

Abstract

Despite increasing legal requirements in planning and documentation, transition outcomes for secondary LD students continue to fall short of pre-graduation expectations. As students move from the supportive and controlled environment of public school special education systems to the less structured world of work or post-secondary education, a myriad of skills, supports, and coordinated efforts are needed for optimal outcomes. As the number of students qualifying for services continues to rise, analysis of the shortcomings and successes of current special education transition strategies is becoming increasingly important. This meta-synthesis of the literature on transitioning secondary LD students investigates the realities of secondary transition planning and the difficulties in implementation.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In the United States, children typically begin their school careers around five years of age. Year after year, they (ideally) continue through the school system until they are finally deemed ready for graduation around age 18. After 12 years of schooling, they are thrust into the “real world”, where they are expected to use the skills learned in the classroom to make their own life decisions, and independently navigate the daily physical, social, and financial obstacles all adults face. The effectiveness of this process in preparing students for adulthood is debatable, especially for special education students. These students have a documented need for additional help and support beyond high school graduation. Only through an effective transition process will their true potential be met.

What has historically been viewed as a small, isolated school population, students now qualifying for special education services comprise approximately twelve percent of all school-age children. The broad category of learning disabled (LD), by far the largest category of special education, accounts for more than 50% of the students receiving special education services in the U.S. today. Currently, there are more than three million students being served through special education programs as learning disabled (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The LD student population is growing, and their post-graduation needs cannot be ignored.

Learning disabilities are considered high-incidence disabilities, meeting specific criteria as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA). Though not easily categorized, under IDEA, learning disabilities are defined as:

a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to

listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. (34 Code of Federal Regulations §300.7(c)(10)).

An important distinction is that this definition does not include "learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage." (34 Code of Federal Regulations §300.7(c)(10)).

According to the American Psychiatric Association's (2000) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR), the diagnosis of LD is reached when individually administered, standardized test scores are "substantially below that expected for age, schooling, and level of intelligence" (p. 46-47). In other words, there is a discrepancy between intelligence and achievement. By any definition, however, the group of students being served as LD is a significant population requiring special accommodations and services to succeed. As these students approach high school graduation, they are particularly susceptible to failure for a number of reasons.

To potential employers and other outsiders, the LD student often appears to have no disability at all. There are typically no outwardly obvious signs that a mental deficit is present, and this can easily lead to expectations that are beyond the abilities of someone with a learning disability (Madaus, Gerber, & Price, 2008). Their limitations and need for certain accommodations may not become apparent until they are already placed in an employment or life situation that is beyond their abilities. In a job situation, this type of scenario will obviously be frustrating for both employer and employee. With a solid transition plan upon leaving high school, these false expectations might better be avoided (Brooke, Revell, & Wehman, 2009).

The graduating LD student is often in a precarious position, having functioned at a level high enough for general education integration, yet still low enough to require specific accommodations. This is a gray area on the education continuum, falling between the high functioning regular education students, and the high needs (low-incidence) special education students. Available resources are often more focused on students with severe physical or mental disabilities than those with LD (Cummings, Maddux, & Casey, 2009). In addition, LD students often over-estimate their own abilities, making self-assessment and defining their own transition needs even more difficult (Carter, Trainor, Sun, & Owens, 2009).

Under IDEA (2004), all LD students are required to have a transition plan in place during the first Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that will be in effect when the student turns sixteen years of age. The IEP transition plan is a plan for academic and functional achievement after graduation, including services, training, and community experiences that will further their chances of successful integration. The plan should also include the student's desires, strengths, and interests. This establishes a solid plan for transition to the adult world, but must still be exercised and enforced to ensure the best chance of success. Establishing the plan in writing is only the first step. Due to other pressures, such as completion of required school curriculum and preparation for high-stakes graduation testing, transition planning does not always receive the focus and attention it warrants.

The secondary LD student has often faced many years of struggles and frustrations by the time they reach high school. For many students self-determination is difficult (Steele & Cavaiuolo, 2002). They might view themselves as the same as their regular education peers, yet they continually fall short in similar achievements and milestones. Confusion about what is "wrong" with them, and where they fit into the world, frequently culminates as high school

graduation approaches (Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003). During their high school years, the LD student needs planning and support more than ever before. It is the critical time when they can see their years of comforting supports coming to a close.

It is generally stated by education systems that the goal of public education is to produce functional, productive members of society. This includes a certain level of personal happiness, contributive employment, and the ability to make positive independent decisions. If this professed goal of the education system holds true, secondary transition planning should maintain a high priority among all the other demands faced by both the student and teachers.

In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education reported that “students with disabilities are significantly unemployed and underemployed upon leaving school compared to their peers who do not have disabilities” (p. 43). It further stated that “adults with disabilities are much less likely to be employed than adults without disabilities” (p.43). Unemployment rates for working-age adults with disabilities have hovered at the 70 percent level for at least the past 12 years (p. 43). These facts make it apparent that twelve years of special education schooling are ineffective without an effective transition into adulthood. The LD student represents the highest functioning special education student, and has the best chance of post-secondary integration, but only with proper transition supports.

The graduating LD student faces unique obstacles as they enter the adult world (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010; Jacobsen, 2003). Often misunderstood and over-estimated, this group of students needs a full team of advocates, including the student, in the planning and execution of individualized transition planning (Thompson, Fulk, & Piercy, 2000). Despite the explicit requirements of transition planning under IDEA (2004), there is still a real world need for better

plan execution, as well as public awareness in regards to the needs and abilities of LD students entering the workplace, vocational training, or any other life situation.

1.2. Author's beliefs and experiences

My experience and interest in transition planning for secondary students with learning disabilities began unexpectedly eight years ago, when I accepted a winter job working in various capacities with LD students at Ketchikan High School, in Ketchikan, Alaska. Ketchikan High School is a public secondary school serving grades nine through twelve, nestled in the remote coastal mountains of southeast Alaska. The student population is approximately 550, with about 22% being Alaska Native. Among the total school population, approximately 4% are identified as learning disabled.

