

# The COVID-19 pandemic as a tipping point: The precarity of transition for students who receive special education and English language services

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## Abstract.

**BACKGROUND:** School closures and service disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted students' postschool transitions. Students with disabilities who were also members of historically marginalized groups including immigrant students, multilingual students, students of color, and those experiencing poverty, were disproportionately negatively impacted by pandemic-limited services.

**OBJECTIVE:** This paper examined the impact of the pandemic on the transition experiences of secondary students receiving both special education and English learner services.

**METHOD:** We collected and analyzed data from ethnographic interviews with 26 students, their parents, and teachers. A close analysis of a representative case illustrates how transition education and planning were affected by challenges introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic for some of the nation's most vulnerable students.

**RESULTS:** Despite postsecondary education goals and high parent expectations, evidence of minimal information sharing between school and family, specific plans for goal actualization, and interruptions to service delivery negatively impacted goal attainment, tipping precariously positioned transition plans toward missed opportunities.

**CONCLUSION:** The pandemic accentuated pre-existing inequities in transition and vocational rehabilitation (VR) services. Implications for practice and research are discussed, including the importance of supported family engagement, enhanced self-determination skills, and integrated VR services into high school special education programming.

Keywords: Transition, English learner, special education, postsecondary education, employment, pandemic, COVID-19

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically shifted many aspects of society, effectively upending the education system and significantly impacting the lives of students and families. The pandemic also highlighted

and even exacerbated inequities. Existing persistent patterns of poverty and discrimination have disproportionately affected communities of color over time, leaving family and student members to shoulder both high rates of COVID-19 infection and mortality, as well as pandemic-related school closures and disruptions (Lopez et al., 2021).

Preliminary studies suggest that the pandemic has also exacerbated racial disparities in education (Jones

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et al., 2021). For secondary students receiving both special education and English learner (EL) services, postsecondary transitions were impacted because education and vocational rehabilitation (VR) services shifted to remote access and work experiences abruptly paused or ended. These difficulties, in addition to the pandemic's unpredictable and uncertain health, social, and economic effects, made postschool planning and preparation difficult.

As part of a larger study, we examined transition planning and experiences of students who receive both special education and (EL) English learner services. In this single case study, we present an analysis of the pandemic's ramifications on transition experiences of a representative case of one dually identified student. We refer to students receiving both special education and EL services as "dually identified," recognizing the complexities and inaccuracies associated with identification particularly for students who also face the societal impacts of racism, ableism, and linguicism (Klingner et al., 2012). We then share our analysis of the parent and student interviews, which illustrate both the pandemic's deleterious effects on postschool transitions and expose pre-existing weaknesses in transition planning and education. Last, we present implications for improving and expanding services to ameliorate negative impacts of the pandemic and to increase alignment between planning and dually identified students' preferences, strengths, and needs.

### *1.1. Vocational rehabilitation and COVID-19*

Vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs play an important role in transition, connecting students with disabilities to continued career planning and preparation, work experiences, and postschool accommodations. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) requires that, at a minimum, 15% of each state's Title I-VR funds must be used for pre-employment transition services, including job exploration support, postsecondary education guidance, and self-advocacy instruction. Additionally, local VR offices are responsible for overseeing pre-employment transition coordination for students with disabilities, including attending IEP meetings as needed and working with schools to coordinate and ensure students receive adequate pre-employment transition services (WIOA, 2014).

Through targeted career development and support, the aim of VR is to enable individuals with disabilities to access and maintain competitive employment

that aligns with their life goals (Chan et al., 2009). Partnering with high school educators to support students in transition, VR counselors provide expertise and education related to postschool support necessary for actualizing transition goals and plans (Frentzel et al., 2021). Vocational rehabilitation counselors are taught to challenge deficit-oriented models of disability and to circumnavigate biases about the limitations of disabled young adults' capacity to fully engage and participate in society as socially and financially contributing members (Chan et al., 2009). Partnerships between VR counselors and students, families, and educators bridge high school to postsecondary options.

