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A STUDY ON HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES WITH DISABILITIES:
HOW IS THEIR TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO ADULTHOOD?

by
Dawn M. Wilson

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
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Approved by _____
Professor

Date Approved 5/3/07

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ABSTRACT

Dawn M. Wilson

A STUDY ON HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES WITH DISABILITIES:
HOW IS THEIR TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO ADULTHOOD?

2006/07

Dr. Joy F. Xin

Master of Arts in Special Education

The purpose of this study was to investigate the transition of high school students with disabilities after graduation, including their satisfaction with their preparedness for college, vocational school, employment options, and independent living, and the school's transition plan and services. A total of 125 high school graduates with disabilities, in the past five years, were included in this study and 50 were randomly selected for a phone interview to obtain their responses in detail. In this study, the effect of a student's transition plan and services was evaluated by the percentage of graduates attending college after high school and their satisfactory level. Findings indicated that most graduates were employed in hourly rate jobs and living at home with family members. Graduates attended two-year colleges were satisfied with their transition plan and services received at their high school.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is dedicated to my husband, Bill, who has supported and encouraged me every step of the way. Thank you for loving me unconditionally and helping me reach all of my goals.

Thank you to Wil and Lou, my sons, who have always been supportive of me. I would not be the person I am without the two of you in my life.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problems

According to the report of the National Center for the study of Postsecondary Education (2002), fewer young adults with disabilities possess a bachelor degree, and work full-time when compared with their non-disabled peers, and fewer individuals with disabilities are employed when compared with those without disabilities. Of those with disabilities who are employed, the vast majority is working at non-professional jobs with low-payment and limited medical or retirement benefits (Stoddard, Jans, Ribble, & Krauss, 1998).

The Disability Rights Advocates (1997) reports that education is emphasized to be closely related to two important aspects of successful employment. One is lifetime earnings and another is economic self-sufficiency. It is crucial that students with disabilities obtain education to learn vocational skills during their schooling and receive postsecondary training. The postsecondary education is one of the most significant ways in which an individual can increase his/her employability. Unfortunately, students with disabilities are much less likely to be qualified to attend a college because of their low academic achievement. A smaller percentage of students with disabilities graduated with a high school diploma from 1996 to 1998 compared to students without disabilities (US DOE, 1999). These data show that students with disabilities lag behind their peers on academic achievement, graduation rates, and employment outcomes.

One of the problematic areas encompassed is preparation for and transition from high school to postsecondary education programs for students with disabilities. In secondary schools, students are left without adequate directions and counseling due to a lack of coordination among teachers and counselors. Low expectations and a limited sense of opportunity may also impact these students on decision making in their future career (Stodden, Jones, & Chang, 2002). This can leave students with disabilities with a sense of failure before they have even begun to explore their career interests.

Although supports and services are available, some services are primarily focused on a single academic outcome rather than a continuum of outcomes leading students to a successful transition (Izzo & Lamb, 2002; Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003). For example, if a high school diploma is viewed as a successful outcome, then, the preparation process may be viewed as a termination of high school completion. Ultimately, without a functioning and successful transition program from secondary to postsecondary education, students with disabilities may find themselves burdened with additional disadvantages (Stodden, Jones, & Chang, 2002).

According to Martin and Marshall (1996), there are three transition problems in high school. These are training programs, student opportunities and cost.

Training Programs

Current training programs for teachers and counselors at the high school level do not always provide adequate knowledge about how student needs and supports in the secondary school environment link to their needs and supports in post secondary and beyond (Martin & Marshall, 1996). Training tends to focus on the assistance teachers and school personnel provided to students in school. Many students do not continue in their

postsecondary studies because they are not prepared to inquire about the services offered at the college level. Special education practices have traditionally done little to enable students to manage their lives (Martin & Marshall, 1996). The school personnel often make important decisions for students. This situation hinders students from their personal involvement in their career decision-making. They need to learn how to make decisions and inquire about the services they will need leading to a successful completion of college studies.

Student Opportunities

Special education and transition programs have relied on an educational model in which teachers have been given full responsibility for making essential decisions for their students, thus denying students the opportunity to participate in their educational programs in any meaningful ways (Wehmeyer & Sands, 1998). Making choices, taking risks, having control over outcomes, and assuming responsibility for personal action are highly valued goals but instructional activities to promote and support such attitudes and abilities have rarely been included in transition programs for students with disabilities (Agran & Hughes, 1998). As a result, many students in their adulthood are still dependent on others for support or not aware of their goals and career choices when leaving school (Mithaug, 1996).

