To Drive or not to Drive:

Exploring Regional Interagency Collaboration for the “Unwanted Step Children” of Special Education

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Abstract

Within this mid Atlantic state in general, and Bush County, in particular, the inability to drive can prevent students from accessing continued education and employment. In order to minimize the impact of their disabilities within the community’s context and maximize the opportunities they have to live full and engaged lives, schools, agencies, families and businesses must work together to overcome disabling impediments. This study employed semi-structured conversational interviews with individuals from three different agencies regarding this question. The director of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Transition coordinator of Bush County, and the major IEP special educator, job coach coordinator and students of James Madison High School were interviewed. Through iterative analysis interagency strengths and gaps were uncovered, and a surprising power struggle between different disability populations was uncovered.

To Drive or not to Drive: Exploring Regional Interagency Collaboration for the “Unwanted Step Children” of Special Education

Interagency collaboration which can form communities of practice is a necessary component of educational leadership. It is especially essential for the transitional planning towards adult life for students with disabilities. In order to minimize the impact of their disabilities within the community’s context and maximize the opportunities they have to live full and engaged lives, schools, agencies, families and businesses must work together to overcome disabling impediments. Within this state in general, and Bush County, in particular, the inability to drive can prevent students from accessing continued education and employment. Even in the most cosmopolitan cities in this state, public transportation is inadequate to meet individuals’ needs for transport to school, work, or entertainment, because of their limited routes and hours.

Individuals who struggle with intellectual disabilities often struggle to pass even the written drivers exam, and therefore often never get to the point where they can be evaluated to see if they can be trained to be safe drivers. It is also often necessary to teach these individuals specifically how to negotiate the public transportation system, even as limited as it is. I know this first hand as parent of a daughter who struggles with a mild to moderate intellectual disability, though our daughter’s accomplishment of successfully overcoming some barriers can be attributed to the many advocates who helped her to normalize through individualized instruction (Kohler & Field, 2003). Our daughter has benefited from a rigorous education that we were able to provide both through homeschooling her with a specific curriculum designed to overcome neurological short-circuiting combined with classes she took at the parochial schools. She has been able to receive and maintain certification as a lifeguard through many individuals who have given her one-on-one support so that she could master the material. The jobs that she has held and kept have had employers who recognized her strengths of reliability and diligence, so they were willing to break down teaching her various responsibilities, and assist her with duties (like writing up reports) that she couldn’t perform independently. We need to remind them to continue to have her practice bi-weekly so that she can apply what she knows in emergency situations.

We had some misgivings about encouraging our daughter to learn to drive, since not only did she face the challenges of mild to moderate intellectual disability, but also needed to continually adapt and compensate for neurological misfirings which interfered with appropriate data bank recall. We wanted a driving instructor who specialized in preparing people with disabilities to teach and evaluate her. There was only one location in this state at that time which could provide instructors with such qualifications, and that was at one of the nine Vocational Rehabilitation Centers in the country, located outside of the state’s capital. During the several semesters that our daughter was at the Center, mastering advanced life skills and additional vocational training, she also was able to finally enroll in drivers’ training for a few months before the Center was unexpectedly and permanently closed. Much to the chagrin of her driving instructor, my daughter was not able to pass the written driver’s exam after six attempts, even though he knew that she knew the material thoroughly. He still wasn’t sure whether or not she could ultimately be able to master the practical skills necessary to be a responsible and safe driver, because she was never able to prove she knew the material on the written exam, and so therefore was never able to get a learner’s permit which would allow him to train/evaluate her behind the wheel.

Since the Center was closed, we became aware of many of my daughter’s newly acquired friends who were struggling to continue training, obtain jobs, or commute to jobs, without driving a car. My daughter, who worked the early shift as a lifeguard at the YMCA, took taxis in the morning to get to work, since the bus didn’t run that early. She started taking the public bus for other purposes, but one day got on the wrong one, and had a bad experience with the impatient driver. Though she now has her own apartment which is in walking distance of work, she must rely on us to be able to do grocery shopping, etc. until we can take the time to reacclimatize her to using the bus again. Some of her friends who live in more rural areas have not even been able to successfully land jobs, for the most part because of a lack of transportation.

