

# An Evidence Review of Key Transition Components for Students with Learning Disabilities

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The purpose of this analysis was to systematically review research specific to the transition of students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) and report identified key components of that process along with identifiable gaps to offer information useful for practitioners, families, and others that may be supporting students with SLD during transition. Researchers reviewed thirty years of research since the 1990 addition of transition to IDEA. Fifty-four articles met established inclusion/exclusion criteria specific to students with SLD in the United States. Articles included qualitative and quantitative studies, literature reviews, policy papers, and conceptual frameworks describing effective transition practices and services. Five themes from the literature were identified. Utilizing a historical frame, researchers analyzed the five key themes identified in the context of previously identified key components for transition planning. Recommendations and implications are suggested for future research.

**Keywords:** *Transition, post-secondary, literature review*

Transition from secondary education to adult life is a challenging process for many young adults including those with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). Students with SLD remain the largest number of students served in K-12 environments across all disability, racial, and ethnic groups, making up 34.9% of all students served (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Over 70% of these students received their education in general education classroom and graduate with a general education diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). On the surface, these students may appear no different at their exit from high school than any other student graduating. Individuals with SLD must learn to self-disclose their disability and to self-advocate within existing systems to determine eligibility for supports (Madaus et. al., 2008). Legislation and mandated policy exist that should contribute to positive adult outcomes for students with SLD. Analysis of the data collected by those mandates leads to significant questions about whether

supports are being used with efficacy for students with SLD in preparation for and support of their transition to adulthood.

## **IDEA Transition Reporting Requirements**

Graduation rates for students with SLD have continued to improve (United States Department of Education, 2023) but adult outcomes for students with SLD are not as positive as their same-age peers with whom they are graduating (Sanford, et al., 2011). Since the 1990 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), transition services are required for all students aged 16 and older determined eligible as having an educational disability under IDEA, including those with SLD. An Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) is required for each student receiving services and should address all areas necessary to transition into adulthood based on the student's identified need (IDEA, 2004). These areas for consideration for all students with disabilities

include: employment, postsecondary education to include pursuits in college and/or vocational training, community resources and supports, independent living, recreation and leisure, social resources and supports, and any other areas deemed necessary based on the unique needs of the student (Prince et al., 2013). According to IDEA 2004, at age 16, the student's ITP should utilize evidence-based assessment techniques to identify areas of need and student preferences for adulthood, enabling the design of a plan of attainment throughout the student's final years in the K-12 system. A systematic alignment between IEP goals and ITP goals should be completed to ensure the student is moving forward successfully in their current educational environment, while at the same time moving forward with steps designed to lay the foundation for their future success in transitioning to adulthood (IDEA, 2004). However, utilizing the mandated measures required by IDEA to determine how students with SLD are transitioning is difficult (Etscheidt et al., 2023).

IDEA (2004) requires measurement of transition planning and outcomes through Indicators 13-14. Indicator 13 asks states to self-report a discrete "yes/no" as to whether or not the transition planning process includes invitations to the IEP meeting, transition assessments, services, and annual IEP goals related to transition goals as well as adult service participation (IDEA, 2004). The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) reported a 92% rate of states/districts reporting that transition goals were annually updated and included student and agency participation (NTACT, 2017). Appropriateness, comprehensiveness, or success of transition planning was not reported. Indicator 14 tracks the percentage of eligible IDEA students who have exited the k-12 system one year past exit to determine if they were: "(a) enrolled in higher education within one year of leaving high school, (b) enrolled in higher education or competitively employed within one year of leaving high school, or (c) enrolled in higher education or some other postsecondary education or training program; or competitively employed or in some other employment within one year of leaving high school." (20 U.S.C. 1416(a)(3)(B)). NTACT (2017) reported the following median scores for Indicator 14 as reported from all 60 states/territories for School Year (SY) 2015-16: 27.43% of youth with disabilities were enrolled in higher education; 63.03% were enrolled in higher education and competitively employed; and, 78.61% were enrolled in higher education, competitively employed, engaged in some other postsecondary education or training program, and/or some other type of employment. Since Indicator 14 is self-report, these measures only reflect the completers of the survey; in this data set, the number was 133,681 completers. For the SY 2015-16, the

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported the number of individuals with disabilities exiting school as 403,466 (2018). Of those, 206,204 were identified as having an SLD, a number much greater than the total number (133,681) of completers of the Indicator 14 survey. Indicator 14 data does not accurately report what students are doing post school. In addition, these Indicator 13 and 14 reporting structures do not collect data related to the efficacy of transition plans written for students with disabilities including those with SLD. The IDEA mandated transition data is not enough to know if the transition planning process effectively contributes to better outcomes for students post K-12 environments.

### **Other Transition Reporting Sources**

Other data sources outside the K-12 environment provide information that reflects less successful transitioning once students with disabilities leave public schools. Unfortunately, due to categorical language differences between IDEA of 2004 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, it is not easy to extrapolate specific outcomes for students identified with SLD in secondary school (Gil, 2007). Data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019) reported a mere 20.8% of individuals with identified disabilities as participating in the workforce, dropping to 17.9% in updates released in 2021 (U.S.B.L.S., Feb. 24, 2021). Individuals with a disability and no high school diploma are employed at 9.8%, those with a high school diploma but no college are employed at 15.6%, while those with some college are employed at 21.8%. Finally, those with a Bachelor's degree and higher are employed at 28.5%. Comparatively, using the same sequence for those without disabilities, the data indicated that: individuals with no high school diploma were employed at 54%, individuals with a high school diploma/no college were employed at 63%, individuals with some college were employed at 69.7%, and individuals with a Bachelor's degree or higher were employed at 75.5%. The 2020 Annual Disability Statistics Compendium (Houtenville & Rafal, 2020) funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), categorized individuals with disabilities into six disability categories: hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, independent living, and self-care. Overall employment rates indicated that 38.9% of individuals with a disability were employed in 2019 while 78.6% of individuals without a disability were employed, still demonstrating a large deficit in the employment of those with disabilities as compared to those without. The disparity in these employment rates for those with and without disabilities is noticeable. How transitioning adults with SLD calculate into these statistics

is not as clear due to categorical differences in the reports (Houtenville & Rafal, 2020; U.S.B.L.S., Feb. 24, 2021). As a result, aside from the clear distinction that individuals with disabilities are unemployed at a much higher rate than those without disabilities and that postsecondary education is useful to increase the likelihood of employment, these measurements are not as useful for educators planning transitions for students with SLD.

