



## Transition Goals and Experiences of Females with Disabilities Youth, Parents and Professionals

***The impact of feeling 'different' and 'not normal' and the disapproval and negative messages young women in special education receive are 'especially influential in their ability to achieve future goals'***

Researchers at the Regional Research Institute (RSI) at Portland State University studied the influence of gender in the setting of goals and planning of transition services for young women with disabilities. Despite a more positive trend in outcomes for youth with disabilities in the past twenty years, high school graduation rates, percent of students attending 4 year colleges and wages for women all remain lower than those for men. These differences have persisted over time and were identified in the early 1980's as the "double handicap" of both disability and gender inequality (Kutza, E.A., 1985).

There are only a few studies that have examined gender differences in transition. What is known is that the experiences of female students are very different from those of their male classmates:

- Many young women in special education have career goals that may lead them only to lower paying female-typical jobs.
- Special education encourages these limited aspirations by steering young women students into occupations such as childcare and food services while young men's opportunities have broadened considerably.
- Transition Plans for young women tend to set goals that conform to and reinforce outdated stereotypes about women's roles in the workplace.

Information was gathered through a series of interviews and focus groups with 146 youth, parents and education professionals. Activities and participants were located in two major urban school districts located in the western U.S. and through the student services office serving disabled students at a Western public university. Ten focus group interviews were held with young women still in high school, one focus group was comprised of college students, six group interviews were held with the parents or caregivers of the young women students and seven were held with special education professionals. The initial questions presented were developed by two independent advisory committees consisting of students, parents of young women with disabilities and education professionals and included general questions about transition experiences as well as experiences specific to young women in special education.

## FINDINGS

**Transition goals.** The young women in the study generally identified concrete goals related to specific careers. Most tended to “want it all” and often spoke of marriage, family, work and good jobs. They frequently acknowledged that their education—finishing school and attending college—as a valuable goal and all mentioned family and relationships as extremely important in terms of their futures.

Parents also identified education, family and relationship goals for their children. Where the goals of the parents and their children diverged was often related to whether the parents or caregivers felt that the goals were realistic and congruent with the skills and current situation of their daughters. For example, one parent commented that attending college was a shared goal but that currently “We’re having problems with her even to finish high school. She wants to drop out.”

Special education professionals, in contrast to the students and parents, held views that the RSI researchers characterized as “striking” in that they were mostly much more general goals such as “contributing” or “having choices”. A number of educators consistently identified student and parent goals as unrealistic in terms of what they believed the student could do or would do in the future and some saw their role in transition planning as “shaping” realistic goals and “bursting bubbles” for families.

**Factors that Shape Transition Goals.** RSI researchers were particularly interested in identifying the factors that influences the transition goals and planning of young women with disabilities. The data they collected indicated that **mentors, peers, family, teachers and exposure to opportunities** were the influential factors in the setting of goals.

A number of the study participants considered role models and mentors as very important in both setting an example and in opening up opportunities for broader experiences. Parents identified coaches, bosses and other influential adults in the lives of their nondisabled children as making positive contributions and teaching important life skills. Professionals as well expressed concern that young women from minority or cultural and language diverse communities lacked role models in the area of work but at the same time few professionals identified the positive role of culture in other areas of adult life such as relationships, family and community involvement.

The young women in the study identified their friends as very influential in the development of their goals. Confidence and “courage” were often mentioned as the outcomes of the loyalty and encouragement of their friends.

Parents and professionals were much more concerned about the influence of friends in terms of dating, pressure for sexual activity and on family planning. These are very real concerns for the health and safety of female students and their vulnerability.

Young women expressed frustration with what they often see as their family’s failure to “let go” because of their fears and sometimes low expectations. Professional participants as well discussed the positive influence of families, acknowledging that they are often “amazing” but at the same time feel that the fears of families prevent young women from having the experiences they need for successful transition to adulthood.

While some of the student participants spoke of the positive influence of their teachers in helping to formulate their transition goals, many others had the experience of being hurt by the low expectations and constant reminder that “you can’t do that” or that they might never be able to do the things they wanted to do in the future. Researchers commented that these reports by the young women were consistent with the “bubble bursting” role teachers often adopt.

