterproductive and unnecessary. It did however provide the opportunity to encourage other faculty members to view CBTP in a college context a bit differently and more expansively.

The faculty liaison had a subsequent discussion with the CBTP classroom teacher to make her aware of some faculty member's concerns regarding the *Stopping the "R" Word* poster. The CBTP teacher brought this up to the CBTP class to consider the reactions of the public to the language of posters. One CBTP student responded saying "Well I would be less offended if someone flipped me the bird, than if s/he called me the 'R' word." The message of how derogatory language impacts sense of self and image came across clearly. No different than when the word *gay* is used with condescending implications. The perspectives of the CBTP students were very passionate and real. The conversation of censorship of individuals with disabilities spread across campus after the story was discussed in a CBTP mentor meeting. The campus community moved beyond the level of "be considerate to others with the language we use to describe them," an important lesson in and of itself, to "is it socially just to censor one group based on their level of ability?" Needless to say the faculty liaison reflected on the process as a win-win for all. A college campus should be a safe place for difficult conversations; all people should have voice in these conversations and the conversations should provoke new thought and awareness for all who engage.

The benefit of the CBTP program and the interprofessional collaborative effort that created and sustains the program is captured in the above story. The authenticity of the campus conversation reflected the actual existence of the CBTP within the campus community. The story illustrates the ripple effect the collaboration and the program have had on the campus. It also exemplifies the synergistic and unexpected effects the program had on the campus community.

Benefits to Collaborative Agencies

Parity, as discussed by Friend and Cook (2010), is more than equal partnership among collaborating partners. It is a coming together with a mutual respect for one another's expertise. Such respect was foundational in the initial relationship building and work among the three agencies that designed the CBTP. Over the past four years, the parity has matured into a deep appreciation for the purpose and work of each agency as a stand-alone in the community. Working together we recognized the different constraints each agency had (i.e., calendars, school, vs. college vs. full year adult agency) and collectively problem solved to find a common ground for operation. Developing the Memorandum of Understanding for the CBTP program was a process that not only provided the partners with insight to one another's communities but enabled us to embrace and transform operational procedures from three different agencies into a procedure for the operation of the CBTP that was in compliance for all the partners. Being involved with one another's agencies on a day to day basis has kept all three partners current on the ever changing regulations that guide school systems and community agencies providing services to individuals with disabilities. Such information allowed the school district to prepare the CBTP students turning 21 to seamlessly transition from receiving school services to adult services. At the same time, the information allowed the adult agency the opportunity to both prepare and greet the CBTP students as they began receiving adult services. This seamless transition benefits all parties involved: CBTP students, the school district, and the adult agency. This example of seamlessness in transition can serve as a model for school systems and adult agencies serving individuals with developmental disabilities.

The operational procedures also kept the college up to date, preparing college students enrolled in professional programs to go out and work in a variety of fields and settings that support individuals with developmental disabilities. Most importantly there was a new level of sensitivity for the process that individuals with disabilities and their families must navigate when they transition from school programs to adult agencies. Schools and adult agencies are two support systems that have different

jargon, levels of support, eligibility requirements and expectations for participation along with other differences that are often overwhelming during a time of transition from adolescent to adult services. The interagency collaboration facilitated new levels of awareness and ability that allowed CBTP personnel the expertise to lead additional workshops for CBTP participants and their families and to effectively support CBTP participants and their families at this time of transition and new horizons.

Benefits to the Interprofessional Team

Working as part of an interprofessional collaborative team proved to be an enriching experience for all members. The different professional perspectives on disability enabled members to better grasp the needs of students with developmental disabilities. Our professional practices have always championed the self-determination of the individuals we support. Facilitating self-determination on a college campus took on a new level of letting go. Working in partnership with one another and listening to and allowing the students in the CBTP to be truly integrated into the larger college campus challenged our beliefs regarding our professional roles with CBTP students. The CBTP students pushed all of us to truly embrace self-determination. The students can and do make their own choices this includes the opportunity to make both good and bad choices without the intervention of professionals. It is through choosing a class that might not be the best fit or choosing to go on a field trip rather than attending class that CBTP students begin to learn about themselves and their capabilities, limitations, possibilities, and desires for their futures. Embracing the independence and abilities of the CBTP students both allowed the students to realize their possible selves and forced our interprofessional team to realize our possible selves as professionals who see individuals with developmental disabilities as independent, self-determined contributors to our campus and the larger community.