Without formal training, I was at first unaware of the technical definition of LD, but rather viewed these students as I saw them: teenagers with typical desires, goals, and a certain amount of anxiety about the unknowns of the future. By high school age, I have found these students to have an established routine of survival. They know the school system and how to work through it. They basically know their limitations and have figured out ways around them within the school system. They know how to reach the end without following the intended path. Over time, I was better able to understand the specific transition challenges this group of special needs students face as they move from the familiar, structured, and supportive school environment to the independent and less defined adult world. Upon graduation, the entire system they have navigated since kindergarten is removed. Seeing the results of this first hand only furthers my interest in this topic.

I have found LD students to generally look and act like their typically developing peers, and this inevitably causes them some confusion and frustration when their disabilities do surface. In

no way do I want to undermine the immense challenges that students with low-incidence disabilities face, but I do believe the general public is more immediately understanding, compassionate, and accommodating when disabilities are physically obvious. This is not the case with LD students, and lack of public understanding is another area of my own interest and concern. I have seen this disparity between apparent ability and true ability cause considerable fear and frustration for an LD student graduating high school. I do not believe transition anxiety with LD students is inevitable, but rather largely avoidable with proper individualized planning.

I have a specific interest in this topic because the LD student is often integrated into regular education classrooms, and is therefore susceptible to falling between the cracks of the system. They are an ill-defined group with a broad range of disabilities, and therefore easily misunderstood. When I tell someone I work with special education students, the term invariably conjures up images of low-incidence, high needs individuals. The LD student is not what the general public envisions when the term “special education” is used. For myself, this continually shows the need for better public understanding of what a learning disability is, and what these individuals require to be at their best. Proper understanding of their disabilities by outsiders (e.g., employers), and appropriate placement in living or vocational situations is critical to their present and future functionality in the greater society.

Another specific area of interest I have is the increasing pressures on academia and standardized tests, as opposed to spending school time on life skills and other necessary social skills. I have repeatedly witnessed the incredible pressure to pass high-stakes graduation testing take priority over transition planning and its related tasks. After years of working with LD students, it has become apparent that the structure and flow of the outside world is virtually a complete unknown to them. There is very little understanding of daily adult life, and

subsequently there is much anxiety at even the thought of leaving the world they know, for a world they don't want to know. I have concerns that the emphasis on graduation may leave the LD student even less prepared for adult life. If we stand by the true goal of producing productive members of society, graduation cannot be the final process. The supports that are documented as necessary for the LD student do not mysteriously disappear upon graduation, but continue to be required during transition and possibly through adult life.

An LD student with a diploma will find great struggles integrating into society without a well thought and supportive transition plan. Their disabilities quickly catch up to them, and without the previously relied upon resources and support, the result is an ineffective transition from high school. In the broader sense, years of educational efforts are lost without an effective transition into the adult world. Working with students in this situation has shown me what an incredibly important piece of the puzzle effective transition planning is for secondary LD students. Without it, we have failed the student, and left them alone in a confusing and uncertain world. We all pay the price for this.

Proper post-secondary placement of LD students has great social implications since potential employers, employees (including former LD students), and the general population will all benefit from a well-formulated transition plan. I believe with solid, individualized transition planning these LD students can become assets to society, and without such planning they will be liabilities. It is in everyone's best interest that our citizens with learning disabilities have the best chance for success, and this is why I am researching this topic.

For special educators this is the essence of all their years of work with the student. The question we as special educators must ask is, "Have we prepared the LD student to the best of our abilities, to enter the post-secondary world?" Only with effective transition planning will we

know that we have. Although IDEA requires specific transition planning, in my own work with these students, I have seen that there is a need for improvement in this area. I have also become acutely aware that these are not just numbers or statistics, but real people who we have already invested so much time and effort into, that deserve the final support of effective transition planning based on their specific individual needs. Again, this is the goal of all public education, and should hold true no less for LD students than for regular education students. Though I was not in special education as a student, I remember well the pressure and anxiety in shifting from high school to “real life”, and I know these same feelings are greatly exacerbated by having a learning disability.

With this meta-synthesis, I hope to investigate the following research questions:

1. If the entire school process from K-12 is to produce functional, productive members of society, why is there so little emphasis on LD transition planning from high school?
2. Would better public awareness help with the understanding that people with learning disabilities do have documented needs for accommodations and support, though these may not be immediately apparent?
3. What does the current research show to be the more effective strategies for successful transition of LD students from high school to post-secondary education, vocational training, or immediate employment?

1.3. The purpose of this meta-synthesis

This meta-synthesis, which focused on post-secondary transition planning for students with learning disabilities, had multiple purposes. One purpose was to review journal articles related to the post-secondary transition planning process, specifically the realities of making time and resources for this process amid regular academic requirements. A second purpose was to review

journal articles related to the education of the general public about learning disabilities; I was specifically interested in articles that analyze effective techniques to convey to the public what learning disabilities actually are. A third purpose was to analyze strategies that have proven effective for integrating LD students into the mainstream society. A fourth purpose was to classify each article by publication type, to identify the research design, participants, and data sources of each research study, and to summarize the findings of each study. My final purpose in conducting this meta-synthesis was to identify significant themes in these articles, and to connect those themes to my own classroom experience in teaching secondary LD special needs students in rural Alaska.

2. Methods

2.1. Selection criteria

The 40 journal articles included in this meta-synthesis met the following selection criteria.

1. The articles explored issues related to transition planning for secondary students with LD.
2. The articles explored issues related to public education concerning learning disabilities.
3. The articles were published in peer reviewed journals related to the field of education.
4. The articles were published between 2000 and 2011.

2.2. Search procedures

Database searches and ancestral searches were conducted to locate articles for this meta-synthesis.

2.2.1. Database searches

I conducted Boolean searches within the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC, Ebscohost) using these specific search terms:

1. (“Transitional Programs”) AND (“Learning Disabilities”).
2. (“Individualized Transition Plans”) AND (“Learning Disabilities”).
3. (“Special Education”) AND (“Transition Planning”).
4. (“Secondary Education”) AND (“Transition Planning”).