In terms of their exposure to opportunities that would prepare them to reach their transition goals, female students felt that male students had more opportunities to get a job or a scholarship. Even in terms of vocational rehabilitation services, young women found that the low expectations for them often resulted in assignment to routine and uninteresting tasks—stocking shelves, for example—rather than the more challenging and enjoyable higher level tasks. Here to, gender bias was quite evident, with young women reporting that getting a job such as caring for children was much easier than trying to gain experience in fields that matched other goals.

Parents and professionals also identified lack of options and gender bias as significant obstacles to young women benefiting from school-based work experience programs and vocational training. “They’ll put the boys in work programs a lot faster than women,” commented one parent.

**Sources of Support and Impediments to Transition to Adulthood.** What helps young women with disabilities in setting goals and planning a successful transition to adulthood?

Sadly, female students reported that special education classes had not helped them much in working toward their goals, that they were not “real education”. Some felt that special education had actually resulted in their missing opportunities and only a small number of the students knew the purpose and intent of the IEP/TP meeting. Students often reported that they were discouraged from being in those meetings and one student even commented, “I’m not allowed to sit in those meetings. ” Those who did attend sometimes thought they were pointless or that the meetings were frustrating and embarrassing.

The difference in behavior between male and female students in special education classes was also identified by students and teachers as slanted towards the male students, who often need and get more attention and services. This was acknowledged as a disadvantage for their daughters by parents as well.

Teachers also expressed some concern that gender bias in certain cultures serves as a barrier to young women learning the self-advocacy and work skills they will need in adulthood, particularly in dealing with men in the work and training environment.

But perhaps the most dominant theme throughout the focus group discussions was the critical importance and impact of each young woman’s views regarding her disability and how that view shapes her self-perception. Researchers concluded that the impact of feeling “different” and “not normal” and the disapproval and negative messages young women in special education receive are, in their words, “especially influential in their ability to achieve their future goals”.

Parents also understand the value of self-esteem and some discussed the issues of low self-esteem for their children. Teachers as well as students made the connection between special education and low self-esteem. Others discussed their concern that often the young women they serve seem to be searching for something that they can do well and that this could result in their identifying finding someone to love them and having children early as transition goals.

Only the single focus group of college age women expressed their successful efforts at overcoming negative comments and treatments. They reported an increased awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and the positive outcomes for them as they identified their passions and niches—where “that’s where you realize what you’re good at.”

All participants agreed that young women in special education needed to receive more exposure to job training, paid work experiences and job shadowing (mentoring). Exposure to adults with disabilities who are working and some understanding of the tools they use and the accommodations that have made them successful were identified as especially important by the professional participants. Teachers also expressed the need to help

parents from other cultures understand the relationship between job experiences and the acquisition of those skills and school success.

Social support from parents, friends and family members was discussed by a number of the female students and parents as important to their feeling confident and, beyond the emotional support and encouragement, providing real opportunities to network with individuals who share similar interests over time.

RSI researchers commented that parents and teachers often “blamed” each other for some of the failures that occurred in setting goals and transition planning for their female students. Parents particularly felt a lack of support from teachers. Some teachers acknowledged that the goal setting and transition planning was frustrating for them as well, due to lack of resources, big case loads of students and time constraints.

Across focus groups, agreement was significant in terms of the importance of self-determination, or “the opportunity and capacity for young women to determine and direct their own lives to the greatest extent possible.” The young women in particular felt that at least becoming a full “partner” in making the decisions that impact their lives would assist them in determining what they can do.

Still, parents reported a continual push and pull of high expectations and support for self-determination and the very real need to keep young women safe and healthy.

**Additional Issues and Barriers for Cultural or Linguistically Diverse (CLD) Parents and Young Women.** Young women from different cultures and language communities felt keenly that perhaps the limited expectations held for them had as much to do with stereotypes about their culture as with their disability. RSI researchers did report several significant findings in this area that indicate young women from Cultural or Linguistically Diverse backgrounds do experience:

- Stereotyping and discrimination toward racial and ethnic backgrounds
- Different cultural definitions and ideas about disability between parents and professionals
- Professionals rarely reflecting the population that they serve

Young women from other countries and particularly young women of color and their parents commented on their sense that they were not “accepted” in any group.

