Improving Transition Outcomes for Marginalized Youth

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This article describes research designed to identify the impact of marginalization on transition planning for two groups of youth with disabilities: Latinas and youth in foster care. Findings are presented through the ecological systems framework, which provides a useful means of examining differing single and multilevel influences on transition planning. Data from each area are provided to identify the unique barriers and sources of support that these youth experience. Results support the need to consider the culture of marginalization and disenfranchisement within a broad diversity lens when developing transition plans and providing services to youth with disabilities. The discussion includes a guide for transition service providers and reflects approaches that more appropriately address circumstances faced by marginalized youth with disabilities.

Challenges to successful transition are well documented for students with disabilities (Greene & Nefsky, 1999; Leake & Cholymay, 2004). These challenges increase in complexity for special education students, who experience additional marginalization and disenfranchisement beyond disability status alone (e.g., being culturally or linguistically diverse [CLD], in foster care, experiencing poverty). For example, minimal enrollment in postsecondary education and disproportionate unemployment rates have been noted for CLD youth with disabilities who have recently left high school as compared to their peers with and without disabilities (Greene & Nefsky; Leake & Cholymay). The multiple levels of discrimination faced by these youth often create additional barriers to successful transition.

In this article, we describe a program of research that was designed to identify the impact of marginalization on transition planning and methods for supporting youth with disabilities in their transition to adulthood. This research was conducted over 5 years by the National Center for Self-Determination and 21st Century Leadership and included several projects that uniquely investigate the transition experiences and outcomes of youth with disabilities as influenced by ethnicity (specifically, Latina) and foster care status. Across these projects, the investigators worked collaboratively to design instruments, select appropriate methodology, and interpret the results.

DEFINITIONS

In this article, *marginalization* is defined as "the practice of excluding a social group from the mainstream of the society, placing that group—legally or socially—on the 'margins' of the society" (McGraw-Hill, n.d.). For the purposes of this article, *disenfranchisement* refers to depriving the rights of a citizen (*Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary,* 1913). Individuals who are marginalized (e.g., a person living in poverty) are often disenfranchised. Students with disabilities are often marginalized, and when other types of diversity (e.g., CLD status) are also relevant to their identity, they are more vulnerable to negative outcomes, particularly regarding transition. The terms *marginalization* and *disenfranchisement* frame diversity broadly. The terms *diversity* and *cultural diversity* are often used to describe only ethnic and racial diversity rather than other types of diversity (e.g., disability) and multiple diversities (e.g., Latino/a and hearing impaired). Each line of research described herein involves two different groups of

marginalized youth with disabilities: Latinas with disabilities and youth with disabilities in foster care.

TRANSITION IS BEST DESCRIBED THROUGH ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Because it is sensitive to contextual factors, including broad social, cultural, and historical forces, ecological systems theory provides a relevant framework for understanding, describing, and addressing transition experiences and barriers faced by marginalized youth with disabilities. By considering these broad and distal influences on an individual student's development, this framework attends to the impact of marginalization and disenfranchisement on transition planning and, as a result, provides a contextual map to help transition teams understand the many and complex barriers faced by youth with disabilities in transition.

Ecological systems theory was developed by Bronfenbrenner in 1977 and is based on the assertion that a child's development is influenced by the interaction of four ecological systems:

1. the microsystem, or primary setting(s) in which the child spends most of his or her time;
2. the mesosystem, or the connection between two or more microsystems;
3. the exosystem, or those settings not immediately experienced by the child but that influence the child's microsystems; and
4. the macrosystem, the wider society and culture that contains the other systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Bronfenbrenner, 1989).