It is necessary therefore, to discover collaborative, creative options available to overcome these barriers. These could include agencies that could provide additional transportation, those that could teach individuals how to navigate the public system, and differentiated preparation for written exam. Are there resources through various agencies that could be pooled collaboratively to help this population overcome this barrier? A previous study indicated that some individuals with mild to moderate intellectual disability could be trained to safely drive at least under daylight conditions (Zider & Gold, 1981), but needed to be able to overcome the barrier of the written test. Who might be able to coordinate appropriate steps to make this possibility a reality? Why, 20 years later, have we still not solved this problem? Is it because there are gaps in collaborative advocacy? This study will be a beginning exploration through the perspectives of different individuals who work for three different agencies/institutions to see the nature of collaboration that presently exists to overcome this barrier, and discover what new collaborative ideas might surface. It will triangulate with the perspectives of some students who are representative of this particular population and are presently in the transitional process at one particular high school.

**Conceptual framework and experiential knowledge**

**Educational Leadership Constituent Council’s Foundational Standards**

Standards 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 of the ELCC’s Standards (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002b) indicate the necessity for school leaders to be prepared to collaborate and communicate effectively with individuals, agencies, and institutions within the community. These include families, businesses, governmental agencies, social service organizations, the media, and higher education institutions. The Policy Board explains that these standards are crucial because educational leaders must recognize that schools are integral parts of the larger community, and thereby appropriately engage all resources, institutions, and agencies that are present. According to the Board, as articulated through these standards, school leaders must be able to analyze issues and trends that might affect schools and their districts, and then collaboratively plan effective instructional programs and services. In particular, Standard 4.2 articulates the importance of an educational leader mobilizing community resources in order to design programs that meet the needs of students with exceptional challenges (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002b).

The wisdom of these standards is clear. Real effective education cannot be solely contained within the walls of the school building; it must incorporate a dynamic dialogue with relevant members of the larger community. The educational leader should be capable of recognizing the untapped resources that are present, and subsequently join an established, or construct a new, *community of practice*. The term community of practice can be understood to mean, “a group of people who work together to solve a persistent problem or to improve practice in an area that is important to them. By working together, they can deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis” (“Communities of Practice”, n.d.). Moreover, as was elucidated by Standard 4.2, it is especially important for educational leaders to collaborate when it comes to educating students who have special needs. On the building level, “candidates [should] provide leadership to programs serving students with special and exceptional needs”( National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002b, p. 11). On the district level, “candidates [should] demonstrate the ability to advocate for students with special and exceptional needs” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002b, p. 11). Furthermore, collaboration has been found to be most crucial in the transitional programming towards adult community life for students with disabilities.

**Community Collaboration and Transitional Special Education Leadership**

The essential presence of interagency collaboration is most definitely recognized

within the field of transition education for students with special needs. Kohler and Field (2003) elucidated that the Taxonomy for Transition Programming (developed by Kohler and her colleagues) was grounded upon two tenets of special education: *normalization* and *individualization.* Normalization strives to maximize the opportunities to experience the norms of mainstream life for persons with disabilities. Individualization, on the other hand, must occur because, “due to the unique needs of individuals with disabilities, it [is] also clear that in order for persons with disabilities to participate in typical communities, individualized instruction, accommodations, and supports [are] necessary” (Kohler & Field, 2003, p. 180). One of the Taxonomy’s practices is interagency/ interdisciplinary collaboration. “The purpose of these collaborative activities is to implement an integrated system that addresses the lifelong learning and support needs of a community’s members” (Kohler & Field, 2003, p. 178). In other words, it is necessary for school, agencies, family, and student to work together in order to provide the support, training, and accommodations that an individual student needs in order to participate as an adult in the community as normally as possible. Therefore, a major component of a special educational leader’s work should be to form unique collaborative teams in order to minimize the impact of the disability and maximize the opportunities for community participation for each individual student as they prepare to transition from high school (Hehir, 2009).

