

Gender Gaps: Career Development for Young Women With Disabilities

Career Development and Transition for
Exceptional Individuals
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Abstract

Young women with disabilities face multiple barriers in making the transition from high school to meaningful careers. This study used focus groups and individual interviews with high school girls with disabilities, college women with disabilities, high school special education teachers, school administrators and employers to examine career development and transition needs for young women with disabilities. Barriers and supports were identified in four major categories: a) individual/interpersonal skills, b) career options, c) school system issues, and d) disability needs. Recommendations for practice are discussed.

Keywords

gender issues, career and vocational development, postschool outcomes, qualitative research, employment

Young women with disabilities face unique challenges in gaining employment, accessing postsecondary education, living independently, and fully participating in their communities (Lindstrom & Benz, 2002; Rousso, 2008; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). During the complex transition from high school to meaningful employment, they may be faced with barriers based on both gender stereotypes and disability discrimination creating a “double jeopardy” situation that restricts career development and limits occupational opportunities (Doren & Benz, 2001; Hogansen, Powers, Geenen, Gil-Kashiwabara, & Powers, 2008).

These barriers are especially pronounced in the area of employment. Although women now account for 49% of the total workforce, gender disparities in earnings are still prevalent (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). In 2010, female full-time year round workers earned on average 19% less than male full-time employees, and many women remain clustered in a limited number of low-paying traditional female occupations (Betz, 2005; U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). In addition, young women graduating from high school continue to earn less than their male counterparts. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the median income for a male high school graduate in 2009 was US\$32,900 compared with US\$25,000 for a female high school graduate (<http://nces.ed.gov/>). Gender gaps in employment also impact young women with disabilities entering the workforce. The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 reports overall gains in employment rates and wages for females who have been out of school for up to 4 years (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009). However, this same report documents that young women with

disabilities have lower participation in high-skilled jobs and work fewer hours per week than their male counterparts. Several other studies have found gender differences on important postschool employment indicators, including significantly lower postschool employment rates, lower participation in full-time work, lower earnings, and lower participation in high-skilled jobs for females with disabilities compared to their male peers (Doren & Benz, 2001; Doren, Gau, & Lindstrom, 2011; Rabren, Dunn, & Chambers, 2002; Wagner et al., 2005).

There are both internal and external barriers that contribute to gender disparities in postschool career options (Betz, 2005; Nosek & Hughes, 2003). Internal barriers may include multiple role conflicts, skill deficits, underestimation of capabilities, poor self-efficacy, low outcome expectations, and constrictive gender role socialization (Noonan et al., 2004; Smith, 2007). As young women prepare to transition to adulthood, they are at the critical developmental stage of identity formation determining both who they are and who they would like to become. Previous researchers have documented that adolescent females often lack self-confidence that is necessary to pursue nontraditional or male-dominated careers (Burgstahler & Chang, 2007; Hogansen et al., 2008). The process of developing a vocational identity becomes especially challenging because aspirations may be limited

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by traditional gender roles as well as disability stereotypes (Darling, 2003; Rousso, 2008). For many young women with disabilities, vocational choice may involve a process of “circumscription” whereby certain occupations are gradually eliminated based on gender, prestige level, and perceived self-concept (Gottfredson, 2005).

External barriers to career attainment for young women include sexual harassment, socioeconomic disadvantage, educational and workplace discrimination, and lack of female role models (Ferri & Connor, 2010; Noonan et al., 2004; Smith, 2007). In addition, workplaces may be physically inaccessible and schools themselves may put young people with disabilities at a significant disadvantage compared to their nondisabled peers in transitioning to adulthood (Janus, 2009). Young women with disabilities in high school often have limited opportunities for career exploration or skill development. They are less likely than their male peers to enroll in occupational specific vocational courses or participate in community work experiences (Wagner et al., 2005). This restricted set of opportunities and experiences may ultimately lead to a narrow range of career interests and aspirations (Hogansen et al., 2008; Lindstrom, Benz & Doren, 2004).

Previous transition literature has clearly documented gender differences in postschool employment outcomes for young adults with disabilities (Doren et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2009). However, only a few studies have explored supports and strategies that may increase postschool success specifically for young women with disabilities.

