

UNDERSTANDING TRANSITION PLANNING AND POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES ACROSS NATIONAL, STATE, AND SCHOOL LEVELS

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Abstract

Postsecondary employment and education enrollment rates for students with disabilities are substantially lower than rates for students without disabilities, despite recently amended legislation requiring high schools to provide transition planning to develop college and career readiness. The purpose of this study was to investigate aspects of transition planning experienced by students with disabilities, including course of study, direct instruction, and student role, and to simultaneously study postsecondary outcomes among youth with disabilities. In addition, an important focus of the study was to disaggregate both postsecondary outcomes and aspects of transition planning by disability category because much current literature regarding transition planning does not disaggregate by all twelve disability categories. This mixed-methods study utilized data from the National Longitudinal Transition Survey-2, New Hampshire Indicator 13 (transition planning) and Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcomes) compliance and survey data, and six interviews from two high schools each (three educators and three alumni who received special services in high school) for a total of twelve interviews, providing an opportunity for detailed investigation into how transition planning impacted employment and educational outcomes for students with different disabilities.

It was found that employment and education enrollment percentages vary by disability categories. Young adults with mild disabilities tend to be more often employed and enrolled in postsecondary college programs than young adults with more involved disabilities. Although students with intellectual disabilities were the least likely to be enrolled in college, they reported receiving the most direct instruction about transition in high school. Students with visual and hearing impairments most often took the leadership role in their transition planning and were the most likely to be enrolled in postsecondary education. Unfortunately, New Hampshire state-level data was limited, and did not allow study of the relationship between transition planning features and educational or occupational outcomes. However, interviews with former students and current educators from two high schools in New Hampshire suggest that positive educational and occupational outcomes for these students were related to aspects of transition planning, involvement in a course of study, and social opportunities during high school.

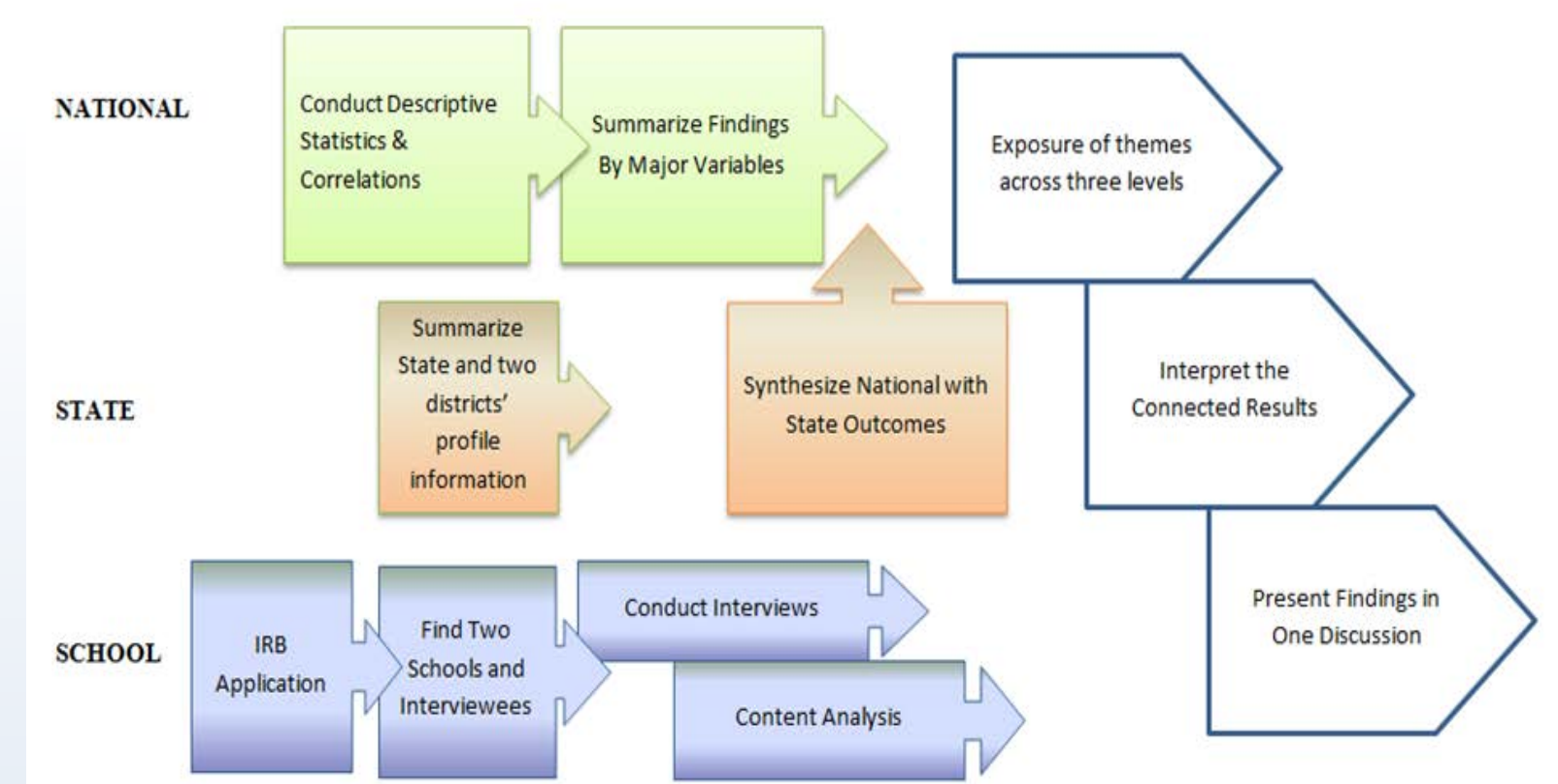
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this mixed methods study is to research potential factors that impact postsecondary employment and educational outcomes to best inform high schools as they design transition planning for students with disabilities. This is a growing area of research with much still unknown about the ways in which transition planning occurs across schools and about the ways in which programs may have a differential impact on students as a function of various individual characteristics. Given state-to-state variation in transition planning, this research includes an analysis of one state in addition to the national and school level analyses. New Hampshire was chosen as a convenience sample due to the adequate number of large high schools from which to find interviewees, proximity to the researcher, availability of the data from the NH Department of Education, and for the general positive reputation of this state's adult agency involvement and school dedication to transition.

