Interventions for Reading Disabilities in Transition from High School

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Abstract

Transitioning through high school and into adulthood is a complicated and overwhelming process for typically developing students. For students with disabilities, there are added concern about the intellectual, neurological, and or physical barriers they also face. Quality of life can be greatly diminished by a disability. Employed adults with a reading disability often have low wages and live in low-rent areas. Higher rates of crime and exposure to drugs are more likely to occur in these communities. A person who has a reading disability is more apt to be subject to negative peer influences and has more of a likelihood to succumb to substance abuse [1]. Those who have a reading disability are also more likely apt to be victims of a crime, or commit more crimes themselves due to the socio-economics in which they live. Because of their living conditions, these individuals may also feel alienation and emotional complications which can lead to further disability [1]. This paper highlights the significance of reading ability to quality of life, addresses the need for further research and development of effective intervention programs, and explores transition programs focused on reading. A successful transition plan is necessary to effectively move a student with reading disability into independent adulthood.

Introduction

The ability to read is an essential element for educating all learners. When a reading disability impedes learning and comprehension, the effects are lifelong. When reading ability is limited, learning is limited, and that ultimately limits opportunities and affects quality of life. Because our level of education may dictate the quality of life we lead, it is important to address the factors that lead to a limited education. Those concerned with educational opportunity may have as their goal the eradication of reading disabilities. However, when reading disability cannot be overcome, transitioning those with the disability into independent adulthood becomes a major challenge. While many people with disabilities have the capability to live independently, there often are economic factors that prevent people with learning disabilities from doing so.

Learning to Read

Reading begins when an individual starts to turn sounds into words. Next, phonological awareness of early skills such as rhyming and syllable counting are the first signs of organized skills. There are many components and factors that are involved in learning how to read. To achieve skilled reading, language comprehension skills such as background knowledge, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge

are necessary. In addition, word recognition achieved through phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition are necessary [2]. Please examine Figure 1 as an example of how these components work together to achieve skilled reading.

The leading problem of poor readers is underdeveloped word recognition for accuracy and speed. The most effective reading instruction includes phonological awareness; decoding and encoding skills that are systematic, explicit, and cumulative; daily text reading that is supported and mediated; and language and reading comprehension [3]. Direct explicit reading instruction is most effective in teaching individuals to read [4].
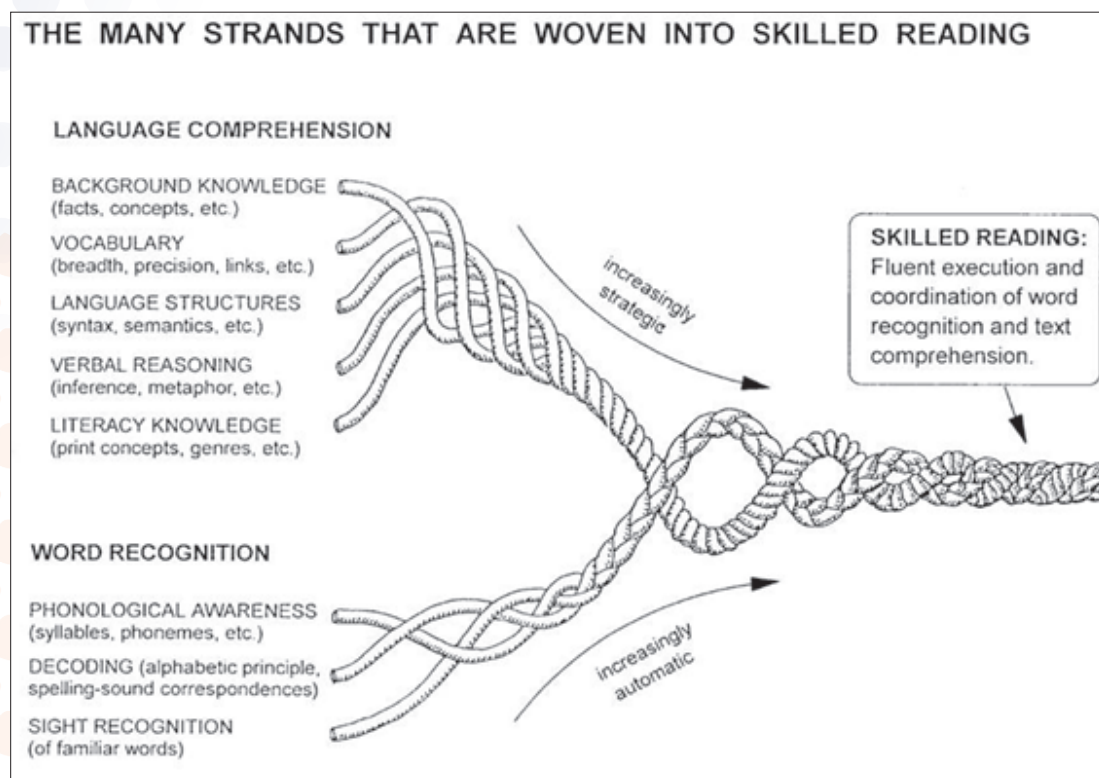
Figure 1: Reading Rope Graphic. Adapted from Scarborough, H. S. [2]. Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), Handbook for research in early literacy (pp. 97–110). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