In a study that examined the career development process for young women with learning disabilities, Lindstrom and Benz (2002) found that individual motivation and persistence, family supports, opportunities for career exploration, vocational training, and supportive work environments all led to greater stability of employment as well as clarity of career goals for this population. A follow-up analysis of the same data set focused on barriers and facilitators to career choice (Lindstrom et al., 2004). This subsequent analysis revealed that for young women with learning disabilities in transition from high school to the workforce, career choices and opportunities were often restricted by both gender roles and disability barriers. These data also confirmed that career goals can be expanded through targeted transition services, including career exploration and work experience (Lindstrom et al., 2004). Trainor (2007) examined the perceptions of young women with learning disabilities about self-determination in the transition process. This qualitative study found that although young women often perceived themselves to be competent and independent, several key components of self-determination were not consistently present. Data from in-depth individual interviews with young women with learning disabilities “illustrated a lack of connection between their understanding of personal strengths and needs and their goals” (Trainor, 2007, p. 7)

In a more recent study, Hogansen and colleagues (2008) conducted focus groups with (a) female youth with

disabilities from ages 15 through 23, (b) parents of young women with disabilities, and (c) professionals who work with them, to examine the influence of gender on transition goals and experiences. Data were gathered from 146 participants. Findings revealed patterns of unique experiences for females with disabilities, including the type of transition goals developed, the influences of multiple factors on these goals (e.g., peers, mentors, families), and the specific supports available for the transition to adulthood. A key finding from the Hogansen study was a persistent lack of exposure to career and vocational opportunities that would prepare young women with disabilities for the transition to adulthood.

This study extends the sparse literature base on gender, disability, and transition by focusing specifically on barriers and supports needed to assist young women with disabilities in transitioning from school to postschool environments. Unlike previous studies, this research includes the perspectives of community employers who have hired and trained young women with disabilities as well as adult women with disabilities enrolled in both 2-year and 4-year postsecondary institutions. In addition, this study includes a broader sample of young women with a variety of disabilities (in addition to learning disabilities). Three broad research questions structured our investigation:

Research Question 1: What are the barriers faced by young women with disabilities in transition?

Research Question 2: What supports and specific strategies are needed to prepare young women with disabilities to succeed in postsecondary education/training and in the workforce?

Research Question 3: Do school administrators, teachers, employers, high school girls, and college women with disabilities have differing perceptions and input around supports and barriers to postsecondary education/training and employment?

Method

We used qualitative methodology to collect data from multiple perspectives and to illuminate the multifaceted process of transition from school to postschool environments. Qualitative research offers a systematic approach to understanding the essential nature of a complex phenomenon, and descriptive studies such as this one provide an ideal approach for “understanding individuals with disabilities, their families and those who work with them” (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 196). More specifically, we conducted 5 focus groups with high school girls and college women with disabilities, as well as 26 individual interviews with employers, special education teachers, and school administrators to answer our research questions. Qualitative methods allowed us to give voice to

the unique perspectives of girls and women with disabilities who were either currently enrolled in special education programs in high school or had successfully entered either a 2-year or 4-year college. In addition, we were able to collect important supplemental information from teachers, administrators, and employers as they reflected on the challenges faced by young women in transition from high school to adult roles in the community.

Participants

We recruited participants using a purposeful sampling approach. Purposeful sampling refers to intentionally selecting subjects according to predetermined criteria to insure representation from all important groups (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). Educators, employers, and high school students were recruited through two large school districts, as well as through an Educational Services District serving rural schools. College women were contacted through disability services offices at a community college and a 4-year public University. All participants met a set of predetermined sampling criteria. High school girls and college women had a documented disability and were currently receiving services either through a high school special education program or college disability services. School personnel and employers had direct experience working with young women with disabilities, and either managed, supervised, or provided career or transition services in the community, classroom, or school district.

Our final sample included 25 high school girls with disabilities from three high schools ranging in age from 15 to 19, and 9 college women with disabilities ranging in age from 21 to 57. Three of the college women were traditional age students (average age = 22) who attended a large 4-year University whereas the other 6 were community college students. The community college women were primarily nontraditional students (average age = 37) who had returned to school after working or raising children. These mature adult women with disabilities brought important perspectives and insights as they reflected back on their high school and transition experiences and made recommendations for improving career outcomes for girls with disabilities currently in high school. Demographic data for focus group participants are included in Table 1. Additional interview participants included nine school administrators, (five high school vice principals or principals, three special education directors, and one superintendent), eight high school special education teachers, and eight community employers. Employers represented a variety of industries and included several managers and small business owners.