While all eligible students under IDEA should receive effective transition planning, students with SLD have specific learning needs that may affect their transition needs (Olfesh, 2006). Students with SLD are traditionally students who do not achieve adequately to the level of their abilities (Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA), 2018). They may have average or above average intelligence but experience issues with “acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information” (LDA, 2018, p.1). Often, students with SLD leave K-12 environments with insufficient skills to be successful in employment or postsecondary education (Shaw et al., 2010). Although most frequently alongside their typical peers, they are missing important self-advocacy, self-monitoring, and self-efficacy skills that are important for securing supports in the post-secondary world (Seo, et al., 2008).

### Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

In order to extend the knowledge we have from legislated policy reporting gaps as discussed previously and to better understand the unique needs of students with SLD as they transition into adulthood, the following research questions guided the present study:

First, what extant literature identifies the specific needs of students with SLD when planning for transition to adulthood?

Second, what key components of transition planning have been identified as critical for educators and families to support students with SLD in making successful transitions to adulthood?

To answer these questions, researchers analyzed the transition literature specifically for students with SLD by conducting a systematic review of the existing literature. The purpose of this analysis was to systematically review research specific to the transition of students with SLD and report identified key components of the process as well as identifiable gaps within the larger topic of transition in order to better prepare practitioners, families, and others supporting students with SLD during transition.

## Methods

In order to identify research specific to the transition of students with SLD and report the key components and gaps, a systematic review of the literature was conducted (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008; Page, M. et al., 2020). Following the PRISMA model checklist, this review was conducted using a pre-established research protocol that outlined the inclusion and exclusion criteria, explicit criteria for evaluating the methodology of the included research, and categories for analyzing descriptions of participants, outcomes, and recommendations made in each study (Page et al., 2020).

Before beginning the review, a research team was established. This team consisted of a lead researcher with extensive experience in transition-based educational programs and services (researcher A), a secondary researcher with experience in high incidence disabilities to include SLD (researcher B), and two student assistants with research experience (researchers C and D). Researcher A established a research protocol for the literature search based on the PRISMA model checklist (Page et al., 2020). Team-based discussions and reviews of findings were conducted after the initial search to limit a biased interpretation from any one team member. The final phase of the review was conducted by researchers A and B concurrently.

### Search Procedures

#### *Initial Search and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria*

Initial search procedures, outlined on the coding sheet (See Table 1) by researchers A and B, were “specific learning disabilities,” or “learning disability,” or “SLD,” or “LD,” or “high-incidence disabilities,” and “transition.” Researchers C and D were assigned search databases (i.e., PsycINFO, Academic Search Premier, and ERIC). Articles to be included and coded in the initial search must have been in peer-reviewed journals, published after 1990 (when more specific transition provisions were introduced in IDEA), and cover transitions that lead to adulthood. Exclusion criteria in the initial search were transition services focused on educational transitions (e.g., transitions from pre-, elementary, and middle school, between grade levels or classes, etc.), educational processes of which one component was transition, and articles published prior to 1990. To ensure that all research on this topic was captured, the research team conducted a hand search, using the same inclusion and exclusion criteria.

#### *Review of Initial Search*

Following the initial search, the research team met to discuss and review the initial results in order to establish

**Table 1**  
*Directions for Phase 1 Initial Literature Search*

Assigned Database:		Person Completing Form:
Use this coding sheet to record LD Transition Articles		
<b>Code areas on the code sheet for each article as follows:</b>		
INCLUDE:		
1.	<b>SEARCH</b>	In your assigned database, search all peer-reviewed articles on SLD, LD, High-Incidence disabilities + Transition.
2.	<b>PROVIDE</b>	Citation: Provide the full citation including doi.
		Key Words: List key words used as descriptors under the abstract
EXCLUDE:		
1.	<b>EXCLUDE</b>	Exclude articles on transition services other than those that lead to adulthood (e.g., transitions from preschool, elementary school, in between classes, etc.).
2.	<b>EXCLUDE</b>	Exclude anything prior to 1990.
<b>At the bottom of your code sheet table, provide total number of articles included and excluded from that database.</b>		
<b>Save code sheet by database name. Load into Dropbox.</b>		

reliability of search procedures and control for individual bias of inclusion/exclusion. Researchers C & D called out key words/key elements of each article found to Researcher A who recorded them on a blackboard. As repetitions such as “employment” occurred, topical themes were formed. Categories that were closely aligned such as “legislation and policy” were collapsed into one theme. While reviewing initial literature results of the search, as well as the keywords published under each abstract, the research team identified trends in the literature. After this initial process, themes identified were: (a) Legal and Policy Based Transition Planning Requirements, (b) Transition Steps, (c) Essential Components Leading to Post-secondary Education, (d) Essential Components Leading to Post-Secondary Employment, and (e) Ways to Increase Self-Determination/Self-Advocacy for Individuals with SLD. Also considered were Social Skills/Relationships and Community Access/Community Resources, but due to the lack of literature specific to those areas, researchers A and B decided to embed those foci in each previously identified theme, tailored specifically to the ways they were utilized in each area within the literature.

Next, researchers C and D were charged to independently update their final literature coding sheets (See Table 2) with additional information to include full citation, sample size, method, and abstract. Researchers C and D sorted their findings into the five topical themes using a shared google doc. Results were submitted to researchers A and B for review.

