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### Transition to Adulthood: Preparing Students With Specific Learning Disabilities

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Transition to adulthood: Have we done enough for students with specific learning disabilities?

*“You’re off to Great Places! Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting, so...get on your way!”*

*Dr. Seuss*

Selecting a college, seeking employment, and preparing for independent living are some of the tasks young adults with specific learning disabilities (SLD) face during the critical time of transition from high school to post-school environments. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines a specific learning disability as a disorder of “the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written”, that may affect a person’s listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, or mathematical skills ~~and~~ excludes a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage (20 U.S.C § 1401 (30)).

Transition is a results-oriented process which focuses on improving the academic and functional achievement of the student as they move to post-school environments and mandates individualized transition planning that is specific to each student’s unique strengths, preferences, and interests (20 U.S.C. §1401 (34)). Transition can be explored through: (a) job exploration counseling; (b) work-based learning experiences; (c) postsecondary education counseling; (d) workplace readiness training; and (e) instruction in self-advocacy. Despite such federal regulations, students with disabilities, including those with SLD, leave high school unprepared to face post-school environments (Newman et al., 2011).

### **Post-School Outcomes for Students with SLD**

Achievement of students with SLD in the area of postsecondary education, employment, and community engagement lags in comparison to the general population. Students with SLD enroll in 4-year colleges at half the rate of all students and are less likely to complete any type of postsecondary school (Horowitz, Rawe, & Whittaker, 2017). As a result, students with SLD are disproportionately affected by the impact of education on unemployment and earnings. The rate of employment among individuals with SLD has declined: nearly half (46%) of working-age individuals with SLD report they are not in the labor force (NCLD, 2014). Data indicate that individuals with SLD are twice as likely to be jobless as their peers without disabilities (Horowitz et al., 2017). Community participation for individuals with SLD ranges from 19.2% for volunteering to 26.5% for a community group participation (Newman et al., 2011). Furthermore, more than half of individuals with SLD (55 %) become entwined with the criminal justice system within 8 years of leaving high school (NCLD, 2014), which creates disruption to their educational programs, employment, and family life. Overall, young adults with SLD experience poor post-school outcomes that may initiate with the transition planning and services received while in high school (deFur, 2003).

The assumption that students with SLD have a *mild disability* primarily affecting their academic achievement may contribute to the insufficient attention given to their transition planning. Regardless of this perceived lack of need for transition, students with SLD experience difficulties during transition and require effective support during this complex process. The demand for addressing transition of students with SLD comes from the evidence of a significant disparity in post-school outcomes that exists between students with SLD and their peers without disabilities. Therefore, the call exists for educators to strengthen transition services for students

with SLD that would assist them with finding and maintaining employment, obtaining postsecondary education, and navigating the world of adulthood.

### **Effective Transition Planning**

Effective transition planning has been linked to successful post-school outcomes for young adults with SLD (Trainor, Morningstar, & Murray, 2016). Transition literature identified evidence-based predictors of post-school employment, education, and independent living success for students with disabilities (e.g., paid employment/work experience, self-care/independent living skills, interagency collaboration, self-advocacy/self-determination, community experiences; Test et al., 2009). These predictors provide guidelines for transition services for students with SLD whose success in post-school environments remains elusive. Research suggest that transition planning should be student-centered, start in the primary grades, and involve all stakeholders (Papay, Unger, Williams-Diehm, & Mitchell, 2015; Trainor et al., 2016).

### **Student-Centered Transition**

The idea of a student-centered approach to transition planning is evidenced in the literature. Researchers applied this principle to the conceptual framework developed to understand the transition of students with disabilities to college, engagement of critical stakeholders in a transition process through collaboration, active student and family involvement, and the promotion of self-determination for students with disabilities and their families (Blessings, 2001; Davis, 2016; Garrison-Wade & Lehman, 2009). A student-centered transition planning process is essential for supporting students with disabilities in “learning, earning, loving, and living in their communities” (Blessings, 2001, p. 10). Thus, placing the student with SLD in the center of the transition process is crucial component of planning and should not be overlooked.

