POST-SECONDARY TRANSITIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH HIGH-INCIDENCE DISABILITIES

Thesis
Submitted to
The School of Education and Health Sciences of the
UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree of
Educational Specialist in School Psychology

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Dayton, Ohio
December 2017
POST-SECONDARY TRANSITIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH HIGH-INCIDENCE DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

POST-SECONDARY TRANSITIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH HIGH-INCIDENCE DISABILITIES

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The transition from high school to post-secondary life is especially difficult for students with high-incidence disabilities. The purpose of the present study was to examine the educational experiences of students with high-incidence disabilities, such as ASD, specific learning disability, and ADHD, who received post-secondary transitional services. Participants included (n = 25) seniors in high school with current IEPs, who completed questionnaires regarding their experience with post-secondary transitional services and were interviewed after graduation to share their perceptions of the process and services they received to prepare them for post-secondary life. Results suggest that participants perceive themselves as prepared for their post-secondary goals both before graduation and during the fall after graduation; however, they do not attribute their readiness to the services received in school. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee chair, Dr. Susan Davies, and my other committee members, Dr. Elana Bernstein and Dr. Nasser Razek, for their help and support in the completion of this thesis. I would also like to thank the school districts and participants for making this thesis possible.
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Graduating from high school is a difficult transition for young adults. It is the first time major autonomous decisions are made; it is a time of new experiences, challenges, and opportunities. This transition from high school to post-secondary life is especially difficult for students with high-incidence disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorder, specific learning disability, and attention-deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD). Many challenges experienced by these students are not as prominent in students without disabilities. Ideally, high schools offer the transitional services that are necessary for students with disabilities to succeed post-high school. However, this is not always the case.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004), all children with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate education, regardless of any physical, mental, or psychological disabilities. IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities. Under IDEA, students in special education who are approaching the end of high school are entitled to transitional services to post-school life (Gage, 2013).
This transition planning is intended to assist students with disabilities in obtaining employment, pursuing postsecondary education and training, and living independently after high school (Cobb, Lipscomb, Wolgemuth, Schulte, & National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2013). However, little to no uniformity exists among these transitional services and success is not measurable once the student graduates and is no longer protected by IDEA. This leaves tremendous variability in students’ feelings of preparedness for life after high school. Individuals with disabilities typically require assistance to gain life and work skills that apply to life after graduation. Furthermore, there is limited research examining the satisfaction levels of students who have received transition services or their perceptions of the efficacy of post-secondary transition plans (Aylward & Bruce, 2014; Doyle & Giangreco, 2013).

**Purpose of Research**

The purpose of the present study was to examine the educational experiences of students with high-incidence disabilities, such as ASD, specific learning disability, and ADHD who received post-secondary transitional services. Participants completed a survey and a subset of these participants were later interviewed to share their perceptions of the process and the services they received to prepare them for post-secondary life.

The study was designed to discern whether students with high-incidence disabilities feel their high schools are preparing them to be successful in higher education and/or vocational opportunities, as well as how they perceive the post-high school transitional process and services, in retrospect.
**Constructs**

The construct examined in this research study was how successful/prepared students with high-incidence disabilities feel they were for life after high school. As there is no way to control the lives of these individuals, there are many extraneous constructs that exist in this study. These include the life histories of the students, their disability category under IDEA, the school personnel administering the services, and the schools they attended (i.e., they may have transferred and different schools offer different services).

**Significance of the Study**

The rates of postsecondary educational participation for students with high-incidence disabilities are substantially lower than the general population (Shattuck et al., 2012). Previous studies provide information on services that have worked in other regions, as well as suggestions on how these services can be built upon or improved (e.g., Angell, Stoner & Fulk, 2010; Cobb et al., 2013; Connor, 2012). However, there is limited information regarding the subjective effectiveness of post-transitional services in Southwestern Ohio (Dayton). One unexplored way of evaluating the success of transition services is examining the perceptions students have of them. Thus, this study builds on previous research by gaining in-depth knowledge on how individuals with high-incidence disabilities feel their high schools are preparing them to be successful in higher education and vocational settings, as well as the processes and services that are perceived as the most and least helpful in preparing the participants for life after IDEA.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review explores key literature related to the topic of transition services for high functioning students with disabilities. First, students with high-incidence disabilities will be defined and described. This is followed by a description of the experiences that occur for this population while in high school. Then, post-secondary options will be examined, including higher education and vocational settings. The success factors and disadvantages students with high-incidence disabilities are provided. Finally, past and current post-secondary transitional programs are discussed.

High-Incidence Disabilities

Students with disabilities are assessed individually and provided with individualized education plans (IEP) and education services in the least restrictive environment (LRE) per the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA). The LRE indicates that students will receive some level of instruction in general education settings (Gage, Lierheimer & Goran, 2012). Students with disabilities who are considered “high functioning” typically receive a greater amount of instruction in general education settings (a less restrictive environment) than students with more severe disabilities. This group typically includes students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders (E/BD), learning disabilities (LD), mild intellectual disability (MID), high-
functioning autism (HFA), attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and speech and language impairment (SLI; Gage, Lierheimer & Goran, 2012). Students with more severe disabilities such as low-functioning autism, down syndrome, and other severe developmental and cognitive disabilities might require more pull-out services in special education classrooms—or even in separate facilities. As students with high-incidence disabilities are often included primarily in general education classrooms, it is difficult at times to distinguish between those students receiving special education services and those who are not.