***Final Review***

Once researchers C and D submitted their findings to researchers A and B, researchers A and B met to concurrently review the literature that was found in the search. Researchers A and B analyzed these findings for inclusion in the final analysis. Additional exclusion criteria were used to allow the full team to answer the research questions. These additional exclusion criteria were; if the article included participants or was conducted internationally, were a dissertation or thesis, and those that were focused solely on intellectual disability. Simultaneously to reviewing literature included in the findings from researchers C and D, researchers A and B reviewed how those articles were sorted into the five

**Table 2**  
*Directions for Phase 2 Literature Search*

Assigned Database:		Person Completing Form:
Use this coding sheet to record SLD Transition Articles		
<b>Code areas on the code sheet for each article as follows:</b>		
<b>Code</b>		
For each identified article meeting the inclusion/exclusion criteria (date/postsecondary transition), include the following:		
1.	Citation	Provide the full citation including doi
2.	Research study or Descriptive	Identify if this is a descriptive or research article. If descriptive, try to provide the main idea if not clearly articulated in the abstract. If research, note research and then design (e.g.: Research: Multiple Baseline Design)
3.	Participant Group	Note the disability category/ies included (Mild Intellectual Disability, SLD, ADHD, at-risk—you may also see Developmental Disability, Other Health Impaired or unspecified). If possible, note the sample size.
4.	Abstract	Cut and paste the abstract into the last column. Include key words.  **Exclude articles that are specifically on other disabilities
<b>At the bottom of your code sheet table, provide total number of articles included from that database.</b>		
<b>Save code sheet by database name. Load into Dropbox.</b>		

topical themes. Any disagreement between researchers A and B were discussed until 100% agreement was met.

The remaining findings were ranked by researchers A and B as (1) definitely relates to the topic; (2) probably relates to the topic but needs further analysis; or (3) does not relate; can be removed from the analysis. Articles ranked as a 1 or 2 were further analyzed through annotated bibliographies until researchers A and B agreed as to whether the article should be included. Articles marked as a 3 were removed from the analysis. At the end of the final review, the team determined the systematic review complete and began assembling results based on the identified literature.

### Results

The initial search resulted in the identification of 645 articles. After the initial exclusion criteria were applied, 137 articles met initial criteria. From the ERIC database, researchers initially identified nine articles. From the PsycINFO database, researchers initially identified 77 articles. From the Academic Search Premier database, researchers initially identified 20 articles. The hand search

found an additional 31 articles. In total, 137 articles were identified to be screened for inclusion. In addition, all recurring author submitted key words were recorded from those 137 articles for review by researchers A and B.

All research members met and reviewed the recurring keywords listed from the 137 articles to ensure all IDEA required transition topics had been searched. Key words published under abstracts and identified as recurrent were “transition,” “transition into adulthood,” “transition from high school to college,” “learning disabilities,” “mild learning disabilities,” “employment and/or vocational training,” “postsecondary,” “community,” “community access,” “community resources,” “social,” “friendship,” and “independent living.”

Lastly, researchers A and B used the final inclusion/exclusion criteria to narrow findings to 54/137 articles to be used in the evidence review utilizing the concurrent ranking procedure previously described. Figure 1 provides a detailed illustration of the process following the PRISMA Model (Page et al., 2020). From the identified topics in the review of the initial search, under the legal and policy theme there were 27 articles, transition steps had 14 articles,

post-secondary education had 20 articles, post-secondary employment had 23 articles, and self-determination had 13 articles. Several articles addressed more than one theme. The final list of included articles, sorted by theme, can be found in Table 3. Final themes were: (a) Legal and Policy

Based Transition Planning Requirements, (b) Transition Steps, (c) Essential Components Leading to Post-secondary Education, (d) Essential Components Leading to Post-Secondary Employment, and (e) Ways to Increase Self-Determination/Self-Advocacy for Individuals with SLD.

**Table 3**  
*Results of Systematic Literature Review*

Author	Year	Method
<b>Legal and Policy-Based Transition Planning Requirements</b>		
Carter, E. W., Trainor, A. A., Sun, Y., & Owens, L.	2009	Qualitative
Cavendish & Connor	2018a	Mixed
Cavendish & Connor	2018b	Qualitative
Clark, G. M.	1996	Lit Review
Connor & Cavendish	2018	Descriptive
Cummings, R., Maddox, C. D., & Casey, J.	2000	Conceptual
Daviso, A. W., Denney, S. C., Baer, R. M., & Flexer, R.	2011	Quantitative
Dowdy, C. A.	1996	Policy
Dunn, C.	1996	Lit Review
Eisenman, L. T.	2003	Lit Review
Evers, R. B.	1996	Lit Review
Grigal, M., Hart, D., & Migliore, A.	2011	Quantitative
Hamblet	2014	Qualitative
Joshi, G. S., & Bouck, E. C.	2017	Quantitative
Madaus, J. W.	2005	Conceptual
Madaus, J. W., Gerber, P. J., & Price, L. A.	2008	Lit Review
Madaus, J. W., & Shaw, S. F.	2006	Policy
McCall, Z. A.	2015	Quantitative
Morningstar, M. E., Turnbull, A. P., & Turnbull, H. R.	1995	Qualitative
Reiff, H. B. & deFur, S.	1992	Policy
Rojewski, J. W.	1992	Lit Review
Sitlington, P. L.	1996	Lit Review
Sturomski, N.	1996	Policy
Theobald, R. J., Goldhaber, D. D., Gratz, T. M., & Holden, K. L.	2019	Quantitative
Trainor, A. A., Morningstar, M. E., & Murray, A.	2016	Qualitative
Wagner, M. M., Newman, L. A., & Javitz, H. S.	2016	Quantitative
Yu, M., Novak, J. A., Lavery, M. R., Vostal, B. R., & Matuga, J. M.	2018	Quantitative

<b>Transition Steps</b>		
Blalock, G., & Patton, J. R.	1996	Lit Review
Cavendish & Connor	2018a	Mixed
Cummings, R., Maddox, C. D., & Casey, J.	2000	Conceptual
Dowdy, C. A.	1996	Policy
Dunn, C.	1996	Lit Review
Grigal, M., Hart, D., & Migliore, A.	2011	Quantitative
Kelley, S. D. M., English, W., & Schwallie-Gaddis, P.	2007	Qualitative
King, G. A., Baldwin, P. J., Currie, M., & Evans, J.	2005	Conceptual
McCall, Z. A.	2015	Quantitative
Rojewski, J. W.	1992	Lit Review
Sitlington, P. L.	1996	Lit Review
Sturomski, N.	1996	Policy
Trainor, A. A., Morningstar, M. E., & Murray, A.	2016	Qualitative
Yu, M., Novak, J. A., Lavery, M. R., Vostal, B. R., & Matuga, J. M.	2018	Quantitative

Table 3 (cont.)