Cost

Cost presents a major barrier to students with disabilities in their quest to complete postsecondary education. Time is a factor because the extended period necessary for some students with disabilities to complete their degree adversely affects the final cost of their education and delays the start of their employment. These students

often need more time than their non-disabled peers because they have difficulty in taking a full course load. If they can only take one or two courses each semester it is going to cost more with additional years to complete their college degree. Time also directly influences cost and success in the post secondary education. In such situations, families perceive the cost of college to be impossible for the families' finance. Schools are challenged to provide individualized transition plans that are developed as early as possible, be comprehensive, communicate high expectations, reflect student's preferences, and cooperate with parents (Blackorby & Wagner, 1997). These challenges include:

- accurate self-knowledge about skills, abilities, interests, and goals;
- career exploration, job shadowing, and appropriate job experience;
- self-advocacy skills, including knowledge of civil rights, accommodations, assistive technologies, and compensatory strategies;
- job-search skills; and
- development of personal qualities such as persistence, resilience, and the ability to build social service agencies.

Background

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) amendments of 1997 requires that transition planning must begin for students with disabilities at the age of 14, and services must focus on the student's studies, such as participation in advanced placement courses or a vocational education program. School policies are developed and curricular are revised at the secondary level in order to comply with IDEA (1997). These policies include students' completion of a career interest inventory at the age of 14 and a

discussion with students during their annual Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting. One page of the IEP is provided for the student's transition plan to indicate the goals and objectives, and related activities. Each year, the student is required to report his/her individual transitioning career plan for postsecondary school or vocation school options. Student curricular are focused on his/her plans and goals after high school to improve student academic achievement, in hope that he/she will be facilitated to access higher education.

According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education Students (NLTS), only 27% of youths with disabilities had been enrolled in postsecondary school after their graduation of high school for three to five years, while 68% of youths in the general population attended colleges during the same time period (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996). Even though some youths with disabilities did continue their postsecondary studies, they were rarely in four-year colleges. Two-year college attendance was more common (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996). These current data present transition problems of students with disabilities.

The high school's drop out rate of youth with disabilities is twice higher than their peers without disabilities. According to US DOE (1999), 85% of high school dropouts have some kind of disability. Students with disabilities are less likely than their non-disabled peers to complete a full secondary school academic curriculum, especially in math and science. They seldom attend or have any, but the most perfunctory involvement in their Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. Thus, they are rarely prepared with a post-school transition plan (Abery & Stancliffe, 1996). When ranked according to how qualified they were for college admission, they were "much less likely to be even

minimally qualified,” based on an index score of grades, class rank, and SAT scores (NCES, 1999). Young adults with disabilities in postsecondary education are less likely to complete a degree or certificate than their non-disabled peers. On an average, students with disabilities who finish postsecondary education take twice as long to complete their degree as their non-disabled peers.

The barriers within postsecondary education that obstruct the progress of students with disabilities bring about employment-related problems. As data showed, individuals with disabilities are more than twice as likely to live below the poverty line as individuals without disabilities (New Freedom Initiative, 2001). Individuals with disabilities are less likely to be employed than individuals without disabilities across all age groups (NCSPES, 2002). Only 49% of individuals with disabilities are employed versus 79% of individuals without disabilities (US Census of Population and Housing, 2000). It seems that serious gaps remain in the services and supports provided to students with disabilities.

Careful considerations must be given to the barriers of students with disabilities as they transition to adulthood. Endeavors to promote a smooth transition from secondary to postsecondary education have not met the requirement of federal laws and initiatives, such as IDEA (NCD, 2000). Transition planning and student involvement, as well as resources are factors impacting student transition. In addition, evidence shows that there is a failure of secondary and postsecondary schools to establish communication paths. For example, some secondary schools lack a formal structure to assist students in planning to adjust to the highly discrepant laws governing secondary and postsecondary education (Stodden, Galloway & Stodden, 2003). The secondary schools do not tailor the

delivery of services and instruction toward strengthening the links between secondary and postsecondary education. The result is that students themselves, parents and other natural supports are often “caught unawares” when the level of services drop off without an automatic extension following high school (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003). The lack of knowledge about their rights, for searching services and funding has the effect of discouraging or possibly even barring students with disabilities from higher education. For example, students with disabilities and their families are often not well informed about the needs as they transition from high school to college, and how to address these needs. They are not aware of their own needs to succeed in postsecondary education or the supports and services provided by specific postsecondary education programs (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003). In order to better prepare families and students with disabilities for postsecondary education, comprehensive and accessible information is essential.