These database searches yielded a total of 36 articles (Abbott & Heslop, 2009; Baer, Flexer, Beck, Amstutz, Hoffman, Brothers, et al., 2003; Brooke, Revell, & Wehman, 2009; Carter, Trainor, Sun, & Owens, 2009; Chiba & Low, 2007; Cobb, 2002; Cowan, 2006; Cummings, Maddux, & Casey, 2000; Daviso, Denney, Baer, & Flexer, 2011; deFur, 2003; Gartland & Strosnider, 2007; Harrison, Larochette, & Nichols, 2007; Hennessey, Rumrill, Roessler, & Cook, 2006; Jacobsen, 2003; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Kaehne & Beyer, 2009; Kellems & Morningstar, 2010; Kortering, Braziel, & McClannon, 2010; Kosine, 2007; Li, Bassett, & Hutchinson, 2009; Lindstrom, Paskey, Dickinson, Doren, Zane, & Johnson, 2007; Madaus & Shaw, 2006; Madaus, 2006; Madaus, Gerber, & Price, 2008; Mellard & Lancaster, 2003; Parker & Banerjee, 2007; Osterholt & Barratt, 2011; O’Conner, 2009; Sitlington, 2008; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003; Steere & Cavauiolo, 2002; Test, Fowler, White, Richter, & Walker, 2009; Thompson, Fulk, & Piercy, 2000; Trainor, 2010; Wasburn-Moses, 2006; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007).

2.2.2. Ancestral searches

An ancestral search involves reviewing the reference lists of previously published works to locate literature relevant to one’s topic of interest (Welch, Brownell, & Sheridan, 1999). I conducted ancestral searches using the reference lists of the previously retrieved articles. These

ancestral searches yielded four additional articles that met the selection criteria (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Epstein, Rudolph, & Epstein, 2000; Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002; Siperstein, Romano, Mohler, & Parker, 2006).

2.3. *Coding procedures*

I used a coding form to categorize the information presented in each of the 40 articles. This coding form was based on: (a) publication type; (b) research design; (c) participants; (d) data sources; and (e) findings of the studies.

2.3.1. *Publication types*

Each journal article was evaluated and classified according to publication type (e.g., research study, theoretical work, descriptive work, opinion piece/position paper, guide, annotated bibliography, review of the literature). *Research studies* use a formal research design to gather and/or analyze quantitative and/or qualitative data. *Theoretical works* use existing literature to analyze, expand, or further define a specific philosophical and/or theoretical assumption. *Descriptive works* describe phenomena and experiences, but do not disclose particular methods for attaining data. *Opinion pieces/position papers* explain, justify, or recommend a particular course of action based on the author's opinions and/or beliefs. *Guides* give instructions or advice explaining how practitioners might implement a particular agenda. An *annotated bibliography* is a list of cited works on a particular topic, followed by a descriptive paragraph describing, evaluating, or critiquing the source. *Reviews of the literature* critically analyze the published literature on a topic through summary, classification, and comparison.

2.3.2. *Research design*

Each empirical study was further classified by research design (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods research). *Quantitative* research utilizes numbers to convey

information. Instead of numbers, *qualitative* research uses language to explore issues and phenomenon. *Mixed methods* research involves the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods to present information within a single study.

2.3.3. Participants, data sources, and findings

I identified the participants in each study (e.g., students with learning disabilities, teachers of students with learning disabilities, parents of students with learning disabilities). I also identified the data sources used in each study (e.g., observations, surveys). Lastly, I summarized the findings of each study (Table 2).

2.4. Data analysis

I used a modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method previously employed by Duke (2011) and Duke and Ward (2009) to analyze the 40 articles included in this meta-synthesis. Significant statements were first identified within each article. For the purpose of this meta-synthesis, significant statements were identified as statements that addressed issues related to: (a) the need for self-advocacy, self-determination, and self-awareness; (b) transition to college; (c) transition to work; (d) employer and consumer attitudes; (e) need for student input and collaboration; (f) transition difficulties and system shortcomings; and/or (g) ideas for improvement. I then generated a list of non-repetitive, verbatim significant statements with paraphrased formulated meanings. These paraphrased formulated meanings represented my interpretation of each significant statement. Lastly, the formulated meanings from all 40 articles were grouped into theme clusters, represented as emergent themes. These emergent themes represented the fundamental elements of the entire body of literature.

3. Results

3.1. Publication type

I located 40 articles that met my selection criteria. The publication type of each article is located in Table 1. Seventeen of the 40 articles (42.5%) included in this meta synthesis were research studies (Abbott & Heslop, 2009; Baer et al., 2003; Benz et al., 2000; Carter et al., 2009; Chiba & Low, 2007; Daviso et al., 2011; Hennessey et al., 2006; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Kaehne & Beyer, 2009; Kortering et al., 2010; Li et al., 2009; Madaus, 2006; Parker & Banerjee, 2007; Sipersteine et al., 2006; Thompson et al., 2000; Wasburn-Moses, 2006; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). Fifteen of the articles (37.5%) were guides (Cobb, 2002; Cummings et al., 2000; deFur, 2003; Epstein et al., 2000; Jacobsen, 2003; Kellems & Morningstar, 2010; Lindstrom et al., 2007; Madaus et al., 2008; Mellard & Lancaster, 2003; O'Conner, 2009; Osterholt & Barratt, 2011; Sitlington, 2008; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003; Steere & Cavaiuolo, 2002; Test et al., 2009). Five of the articles (12.5%) were descriptive works (Brooke et al., 2009; Gartland & Strosnider, 2007; Harrison et al., 2007; Madaus & Shaw, 2006; Trainor, 2010). Three of the articles (7.5%) were reviews of literature (Cowan, 2006; Johnson et al., 2002; Kosine, 2007).

