

# **Examining the Collaborations of Professionals Providing Pre-ETS to Illinois Students with Disabilities**

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# What are Pre-ETS?

Pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) are . . . .

- Mandated by the **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)** of 2014 to be funded by vocational rehabilitation agencies (e.g., Illinois Department of Human Services)
- Meant for all **students with disabilities** (age 14-21) who qualify, or could potentially qualify, for adult vocational rehabilitation services
- Often delivered **in collaboration with schools** and meant to supplement school-based transition services as part of the individualized education program (IEP)
- Provided by **school providers and community-based providers** (e.g., Centers for Independent Living) using various contracts with vocational rehabilitation agencies



# What are Pre-ETS?

Pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) include . . . .

Job Exploration  
Counseling

Counseling on  
Postsecondary  
Education

Instruction in Self-  
Advocacy

Work-Based  
Learning  
Experiences

Workplace  
Readiness Training

[Find out more here](#)



# Why are collaborations important for Pre-ETS?

- WIOA (2014) calls for the ***coordinated delivery*** of Pre-ETS, necessitating interagency collaboration amongst important partners (i.e., vocational rehabilitation, school systems, and community rehabilitation programs)
- Interagency collaboration is associated with ***more effective transition service delivery*** and ***increased employment outcomes for youth***
- Research and policy highlights the importance of interagency collaborations but provides ***minimal guidance*** on how to address this complex challenge
- Even 10 years after the passing of WIOA (2014), these partners continue to struggle to collaborate ***locally*** in many states and communities, calling for new adaptations
- Limited research is available on the actual processes taken by local professionals who engage in ***shared partnerships*** to deliver Pre-ETS



# What are learning loops?

## Single-Loop Learning

- Learning that supports or occurs within existing policies and practices
- Involves adjustments in actions that do not confront fundamental assumptions and values (behavioral)
- Considers: *Are we doing things right?*

## Double-Loop Learning

- Learning that questions or challenges existing policies and practices
- Involves shifts in underlying assumptions and values (cognitive)
- Considers: *Are we doing the right things?*

## Triple-Loop Learning

- Learning strategies, structures, processes, or methodologies that allow for sustainable single- and double-loop learning
- Involves shifts in governing variables of double-loop learning, like identity (existential)
- Considers: *Is power determined by rightness?*

# Our research questions:

1. How do school personnel, VR counselors, and community agency providers who partner with one another to provide Pre-ETS **perceive these collaborations?**
2. What **successes and breakdowns** are identified in these collaborations for impacting Pre-ETS delivery?
3. How can the collaboration behaviors of school personnel, VR counselors, and community agency providers who engage in shared partnerships be explained by the concepts of **single-, double-, and triple-loop learning?**



# How did we recruit participants?

- Purposively sampled from two Illinois counties from June 2023 to January 2024
- Emailed or called VR personnel, school staff, and community rehabilitation providers who engage in shared Pre-ETS partnerships ( $n = 46$ )
- Asked to participate in a semi-structured interview via Zoom about their collaborations for providing Pre-ETS





# Who participated?

Total  
 $n=22$



School Staff  
 $n=14$



VR Personnel  
 $n=5$



Community  
Rehabilitation  
Providers  
 $n=3$



# How did we collect data?

- We conducted a semi-structured, in-depth interview by Zoom with each participant ( $M = 77$  min)
- Interview questions addressed the participants' . . . .
  - Collaboration aims in providing Pre-ETS
  - Roles in such collaboration
  - Perceived successes and breakdowns in these partnerships
  - Learning and adaptations for addressing breakdowns in collaborations
  - Recommendations for improved Pre-ETS collaborations



# How did we analyze data?

- Transcribed audio-recorded interviews and conducted member checking with participants (63.6% responded)
- Applied an interactive approach to qualitative analysis (Miles et al., 2014), tagging back and forth between existing theories and findings emerging directly from the data

