

Transition to Employment: Role of the Family in Career Development

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigated the role of the family in career development and postschool employment outcomes for young adults with learning disabilities. Using a multiple-case study design, the authors examined a set of family structural and process variables. Fifty-nine in-depth interviews were conducted with young adults, parents, and school staff. Family structure was not directly linked to employment outcomes, but family socioeconomic status was related to initial career decision making and vocational identity development. Family process variables, including family relationships, involvement, support and advocacy, career aspirations, and intentional career-related activities worked in combination to form 3 patterns of family interaction labeled (a) advocates, (b) protectors, and (c) removed. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.*

Navigating the transition from school to the workforce often is a challenging process for adolescents and young adults with disabilities. Although much effort has been placed into career development and transition programs, the employment rate for young adults with disabilities is still substantially below that of youth in the general population (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). Over the last 15 years, many authors have focused on describing the role of school and community programs in better

preparing youth with disabilities for positive postschool employment outcomes (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997). There are, however, relatively few studies that explore the role that families play in influencing career aspirations, providing career-related planning activities, and ultimately shaping postschool employment outcomes for young adults with disabilities.

Families have a clear influence on the career development process for all youth, often having a greater impact than peers (Penick & Jepsen, 1992; Whiston & Keller, 2004). In their comprehensive

review of the literature, Whiston and Keller found that adolescent career development was influenced by two interdependent family contextual factors: (a) family structural variables (e.g., parents' education and occupation, socioeconomic status), and (b) family process variables (e.g., family relationships, parental aspirations, family support and advocacy; Ferguson, Ferguson, & Jones, 1988; Newman, 2004; Young & Friesen, 1992). In the following section we briefly summarize relevant literature in these two domains.

FAMILY CONTEXT

FAMILY STRUCTURE

Family structure is a broad concept that includes several demographic variables, including parents' education, occupation, and socioeconomic status (SES). Family structural variables play a role in influencing career development (Whiston & Keller, 2004). Family SES seems to be an especially strong predictor of later access to career opportunities and options (Blustein et al., 2002). Youth from higher status backgrounds often aspire to higher status or more prestigious occupations (Fouad & Brown, 2000; Jacobs, Karen, & McClelland, 1991) and have higher occupational expectations (Rojewski & Kim, 2003; Solorzano, 1992). One possible explanation for this effect of SES on career development, beyond lower levels of parent education and occupational attainment, is differential access to relational resources. Blustein et al. (2002) reported that parents in higher SES families are more likely to provide both instrumental (e.g., job leads, career information) and emotional support, whereas young adults from lower SES families experience a greater number of relational disruptions and less structured involvement from parents in the career development process.

The influence of parents as role models for educational and occupational attainment may be especially salient for young adults with disabilities. In a study that examined student perspectives of family involvement in transition planning, many of the students with disabilities expressed career interests that were similar to those of a close family member. These initial career interests typically were not based on formal conversations

or interactions with the family, but simply on the presence of "informal role models" (Morningstar, 1997; Morningstar, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 1995). Parental employment patterns also play a role for young women with learning disabilities entering the workforce, influencing both occupational goals and expectations (Lindstrom, Benz, & Doren, 2004). This qualitative study documented the importance of family and childhood experiences in providing an initial exposure to the world of work. Young women with working parents were likely to develop positive work habits and also to be introduced to a variety of potential career options (Lindstrom et al.).

FAMILY PROCESS

Overall, family process variables appear to have a more powerful influence on career development than family structural variables (Whiston & Keller, 2004). Young and Friesen (1992) described the family role in career exploration and planning, and concluded that psychological variables such as support and expectations may influence adolescent career development to a greater degree than family demographic variables. These complex patterns of family interactions, including parenting style and parental attitudes, also influence adolescent vocational identity development, which includes interests, goals, and values related to career planning (Lopez, 1989; Penick & Jepsen, 1992).

Family expectations and aspirations also play a role in influencing career development and ultimately postschool employment outcomes (Blustein, Phillips, Jobin-Davis, Finkelberg, & Roarke, 1997; Gallivan-Fenlon, 1994; Symanski, 1994). Turner and Lapan (2002) found perceived parental support to be a significant predictor of the career self-efficacy of adolescents in the general population. There is also evidence that family expectations influence the vocational goals, self-efficacy, and achievement of young adults with disabilities. In one study of 20 families, most parents expressed a desire for their child with a disability to live outside of the home, work in the community, and earn at least minimum wage—yet in each case, significantly fewer imagined that these outcomes would actually occur (McNair & Rusch, 1991). Lindstrom and Benz (2002)

examined employment outcomes for young women with learning disabilities and reported that high parental expectations were linked to later attainment of career goals. In addition, a recent study examining the involvement of families in the educational development of secondary school age students with disabilities (Newman, 2004) found that a majority of youth with disabilities have parents who expect them to succeed in entering adult roles after high school. Most parents in this nationally representative sample expected their children to graduate from high school with a regular diploma, enter paid employment, achieve financial independence, and live independently. However, fewer than two thirds of parents expected that their child would transition into postsecondary education or training. Postschool expectations were also generally lower for youth with disabilities from lower income households (Newman).

Family interactions are another key component of family process. Young, Friesen, and Pearson (1988) examined the specific behaviors and activities occurring within the family context that impact career decision making. When asked about the events or behaviors they used to assist in their adolescents' career development, a sample of 207 parents reported that the most critical interpersonal interactions they provided were helping and protecting, affirming and understanding, and watching and managing (Young et al., 1988). Additional evidence points to the importance of intentional career-related activities undertaken by parents. Blustein et al.'s (2002) qualitative analyses found that young adults from high-SES backgrounds were particularly helped by parental encouragement of career exploration, guidance in career planning, and the provision of relevant job leads. In families with a child with a disability, however, this type of intentional career-related planning is often not present (Gallivan-Fenlon, 1994; Lindstrom & Benz, 2002; Morningstar et al., 1995).