Procedures

We used a multistage recruitment process to identify participants who met our sampling criteria. First, we recruited

Table 1. Focus Group Demographic Information

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Participant group		
High school girls	25	73
College/adult women	9	26
Primary disability		
Learning disability	20	59
ADD/ADHD	5	14
Unknown/declined to report	3	9
Autism	2	6
Multiple disabilities	2	6
Mental retardation	1	3
Speech/language	1	3
Race/ethnicity		
White	24	70
Native American	4	12
Unknown/declined to report	3	9
African American	1	3
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	3
Multiple races	1	3

Note: ADD = attention-deficit disorder; ADHD = attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

high school special education teachers and school administrators using our contacts at the school districts and Educational Services District. Next, we asked the participating teachers to assist us by recruiting high school girls with disabilities for the focus groups and recommending employers who had supervised, trained, or hired girls with disabilities in their place of business. Finally, we had personnel from the Office of Disability Services at the community college and University post flyers and recruit college women with disabilities to participate. All participants completed informed consent forms prior to the focus groups or individual interviews.

We created a set of interview protocols based on transition, counseling psychology, and career development literature, as well as our specific research questions. Specialized protocols were developed for high school girls, college women, teachers, school administrators, and employers. All interview protocols included the following broad topics: (a) individual characteristics and current status, (b) personal or professional experiences with transition services, (c) unique career and transition needs for young women with disabilities, and (d) recommendations for improving school and community services.

Focus groups were facilitated by two project staff and conducted either in high school classrooms or conference rooms on college campuses. Each focus group lasted 60 to 90 min. At the completion of the focus groups, participants received a US\$15 gift card. Individual interviews with teachers, administrators, and employers were conducted by project staff in various school and community locations and

lasted between 40 and 60 min. All focus groups and individual interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the focus group and individual interview transcripts following a multiple stage process recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994). First, we developed a set of broad descriptive codes based on previous literature and our research questions. We used these descriptive codes, such as “career preparation” or “gender barriers” to assign concrete labels to individual passages of text. After reviewing an initial set of transcripts, the research team revised and expanded the codes to include additional key topics that emerged from participant data. All transcripts were entered into a qualitative database (N*VIVO 8) for further coding and analysis. We used several strategies to insure that the data analysis process was credible and trustworthy (Brantlinger et al., 2005). First, the study utilized varied sources of data (data triangulation). Second, several researchers participated in the analysis (investigator triangulation). Last, to insure that analysis and interpretations were not idiosyncratic or biased, all interview transcripts were coded by two of the coauthors following a common coding scheme (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Brantlinger et al., 2005). We did not attempt to resolve coding differences. Instead, coders reached an initial agreement on the definition of each code and utilized multiple levels of coding on each passage of text to allow for flexible yet consistent interpretation of the data. In the second phase of analyses, we used cross-case methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002) to further describe and verify our findings. During this phase, we conducted a second level of coding and analysis, returning to the coded interview data to identify specific examples of gender and disability barriers as well as recommendations for improving career and transition services. After completing this second level of detailed analysis, we created individual data tables for all groups (school administrators, teachers, employers, college women, high school girls), which allowed us to identify key themes identified within each respondent group. Next, we used cross-case data tables to compare and contrast findings across participant groups. The research team then met to review within-group and cross-group data tables and discuss emerging themes. As a decision rule, only themes that were identified by at least four of the five groups were presented as cross-case findings. Through this cross-case analysis process, we confirmed unique career development needs for young women with disabilities.

Findings

Focus groups and individual interviews provided new insights into the unique career and transition needs of

young women with disabilities. Themes that emerged from the data were quite consistent across respondent groups and included individual, school, community, and social-level issues. Overall, the interview data revealed patterns of individual and systemic barriers which served to restrict career aspirations and limit postschool options and opportunities for young women with disabilities. In addition to identifying barriers, participants also provided a number of specific suggestions designed to increase access and improve career outcomes. Table 2 provides a list of key themes as well as a summary of the barriers and supports identified by school administrators, special education teachers, employers, college women, and high school girls with disabilities. In the following section, we present our cross-case findings organized by these four major themes.