According to the ecological framework, children and adolescents interact within their microsystem, which is composed of family, peers, school, workplace, and neighborhood (Abrams, Theberge, & Karan, 2005). Interchanges between children or adolescents and their microsystem are influenced by the interrelationships among, for example, home and school, or school and workplace (i.e., the mesosystem). The type and quality of these relationships, as well as their absence or presence, will affect the transition process for youth with disabilities by either creating more barriers or increasing access to supports. When the model expands to focus on how individual children or adolescents and their microsystem are affected by the exosystem and macrosystem, the disadvantages faced by marginalized youth with disabilities become apparent. For example, at the exosystem level, government cutbacks in mental health and related services will most affect children and youth with the least resources (e.g., youth with disabilities in foster care), and this lack of support can permeate other life areas, thus influencing overall transition outcomes. At the macrosystem level, which accounts for issues in the broader society and culture, such as racism, it is possible to encounter the marginalized among the marginalized (e.g., CLD youth in poverty with disabilities).

Transition planning teams have direct access to individual students and components of their microsystems (e.g., interactions related to home, school). As well, transition teams can affect meso-, exo-, and macrosystemic influences in the lives of their students. For instance, parent–teacher collaboration to help establish goals for youth who are exiting special education is an example of mesosytem support in transition services (Powers, Hagans-Murillo, & Miller, in press; Whitney-Thomas & Hanley-Maxwell, 1996). The ecological framework can assist transition teams in determining where to focus their intervention, such as facilitating collaboration among agencies and individuals (Powers et al.). This perspective becomes especially valuable to transition teams who are working with marginalized students with disabilities because it may identify services and interrelationships that are contextually relevant for these students and that differ from those typically considered in a more traditional, mainstream framework.

Two areas of research addressed in this article illustrate the complexity of transition for marginalized youth with disabilities. A total of six separate studies using different methodologies (e.g., focus group, survey) are described. Table 1 provides a description of the methodology used in each study, along with the applicable citation. Readers may refer to the relevant citation for additional details. Data from each area of research identify the unique barriers and sources of support experienced by these youth, and the results are discussed within an ecological framework to guide transition service providers toward approaches that are more appropriate for use with marginalized youth with disabilities. The results support the need to consider the *culture of marginalization and disenfranchisement* within a broad perspective of diversity when developing transition plans and providing services to these youth as they exit the high school special education system.

TABLE 1
Research Methodology for Six Studies Addressing the Culture of Marginalization in Transition Planning

Study and citation	Method	Sample
	Research Area 1: Latinas with disabilities (HALA Project)	
Study 1: Gil-Kashiwabara, Hogansen, & Powers (2006)	Survey	208 total survey respondents (48 Latina youth with disabilities, 50 parents of Latinas with disabilities, 52 Anglo female youth with disabilities, and 58 parents of Anglo girls with disabilities) from one Oregon and one California school district
Study 2: Gil-Kashiwabara & Powers (2006)	Focus groups and interviews	38 total participants (25 Latina youth with disabilities and 13 parents of Latina youth with disabilities) from various schools and community settings in Oregon
	Research Area 2: Youth in foster care	
Study 1: Geenen & Powers (2006b)	Focus groups	88 total participants (19 youth in foster care, 8 foster care alumni, 21 foster parents, 20 child welfare professionals, 9 educational professionals, 9 ILP staff, and 2 other key professionals)
Study 2: Geenen & Powers (2006c)	Modified STSRP used to evaluate transition plans	Transition plans from 45 students in special education and foster care compared to the plans of 45 students in special education only; plans from one Oregon school district collected for review
Study 3: Geenen & Powers (2006a)	Review of extant academic data	Extant academic data reviewed for 70 youth in foster care and special education, 88 youth in foster care only, 81 youth in special education only, and 88 youth in general education only
Study 4: Geenen, Powers, Hogansen & Pittman (in press)	Randomized clinical trial	60 youth with disabilities, age 17, randomly assigned to either a comparison group receiving typical ILP supports or a treatment group receiving ILP services that incorporate self-direction opportunities and coaching on how to apply self-determination skills

Note. ILP = Independent living program; HALA = Helping All Latinas Achieve; STSRP = Statement of Transition Services Review Protocol (Lawson & Everson, 1993, as cited in Everson et al., 2001). The STSRP was modified for the current study. Modifications included collecting information found on the IEP, such as projected diploma type, gathering additional detail about subgoal areas related to independent living and community participation, rating the quality of action steps toward transition goals, and collecting information about effective practices, such as person-centered career planning, self-determination education, and participation in extracurricular activities or mentoring opportunities. Additionally, the STSRP was revised to gather information on the extent to which the transition plans acknowledged issues or services specific to youth in foster care, such as connection to independent living programs, specific college scholarship programs for foster youth, emancipation from child welfare, and so forth.