Mixed-Methodology

The methods of this three-level research project are quantitative (national and state) and qualitative (school level). The first level of analysis was to pull data from two waves of the NLT2 for national findings. The second state of the analysis was an overview of compliance data as it pertains to transition planning and outcome survey data in New Hampshire. The last stage of data collection and analysis involved interviews with three former students/parents and three educators from two high schools in New Hampshire.

The purpose for combining qualitative and quantitative data collection methods in this study was to gain information about different aspects of transition planning and the outcomes which might not otherwise be available. The strategy of triangulating the data "reduces the risk that conclusions will reflect only the biases of a specific method, and allows you to gain a more secure understanding of the issues you are investigating" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 102). Using multiple methods such as secondary data analyses and interviews in one study allows the researcher to understand and synthesize information from several levels and perspectives. This mixed methods approach provides a perspective of educators and former students which may provide a greater depth in understanding of how disability and transition planning impacts employment and education enrollment.



Participants

The target population for the national level of analysis consists of students who have been identified with disabilities and are eligible for special education in the United States and are thereby receiving specialized instruction as indicated on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The population for the state-level analysis includes students receiving special services in the state of New Hampshire. Finally, for the school level, the population consists of students who formerly attended two large high schools and received special services.

Limitations

Although this study involves an analysis of three levels of data (national, state, and school levels), results may not be generalized to all states or all schools because transition programming varies from state to state. At the national level, the data is not available by state and the state level data is not available by every disability. The interviews are limited to six individuals from two high schools: special education director, two teachers/transition coordinator, and three former students. The study's dependent variables are measured only through self-reported (and sometimes parent-reported) data at the national, state, and school levels.

Results

National

Results from the Parent/Young Adult combined survey revealed that 95.8% of students identified with disabilities reported having worked for pay other than around the house since leaving high school (See Table 3). However, at the time of the survey (2009, Wave 5), only 59% of young adults reported currently being employed in a paid job outside the home (See Table 3). This discrepancy may suggest that people with disabilities are attaining paid jobs more readily than sustaining those paid jobs. All of the percentages fall within the range of 70.5% (multiple disabilities reported at the low end of the range) and 98.4% (learning disability reported at the highest percentage) as having worked in a paid job since high school whereas all categories reported results within the range of 29.5% (Deaf-blindness) and 66.7% (learning disability) as currently having a job (Table 3).

Table 3. Young Adult Employment & Education Outcome Percentages by Disability Category.