The current approach for assessing reading disability is the Response to Intervention (RTI) model. In the United States, schools perform kindergarten screening based on the research of Satz, Taylor, Friel, and Fletcher [5]. This tiered model allows educators and support staff to access and identify reading difficulties and implement intervention strategies to assist individuals with reading deficits early on. While RTI is generally conducted in the elementary school level, the impact of how effective or ineffective the intervention is can move with an individual throughout his or her high school career.

Defining Reading Disabilities

Reading difficulties occur in different individuals for different reasons. Some reading difficulties are marked by language comprehension, some by word recognition, and some by orthographic matching, or a combination of these [3]. Reading Disability is a neurological condition in which a person experiences difficulty with any part of reading such as difficulty reading quickly, trouble with handwriting, and difficulty understanding the written word [6]. Individuals who meet the criteria are diagnosed with Specific Learning Disability (SLD) which encompasses understanding and using language, which is characteristic of dyslexia. Nationwide, SLD is the largest disability category, accounting for nearly 39% of students receiving special education in 2015–2016 [7].
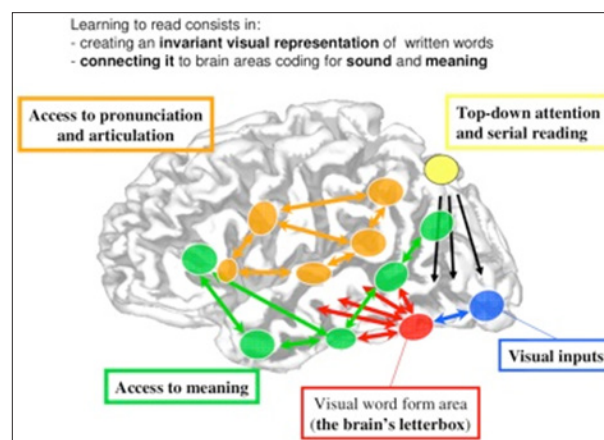

Figure 2: Brain Activation During Reading [8].

As demonstrated in Figure 2, different areas of the brain are activated during reading. When a neurological condition interferes with a certain area or areas of the brain, this causes difficulty with reading and results in a reading disability. Those with reading disabilities also have difficulty making connections between the written and the spoken word [9]. Introducing neuroimaging findings to support a reading disability diagnosis already based on low achievement and RTI affirms those factors [10]. For example, it was found that children with reading disabilities who responded to RTI had different neural activity than children who did not respond to RTI. Those who responded had more activity in the left temporoparietal region which is the site of the brain for

grapheme–phoneme integration and phonological processing. Neurological findings will further aid in diagnosis reading disability and predicting reading outcomes and should also serve to inform policy and intervention [10]. Diagnoses and interventions could be identified and implemented earlier which could lead to more beneficial reading outcomes.

Quality of Life and Outcomes for Individuals with Reading Disabilities

Reading disability touches upon more than merely the difficulty itself. As with any other disabilities, it affects all aspects of an individual's life. In 2013–2014, 18.1% of students with specific learning disability (SLD) dropped out of high school, nearly three times the rate of all students of 6.5% [7]. The most common reason that students with SLD gave for dropping out was that they disliked school. If a student fails to get supports for his or her learning disability, the student is more likely to be incarcerated which leads to gaps in learning, dropping out, and recidivism. For students with LD, 24% informed their college that they have a learning disability while 7% did not even though they still considered themselves to have a learning disability. Sixty nine percent did not inform their college because they no longer considered themselves to have a learning disability even though there is no likelihood that one grew out of the learning disability. Individuals with LD are twice as likely to be unemployed as their peers [7]. There is also an inequality in the average income between people with disabilities and people without. People with disabilities in general have less health insurance, lower annual household income, they are less educated, their poverty rate is higher, and annually they earn less money than people without disabilities [1].