Gage, Lierheimer and Goran (2012) found that the students who fall within “high-functioning” categories generally perform similarly in the domains of cognitive abilities, academic performance, and behavior. However, students in the E/BD category were found to have more behavioral issues than the other categories. Overall, school psychologists should provide interventions and programs to students based on individual need, not disability category.

**Transition Planning and Services**

A number of transitional programs exist for students with disabilities depending on the school district and policies. Aylward and Bruce (2014) examined the effectiveness of Inclusive Post-Secondary Education (IPSE) programs on the transition to post-secondary institutions for students with intellectual disabilities in Canada. IPSE is a set of practices that enables students with diverse learning needs to engage in general college and university experiences rather than specialized targeted programs. These programs are based on the understanding that all students are valued members of the educational
community and want to be challenged, to participate in their education, to contribute to their society, and to be respected for who they are. Aylward and Bruce (2014) found that these types programs are spreading and appear to be effective.

Connor (2012) compiled recent research on the transition from high school to college and outlined 21 ways that students, their families, and high schools can ease the transition from high school to college. These tips included: be comfortable with the classification many students have, acknowledge strengths and areas of needs, learn about the college disability services office, participate in precollege activities, and utilize peer tutor services.

Many concerns were related to disabilities among college students and how transition factors from high school can affect this particular population. High school counselors could help to make the transition smooth and effective. School personnel could use a wellness model to help students to develop balance and a healthy foundation to be successful (Fier & Brezezinski, 2010). School teams, including school psychologists, counselors, teachers, and administrators, could help students plan for college and point out the need to communicate with students about the differences between high school and college. School counselors could also help facilitate discussions related to drugs, sex, alcohol, peer pressure, and consequences of risk-taking. Lastly, the school counselor could take the opportunity to discuss the role of counseling in college to help assist with emotional wellness that can affect a student’s college experience.

Students with learning disabilities also have a difficult time with transitions from high school to college. Hamblet (2014) presented advice for promoting college transition
planning for high school students with learning disabilities. The researcher provided nine strategies at the school district level for improving educational transition services to students, which include encouraging student independence proactively, reaching out to families to educate and include them in the preparations, and providing documentation to colleges for accommodation requests.

According to IDEA the term “transition services” refers to a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that are designed to be a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child’s movement from school to post-school activities (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400, 2004). Transitional services include postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment, continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. Transition services are based on the individual child’s needs, taking into account the child’s strengths, preferences, and interests. This can be through instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. IDEA does not specify exactly what is required of the school; that is left up to the discretion of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team.

High school is a time for students to learn a variety of skills, including functional life skills, both inside and out of general education classrooms. However, data suggest that the percentage of students with disabilities who are included in general education
classes for 80% of the time or more varies significantly based on the student’s category of disability and where the student lives (Doyle & Giangreco, 2013). Nationally, 61% of students across all disability categories are placed in general education classes 80% of the time or more, although this varies from state-to-state.

General education classrooms offer naturally-occurring learning for students with high-incidence disabilities and which can translate to skills after high school (Doyle & Giangreco, 2013). These skills include getting to class on time with peers, having the necessary materials for each class, maintaining appropriate behavior while in class, hanging out with friends, making and communicating choices, managing money for events with friends, and participating in after-school activities. The classroom experience also offers students with high-incidence disabilities with opportunities to expand their understanding of the world around them, identify their strengths, discover new interests, and tackle new challenges (Ryndak, Alper, Hughes, & McDonnell, 2012).

During high school, students with high-incidence disabilities can benefit from additional encouragement and guidance at an earlier age than their typical peers. Sweet, Dezarn, and Belluscio (2011) suggest that, more so than their typical peers or those with more moderate to severe disabilities, students with high-incidence disabilities can become so defeated by the time they reach their junior or senior year of high school that it is difficult for them to consider staying in school, much less to consider post-secondary education.

Planning for life after high school must take into account the student’s strengths, preferences, interests, and needs (Moore & McNaught, 2014). Furthermore, due to
amendments made to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, students with disabilities are required to be involved in the development of their Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE; Angell, Stoner, & Fulk, 2010). Including students in planning and decision-making engages them and motivates them to work toward the goals they set. Strong transition plans require a high degree of involvement with students and their families, specific training towards their goals, such as job skills training or test preparation for college entrance exams.

**Post-Secondary Options**

As with students who are not on IEPs, multiple postsecondary options are available to students with high-incidence disabilities. These options include, but are not limited to, post-secondary education, such as a four-year university, community college, or pursuing an associate’s degree, or a career path.

**Higher education.** The number of high school graduates with learning disabilities going on to higher education has tripled in the last two decades (Newman et al., 2010). The percentage of high school graduates with learning disabilities who attended postsecondary education within four years of graduation rose from 11.4% in 1990 to 34.5% in 2005. This increase indicates a need for a greater emphasis on preparing students with disabilities for life in higher education.

Moore and McNaught (2014) examined success factors in high school that lead to a path toward higher education, the most prominent of which *self-determination*. Self-determination refers to behaviors that include decision-making, problem-solving, goal setting and attainment, self-advocacy, self-awareness, and self-regulation. Self-
determination is a critical component of the transition process because students with high-incidence disabilities’ outcomes in post-secondary education are significantly poorer than their peers without disabilities (Moore & McNaught, 2014). Fortunately, many skills associated with effective self-determination are teachable.