Table 1

Author(s) & Year of Publication	Publication Type
Abbott & Heslop, 2009	Research Study
Baer et al., 2003	Research Study
Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000	Research Study
Brooke, Revell, & Wehman, 2009	Descriptive Work
Carter, Trainor, Sun, & Owens, 2009	Research Study
Chiba & Low, 2007	Research Study
Cobb, 2002	Guide
Cowan, 2006	Review of the Literature
Cummings, Maddux, & Casey, 2000	Guide
Daviso, Denney, Baer, & Flexer, 2011	Research Study
deFur, 2003	Guide
Epstein, Rudolph, & Epstein, 2000	Guide
Gartland & Strosnider, 2007	Descriptive Work
Harrison, Larochette, & Nichols, 2007	Descriptive Work
Hennessey, Rumrill, Roessler, & Cook, 2006	Research Study
Jacobsen, 2003	Guide
Janiga & Costenbader, 2002	Research Study
Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002	Review of the Literature
Kaehne & Beyer, 2009	Research Study
Kellems & Morningstar, 2010	Guide
Kortering, Brazier, & McClannon, 2010	Research Study
Kosine, 2007	Review of the Literature

Li, Bassett, & Hutchinson, 2009	Research Study
Lindstrom, Paskey, Dickinson, Doren, Zane, & Johnson, 2007	Guide
Madaus, 2006	Research Study
Madaus, Gerber, & Price, 2008	Guide
Madaus & Shaw, 2006	Descriptive Work
Mellard & Lancaster, 2003	Guide
O'Conner, 2009	Guide
Osterholt & Barratt, 2011	Guide
Parker & Banerjee, 2007	Research Study
Siperstein, Romano, Mohler, & Parker, 2006	Research Study
Sitlington, 2008	Guide
Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003	Guide
Steere & Cavaiuolo, 2002	Guide
Test, Fowler, White, Richter, & Walker, 2009	Guide
Thompson, Fulk, & Piercy, 2000	Research Study
Trainor, 2010	Descriptive Work
Wasburn-Moses, 2006	Research Study
Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007	Research Study

3.2. Research design, participants, data sources, and findings of the studies

As stated previously, I located 17 research studies that met my selection criteria (Abbott & Heslop, 2009; Baer et al., 2003; Benz et al., 2000; Carter et al., 2009; Chiba & Low, 2007; Daviso et al., 2011; Hennessey et al., 2006; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Kaehne & Beyer, 2009; Kortering et al., 2010; Li et al., 2009; Madaus, 2006; Parker & Banerjee, 2007; Sipersteine et al., 2006; Thompson et al., 2000; Wasburn-Moses, 2006; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). The research design, participants, data sources, and findings of each of these studies are identified in Table 2.

Table 2

Authors	Research Design	Participants	Data Sources	Findings
Abbott & Heslop, 2009	Qualitative	14 young people with LD, 16 parents, 29 disability services professionals	Semi-structured interviews	Transition planning proved inadequate for students in out-of-area residential special schools and colleges. A greater focus on planning and commitment to positive outcomes is needed in order for these students to have similar life chances as their non-disabled peers.
Baer et al., 2003	Quantitative	140 special education high school graduates	Surveys	Special education students from rural schools were more likely to have vocational training, and favored full-time employment after graduation, whereas those from urban schools were more involved in regular academics, and were more likely to enroll in postsecondary education after graduation.
Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000	Quantitative	709 high school students with disabilities	Oregon Youth Transition Program (YTP) database analysis	Combining student-identified transition goals with career-related work experience greatly improved graduation and employment outcomes. Students placed high value on individualization of services and personal attention in transition planning.
Carter, Trainor, Sun, & Owens, 2009	Quantitative	160 high school students with EBD or LD	46 item Transition Planning Inventory (TPI)	Students and teachers differed in rating specific needs of EBD and LD students. TPI showed the importance of including multiple perspectives in transition planning.
Chiba & Low, 2007	Quantitative	73 high school transition	Surveys; pre- and post	Transition course helped students understand and

		course students	measure questionnaires	accept their disabilities rather than ignore them. Enhanced social adjustment was the most common theme of post-course responses.
Daviso, Denney, Baer, & Flexer, 2011	Quantitative	416 exiting high school students with LD	In-school surveys	Study found that LD students are keen users of available transition planning services, and that students' courses do match their postschool goals. A majority of students were satisfied with their own postschool goals as well as their postsecondary planning and transition services.
Hennessey, Rumrill, Roessler, & Cook, 2006	Mixed Methods	110 college students with LD and/or ADD and/or AD/HD	Surveys	College students with LD and/or ADD and/or AD/HD rated their own employment strengths highest in marketable skills, realistic career choices, interview skills, and meeting expectations. They rated their greatest weaknesses in understanding health benefits, Social Security, employee rights, discrimination, and discussing accommodation needs.
Janiga & Costenbader, 2002	Mixed Methods	74 college coordinators of special services in New York	Mail surveys	Special services coordinators reported low satisfaction with high school special education students' preparedness for college life, especially in regard to self-advocacy skills. The greatest satisfaction was in updated evaluations of students prior to enrollment in college.
Kaehne & Beyer, 2009	Qualitative	28 transition authorities in the U.K.	Policy related interviews	A gap was found between the desires of transition professionals and the actual

				outcomes of transitioning students. Skills acquired in high school were found not to be developed further with advanced education. Parents and students expressed a desire for more work experience opportunities, opposed to the push for advanced academic education.
Kortering, Braziel, & McClannon, 2010	Quantitative	82 high school students with SLD, and 406 general education high school students	Surveys	Both SLD and general education students reported similar family backgrounds, perceptions of school, and future dream jobs, but the most likely jobs reported by both groups were significantly different. Those without SLD had higher rates of postsecondary education plans; those with SLD responded with more uncertainty, and were more likely to have unrealistic ambitions.
Li, Bassett, & Hutchinson, 2009	Quantitative	343 secondary special educators	Surveys	Educators showed not frequently involved in using assessment tools and their results in transition planning. Educators were more confident in their classroom activities and curriculum as related to post-secondary goals and self-determination skills.
Madaus, 2006	Mixed Methods	170 college graduates with LD	Surveys	College LD graduates stressed the need for services in the areas of college internships, mentoring programs, specific courses, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) knowledge, and follow-up with graduates. They rated self-understanding as the