Significance of the Study

According to Stodden, Conway, and Chang (2003), student involvement in transition planning is essential to their future transition success. However, so often important decisions about a student with disabilities are made by the child study team, family members, and teachers without any serious input from the student himself/herself, or lacking the voice of the student with disabilities in his/her transitional decision making. Thus, many students do not continue their postsecondary studies because they lack support to meet their special needs. Given the emphasis in the IDEA Amendments of 1997 on active student involvement and engagement in learning, it is important to identify ways in which all students, including students with cognitive and multiple

disabilities, can be actively involved in their transition programs and learning experiences. Unfortunately, few empirical investigations have been published involving students with disabilities in transition. This study examined the transition status of students with disabilities after their high school graduation, so that their transition planning and transition services or programs could be evaluated. Were the special education students well prepared for college, employment, or vocational school? Were the special education students well prepared for transition from school to adulthood? Were they satisfied with their school's transition services? These questions were explored and discussed.

Statement of the Purpose

The purposes of this study were to investigate 1) the transition status of high school students with disabilities after graduation, 2) these students' satisfaction in their preparedness for college, vocational school, employment options, and independent living, and 3) student satisfaction with their school's transition plan and services.

Research Questions

1. What are the percentages of students with disabilities who have attended colleges or vocational schools after their high school graduation?
2. What are the percentages of students with disabilities who have been employed and independent?
3. Are these students satisfied with their transition plan and services in their high school?

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, changes in the work force have required an employee's higher education and skills to meet the employers' qualifications, thus making it necessary for obtaining a postsecondary degree. Students who continue their education after high school maximize their current and future job opportunities. For individuals with disabilities, completion of some type of postsecondary education significantly improves their chances of securing meaningful employment. In fact, there is a strong positive correlation between level of education and rate of employment for individuals, especially those with disabilities (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003). Barriers exist to accessing a postsecondary education for individuals with disabilities because the difference between secondary and postsecondary schools, and the difficulty those students may have in their transition from one environment to another. This chapter reviews the current transition status of students with disabilities and needed services to support their successful transition from secondary school to adulthood.

Current Status of Transition

Sweeping changes in the workplace characterized by technological advances, intense competition, and high standards of productivity have created a gap between the skill demands of our nation's workplaces and the skills of the emerging labor force (Stodden & Dowrick, 2001). The magnitude of this challenge for students with

disabilities is emphasized by the findings of the National Longitudinal Transition Study. When compared to students in the general population, students with disabilities drop out of school at higher rates, have higher absenteeism, lower grade-point averages (GPA), and more prevalent feelings of poor self-esteem (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Other researchers agree that students with disabilities lag far behind their peers without disabilities on factors such as achievement, graduation rates, postsecondary attendance, and employment outcomes (e.g. Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovonoff, 2000; Benz, Yovamoff, & Doren, 1997; Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Izzo, Cartledge, Miller, Growick, & Rutkowski, 2000). Although postsecondary supports for students with disabilities have been more available in recent years, little research has addressed the planning and organization of these services (Bursuck, Rose, Cowen, & Yahaya, 1989; Sergent, Carter, Sedlacek, & Scales, 1998; Shaw, McGuire, & Brinckerhoff, 1994). As a result, service providers have been left to develop programs for their students based on little or no empirical evidence (Gajar, 1992).

A postsecondary education is one of the most significant opportunities in which an individual can increase his/her employability (Horn & Berkold, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics, 1999; US Department of Labor, 1999). Educational attainment closely relates to lifetime earnings and economic self-sufficiency that become two of the hallmarks of successful employment (Disability Rights Advocates, 1997). The reality is that only 27% of high school graduates with disabilities enter into some type of postsecondary education compared to 78% of high school graduates without disabilities (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

Access to postsecondary education and training is a major factor in the transition from high school to successful adult life. Research has shown that participation in and completion of colleges and vocational programs enhances the development of self-esteem and the likelihood of obtaining employment for individuals both with and without disabilities (Fairweather & Shaver, 1991).

There is also evidence that participation in postsecondary educational training is more strongly related to long-term employability than a completion of secondary vocational programs (Rumbeberger & Daymont, 1984). While some research has found that the difference in participation in postsecondary vocational programs between youth with and without disabilities is minimal, there is a vast difference between participation rates in college programs. Youth with disabilities are approximately 3 times less likely to take some community college courses, and as much as ten times less likely to take some 4 year college courses than their non-disabled peers. According to Fairweather and Shaver (1991), the fact that a student with a disability graduates from high school does not increase the likelihood of attending postsecondary programs. In general, a number of gaps, issues, and problems remain for persons with disabilities as they seek to prepare for and succeed in postsecondary education and subsequent employment. Continuing issues include:

- Students with disabilities are less likely than their non-disabled peers to complete a full secondary school academic curriculum, resulting in lower levels of academic achievement and preparation for postsecondary education;
- Students with disabilities drop out of high school at twice the rate of their non-disabled peers;

- Youth with disabilities are less likely than their non-disabled peers to graduate from high school;
- Youth with disabilities are less likely to start postsecondary education than their non-disabled peers;
- Youth with disabilities who start postsecondary education are less likely to retain and complete a degree or certificate than their non-disabled peers;
- Students with a disability who finish postsecondary education take significantly longer to complete their degree than their non-disabled peers;
- More than 80% of youth with disabilities who attempt postsecondary education require assistance to manage their educational studies and related activities;
- Individuals with disabilities are less likely to be employed than those without disabilities across all age groups (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003).