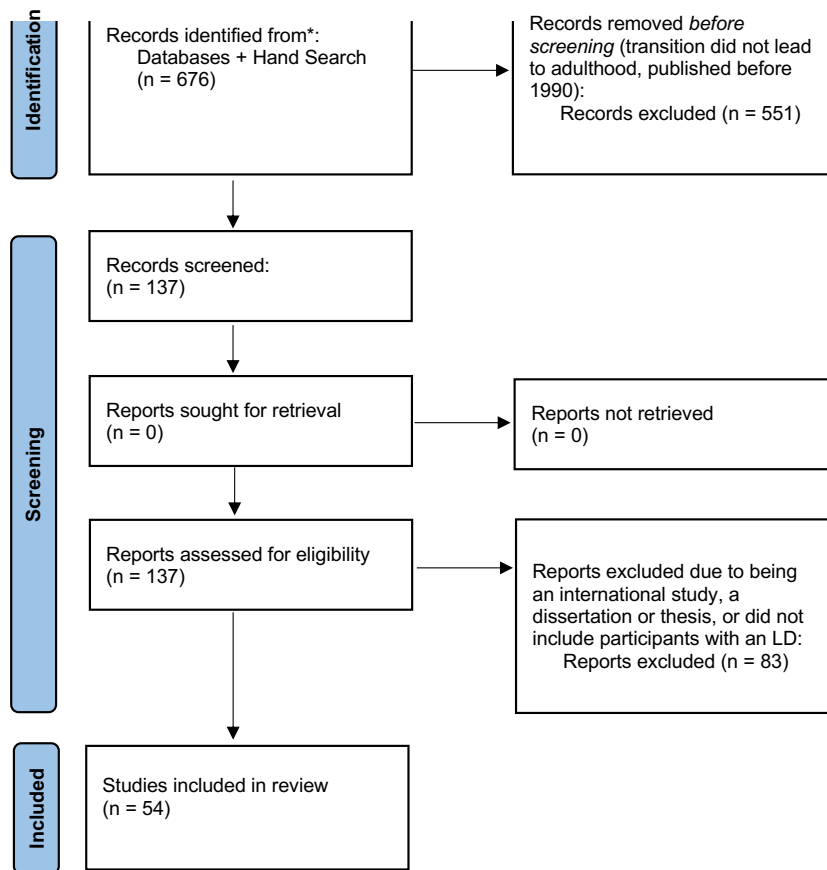
Essential Components Leading to Post-Secondary Education		
Blalock, G.	1996	Lit Review
Cavendish & Connor	2018a	Mixed
Cleveland, J., & Crowe, M.	2013	Lit Review
Davis, C., & Bullis, M.	1990	Lit Review
Daviso, A. W., Denney, S. C., Baer, R. M., & Flexer, R.	2011	Quantitative
Dowdy, C. A.	1996	Policy
DuPaul, G. J., Pinho, T. D., Pollack, B. L., Gormley, M. J., & Laracy, S. D.	2017	Quantitative
Grigal, M., Hart, D., & Migliore, A.	2011	Quantitative
Hadley, W.	2018	Quantitative
Joshi, G. S., & Bouck, E. C.	2017	Quantitative
King, G. A., Baldwin, P. J., Currie, M., & Evans, J.	2005	Conceptual
Langi, F. L. F. G., Oberoi, A., Balcazar, F. E., & Awsumb, J.	2017	Quantitative
Lee, I. H., Rojewski, J. W., Gregg, N., & Jeong, S.-O.	2015	Qualitative
Madaus, J. W.	2005	Conceptual
Madaus, J. W., Banerjee, M., & Hamblet, E. C.	2010	Quantitative
Posthill, S. M., & Roffman, A. J.	1991	Qualitative
Rojewski, J. W.	1992	Lit Review
Smith, S. G., English, R., & Vasek, D.	2002	Quantitative
Wagner, M. M., Newman, L. A., & Javitz, H. S.	2016	Quantitative
Yu, M., Novak, J. A., Lavery, M. R., Vostal, B. R., & Matuga, J. M.	2018	Quantitative

Essential Components Leading to Post-Secondary Employment		
Blalock, G.	1996	Lit Review
Cavendish & Connor	2018a	Mixed
Cleveland, J., & Crowe, M.	2013	Lit Review
Davis, C., & Bullis, M.	1990	Lit Review
Daviso, A. W., Denney, S. C., Baer, R. M., & Flexer, R.	2011	Quantitative
Daviso, A. W., Baer, R. M., Flexer, R. W., & Meindl, R.	2016	Quantitative
Dong, S., Fabian, E., & Luecking, R. G.	2016	Quantitative
Dowdy, C. A.	1996	Policy
Dunn, C.	1996	Lit Review
Eisenman, L. T.	2003	Lit Review
Evers, R. B.	1996	Lit Review
Gonzalez, R., Rosenthal, D. A., & Kim, J. H.	2011	Qualitative
Grigal, M., Hart, D., & Migliore, A.	2011	Quantitative
Ji, E., Schaller, J., Pazey, B., & Glynn, K.	2015	Quantitative
King, G. A., Baldwin, P. J., Currie, M., & Evans, J.	2005	Conceptual
Luftig, R. L., & Muthert, D.	2005	Quantitative
Posthill, S. M., & Roffman, A. J.	1991	Qualitative
Rojewski, J. W.	1992	Lit Review
Shapiro, E. S., & Lentz, F. E.	1991	Lit Review
Sturomski, N.	1996	Policy
Theobald, R. J., Goldhaber, D. D., Gratz, T. M., & Holden, K. L.	2019	Quantitative
Wagner, M. M., Newman, L. A., & Javitz, H. S.	2016	Quantitative
Yamamoto, K. K., & Black, R. S.	2015	Qualitative