**Transitional Programming Collaboration Research Challenges**

Though Kohler and colleagues’ Taxonomy for Transition Programming has been recognized as a foundation upon which evidence-based transition practice checklists can be built, current research indicates that not all five categories of practices indentified by the Taxonomy are being utilized (Test, Fowler, Richter, et al., 2009). Their literature review was conducted to identify evidence-based practices in secondary transition. Of the 32 practices that were identified, none were in the category of Interagency Collaboration. Test, Fowler, White, et al. (2009) reviewed 11 studies which focused on transitional practices employed to prevent high school dropout, with only two of those studies identifying Interagency Collaboration. Michaels and Ferrara (2005) clarified some practical reasons why there may be a lack of practices in this area. They indicated that person-centered collaborative transition planning requires: (a) a substantial investment of time and resources; (b) teams to balance and prioritize between competing goals; (c) consensus from all team members about what support or goals are realistically feasible; and (d) consensus from all team members about levels of support or goals that encourage risk-taking competency, while still remaining healthy and safe. In light of these challenges, it is imperative to continue to conduct research in order to: (a) first discover what essential *individualized* supports are missing that could help individuals with certain disabilities to minimize their disability and maximize their ability to fully participate in *normal* community life; and (b) discover what tools could be designed and utilized by new collaborative community of practice teams to best help individuals with disabilities receive these supports so that they can reach their own unique potential, and lead *normal* lives. One area that can create a huge impediment in certain communities is the issue of transportation.

**Collaborative Transitional Planning for Transportation Challenges**

Mitra (2006) views capability to be, “understood as a *practical opportunity”*(p. 236). This opportunity combines the environment with the personal characteristics of the individual. If one lives in a part of the world where transportation was still provided by animals, or simply by foot, the inability to pass a written driver’s exam or operate a vehicle would not be disabling. Indeed, in this country, if you are part of the Amish community and drive a horse drawn carriage, you would also not be disabled by not obtaining a driver’s license. Likewise, if you live in a large urban metropolis with ample, round the clock public transportation, the ability to obtain a driver’s license is not disabling. In most communities in this country, however, access to transportation is necessary to access training or schooling, get to places of employment, and increase independence. The leadership challenge is to collaborate creatively within the context of each community so that the characteristics of that unique society are not so disabling for individuals with physical or cognitive disabilities that they cannot be productive, fully engaged citizens.

The National Community of Practice on Transition has joined four federal agencies, many national organizations, within 10 states in order to improve school and post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities. One of the areas of focus is accessible transportation (“National Community of Practice”, n.d.). They have partnered with Departments of Transportation and Easter Seals/United We Ride in order to provide better transportation options. Before addressing creative options for providing alternative means of transportation, it makes sense, however, to see if roadblocks could be overcome that prevent many individuals from obtaining driver’s licenses. McGill and Vogtle’s (2001) qualitative study’s participants with physical disabilities found it difficult to obtain licenses because they were not included in the secondary schools’ drivers’ education programs, and alternative programs were both expensive as well as difficult to locate. Certainly citizens who have intellectual disabilities struggle with obtaining driver’s licenses, as well, but is it feasible for them to learn how to drive? Zider and Gold (1981) conducted a study which included two individuals with moderate intellectual disabilities as compared with four others with average intellectual abilities using a driving simulator and driving range. At the conclusion of their study they found that, “… the

trainer felt very strongly that the individuals being trained could have driven in light or

moderate traffic in the community and under clear weather, daylight conditions”(p. 638). The authors also indicated that the language roadblocks which deterred individuals from mastering the multiple choice written exam needed to be researched and addressed.

It appears, therefore, that roadblocks which prevent certain individuals from obtaining a driver’s license might be able to be overcome. Russell, Hoffman and Higgins (2009) have piloted the universal design principle applied to the high-stakes test. The barriers to access of information, engagement with material and communication of understanding are thereby eliminated. If this principle is being piloted for high-stake tests, why not for driver’s license evaluations? Graduated licenses for young drivers, and stickers on license plates which restrict driving under certain conditions for individuals whose licenses have been suspended for DUIs are already being employed. Would it be possible to provide these alternatives for some individuals with disabilities so that they could get to school and work?

**Purpose**

As a Special Educational leader I would like to begin to discover the nature of the collaborative interagency work that is presently being done in Bush County to assist individuals who struggle with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities with overcoming the transportation barrier which can interfere with continued training, education, and employment. I would also like to discover some of the creative possibilities through renewed or new collaborative relationships that could enhance the surmounting of these barriers. By interviewing four individuals, the director of Vocational Rehabilitation, the transition director for Bush County schools, a special educator and his aide at a Bush County high school, and the students in two of his classes, I hope to answer the following questions:

How do interagency coordinators perceive the transitions available for individuals who struggle with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities in regards to access to adequate transportation to continue their training and education and garner employment?