In the wake of COVID-19, emergent research suggests that VR services, like many other support services, were severely impacted by the upheaval of the pandemic. For instance, unemployment during the pandemic was far worse for individuals with disabilities compared to their peers without disabilities and, as a result, an increase in services is required to support a successful reintegration into the workforce (Strauser et al., 2021). Pandemic-related employment disparities were greater for employees with disabilities who were also people of color than their White peers (Schall et al., 2021). Recent research has also found that transition-aged youth with multiple VR services delivered in a shorter period of time are more likely to have positive outcomes in employment, suggesting that correcting a pandemic-related absence of services could be redressed (Kaya et al., 2021).

While the limitations of VR services during the pandemic exacerbated disparities, limitations in secondary transition services may also be contributing to the problem (Dong et al., 2016). Across disability categories, only 38% of high school students with disabilities reported that any community agency staff, including VR, attended their transition planning meetings (Lipscomb et al., 2017). Studies of interventions designed to increase VR involvement in transition show that amelioration efforts have remained inconsistent. Multiple studies have found that urbanicity, race, and socioeconomic factors impact access to and successful outcomes of early work exploration for transition-aged youth (see Gold et al., 2013; Osmani et al., 2022, for examples). This research suggests that VR and transition services have yet to effectively actualize aims to improve postschool outcomes and to facilitate the full integration of individuals with disabilities into postsecondary college and career opportunities. Preliminarily, the impact of the pandemic on transition

outcomes has intensified limitations associated with a lack of optimal pre-pandemic services (Strauser et al., 2021).

### 1.2. Transition services and COVID-19

While sparse, several studies have recently been published on the topic of transition for students with disabilities during the pandemic. For instance, Chugani & Houtrow (2020) found that college students with disabilities experienced a range of challenges during the pandemic, leading them to call for concerted efforts to address exacerbated disparities in college and career preparedness and diminished employment opportunities. In another study, researchers examined access to accommodations and services for college students with disabilities during the pandemic and found that students were unable to access pre-existing services, such as testing accommodations (Gin et al., 2021). These authors also found that online learning posed additional challenges related to service provision and differentiated instruction. Findings from both studies implicated the pandemic as a contributing factor to inequitable college access and outcomes for students with disabilities. Both studies also point to the need for additional and novel approaches to aiding successful college matriculation and completion for this population.

Examining the impacts of COVID-19 on the transition experiences of high school students with disabilities during the pandemic, Rowe and colleagues (2020) identified barriers associated with transitioning to and engaging in remote schooling, uncertainty about employment, and missed opportunities for career development and exposure. Increased accessibility and additional support for engaging with vocational activities aligned to students' transition goals and plans were identified as strategies to remedy pandemic-related challenges (Rowe et al., 2020). Providing opportunities for skill development in self-determination was identified as essential to postschool goal attainment and increasing efforts to support students' related skills set may help them navigate the additional pandemic-related challenges they face.

### 1.3. Dually identified students and transition

The focus of the present study addresses a gap in the knowledge base. Following a thorough review of the extant literature, we found no studies examin-

ing the pandemic's impact on transition for dually identified students. Dually identified students face additional barriers in transition compared to their peers who receive EL services without special education and/or students with disabilities who do not also receive EL services (Trainor, Newman et al., 2019). Because special education and EL services function as two separate systems, dually identified students may experience what is considered an intersectional gap whereby services are insufficiently integrated (Stinson, 2018). Limited integration is attributed to multiple factors including the siloing of special education and EL educators and the complex logistics of dual services delivery (Miranda et al., 2019). For example, one recent study found that dually identified students' transition planning often occurred with parents outside of school, disconnected from school transition planning (Trainor et al., 2022). Despite the identification of evidence-based transition interventions such as early work experiences and family involvement in planning (Mazzotti et al., 2015), dually identified youth have not consistently been included in intervention studies; both their individual characteristics and educational contexts are in need of further research (Trainor, Carter et al., 2019). Results suggested that leveraging home experiences to inform and guide school-based transition planning could reduce preparation gaps.