**Table 3 (cont.)**

Ways to Increase Self-Determination/Self-Advocacy for Individuals with SLD		
Carter, E. W., Lane, K. L., Pierson, M. R., & Glaeser, B.	2006	Qualitative
Farmer, J. L., Allsopp, D. H., & Ferron, J. M.	2015	Qualitative
Goldberg, R. J., Higgins, E. L., Raskind, M. H., & Herman, K. L.	2003	Qualitative
Hogansen, J. M., Powers, K., Geenen, S., Gil-Kashiwabara, E., & Powers, L.	2008	Quantitative
Kelley, S. D. M., English, W., & Schwallie-Gaddis, P.	2007	Qualitative
McCall, Z. A.	2015	Quantitative
Morningstar, M. E., Turnbull, A. P., & Turnbull, H. R.	1995	Qualitative
Murray & Naranjo	2008	Qualitative
Rojewski, J. W.	1992	Lit Review
Smith, S. G., English, R., & Vasek, D.	2002	Quantitative
Trainor, A. A.	2005	Quantitative
Trainor, A. A.	2007	Qualitative
Zheng, C., Gaumer Erickson, A., Kingston, N. M., & Noonan, P. M.	2014	Quantitative

**Figure 1**  
*Identification of Literature Via Databases and Hand Search*



*Note:* Adapted from Page, M.J., McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71

Upon completion of the search and review process, researchers A and B noted that the literature were grouped by legislative policy cycles. In 1990, transition procedures were added to the reauthorization of IDEA. Fifteen articles were identified as published after the 1990 reauthorization by researchers A and B. No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2002) was another legislative marker found in the results. NCLB greatly moved the focus to academic outcomes and accountability. Transition was still included in IDEA, but not as prioritized. From 2002–2008, 14 articles were published. 2008 saw the passage of the Higher Education Act reauthorization, and another marker of published articles on transition. This act increased the focus of individuals with disabilities participating in post-secondary education programs. Twenty-six articles were identified during the analysis of the findings by researchers A and B that were published after 2009.

Additionally, the types of literature identified contributes to the knowledge of transitions on the database of students with SLD. Literature in this review demonstrated there were more reviews of the literature (11), descriptive/policy/conceptual (8) and/or mixed/qualitative studies (15) were published in the transition literature than quantitative studies, respectively. From the 54 articles identified for this review, 18 were quantitative studies (See Table 3).

## Discussion

The purpose of this analysis was to systematically review research specific to the transition of students with SLD in the U.S. and report identified key components of that process and identifiable gaps within the larger topic of transition in order to offer information useful for practitioners, families, and others that may be supporting those students with SLD during transition. Fifty-four articles met the inclusion criteria for this analysis.

### Alignment with Historical Components

The inclusion of transition planning in IDEA 1990 created an initial surge of 13 identified publications specific to learners with LD. Soon after the initial 1990 mandate, Rojewski (1992) examined nine model transition programs to identify components critical to supporting the transition needs of students with SLD. He presented seven generic components of secondary transition programs: (a) individualized transition planning, (b) integration with mainstream settings, (c) paid work experiences, (d) active family involvement, (e) coordination of data and services, (f) job seeking and placement, and (g) follow-up and/or follow-along (p. 137). Examining the resulting themes from the current analysis of critical transition information, five themes were identified: (a) Legal and Policy Based

Transition Planning Requirements, (b) Transition Steps, (c) Essential Components Leading to Post-secondary Education, (d) Essential Components Leading to Post-Secondary Employment, and (e) Ways to Increase Self-Determination/Self-Advocacy for Individuals with SLD. To enhance discussion, researchers utilized Rojewski's generic components of high-quality transition to the current findings and found most literature aligned directly into Rojewski's initial categories. Using Rojewski's essential components compared to findings of this literature review allowed a historical comparison of developments in the literature since 1992. Each of Rojewski's recommended components is integrated with current research findings and explored below.

### Individualized Planning and Coordination

Individualized transition planning and coordination was the initial component identified by Rojewski in 1992. This aligns with the current themes of Legal and Policy Based Transition Planning Requirements and Transition Steps (e.g., Blalock & Patton, 1996; Carter et al., 2009; Cavendish & Connor, 2018a; Dowdy, 1996; Reiff & deFur, 1992). In 1990, based on the mandate IDEA reauthorization regulations, transition planning was a new requirement. Today, transition planning is standard practice for students considered eligible under IDEA 2004. Early on, Posthill and Roffman (1991) identified the necessity of personalized and authentic goal setting as a critical component of successful transition programs. Individualized goal-setting has been shown to enhance Individualized Transition Planning. For example, individualized goal-setting in the transition planning process has directly correlated with student's postsecondary targets and has led to positive effects in the achievement of those targets (Davis et al, 2011; Hogansen et al., 2008). Clarified in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, individualized transition planning should occur at least annually, either as a component of the Individualized Education Plan or as a stand-alone document, and must be included in the IEP by the time that the student reaches age 16.

Although Indicators 13 and 14 of IDEA (2004) require transition plans to meet certain compliance regulations, these requirements may not be enough to promote in-depth individualization of these plans, necessary for successful implementation and outcomes. Professional literature is replete with findings that imply this deficiency to be the case. To illustrate, Trainor (2005) utilized document reviews, observations, and interviews to research the transition planning experiences of 15 students with SLD and found that students' ITP exit goals were not shown to correlate with the goals that students had provided in the interview. Furthermore, Trainor found specific disconnects

between employment goals, postsecondary education goals, and independent living goals, for which goals on the ITP did not make any connection to the current experiences of these students or outcomes expressed for their futures. Trainor also identified the participation of these students in their transition plans as “participating on the periphery” (p. 238). Students may have participated in the plan at school (i.e., attended), but most saw it as a place to schedule the next year’s classes. Trainor further found that participants in this study relied heavily on families for authentic transition planning not associated with the school ITP. Trainor (2005) echoed Rojewski’s (1992) recommendation that transition planning should be individualized and aligned with each student’s unique goals.