How do students of this population view the transportation barriers?

Are the students accessing means to overcome these barriers through the opportunities given them by the transition process?

* Are there any other barriers that prevent interagency collaboration from more effectively assisting these individuals to access transportation for continued training and employment?
* Are there any new ideas or new collaborative relationships that could more effectively enhance the present process?

It is imperative, however, to address some of the assumptions and beliefs I held before I started the interview process.

* Public school systems do not provide adaptive/modified access for driver’s education
* Many individuals who administer and design tests like the drivers’ test don’t recognize what tests are really assessing, and believe that accommodations/modifications are forms of cheating.
* On the other hand, we as special educators and parents can get so zealous about advocating for our students/children that we lose sight of when certain accommodations/modifications might not provide prudently valid assessments.
* Although West Virginia may allow students with disabilities to remain in school up until 22, not many are really accessing those services.
* Most assume that Vocational Rehab counselors will tie up all the loose ends, but this is indeed not reality.

**Method**

I used a semi-structured conversational interview format in order to interview my 2 participants and one focus group which consisted of the special educator, his aid, and students of two of his classes. Each interview took place in the interviewee(s) office, or classroom. By semi-structured, conversational, I mean that I had the questions I wanted to address, but the order, the phrasing, and the amount of probing depended on the conversational interchange that ensued. Also, there were questions that were addressed specifically to each individual that corresponded with their unique role, and expertise, and there were also questions that were added because they had come to light in the previous interview(s). (Appendix A)

I purposely chose to interview individuals at Vocational Rehabilitation, the County Office, and the high school because they had expertise at three different levels of the transition process for this particular county. In this way I could view a slice of the process through different lenses and on different levels. The interview opportunity at the high school was expanded to include the teacher’s aide and students from two of his classes. The opportunity to interview the students who represent this population of interest provided a realistic perspective from the stakeholders who must actively live through the opportunities and limitations that this process provides. The students were diagnosed as struggling with a mild to moderate intellectually disability, having been diagnosed as having IQ’s which ranged from 55 – 70. These particular students were also going to receive a modified diploma, which allowed them to substitute more functional classes for those required for the standard diploma. There were other students with this diagnosis at this high school who were going to receive standard diplomas. However, these students, for example, could take math classes which focused on making change and balancing checkbooks, rather than Algebra..

Two of the individuals I had worked with professionally in the past. Patricia, the Vocational Rehabilitation director, had been involved in planning meetings with a former student of mine when he was a client at Vocational Rehabilitation. She also had attended planning meetings with my husband at the university where he works, is presently my one son’s field counselor, and teaches a sign language class which my other son is taking at the university. I had done a preliminary interview with her on the phone last semester about this subject for an exploratory project I was doing for another class. Patricia has worked for Vocational Rehabilitation for the past 22 years, throughout district 3 which encompasses twelve counties, and though her specialties focus on support to individuals with vision and hearing impairment, she worked with individuals across the disability spectrum. She is both a licensed professional counselor and nationally certified Rehabilitation counselor.

I had coordinated with Maria, the current Special Education/Transition coordinator for Bush County, while she was functioning in a variety of different capacities while I was working to provide support services for students with learning challenges at several of the local Catholic grade schools and high schools. Maria provided psychological testing services for one of my high school students, provided Wilson reading tutoring for some of my grade school students through her own business, and helped coordinate college student tutors when she was at the university for some of my other high school students. She has worked as a self-contained elementary school teacher for students with learning and behavior disabilities, as a school psychologist, the regional special education director for RESA, and is currently the Bush County special education coordinator with a transition specialty. Her emphasis has been in learning and behavior disabilities, and autism. Maria recently received her Ed.D in Special Education.