Inconsistent services are a significant problem in higher education programs for students with disabilities (Schuck & Kroeger, 1993). In order to address this problem, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002), recommended to support higher education faculty, administrators and auxiliary service providers to effectively provide and help post-secondary students with disabilities to complete a high quality post-secondary education. The need to prepare students with disabilities for the transition from high school to postsecondary education is critical to enable them to advocate for themselves and to seek for needed services (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

Transition Services

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997), transition services are activities based upon the individual student's needs, taking into account the

student's preferences and interests, including instruction, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. The IDEA and its amendments specify that beginning at age 14, and annually thereafter, a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) must include transition needs, plans, and implementation processes. Both IDEA (1997) and ADA (1990) legislation emphasize that the students' preferences and interests must be considered in transition planning, making self-determination skills essential for students with disabilities (Field, 1996). Once a student has determined that he or she is capable of and interested in pursuing postsecondary education, the transition plan must contain components to ensure that the current course of study is preparing the student for his or her future goals (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

Adolescents with disabilities who wish to attend college are often faced with responsibilities they are unprepared to meet because they have low self-advocacy skills, independent-living skills, and limited opportunities to have access to technology (Stodden, 1998; Stodden & Dowrick, 2000). Those students enrolled in college often do not know how to request the specific accommodations they need (Durlak, Rose, & Bursuck, 1994).

In short, according to the National Council on Disability and Social Security Administration (2000), despite advances in the Disability Rights Advocates policy (1997), adaptive technology, and funding targeted at issues that affect the transition of students with disabilities to college and careers, far too many adults with disabilities end up being undereducated, unqualified for today's high technical job market, and become

unemployed (Burgstahler, 2004). To minimize continued casualties among youth with disabilities in transition, we must implement a process for reversing historical trends of ineffective transition service planning and provision (Burgstahler, 2004). The National Council on Disability (1989) affirms that effective transition planning for high school students with disabilities can facilitate their success in adult life. Factors leading to successful post-school outcomes include activities that develop and provide opportunities to practice social, academic, career, and self-determination skills (National Council on Disability and Social Security Administration, 2000).

The Related Support

The process and basis for determining if and what educational assistance will be provided to students with disabilities in secondary and postsecondary education and employment settings varies widely. The fact is that students with disabilities are impacted in negative ways as they transition across these environments and seek to become successful participants in their community (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003).

During secondary education, schools are responsible for identifying and assessing students with disabilities, and developing an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that outlines each student's needs. Because of the prescriptive nature of the IDEA, there is a tendency for secondary schools to place students with disabilities in special classrooms for all or part of their curricula (Fleischer & Zames, 2001; Stodden, Jones, & Chang, 2002). The district might also supplement special education or general education with related services. At the postsecondary level, students are no longer covered under IDEA and must identify themselves as having a disability and provide the school with documentation of their disability (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003).

Postsecondary schools will tend to provide students with accommodations based on their type of disability. The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) only mandate access to higher education and do not mandate a vast array of support personnel to meet students' needs. In addition, many college students with disabilities report that they are not comfortable requesting accommodations from college faculty (Izzo, 2001). Often times, the student must advocate for accommodations with faculty who may not understand the nature of specific disabilities or appropriate accommodations. Many students with disabilities do not understand their strengths and limitations well enough to explain how certain compensatory strategies will assist them but will not grant an unfair advantage over their non-disabled peers (Gordon & Keiser, 1998).

Secondary School

The process to determine educational assistance for children and youth with disabilities in primary education is detailed specifically in the IDEA as the steps educators and parents must follow in the development of an individualized education plan (IEP). The process is delineated as the Federally mandated steps to be followed to determine a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for children with disabilities. Youth with disabilities are encouraged to attend their IEP meeting during the secondary school years. However, the fact is that few youth attend, and the same assistance and process used in pre-school and elementary school settings is frequently applied to adolescents in secondary school, who are preparing to participate in adult environments (Johnson, 2001). This can be true even with the requirement that school districts develop an individualized transition plan (ITP) that outlines the student's postsecondary school

plans and the implementation actions in order to meet the goals. The IEP process requires the input of service providers and parents or their advocates for decision making about the types and levels of assistance provided but does little to model or prepare the student for transition (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003).