Given the limited knowledge base on the experiences of dually identified students in transition, both generally and during the pandemic, we conducted interviews with students, their parents, and their teachers. The following question guided this analysis: *What were the experiences of dually identified students in transition during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

## 2. Method

This ethnographic interview study is part of a mixed-methods multiyear study of the transition to postsecondary education of dually identified students in a large northeastern city in the United States. For this analysis, we focused on one purposefully selected case, an appropriate approach when a closely bounded set of data is representative of a larger theme (Patton, 2015). This case was representative of the challenges faced by a dually identified student who was transitioning out of high school during the pandemic.

### 2.1. Procedure

In the fall of 2017, researchers received permission from both university and school district review boards to conduct research in a large metropolitan school system where 19% of all students receiving special education services also received EL services. In the first year, data collection consisted of preliminary interviews of principals and other educators from six schools whose leaders voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. During the following two years we visited these schools and interviewed participating students, parents, and teachers. In the final stages of data collection, the COVID-19 pandemic began.

### 2.2. Sample

As researchers, we were able to confirm participants' receipt of special education and EL services, however, we were not granted access to disability- and EL-specific documents. This case study is based on the interviews of Emily, one of 26 dually identified students in the qualitative study, and her mother, Ms. Lopez. Mother and daughter used general terms to describe learning challenges and having an IEP, but neither focused on a specific disability category or service. Emily was interviewed when she was in high school and her mother was interviewed about a year later, as Emily embarked on continued learning at a community college. The family, originally from Puerto Rico, spoke mostly Spanish at home.

### 2.3. Data collection

Student participants were interviewed twice, once in the fall and once in the spring. Student participants were asked to nominate teachers and parents or guardians who knew them well and could speak to their transition planning. Adults were interviewed once and all interviews were between 45 minutes and one hour. We used an open-ended interview protocol that included the following example question, "What are some of your goals for life after high school?" Questions based on the extant transition literature included, "What are some of the accommodations on your IEP and do you see yourself using this support in college?" We also asked students about bilingualism and related educational and career goals. Interviews conducted after the pandemic-related school closures also included questions about how students navigated transition during the pandemic. Participants'

languages included Arabic, Chinese, English, and Spanish; each selected the language in which they were interviewed. A bilingual member of the research team interviewed Emily in English and Ms. Lopez in Spanish.

### 2.4. Data analysis

Our team approach to analysis, following transcription and translation, included multiple readings of interviews during which we created a codebook of terms and associated operational definitions (Miles et al., 2014). We conducted both inductive and deductive coding, analytic memo writing, and iterative reviews of emergent themes that are associated with a grounded theoretical approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During the coding process, we met weekly and discussed coding until consensus agreement of codes and their application was reached. Once initial coding was complete, we conducted a constant comparative analysis for the purpose of identifying the relationships among codes and across interviews (Miles et al., 2014). During this second-level, relational coding (Miles et al., 2014), Emily's case emerged as an important, representative case because it demonstrated the challenges many dually identified students experienced as they planned postschool transition. Emily's case was also a "critical case" (Patton, 2015, p. 243), because it illuminated a phenomenon (i.e., transition during the pandemic) in ways that provided insight into what likely occurred across other cases with a common set of circumstances and contexts.

We took multiple measures to ensure the trustworthiness of our analysis. We employed reflexivity throughout the project, examining our positionality in relation to the participants, being explicit about our use of theory, and working as a team to identify multiple and contradictory perspectives of team members, participants, and mentor texts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Due to the stoppage of data collection during the COVID pandemic, member-checking was limited. We were able to triangulate student and parent interviews and we used field notes to confirm contextual details.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Case study: Emily Lopez

As the first wave of the pandemic surged throughout 2020, Emily Lopez was one of nearly 6.3 million

American high school students with disabilities (U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation, 2021), many of whom were transitioning out of high school and into adulthood. Similar to approximately 12% of all youth with disabilities (U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation, 2021), Emily was identified as a student who qualified for both special education and EL services. While she qualified for formal transition planning that is a required part of the individualized education program (IEP), input about EL services in the transition to employment and further education was not formalized, according to Emily and her mother, and appeared to be limited to EL teacher interactions with Emily and her mother. Transition goals had been identified at school and at home and Ms. Lopez and Emily identified college-going as an expectation; however, as Ms. Lopez saw it, the pandemic created barriers to regular contact with school personnel, both at the secondary and post-secondary levels, leaving any effort toward progress “up to her [Emily].”