Although current literature has confirmed the importance of family structure and process variables in influencing career development, the exact nature and extent of family influences has yet to be determined and fully described (Blustein, Juntunen, & Worthington, 2000; Whiston & Keller, 2004). There is a need to capture the

perceptions of young adults and parents regarding which family factors are most influential and how these factors contribute to postschool employment outcomes. In addition, there are relatively few studies that focus on the influence of family variables on career development for young adults with disabilities. This investigation extends our current knowledge base by carefully examining the impact and interaction of family structure and family process variables on career development for youth with disabilities. By utilizing family contextual factors described in the existing career development literature, we were able to delve deeper into the complexities of family structure and family process variables and examine these factors within the unique lens of transition for young adults with disabilities.

The purpose of this study was to describe the role of the family in shaping career development and postschool outcomes for a sample of young adults with learning disabilities. We sought to answer two main research questions: (a) How are family structural variables (e.g., parental occupation, education, and SES) related to career development and postschool outcomes for young adults with learning disabilities? (b) How are family process variables (e.g., family involvement, support and advocacy, and career expectations) related to career development and postschool outcomes for young adults with learning disabilities?

METHODS

We used a multiple-method, multiple-case study design to examine the influence of family structure and process variables on career development and postschool employment outcomes for young adults with learning disabilities. Case study research involves a thorough examination of factors within the context of a single case (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). This methodology is ideally suited to developing an in-depth understanding of a complex process. A multiple-method, multiple-case approach includes multiple sources of evidence and multiple perspectives, permitting the use of a triangulation strategy that increases the overall validity and reliability of findings (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Patton, 2002; Yin). By developing retrospective

case studies that examined family interactions over time, we were able to document the influence of family structure and the patterns of family interaction that seemed to influence career development and postschool outcomes. Qualitative methods also allowed us to give voice to the unique perspectives of young adults and their family members as they reflected on the opportunities and challenges faced during the process of transitioning from high school into adult roles in the community (Brantlinger et al.).

SAMPLE

Our sampling strategy was specifically designed to support the purpose of this study—to conduct an in-depth case study examination of the family structural and process variables associated with postschool employment outcomes for young adults with learning disabilities. This sample was not intended to be representative of the entire population of youth with learning disabilities. Instead we utilized a combination of qualitative sampling methods described by Patton (2002) as mixed purposeful sampling. Our methods combined two specific sampling techniques: criterion and stratified purposeful sampling.

Criterion sampling consists of selecting cases that meet certain predetermined criterion. This sampling technique allows for quality assurance in the interpretation of results due to specific “knowns” about the sample under investigation. For the purpose of this study, we selected individuals who (a) had a documented learning disability and received special education services during high school, (b) participated in a school-to-work transition program for at least 1 year, (c) exited high school (either graduated or dropped out) between 1996 and 2001, and (d) were employed at some point during the first 3 to 5 years after high school. Stratified purposeful sampling allows for recruiting particular subgroups of interest to facilitate comparisons. Thus, we selected a sample with near equal numbers of young women and men with learning disabilities. In addition, we recruited individuals who achieved a variety of postschool employment outcomes including some young adults who were working in low-wage and/or low-skilled jobs or were currently unemployed. Findings yielded from very different out-

comes allow high-quality descriptions for each case that are useful for documenting the uniqueness and important shared patterns that occurred across cases (Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995)

Young Adults With Disabilities. We recruited our initial pool of participants by sharing information about the study with a statewide network of high school special education teachers and transition specialists. School staff were then asked to nominate young adults with learning disabilities who had been out of school for 3 to 5 years. After completing an initial informed consent process, only those participants who met the criterion and stratified sampling plan were included in the final sample. Table 1 provides complete demographic information for our case study participants. This study included 13 young adults with learning disabilities ranging in age from 21 to 27 years of age. Participants included 8 women and 5 men who had attended high school in 12 different rural, midsized, and metropolitan communities. Most participants were from a nonminority background, typical of the students in the state in which the study occurred. School-leaving status varied across our participants. Eight participants graduated with a standard high school diploma, 3 graduated with a modified diploma, and 2 dropped out during their senior year of high school. SES varied across the sample.

Key Informants. We obtained consent from participants to interview certain individuals who could provide additional perspectives on the role of the family in the career development process. For each participant, we interviewed one or both parents and at least one high school teacher or transition specialist who was familiar with the young adult’s background, services, and outcomes. Key informants provided alternative views of events that had been related in interviews or provided in documents. This allowed us to triangulate and further corroborate information collected across multiple perspectives (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Patton, 2002).

DATA COLLECTION

Multiple methods and multiple sources of data were used to further corroborate, elaborate, and verify information collected (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003). The primary method of data collection

TABLE 1*Participant Demographic Information*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age at PSI</i>	<i>Primary and Secondary Disability</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Community Locale</i>	<i>Diploma Status</i>
Tracy	F	25	LD, hearing loss	East Indian	Rural	Standard
Grace	F	22	LD	Caucasian	Midsized	Modified
Julie	F	22	LD	Caucasian	Rural	Standard
Dan	M	27	LD	Caucasian	Metro	Standard
Susan	F	21	LD	Caucasian	Metro	Modified
Gary	M	23	LD	Caucasian	Rural	Standard
Warren	M	24	LD	Caucasian	Metro	Dropped out
Kelly	F	23	LD	Caucasian	Rural	Standard
Patricia	F	22	LD	Native American	Midsized	Dropped out
Sharon	F	22	LD, ADD	Caucasian	Metro	Standard
Linda	F	23	LD	Caucasian	Rural	Standard
Bill	M	25	LD	Caucasian	Rural	Standard
Kyle	M	22	LD, ADHD	Caucasian	Metro	Modified

Note. PSI = postschool interview; F = female; M = male; LD = learning disability; ADD = attention deficit disorder; ADHD = attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

was in-depth, semistructured interviews with participants and other key informants. Secondary methods and sources included review of records from special education and vocational rehabilitation files, family background questionnaire, on-site observations at the workplace and home, and field notes documenting all contacts and interactions with participants and other key informants. In order to organize the various sources of data and collect consistent information across cases, we developed a written case study protocol (Yin) that included structured interview protocols, field note and observation forms, and a document review form.