Living with Reading Disability

In the workplace, 19% of young adults with LD reported that their employers were aware of their disability while 5% reported that they were receiving accommodations in the workplace [7]. When a reading disability cannot be overcome, those affected sometimes have difficulties. They do not get the supports needed to prosper and successfully complete an educational, occupational, or vocational program, and they are not always able to find and keep gainful employment. The inability to read or comprehend written language in contracts and on employment forms causes a person to be vulnerable to fraud and abuse. Sellers, employers, or other dishonest individuals may take advantage of individuals with reading disabilities and deny them of something they are deserving or embezzle something they already have. There are limits in life choices for a person with a reading disability.

Individuals with Reading Disabilities do not have the same access to education as the others often do due to the fault of their disability. The field is lacking in research-based interventions to practice in schools, which leads to adults who pass through the system with reading disabilities. Future implications of this paper point to continued research focused on interventions to extinguish reading disability. Until this is complete, there needs to be protections in place for students transitioning into adulthood.

Transition Policy and IDEA

Transition planning in special education involves identifying and developing goals with students at the secondary school level as the student with disabilities prepares for life after high school. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) defines transition planning specifically as:

(a) Transition services means a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that
1. Is designed to be within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation;
2. Is based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests; and includes—
   (i)   Instruction;
   (ii) Related services;
   (iii) Community experiences;
   (iv) The development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives; and
   (v)   If appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and provision of a functional vocational evaluation.
(b) Transition services for children with disabilities may be special education, if provided as specially designed instruction, or a related service, if required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education. (IDEA, 2004, 300.43)

Transitioning students beyond high school involves setting measurable goals which may academic, vocational, independent living, or community oriented in nature. While in school, students with disabilities who need accommodations and modifications in order to be successful in the general education setting are provided with an individual education plan (IEP). The IEP details the accommodations, modifications, services, and supports that the student with disabilities needs in the classroom. During transition planning, the student with disabilities must also be provided with an individualized transition plan. This transition plan provides the details of accommodations, modifications, services, and supports that the student will need in order to be successful after high school- whether that setting is college, employment, or another program.

Summary of Research on Reading Disabilities and Transition
Neurological Underpinnings of Reading Disabilities

Neuroscientists have sought to better understand reading disabilities by examining brain activity using Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI). While traditional MRI provides high resolution images which contrasts different tissues, the Functional Magnetic Resonance Image (fMRI) reports brain activity during performance of tasks, as well as the physical aspects of the brain [11]. The fMRI allows us to view the

parts of the brain that are active during cognitive processes by measuring the change in blood flow in the brain when the brain is directed to a new task. Landi et al performed neurological studies of word reading and reading comprehension [12]. They determined that when learning new words, three regions of the brain were involved: the temporoparietal, occipitotemporal, and anterior. These three regions of the brain, in conjunction, allow skilled word reading. Landi et al also found that as reading skill increased, the circuitry shifted from predominantly dorsal which is the upper and back area of the brain, to the predominantly ventral area, which is located in the underside of the brain. See Figure 3 for a visual representation of the dorsal and ventral areas of the brain. Their study also found overlapping of the circuitry for reading comprehension and single word comprehension. Syntactic processing, semantic processing, working memory and inferential processing all work together, but cognitively they activate different areas of the brain. The superior parietal lobe is activated during working memory [12]. Advances in neuroimaging techniques allow the opportunity to investigate how the brain is activated during reading, but simply stated, if an individual has difficulty developing phonemic awareness, a reading disability occurs.
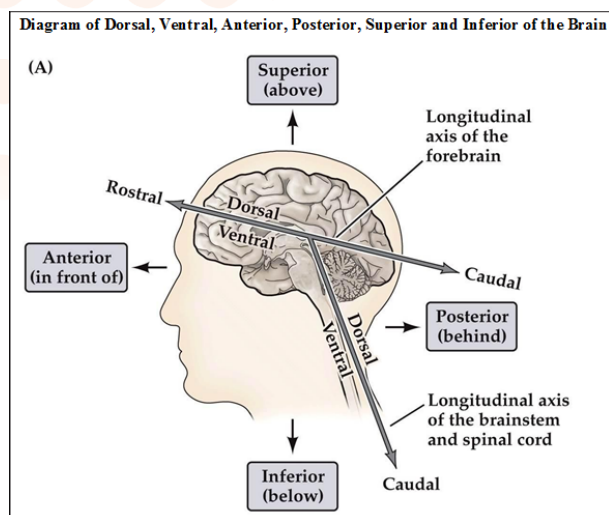

Figure 3: Diagram of Dorsal, Ventral, Anterior, Posterior, Superior and Inferior of the Brain. Purves, D., Augustine, G., Fitzpatrick, D., Hall, W., LaMantia, A., White, L. (2011) Neuroscience, 5th Edition.