I had never met Steve, Miss Jones or the students before I interviewed them. Steve has been in the field and at the high school as a teacher, job coach, as well as at the county office for over 25 years. I was not able to specifically question him about his area of expertise, or specialty, but from his descriptions from the interview, I believe that he has specialized in the students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities for most, if not all of his career. According to his descriptions, he has been in the trenches and has seen and had to respond to the changes in school and community policy and offerings for this population. Miss Jones has worked as his aid for five years. Steve told me privately that the students all fell into the IQ range of 55 – 70 and those that I met that day all were receiving modified diplomas. All but three of the students had behavioral, physical, or social skill characteristics which would separate them from other students quite readily, and they also appeared to me to perhaps struggle with self–esteem issues based upon body language cues, such as problems with eye contact, and hesitancy with speaking. Though they appeared comfortable with each other, it would be easy to see that their differences in appearance, awkward interchange, and discourse flow would set them apart from other students, and perhaps subject them to isolation and ridicule, if proactive steps for compassionate acceptance of difference were not taken.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name | Role | Date | Length of Time |
| “Patricia” | Vocational Rehabilitation Director | 3/15/2010 | 43 minutes |
| “Maria” | Director of Transition Marshall County Schools | 4/5/2010 | 44 minutes |
| “Steven”  “Miss Jones”  8 students from  2 math classes | - Special Educator, teaches ID students  functional math/support  - The classroom aid  - Mild to moderate intellectually impaired;  modified diploma recipients | 4/19/2010 | 66 minutes |

**Data Analysis**

I must first begin with the confession that I was taken aback and overwhelmed by the amount of time transcription of interviews took me. Though we had been forewarned that every hour of interview would take about four to five hours to transcribe, only one of my interviews fell into that time frame. The other two took at least three to four times that long to transcribe. In fact I completely lost track of how long the last 66 min. interview took to transcribe, but it filled 35 pages. The only difference I could surmise was that the interview which took a normal transcription time, my second with Maria the County special education coordinator, fell into a more typical interview format, with questions and shorter answers. The other two were much more conversational; my interviewees, and sometimes I, shared lengthy anecdotes, and reflections. With that said, I must also confess that the actual coding process is probably not thoroughly complete, but some significant data based themes have indeed been identified, though there are probably more to come. In truth, I probably am still in the initial, rather than final phases of the coding process, so the data analysis and results must be viewed in that light.

There were several weeks between interviews, which gave me the opportunity to transcribe, do some initial coding, reflect, and refine questions before the next one. My critical friend and professor, Dr. Samaras, encouraged me to keep what Saldana (2009) refers to as “pragmatic eclecticism” (p. 47) for as long as possible before choosing to close in on a more selective coding method, but time pressure and anxiety kept pushing me into organizing and shaping this data into more manageable packages. Though I had begun by coding categories with the word processor, using colors and comments, and proceeded to further code them with colored pencils, three recurring images kept coming to mind as I read, reread, and reflected upon the data: (a) barriers which prevented normalized access to employment and training for employment (b) gatekeepers who hold the key for overcoming those barriers so that individuals can lead those normal lives; and (c) the power struggle which leaves ***some*** to ***have no***access to gatekeepers who can assist with individualization which can lead to normalization, and ***others*** to ***have*** such access so that unique individualization and subsequent normalization can take place. Not only do we have the obvious struggle between a community designed to provide access to training, education and employment to those who can drive cars, but within the realm of those who cannot access driving cars through the normal channels, there is a power struggle between those with different disabilities, creating another struggle between **‘haves’** and ‘**have nots’**. The ‘haves’ may have a required ‘orientation/mobility’ indication on their IEP which would require the school to access an agency to train them to use transportation and beyond. Though this same agency might be able to provide those services to the “have nots”, such an indication is not required on their IEPs, so it is not necessarily offered. The ‘haves’ have access to gatekeepers of special accommodation possibilities, such as lower reading level written driving tests, that the ‘have nots’ do not. The ‘haves’ have nationwide advocacy groups which include physicians, lobbyists and various rehabilitation agencies so that they can be screened and trained for graduated or normal drivers’ licenses, yet the ‘have nots’ do not. The open, “pragmatic eclectic” coding was therefore augmented with Versus coding (Saldana, 2009). “Versus Coding is appropriate for policy studies, discourse analysis, and qualitative data sets that suggest strong conflicts within, among, and between participants” (Saldana, 2009, p. 94). It identifies “two mutually exclusive divisions within a group” (p. 94).