Interview Protocols. Our research team developed structured interview protocols by first identifying a set of key indicators from the transition and career development literature. We used those common indicators as a framework to develop three different interview protocols for young adults, parents, and school staff interviews. The following major topics were addressed across all three interviews protocols: (a) individual characteristics and motivation, (b) family and childhood experiences, (c) high school services and supports,

and (d) workplace and other postschool experiences. (See Figure 1 for a set of sample questions.)

Interview Procedures. Data collection occurred over 9 months. We interviewed each young adult twice: one interview focused on childhood and school experiences, whereas the second interview asked participants to describe postschool opportunities, barriers, and experiences. In addition, we made home visits to conduct interviews with one or both parents, and we interviewed a high school staff member for each participant. During this phase of the study, we completed a total of 59 interviews including 26 young adult interviews, 18 parent interviews, and 15 school staff interviews. Each interview lasted 90 min to 2 hr. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in an average of 30 pages of text per transcript and 75 to 100 pages of single-spaced text per case.

Secondary Sources. In addition to the interview data, we asked each family to complete a written background questionnaire to collect consistent information about family structural variables including education level, employment information, and family income. Members of the

FIGURE 1

Sample Interview Questions (Parent Interview)

Family Background

Can you tell me what you and your spouse (if appropriate) did for a living while _____ was growing up?

- What did you do for a living?
- What were the positive or negative aspects of this (job, career, other situation)?
- What did your spouse (partner) do for a living?

Now we'll talk about your family situation while _____ was growing up.

- Where did you live when _____ was in high school?
- Tell me a little bit about your relationship with _____ while he/she was growing up.
- Did he/she have any brothers or sisters?
- Describe _____'s relationship with his/her brothers and sisters while growing up.
- Did any other family members have a disability? What type?
- Which family member do you think affected _____ the most (positively or negatively)? How?

Career Preparation

In what ways would you say you (or other family members) were involved in helping _____ decide/prepare for a job after high school?

- What do you think you (or other family members) did or said that helped him/her the most?
- Thinking back, would you (or other family members) do anything differently?

Did _____ have any role models that he/she could look up to that influenced his/her career choices or other life decisions?

- Who was this person(s)?
- How did he/she influence _____ ?

research team also completed an extensive file review of special education and vocational rehabilitation records for each participant, including an analysis of high school courses completed, grades, attendance data, high school graduation status, and postschool services received. We also compiled field notes documenting all contacts and interactions with participants, school and rehabilitation staff, and family members. On-site observations, field notes, and file reviews were recorded onto structured forms allowing us to develop a clear audit trail and ensure comparable information across cases (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Yin, 2003).

DATA ANALYSIS

We analyzed the interview transcripts following a multiple-stage process recommended by Miles

and Huberman (1994). First we developed a set of broad descriptive codes based on relevant family and career development literature. We used these descriptive codes, such as "career aspirations" or "family background," to assign concrete labels to individual passages of text. To ensure intercoder reliability, all transcripts were coded by two of the co-authors following a common coding scheme. First, interviews were coded independently. Second, coders met in pairs to confirm the assignment of codes and discuss additional codes that may have emerged from the interview data. If there were any disagreements, coders reached consensus through discussion or reconnected with the respondent to clarify information. All coded transcripts were then entered into a qualitative database. By using the common coding scheme as an organizing structure, we were able to then

summarize and compare information from multiple sources and informants within each case.

Next we used the coded data, observations, field notes, and file review information to develop an in-depth case report for each participant. These individual case reports included four major components: (a) narrative description of family characteristics and relationships, (b) summary of in-school experiences including family involvement in school activities and services, (c) overview of postschool experiences including current employment and independent living status, and (d) a set of summary tables describing influencing factors and linkages to postschool outcomes. For each case study participant, we also developed a timeline of key events and job history beginning in high school through the time of the postschool interviews. Individual case reports included sufficient quotes and field note descriptions to provide evidence for our interpretations and conclusions (Brantlinger et al., 2005). The entire research team met to review and validate individual case reports, discuss influences on postschool outcomes, and develop initial themes. These team meetings served as a means of investigator triangulation (Patton, 2002) allowing us to verify and confirm our initial within case findings. This initial within case analysis produced several key findings that led us to focus on an in-depth examination of family variables.

In the second phase of analysis, we utilized explanatory methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to focus on family structure and process variables across cases. During this phase, we conducted a second level of coding and analysis, returning to the interview transcripts to identify specific family structural variables and family interactions that may have impacted either initial career decision making or postschool outcomes. After completing this second level of detailed analysis, we created family data tables for each individual summarizing the key variables and patterns of influence. Cross-case data summaries were developed to determine the extent to which certain characteristics influenced postschool employment outcomes similarly or uniquely across our cases. Through this process, we observed that certain family process variables worked in combination to form three distinct patterns of family interaction. We reviewed confirming and disconfirming evidence to further confirm

the three patterns of family involvement. Multiple team members provided input and reviewed the cross-case explanatory findings in order to triangulate and verify our results.

In addition to analyzing the qualitative data, we also completed a brief analysis of family structural variables using information from the family background questionnaire. We used the Nakao-Treas Socioeconomic Index (Nakao & Treas, 1994) to evaluate the prestige or status associated with parental occupational attainment and to assign each family a socioeconomic index (SEI) score, meant to approximate their relative socioeconomic status. The Nakao-Treas index is based on ratings of occupational characteristics from the 1980 U.S. Census codes. In this index, SEI scores can range from 17 (e.g., sewing machine operator) to 97 (e.g., physician), with a mean score of 52.5. Consistent with previous research (Blustein et al., 2002; Lauver & Jones, 1991; McWhirter, 1997), a family SEI score was determined based on the highest occupational score for family members providing financial support to the household. SEI scores for our sample ranged from 27 to 80 (see Table 2). For purposes of further analysis, we rank ordered the cases and compared patterns of postschool outcomes with family SEI scores.

We observed that certain family process variables worked in combination to form three distinct patterns of family interaction.