Executive Functioning and Transition

Although the executive function may not be a measure in many reading comprehension rubrics, there is cognitive demands for these higher level skills which would suggest a connection to executive function [13]. Researchers have zeroed in on three skills which are relative to EF. They are cognitive flexibility, working memory, and inhibitory control [14]. Executive function skills allow an individual to plan, self-monitor, and regulate impulses. These skills allow individuals to control emotions, practice time management, and practice organization [15]. EF involves the student's ability to keep up with schedules, daily organization, time management, organization, prioritizing, focus and attention, planning, motivation, and impulsivity, all of which influence academic performance. Many individuals who are diagnosed with LD also struggle with EF skills. While parents and teachers assist in compensating for a student's deficiency of EF during high school, once he or she goes to college, the student will take on more of, if not all of, the responsibilities him or herself.

Planning and implementing steps are challenges faced by those who struggle with executive function deficits. Simple strategies to assist individuals with EF deficits include keeping a calendar or planner, checklists, post-it notes, and timers [16]. There are paper, digital, or cloud options for many of these strategies including tools such as Google Drive or Evernote drive to help keep files and papers organized as well as applications such as ZenDay or Google Calendar to keep dates and deadlines organized. Transitioning successfully through high school and to college calls for planning and implementation. These tools can assist those with executive function deficits to develop and maintain steps that can support a successful transition. Most studies that focused on the progression of EF determine that over time, EF skills make continuous improvement. The goal is to reach a point of automaticity where the individual with deficient EF skills utilizes the EF skills taught to them and eventually become a self-regulated learner [14]. These skills should be taught and practiced throughout high school so that there is no learning curve to the skill, only fashioning it to college or career life.

Transition Programs That Address Reading and Self-Determination

Reading skills are essential for success in college, and ultimately in one's career. To be ready for college, students are expected to know how to utilize comprehension strategies, summarize, skim and scan, vocabulary, proper grammar, pull out details and major concepts, and how to access their prior knowledge [17]. An ideal transition program would include a reading program component that would include directly teaching vocabulary, address fluency and decoding, as well as address the previously mentioned points of readiness. It has been noted that students with learning disabilities struggle with domain-specific vocabulary instruction. While instruction of vocabulary is an integral component of enhancing reading comprehension, it should not be utilized as a primary means of vocabulary instruction as students at this level often lack the fundamentals and the domain-specific instruction will be lost [18]. Assessment of these skills and how they translate into speaking and writing are further factors to consider when designing a reading program for transitioning students.

When literacy training is added to a program for transitioning students, the students' overall reading scores increase [19]. EnvisionIT is an online program that combines aspects of Common Core Standards for ELA with transition planning, financial literacy, and technology [20]. When EnvisionIT was utilized, reading comprehension scores largely increased. This study was performed in the general education and special education setting. The findings suggest that the implementation of EnvisionIT is an effective intervention for all students, and specifically for those with learning disabilities [21].

Besides reading disability, there are other barriers to successful transition that must be taken into account as well. During this time students are becoming more self-aware, they are understanding their own identities, and they are learning the skills of self-assessment [22]. Effective transition programs are most important for students with disabilities not only to ensure they get the most education and preparation for adulthood, but also that they become advocates for themselves. Lee et al. studied 168 students between the ages of 12 and 16 with reading impairments in junior high and high school. They implemented a training conducted by teachers called Whose Future Is It Anyway? (WFA) a student centered approach to transition planning [23]. The aim of the program was to introduce students to the concept of transition and transition planning, which involved: enabling them to self-direct learning related to:
(a) having self-awareness and disability awareness;
(b) decision making about transition-related outcomes;
(c) identifying and securing community resources to support transition services;
(d) writing and evaluating goals and objectives;
(e) communicating effectively in small groups; and
(f) developing skills to become an effective team member, leader, or self-advocate" [23].