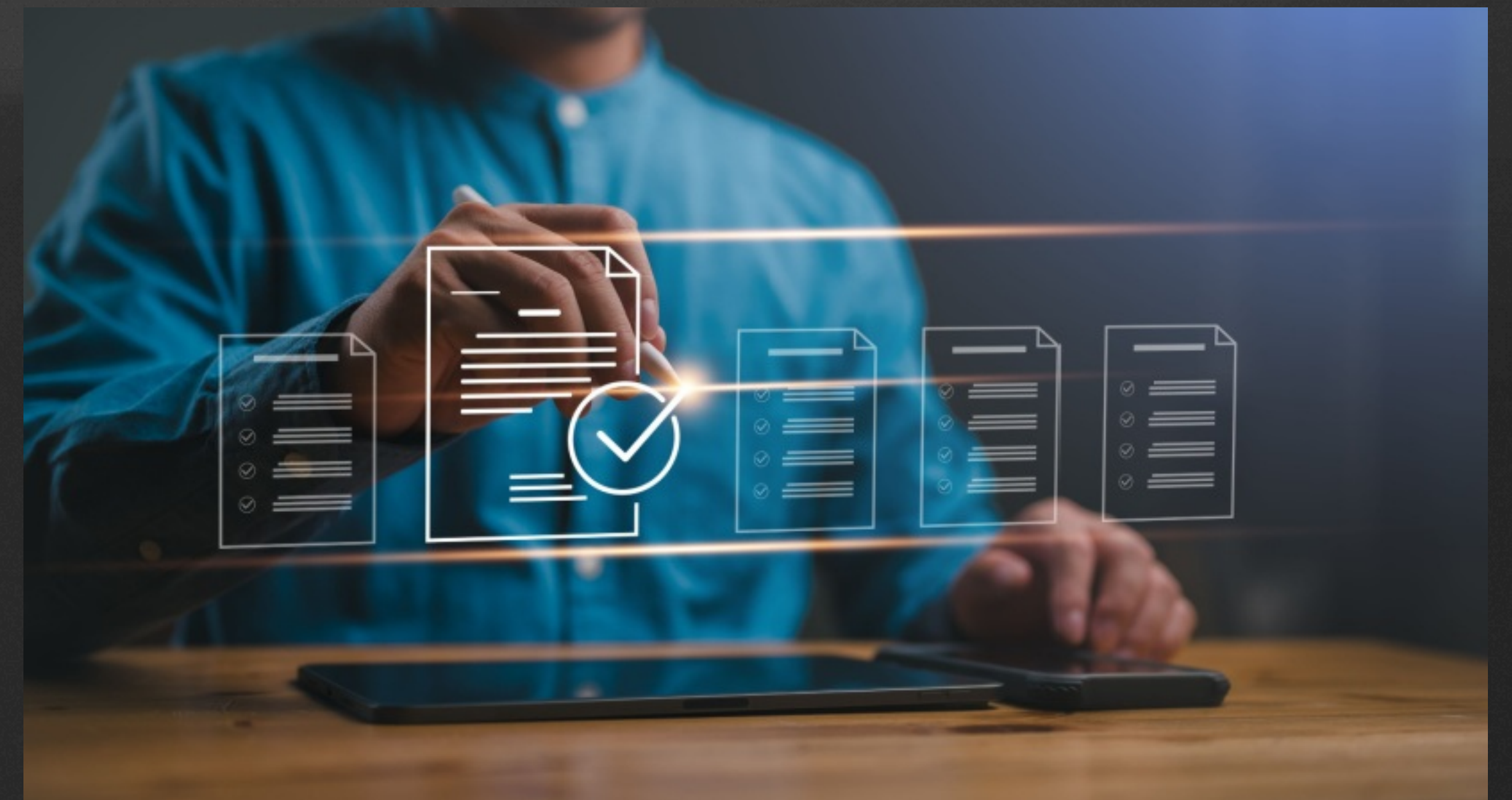




# How did we analyze data?

Applied codes related to . . . .

1. Types of collaborators
2. Collaboration purposes
3. Foundations of collaboration
4. Impacts of collaboration
5. Success and breakdowns in collaboration
6. Recommendation for improvement
7. Occurrences and opportunities for learning loops





**RQ1: How do partners perceive their collaborations related to Pre-ETS?**



# RQ1: How do partners perceive their collaborations related to Pre-ETS?

The *types* of collaborations included . . . .

School Staff

Vocational  
Rehabilitation  
Personnel

Community Provider  
Staff

Other:

Employers, families, other disability service providers, community organizations (e.g., after school programs) and additional community members



# RQ1: How do partners perceive their collaborations related to Pre-ETS?

Regarding the *purposes* of their collaborations . . . .