NLT2 Question

Employment	Total	LD	OHI	SLI	HI	TBI	ED	VI	ID	MD	OI	AUT	D/B
Currently	59	66.7	63.2	62.8	56.4	51.2	48.2	41.5	37.2	34.7	33.1	32.5	29.5
Previously	95.8	98.4	97.6	97.1	94.2	90.3	95.4	86.4	88.9	70.6	75.9	79.5	75.1
Postsecondary Education	Total	LD	VI	D/B	OI	SLI	LD	OHI	TBI	ED	AUT	MD	ID
Currently	14.7	24.4	23.9	22.7	22.5	19.5	16.9	16.2	14.3	12.7	12.4	7.4	2.3
Previously	58.4	73	67.8	53	59.8	65.3	65.2	64.7	60.5	51.4	39.6	28.9	28.5

NLT2=National Longitudinal Transition Survey-2; LD=Learning Disability; SLI=Speech Language Impairment; ID=Intellectual Disability; ED=Emotional Disability; HI=Hearing Impairment; VI=Visual Impairment; OI=Orthopedic Impairment; OHI=Other Health Impairment; AUT=Autism; TBI=Traumatic Brain Injury; MD=Multiple Disabilities; D/B=Deaf/Blind

Although there is a narrow range of who received a course of study pertaining to their transition, the students who received the most direct instruction in the area of transition planning are the students with the most significant disabilities (Table 4).

Students who receive the most instruction do not necessarily have the most successful outcomes. Although these findings seem to be pointing to a conclusion that direct instruction is ineffective, it could be surmised that the instruction is not enough in and of itself to be effective for students with the most involved disabilities. These results reveal that transition planning features (direct instruction, course of study, and student role) do indeed differ by disability category.

Table 4. Percentages of Students Reporting Transition Planning Features by Disability Type

NLT2 Question

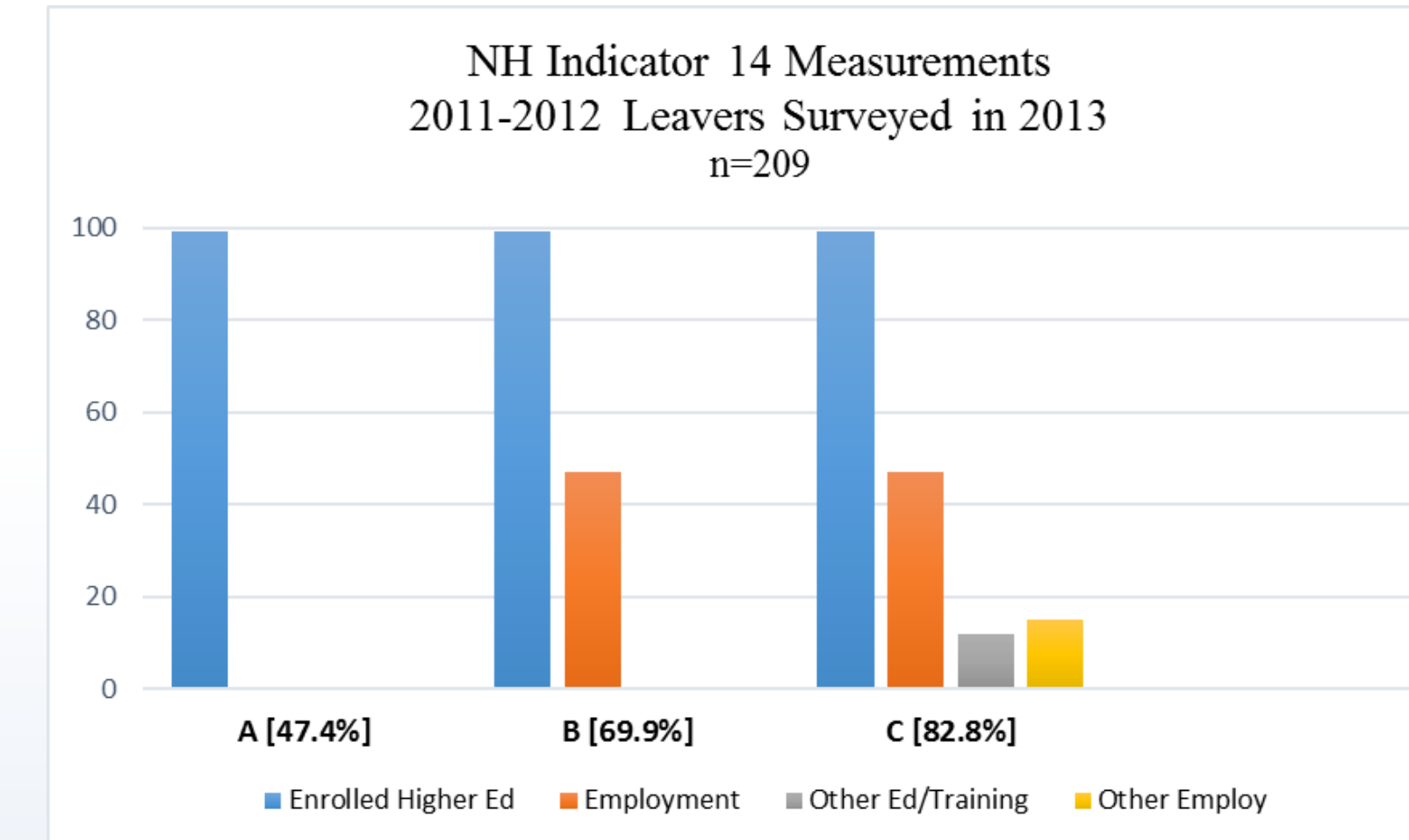
Youth with Transition Plan Received Direct Instruction focused on Transition Planning	Total	ID	AUT	MD	TBI	ED	HI	LD	VI	D/B	OI	SLI	OHI
	64.5	75.8	70.6	69.2	64.7	64.7	63.6	63	62.8	61.8	59.7	59.6	55
Transition Plan specifies Course of study to achieve goal	Total	LD	TBI	ED	ID	SLI	MD	OI	OHI	VI	D/B	AUT	HI
	74.1	75.6	72.9	72.8	72.1	72.1	71.8	71.3	70.8	69.8	68	66	64.4
Youth Took Leadership Role in Transition Planning	Total	VI	HI	OI	LD	TBI	ED	OHI	SLI	ID	AUT	MD	D/B
	12.2	24.9	17.7	17.5	14.6	13.7	10.8	10.3	9.4	3.3	2.6	-	-