Individual/Interpersonal Skills

The first major theme that was clearly articulated by all respondent groups was a need for young women with disabilities to develop individual capacities and skills, including building a stronger sense of self-worth and self-confidence. Many of the interview participants specifically focused on the core concepts of increasing self-esteem and building self-confidence for this population. When asked to identify unique needs for high school girls in her classroom, one special education teacher noted, “So I would say self-esteem issues are really paramount to see that they can achieve whatever they want to achieve.” Another teacher noted,

They need support. . . getting along better, they need support valuing themselves more. I think they’re more critical of what they look like, where they come from, how they act [. . .] they’re more critical of themselves that way than boys.

An employer who had hired and supervised girls with disabilities also observed this tendency for low self-esteem and lack of confidence. “The girls that I’ve had that have disabilities with me [. . .] I think they lack a lot of self-esteem, because of whatever their disability is. I think a lot of times they are very timid.”

Related to this lack of self-esteem, respondents also identified a number of critical deficits in communication and social skills. It seemed that girls with disabilities were often unable to speak up for themselves or clearly articulate their needs. Young women themselves sometimes felt overshadowed or limited by males—one high school girl commented that “it’s harder for girls to speak out around guys.” Lack of social and assertiveness skills served as a barrier in classroom settings, as well as community work placements. An employer from a large manufacturing company described the need for girls to develop interpersonal skills

Table 2. Summary of Key Themes Identified by Participant Groups

Major theme	Group	Barriers	Recommendations	Interview data
Individual/ interpersonal skills	AD, T, EMP, CW, HSG	Low self-esteem/ self-confidence	Identify strengths Teach communication and self-advocacy skills	Probably the first need I would say is self-esteem. I believe that girls tend to be more critical of themselves. (Teacher) And empowerment is everything. I talk to girls about that all the time. (School Administrator)
Career options	AD, T, EMP, CW, HSG	Limited exposure to career opportunities Lack of female role models	Offer community experiences Increase exposure to women in workforce	So I think primarily I would want to expose them (girls) to the variety of career options that are out there that are traditional and nontraditional. (Teacher)
School system issues	AD, T, CW, HSG	Underidentification of girls Limited career/ transition services	Allow girls to find "voice" Provide information about postschool options	I do feel that girls—especially the invisible disabilities the disabilities that aren't so obvious—are really underidentified and therefore they have a greater risk of failing. (College Woman) I pretty much had to figure out everything myself. (High School Girl)
Disability needs	AD, T, EMP, CW	Lack of disability awareness	Teach disability identity and knowledge	Q: What did you need to better prepare you for college? A: I feel that understanding [...] understanding what your disabilities are and how to use your skills is critical. (College Woman)

Note: AD = school administrators; T = special education teachers; EMP = employers; CW = college women with disabilities; HSG = high school girls with disabilities.

and appropriate levels of assertiveness to address the gender gaps inherent in the workplace:

The number one is that assertiveness—being able to not be afraid to assert themselves. [...] Being able to have some personal communication skills. A part of that is assertiveness, but also it's a part of being able to kind of dissolve that gender gap and be able to work with a male partner and have those communication skills, and not always be kind of reflecting on the fact that he's a male, he's going to lead us here. Understand that they're equals.

To address this need, many of the interview participants recommended providing instruction in social and communication skills, including offering specific opportunities to practice or role-play difficult situations.

Career Options

Increasing access to career options for young women with disabilities was another key theme identified by respondents across all participant groups. School administrators, teachers, employers, college women, and high school girls

with disabilities described a set of interrelated factors that served to circumscribe career choices and restrict opportunities. Many participants discussed the lack of exposure to a variety of career opportunities and the need to "broaden horizons" to expand the range of options considered by young women during the career planning process. As one experienced high schoolteacher noted about the girls in her class, "I do believe that they need to be exposed to a much broader variety of job opportunities than they perceive themselves doing. They need to broaden their perspectives about what is possible." In addition to this lack of opportunities, some interview respondents noted that career aspirations for young women with disabilities can often be constrained by social norms and traditional gender role expectations for women. A school administrator talked about the powerful role of gender socialization and the struggle to break down some of the "preconceived notions" about acceptable careers for women:

Those underlying preconceived notions are the ones that are hardest to reach, and this is where I would start. It's a matter of breaking down all of those preconceived notions and rebuilding them. It's a gender issue, it's a cultural issue—you're up against the

media, you're up against their families. It's a huge thing to combat, to say—"you know, you could be a fire fighter. You could be an EMT. You can still be a home maker, but you could also have this career."