Despite her successful efforts to register for an online course during the pandemic, Emily experienced difficulty and her mother observed that her daughter needed more support. Ms. Lopez said,

When the whole pandemic started, she began to be interested in baking and everything. I support everything she wants to do, because it's important to me that when she's an adult, for her to have something to sustain herself... for me the most important thing, that she also finishes her university or college or whatever she can to have a good... a higher education. But many times I don't know if it's because she can't keep trying or if sometimes she is regressing.

While Ms. Lopez identified obstacles that Emily was experiencing, she found it difficult to locate educators who could provide support and insight into Emily's struggles. Ms. Lopez also noticed that Emily seemed reluctant to seek help when she experienced difficulties with both the community college course in which she enrolled and with job applications. Ms. Lopez said, “. . . in high school they explained to me that when they [students] enter the university she would have to do her own thing by herself. . . . I was always telling her, if you need help, go ahead and do it. Apply everywhere, apply other places.” Mother and daughter had different views about Emily's help-seeking skills during high school. Ms. Lopez said that although Emily occasionally sought help and advice from teachers, she rejected the special edu-

cation label and did not attend IEP meetings in high school. Her mother also noticed that Emily sometimes experienced embarrassment when asking for help. In contrast, Emily reported she sought help as needed.

Before the pandemic, Emily and her mom thought her secondary grades were strong and indicated that Emily was on the path to college. They both also considered Emily to be bilingual based on her ability to help Spanish-speaking family members despite the school's continued designation of her as an EL student. Throughout high school, Emily planned for college, and she gave multiple examples of discussing her plans with her mother. She connected her interests to her career goals, she visited some college campuses, and she sought the advice of siblings and other family members about postsecondary education. Emily considered herself to be an engaged student; she participated in student government and the film club, and she maintained a part-time job. Emily's mom thought she was ready for college, too. The two had discussed many aspects of further education including which of her career interests were most likely to result in personal fulfillment and financial stability, the pros and cons of attending college away from home, and initially attending a community college. At the same time, neither Emily nor her mother recalled formal transition planning activities at school.

As both mother and daughter reflected on Emily's future goals and current struggles, they shared relevant details about their family background that informed their expectations of Emily's transition into adulthood. For example, Emily's family experienced the difficulties of poverty in a densely populated metropolis firsthand. Emily was the tenth child of her parents, who had moved with their older children to the continental U.S. before she was born. The family had relocated when Emily was in both middle school and then again in high school, settling in the northeastern part of the U.S., where she remained during the pandemic. Ms. Lopez was employed as an office cleaner, and Emily saw how hard her mother worked. During high school, Emily sometimes accompanied Ms. Lopez to Saturday jobs. During the time they spent together, Emily learned from her mother that further education would lead to opportunities that she, Ms. Lopez, had not had because she was forced to leave elementary school to support herself and her family. In another example, Emily talked about the advice and encouragement she received from older siblings who had left school and became parents

before high school graduation. She said she understood that she would have better opportunities if she graduated high school and continued her education. Her siblings, she said, encouraged her to research postsecondary education programs close to home. Emily's father also contributed to her perceptions about the future, reminding her to balance earning potential and personal safety.