RESEARCH AREA 1: LATINAS WITH DISABILITIES

Background and Significance

With regard to educational experiences, CLD students with disabilities are more likely to face social and language barriers, the negative effects of being raised in poverty, and difficulty processing written and oral information in standard English, all of which may contribute to their risk of school failure (Greene & Nefsky, 1999; Leake & Cholymay, 2004). Such disadvantages in school may set the stage for challenges in their transition to adulthood, suggesting that minority students with disabilities may experience greater transition disadvantages.

These obstacles may be especially prevalent for young Latinas with disabilities. For all Latinas, the high school graduation rate is lower than for girls in any other racial or ethnic group (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). Furthermore, when they do drop out of school, they are less likely than their Latino counterparts to return and complete school (American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 1998). Regarding postsecondary education, Latinas, compared with other groups of women, are least likely to earn a college degree (Ginorio & Huston). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), only 10.6% of females of Hispanic origin ages 25 years and older have completed 4 or more years of college, compared with 16.8% of Black women and

25.5% of White women. These outcomes are even more alarming when one considers recent U.S. Census Bureau (2005) statistics indicating that Hispanics are now the largest minority group.

Other issues affecting the transition to adulthood for all Latinas include teenage pregnancy rates and gender roles within the Latino community. With regard to the former, the teenage pregnancy and birth rates of Latinas have not followed the same pattern of decline of rates among Whites and African Americans (American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 1998; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Madigan, 2002; Portner, 1998). Because the U.S. educational system is not set up to support the educational goals of teenage parents, Latinas in this situation are often discouraged from pursuing their academic goals, which may disrupt their pathway to successful transition. Furthermore, the patriarchal arrangements in some Latino cultures give privileges to men over women, adding to the oppression and burden experienced by Latina adolescents (Gallegos-Castillo, 2006). For example, in her qualitative study exploring the social worlds of 22 Latina adolescents of working-class Mexican origin, Gallegos-Castillo found that these girls realized early on that male privilege would influence their day-to-day lives and would need to be negotiated. The girls in her study learned that their role in the family involved serving others, obeying and being subservient to men, and expecting to be socially controlled. While such gender roles certainly vary from household to household, Latina adolescents from households that ascribe to more traditional gender roles have an additional level of complexity in their transition process—one that involves developing strategies to establish more liberating norms while retaining their social and cultural identities (Gallegos-Castillo).

Currently more than 185,000 young Latina women, ages 15 to 24, experience a disability, with 113,000 of this group experiencing a severe disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997). Yet, there is a lack of information regarding the specific transition planning experiences for and needs of Latinas in special education. The Helping All Latinas Achieve (HALA) Project employed a mixed-methods approach to develop a clearer understanding of the transition barriers and needs of Latinas in special education (see Table 1). The findings across both Latina studies in the project addressed contextual issues that Latinas with disabilities face in transition planning, while identifying transition barriers, supports, and Latina community strengths that can help Latinas with disabilities and their families in their negotiations within each system of the ecological framework.