In a case study of three students with SLD that included in-depth analysis of each student’s transition into college, Connor (2012) noted similar findings. These findings illustrated just how variable students with SLD can be in their goals, strengths, and challenges. Examining the need for individualized supports unique to African-American students with SLD, Durodoye et al., (2004) endorsed the need to support individuals’ differences. Individualized transition planning remains a key component of effective transition planning today, while active and authentic student participation (not simply attendance) continues to be a critical factor in successfully individualizing transition plans (Blalock & Patton, 1996). However, teachers need additional training for working with culturally and linguistically diverse students with SLD and their families as they support an individualized transition process (Keel et al., 2018).

### Integration with General Education Settings

Rojewski (1992) originally advocated for integration into mainstream settings on the cusp of the inclusive practices movement. Rojewski (1992) wrote, “All exemplary transition models stress the need to integrate students with disabilities into normalized environments” (p. 137). The recommendation was that students be included in general education classrooms, work settings, and postsecondary environments. *Resulting literature on Legal and Policy Based Transition Planning Requirements, Transition Steps, and Essential Components Leading to Post-secondary Education* all support access to general education settings (Davis et al., 2011; Hadley, 2018; Lee et al., 2015). Through IDEA 2004, federal law reiterates the need for students to receive services in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Though placement may vary based on unique student needs, students with SLD who are working toward transition goals should be included in the general education setting as much as possible to promote

their acquisition of skills useful to an adult world. This includes inclusion in vocational training, job sites, and the community at large.

When it comes to career and technical education classrooms, Theobald et al. (2019) emphasized the need for inclusion in a study of individuals with SLD. Students with SLD who spent more time in inclusive, general education settings graduated from high school on-time at a higher rate, were more likely to attend college, and were more likely to be employed when compared to individuals with SLD who spent less time in inclusive settings. Luftig and Muthert (2005) studied outcomes of 36 students (17 identified as having SLD) who were recent graduates of an inclusionary vocational and technology emphasis high school. Outcomes for students with SLD were overall positive when compared to outcomes for peers reported in other studies. Of note, 94% of the participants were employed, 47% were no longer living at home with their parents/guardians, 94% reported owning a car, and all reported registering to vote/voting. Although the study was small, these findings support the idea that inclusion in generalized settings has been beneficial to the adult outcomes of students with SLD.

In contrast, McCall (2015) conducted a qualitative study of four students’ transitions into college and expressed concern that three of the four did not receive specific transition services because they had been in inclusive settings which stressed academics. As McCall found, it is critical to ensure that transition continues to be a priority when students participate in inclusive settings. Least Restrictive Environment, a key provision in IDEA and key component in effective transition services, should not be interpreted as the environment in which the student receives the least amount of supports. Instead, supports—including those that support transition—should be pushed into the environments in which the student has the most access to the general curriculum, peers, and activities while receiving the supports necessary to meet their individualized needs. This is how we can merge transition supports into inclusive classrooms.

### Paid Work Experience

“Students receiving paid work experience are more likely to be employed following completion of high school than those not receiving it” (Rojewski, 1992, p. 137). This finding has continued to stand the test of time for all disability categories (Butterworth et al., 2011). *Literature from Legal and Policy-Based Transition Planning Requirements, Transition Steps and Essential Components Leading to Employment* all support this (Cleveland & Crow, 2013; Dong et al., 2016; Eisenman, 2003). Luftig and Muthert (2005) found that 53% of their employed

participants had continued in the same job since graduation with wages at or above minimum wage. The need to acquire vocational training and real work experience while in high school is important for students with SLD (Evers, 1996; Luftig & Muthert, 2005). Targeted goals toward achieving paid work experiences while in secondary settings should be included as a key component of any transition services. Students should be supported to participate in paid work experience as part of their transition planning and experiences.

### **Job-Seeking and Placement**

Not only should students with disabilities receive rigorous academic instruction, but students with disabilities should also receive instruction on how to locate and obtain employment. These skills can be beneficial not only for those seeking employment directly after high school but also for those choosing a post-secondary education route. *Literature from Legal and Policy Based Transition Planning Requirements, Transition Steps, Essential Componentes Leading to Post-Secondary Education and Essential Components Leading to Employment* all support this (King et al., 2005; Luftig & Muthert, 2005; Posthill & Roffman, 1991). Vocational Rehabilitation has been a primary agent included in transition planning and in supporting transition to employment and post-secondary education. Langi et al. (2017) found that specific types of VR service delivery may have more benefit than others in supporting positive outcomes in transition. Results of the Langi study suggested that VR services delivered through an enhanced, contract-based secondary transition program showed a greater effect in transitioning individuals with disabilities to obtain employment as compared to traditional transition services delivered by VR. Vocational training should also be considered while planning for post-secondary transition. Ji and colleagues (2015) found statistically significant differences in employment rates and income based on gender and ethnicity. College and occupational training were found to be positively correlated to successful employment (Ji et al., 2015). Adequate vocational preparation through college or occupational training for individuals with SLD can support successful employment, regardless of ethnicity or race, which is an important factor to be considered when designing transition services.

### **Active Family Involvement**

Family can provide added support that many students with disabilities require. In 1995, Morningstar et al. established that students with SLD tend to rely on their families as sources of support to successful transitions. Literature from all five themes of the current study supported the active participation of families (Carter et.

al., 2006; Carter et. al., 2009; McCall, 2015). Identified supports have included parents, relatives, friends, and teachers (i.e., those who know the student best and who have goals and outcomes they would like to see the student accomplish; McCall, 2015). Parents can be a resource for connections to post-secondary employment and education opportunities, while also providing various forms of other support (e.g., post-secondary supports, medical appointments/medication, advocacy; McCall, 2015). However, in interviews focused on females with disabilities, Hogensen et al. (2008) found a disconnect in the goals of the participants and what their parents/educators' thought were attainable and sensible. Working with families to identify a shared vision for student achievement through transitions is beneficial (Carter et al., 2009). Lee and colleagues (2015) recommended that school programs strengthen their relationships with parents to support their awareness of factors that can impact the educational persistence of students with SLD. Smith et al. (2002) recommended training for parents to assist their high school students to transition to life after high school, as families are a key component of students' transitions. Creating supports for active family involvement helps ensure that support will carry-over once the student exits the K-12 system.