As non-disabled children proceed through their primary education years, opportunities are made increasingly available for them to become aware of and explore their needs and interests related to post-school environments (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003). For students with disabilities, the decisions are made during the IEP meetings. Without the IEP process, they are not aware of or understand their own disability and the assistance they might need, in order to successfully function in post-secondary environments (Grigal, Test, Beattie, & Wood, 1997). Students with disabilities often have little concern or interest in the basis of their assistance because it is taken for granted that assistance would be provided based on Federal Mandates (Gritgal et al., 1997). The greatest concern is what the IEP process models and teaches youth with disabilities (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003). They are not prepared in secondary school for the changes they will encounter such as services offered and support provided in post-school environments (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003).

Student Needs at the Postsecondary Level

Students with disabilities who have the ability to attend postsecondary education programs face a variety of challenges. For example, attending a college may not be considered as an option for these students; school counselors and teachers may encourage them to pursue vocational education (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002); parents who are not informed of the options for their children may follow the advice of school personnel and

fail to encourage postsecondary education; students with disabilities who have struggled through school also may not consider themselves smart enough for college. These issues must be addressed if students with disabilities want to reach their full educational potential (Getzel & Gugerty, 1996).

However, transition planning that begins as early as age 14 may be too late (Cummings, 2000). The unique characteristics of students with disabilities make early planning critical (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Compared to their non-disabled peers, the career awareness of students with disabilities is generally less developed. Often, these students hold unrealistic employment expectations and are not aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, and how their weaknesses may affect their educational and vocational outcomes (e.g. Levinson & Ohler, 1998; Ohler, Levinson, & Barker, 1996). Also, they are less likely to communicate their special needs to their instructor in the educational setting or their manager in the employment setting (Wilson, 1994). Unfortunately, students with learning disabilities (LD) enrolled in postsecondary institutions receive less attention (Levinson & Ohler, 1998). Most efforts to improve the transition of students with disabilities have focused on students with severe physical or emotional disabilities, targeting skills needed for postsecondary employment and independent living (Levinson & Ohler, 1998; Patton & McMahon, 1999). High school personnel may fail to provide adequate transition plans for students with LD who wish to pursue postsecondary education because they hold the misconception that LD is such a mild disability that these students can succeed without assistance (Levinson & Ohler, 1998). The fact is that LD is a lifetime disability if transition planning is not thorough; many students with LD will be unsuccessful in vocational and educational settings

(Collet-Klingenberg, 1998; Levinson & Ohler, 1998). As adults, many individuals with LD experience dismal post-school outcomes, including higher rates of unemployment and lower wages when employed compared to adults without disabilities (Collet-Klingenberg, 1998; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Levenson & Ohler, 1998).

To determine the essential elements of an appropriate transition plan for students considering postsecondary education, the needs of students with disabilities enrolled in college must be understood and integrated into the transition plan (Levinson & Ohler, 1998). The skills needed to be successful in postsecondary educational and vocational settings, such as self-awareness, awareness of appropriate career options, and the ability to engage in self-advocacy take many years to develop (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

The universal process for determining educational assistance for students with disabilities in higher education is undefined, not mandated, and varies extensively from one program setting to another (Stodden & Dowrick, 2001). Further, youth with disabilities take full responsibilities for initiating, leading, managing, and following through with a process of determining assistance that might be provided by the postsecondary institution (Stodden & Dowrick, 2001). Without the mandates of the IDEA, nothing similar to an individualized planning process exists in postsecondary education settings (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003).

Typically, students are expected to take the initiative to declare their status as a person with a disability, provide assessment data that would verify their specific disability, and then work with the personnel in the disability support office to plan, and participate in one or more of the accommodation activities or services that might be available (Stodden & Dowrick, 2001). Further determination of the extent to which the

accommodation might be implemented must be negotiated between the student and instructor. Given the lack of experience with disabilities among postsecondary instructional faculty, this process may require an extensive explanation of one's disability and justification for the proposed accommodation to be provided (Stodden & Dowrick, 2001). This process often requires the student to have an understanding of the course content to be encountered and the range of teaching methods that each instructor may apply. The student is often required to share specifically with the instructor about disability related needs and how these needs might be most efficiently addressed in each course (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003).

In postsecondary education settings, the process of determining educational assistance is often impacted by the institution's availability and feasibility (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2000). Typically, a menu of possible accommodations and supports is used. The scope and depth of this menu is impacted by the extent of interest in supporting students with disabilities at each institution and the amount of funding available for such services (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003). Unlike primary education, postsecondary educational institutions often do not provide per capita funding for support services, so as increased numbers of youth with disabilities enter the postsecondary education setting, support budgets become low, and limited funds may impact decisions for service provisions (Gajar, 1998).