RESULTS

These in-depth case studies of young adults with learning disabilities provided a unique opportunity to examine both family structure and process variables in relation to career decision making and postschool employment outcomes. The findings from this study were consistent with prior literature that found family process variables and patterns of family interactions to have a greater influence on postschool employment outcomes than family structural characteristics (Whiston & Keller, 2004; Young & Friesen, 1992). Although family SES seemed to set the context for initial career decision making and vocational identity development, the fundamental difference in out-

TABLE 2
Family Structure Variables

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Mother's Education Level</i>	<i>Mother's Occupation</i>	<i>Father's Education Level</i>	<i>Father's Occupation</i>	<i>Family SEI^a</i>
Tracy	Bachelor's degree	High school biology teacher	Some college	Computer operations director	80
Grace	Some college	Retail sales	Some college	Contractor (self-employed)	50
Julie	< High school	Homemaker	Trade school: diesel mechanics	Diesel mechanics supervisor	49
Dan	Some college	Homemaker	High school diploma	Newspaper pressman	41
Susan	High school diploma	Personal care for people with disabilities	Stepdad: < High school	Security guard	39
Gary	High school diploma	Housekeeper, private residences	< High school	Delivery driver for appliances	35
Warren	Some college	Meat cutter			33
Kelly	< High school	Homemaker	< High school	Installs flooring (self-employed)	30
Patricia	Some college	School bus driver			30
Sharon	Grandmother: Some college	Grandmother: Mental health worker			29
Linda	Some college	Certified nursing assistant			29
Bill	High school diploma	Hospital food service worker	< High school	Disabled	29
Kyle	Unknown	Manufacturing	Some college	Unemployed	27

Note: Blank cells indicate parent was not in the home during the participant's high school years.

^aSEI scores based on the Nakao-Treas Socioeconomic Index (Nakao & Treas, 1994).

comes across our cases was related to patterns of family interactions. In this section we present our cross case findings, organized by our two major research questions. In the discussion we describe the interaction between structural and process variables.

FINDINGS: ROLE OF FAMILY STRUCTURE

We were interested in understanding the role of family structural variables in relation to postschool employment outcomes for a sample of youth with learning disabilities. The following structural variables were included in our interview protocols and family background questionnaire:

(a) mother's occupation, (b) mother's education level, (c) father's occupation, (d) father's education level, and (e) family SES. Table 2 provides specific information on family structural variables for all study participants. Families are rank ordered from high to low SEI scores. Table 3 includes participant postschool employment and independent living outcomes. For purposes of further comparison, we placed the participants on a continuum of highest to lowest average weekly wages.

Upon initial examination of the data, we found that family structural characteristics did not seem to be directly linked to postschool

TABLE 3*Participant Postschool Outcomes*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Family SEI</i>	<i>Pattern of Family Interaction</i>	<i>Living Status</i>	<i>Employment Status</i>	<i>Job Title</i>	<i>Weekly Wages</i>
Bill	29	Removed	Independent: with partner	Full time	Auto body technician	\$620
Kelly	30	Advocates	Independent: with spouse	Full time	Wax mold	\$577
Julie	49	Advocates	Independent: with partner	Part time	Hairdresser	\$571
Warren	33	Removed	Independent: with spouse	Full time	Custodian, school district	\$540
Patricia	30	Advocates	Independent: lives on fishing boat	Full time	Lead processor on fishing vessel	\$518
Linda	29	Removed	Independent: with spouse and three children	Part time	Grocery courtesy clerk	\$410
Grace	50	Protectors	Independent	Full time	Food services worker	\$400
Kyle	27	Removed	Independent: with roommates	Full time	Custodian	\$380
Gary	35	Protectors	With parents	Full time	Custodian, retail store	\$380
Sharon	29	Removed	With grandmother	Part time	Human resources clerk	\$321
Susan	39	Removed	With parents	Part time	Child care worker	\$210
Dan	41	Protectors	With parents	Part time	Food Service	\$100
Tracy	80	Protectors	Independent: with partner and child	Unemployed	N/A	N/A

Note. SEI = socioeconomic index. NA = not applicable (This individual was not employed at the time of the postschool interview; therefore, no information was provided on job title or weekly wages).

employment outcomes. The interview data did not provide any supporting evidence directly linking parental occupation or education to career goals or employment status. Family SES in isolation also did not seem to be linked to post high school employment status. We noted that the set of participants from the upper end of the SES continuum experienced widely divergent employment outcomes: several were unemployed whereas one (Julie) completed a postsecondary vocational training program and is employed in a living wage occupation. (See Table 3.)

Low-SES Families. Although family SES was not linked directly to postschool employment, we did discover some important patterns when we focused our analysis on the 6 young adults from

the lowest SES families. These families were assigned SEI scores below 32, equivalent to one standard deviation or more below the national mean (See Table 2). Only three of the parents from this group had attended any postsecondary education and several of them were high school dropouts. Lack of formal education is often associated with lower wage occupations (Blustein et al., 2002; Wilson, 1996) and these families were no exception. Many of the parents in this group held a series of low-wage service jobs or had periods of unemployment that contributed to family instability.

These participants reported that growing up in a low-SES family had an effect on career development and vocational identity. It seemed that

family status set the context for these young adults with learning disabilities as they prepared to enter the workforce. There were two primary themes that emerged from our analysis of the participants from the low-SES group. First, the young adults in this group were often expected to make ongoing contributions to family functioning. Second, although low SES can often limit career aspirations and outcomes (Blustein et al., 2000) in these cases, family economic instability sparked a desire in many of the youth to “be different” than their parents.

Contributions to the Family. Patterns of low family income and job instability often placed these youth in a position of making important and early contributions to bolster family functioning. All of the youth in this group were employed while they were still in high school. Several of the participants began working as early as age 14, and they were often asked to either assist with basic family expenses or use their wages to purchase their own personal items. Linda’s family is typical of this pattern. Her mother worked in a series of minimum wage positions while Linda held food service and child-care jobs during high school. When the field interviewer asked Linda’s mother how much financial support she was able to provide to her daughter, she replied, “Actually it’s been the other way around. She has been more financially supportive than I have. I’ve been out of work off and on . . . and so I know she does eventually want to get out on her own but she’s worried about being able to take care of Mom.” As a group, these youth experienced early entry into the workforce, responding to the immediate and pressing financial needs of their families.