### **Coordination of Data and Services**

Coordination of data and services includes active involvement of all parties (e.g., teachers, school support staff, adult service providers, post-secondary education, etc.), collaborative agreements to share information (including data), and resources that will benefit the student during the transition planning towards adulthood. Using a Transition Planning Inventory with teachers, parents, and students, Carter and colleagues (2009) found significant variability in identifying transition needs among the ratings of teachers, students, and families. By comparing ratings of these three groups on 160 students (101 with SLD), the research demonstrated the importance of including multiple perspectives in transition planning. A resulting recommendation was to encourage teachers, parents, and students to collaborate so that transition planning can be consistent and shared across groups. Sharing and coordinating data around needs is critical to effective transition.

In 1996, Dowdy recommended specific coordination steps shared between Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselors and Special Education Teachers for the education, training, and support of individuals with SLD in transition. These recommendations clearly outline the roles teachers and VR counselors should share and/or complete independently to support the transition

of students with SLD. Examples include things such as VR Counselors providing an inservice for secondary teachers; sharing educational and vocational assessment data; VR counselors visiting the classroom informally; teachers modeling appropriate employment behavior in the classroom and so on (Dowdy, 1996, p.146). While Dowdy (1996) provides an extensive list, many of these recommendations for coordination of data and services are still viable today in more current literature (Cavendish & Connor, 2018a; Madaus et al., 2010). These recommendations could be reconfigured to fit any adult agency, including postsecondary education agencies or other agencies involved in students' transition.

### **Follow-Up and/or Follow-Along**

Finally, to understand the impact that transition planning had on post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities, follow-up or follow-along measures should be used to determine additional support for those in post-secondary settings and to evaluate transition planning services (Rojewski, 1992). When examining recommendations made from literature in each of the five themes identified in this study, follow-up or follow-along supports and assessments are recommended (current literature citations). In 1991, Shapiro and Lentz found that the efficacy of vocational training programs may be impacted if follow-up is not continued post-completion. However, it is important to recognize that transition into adulthood has a much wider definition than just education and employment. Janus (2009) found that individuals with SLD may be employed but may not reach other adult outcomes, such as an independent residence, marriage, and children. Hogansen and colleagues (2008) found that gaining their own family was an important goal for their participants with disabilities, even though it was not a shared goal of participants' families and teachers. Connor (2012) found that two of the three participants with SLD had difficulty making friends in college. Longitudinal service supports may be beneficial in identifying additional needs to support transition post-graduation and in other areas outside of employment. This may be particularly salient for students with SLD who have shown success in employment but display some deficits in other quality of life domains.

### **New Developments**

Since 1990, two additional components have arisen as foci of successful transition for students with SLD (Farmer et al., 2015; McCall, 2015; Rojewski, 1992). Based on the results of the literature review, Self-Determination/Self-Advocacy and Evidence-Based Practices should be added

as key components addressed in the delivery of successful transition services for students with SLD.

### **Self-Determination/Self-Advocacy**

In Individualized Transition Planning, active participation is an important component of individualizing transition services (Davis et al., 2011; Hogansen et al., 2008; Trainor et al., 2016). However, effective and active participation can be difficult without having the proper skills and knowledge to support that participation. Learning self-determination skills that include self-advocacy is critical to authentic involvement in one's transition process. In the Hogansen et al. (2008) study, researchers found a large gap between what students and what parents/teachers saw as feasible goals for transitioning to adulthood. Self-determination skills, beginning with self-awareness, may be useful in narrowing that gap and/or in providing students the skills to advocate for higher expectations. Madaus et al. (2008) found it imperative that students be taught self-determination skills before leaving the school environment. Findings from this research demonstrated that adults with SLD are largely unaware of the workplace supports provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and lacked the self-determination skills to secure appropriate work accommodations. Similar to recommendations from Dowdy (1996), researchers recommended teaching students about their SLD while still in secondary settings in order to assist in their own self-advocacy in future decisions. Self-awareness as to the impact of their disability is key in producing informed decisions and advocating for necessary supports into adulthood.

Smith et al. (2002) recommended training for parents to teach their transitioning students how to move from other adults advocating for them to a position of self-advocacy as well as toward learning self-disclosure skills. Such skills are necessary for students to attain success when transitioning to adult environments and opportunities to practice self-determination should be provided as often as possible (Carter et al., 2006). Self-determination, including self-advocacy, should be seen as a key component to effective transition for students with SLD.

### **Toward Evidence-Based Practices**

There are many strategies and approaches to providing best practices for transition planning. As early as 1996, Dunn recommended empirical validation of "best practices" in transition through evidentiary support. Substantiated practices identified by Dunn were vocational training, parent involvement, and interagency collaboration. Practices with some evidentiary support

were social skills training, paid work experience, and individual transition plans and planning. Dunn (1996) recommended additional validation of each practice, specific to the needs of individuals with SLD. Similarly, King et al. (2005) identified six groups of transition strategies, each with specific skilled targets which have been used to enhance students' knowledge, skills, support, and direct involvement in social, productivity, and leisure roles (p. 203). Empirical validation may move those practices that were known as "best" since 1996 to evidence-based in 2020, assuming the empirical validation meets criteria.

While there is certainly a benefit to deeper narrative investigations and descriptive reviews/policy papers, the Institute of Education Sciences, Council for Exceptional Children, and other organizations utilize primarily quantitative measures to determine evidence-based practices (Cook et al., 2009). Quantitative research is the gold standard used for establishing evidence-based practices (Cook et al., 2009). Empirical studies could contribute to findings about causality and evidence-based practice.

### Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

First, when examining publications on the transition experiences and recommendations for students with SLD from the 1990s to today, many earlier recommendations remain relevant. There continues to be limited research on the postsecondary transition of students with SLD; specifically, there is not enough empirical research. Since the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2008, research, specifically into postsecondary experiences, has increased. However, most of that research has been qualitative and has not met the criteria to establish specific evidence-based practices or supports (Cook et al., 2009). Research is needed, specific to the transition experiences and needs of students with SLD, to help educators and families understand what works and what does not work for this population. Of the 18 quantitative studies identified in this review, most would benefit the field through replication. Evidence-based strategies are an important part of our educational world since the passing of the No Child Left Behind in 2001 (Cook et al., 2009). With the reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, evidence-based practices continue to be critical to education. This is no different for transition. While Cobb and colleagues (2013) have identified specific practices supported by evidence, those practices should be studied through their implementation with students with SLD. Many of the studies reviewed in the course of this analysis demonstrated that students with SLD had unique needs (Connor, 2012; Hogansen et al. 2008; Janus, 2009).

It is critical to ensure that the identified practices have evidence to support their implementation with students with SLD.

Funded model-demonstration projects are needed in order to allow educational and adult agency systems to develop and evaluate essential steps in supporting the transition of students with SLD. This research team did not find any models specific to this population. While generic models may be effective, focused study should confirm or disprove if those generic models work equally well for this population. Many of the models existing are predicated on the needs of individuals with Intellectual Disabilities (i.e., Project Search, Dual Enrollment TPSIDs). As demonstrated through the literature reviewed here, needs of students with SLD may. Further study should be conducted creating a tailored transition process designed to consider the specific needs of this population. Additionally, Blalock's (1996) teaming models offer the opportunity to explore supports within individual transition planning, community, regional, and statewide transition supports. Exploration should be conducted to identify where these teams are in operation and how effectively they are meeting their described function. Based on that data, new models stemming from advocacy agencies or other outside education groups may be beneficial to put in place to support transition resources and structures in schools.

Social skills in the form of friendships, work colleagues, and romantic relationships were mentioned in several studies and were discussed in key components (Connor, 2012; Hogansen et al., 2008; Janus, 2009; Rojewski, 1992). In reality, both relationships and social skills transcend work, home, and recreational life. However, no studies were identified that directly evaluated social skills in the areas of developing and maintaining those specific types of relationships for students with SLD. Efforts should be made to promote the study and development of key strategies supporting transition to adulthood in these areas.

A similar recommendation is made for access and participation in community settings or with community resources. Informal family supports were mentioned in this area (Carter et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2015; Morningstar, et al., 1995; Smith et al., 2002), but no formal supports were discussed. Participation in the community and the ability to access resources within the community is a critical transition skill. However, no research was identified directly addressing the needs of individuals with SLD as they transition into the community. Direct research is needed to identify necessary planning and supports specific to this population.

The role of student variability requiring individualization has been identified as a critical area in transition planning (Posthill & Roffman, 1991).

Furthermore, differences existed across gender, race, and ethnicity. Studies demonstrated the need for educators to become more culturally competent in understanding how transition goals may vary based on culturally informed preferences. While teacher training in this area is important, additional research is needed to better inform what types of cultural education and training would be useful to inform the transition process. Family involvement continues to be identified as a key factor. Investigating how families from culturally diverse backgrounds participate in and support their student's background would be beneficial in preparing teachers to better support students from culturally diverse backgrounds.

No articles were found that discussed a specific sequence of steps in creating a transition plan. This finding, in and of itself, is critical. No research demonstrations of effective transition planning guides for individuals and families with SLD were identified in peer-reviewed literature. Generalized how-to guides were found in textbooks and websites; however, few studies exist focused specifically on the essential and sequential steps of transition planning for individuals with SLD and their families. Additional studies testing the use of sequential planning steps in the planning of transition activities for individuals with SLD and their families are needed.

Finally, researchers noted that literature seemed to align with policy cycles and the focus of that legislation. The review included articles beginning with the year 1990, the year transition was added into IDEA. Fifteen articles were identified during the 1990s. Beginning in 2001, a second phase of literature was noted, concurrent with the writing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 and its signature into law in January, 2002. NCLB maintained a focus on graduation, prioritizing academic achievement and school accountability for that achievement over other types of educational experiences. Fourteen articles were published from 2002-2008. Finally, reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2008 focused on increasing participation in higher education by individuals with disabilities. While the Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) were not programs focused on students with SLD, they had a broad impact on supporting transition, self-advocacy, and resources for any student with a disability transitioning to postsecondary environments. Twenty six articles were identified from 2009-forward. These groupings of literature may demonstrate a connection between policy and research. Although not the purpose of this review, a broad exploration might establish a link between policy and publication trends, thereby emphasizing the need for prioritizing transition in policy.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations to report. First, this study is predicated on questions specifically about students with SLD and their transitions. This was not intended to imply that the larger body of transition research does not also apply to students with SLD, rather it was to look specifically at the transition work focused on students with SLD. A larger body of general transition literature may have included richer and more current literature to enhance the literature provided here. Second, this study is focused on transition practices and measurement within the U.S. Broadening to international work may have included more or different practices specifically used with students with SLD in other areas. Finally, dissertations were not included in this work. A close examination of dissertations may have yielded additional, informative results.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this analysis was to systematically review research specific to the transition of students with SLD in the U.S. and report identified key components of that process and identifiable gaps within the larger topic of transition in order to offer information useful for practitioners, families, and others that may be supporting those students with SLD during transition. Overall, 54 studies were analyzed, with publication years ranging from 1990-present day (spanning just under 30 years). Within these three decades, few findings provide certainty about the transition process for this population of students. In fact, the key components provided by Rojewski (1992) are still valid today. In 1996, Blalock and Patton summed up critical themes in transition planning as follows: a) student participation is crucial, b) efforts should be made to get families involved in the transition process, c) transition efforts should start early, d) transition planning must be sensitive to cultural factors, and e) transition planning must be comprehensive. Blalock's critical themes could be written as current findings from this literature analysis. We must make specific plans of actions to address recommended needs so that in 2051 we are not repeating these same findings and recommendations again. Educators, and families can utilize the findings of this analysis to support successful transition planning experiences that meet the unique needs of students with SLD.

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