The purpose of the WFA program is to empower the students with knowledge and self-awareness and in effect make them become more self-determined and take a more vested interest in their future. The study determined that the WFA intervention enhanced self-determination, transition planning knowledge, and self-efficacy and outcome expectations for educational planning for these students with reading deficiencies [23]. Teacher comments on this intervention included praise for getting students, especially middle school students, involved in the preparation of their own IEPs and students became more active participants in their education process. This type of program allows and empowers students early on to be part of their own education process.

WFA is a program focused on giving students more autonomy in transitioning students through middle and high school. The study determined the importance of explicitly teaching students about transition. It was determined that it is important to include the students in their IEP meetings, and to actively participate in the decision-making, goal-setting, and transition planning [24]. It was also determined that this program, alongside a reading program called Rocket Reader boosted feelings of self-efficacy and determination in middle school students [23]. The focus on reading helped to boost the self-determination of the students who participated in the study.

Another intervention for successful transition of high school students is the on-going family engagement. Schools can assist parents to become active in their child's education that will assist in successful transition. These steps include professional development for teachers to learn how to engage and reach out to engage parents in the school climate. As a district continues to reach out and educate parents, this bolsters the parental skills and involvement which will in turn increase the likelihood that the parent will support their child through transitioning. This continued communication and outreach will also assist in keeping attendance problems at bay and also homework completion at a higher rate. Finally, higher attendance rate and increased homework rate will lead to better student performance [25]. Keeping students in the classroom has been a challenge since the inception of formal education.

Self-Determination and Activism
Studies have determined that there is positive correlation between self-determination and quality of life of individuals with disabilities [26]. This is evident because, "self-determination and quality of life share many core concepts, such as self-concept, self-value, goal setting, self-care, and choice and decision-making" [26]. The added investment in oneself raises the values and aspirations of an individual and in effect creates an atmosphere that is more conducive to success.

One form of self-determination development for students transitioning from high school is to motivate them to become activists. A program called Public Achievement began in 1990 and it was made up of college students who coached and became project leaders for students in elementary through high school [27]. Boyte determined that these service learning projects instilled values in the students such as community, responsibility and concern for the common good [27]. As a result of this project, students continued the role of public servant and were encouraged to be a part of their community to further and develop their skills. Activism and involvement are important elements to creating a sense of community. Although this program did not specifically target students with disabilities, this project could be translated into a transition program for students with disabilities and enabling them to a smoother transition into the community while employing the community in efforts to remove the alienation and stigma of disabilities.

Need for Further Research and Development on Effective Intervention Programs
Generally, individuals with higher reading skills attain a higher quality of life. Reading disability plays a role in one's lifestyle; therefore, theoretically becoming a better reader will enhance one's lifestyle. A correlation is found between self-determination and quality of life; therefore, any intervention that will augment a student's self-determination should in effect boost one's quality of life [28,29-37]. Family involvement is an important component for successful transition through high school, which also leads to a higher quality of life. While these aspects of involvement and intervention are essential to transitioning students, we must also understand that they are not aspects that exist in a vacuum, and they are not to be introduced at the stage of transition, but should be components of a student's total education plan throughout his or her school career. Assisting students to become better readers, helping to build self-determination in students, and encouraging families to be involved in the education process, are not necessarily programs or interventions that can be implemented as

"transition" programs, as these programs are aimed at students 15 or over, but need to be embedded in the school curriculum from the first year on. Incorporating these elements early on in a child's education can assist the student to be more successful overall. It can empower them to transition successfully with supports to which they have been exposed over an extended period of time, not simply later in their high school career, at the stage of transition. It is suggested that a longitudinal study of how school career-long implementation of these practices affects the overall outcome of successful transition of students with disabilities into adulthood. In addition, there are limited studies on the more specific topic of transitioning students with reading disabilities, but those that exist point to the importance of careful coordination between the high school team, the student, and the family.

Closing Summary

Successful transitioning into adulthood is a crucial passage for attaining a quality lifestyle for students with disabilities. By using evidence-based practices to improve the transition experience, teachers, support staff, and administration evaluate, plan, and prepare students for moving through this time successfully. However, more than half of students with IEPs were unclear of the purpose of their IEP planning or transition meeting [23]. This number is problematic when we take into consideration that a student's successful transition through high school and beyond relies on student involvement and engagement. In order for students to realize the full benefit of transition planning, each student must be an active participant in his or her own individual education plan and therefore have the best opportunity to lead a quality life. Beyond high school, colleges are not always bound to the same standards for accommodating students with disabilities, and it is important for individuals with LD and SLD to go into that setting understanding what is available to them and how to get the supports and accommodations they need.

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