To better clarify and flesh out the themes’ components and their relatedness I began to sketch diagrams (Appendix B in hard copy only). These helped me clearly collapse and identify the categories within each theme, as well as discover three moieties as Saldana (2009) suggests.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Barriers to training & Employment* | *Gatekeepers* | *Moities* |
| Lack of adequate non driving transportation options | Advocate Communities of Practice | Driving Society vs Nondrivers |
| Individualized accommodations completely absent | Policy Makers | Visual/hearing impaired vs ID population |
| Individualized accommodations present but inadequate | Funding Sources | Worthy/wanted SPED individuals vs. Not wanted/not worthy SPED individuals |
| Lack of Interagency Communication/coordination | Laws/IEP guidelines/decisions |  |
| Lack of unified advocacy | Agencies |  |
| Lack of motivation |  |  |

**Results**

**Barriers**

**transportation in a society made for drivers.**

Patricia, whose agency’s main goal is to train and rehabilitate individuals in order that they can gain employment, stated, “…probably one of our biggest deterrents to employment is lack of transportation.” This realization was echoed by Maria and Steve, as well. They all spoke of the limited hours, and routes of buses, as well as the many locations where there was no access to public transportation at all. Though lack of transportation was not explicitly stated as a barrier to training for employment, it was indicated by all that many of the training options, beyond what could be accessed through high school sites, were not accessible by public transportation. None of them explicitly revealed that this reality reflected a society which is designed for drivers, but upon reflection, that is indeed apparent. Faced with the inability to drive, individuals must come up with other means of transportation through friends, family, agency, or consider moving elsewhere, an option that is often offered to clients at Vocational Rehabilitation, according to Patricia.

**accommodations lacking or inadequately limited.**

For those individuals who live where there are no bus routes there were possibilities to access transportation to work through an agency called Change Inc., but this agency would not operate in competition with the public bus, nor would it provide service for training or other needs. Even if individuals were to use a bus, no one particular agency was responsible to train individuals how to use public transportation, read a schedule, if mobility and orientation was not explicitly indicated on their IEP. As Steve indicated, in the past “persisting life problems,” including mobility and transportation, was explicitly addressed, but no longer. “You look at the CSOs for the state of WV, there is nothing. You try to find anything about job applications, interviews, anything of that nature, it’s not in there. It’s purely academic, and that’s frustrating.” Even the accommodation which allows students to remain in school until 22, is sorely inadequate because very few of the students “buy into that option.” So though Bush county offers vocational training, job coaching, and functional training that other schools systems may not, according to Patricia, few students choose to make use of these opportunities because they are given the choice not to. Since they have the choice at their exit IEP meeting, few of them are willing to freely choose to remain in high school. James Madison has developed a curriculum approach which can help students prepare for the written driver’s exam, but that too has fallen short of the original goal, since there is often not enough staff to work with the students to assist them in using the mastery tools available. “They are often left to study on their own, which is not the way it was originally designed,” Steve said. The students admitted that studying for the test, even with the mastery tools was very difficult, and they doubted their ability to ultimately succeed.

**lack of interagency collaboration/communication.**

According to Patricia at Vocational Rehabilitation, when students who on IEP are still in high school, it is up to the high school to find the appropriate agency linkages. She admits that there indeed may indeed be some agencies like RESA who are known to provide certain mobility and transportation support/training to the visually impaired, who might also provide those same services to other students with different disabilities, they just need to be asked. Maria from the county, however, looks towards the Vocational Rehabilitation counselors as the individuals who will keep the students, families, teachers on track, “…they always bring us back to ‘what are we going to do AFTER school is out.’” Steve relayed in frustration that they have tried for years to contact agencies (though he didn’t get a chance to name them) to get on board as part of the high school program, so that there could be a well established relationship already in place before the students left school, but he said that none of them ever responded. They would come to informational meetings, or attend some IEPs, but never more than that. In terms of lack of information shared, both Steve and Maria were surprised to find out that there was a lower reading level written driver’s test offered at one of the local DMVs. No one in the field working with students to help prepare them to pass the test had ever heard of this option. In fact, from my experience, I am sure that many Vocational Rehabilitation counselors themselves do not know about it. Patricia was also not aware of the driver’s test mastery curriculum tool that James Madison staff had worked on for years to help students prepare for the exam. She had said that Vocational Rehab could certainly use a tool, for the tutors that they might hire to assist clients really had nothing to work with.