In addition to the financial contribution to the family, all of the young women from low-SES families were asked to assume a caretaking role with either younger siblings or other family members. One young woman cared for an ailing grandfather in addition to working part time and attending high school. During high school another young woman was expected to help her mother with nighttime care for twin infants. Patricia’s mother described her daughter’s role as a caretaker for two elementary age siblings:

It was a difficult time. What made it worse was the fact that I was working two jobs and

sometimes I wasn’t there in the evenings because I’d be working delivering pizzas or chicken in the evenings. So a lot of times it was ten or eleven o’clock before I got home at night. So they were old enough to be alone, but they had their battles. One time her little brother had done something to her and so she was chasing him and ran into a wall and broke her hand.

Although these early work experiences and family caretaking responsibilities sometimes created hardships, there were also benefits related to career development and maturity. In a certain sense, young adults from low-income families “grew up” earlier than typical adolescents by taking on a variety of adult roles as teenagers. In retrospect, both parents and young adults believed that these contributions instilled a sense of responsibility, taught time management skills, and promoted the development of a strong work ethic during the adolescent years.

Family Role Models: Desire to Be Different. Although low family SES can often limit career aspirations and outcomes (Fouad & Brown, 2000; Whiston & Keller, 2004), the majority of young adults in this group articulated a strong desire to succeed or achieve beyond family norms. Instead of serving as positive role models for achievement, parents in the low-SES group sometimes came to symbolize undesirable career and life outcomes. When asked if she had any role models in high school, Patricia replied, “My mom. She’s my role model to make myself NOT be like her. You know, not to be a single mom and have to work two jobs.” One participant noted that his vocational goals were determined by being the “opposite” of his family, whereas another young woman from this group believed as stated:

I think that most of it has got to do with knowing that if I don’t strive to be the best then I’m going to be like my mom . . . working two jobs, miserable until something better comes along and it doesn’t seem like it ever comes along. That’s not my idea of life. I just don’t want to have anything to do with that.

Overall, the young adults in the low-SES group made the transition from high school to the workforce despite this lack of positive family role models. They were motivated to enter the

workforce and seemed determined to achieve more financial stability than their families. Bill, who is currently employed full time as an auto body technician, commented on his ability to rise above his family background:

Well I'm not a doctor or a lawyer, but I'm doing pretty good for basically what I was. When you start out in a trailer park, there's only certain levels that most people get to out of trailer parks. So I'm doing pretty good.

Low family SES and patterns of job instability set an important context for initial career decision making and vocational identity. Rather than only serving as a limiting influence, growing up in low-SES homes became a motivation for these young adults with disabilities to pursue steady employment and create stable life outcomes for themselves.

FINDINGS: COMPONENTS OF FAMILY PROCESS

We found that family process variables and patterns of family interaction influenced career development and postschool employment outcomes for the entire sample of young adults with learning disabilities. In our second level analysis of the data, we found supporting evidence to confirm the importance of the following components of family process: (a) early and ongoing relationships with parents, (b) level of family involvement in school and other activities, (c) family support and advocacy, (d) parental career aspirations and expectations, and (e) presence of intentional career-related activities. These five components were verified through in-depth interview data from parents, young adults with disabilities, and school staff members. In this section, we provide descriptive cross-case data for each of our five key components of family process.

Family Relationships. The majority of young adults in this study described positive relationships with their families over time. Parents and youth often depicted "close knit" families, with fond memories of special family activities and warm interactions during childhood. Tracy's mother described her initial connection with her daughter as, "excellent when she was really little. She was such an affectionate little girl. She always

wanted to hold my hand when we went any place and she would do my hair at night." Family relations sometimes became more strained during adolescence, as parents set limits and struggled with providing guidance to young adults who were seeking greater levels of independence and decision making. In a few cases (mainly young men), the stress of the transition led to complete separation and disengagement from the family. Kyle's special education teacher recalled that "his mom just came out and said that Kyle drives her crazy . . . he's the least favorite of her five children." We noted that these negative or strained family relationships were more common for male than female participants.

Family Involvement. Family participation and levels of involvement in school and other day-to-day activities varied across the sample. Two markedly different types of family involvement were evident. About half of the families (53%) were highly involved in providing supervision and structured activities during childhood and into adolescence. Grace's mother remembered that "we were at every event, every school activity and so I volunteered at the school at least one day a week for each of the three kids." This pattern of participation continued into the young adult years with parents highly involved in making decisions about independent living activities, personal relationships, and postschool employment and training opportunities. The remainder of the parents was less involved in either in-school or postschool activities. These parents tended to not attend school events or meetings and sometimes did not participate in daily family routines. Warren's family typified this low level of involvement. He remarked, "It's the way I grew up. My mom always worked. She was pretty much never around."

Family Support and Advocacy. Although more than half of these families displayed high levels of involvement, high participation did not always equate to active family support or advocacy for the young adults' career interests and transition needs. We identified only three families that provided specific supportive activities in either home, high school, or adult services settings. Julie's family perhaps provides the strongest example of family support. When Julie was diagnosed with mononucleosis during adolescence, her mother

insisted that the school provide her with a home-based tutor so she could continue to meet her academic requirements and graduate with her class. Within the rehabilitation services agency, Julie's mother pushed the assigned rehabilitation counselor to provide assistance for Julie's self-identified career goal. "We told him what she (Julie) wanted to do and that she needed to be financially independent."

In contrast, the other parents in this study were either unable to provide support or did not act as advocates for the youth as they transitioned from high school into adult status. Some parents offered vague encouragement for achieving postschool goals, providing comments such as, "It may be a struggle but if you really want it you've got to try," whereas many others were simply uninvolved. In one case, lack of family support clearly impacted a young man's opportunities for postschool success. At the age of 17, Warren's stepfather forced him to move out of the family home because he was being "obnoxious and disrespectful." Warren lived on the streets for a while and dropped out of high school during that time period.