				most important personal asset.
Parker & Banerjee, 2007	Quantitative	142 college students	Investigator-designed technology surveys	Surveys revealed significant differences between the technology competencies of students with and without disabilities. Effective assessment and intervention are required for college bound students to gain fluency in technologies.
Siperstein, Romano, Mohler, & Parker, 2006	Quantitative	803 adults nationally selected by random digit telephone dialing	National public surveys	Participants overwhelmingly favored companies who hire people with disabilities, and expressed positive experiences with such businesses. All responses were positive in regard to working with people who have disabilities. The general public supports integration.
Thompson, Fulk, & Piercy, 2000	Mixed Methods	22 high school students with LD	Student Transition Planning Guide (TPG) file analysis; parent and student interviews	Support needs recorded in TPG's differed greatly from student and parent desires. Adult service agencies were supportive after graduation, but were rarely involved in the transition planning process. Support needs could be better aligned with personal abilities and goals.
Wasburn-Moses, 2006	Quantitative	191 high school special education teachers	Surveys	Teachers reported lack of consistency between basic skills instruction, vocational training, content area instruction, and transition planning. Student options were reported as limited. Reform is needed in balancing basic and vocational skills in a way that improves student outcomes, both academically and in employment.

Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007	Mixed methods	103 Texas high school special education students	Ten question survey	Teachers and students must both understand the legal and practical aspects of transition planning in order for it to be effective. Administrators must allow teachers the time for individualized transition planning. Adult local service providers need a strong relationship with local high schools.
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3.2.1. Research design

Ten of the 17 studies (58.8%) used a quantitative research design (Baer et al., 2003; Benz et al., 2000; Carter et al., 2009; Chiba & Low, 2007; Daviso et al., 2011; Kortering et al., 2010; Li et al., 2009; Parker & Banerjee, 2007; Siperstein et al., 2006; Wasburn-Moses, 2006). Four of the studies (23.5%) utilized a mixed methods research design (Hennessey et al., 2006; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Madaus, 2006; Thompson et al., 2000). Three of the studies (17.6%) used a qualitative research design (Abbott & Heslop, 2009; Kaehne & Beyer, 2009; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007).

3.2.2. Participants and data sources

The majority of the 17 research studies included in this meta-synthesis analyzed data from high school students with disabilities and special services professionals. Seven of the studies (41.2%) analyzed data collected from high school students with disabilities (Benz et al., 2000; Carter et al., 2009; Chiba & Low, 2007; Daviso et al., 2011; Kortering et al., 2010; Thompson et al., 2000; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). Three of the studies (17.6%) analyzed data from special services professionals (Abbott & Heslop, 2009; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Kaehne & Beyer, 2009). In addition to high school students with disabilities and special services professionals, data was also analyzed from other participants. These additional participants included high school special education teachers, secondary special education teachers, general education high school students, special education high school graduates, parents of young people with LD, college students, college students with LD, college graduates with LD, and adults nationally selected by random digit telephone dialing.

Surveys and interviews provided the main data sources used in the research studies.

Twelve of the studies (70.6%) used surveys to collect data from participants (Baer et al., 2003;

Chiba & Low, 2007; Daviso et al., 2011; Hennessey et al., 2006; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Kortering et al., 2010; Li et al., 2009; Madaus, 2006; Parker & Banerjee, 2007; Siperstein et al., 2006; Wasburn-Moses, 2006; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). Three of the studies (17.6%) used interviews to collect data (Abbott & Heslop, 2009; Kaehne & Beyer, 2009; Thompson et al., 2000). Other data sources were also used in the research studies, including database analysis, transition planning inventories, and student file analysis.

3.2.3. Findings of the studies

The findings of the 17 research studies included in this meta-synthesis can be summarized as follows.

1. Teachers, students with disabilities, parents, and special services coordinators often have differing ideas as to the needed supports and training for a given student, leaving a fragmented approach to transition planning. Cohesion is needed between all involved parties in order for the disabled student to maximize their potential. Legal and practical understanding of transition planning is needed by everyone involved.

2. Special education students need continued supports after high school graduation. Graduates tend to be confident in their personal skills, but are less confident in understanding social systems, their rights under ADA, and in being self-advocates. College LD graduates stress the need for continued support systems in both school and work, and the general public has shown positive support for integrating these students into mainstream society via these support systems.

3. Students with LD are capable participants in the planning and execution of their future goals. These students tend to utilize known resources, and with education have proven to better

understand their disabilities and how they impact daily life. The student's perspective and realistic desires should be reflected in transition planning.

3.3. Emergent themes

Seven themes emerged from my analysis of the 40 articles included in this meta-synthesis. These emergent themes, or theme clusters, include: (a) need for self-advocacy, self-determination, and self-awareness; (b) transition to college; (c) transition to work; (d) employer and consumer attitudes; (e) need for student input and collaboration; (f) transition difficulties and system shortcomings; and (g) ideas for improvement. These seven theme clusters and their formulated meanings are represented in Table 3.