To ensure that students with SLD have the best chances of success after school, transition planning activities must be influenced by the students and be connected to the skills needed to achieve their post-school goals (NCLD, 2014). Building student independence might be the first step in this process. Young adults with SLD will have to advocate for themselves in postsecondary settings. At a minimum, they should understand the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and their rights under these laws (Madaus, Gerber, & Price, 2008). This knowledge will empower the individual to seek reasonable accommodations in the postsecondary workplace and in institutes of higher education. Moreover, young adults with SLD will only receive accommodations in their college or workplace if they disclose their disability (Keenan, Madaus, Lombardi, & Dukes, 2019). However, many individuals fail to identify themselves as having a disability as they leave high school lacking the self-awareness, self-advocacy skills or self-confidence to seek help when needed and successfully navigate their new environment (Madaus et al., 2008; NCLD, 2014). While 98% of students with SLD received accommodations in high school, only 24% of students with SLD received accommodations in PSE (Newman, Madaus, Lalor, & Javitz, 2019). The lack of disclosure may have a negative impact on attainment of postsecondary education and employment.

Students with disabilities that possess self-determination skills have better post-school outcomes (Test et al., 2009). Therefore, educators need to understand the implications of students with SLD not disclosing their disability at the postsecondary level and equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills by teaching self-determination skills such as self-awareness, self-advocacy, and goal-setting necessary for student decision-making while in school and beyond. In Lilly's case (see Figure 1), Ms. Edwards could help Lilly with learning and practicing

self-determination by providing opportunities for participating and leading her Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. Most students with SLD attend their IEP meetings involving transition planning; however, only 15% of students take an active leadership role (NCLD, 2014). Student participation in the development of their postsecondary goals promotes self-awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy (Morgan, Kupferman, Jex, Preece, & Williams, 2017). Ms. Edwards could facilitate Lilly's active involvement in her IEP meetings and have Lilly create her own person-centered plans. To help Lilly feel more confident, Ms. Edwards could create opportunities for rehearsing and role-playing prior to the IEP meeting.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

### **Early Transition**

Another key to successful transition for students with disabilities is early planning (Kallio & Owens, 2004). Although IDEA mandates that transition planning begin by the time the student is 16, several states begin the transition process at the age of 14 or earlier. Transition planning has a significant positive effect on postsecondary support receipt by students with disabilities (Newman, Madaus, & Javitz, 2016). At the heart of the transition planning process in the individual transition plan (ITP). An ITP maps a personalized course of action based on individual strengths, interests, desires, and dreams for life after school. Transition goals and services, the two main components of an ITP, help prepare the student to be an independent adult. Transition goals describe what the student wants to do or achieve after school as related to vocational training, postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. After the goals are set, the IEP team decides which services are needed for the student to meet his goals. The range of transition services is wide and may include instruction, community experiences, career counseling, and independent living. In Lilly's case, her IEP team could develop a goal for

attending a 4-year college and taking courses in the area of Lilly's interest (see Figure 1), or a goal that would require completion of a college application or visiting a college campus. It is also important to list people and agencies involved in each goal (e.g., teachers, parents, transition specialists, colleges) and resources that can be helpful.

It is also recommended that students participate in job fairs, work-study programs, and attend career day events that help them to begin thinking about life after high school (CEC, 2015; Cease-Cook et al., 2015). Research also suggests that development of critical skills of self-determination, self-awareness, and career awareness is a lifelong process that should begin in the elementary school (Papay et al., 2015). Educators are encouraged to infuse self-determination and embed career awareness into general education curricula in the primary grades (Papay et al., 2015; Rowe et al., 2015).

Transition planning is an ongoing and comprehensive process that involves student preparation for all aspects of post-school life. To increase the likelihood of successful post-school outcomes, transition should begin early for students with SLD and continue throughout middle and high school (Uphold, 2013). As evidenced by the dismal outcomes, waiting for the legally-mandated age of 16 for students with SLD to become involved in the transition process proves far too late.