**lack of unified advocacy.**

One of the gems that surfaced in my interviews was a story that Patricia shared about the importance and effectiveness of community advocacy. Years before she had been assigned to help work with an Amish community. One of their members, who had been a farmer, had been injured and subsequently was paralyzed from the waist down. The community not only worked to make his home wheelchair accessible, but they had him trained as a watchmaker, because he had use of his hands and fingers. Patricia shared that indeed that sense of community advocacy is hard to find anymore. Maria concurred that for the population of those struggling with intellectual disabilities she can think of no unified advocacy group which effectively works for changing policies to provide adequate accommodations and modifications necessary to help this population effectively contribute and lead normal lives. Steve shared that we even have lost the community fostered by neighborhood schools, leaving this population and their families all the more isolated.

**lack of motivation.**

Steve, Miss Jones and the students were the only individuals who addressed the serious barrier of lack of motivation. “…they don’t necessarily in all cases see a need to work. They’ll tell you now they want to, but when it comes to being on the job, they’d prefer, quite honestly, if they can get subsidies of some sort,” Steve said. Miss Jones added, “the biggest thing that I have a problem with is motivation, and that’s, you know, you learn what you live.” When the students were asked to be honest in answering the question, “do you want a full time job”, four students answered no, or not really, with only one students saying, “not really, but I have to.” This lack of motivation I believe can be directly linked to the lack of effective advocacy, which is linked to a perception of unworthiness which is continuing to be perpetuated. This became clear when I looked at which populations have had access to the gatekeepers to help them overcome barriers, and which did not. It became apparent that this population as Steve said, “…is truly the unwanted step-child.” Without effective advocacy that not only gives them the tools necessary, but affirms the expectation that they have something unique and valuable to contribute, it is no wonder that as some of these students shared they don’t believe they have something to offer.

**Gatekeepers and the “Have’s” vs. the “Have Not’s”**

It came as a complete surprise to me that there indeed was such a disparity between the accommodation changes regarding access to transportation that had been effected for the vision and hearing impaired populations as compared with the complete lack of such for those who suffer with intellectual disabilities. Extensive collaborative work between physicians, counselors, and policy makers had to be done in order to prove that individuals with corrected vision that ranged from 20/40 to as much as 20/200 could drive safely enough to be offered a graduated driver’s license; a license that would allow them to drive a certain route, during daylight/good weather conditions, for three years. Moreover, once that law was passed, states offered special training so that they could obtain the licenses. Likewise, advocates for the hearing impaired have worked hard to prove with sufficient data that a person with a hearing impairment can be trained to be as safe behind the wheel as someone without impairment. In fact, Patricia indicated that insurance rates are comparable. Who indeed could be considered the gatekeepers? As I show in my chart, they can be separated into the following categories: advocates, policy makers, policy/laws/guidelines, funding allotments, and agencies.

Because of a lack of a unified advocacy community of practice, which all interviewers attested to, the ID population lacked access to: (a) unique training, assessment and even graduated (or regular) license options if they couldn’t pass the written test; (b) education policies that could assist them effectively to prepare for independent, contributive living; (c) funding allotments to allow agencies to give them the additional support and training they needed; and (d) clear flow of information about supportive tools available, as well as adjustments that needed to be made. When I reflected on Patricia’s story about the Amish farmer, Steve’s description of the mild to moderate ID population as being the “unwanted step-child, the students’ sharing about not feeling they had anything to offer because they were “picked on,” and the disparity between the driving options for the visually or hearing impaired vs. this population’s, an explanation from my own experience came to light. This population lacks the advocacy, with all the corresponding access to various gatekeepers, because it is one of the last disabilities that carries shame. There is something, shameful, embarrassing about having an intellectual disability, which is not present with blindness, or loss of a limb. Though I need to do research in this area, reflect upon the difference between how the public views the Para-olympics with the Special Olympics. Certainly the advocacy for other physical disabilities is not based on sheer numbers, but rather on the conviction that these individuals have something to offer, and are worthy, therefore, of all the accommodations that can help them. Behind the shame experienced by those individuals and their family members who have an intellectual disability, is an unspoken assumption, perhaps, that this particular individual really has very little to contribute. Rather than investing time, money, effort on utilizing and designing the best tools which could help them develop their unique gifts and lead productive lives, those resources are diverted elsewhere.