Of the multiple career options that captured her attention during high school, Emily was most drawn to forensics. Her motivation, she said, was to correct what she believed was an unfair arrest of one of her brothers. Despite challenges associated with learning struggles and poverty, the family concurred that Emily was ready to pursue more education. One sibling helped her find information on a forensic program at a nearby college. Interviews with Emily and her mother revealed that the family discussed transition expectations frequently but these interviews did not reference teacher or school counselor input. The opinions and experiences of her family, however, fueled her desire to do well in school, plan for the future, and transition into postsecondary education. Prior to the pandemic, Emily and her family saw her as college-bound. At the same time, when directly asked, mother and daughter had limited information about the specifics of that transition including receiving disability-related services at college.

Neither Ms. Lopez nor Emily mentioned the potential implications of Emily's continued receipt of EL services in high school with regard to applying or enrolling in further education. Emily's mother considered English fluency to be one of her daughter's strengths. "Compared to me, she knows a lot of English." Still, she worried that Emily would struggle with collegiate level instruction conducted entirely in English. Ms. Lopez prioritized postsecondary goals that allowed Emily to stay close to home and matched her strengths and interests. More than anything, she wanted her daughter to experience success, and in the beginning of the pandemic when Emily enrolled in community college, she felt hopeful about Emily's future.

In 2020, local pandemic-related closures of businesses, institutions, and public spaces began to factor heavily in Emily's postschool decisions and subsequent experiences. Originally, Emily had visited a nearby postsecondary university that offered a range of two- and four-year degree programs in forensic science and criminal justice. As the pandemic progressed her mother noticed that Emily became isolated from both high school and community col-

lege peers and teachers. Ms. Lopez began to worry about Emily's preparedness and fit with the remote community college experience. During Ms. Lopez's interview she also expressed concern that the initial course in which Emily enrolled was too difficult. She said that although she supported Emily's decisions, she encouraged her daughter to select something that was feasible and enjoyable. Ms. Lopez also felt unsure about how to best support Emily's choices to move forward with difficult courses such as an introduction to psychology. Ms. Lopez's inexperience in higher education made her cautious about advising Emily on the topic. She also noticed that her daughter's interests varied and shifted over time and she expressed concern about Emily's learning challenges. Ms. Lopez stated that her contact with school personnel had been minimal during high school and entirely absent during the pandemic. As the pandemic continued to linger and impact social connections, it became clear that the online courses at the community college were not going well. She noticed that Emily stopped attending remote classes. Despite that Emily assured her mother that she would restart her studies next year, Ms. Lopez worried, "Having almost a year out of being out of school right now, I really don't know."

The pandemic impacted the end of Emily's high school career and the first years of her transition into adulthood. Ms. Lopez said that during the pandemic, absent contact with teachers and peers, Emily seemed to lose sight of her goals and become less focused on her future. Partly in response to the pandemic's constraints on her employment, Emily started baking for neighbors to earn money. She began to shift her career focus from forensics to catering baked goods, a career that she could pursue from home. Ms. Lopez worried about the changes in her plans but in an effort to be supportive, she and Emily watched YouTube videos on baking techniques and put this knowledge to use. Early successes, however, failed to transfer into a sustainable business model. Ms. Lopez said, "How do I tell you? She was a bit unenthusiastic because she was no longer doing anything." At this point, Emily's mother was worried that Emily would give up.

As the pandemic surged and retreated, both transition and vocational services seemed to be out of Emily's reach. Ms. Lopez recalled that teachers had connected Emily to vocational services, but they had yet to receive any responses following an initial meeting. Meanwhile, as Emily waited, she lost direction and traction in pursuit of her goals. Ms.

Lopez, concerned about the future, wondered if additional support services existed. She said what her daughter needed was “a type of counseling that can explain to her what awaits her when she is more adult.”