Summary

It is apparent throughout the literature that there are problems in the transition process for students with disabilities. In shaping programs for students with disabilities, a range of options tailored to the individual needs of students continues to be the most

effective approach to meeting the wide range of needs, preferences, and abilities of students in special education. No principle that is held to be appropriate for all students is likely to succeed in helping all students meet their needs. A diversity of students requires a diversity of program choices if students are to benefit from their education and make a successful transition to their adulthood.

Studies show that, perhaps, the greatest positive contribution schools can make to the postsecondary education for students with disabilities is to improve transition programs. This includes increased use of postsecondary supports in secondary school and better education of secondary students about their responsibilities after their high school graduation. More research is needed to examine effects of transition programs in order for schools to provide appropriate transition services to help our students with disabilities be prepared for postsecondary education.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Participating School

The study was conducted at a high school located in the southern area of New Jersey. This high school consists of grades 7 through 12 with 159 students in 7th grade, 172 in 8th grade, 187 in 9th grade, 168 in 10th grade, 198 in 11th grade, and 175 in 12th grade. A total of 94 teachers and seven special education aides are employed. This high school is made up of four local school districts.

According to the state Department of Education (2000), the District Factor Group (DFG) for this high school is “CD” which means that the school has a low socioeconomic status. This is based on the 2000 Decennial Census data. The DFGs were first developed in 1975 for the purpose of comparing students’ performance on statewide assessments across demographically similar school districts. The categories are updated every 10 years using the Census Bureau’s latest data. The DFGs represent an approximate measure of a community’s relative socioeconomic status (SES). It is ranked from “A” (the lowest SES) to “J” (the highest SES). It is interesting to note the DFGs for the individual sending districts that make up this high school. Two of the sending districts are both rated “B”, another is rated “FG”, and the last one is rated “I.” That means the high school is made up of students with a large range for its socioeconomic status. With two of the sending districts being rated “B” (the next to the lowest SES) and one of the districts being rated “I” (the next to the highest SES) it makes an interesting mix of students.

Participating Students

The population for the study was all classified special education students who attended the high school in the Classes of 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006. A sample was selected from the graduates in the past five years. The selection of the sample was based on the students' classifications. A total of 125 graduates with disabilities participated in the study. Of these graduates, 48 are females and 77 are males. In addition, 50 of the graduates were interviewed by phone. Of those, 26 are female and 24 are male.

Survey

I found a copy of the Post High School Plans Survey (PHSPS) that a school used to investigate their graduating students because I could not find a survey to meet my exact needs. I had to use the PHSPS as a model to develop my own survey that would be relevant to my study. The PHSPS was developed by a local school to investigate graduates from that particular institute each year. The survey consisted of 10 questions ranging from student's name to their employment status and their desired career. Based on this survey, I developed a telephone survey to obtain graduates' information after they graduated from high school.

The telephone survey consisted of the following 12 questions:

1. What is your name?
2. What was your graduation date?
3. What was your major?
4. Do you attend college?
5. If you attend college, is it a 2yr or 4yr college?

6. Do you attend a trade/career school?
7. Did you serve in the military? Which branch?
8. Who is your current employer?
9. If unemployed, what is your desired work?
10. Do you live independently?
11. How has your transition from high school been?
___excellent ___very good ___good ___fair ___poor
12. Are you satisfied with your transition plan and services you received in high school?
___very satisfied ___satisfied ___some what satisfied ___not satisfied

Procedures

Data Collection

After receiving an approval from the Institutional Review Board of Rowan University, data collection started. Permission for the study was granted from the Director of the Guidance Department at the high school (Appendix One) to obtain the graduate information of the past five years.

College spreadsheets for the classes of 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006 were obtained from the Director of the Guidance Department of the high school. Student names were kept confidential without any exposures, as well as any information obtained from the individual phone survey.

I randomly selected graduates and called them. I introduced myself as a special education teacher from the high school they graduated, explaining the survey and requested permission to interview him/her over the telephone. I informed the former

student that all the information would be strictly confidential. Once the graduate permitted, I proceeded to ask the 12 questions in order. At the conclusion of the telephone survey, I thanked him/her for his/her time and cooperation.

Data Analysis

The study was an ex post facto, which means “after the fact.” An independent variable was identified and studied to determine its effect on the dependent variable. In this study, the effect of a student’s transition plan and services (independent variable) was evaluated by the percentage of graduates attending college after high school (dependent variable) and their satisfactory level.

The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Frequency tables, and descriptive statistics (frequency distribution, percentages, and measures of central tendency) were presented and examined in regards to the research questions.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Sample Profile

The data of this study were collected from the high school graduates in the past five years who were classified with disabilities. A total of 125 graduates with disabilities from the classes of 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006 were included in the study. Of those, 48 are female and 77 are male, and 50 were randomly selected for a phone interview to obtain their responses in detail. Of those 50 graduates, 26 are female and 24 are male.