### **Interagency Collaboration**

Interagency collaboration is "a clear, purposeful, and carefully designed process that promotes cross-agency, cross-program, and cross-disciplinary collaborative efforts leading to tangible transition outcomes for youth" (Rowe et al., 2015, p.122). Research indicates that purposeful collaboration likely leads to successful student outcomes (Test et al., 2009). The involvement of representatives of other agencies and service providers is a critical component of

the transition planning process for students with SLD. The majority of students with SLD have transition plans that identify the need for some type of services after high school including postsecondary education accommodations (55%), vocational training, placement or support (32%), behavioral intervention (4%), social work services (3%), mental health services (2%; NCLD, 2014). These data confirm the need for greater involvement by outside agencies in the transition planning process for students with SLD.

One major element of transition planning is the connection among all stakeholders. Stakeholders must intentionally collaborate to develop a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the whole student (The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2017). “School, family, and community cannot alone produce successful students. Rather, partnership activities may be designed to engage, guide, energize, and motivate students to produce their own success” (Epstein, 1995, p. 2). Researchers emphasize the participation of multiple stakeholders in transition planning for students with SLD and suggest that effective transition services must be implemented in collaboration with postsecondary educational institutions and other outside agencies (Trainor et al., 2016). However, a relatively low level of involvement of agencies and organizations has been reported (NCLD, 2014).

Therefore, educators must strengthen collaborative relationships with outside agencies and ensure that professionals from other agencies are frequently involved in transition planning for students with SLD (Bailey et al., 2016; Garrison-Wade & Lehman, 2009; NCLD, 2014). In Lilly’s case, Ms. Edwards could assist the IEP team by inviting a representative from the office of disability support services from the college of Lilly’s choice and encourage communication with academic advisors from the campus. Educators also need to increase their collaborative efforts with business communities which will lead to increased opportunities for career



exploration, job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships, or paid employment for students with SLD. For example, school professionals could collaborate with the business community by conducting company tours or field trips to local businesses, having students conduct interviews with employers, hosting career days when business leaders come and speak to students, and hosting a career fair with college admissions and employment (Cease-Cook, Fowler, & Test, 2015).

### **Closing Thoughts**

As discussed earlier, acceptable post-school outcomes are largely not achieved for students with SLD compared to peers without disabilities. Transition planning must be student-centered and based on the student's interests and preferences. To ensure that students with SLD have the best chances of success after high school, transition planning activities must be heavily influenced by the students themselves and be better connected to the skills they need to achieve post-school goals. Students have the right to be actively involved in their transition planning and act as empowered leaders, not spectators because active student participation is critical in effective transition planning. Transition-related knowledge and skills acquired by students with disabilities in secondary schools are recognized predictors of successful adult outcomes (Test et al., 2009). Therefore, including predictors associated with successful outcomes in school programs (e.g., infusing self-determination training into classroom instruction) may increase the likelihood of effective transition services to help students with SLD achieve their post-school goals.

Because transition is a complex process that takes years of planning, it must start early. Various aspects of transition should be incorporated into classroom instruction at the primary grades. Educators should also consider early improvement of community engagement that

supports multiple life outcomes for students with SLD, including employment, postsecondary education, and independent living (Morningstar et al., 2015). Stakeholders must also consider the student's social network and engagement during transition, which could "potentially bolster support and satisfaction in another area" (Morningstar et al., 2015, p.207).

Further, bridging the gap in transition services between high school and postsecondary environments requires increased collaborative efforts between both present and future service providers. Participation of various agencies in transition planning has been theoretically and empirically linked to successful post-school transitions. This calls for an active involvement of community representatives from the employment sector and postsecondary institutions in the transition planning process for students with SLD.