Table 3

Theme Clusters	Formulated Meanings
<p>Need for Self-Advocacy, Self-Determination, and Self-Awareness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successful adults with LD understand their strengths and weaknesses, and can address these in making personal and career decisions. • Student acceptance of a disability is an important step in transition planning. • Students with LD consistently over-estimate their abilities, and as a result often hold unrealistic job expectations. • Self-knowledge and self-awareness are necessary in the process of identifying preferences and interests; to decide on a career a student must know what they are good at and interested in. • Students with disabilities can be taught self-advocacy for their academic needs, especially through self-determination training programs. • Understanding ones self, and gaining the ability to self-advocate, takes many years to develop. • Transitioning students inherit the task of advocating for themselves, making self-advocacy a critical skill. • In order to receive proper accommodations, transitioning students must know how to effectively communicate their strengths and weaknesses to professors and potential employers. • The web of services and supports is simply not in place for students with LD, as it is for those with more severe disabilities, making self-advocacy a required skill. • Students with LD often deny their learning problems, furthering the need for realistic self-awareness. • Knowledge of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is important for transitioning students, and should be part of a comprehensive transition plan. • Research shows that many adults with LD are not familiar with the ADA, and are therefore not aware of their personal rights. • Students must learn self-determination skills in order to succeed in life outside the protections of IDEA. • Secondary students with LD tend to spend much of their time with people who are paid to be with them, making self-advocacy an especially important skill as familiar professional supports decrease with transition.
<p>Transition to College</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The transition to college is difficult for all students, but especially for LD students. • Students with LD have difficulty gaining admission to college due to standardized testing requirements. • There has been a large increase in the number of disabled students entering college, and students with LD are the fastest growing disability category among college freshmen.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although enrollment is growing, retention rates are low for LD college students, as many lack the transition skills necessary to adjust to college life. • Significant changes in legal rights occur at the college level; parent and student reverse responsibility, removing the parents as legal advocates. • Postsecondary institutions are not required to comply with IDEA. • Many students who qualified for services under IDEA do not qualify for services under ADA or Section 504. • Once in college, students with LD are expected to document the presence and severity of their disability, and ensure reasonable accommodations for themselves. • Navigating the college environment has proven very difficult for many students with LD, with less teacher-student interaction, larger classes, long-range projects, infrequent evaluations, and greater independence in time management. • Many college students with LD have relied too heavily on parent and secondary teacher support. • Students with LD have difficulty transferring academic and social strategies learned in high school to the postsecondary school setting. • Students with LD fail in college more because of inadequate preparations and lack of understanding the complex college environment, than because of poor academics. • College professors have varied teaching styles, and may have little experience or awareness in teaching students with LD. • Transition planning for potential college students must include instruction on how to access services and obtain needed accommodations. • Most college students with LD have not used career services on their college campus until nearing graduation, and the impending need for employment. • Successful transition from high school to college requires careful planning between the student, high school, and postsecondary school. • Postsecondary education is a common transition goal because post-college employment rates for LD graduates are comparable with employment rates for non-disabled graduates.
<p>Transition to Work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many people with LD want the chance to work, yet unemployment rates for this group remain disproportionately high. • Adults with disabilities are at a significant disadvantage in meaningful employment choices, and many find it a challenging prospect after the protections offered in secondary education. • Students with LD have confidence in their abilities and technical skills, yet show uncertainty in areas such as insurance, ADA rights, taxes, and Social Security. • Research shows that many people with LD do not transfer well from courses and training to paid employment.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internships and job shadowing connect school to real life experience and problem solving, and are strong predictors of successful postsecondary full-time employment. • The social system of the employment world is barely knowledgeable about disability issues. • The disclosure and accommodation process in the workplace is not the same process as in educational settings. • The person with LD transitioning to work is not protected by IDEA, and is left to secure proper accommodations on their own. • Disclosure adds to the difficulties of a job search, job security and relationship issues with other workers and supervisors. • If an employee with LD does not self-disclose, they are not eligible for ADA protections. • The strong focus on high school academics due to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) leaves little time for life-skills instruction and coordination.
<p>Employer and Consumer Attitudes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The successful employment of disabled people depends on the views of consumers. • The public expresses positive experiences in interactions with disabled employees, and favors businesses who hire disabled people. • Employers’ negative perceptions of hiring disabled people creates more limitations than external barriers. • Despite verbal endorsement of hiring disabled people, few employers follow through in practice. • Hiring people with disabilities is socially responsible, and consumers are increasingly supporting businesses they view as socially responsible. • Reputation is a cornerstone of business, and hiring people with disabilities can improve reputation. • Employers are less likely to hire a disabled person with an alternate diploma, such as a certificate of achievement, than a regular high school diploma or General Education Diploma (GED).
<p>Need for Student Input and Collaboration</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective transition planning must consider the hopes a student has for themselves. • Research shows that students are not often included in their own transition planning, and are often passive recipients of other’s opinions and desires. • Relationships between parents, student, school professionals, and community services are not always as good as they could be. • It is critical that transition teams learn an individual student’s strengths, and not base decisions on deficits. • Transition planning must be agreed upon by all stakeholders, especially the student. • Without student input there is little chance of meeting documented postsecondary goals. • Including the student in transition planning gives them a chance to

	<p>improve skills they need as adults, such as decision making, multi-step planning, and effectively communicating thoughts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students appreciate individualized planning, and completion of student-identified goals are highly associated with improved graduation and employment outcomes. • Student inclusion in planning helps improve current and future curricular relevance by helping align school content with student desires. • Students with LD who view their school curriculum as irrelevant to the adult life they envision for themselves are far more likely to drop out of school.
<p>Transition Difficulties and System Shortcomings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special education programs are criticized for failing to individualize instruction and improve student outcomes, both social and academic. • Transition planning and IEPs developed as separate processes prior to IDEA 1990, and though now legally tied together, have yet to show such unity in practice. • Dropping out of school is one of the most serious and persistent problems facing special education programs nationally, and statistically little has changed in the past few decades. • Few LD students are achieving a high quality of postsecondary life. • Many high school special education students do not receive an education that maximizes their potential. • Anticipated postschool outcomes often differ from actual experiences. • Many secondary students with LD are not fluent with technologies needed for postsecondary ambitions. • High schools cannot provide for successful transition of LD students without assistance from other professionals and agencies. • There is a lack of coordination between public schools and community service agencies. • There is too often a disparity between the postsecondary expectations of students, parents, and involved professionals. • Laws that govern access to programs and services are not consistent between secondary and postsecondary institutions. • Many years of transition outcome data are available, however local schools rarely receive and use this data to improve their transition planning efforts. • Secondary and post-secondary requirements can be mismatched unless all involved parties agree on goals. • Despite clearly set legislation, there is a lack of clarity concerning professional's individual roles in transition planning, adding to student and family confusion about their own roles. • There is a lack of shared student information between agencies, complicating efforts to develop integrated service plans. • Special education students are too often guided toward a non-challenging curriculum, and given alternate diplomas, leaving them with