Moore and McNaught (2014) described the results of a statewide project called I’m Determined, to assist students with disabilities in middle and high school to obtain the skills necessary to become college ready. The project provides direct instruction, models, and opportunities to practice skills associated with self-determined behavior beginning at the elementary level and continuing throughout a student’s educational career. The goal of I’m Determined is to integrate the components of self-determination both at school and in the community. The components of I’m Determined include choice making, decision making, problem solving, goal setting, leadership, self-advocacy, and self-awareness. I’m Determined offers information and strategies on how these skills are incorporated into the daily lives of students with disabilities as they prepare for adulthood. The results of the project suggest that students with self-confidence and high levels of motivation are more likely to persist and succeed in post-secondary education and the principles and strategies incorporated into the project can go beyond formal education, with benefits continuing throughout a student’s life, regardless if s/he pursues post-secondary education.

One way students may be aided in their transition to adulthood is through community activities. Community experiences offer students a unique opportunity to explore and gain new perspectives in their environment before leaving high school.
However, students with disabilities often miss those experiences because they are not offered through their high school. Service learning is one type of community based activity that offers a variety of advantages for students in transition from secondary school to post-school living. Hoover (2016) defines service learning as a teaching and learning experience strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction to enrich the learning process, and it also teaches students civic responsibility and how to strengthen communities. Using community resources can also help close the gap in employment for youth with disabilities after high school.

Fichten et al. (2014) examined the experiences that lead to higher grades and graduation rates of postsecondary students with disabilities. Questionnaires administered to community college and university students revealed that factors associated with success included the absence of social alienation on campus, strong belief that the student will do well in the course, school environment related facilitators, personal situation facilitators, and being registered for campus disability-related services.

The attitudes of those around students with disabilities toward students with disabilities can also affect post high school experiences. Through completed surveys, journals, and participation in a focus group, Izzo and Shuman (2013) examined the perceptions and experiences of educational coaches and mentors who worked with college students with intellectual disabilities enrolled in a Disability Studies Internship class. The researchers found that students without disabilities agree that students with intellectual disabilities have the ability to participate in college experiences such as classes, campus organizations, and living in dorms with support. This suggests that
typically enrolled college students benefit from inclusive postsecondary programs that serve students with intellectual disabilities.

One such program is the University of Washington’s Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technologies (DO-IT) program (Naugle et al., 2010). This program was developed to enhance the involvement of individuals with disabilities in challenging vocational and academic opportunities with specific aims which include increasing the success of people with disabilities in college and career and promoting the application of universal design to physical spaces, information technology, instruction, and services.

The help of faculty has also been shown to have positive effects on students who have transitioned from high school to college (Patrick & Wessel, 2013). Students with physical and/or intellectual disabilities who were interviewed regarding their experience with faculty mentorship reported that for many of them, having a faculty mentor was helpful with supporting them during their transition to college.

Students who fall on the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum have significant untapped potential that is often underappreciated in higher education due to lack of comprehensive transitional services (Wehman et al., 2014). Improving high school curriculum and services, increasing access to internships and employment during high school, promoting post-secondary education and dual enrollment, promoting inclusion and social skill instruction, and providing systematic instruction to increase functional literacy, independence, and self-determination can aid in accomplishing these changes.
**Vocation.** Shattuck et al. (2012) examined the percentage of youth with a high-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the career world after high school. They found that only 55.1% had held paid employment during the first 6 years after high school. They found that students with high-functioning ASD had the lowest rates of employment and the lowest rates of participation compared with other disability categories. More than 50% of youth who had graduated from high school in the past 2 years were not employed. Those students with ASD who came from a family with a higher income and higher functional ability had better success in post-secondary employment. Those who are employed often are employed below their level of education and have difficulty maintaining stable employment.

Mediating factors exist to increase satisfaction in students with disabilities when entering the workforce. A study by Bellman, Burgstahler, and Ladner (2014) found that, when offered work-based learning, participants with disabilities were motivated to work towards a career, were more knowledgeable about the workplace, believed that work-based learning experiences were valuable, experienced greater employment success when compared to those who did not engage in work-based learning, and developed meaningful relationships with peers and mentors.

A number of experiences in high school can increase student career readiness. These includes providing opportunities that may occur in service-learning situations, during elective hours, in job exploration courses, or through student participation in a part-time job or volunteer opportunities after school (Gothberg, Peterson, Peak, & Sedaghat, 2015).
Factors affecting post-secondary outcomes

Factors that affect success in higher education can come from both high school and beyond. Through focus groups at the University of Texas, Agarwal, Calvo, and Kumar (2014) found that participating in student organizations that included both students with and without disabilities had a significant positive impact on the students’ experiences at the university. However, opportunities are often limited for social interactions between individuals with and without disabilities. This lack of interaction can adversely affect students with disabilities’ graduation rates.

Another factor that affects graduation rates among students with disabilities is the setting in which they receive their services. Students who participate in general education classrooms tend to have better academic outcomes than those in substantially separate classrooms (Schifter, 2016). After examining all disability groupings and in each year after high school entry, Schifter (2016) found that students who are educated in fully included settings had a higher probability for graduation than students educated in substantially separate settings, on average.

Other factors that increased satisfaction on a college campus included a positive transition from high school to college, social interactions with peers, establishing an informal leadership network, developing opportunities for members to provide training, and educating others about their successes and daily struggles (Argarwal et al., 2014). Students who participated in student organizations that integrated these factors felt more socially assimilated in student organizations on campus.
**Transition difficulties.** Transitions in general offer new opportunities and challenges. Schlossberg (1981) defined a transition as any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. A key aspect of transitions, according to Schlossberg, is the role perception plays. An event meets the definition of a transition only if it is so defined by the individual experiencing it. Schlossberg identified four major sets, the 4 S’s, of factors that influence a person's ability to cope with a transition. These factors are the situation, self, support, and strategies.