This also was a very authentic model for the college students in our professional programs. Each of us desires that the teachers, social workers and speech language pathologist that we send forth do not simply repeat what we do. Our students have seen us break new ground and envision the unseen making it seen. There will be new ground for them

to break when they go out. They know ours is a story of collaboration to solve a local problem. We want them to see their possible selves as more than just a professional title. We want them to be responsive to the social challenges ahead and work with others for solutions.

Conclusions

The authors of this article found working together as an interprofessional team enriched our understanding of one another's profession and enriched the integration of interprofessional content into their courses. The knowledge of one another as individuals and professionals allowed us to see our possible selves in new ways just as it allowed the CBTP students to see their possible selves in new ways. The experience has made us richer as instructors not just about disability but about the processes of professionalism, specifically the process of interprofessional work. All of us incorporate the lessons learned into the whole of our work. The desire to have an interprofessional perspective influences our decision making as we reach beyond our disciplines seeking the perspective of others deeply enriching our own understanding and the understanding of those we teach and serve.

It has been difficult to simply summarize the experience because as expressed in the introduction the work has been both non-summative and synergistic. The interprofessional model has infused itself into the thinking and working of the authors and has caused ripple effects resulting in further collaboration in other venues with more disciplines thus influencing those collaborative partners to collaborate with others resulting in rich knowledge and experiences for those we serve and teach.

Cate Weir's (2004) quote at the beginning of the article "The criteria for a happy life are to set goals, have control, contribute to something bigger than yourself, and to have hopes and dreams" has been a mantra for the design and development of the CBTP. Initially it motivated the interprofessional and interagency partners to stretch for a program that crossed the boundaries of discipline and agency. The crossing of these boundaries has resulted in a program that is bigger than any one discipline or agency. It has allowed each member to see her possible professional self in a new light. To parallel the thoughts of Markus and Nurius (1986),

the potential of our professional possible selves has expanded as a result of this collaborative effort.

nboyle5@naz.edu).

**All names discussed as examples in this article are pseudonyms.

References

- College Based Transition Program*. (2011). *College Based Transition Program Promotional PowerPoint: Mission Statement*. Retrieved from College, Center for Civic Engagement website: http://www.col.edu/center-for-civic-engagement/copy_of_CBTP
- Crisp, G., & Cruz, I. (2009). Mentoring college students: A critical review of the literature between 1990 and 2007. *Research in Higher Education, 50*, 525–545. doi:10.1007/s11162-009-9130-2
- Friend, M., & Cook, L. (2010). *Interactions: Collaboration skills for school professionals* (6th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Markus, H. and Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist, 41*, 954-968.
- Viggiani, P. (2012). *Satisfaction Assessment: College Based Transition Program 2011-2012*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Weir, C. (2004). Person-centered and collaborative supports for college success. *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities, 1*(1), 67-73.

About the Authors: Pamela A. Viggiani, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at the College at Brockport, State University of New York teaching within the Greater Rochester Collaborative, MSW Program (585-395-8460, pvgiggian@brockport.edu); Ellen Contopidis, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor and Faculty Liaison for LifePrep@Naz, Nazareth College, Department of Inclusive Childhood/Early Childhood Education, School of Education (585-389-2916, econtop4@naz.edu); Dawn Vogler-Elias, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor, Communication Sciences and Disorders, Nazareth College, School of Health and Human Services (585-389-2770, dvogler9@naz.edu); Jennie I. Schaff, Ph.D., is an associate Professor, Nazareth College, Educational Technology, School of Education (585) 389-2957, jschaff2@naz.edu); Nuala S. Boyle, MA, is the Director of the Center for Civic Engagement under which the LifePrep@Naz program is housed at Nazareth College (585-389-2670,