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Results cont.

State

Measurements are more specifically separated by higher education, competitive employment, other education/training, some other employment, and not engaged to outline the results of the survey in 2012. Respondents (school-level percentages) reported to be enrolled in higher education at an average of 47.4% and in other postsecondary education/training at 5.7%. Only 22.5% of respondents reported to be competitively employed and 7.2% in some other employment. Indicator 14 measures A, B, and C are clustered as including all of the segments of the chart with the exception of "not engaged" which was reported at 17.2%. Although it is consistent in the literature review and recommendation of this research to identify results by each disability category without combining categories that may be of low incidence, the NH DOE only provides responses for three individual categories and combines the other nine categories in special education when reporting the demographic of responders for Indicator 14 purposes.



NH Indicator 14 Measurements (2011-2012 leavers) New Hampshire Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education website: <http://education.nh.gov/instruction/>.

School

Educators discussed several aspects of transition planning features in high school as positively impacting their students' lives including career and college preparation and exploration activities, connecting families with adult service agencies, community experiences, and regular education offerings. Educators from the smaller school described in-school activities to satisfy Indicator 13 requirements and, in contrast, educators from the larger, less-funded school stressed the importance of community experiences as crucial to the transition planning process. The stronger focus on community experiences for students among the educators at the larger, less funded school may be attributed to the need for a less funded school to depend on community resources over costly alternatives such as additional positions or classes in the high school setting.

Students (and their parents) from the larger school attributed career exploration activities, internships and part-time jobs, social opportunities, and the connection to adult service agencies to productive lives after high school. Students from the smaller school cited the career exploration and preparation in-school as contributing to their knowledge pertaining to job seeking skills.

Discussion

While it is encouraging to find that there are students in every disability category that reported having been employed at some point since high school, the employment and education rates vary by disability in that students with the most involved disabilities are employed less often and for shorter periods of time. This was true across the three levels of analysis in this research: national, state, and school. Compared to youth in other disability categories, students with learning disabilities are employed and enrolled most often in New Hampshire and around the country. Student interviews revealed that all respondents had been employed at one time; however, only three out of six interviewees were currently employed. The other three had been employed at fast-food establishments and were in the process of seeking employment. None of the interviewees had been or were currently enrolled in college or career training programs. This result points to the lack of college and training programs in the area that are suitable for young adults with disabilities.

The disparities persist when comparing employment rates of neurotypical young adults and those with disabilities possibly due to the lack of postsecondary education programs for youth with disabilities in the community. High schools are required to comply with detailed transition plans in IEPs that include an employment and postsecondary education or training goal every year. The requirements exist regardless of the disability and what programs might be lacking in the community. The students in the most significant disability categories have the lowest enrollment in community training programs and are the least likely to be employed. A lack of postsecondary education and training programs could be contributing to the lower rates of currently employed young adults with disabilities and threatening the integrity of the transition plans schools are required to follow. Still, the question remains as to which stakeholder is responsible for providing postsecondary education options.

Recommendations

Recommendations include comparing and contrasting what students across disability category have received for college and career readiness in schools and the actual number of successful outcomes (such as employment and college/training programs). To fully understand what is needed for all students with disabilities, it is strongly recommended to disaggregate by disability category when identifying variables for a study.

Furthermore, using a mixed-methodology that looks at similar points in time at quantitative and qualitative findings will triangulate the results thereby providing an opportunity for a cross-section analysis. Due to variability in transition programming, finding interviewees in every disability category within one state followed by an analysis of that state's compliance data according to the full Indicator 13 checklist along with the national findings is pivotal to provide information that is missing from the current pool of research in this area.

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