- Participants collaborated *to various extents*, with the most extensive collaborations tending to occur within school systems (e.g., co-development of services) and less extensive collaborations occurring across systems (e.g., exchange of information, consultation, logistical coordination)
- Most participants called for *more co-development of services* across systems, but some participants were satisfied with their own level of self-sufficiency within their system (particularly for some school staff)
- Multiple participants called for increased *opportunities* to collaborate, more sharing of *resources*, and *systematic structures* for collaborating



# RQ1: How do partners perceive their collaborations related to Pre-ETS?

Regarding the *foundations* of their collaborations . . . .

- Partnerships were primarily shaped by the requirements or procedures of the *Pre-ETS contracts*
- Collaborations also tended to be heavily impacted by the infrastructures, preferences, and climates of the *local school systems*
  - And meeting the needs of schools was cited to help community providers provide services to students
- Collaborations were sometimes described to be shaped by *student goals*



# RQ1: How do partners perceive their collaborations related to Pre-ETS?

Regarding the *impacts* of their collaborations . . . .

- Most participants perceived their collaborations within and across systems to lead to positive outcomes for students and practitioners
- Some participants (primarily school staff) described their own *independence and self-sufficiency* in their systems to minimize the need for cross-system collaborations
- In a few cases, participants (primarily school staff) did not believe that their cross-system collaborations actually led to positive outcomes for their students after graduation



**RQ2: What successes and breakdowns are identified in these collaborations for impacting Pre-ETS delivery?**



## RQ2: What successes and breakdowns are identified in these collaborations for impacting Pre-ETS delivery?

Among the factors that facilitated their *successes* in their collaborations . . . .

- Most participants emphasized the benefit of *reciprocal communication* with collaborators (e.g. having regular meetings, being responsive, and being open to feedback)
- Several participants pointed out the importance of *strong relationships* within and across their organizations
- Across systems, participants stressed the importance of *embedding* Pre-ETS into the practices, structures, and priorities of school systems when possible
- Some examples of *systematic structures for collaborating* were described to be provided to participants (e.g., local transition planning councils) or created themselves (e.g., shared Google tools to document collaborations)



## RQ2: What successes and breakdowns are identified in these collaborations for impacting Pre-ETS delivery?

Factors that caused *breakdowns* in their collaborations included . . . .

- Having *limited capacity* to collaborate and *overwhelming bureaucracy* created by systems (e.g., completing and submitting paperwork to VR)
  - Participants recommended more effective allocation of staffing (e.g., VR counselors as service providers rather than “paper pushers”)
- *Lack of knowledge* of Pre-ETS for both school staff and VR personnel
  - Participants recommended further training, increased sharing of resources, and clarification of Pre-ETS policies (e.g., consistency in how funds could be used)
- Some *varying - and even conflicting - views and priorities* across service systems or individuals (e.g., expectations for students with disabilities, desire to collaborate)



**RQ3: How can these collaboration behaviors be explained by the concepts of single-, double-, and triple-loop learning?**



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Among the types of learning that took place to facilitate the collaborations . . . .

- Single-loop learning emerged as a prevailing form of learning that enhanced work efficiency within hierarchical systems
- Few incidents were found to be explained by double-loop learning
- There was no evidence of triple-loop learning



# Implications for Practice & Policy

Our preliminary findings suggest that . . . .

- All systems provide ***more systematic structures*** (e.g., joint trainings and workshops, documentation tools) to more explicitly support the effective collaborations of these professionals for providing Pre-ETS
- IDHS provide increased training and support for DRS counselors and community providers ***in building strong relationships with the local communities*** they serve, particularly in small and rural communities
- ISBE provide increased training to school administrators and educators about Pre-ETS, how they can supplement school-based services, and ***their responsibility for educating students and families about service opportunities***
- IDHS and CIL networks provide increased resources and support for community providers to ***market their services to the communities they serve*** and connect with school staff, students, and families more directly



# Implications for Research

Our preliminary findings call for further research regarding . . . .

- The extent to which these themes generalize across ***different areas of the state, other states, and various types of locales*** (i.e., urban, suburban, rural)
- The in-depth roles and experiences of community providers, including ***Centers for Independent Living staff***, in facilitating Pre-ETS
- The ***organizational learning*** that occurs across the state IDHS system
- The development of interventions or strategies for ***connecting cross-systems professionals at the local level***, particularly for supporting VR counselors and community providers in conducting outreach to school staff



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