Data Analysis

All data obtained by the researcher from the Guidance Department of the participating high school were recorded.

Table 4.1 contains information on students' future plans after high school. Of the 125 graduates, 42.4% planned to attend college, 12.8% planned to attend some type of vocational school, 41.6% planned to work, and 3.2 % planned on serving in the military.

Table 4.1

The Career Plans of the High School Graduates with Disabilities

Higher Education	Frequency (n = 125)	%
College	53	42.4
Vocational Schools	16	12.8
Military	4	3.2
Employed	52	41.6

Out of the 53 students planned to attend college, 52 were going to a two-year college and only one was going to a four-year college (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2

Students with Disabilities Planned to Attend Two Year or Four Year Colleges

College	Frequency (n = 53)	%
Two Year	52	98.1
Four Year	1	1.9

In order to investigate these graduates' current career status, a telephone interview was conducted to 50 randomly selected students individually. Out of the 50 students that were interviewed, 39 attended a two-year college and three students went to a four-year college (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.3

Students with Disabilities Attended Two Year or Four Year Colleges

College	Frequency (n = 42)	%
Two Year	39	92.9
Four Year	3	7.1

Table 4.4 presents information about their employment. Of the 50 graduates interviewed by phone, 40 are employed representing 80%, and 97.5% of the students are working at hourly paid jobs.

Table 4.4

Employment of the High School Graduates with Disabilities

Status	Frequency (n = 50)	%
Employed	40	80
Hourly Paid Regular Salary		
39 (97.5%) 1 (2.5%)		
Unemployed	10	20

Table 4.5 presents information about their living independence. Of the 50 graduates interviewed by phone, 12 are living independently representing 24% that means that they are not living with family members but in apartments with roommates.

Table 4.5

Living Independence of High School Graduates with Disabilities

Status	Frequency (n = 50)	%
Living Independently	12	24
Living with Family	38	76

After interviewing each of the 50 participating students by phone, the researcher summarized their responses. Table 4.6 presents their responses to questions regarding their satisfaction with the transition services provided in high school. Of 50, 41 indicated that they are satisfied and six were not satisfied.

Table 4.6

The Graduates' Satisfactory Level with Transition Services in High School

Satisfactory Level	Frequency (n = 50)	%
Very satisfied	22	44
Satisfied	19	38
Somewhat satisfied	3	6
Not satisfied	6	12

When asked about their satisfaction with transition services in high school, students commented the close relationships with individual school personnel, for example, a teacher, an instructional assistant, or a member of the child study team that helped them go through the transition process. The students reported that they are still in contact with the school teachers and other staff.

When a student's response presented unsatisfactory comments on the transition services in high school, a probe was used to further explore the details. The major concerns they raised were a lack of connection with the school teachers or the child study team. Thus, these students expressed their feelings that seemed no one really cared what happened to them.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, CONCLUSION

Discussion

This study investigated the transition status of high school students with disabilities after graduation, including their satisfaction with their preparedness for college, vocational school, employment options, and independent living, and the school's transition plan and services.

The first research question was to obtain the percentages of students with disabilities who attended colleges or vocational school after their high school graduation. Reviewing the graduate data over five years, I found that in this particular school, 42.4% of students were planning to attend college and 12.8% were planning to attend vocational school. This finding supports a study conducted by Blackorby & Wagner in 1996, which concluded that 27% of high school graduates with disabilities enter into post secondary education. In this present study, 33.6% of high school graduates attended college after high school. It appears the percentage of graduates of this participating school attended college is higher than the national average.

When reviewing the difference between students planning on attending a two-year college and a four-year college, I found that only one was going to go to a four-year college, and the rest were all planning for a two-year college. In fact, 39 of the 42 students (92.8%) attending college went to a two-year college and only three (7.1%) went to a four-year college. This finding is consistent with the finding in Fairweather and

Shaver's study (1991) that students with disabilities are approximately 10 times less likely to attend a four-year college.

The second research question addressed the percentages of students who have been employed and are living independently. The researcher conducted a phone interview to ask questions about the graduates' employment status and their independent living conditions. The results showed that of the 50 graduates, 40 (80%) were employed but only 24% were living independently. Most students (76%) were still living at home with their parents or other family members. The majority (97.5%) of the students were working at hourly paid jobs. This financial situation might be the reason for them to consider living at home.