#### 4. Discussion

The findings from this representative critical case study present both a challenge and an opportunity to the field regarding vocational rehabilitation and postsecondary preparation for dually identified students. First, while the pandemic has exacerbated issues of unemployment and access to equitable postsecondary opportunities for individuals with disabilities, our results suggest that these issues did not begin in the pandemic. Rather, this case illustrated that formal planning at school did not provide a strong foundation of resources and connections for students and families to use independently after leaving school. Dually identified students' transition planning and support may need to be fine-tuned to address how both disability and language should be addressed in postsecondary education settings. The precarity of many dually identified students' economic situation necessitates transition goals that have clearly delineated plans and contingencies for setbacks. Identifying potential postsecondary supports in both disability and language learning may address unanticipated challenges and changes, such as preparing for language and disability supports in postsecondary settings that immigrant parents may not have experienced firsthand. Secondary entitlement and postsecondary eligibility may be negatively impacted by label stigmatization, further complicating students' and families' willingness to access services. As with previous studies of family involvement in transition planning (Trainor, 2010), this finding illustrates the need for using transparent and culturally responsive discussion tools so that students and parents understand the implications of opting in or out of services. Counselors' presence during transition is likely to augment their reach.

Results demonstrate robust supports in the transition process during high school are needed to support preparedness and self-determination during transition, whether during a crisis such as the pandemic or during regularly occurring transition contexts. Preliminary research demonstrates that remote services delivered in a relatively brief time period can support positive postschool outcomes, underscoring the

importance of deliberately designing services with both disability and remote technology in focus (Kaya et al., 2021). For example, our findings indicate that remote technology for the purpose of communication could provide a conduit for addressing questions and concerns during transition across contexts. Community-based agencies, educators, and families may find that remote meetings strengthen attendance and participation. Such contact could provide guidance and information about postsecondary support and persistence in courses, and it could help alleviate frustration and despair in times of stress. This critical case showed a disconnect from supports that many people may have experienced while transitioning out of high school during the pandemic. Identifying recent graduates and providing them with the adequate resources to reacclimate into their postsecondary education or career goals and opportunities is key. Passing from one set of services into new systems of support can be difficult in the best of times and corrections to lost opportunities likely need to be directly repaired.

Finally, our findings, in alignment with the work of Chavira and colleagues (2016), point to the strength of immigrant families as a source of support and encouragement for one another when striving for postschool success. Particularly during the pandemic, family members, though isolated from adequate services, remained connected with a heightened awareness of their family members' struggles. Dually identified students may also benefit from increased skill development and practice in support of self-determination because the systems they access in transition may not be familiar to their parents. Bolstering self-determination in ways that are culturally sustaining can strengthen shared goals and actions across community and home.

##### 4.1. Limitations and implications

This study has several limitations. First, interviews with both Emily and her mother, while providing important insights into their perceptions and experiences prior to and during the pandemic, did not include access to Emily's transcripts or IEP. This information would help contextualize the interview content. Second, we were limited to pre-pandemic teacher interviews and did not have access to interview VR counselors. Additional data would allow for greater depth when analyzing this case and enhance our understanding of the impact of the crisis.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite the limitations, this study is useful in shaping practice. The findings, in alignment with a large body of self-determination research (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2017), underscore the importance of developing self-determination skills such as seeking support and adjusting goals during transition. Similar to the extant research, this study emphasizes the importance of culturally sustaining family engagement (Rodriguez & Cavendish, 2013) during crises such as a pandemic. First generation immigrant families may need pointed transition and postschool VR access guidance. Including siblings, extended family, and community members could also be productive. Finally, our study points to the importance of VR programming. Workplace supports and transition planning are in the purview of VR; preparing for pandemic-altered work environments, such as hybrid or remote careers, may require new tools (Kaya et al., 2021).

This study also informs further research. Examining how VR services are connected to secondary special education programming is needed. Dually identified students who resist labeling may forgo services and/or may be ineligible in adult service systems. We need to know more about postschool VR eligibility and use. Our findings hinted that additional collaboration is needed. Understanding specifically what targeted supports are needed is essential at this moment as we identify strategies for supporting students in the transition process.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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## Ethics statement

This research was approved by New York University's Institutional Review Board and University Committee on Activities Involving Human Subjects, Office of Research Compliance in response to application IRB-FY2017-957.

## Informed consent

Participants were fully informed and provided written consent to participate in this research.

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