Transitioning to a college setting after high school is a difficult adjustment for anybody, let alone students with disabilities. Universities may offer a variety of services to assist students with disabilities. However, unlike high school, it is up to the student to seek out such services. Lightner, Kipps-Vaughn, Schulte, and Trice (2012) found that students who sought services later reported having a more difficult time adjusting than those who were more proactive. Additionally, they cited limited knowledge about such services as the reasoning behind the delayed seeking of services.

Although students with disabilities are increasingly enrolling in colleges and universities, many institutions are still unprepared to support them beyond reasonable accommodations. Hong (2015) utilized reflective journaling to capture the anecdotal experiences of 16 college students with disabilities for 10 weeks. The findings suggested that the major barriers and frustrations these students encountered on a daily basis included a negative perception of faculty, a poor fit of academic advisors with students with disabilities, academic and social stress, and a lack of quality support services.
Despite the increase of individuals with disabilities attending college and universities, students with high-incidence disabilities are less likely to complete their college programs than those without disabilities (Stein, 2014). Characteristics of the faculty of colleges and universities can also positively or negatively impact success for students with disabilities. In one study students with disabilities reported that they were less successful in the courses when they felt the instructors were not knowledgeable or understanding about disabilities (Stein, 2014). They also reported feeling reluctant to ask for accommodations when they felt they would not get a positive response from the course instructor.

How students perceive their disabilities may affect their performance in higher education. Formation of these perceptions is influenced by formal and informal social interactions with professors, student peers, and disability professionals (O’Shea & Kaplan, 2017). Negative interactions tend to limit the further desire to participate in college activities. Additionally, participation in different activities, experiences, and courses offered within the college context promoted knowledge and understanding of the disability, increasing the positive perception of a students’ disability as well as their participation in positive activities. Students who felt that endorsement of their disability into their identity prompted their disclosure and use of services such as meeting with professional staff and receiving accommodations, these services were highly influential in furthering exploration and deepening the meaning of having a psychiatric disability, which, in turn, facilitated further use of those and other services.
**Conclusion**

Overall, high school transitions are especially difficult for students with high-incidence disabilities. Many roadblocks exist for these students that hinder their success after high school graduation. However, school psychologists and other school personnel can assist with making this transition easier and more effective for students with high-incidence disabilities.

**The Present Study**

A number of factors can either add to or detract from the post-secondary success of students with high-incidence disabilities. These factors can come from high school, after high school, and within the students themselves. The quality of the transitional services provided by high schools can greatly impact whether students experience success after graduation. Previous research analyzed success factors and difficulties faced by students with high-incidence disabilities; however, the research lacks in-depth communication with the students to discover their perceptions of the impact of these transitional services. The current study examined the services currently offered and the perceptions of those individuals who received those services.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

Research Questions and Predictions

The following research questions were posed for the current study.

**Research question one.** How do students with high-incidence disabilities perceive the post-high school transitional process and services?

**Prediction one.** It was predicted that students with high-incidence disabilities who receive post-transitional services would perceive those processes involving assistance from high school personnel to be most helpful and the lack of preparation for post-secondary obstacles to be the least helpful. This prediction is based on research that suggests that increased involvement and individuation via teachers, counselors, and other high school faculty further prepares students for post-secondary life (Hamblet, 2014; Hong, 2015).

**Research question two.** Do students with high-incidence disabilities feel that their high schools are preparing them to be successful in higher education and/or vocational opportunities?

**Prediction two.** It was predicted that those students with high-incidence disabilities who were interviewed would report feeling inadequately prepared to be successful in their choice of post-secondary pursuits. This prediction is based on research
suggesting that potential barriers, such as feeling defeated in school, are significantly lower when compared to peer without disabilities (Hamblet, 2014; Moore & McNaught, 2014).

**Research Design**

The present study utilized a mixed methods design, including a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews. Taken together, the survey and interviews were designed to create a better understanding of the transitional services students with high-incidence disabilities receive as well as their perceptions of them.

**Participants and Settings**

Participants in the study included (n = 25) current high school students who were receiving individualized education plans (IEPs) for a high-functioning disability, such as ASD and ADHD. Students were recruited through their respective high schools as well as via recommendation of a school psychologist. The students who completed the survey were in their senior year of high school. The high schools in which the surveys were administered were notified of the opportunity to participate in the study. Consent was obtained from the parents of those students who volunteered to participate. Assent was obtained from the students as well. Paper surveys were administered at school. A subset (n = 4) of participants from the initial group were contacted to participate in follow-up interviews with the researcher. Participants were chosen based on their geographical proximity to the researcher and their willingness to be interviewed. The interviews took place in a quiet and isolated location, such as local public libraries.
**Demographic data.** Of the 25 students who completed a survey, 60% reported receiving services under the category of Specific Learning Disability. Eight percent reported receiving services under the category of Speech Language Impairment and 8% receiving services under the category of Other Health Impairment. One student reported that he/she received services under the category of Intellectual Disability and 20% of participants did not respond to the question.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Special Education Eligibility Category</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific Learning Disability</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech Language Impairment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Health Impairment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Disability</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants who were interviewed included (n = 4) young adults ages 18-19 who indicated on their survey that they would be interested in a follow up interview. Each of the participants is described in detail to follow. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

“Troy” is an 18-year-old student currently participating in a two-year associates program at a college in Southwest Ohio. He attended and graduated from a public high school in the same area. He reported that he received special education services in high school under the specific learning disability category.
“Jeremy” is a 19-year-old student currently attending a four-year program at a college in Southwest Ohio. He attended and graduated from a public high school in the same area. He reported that he received special education services in high school under the specific learning disability category.