In conclusion, as evidenced by their alluded postsecondary outcomes, transition planning for students with SLD must be strengthened to better facilitate their successful movement from school to college and careers. Student-centered transition, early transition planning, and increased collaborative efforts of all stakeholders, must be recognized as fundamental strategies for reaching the primary goal of special education - to prepare students with disabilities for life after school and help them move toward their goals and aspirations for adult life. The authors acknowledge that there are potential barriers to the implementation of effective transition for students with SLD. Responses to such barriers as time, lack of training, lack of community resources, and lack of a team approach may be explored in future articles.

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*Table 1: Resources for Transition Planning*

Key Components	Links to Resources
Age appropriate transition assessment	<a href="https://transitionta.org/transitionplanning">https://transitionta.org/transitionplanning</a>
Transition assessment and goal generator	<a href="https://tagg.ou.edu/tagg/">https://tagg.ou.edu/tagg/</a>
Transition planning	<a href="http://www.nsttac.org/content/transition-planning-folder-mapping-out-your-childs-transition">http://www.nsttac.org/content/transition-planning-folder-mapping-out-your-childs-transition</a>
Transition guide to postsecondary education and employment	<a href="https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/transition/products/postsecondary-transition-guide-may-2017.pdf?utm_content=&amp;utm_medium=email&amp;utm_name=&amp;utm_source=govdelivery&amp;utm_term">https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/transition/products/postsecondary-transition-guide-may-2017.pdf?utm_content=&amp;utm_medium=email&amp;utm_name=&amp;utm_source=govdelivery&amp;utm_term</a>
College and career readiness	<a href="http://www.ccrscenter.org">www.ccrscenter.org</a>
Career development activities	<a href="http://www.ncwd-youth.info">www.ncwd-youth.info</a>
Career and technical education	<a href="http://www.caretech.org">www.caretech.org</a>
Transition to college	<a href="https://www.nclد.org/archives/action-center/what-we-ve-done/life-with-ld-navigating-the-transition-to-college">https://www.nclد.org/archives/action-center/what-we-ve-done/life-with-ld-navigating-the-transition-to-college</a>
U.S. Department of Education on transition	<a href="https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html">https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html</a>
Wrightslaw	<a href="https://www.wrightslaw.com/info/college.index.htm">https://www.wrightslaw.com/info/college.index.htm</a>
PACER National Parent Center on Transition and Employment	<a href="https://www.pacer.org/transition/learning-center/">https://www.pacer.org/transition/learning-center/</a>
Self-determination	<a href="https://beachcenter.lsi.ku.edu/beach-self-determination">https://beachcenter.lsi.ku.edu/beach-self-determination</a>

<p><b><i>Lilly's Preferences and Interests:</i></b>  <i>Lilly is a 17-years-old high school senior who receives special education services as a student with SLD. Her favorite classes are Psychology and Child Development. Lilly enjoys reading, spending time with her younger siblings, taking care of family pets, playing golf, and shopping with her mom. She volunteers at her church and considers elementary school teaching as her future career. The results of Lilly's transition assessment indicate that she plans to attend a 4-year college and pursue a degree in education with a minor in sociology. Lilly acknowledges she needs to practice self-advocacy and time management. Ms. Edwards, Lilly's special education teacher and her case manager, has been exploring ways to enhance transition planning and ensure positive post-school outcomes for Lilly.</i></p>
<p><b><i>Postsecondary Education and Training:</i></b>  <i>After graduation, Lilly will attend a 4-year college and take courses in education and sociology.</i></p> <p><i>The summer after graduation, Lilly will take a CPR course and obtain a certification through a local Red Cross.</i></p>
<p><b><i>Employment:</i></b>  <i>The summer after graduation, Lilly will work part-time at the local childcare facility near her home.</i></p> <p><i>After earning her 4-year degree, Lilly will obtain full-time employment working as an elementary school teacher.</i></p>
<p><b><i>Independent skills:</i></b>  <i>After graduation, Lilly will use strategies to effectively manage her time, so that she successfully meets her deadlines for college.</i></p> <p><i>After graduation, Lilly will use self-advocacy skills and discuss her accommodations with college professors.</i></p>

*Figure 1.* Example of IEP transition goals (goals were adapted from National Technical Assistance Center on Transition).