**Validity**

Certainly the time constraint and lack of other methods of research other than interviews certainly affects the validity of my study. It was increased, however, with the opportunity to interview students in a focus group setting. The validity would also have been increased with the opportunity to have someone validate my coding, and/or conduct a member check with the interviewees.

**Closing Reflections**

My initial interviews brought forth many surprising, as well as painful discoveries. As I previously assumed, there indeed is a lack of effective interagency collaboration and communication. Though much work needs to be done, it was surprising that there are tools and options available to help these individuals access transportation, or prepare for and pass the driver’s test, but those need to be effectively shared. I will most likely use this as a foundation for my dissertation. I am most curious to discover all the players who participated in effecting the graduated driver’s license which is now available in 39 states. I am also curious to discover what form advocacy must take to eradicate the current presence of shame embedded with intellectual disability.

Since I will most likely be continuing to use the method of qualitative research for my dissertation, I have already begun to look for better tools that can aid with transcribing. I have found a cassette player/recorder with a foot control that might indeed cut back on the inordinate time it took me to transcribe these few interviews. I also hope to have much more practice with coding. It would be beneficial to do it with others so that we can check and validate our findings.

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**Appendix A**

**Questions**

Note: Because I interviewed people from different institutions/agencies several weeks apart, different questions were added either because they surfaced during prior interviews, or because the individual’s role/expertise required it. During the focus group interview, a question was eliminated and others were added. I indicate the differences below. My first two interviewees were made aware that the population I was particularly interested in was the mild to moderately Intellectually Disabled. The focus group of special educator, aid and students were representatives of that population.

**Questions: March 5, 2010, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor**

1. Describe your background, expertise, area of interest/specialty and what your role entails
2. Describe the public transportation options that you are familiar with where your clients live. Include a description of the area(s): i.e. rural, metropolitan.
3. Describe the options that are available for students who choose to continue their education up until they are 22. Include vocational, functional, community college options etc,
4. What agencies are you aware of that could provide additional services to students with disabilities when it comes to overcoming barriers to transportation? Describe what services you believe they can provide, and whether, to your knowledge their services/expertise are restricted to certain populations.
5. From your perception, in light of your agency’s/institution’s perspective, how important is the transportation issue? What does the lack of access to transportation prevent?
6. From your perception, who, apart from family, can or should be responsible for training individuals how to use public transportation? Are there particular agencies that you are aware of who undertake this task?
7. What are the options that you are aware of to assist individuals with preparation for taking the written driver’s test?
8. From your perspective, describe the various options available for taking both the written and practical driving test?
9. Describe the various alternative options for overcoming transportation barriers that may be available. Include alternative driver’s licenses, agency transportation, other modes of transportation

**Additional Questions for April 5 Interview with County Transition Coordinator**

1. From your perspective, is there a particular population that falls through the cracks? [regarding school-to-work transitioning]
2. Does the community college provide functional skill training like they used to?
3. Who should I interview at the high school?
4. Are you aware of a powerful advocacy group, similar to the one(s) that were able to accomplish offering a graduated driver’s license option for the visually impaired in 39 states for the Intellectually Disabled population?
5. Are you aware of the lower reading level written driving test option that is offered at least one DMV within the area?

**Deleted/Additional Questions for April 19 Focus Group Interview**

Note: the Special Educator asked the students a number of questions so that they could introduce themselves and explain about the program. Both he and his aid assisted me with eliciting answers to my questions that I directed to the students

**Deleted**

1. Did not ask specifically about any one’s role or expertise. Much of that information was shared, however.

**Additional by Me**

[directed to students]

1. What is hard about driver’s ed?
2. Who’s taken the actual test?
3. How did you take the driver’s ed class [at school]? Was someone in the class to help you? Did you get additional help?
4. How did you study for the tests [in driver’s ed]?
5. Does the question of transportation and the various options come up in every single one of you IEPs in terms of your goals?
6. Are there students who choose to come back and work on vocational and/or functional areas after they graduate? What do they work on?
7. What are you guys interested in doing? Where are you guys going to get the training?

[directed to special educator]

1. Am I right, in terms of transition advocacy, does this population appear to fall through the cracks