“Sara” is an 18-year-old student currently participating in a two-year associates program at a college in Southwest Ohio. She attended and graduated from a public high school in the same area. She reported that she received special education services in high school under the specific learning disability category.

“Abby” is an 18-year-old currently participating in a two-year associates program at a college in Southwest Ohio. She attended and graduated from a public high school in the same area. She reported that she received special education services in high school under the specific learning disability category.

Materials

The survey (see Appendix B) consisted of 10 questions regarding the services the participants were currently receiving, their involvement in the transition planning process, and their plans for the fall following high school graduation.

The follow-up semi-structured interview (see Appendix C) included five open-ended questions designed to evoke more in-depth discussion regarding their perceived success in either their higher education or career and what the high school may have done to bolster or hinder this success.
Procedures

**Phase I: Pilot study.** Survey and interview questions were reviewed by colleagues for relevance and wording. Feedback was taken into consideration regarding formatting corrections as well as wording of questions for clarity, such as adding in specific choices and examples. A pilot study was conducted on a small group of individuals similar to the target population. They were current high school seniors who graduated at the end of the school year. This included administration of the survey as well the interview. The pilot assisted the researcher in clarifying questions that were unclear or worded in a confusing manner. It also allowed for the determination of an estimated length of time for the interview.

**Phase II: Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.** Approval for the research study was obtained through the IRB at the University of Dayton in April 2016. Written approval from the high school administrators was sought prior to administering surveys and conducting interviews.

**Phase III: Recruitment.** Participants were recruited through local area high schools who agreed to participate in the study. Those students who were on IEPs for high-incidence disabilities in their senior year of high school were invited to participate via the school psychologist. Consent was sent home to parents prior to the study, and assent was obtained from the participants.

**Phase IV: Survey administration.** The researcher administered a paper and pencil survey to the participants prior to their graduation from high school. Surveys were administered in a group format and collected in a single day with the researcher present.
The survey included an area where the students provided contact information if they wished to participate in the follow-up interview. They were told that they may be contacted in the future for an interview.

**Phase V: Interviews.** A subset of survey participants were interviewed in person by the researcher one-on-one for approximately five minutes in a private, quiet area, such as a private library room. The later date of the interview (approximately 6 months) allowed the participant to be fully immersed in either college or their career before answering questions. Participants were notified that their identities would be kept confidential in a secure location, but that the interviews would be audio-recorded.

**Phase VI: Post-interview data entry.** The recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed.

**Data Analysis**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and a quantitative survey. Survey responses were recorded in a spreadsheet. The information from the surveys was analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically means, percentages, and standard deviations. A predetermined list of questions pertaining to the student’s experiences with post-secondary transitional services was asked and explored during the interview (see Appendix C). Participants’ responses to the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed by the interviewer. The researcher reduced the data collected by exploring and “memoing” the data to select parts for coding (Mertens, 2010). Thematic analysis of the narratives was used to identify themes, codes, groupings, or categories of reports (Turner et al., 2010).
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

This research project examined the postsecondary transition experience of students with high-incidence disabilities.

Survey Data/Research Question 1: Post-Secondary Preparation for Students with High-Incidence Disabilities

The quantitative data collected from the surveys included demographic data of the disability category for each participant, whether students felt they were involved in their post-secondary transition planning, whether or not they took assessments to reach their post-secondary goal, if they felt their high school had prepared them to be successful in reaching their goal, and their level of preparedness for life after graduation (on a scale from 1-5).

Involvement. Participants were asked to rate how involved they felt in planning their post-secondary transition as part of their Individual Education Program (IEP), by answering either yes or no. Fifty-two percent reported that they were not involved, while 48% reported that they were involved.

Assessment. Participants were asked whether or not they took any tests or assessments to help plan future goals. Fifty-six percent indicated that they did take a test
or assessment to help plan future goals, such as the ACT or PLAN test. Forty-four percent indicated that they did not take any tests or assessments to help plan future goals.

**Services received.** Participants were asked if they received any services to help reach their goals. Sixty-four percent indicated that they did not receive any services to help reach their goals while 36% indicated that they did receive some sort of service to help reach their goals.

**Level of preparedness.** Participants were asked to rank their level of preparedness for their future goals on a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being not prepared to 5 being very prepared. The average response was a 3.8 with a standard deviation of 0.98, median of 4, and mode of 3, indicating that participants felt prepared to reach their post-high school goals. While the average level of preparedness is high (3.8), the percentage of participants who indicated they received services through their school, which relate to that preparedness, was low (36%).

**Interview Data/Research Question 2: Perception of Post-High School Transitional Process and Services**

Upon reviewing and coding the transcribed interview protocols, two major themes regarding the postsecondary transition experiences and perceptions of students with high-incidence disabilities emerged from the data, including: (1) feeling prepared in college and (2) lack of support from their high schools. It should be noted that the interviews were relatively short, with the interviews lasting around 2 minutes. The participants kept their responses short with little elaboration when prompted.
College preparedness. The most common theme that emerged from the interviews was that the participants felt prepared for their goals, which included attending either a 2 or 4 year college program. Troy explained how he felt prepared for his 2-year program, “I feel like I am prepared to do homework and take the tests in my classes.” However, when asked how his school could have better prepared him, Troy answered, “I don’t really know.” Abby, Sara and Jeremy explained that they felt similar about the academic rigor of college. Jeremy explained how he was also prepared for the social aspect of college, “I have made a lot of friends to far and that makes class a lot easier.” When asked how she was doing well, Sara responded, “my classes,” and that school “Taught me how to study for tests.”