Employers, teachers, and school administrators also talked about the need to provide a variety of female role models for young women with disabilities: "They have no role models, they don't know what they can do." Many noted the lack of women working in certain male-dominated fields, and suggested bringing women who are employed in various careers into the high schools as guest speakers to share their experiences and career paths. Job shadows and community work experiences were other options noted for introducing employed women as role models. One female employer commented,

So providing them with models . . . I think what I always have felt like as a woman, if I see a man do something, I say—"I wish I could do that," *but if I see another woman doing it, I can say—"I could do that."* And so having more women role models. (Italics added)

In addition to increasing exposure to female role models, high school girls and college women also believed that introducing young women with disabilities to higher wage and nontraditional careers was an important component of expanding career options. Several focus group participants emphasized the need to have choices and be able to be "self-sufficient." One high school student talked about her long-term career goals and need for support to prepare for employment after high school "because I want to be successful and make that good of money. I just want to know what would I have to do to get myself ready for that kind of job."

School System Issues

Lack of appropriate or relevant services within the public school system was another broad theme identified by school administrators, special education teachers, college women, and high school girls with disabilities in our study. Employers did not discuss this theme. In general, young women with disabilities did not seem to be getting their unique needs met for career exploration, vocational training, or transition planning services. Specific school system issues were articulated a bit differently by the different respondent groups. Teachers and school administrators often described the underidentification of, and lack of attention to, specific needs of girls, noting specifically a lack of career exploration and training options for high school girls with disabilities. One high school principal emphasized that these girls need to be

exposed to the possibility of what a college education is. Exposed to the possibility of a salaried position instead of hourly position. All of those things. There's just a finite number of exposures for these students and other students might have had an infinite number of exposures.

In a more personal perspective, high school girls and college women with disabilities often described specific instances where they did not receive needed services based on either gender or disability. Participants often recounted examples of "figuring things out for themselves" when preparing for the transition to employment or college and several recounted the lack of exposure to a variety of postschool employment options. One woman from the community college focus group shared the difficulties she faced during high school and lack of services available to support her needs:

I just want to add that I wasn't diagnosed with anything in high school. I was just kind of one of the ones that was just pushed through high school and just got through as best I could until I got pregnant, because . . . there was nothing else to do but get pregnant as a junior in high school. And I didn't end up getting a high school diploma because the whole system completely failed me—there was nothing there to help me no one was there to reach out to me.

Another college focus group participant poignantly articulated the long-term impact of this gap in appropriate services: "I think because girls are so underidentified, and often are quieted because of the larger process that they're a part of, women don't get their voice for many years often. Young women especially."

Disability Needs

In addition to gender limitations, participants described a set of disability-related barriers that often restricted the ability for young women to successfully transition from high school to productive adult roles in the community. School administrators, teachers, employers, and college women all noted the role of internal skill barriers as well as external system-level barriers. The high school girls in our focus groups did not identify or describe disability as a barrier. One consistent example was a lack of disability awareness. It seemed that many high school and even college women with disabilities did not have a clear understanding of the nature of their own disabilities and the supports and strategies they may need to succeed in employment or postsecondary training. One employer commented that "some of these girls are growing up with nobody really addressing their disability" while another emphasized a need for disability awareness as part of the high school curriculum, observing that all students with

disabilities need to “have an understanding of how their disability affects them now, and how it will affect them in the future.” Another high school special education teacher described this as the need to teach coping skills and strategies: “They have to have the strategies [. . .] They’re always going to have some kind of a disability. It isn’t something that’s going to go away, but you learn how to use strategies.”