Career Aspirations and Expectations. Across the entire sample, families held limited or vague career aspirations. Even the parents who provided high levels of support and advocacy did not promote the concept of college attendance or encourage opportunities for entrance into highly skilled occupations. Patricia's mother did not believe her daughter could be successful in postsecondary education, noting that "She talked about going to college but I didn't think it was going to be feasible for her because I knew she had a disability." Kelly's father echoed this low level of family expectations, explaining, "We were raised like our parents were, probably to work in mills and factories. I think that's all we ever thought of for Kelly." The majority of these parents described very low or vague career aspirations. Gary's mother hoped he would have a "normal life." Linda's mother wanted her to "be happy with what she is doing," whereas Dan's father expected only that his son would "be a productive member of society, keep his nose clean and his mouth shut."

Intentional Career-Related Activities. Intentional career-related activities include career explo-

ration, career planning, and the provision of specific information about job options and opportunities. With a few notable exceptions, the families in this study did not provide any intentional career planning activities during the school-to-work transition process. Only three families were actively involved in helping young adults plan and make decisions about future training and career options. For example, Julie remembered that she and her mother visited several beauty schools and discussed pros and cons of this type of training program. Kelly and Patricia's parents also were involved in ongoing conversations about a variety of employment options. In contrast, the remainder of the families did not engage in this interactive planning process and youth were often left to find jobs on their own. Grace typified this lack of targeted career interactions. When asked about how her family helped her with career and postschool planning she remembered:

They didn't really talk about it (career options). They didn't really discuss it because all the things I wanted to do were going to be hard for me to accomplish. I mean they said I could do anything I tried but we didn't really talk about it much.

Given this lack of specific career-related activities or provision of job-related information, young adults were often left to their own devices to obtain jobs and pursue career goals and interests.

FINDINGS: PATTERNS OF FAMILY INTERACTION

These five dimensions of family process worked in combination to create three patterns of family interaction, which played a role in career development and postschool outcomes for the young adults in this study. Across the 13 case studies, three distinct patterns of family interactions emerged, which are summarized in Table 4. As indicated in Table 4, we characterized the three family patterns as (a) advocates, (b) protectors, and (c) removed. Participants in the advocate group tended to enter higher wage and/or higher skill occupations, whereas youth in the protectors group did not fare as well. Individuals in the removed group all transitioned into some type of employment, with the men in this group tending

TABLE 4*Patterns of Family Interaction*

<i>Components of Family Process</i>	<i>Advocates (Patricia, Kelly, Julie)</i>	<i>Protectors (Grace, Gary, Dan, Tracy)</i>	<i>Removed (Bill, Warren, Kyle, Linda, Sharon, Susan)</i>
Family relationships	Positive	Positive: "close knit"	Varied: overall more negative for men
Involvement	High	High: often structured and controlling	Low
Support and advocacy	Mid to high levels	Very limited	Low
Career aspirations	Limited	Low	Low or vague
Intentional career activities	High	None	None

to fare better overall. (See Table 3 for specific information on postschool outcomes.)

Advocates. Patricia, Kelly, and Julie's families represent the advocate group. All three of these young women with learning disabilities have transitioned into independent living situations and are working at high-wage jobs (See Table 3). Patricia is a lead worker on an ocean fishing vessel, Kelly is a production worker in a high-skilled factory setting, and Julie is a beautician in a children's hair salon. Julie is the only participant in this study to attend and complete a postschool vocational training program.

Postschool outcomes for this group seemed to be impacted by a combination of family process variables. All of the families in the advocate group had positive early relationships and high levels of involvement with their children as they grew into young adults. In contrast to the other two groups, these parents provided support, advocacy, and intentional career-related planning activities. Kelly's father described this pattern of early and ongoing future planning:

So I always gave her those talks that 'you need to buckle down,' and especially I gave her the talks back when she was in seventh and eighth grades. Now is the time to start preparing. I warned her. I just flat out warned her that I can see in the future and I won't be able to afford college so do the best you can now and plan for your future. You know I didn't bring this up to her later on in high school. I preached this to her every year.

In addition to offering support and specific advice on career opportunities, parents in this group also seemed more flexible and willing to allow their adolescents to take risks and make mistakes in the process of becoming more independent. As an example, just a few months after leaving high school Patricia decided to pursue an out-of-state job opportunity working on a horse ranch. Although she ended up losing this job (and her truck in the process), Patricia's mother believed that this was an ideal opportunity for her to "learn to be on her own. She needs to learn the responsibilities of where to put that paycheck. Pay those bills first. She needs to learn that I'm not always going to be there." By allowing opportunities for exploration and even failure, parents in this group promoted self-determination and allowed independent decision making. This combination of support and guidance contributed to positive postschool outcomes.

By allowing opportunities for exploration and even failure, parents in this group promoted self-determination and allowed independent decision making.

Protectors. The protectors group includes Grace, Gary, Dan, and Tracy. These young adults have not been as successful in the process of transitioning from high school into adult roles in the community. Grace and Gary are both employed in low-skill and/or low-wage jobs: Grace works as

a dishwasher in a hospital, whereas Gary holds a night shift job as a custodian at a large retail chain. Dan and Tracy have been unable to maintain consistent employment and were either unemployed or working less than 10 hr per week at the time of the postschool interviews. Dan and Gary continue to live with their families; Grace and Tracy live independently with ongoing financial support from their parents.

Patterns of family interaction played a role in influencing these postschool outcomes. Comparable to the advocate group, families in the protector group also described close positive relationships and a high level of involvement in daily activities with their children. However, these high levels of family participation were also characterized by high levels of control and structure. Gary's mother talked about her style of parenting, "We were a close knit family. Some of the people he associated with had looser strings attached to them. They didn't understand that kids had to answer for where they are going and when they would be back."

These high levels of family structure and control have continued into early adulthood. Parents in this group often imposed strict "house rules" and set limits on independence. These families seemed hesitant to allow youth to explore or make independent decisions. Grace's family exemplifies this pattern. Although she works full time and lives in her own apartment, Grace still relies on daily advice and input from her mother. Her mother described a typical daily interaction with Grace:

I usually have to talk her through a situation. She calls me two to three times a day and we talk. I do her checkbook for her and like today, I've talked to her three times on the phone. And I went to her house to check on things.