Lack of support. Another major theme emerged that the participants felt that their level of preparedness was not due to their special education services. When asked how her school had helped her prepare for college, Abby stated, “I don’t really think they did anything, really. Like, they helped me with reading and stuff, but that was it.” Sara shared a similar experience when asked the same question, stating: “My school didn’t do a whole lot to help me out.” Jeremy explained how school could have better supported him, “um, I don’t know, to set up a schedule so you’re not overwhelmed.” Jeremy also shared that he did not believe his school offered support because, “um, well like, they would tell you about how what to expect, but it’s just, like, old news. Colleges are different than what they were.”
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Review of Purpose and Major Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of the post-secondary transition services of students with high-incidence disabilities. The results of this study may be used to direct future research, as well as provide strategies for school-based professionals to best support students with high-incidence disabilities as they transition from high school to a postsecondary setting.

Findings from survey data/research question 1. Findings from the current study reveal that, while students are in high school, they feel prepared to reach their post-secondary schools. Results from the survey data show that a majority of participants felt they were prepared to reach their future goals. However, the majority also did not report receiving services or assessments from their respective high schools that would assist them toward reaching this goal.

Another key finding revealed that students in the sample were unaware of the post-secondary transition services. This could be due to lack of transparency and involvement between the special education team and the student. High school professionals may be in compliance with transition activities, but are not making their importance explicit to students. Students were not made aware that they were receiving
services, as shown in the low reporting of services and assessments received. Increased awareness in goal-setting and planning in the IEP could further prepare students for their future goals, increasing their overall level of preparedness. This may also lead students to seek out assistance in their post-secondary position, as they see others as a resource toward success.

**Findings from interview data/research question 2.** The interview data suggests that once the participants graduated, they remain feeling prepared. However, the majority of the four interviewed participants did not attribute their success to the post-secondary services received during high school. The services they reported as helpful were not necessarily services provided to students receiving special education services; instead, they reported general high school activities, such as homework and tests, as helping prepare them for college. Previous research shows that students benefit from participating in the development of their IEP goals (Cobb et al., 2013). Students may benefit from increased involvement in the development of their IEP goals, as this was reported as relatively low from the current study’s participants.

**Interpretation of Findings**

Students in this study did not indicate receiving services that were particularly helpful in achieving their goals, although they did report feeling successful and prepared. It is possible that the lack of transparency between the planning team and the student contributed to this incongruence. Participants in this study may not have been made aware that they had a say in the types of services they could receive, or that they were just ‘going with the motions’ of their annual IEP review.
Although students with disabilities are required to be involved in the development of their Individualized Plan for Employment, they may not be aware of the full extent of their role (IPE; Angell, Stoner, & Fulk, 2010). High school personnel can assist in explaining the roles students can play through the annual review of their IEP. They can work with students to help develop a plan for action that the student is responsible for, while explicitly stating the importance of the transition aspect of the IEP.

Increased awareness of the process and planning of the IEP may increase feelings of involvement as well as preparedness for future goals. Strong self-efficacy and the knowledge that one has a hand in developing their future will aid in future decision-making that will occur throughout post-secondary endeavors. Future research can expand on the longitudinal feelings of preparedness as the participants progress through college, while monitoring such aspects as grade point average (GPA) and college retention. The participants subjectively felt successful at the beginning of their post-secondary life, but longitudinal research that tracks objective aspects, such as GPA, can expand on the current research.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this research study, beginning with the limited scope of the design. This study utilized a small sample all from a similar geographic region. Those students who participated in the second round of surveys were not given the opportunity to participate in the interviews; thus their post-secondary input was not considered. Another limitation to this research study may be the students who agreed to
participate in the interview. All participants attended local colleges, which may have influenced their responses.

Another explanation for participants’ reporting receiving limit assistance through their high school could be due to seamless learning. Chan et al. (2006) defined seamless learning as a continuity of the learning experience across contexts. Students receiving special education on a daily basis for a number of years may not recognize they are receiving additional service that differ from their peers. These students may benefit from contextual resources and being made aware of the impact post-secondary transition services can have on their education (Sharples, 2015).

The limited sample size prevented this research study from capturing all the different postsecondary experiences of students with high-incidence disabilities. While the subject pool of the current research project did produce many of the same themes, due to the geographical and logistical limitations, theoretical saturation could not be reached. Further, the descriptive nature of some data gathered may lead to some degree of gender or cultural bias, again due to limited size. Another limitation of this study is the participants’ ability to recall and clearly explain accurate and detailed information about their experiences.

Having the researcher in the room for the surveys and interviews is a limitation that may have affected the participants’ responses. The participants did not expand on their answers when asked. Participants often left answers blank on the surveys and were confused and did not know the answers to some of the survey questions. Recruitment also proved to be an issue which may have affected the results. Many high schools had
already dismissed classes for the summer, earlier than what was expected. This limited the amount of students who would be able to participate in the interview. This caused the examiner to further recruit in the fall for surveys.