According to the National Council on Disability and Social Security Administration (2000), far too many adults with disabilities end up being undereducated, unqualified for today's high technical job market, and become unemployed or underemployed. Changes in the workplace due to technological advances have created a gap between the skill demand of the workplace and the skills of the emerging labor force (Stodden & Dowrick, 2001). The magnitude of this challenge for students with disabilities is emphasized in the findings of the National Longitudinal Transition Study. It is found that students with disabilities lag far behind their non-disabled peers on employment outcomes (e.g. Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovonoff, 2000; Izzo Cartledge, Miller, Growick, & Rutkowski, 2000). This employment challenge is not only for students, but also for schools. There is a need for increased efforts to apply research proven practice when assisting the effectiveness of technology and other modes of assistance for students with disabilities. Decisions are often based upon the assessed deficits of the student rather

than upon the consideration of knowledge about the needs of the student for transition to post-school environments. It is important for there to be a smooth transition of the availability of technology and other supports for all students with disabilities as they move from the high school environment to the postsecondary environment.

In the study, although 82% of the students with disabilities interviewed were either very satisfied or satisfied with their transition services, 12% were not satisfied. These unsatisfied students were not part of any extra curricular activities and did not feel any connections with school teachers or staff. When asked the students who showed their satisfaction with their transition, their responses indicated their involvement in activities outside the normal school day, and their close relationships with school personnel to receive support. It seems that personal relationships with the school staff have made a difference in student transition from school to adulthood.

Limitations

There are some limitations in the study. First, the data presented only include special education graduates from one high school in the past five years. Because of the small sample size and limited time frame to conduct the follow-up interview to only 50 students, the findings may not be generalized to other schools in different districts and regional areas.

Second, the researcher is a special education teacher at the high school where the participating students graduated. Most participants know the researcher as a teacher when they were in school. This relationship may impact their responses to interview questions, especially when asked comments on school transition services and their satisfactory levels with the school's planning. Thus, the interview findings may have some bias.

Recommendations

Based upon the findings of the research, the following are my suggestions. First, further studies should be conducted using more than one high school to confirm the findings in this study. If it is needed, additional studies should replicate this study, but expand the scope to include information concerning teacher attitudes towards transition planning. Second, the transition services offered at high school should be evaluated frequently to make sure students are prepared for adulthood. In the study, the majority of students went to a two-year college rather than a four-year college. Why does this occur? Is their transition plan preparing them to do so or is it more of a financial issue? Further studies may be needed to answer these questions.

Conclusion

Students with disabilities have the right to be successful and to seek opportunities as their non-disabled peers. High school education is important to teach these students self-advocacy skills and their responsibilities in transition from school to adulthood. A major shift for all youth transitioning to adult roles in postsecondary education and employment is a sense of immediate and increased responsibility and independence. It is critical that students with disabilities have an active role and an opportunity to make decisions that carry responsibility and consequences similar to the adult roles for which they are prepared. Given that currently many students with disabilities have minimal or no involvement in their IEP process, there is also a need to improve the guidance and level of support that is offered to individuals with disabilities at the postsecondary and employment level.

Supports are an investment in positive outcomes and productivity. With a focus upon mandated procedures of the IEP process as the method for determining modes of assistance for students with disabilities in secondary school, there is little attention to preparation for post-school outcomes. School personnel should consider individual assistance-related needs within the context of post-school environments rather than fitting people and types of assistance into broad categories or focusing only upon the short-term educational needs of these students. Schools should emphasize high expectations and positive outcomes in the long-term to better prepare students with disabilities for their successful transition from school to adulthood.

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APPENDIX

Director of Curriculum and Instruction Permission Letter

Gateway Regional High School District

775 Tanyard Road
Woodbury Heights, New Jersey 08096-6218

(856) 848-8200 Ext. 220
FAX: (856) 848-2049
E-mail: jmattson@gatewayhs.com



Joan S. Mattson

Director of Curriculum & Instruction

February 7, 2007

Mrs. Dawn Wilson
638 Park Avenue
Collingswood, NJ 08108

Dear Mrs. Wilson:

In response to your request to obtain 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2006 college spreadsheets and student phone numbers to conduct surveys, the district wishes to reiterate your guidelines stated in your letter to ensure student confidentiality. The district requests that all information be kept confidential and that no students are identified by name or characteristics that indicate the identity of the student or students during the gathering of information or in the research project's final form. It is the district's understanding that this information will be used to complete a thesis for your Masters in Education program.

Mrs. Dawn Wilson is formally granted permission to obtain data needed for her research project. Upon completion of this project, it is the district's request that this research and your conclusions are shared with key faculty members, so that improvements to instruction, guidance practices, or curriculum can be made. Our hope is to improve our school based on information you obtain during your research.

Please accept on behalf of the administration and Board of Education warm wishes for success on your thesis. We appreciate the time and effort you have made to continue your education that will ultimately assist our district and most importantly our needy and at-risk population.

If you have any concerns, or if I may be of service, please let me know.

Best wishes,

Joan Mattson
Joan Mattson

Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction

cc: Mrs. Stumpo
File