In addition, it was clear that young women with disabilities need to learn how to advocate for themselves in both high school and postsecondary settings. Many were unfamiliar with their Individualized Education Program (IEP) documents and uninvolved with the formal transition planning process. As one teacher discussed, students with disabilities need to learn specific skills to “advocate for yourself about getting the modifications, accommodations that you need in life.” College women also echoed the lack of consistent services and support at the postsecondary level and the importance of developing strong self-advocacy skills to insure needed accommodations. One University student remembered,

I think, probably the first several times I saw my disability services counselor I was in tears because it was frustrating for me even to acknowledge that I had a disability, and that it was causing me problems. So it’s been an interesting journey trying to find ways to get my needs met. But I think that’s a really, really important step, and it’s also a skill that I’m kind of taking with me—to take care of myself and get my needs met.

Discussion

This study provided multiple perspectives on the career and transition needs of young women with disabilities. Findings confirmed gender differences in career and transition planning, as well as a lack of attention to the unique needs of young women in both education and employment settings. Through our interviews with high school and college women with disabilities, teachers, employers, and school administrators, we identified specific barriers that serve to limit young women with disabilities in transition from high school to adult roles. In addition, participants provided recommendations to address these barriers and expand career options and opportunities. Barriers and supports were organized into four broad categories (a) individual/interpersonal skills, (b) career options, (c) school system issues, and (d) disability needs. These data confirm and extend the existing literature examining the influence of gender and disability on transition planning and career development.

Limitations

This study had several limitations that should be noted when interpreting the findings. One potential limitation that

applies to all qualitative research is the generalizability to other settings or other populations (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). Sampling procedures also limited the study. Our sample of girls and women was primarily White with only 18% identifying as individuals of color; thus, we could not attend directly to issues of culture or diversity in our analysis. In addition, many of the community college women who participated in the focus groups were above the age of 35, which may have limited the relevancy of the data for current high school transition programs. Also, case study participants were selected according to tightly defined criteria and included only high school girls, college women with disabilities, employers, teachers, and school administrators from a single Western state. Further research from other regions of the country is needed to confirm these themes and further elaborate on needed services. In retrospect, it would have also been useful to include interviews with parents as family supports and advocacy have been previously identified as critical for postsecondary success (Hogansen et al., 2008; Lindstrom & Benz, 2002).

Despite these limitations, our findings help to paint a current picture of the transition experiences of young women with disabilities and provide some important new insights into the supports needed to promote positive postsecondary outcomes. Consistent with previous general career development literature, we found that the career decision-making process is multifaceted and influenced by a “myriad of choices” that cumulate over time to shape vocational identity and employment outcomes (Gottfredson, 2005, p. 76). Career aspirations are influenced by external experiences and also linked closely to the internal process of identity development that occurs during adolescence (Darling, 2003; Ferri & Connor, 2010). The ability to move through the various stages of forming a vocational identity is dependent on having multiple opportunities for self-discovery, exposure to a wide variety of experiences, and the ability to integrate all of this information into one’s developing sense of self (Gottfredson, 2005). In the remainder of this discussion, we compare our findings to existing relevant literature as we consider how this complex interplay between external experiences and individual agency shapes the career development process for young women with disabilities.

Role of the Environment: Experiences Shape Identity

“We become who we are through experience, that is by engaging in the world around us” (Gottfredson, 2005, p. 75). Our focus group and interview data were consistent with findings from previous studies (e.g., Hogansen et al., 2008; Lindstrom & Benz, 2002; Lindstrom et al., 2004), which found severely limited or nonexistent career exploration and transition preparation experiences for many young women with disabilities in high school. These restricted

experiences served to foreclose potential career opportunities rather than “broadening horizons” to increase options.

Constrained experiences were evident in several ways. First, high school girls and college women spoke to the lack of specific career and transition programs available to them during high school. Many of our focus group participants talked about having to “figure out everything” on their own and described a lack of support or insufficient preparation to enter postschool employment or continuing education options. Echoing Hogansen and colleagues’ (2008) focus group findings, we learned that girls were often not active participants in transition planning and did not receive any systematic instruction in self-advocacy or other critical communication skills.

Second, participants across all of our respondent groups described a pervasive lack of exposure to a wide variety of career options. Previous studies have documented limited work experience opportunities and gender stereotyped vocational training that may steer young women into low wage female-dominated occupations (Lindstrom & Benz, 2002; Lindstrom et al., 2004). Our findings confirm that young women with disabilities in high school are still exposed to a limited number of career options: They may never be introduced to nontraditional or other potentially high wage careers. This lack of direct exposure through work experiences or career exploration seemed to be exacerbated by the dearth of female role models working in a variety of occupations. Without the opportunity to interact with or observe women working in a wide variety of fields, career aspirations were constrained. For young women with disabilities in our study, restricted experiences served to limit the zone of potential career alternatives.