**Implications for School-Based Practice and Future Research**

While there is still no clear data to describe every postsecondary transition experience for young adults with high-incidence disabilities, the current study’s findings indicate that more transparency and participation from students in their post-secondary planning may foster and promote the success of students with high-incidence disabilities as they transition out of high school. School psychologists in particular are in a unique position to provide more individualized interviews and implement transition plans for students with high-incidence disabilities. This can be done through encouraging participation of students with disabilities in proactive school functions and clubs (O’Shea & Kaplan, 2017). School psychologists may recognize the need for transition planning and are often in a position that would allow them to assess the student’s anticipated postsecondary environment and determine needs. This may allow the school psychologist to identify potential problems and include these areas of need in the student’s transition plan.

Students with disabilities transitioning to a postsecondary setting are often required to advocate for their needs (Shaw et al., 2010). This includes advocating for appropriate and necessary accommodations. As part of the transition planning process, school psychologists may teach students how to self-advocate for their needs in the postsecondary setting. School psychologists in a high school setting may consider
counseling students with high-incidence disabilities on seeking services, such as college preparedness courses and ACT/SAT test preparation.

Wehman et al. (2014) provides examples of changes to aid in increasing readiness, which can include instructing students in natural environments from Grades K through 12, using person-centered planning models in transition planning, developing local, regional, and/or state-level cross agency coordinating teams, incorporating universal design principles in developing postsecondary courses and materials, providing peer mentoring for students, providing educational coaching, providing concurrent engagement in employment, enhancing social pragmatics and communication skills, and enhancing self-determination and self-advocacy skills.

Conclusion

The present study examined the experiences of high school students with high-incidence disabilities as they transition from high school to a postsecondary setting as well as once their perceptions once they graduate high school. Results of the current research study suggest that students with high-incidence disabilities feel moderately prepared to reach their individual post-secondary goals and successful when they start their goal, but they do not attribute this preparedness to services received while in school. Increased involvement from students when planning their transitional plan and transparency in how this plan affects their future may increase feelings of preparedness and success both before and after high school graduation.
REFERENCES


Connor, D. J. (2012). Helping students with disabilities transition to college: 21 tips for students with LD and/or ADD/ADHD. Teaching Exceptional Children, 44(5), 16-25. doi: 10.1177/004005991204400502


APPENDIX A
IRB MATERIALS AND CONSENT/ASSENT LETTERS

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON - CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Post-Secondary Transitions for Students with High-Incidence Disabilities

Principal Consent Form

Dear Principal,

My name is Michaline Flynn and I am a graduate student in the School Psychology program at the University of Dayton. I am writing to invite you to participate in a research project on post-secondary transitional services. These services are covered under a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP).

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of students with high-incidence disabilities who received post-secondary transitional services. The students will be administered a survey to share what processes and services they found helpful, unhelpful, or effective in preparing them for post-secondary life.

WHAT WILL BE DONE IN THIS STUDY?

Participants in the current study will include current high school students who are receiving individualized education plans (IEPs) for high-incidence disabilities who will be graduating at the end of the semester.

If you agree to have your students to participate in this project, they will complete a survey containing questions about the transition services they are receiving as well as what they plan to do after graduation.
The following fall, I contact with the students for a follow-up. The student will reflect on the services they received and whether they feel they benefited from in preparing them for where they are now.

**POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

A possible risk is the lack of anonymity. In order to get in touch with participants for the interview portion of the study, they will need to include their personal information in the survey including name and phone number. To minimize this risk, only I will have access to this information. Names will be changed in any writing.

**ANTICIPATED BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS**

There are a number of potential benefits related to participation in my study. The answers students provide could help guide future transitional services to better prepare students for their post-high school life.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

If results from this study are published or discussed in conferences, no identifying information will be included. Your district and individual students’ identities will be protected through replacing their name with pseudonyms.

**PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your students’ participation in this study is voluntary. If they decide to participate, they can withdraw consent and cease participation in the study at any time without discrimination or penalization. Also, the principal investigator may withdraw participants from this study if necessary circumstances develop.

**IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this study you may contact: Michaline Flynn, M.S., researcher, University of Dayton, 330-321-8851, flynnm6@udayton.edu or the Principal Investigator, Dr. Susan Davies, University Dayton, sdavies1@udayton.edu.

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), Candise Powell, J.D., at the University of Dayton at IRB@udayton.edu.

**SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL**

I have read the information provided above. I have been given an opportunity to ask
questions and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been
given a copy of this form.

Name of Principal (please print) ________________________________

School
District_________________________________________________________

Signature of
Principal____________________________________ Date___________

SIGNATURE OF WITNESS

My signature as witness certifies that the Principal signed this consent form in my
presence.

Name of Witness (please print)
____________________________________________________________

Signature of Witness _____________________________________________

Date___________

(Must be same as participant signature date)
Dear Parent,

My name is Michaline Flynn and I am a graduate student in the School Psychology program at the University of Dayton. I am writing to inform you of your child’s opportunity to participate in a research project on post-secondary transitional services. These services are covered under your child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP). These services are meant to assist your child with their transition to life after high school.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to look at the experiences of students with high-incidence disabilities who received post-secondary transitional services. Your child will complete a survey and be interviewed to share what processes and services they found helpful, unhelpful, or effective in preparing them for post-secondary life.

WHAT WILL BE DONE IN THIS STUDY?

Participants in the current study will include current high school students who are receiving individualized education plans (IEPs) for high-incidence disabilities.

If you agree to have your child participate in this project, they will complete a survey containing questions about the transition services they are receiving as well as what they plan to do after graduation.

The following fall, I may get in contact with your child for a follow-up interview. This interview will ask your child to reflect on the services they received and whether they feel they were sufficient in preparing them for where they are now.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

A possible risk is the lack of anonymity. In order to get in touch with participants for the interview portion of the study, they will need to include their personal information in the survey including name and phone number. To minimize this risk, only I will have access to this information. Names will be changed in any writing.