Although they were highly involved, families from the protector group rarely provided any type of career planning or job exploration opportunities. They held vague or low aspirations for career outcomes and often hoped only for some type of steady employment. For these cases, lack of intentional planning coupled with high levels of control seemed to result in limited employment

options and reduced levels of independence in adulthood.

Removed. Bill, Warren, Kyle, Linda, Sharon, and Susan's families are included in the removed group. Postschool outcomes for this group have been surprisingly positive, despite minimal family involvement and support. All of the young adults in this group are employed in the community (See Table 3). Bill, Warren, and Kyle work full time in traditional male-dominated occupations (auto body repair and janitorial services); Linda, Sharon, and Susan work part time in service industry jobs (retail, clerical, and child care, respectively). Sharon and Susan have continued to live at home with their families, whereas the remainder of the participants in this group live independently—several with partners or spouses.

In contrast to the advocate and protector groups, youth in the removed group reported more negative or unstable family relationships. Sharon had a difficult relationship with her father and eventually chose to live with her grandparents during her high school years. As mentioned earlier, Warren's stepfather asked him to move out of the family home during high school. We also noted some gender differences in family relationships. The young women commonly described strong relationships with their mothers; in contrast, the young men in this group did not describe close family connections and were sometimes in open conflict with their parents. All of the young women in this group also played a caretaking role within their families, assisting with ailing grandparents, younger siblings, or even parents.

In addition to these varied and often stressful family relationships, the removed group was characterized by overall low levels of family involvement, lack of support and advocacy, low career aspirations, and the absence of any sort of intentional career-related planning activities. Parents in this group often seemed to be overwhelmed with their own jobs and personal responsibilities, and were not available to assist in career exploration or job search activities. Linda's mother's comment was typical. "I don't think we did much helping her find a job. She pretty much did that on her own."

As an interesting note, many of the youth in this group had high school transition specialists who were available to offer advocacy, support, and

intentional career-related activities. These school staff members filled a crucial role, serving to replace the absent or uninvolved parents. Warren talked about the critical impact of his transition specialist:

Basically the only one who was really there for me was Ellen (the transition specialist). She is the one that actually got my flame going and thinking. She spent a lot of time with me. She was very important at that time in my life.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although these case studies reflect the complexity of family interactions, this study also had several limitations that affected the ability to interpret the findings. This analysis focused solely on family variables and did not examine other individual characteristics, educational programs, or transition services that may have also contributed to postschool outcomes. Another potential limitation that applies to all qualitative research is the generalizability to other settings or other populations (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003). Sampling procedures also limited the study. Case study participants were selected according to tightly defined criteria and included only young adults with learning disabilities. Comparative studies of young adults with developmental or physical disabilities may illuminate other components of the family role in school to work transition. Finally, the ability to conduct follow-up interviews with this sample would assist in documenting changes in employment patterns over time and would add to the study's overall findings.

DISCUSSION

These case studies offer a rich description of the role of the family in career development for these young adults with learning disabilities. By examining family background, high school, and postschool experiences of a carefully selected sample of young adults with learning disabilities, we have helped to illuminate the family structure and process variables that may impact career development and employment outcomes. The evidence from this study is consistent with the position that families do influence individual career devel-

opment in specific and complex ways (Blustein et al., 1997; Lindstrom & Benz, 2002; Whiston & Keller, 2004). Our findings run counter to prior research demonstrating that low SES serves primarily as a limiting factor (Blustein et al., 2000). In addition, these case studies provide evidence that family process variables work together to influence career development and employment outcomes in both positive and negative ways.

We investigated a set of family structural variables, and found that family SES was related to career decision making and initial vocational identity. Although previous literature has primarily established low SES as a limiting factor that can restrict career aspirations and opportunities (Blustein et al., 2000; Fouad & Brown, 2000; Newman, 2004), we found that family SES was related to participant behaviors in two important ways. First young adults from low-SES families were asked to contribute to the family both through early employment and (for the young women) by taking on a caretaking role for other family members. These early contributions appeared to promote career maturity and establishment of a work ethic. Second, growing up in low-SES families also motivated these youth to "be different" by obtaining steady employment and seeking a sense of stability often lacking in their childhood years. For these young adults, immersion in low-SES families did not seem to limit career outcomes but rather bolstered vocational identity and career maturity.

Although family economic pressures set the context for early career decision making, our data were consistent with the position that family process variables and patterns of interaction are key components in determining postschool employment patterns. Consistent with prior literature documenting the important influence of family interactions (Morningstar, 1997; Penick & Jepsen, 1992; Whiston & Keller, 2004), our findings confirmed that family support and advocacy and intentional career activities were positively related to career development. In a unique contribution to the literature, we found that family process variables worked in combination to create three distinct patterns of family interaction, which we characterized as (a) advocates, (b) protectors, and (c) removed. Participants from the advocate group were employed in higher wage oc-

occupations, whereas the protectors group entered lower wage/lower skill occupations or were unemployed. Youth from removed families fared surprisingly well, seeming to succeed despite the lack of family involvement or support.

In the following section, we discuss three overarching themes related to our overall findings. Through these themes, we describe the interaction and interconnectedness of family structural and process variables.

THEMES: INTERACTION OF FAMILY STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

Family Vision for the Future. Career aspirations play an important role in the occupational status expectations for young adults preparing to enter the workforce (Blustein et al., 1997; Mullis, Mullis, & Gerwels, 1998; Symanski, 1994). The hopes and dreams for the future that parents share with their youth can often serve as a sort of marker or long-range target for postschool achievement. In this study, we found that parents professed very limited, low, or vague hopes for the future. Many simply wanted their children to “be happy” or have a “good job.” These low aspirations seemed to limit career options and interests. Although most of the participants in this study were able to achieve stable paid employment, only one young woman entered and completed a formal postsecondary vocational training program.