Self-Concept: Developing Personal Agency

Although external school and community experiences play a key role in enhancing career opportunities, it is important to understand that environments are not just “out there” molding us from the outside (Darling, 2003; Gottfredson, 2005). Individuals can and do have a part in selecting, shaping, and interpreting their own environments. Similar to Trainor’s (2007) study, we found that many young women with disabilities did not have the requisite self-confidence or communication skills to actively seek information or direct their own career development process. Thus, they were not able to fully engage in a process of self-exploration.

All respondent groups noted that young women with disabilities displayed a clear lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem. It seemed that many young women with disabilities did not value their own contributions or believe in their abilities to succeed. Low self-esteem has been previously identified as a barrier to career development and career choice for young women (Betz, 2005; Burgstahler & Chang, 2007). However, unlike previous studies, we also

found that lack of disability awareness created an additional barrier to postschool success for young women with disabilities. It was interesting to note that the high school girls did not discuss individualized disability barriers, which seemed to reinforce their lack of awareness or understanding of these issues. Without a clear understanding of disability limitations or accommodations needed, it was difficult for young women to articulate their needs and make a plan to succeed in either academic or employment environments. The college women in our study were especially clear about the importance of increasing self-agency to be active seekers of information. They spoke of the need to learn to ask for help and persistently advocate for appropriate supports and services.

Implications for Practice

We found that career decision making and postschool opportunities for young women with disabilities were restricted by both environmental and individual barriers. Limited exposure to career experiences, compounded by low self-esteem, lack of disability awareness, and the inability to self-advocate constrained the process of self-discovery and narrowed career aspirations. Taking into consideration these existing barriers, interview participants offered a number of strategies that may serve to expand career options and lead to a more self-directed transition planning process for young women with disabilities.

On the basis of our findings, we offer the following recommendations for professionals who work with young women with disabilities. First, educators, school counselors, and other transition personnel need to expose young women to a wide range of career options. Ideally, transition personnel can provide a broad menu of introductory career experiences utilizing both short-term and long-term options such as job shadows, field trips, career fairs, service learning options, and other school and community-based work experiences. These hands-on experiences will help young women better understand the requirements and benefits of a variety of careers, and increase the zone of occupational alternatives to be considered (Gottfredson, 2005). As one employer noted, “I think exposing them to as many different types of career opportunities so they get a horizon that is expanded from where they are now.” Providing female role models employed in nontraditional and/or high wage occupations through classroom guest speakers, informational interviews, or mentorship opportunities can also serve to break down preconceived notions of gender stereotyped occupations (Rousso, 2008).

In addition to exploring an array of career options, young women with disabilities need to develop individual skills and strategies to help them navigate and direct the career development process. As part of career or transition classes, educators can provide interest inventories or personal exploration activities to increase self-awareness and

build the capacity for self-reflection. Young women should also learn to identify and describe their own strengths, and engage in self-directed planning and exploration. A teacher in our study felt that “one of the first things to concentrate on is successes—What are your strengths? What are your successes? And build on those capabilities.” Personal communication skills are also critical to increase the ability for self-advocacy. Finally, young women need to increase their disability awareness and learn about relevant accommodations and modifications that may be needed to succeed in employment or higher education settings.

Directions for Future Research

Our findings also point to a need for further research to expand our understanding of the career development process and improve postschool outcomes for young women with disabilities. Additional studies using surveys or other quantitative methods would assist in documenting the unique needs and barriers to career and transition services from a larger sample. Future research should also focus on carefully developing and testing new interventions designed specifically to meet the unique career and transition needs of young women with disabilities. These interventions may include either classroom or community-based programs designed to mitigate identified barriers and enhance resiliency factors. This line of research could also be extended to investigate the unique career development needs of other vulnerable groups of disabilities such as youth of color and those from low-income families.

This study examined the career development and transition needs of young women with disabilities. By collecting in-depth information from high school and college women, teachers, school administrators, and employers, we have filled an important gap in the literature. We believe that with the right combination of skills and opportunities, all young women with disabilities can successfully achieve their career goals.

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