	<p>a transcript weaker than their non-disabled peers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Despite ADA supports, unemployment is exceptionally high for adults with LD, and there has been little narrowing of this employment gap. • Transition planning is often an afterthought, begins too late, and is sometimes criticized as vague, generic, and unmeasurable. • Professionals feel they are at the mercy of the system constraints placed upon them.
<p>Ideas for Improvement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition staff must be extremely efficient at maximizing time and resources in planning future supports and services. • An increase in transition successes will require school staff to go beyond their comfortable and familiar roles, and investigate and experiment with new techniques and partnerships. • Adolescents with disabilities appear to want, and desperately need, trusted adults who can validate their fears, and appreciate their accomplishments. • Transition teams must help students better understand their disabilities and the accommodations they need, so they can self-advocate in postsecondary situations. • Academic and vocational courses must not be diluted, but rather high expectations held for all students with disabilities, so they can maximize their postsecondary opportunities. • Transition practices must consider not only the student's desires and abilities, but also the local culture, the school district's values and vision, and particular community settings in order for seamless transition to occur. • High school students should be allowed flexibility in their secondary programs, to allow alignment with future goals. • More focus on planning and commitment to results is needed in order for students with LD to have similar life chances as their non-disabled peers. • The student and the student's interests must be at the center of all transition decisions.

4. Discussion

In this section I have summarized the emergent themes from my analysis of the 40 articles included in this meta-synthesis. These emergent themes were then connected to my own practices as a special education teacher.

4.1. Need for self-advocacy, self-determination, and self-awareness

The need for students with LD to have a personal understanding of their disability, and the subsequent skills to use that knowledge to ensure their own needs are met, is of paramount importance. Transition from high school is a time when familiar and required supports become nonexistent, and the student with LD must navigate the adult social and bureaucratic systems on their own. A general lack of awareness regarding ADA rights, combined with lack of self-understanding, leads to ineffective transitions out of high school. These students are known to over-estimate their abilities, or simply deny any disability at all, both resulting in less than optimal transition results. With more focus on outwardly obvious low-incidence disabilities, the student with LD must be able to explain to others what their disability is and how it affects the task at hand. Only through understanding their own strengths and weaknesses, and having the will to ensure their rights are protected, will the student with LD make a seamless shift to adult life.

These statements show that special education students are often too dependent on others at the secondary level. More time needs to be allotted for individual counseling regarding a student's specific disability. I would like to integrate more one on one time to help students understand their strengths and weaknesses. With a strict academic schedule this will likely need to take place during lunch, or after school. Self-understanding is essential for transitioning students, and I would also like to have my students take more control over their daily lives by

writing their own IEP and transition goals. This will help them not only define the path they are on, but will allow feedback by other team members, keeping the goals realistic and attainable. The adult world is an unknown and intimidating place to students with LD. I believe the inclusion of the student in the transition and IEP process can include real world skills training that will help ease anxieties. For example, students can practice explaining their disability to other team members at their IEP meetings, as they will later have to do with potential employers. They can also write down their needed accommodations instead of just having a mental idea of what they are. Through the writing of multi-step goals and actively interacting with team members, my students can gain some control over their lives, and some confidence in the transition process.

4.2. Transition to college

The transition from high school to college is a considerable change that requires coordinated planning well before graduation. With the loss of familiar supports, the LD student entering college is faced with a bewildering array of responsibilities, both personal and as a student. Transitioning students with LD have not had to fight for their rights and accommodations while under the protections of IDEA (2004), and are faced with navigating the complex college environment alone. Dropout rates are disproportionately high for students with LD, and the causes come from a combination of factors. Time management skills and the ability to balance all of the new responsibilities of personal and school life are especially important. Self-determination is critical. Only through specific skills training in high school, and coordination between involved agencies, can students with LD become college graduates. College is a desirable path for many because after graduation, employment rates are similar to non-disabled graduates.

The ability to manage multiple responsibilities, while also deciphering unknown processes such as class registration and deadlines, lie at the center of difficulties for LD students transitioning to college. These findings made me realize the need for emphasizing time management skills at the high school level. Without the ability to organize, prioritize, and complete an ever changing variety of tasks, transition to college will never be successful. I have witnessed too many students not given opportunities for self-management, and often students have too much reliance on school staff by the time they are in high school. In my classroom, I intend to give more long-term, multi-step projects that will help students understand the processes they will be faced with in college. Instead of enabling, I want to give support more in line with what they will receive in college, and not only allow, but expect more independence from the student. Research shows that we as professionals must also take the time to explain to students the shift in rights between secondary and post-secondary schools, and also the processes for ensuring that their required accommodations are in place. These are important tasks that should be integrated into my daily academic schedule.

4.3. Transition to work

Graduating high school students with LD want the chance to work, and they want to live similar lives to their non-disabled peers. The world of work, however, presents unique challenges that must be addressed during high school or before. Unlike school environments, work situations are less formal, and employers may have little knowledge of the realities of a particular disability, or the legal requirements in addressing it. Again, self-awareness and self-determination are key skills in ensuring the most productive work situation. There is nobody else to fight for legal rights except the employee. Real world work experience during the high school years is a strong predictor of post-secondary employment success, and mere training and

classes on the subject are not enough. With proper supports and realistic expectations, students with LD can transfer their strengths into the workplace, and pursue productive adult lives.

Many of my own students have a particular career that they identify with early in high school. The need for having real world work experience during the high school years can be applied to my students by individualizing curriculums to align them as much as possible with student post-secondary desires. Vocational and part time work programs are available to high school students through the local university, and I want to be sure my students utilize these resources and gain the skills they can provide. My students are often too passive, and shy away from situations that appear challenging or intimidating. In the past I have held mock employment interviews to give my students the reality of explaining their strengths and weaknesses face to face. However, there is no substitute for real world situations, and I intend to work more closely with local employers to find work situations that will allow my students the best chances to rise to their potential.

4.4. Employer and consumer attitudes

The successful employment of high school graduates with LD depends largely on consumer attitudes and consumer perceptions of interactions with disabled employees. Employers want happy customers, and customers are increasingly supporting businesses they view as socially responsible. The general public has shown not only tolerance and acceptance, but also the expectation that employers will hire disabled people. Research shows that people have a tendency to support those businesses that do hire disabled people. Despite a supportive social atmosphere, most employers are still hesitant to hire disabled people due to their own preconceived notions of what the experience will entail. Employers own fears are the biggest barrier for prospective employees with LD.