Researchers found that comments made by the professionals in the studies did in fact reflect negative stereotypes about the cultures of their students. Stereotypes about Latina students were particularly prevalent, with perhaps the most damaging being the notion that Latinos are uneducated or do not necessarily understand or value the ongoing education and training of their daughters as they transition into adulthood.

Further, professionals identified lack of knowledge or understanding on the part of parents from CLD backgrounds as a barrier while rarely acknowledging the difficulty of the professional environment or the complex process or their own lack of familiarity or tolerance with the language and culture of others as a significant component of that barrier.

## **THE BOTTOM LINE**

The findings of this research indicate that gender does play an important role in setting transition goals for young women with disabilities.

Many young women realize that their school and vocational experiences are not preparing them for life after school. And, there is evidence to suggest that the low expectations reflected in the activities and resources provided to young women with disabilities is

sometimes a result of teacher bias and stereotyping rather than a realistic response to the actual limitations of the students themselves.

It is also troubling that so many of the young women in this study reported significant issues, frustration and embarrassment with the fact of their having a disability and with their lack of understanding of and ability to influence their own education and transition planning.

The academic and transition planning requirements of IDEA are clear in the assumption that it is important for all young people with disabilities to be prepared for successful lives after school. In fact, all Federal disability policy supports the premise that employment and earning a living is just as important for women as it is for men. The degree to which gender is influencing lowered academic and vocational opportunities for women students with disabilities is not acceptable and must be addressed early in each young woman's school career.

Parents and special education advocates need to consider:

- Do special education services and supports reflect both academic and occupationally specific vocational training?
- Are young women in the special education program encouraged to aspire to competitive employment and are they provided access to vigorous training programs?
- Are students provided examples and social supports that model and celebrate success stories of women with disabilities?
- Are teachers and other education staff prepared to encourage the highest aspirations of their students and have they eliminated low-level, sex-role specific materials and activities from secondary school curriculums?
- Are young women specifically taught to advocate effectively for themselves and encouraged to understand and speak up for the supports and services they need?
- Males make up two-thirds of the student population in special education. Given this, are adequate resources being provided to meet the unique needs of female students?
- Are cultural and linguistic differences among students and parents respected and valued or are decisions made based on stereotypes and biases about particular groups or minority communities?

All of these considerations are important in making sure the school infrastructure is designed to maximize opportunities for young women and should form the foundation for developing good goals and effective programs and supports that lead to positive outcomes.

## **DISCUSSION**

Parents and special education advocates can draw on this research to evaluate both their own assumptions about transition goals and IEP content for young women with disabilities and to assist them in doing more powerful planning. Over twenty years of inquiry informs us that we are still not setting high expectations for young women with disabilities.

IDEA defines transition as a "results oriented process" that supports both academic and functional achievement for young women. This research indicates that schools may be providing "just enough" rather than the vigorous education interventions needed to prepare young women for education, career and their own families.

Further, these findings caution advocates to consider and monitor transition planning for gender biases that might serve to limit or discourage young women from pursuing interesting or challenging coursework and training/work opportunities.

Finally, the impact of self-esteem and the importance of social and familial relationships in supporting young women's aspirations and the building of their confidence are highlighted.

Each of these has implications for how advocates and parents view the education and social supports and examples provided to and valued by young women as they assist them in setting and achieving goals for their futures.

**The Research: Transition Goals and Experiences of Females With disabilities: Youth, Parents and Professionals.** Jennifer M. Hogansen, Portland State University, Kristin Powers, California State University at Long Beach, Sarah Geenen, Eleanor Gil-Kashiwabara and Laurie Powers, Portland State University. Published in *Exceptional Children*, Vol. 74, No. 2, pp.215-234.

### References and Resources

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**OBSTACLES TO EQUALITY: The Double Discrimination of Women with Disabilities.** Overview Article by Rannveig Traustadottir, Center on Human Policy, July 1990. To order, please write to Rachael Zubal, Center on Human Policy, 805 S. Crouse Avenue, Syracuse, NY 13244-2380. <http://thechp.syr.edu/womdis2.htm>



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