Family structural variables may have played a role in these limited career aspirations. Families in this study were not highly educated: only one parent had completed a bachelor’s degree and many did not graduate from high school. The majority worked at low-skilled, low-wage occupations (e.g., retail sales, food services). Young adults with parents in unskilled occupations have been shown to have more limited career interests than those with parents in professional occupations (Blustein et al., 2002; Mullis et al., 1998). We noted that parents in this study may have unwittingly foreclosed career options for their children based on their own limited educational and employment experiences.

Family Guidance and Planning Activities. Across the sample, these parents provided limited or no intentional career-related activities. Only the families from the advocate group were actively involved in discussing career options, exploring

postschool job and training programs, and generally guiding youth through the career decision-making process. Echoing prior research describing the lack of family involvement in career and transition planning for youth with disabilities (Lindstrom et al., 2004; Morningstar, 1997; Morningstar et al., 1995), we documented a gap in the systematic attention that should be paid to the process of planning for future employment or career options.

The data from this study also supported the position that family SES and parental employment patterns play a role in this absence of purposeful family interactions. Many of these families were simply struggling to make ends meet, moving from one low-wage job to another with little time to focus on the career needs of their adolescent children. Their own limited experiences and lack of exposure to a variety of career options may have reduced their ability to engage in intentional career exploration activities. We did note the crucial role of high school transition personnel in filling this gap for many youth in this study. School transition staff often developed job shadow and work experience options for these youth, and assisted in job search activities. They also discussed various career options and assisted participants in exploring a variety of occupations. Transition specialists in a way served as replacements for parents who were unable to offer this level of career planning and active support.

Family Status. Social class has been shown to influence both educational and occupational attainment (Blustein et al., 2002; Whiston & Keller, 2004). Our data were consistent with the proposition that family SES has a compelling influence on young adults with learning disabilities. However, we noted that these influences were not necessarily negative. Youth from low-SES families made early contributions to the family through paid work and caretaking roles which taught a sense of responsibility and instilled a strong work ethic. Growing up observing their parents in low-wage occupations also created high levels of motivation and a desire for stability.

The interplay between family structure and process was especially telling when examining family SES. Looking at the relationship between SES and the three patterns of family interactions, we noted that 4 of the 6 removed families were

from the low-SES group. Consistent with Blustein et. al.'s (2002) findings on low-SES families, we found that these families generally provided less advocacy and had fewer resources available to support the transition needs of youth with learning disabilities. Although all the youth in the removed group were employed after high school, none of them completed formal postsecondary training programs. These outcomes may have been limited by low aspirations and lack of intentional career-related planning activities.

By looking at the reverse side of the relationship between family SES and patterns of interaction, we determined that not all the youth from low-SES families experienced "removed" patterns of family interactions or poor postschool outcomes. In fact, the two young women from low-SES families with parents in the advocate group entered high-wage occupations. Family advocacy and intentional career-related activities seemed to make a difference in breaking the cycle of early poverty. The positive postschool experiences of these youth confirmed the importance of family interactions and family process on postschool outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Findings from this study have led us to develop a set of implications for practice as well as direction for researchers in the field of special education.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Increase Awareness of Family Structure and the Impact of Family SES. Classroom teachers, school counselors, and other transition services personnel need to be aware of the impact of family structure and particularly SES on youth in transition. Students from low-SES families may be asked to contribute to the family through paid employment or other caretaking roles. School staff members need to understand the effect of these early experiences and help students frame these as opportunities for skill building and career development. In addition, helping students discuss ways in which their families have influenced their career goals can be a

useful tool for the ongoing process of goal setting and career planning.

Educate Parents About a Variety of Career Options and Opportunities. Parents of youth with learning disabilities need access to information about post high school employment and education options. High school personnel should provide information to parents so that they are aware of a range of options including high-skill occupations, postsecondary education, vocational training programs such as Job Corps or private vocational schools, and other on-the-job training programs. By offering parent information nights or other career-related information meetings, school personnel might help broaden the array of career options for consideration and help expand parental career aspirations.

Build Partnerships Between Parents and School Professionals. Parents in this study were grateful for the ongoing work and support of school transition personnel, yet they rarely described any opportunities for working in partnership with school staff to provide career-related activities. Special education professionals need to create specific opportunities for engaging parents in career exploration, job search, and postschool planning activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

In addition, our findings support the need for future research in the area of family involvement and family influence on postschool outcomes, including the following:

Conduct Additional Longitudinal Research on Family Variables and Postschool Outcomes. Our study focused on young adults with learning disabilities who were 3 to 5 years post high school. Further long-term follow-up studies are needed to confirm the influence of family structure and influences of family interaction over time. A longitudinal design would allow for the investigation of job stability, career advancement, and changes in employment outcomes.

Investigate the Interaction Between Family Structure and Family Process. This study has documented the complex relationship and interconnectedness of family structure and process variables. Additional research is needed to better understand how family demographics and family

functioning work both in isolation and in conjunction to influence student outcomes.

Document and Describe the Factors That Contribute to Resilience in Young Adults From Low-SES Families. Many of the participants in this study seemed to succeed despite hailing from low-status or unstable families. Lack of family role models did not always lead to another generation of low-wage workers or unengaged young adults. It is critical to better understand the individual factors and educational services that contribute to resilience and motivation and the potential linkages to postschool achievements. Documenting these elements can lead to more effective career and transition programs for this population.

Develop and Determine Implications for Educational Policy. Families can play a key role in contributing to educational outcomes (Newman, 2004). Although parent participation in individualized education program (IEP) and transition planning is mandated through the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), this study did not uncover any specific positive (or negative) examples of family involvement in the IEP process. Further investigation is needed to determine how to actively engage families in the educational process and to determine the potential implications for reframing educational policy for secondary and transition age youth.

This study examined the role of the family in career development and postschool outcomes for a purposefully selected sample of young adults with learning disabilities. By collecting in-depth information from young adults, parents, and school staff, we have filled an important gap in the literature. It is our hope that with a better understanding of both family structure and process, parents and professionals can collaborate to ensure successful postschool outcomes for young adults with disabilities.

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