These conclusions show the real need for strong school and employer relations. Our local employers are receptive to hiring disabled graduates, but only if they understand who they are hiring. As a teacher, I spend more time with the students than other transition team members, so I am in the best position to inform potential employers of strengths, weaknesses, and the best scenarios for individual students. I feel that if an employer has a realistic understanding of an employee's abilities, and hires accordingly, it will be a successful match for the long term. It is my responsibility as a teacher to ensure that all possible information is conveyed to potential employers. Each year our class takes part in our local job fair, and this gives a chance for my students with LD to interact with employers, fill out applications, and speak face to face with strangers, in a supportive environment. I would like to enable more real world interactions like this between my students and local employers.

4.5. Need for student input and collaboration

Despite parental and teacher desires, a transitioning student will pursue their own interests and desires. This makes it critical for students to be included in transition planning from the onset. Without heavy consideration of student desires, transition planning will be highly unsuccessful. Student inclusion also provides self-empowerment, practice in multi-step planning, and practice in communication and self-advocacy. The sharing of student plans lets all team members hear the desired goals first hand, and early student involvement in transition planning can help align student programs with expressed post-secondary desires. Student input also helps reduce dropout rates by making school more relevant to the student's life.

This is valuable information for my own teaching practices. I believe there is no greater thing to remember in teaching than the fact that all efforts in school are to give the greatest chances possible to the student after graduation. Despite all the varying agendas, I try my best to

remember that I am teaching solely for the student. The research included in this meta-synthesis indicates that high school students with LD want an adult advocate who accepts them as they are. They need a teacher on their side, and I will use this information to continue focusing on the student regardless of other distractions and requirements. The best way to show I care about a student is to not only include, but rather make them the center of, transition planning. The research shows that professional team members cannot force their own will on a student, and I try my best as a teacher to simply give them the skills to pursue what they want.

4.6. Transition difficulties and system shortcomings

A high dropout rate for students with LD continues to be a persistent problem in high schools. Despite increasing regulations and legal requirements, the realities of day to day school life do not allow enough individualized time for comprehensive transition planning. Coordination between service providers is often fragmented, and professional agendas may not match what the student will actually pursue. Employment rates are exceptionally low for people with LD, and most are not achieving a high rate of satisfaction in adult life. Transition planning often begins too late to allow enough time for academic and vocational programs to prepare students for their desired outcome. With the added academic stresses of high stakes testing and other strict academic requirements, teachers feel they are at the mercy of an already overtaxed system. There is simply not enough time in a day to complete all the necessary tasks for successful transition planning.

Time and resource management are at the center of transition difficulties. My classroom is like all others. We have been given too many requirements and too many students to have consistent individualized planning and counseling time. There is really no good time in a given day to sit down and discuss a disability one on one with a student. There is no set schedule for

working through ADA requirements, or for filling out job applications. It is up to myself as the teacher to manage my time and resources, and find ways to fill all the needs a student has while still meeting academic requirements. For myself, this gets back to maintaining focus on the student. As long as I keep my center of attention on the student, all the other pieces of the puzzle will fall into place. The main problem I see in high school is students feeling that school does not relate to their own life. High school students are not unmotivated; they are simply unmotivated in areas they view as irrelevant to their own life. If I can help my students view school as a resource for their own plans, the long list of transition problems will be greatly reduced.

4.7. Ideas for improvement

In order for successful transitions to take place, transition staff must go beyond the typical and routine solutions and try new and unconventional approaches in preparing students with LD for adult life. These students need adult advocates. Their schedules need enough flexibility to blend academic and personal goals into a unified school program. If students feel school is benefitting their personal future plans they will stay engaged and not drop out. With limited time and resources, transition team members need to be very efficient in all aspects of the process. Above all, transition success lies in consideration of the student's own post-secondary desires.

In my teaching, I would like to explore career options for students at a younger age. Transition difficulties often lie in the short amount of time remaining before graduation, when planning really begins in earnest. Training and exposure to real world work situations can take years to implement, and high school age is too late for many. For my students with LD, the adult world seems so foreign that they refuse to even think about it. I am constantly telling them how

great it is to be an adult, and to make my own choices. I try not to use intimidating words like “career”, or “real world”, but rather just talk to them about what they would rather be doing than sitting in school. This gives us a starting point to work out the discrepancy between school and what they see their life as being. I intend to shift school as much as possible to fit the student’s goals, instead of the futile approach of trying to make students fit the school.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this meta-synthesis highlight the complexity of factors influencing post-secondary outcomes. The evidence shows that each student’s situation is so unique that it requires not only an in-depth understanding of the student, but also a coordinated team of professionals to give the student the best chance of post-secondary success. However, the realities of a typical academic day do not often allow enough time for individualized planning to the extent necessary for students to reach their true post-secondary potential. The research does not show a gap in any particular planning area, but rather a difficulty in the merging of all the necessary components of a successful transition.

Graduation is a time when a learning disability shows its true impact on the transitioning student. The changes in personal, social, and professional environments often prove too complex and overwhelming. College graduation and work retention rates are exceptionally low for people with LD, and the research shows that the only way to combat this is to have the high school LD student gain a true understanding of their disability and its impact on their life. Only through self-understanding and the skills and determination to not settle for less than their best, will these students eventually lead fulfilling and productive adult lives. This is an area in which transition professionals can make a long term difference in a student’s life. Self-confidence is a consistent trait in successfully transitioned students.

The findings of this study show that there are no easy answers. One of the only certainties is that the graduating high school student will eventually pursue the path that they see best fit for themselves. If transition team members keep the student's own goals as the center of their efforts, success rates will increase. Despite the limitations a learning disability may place on a transitioning student, if equipped with self-knowledge, self-confidence, and a desire to carve their own path they can clearly lead adult lives similar to their non-disabled peers.

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