ANTICIPATED BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS

There are a number of potential benefits related to participation in my study. The answers
your child provides could help guide future transitional services to better prepare students for their post-high school life.

**IN CASE OF RESEARCH RELATED ADVERSE EFFECTS**

If you experience any kind of discomfort as a result of your participation in my study, you may contact me (Michaline Flynn) at 330-321-8851 or my thesis advisor, Dr. Susan Davies at sdavies1@udayton.edu.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

If results from this study are published or discussed in conferences, no identifying information will be included. Your child’s identity will be protected through replacing their name with pseudonyms.

**PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to allow your child to participate, you can withdraw your consent and cease participation in the study at any time without discrimination or penalization. Also, the principal investigator may withdraw you from participating in this study if necessary circumstances develop.

**IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this study you may contact: Michaline Flynn, M.S., researcher, University of Dayton, 330-321-8851, flynnm6@udayton.edu or the Principal Investigator, Dr. Susan Davies, University Dayton, sdavies1@udayton.edu.

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Candise Powell, J.D., at the University of Dayton at IRB@udayton.edu.
I have read the information provided above. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been given a copy of this form. **I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.**

**Name of Participant (please print)**

________________________________________

**Address**

____________________________________________________________________

**Signature of Participant**

________________________________________ Date ____________

**SIGNATURE OF WITNESS**

My signature as witness certifies that the Participant signed this consent form in my presence.

**Name of Witness (please print)**

________________________________________

**Signature of Witness**

________________________________________

Date ____________

(Must be same as participant signature date)
Post-Secondary Transitions for Students with High-Incidence Disabilities

Student Assent Form

(To Be Read Aloud To Student)

Dear Student,

My name is Michaline Flynn and I am a graduate student in the School Psychology program at the University of Dayton. I am inviting you to participate in a research project on post-secondary transitional services. These services are covered under your Individualized Education Program (IEP). These services are meant to assist you with your transition to life after high school.

If your parents agree and you decide to be a part of this project, you will be asked to complete a survey and possibly meet with me in the fall for a one-on-one interview.

You do not have to be a part of my research if you do not want to. You can tell your teacher, your parents, or me at any time that you do not want to be a part of my research anymore. Everything we talk about will be kept confidential. This means I won’t tell anyone what we talk about. However, if you tell me that you are going to hurt yourself, someone else, or someone is hurting you I would have to tell someone like your parents or a safe adult.

Please sign the next paper and let me know if you want to be a part of my program or not. Thank you!

If you have any questions or concerns about this study you may contact: Michaline Flynn, M.S., researcher, University of Dayton, 330-321-8851, flynnm6@udayton.edu or the Principal Investigator, Dr. Susan Davies, University Dayton, sdavies1@udayton.edu.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), Candise Powell, J.D., at the University of Dayton at IRB@udayton.edu.
Please complete this form and return this form to the principal investigator.

I have been told about this project and I understand it. If I have any questions I know I can ask my teacher or my parents. I also understand that I can stop participating at any time and that everything will be kept confidential.

__________________________  __________________________
Child’s name  Child’s signature  Date

__________ Yes, I want to participate in this project.

__________ No, I do not want to participate in this project.

I certify that I have explained to the above participant the potential risks and potential benefits to participating in this study. I also certify that I have answered all questions that have been raised.

________________________________________
Principal Investigator’s signature  Date
APPENDIX B

MEASURES

After Graduation Goals

Student Name: _________________________________ Grade: _______
Date: _______
Anticipated Graduation Date: ____________
Are you currently receiving an Individualized Education Program (IEP)?
Yes _____ No _____
If yes, under which category (circle 1)?

Speech or language impairment    Deaf-blindness
Traumatic brain injury           Emotional disturbance
Hearing impairment               Intellectual disability
Multiple disabilities           Orthopedic impairment
Other health impairment          Specific learning disability
Blindness                       Autism
Visual impairment (including blindness).
Check what your plan is after high school.

_____ College, 4 year
   Where:
_____ College, 2 year
   Where:
_____ Career
   Where:
_____ Other
   Description:

Were you invited to participate in planning your goal after high school for your IEP?
Yes_____ No______

If yes, how much were you involved on a scale from 1 to 5? Circle 1

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Not very involved
Involved a little
Somewhat involved
Involved
Very involved

Did you take any tests or assessments to help plan your future goals? Yes_____ No______

If yes, which tests or assessments (ACT, SAT, PLAN, Career Aptitude Tests, etc.,)?
Did you receive any services to help you reach your goals? Yes _____ No_____

If yes, which services?

Community experiences  Daily living skills  Vocational Skills
Training

SAT/ACT Prep Courses  Other:

How prepared do you feel for your post high school plans?

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<td>Not very prepared</td>
<td>Prepared a little</td>
<td>Somewhat prepared</td>
<td>Prepared</td>
<td>Very Prepared</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Would you be interested in participating in an interview next fall? You will be asked questions about how well you were prepared in high school after you graduated.

Yes_____ No_____

If yes, provide a telephone number or email address where you can be reached and your favorite fast food lunch to be provided:
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**College**

How would you say you are doing in college so far?

How do you feel your high school prepared you going into college?

What did you learn in high school that helped prepare you to be successful?

What could have helped you more in high school?

What was unhelpful?
Career

How would you say you are doing in your job so far?

How do you feel your high school prepared you going into college?

What did you learn in high school that helped prepare you to be successful?

What could have helped you more in high school?

What was unhelpful?