Microsystemic Influences

The HALA Project focus group and survey studies obtained data to describe important microsystemic influences and their role in transition planning for Latinas with disabilities (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2006; Gil-Kashiwabara & Powers, 2006). For example, the survey results showed that parents of Latina youth with disabilities placed far greater importance on having their daughter live in the same house or apartment with her family in the next 5 years than did parents of Anglo girls with disabilities. Youth respondents reported similar findings, with 40% of Latinas indicating that it was very important to live in the same home with their family in the next 5 years, compared with 10% of Anglo girls. An important related finding from the survey indicated that parents of Latina girls with disabilities placed greater importance than Anglo parents on their daughter's being able to "take care of her parents, sisters, brothers, or other family members" in the next 5 years. Youth respondents echoed the parents on this issue, with 61% of Latina youth indicating that it was "very important" to take care of their parents, sisters, brothers, or other family members in the next 5 years, compared with 35% of Anglo girls. These results, which focused on key persons and aspirations within the home microsystem, may have major implications for key aspects of transition planning, such as the transition goal area of independent living (IL). From the perspective of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA), IL implies the ability of individuals to obtain employment to earn a living, enabling them to support themselves and live independently in the community. Based on the previous survey results, one might conclude that the Latino community does not value the concept of independent living. However, these authors suggested that IL *is* valued among Latinas, but that they may define this concept differently. For example, rather than define IL as living alone and working to support themselves, Latinas and their parents may define it as becoming employed to contribute to the family. Indeed, given the emphasis and importance of family among Latino cultures (Gallegos-Castillo, 2006), it makes sense for the Latino definition of IL to include family.

The survey and focus group studies both demonstrated the importance and value placed on education among Latinas with disabilities and their families. For example, when parents of Latinas with disabilities were surveyed about the importance they placed on their daughter's attending college in the next 5 years, 63% indicated that this was "very important," compared with

34% of Anglo parents. Parents echoed these desires in the focus groups. As one parent noted:

> At the university we hear that there are lots of obstacles, like its very expensive, but I tell her that if she gets accepted to university . . . she will have all my support and everything I can do for her. It's important to me as a parent to have my child in university.

Another parent also indicated the importance of school, including for Latinas who have children. She stated:

> If my daughter had a child, I would help her in any way I could (to go to school). . . and I tell her that she needs to move forward and she doesn't need to do the same thing that I'm doing. . . . God willing she doesn't end up pregnant and having a child, but if she does, I will support her.

It is apparent that parents of Latinas with disabilities not only value education for their daughters but are also committed to helping their daughters achieve this outcome, including providing support to daughters who are also young parents. Such values held within the microsystem of the family unit are critical pieces of information for transition teams to know in order to conduct culturally relevant transition planning. Transition teams that see early parenthood and postsecondary education as mutually exclusive do not fully understand the role of family and extended family in the lives of Latinas with disabilities. As well, transition teams that hold to the damaging stereotype that Latinas and their families do not value education are ignoring a major community value and reinforcing the practice of discouraging Latinas with disabilities from obtaining an education. Latina girls with disabilities might experience greater transition success if transition teams would attend to the supportive role of family (i.e., by actively involving the family in transition planning) and encourage goals that are meaningful and relevant to Latina girls and their families (i.e., postsecondary education). Family support and values are important microsystemic influences that if appreciated by transition teams can have a positive impact on Latinas in transition.

Mesosystemic Influences

With regard to transition planning, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting is an ideal opportunity for representatives from youths' immediate environments to make connections. Such representatives would naturally include individuals from the school and home environments (i.e., teachers, parents). However, it is important for transition teams to consider other immediate environments for Latinas that might be important to include in the IEP meeting. For example, when asked on the survey about the importance of their daughter's participation in spiritual activities, such as prayer or attending church, 41% of parents of Latinas indicated that this was "very important," compared with 12% of Anglo parents. Youth responses echoed the parent responses, with 45% of Latinas with disabilities indicating that it was "very important" for them to participate in spiritual activities, compared with 25% of Anglo girls with disabilities. For youth and families who place a great importance on spirituality, a significant amount of time may be spent at a setting such as a church. Youths may attend a youth group at the church, assist with teaching Sunday school, and attend one or more services per week. The church may operate as an important, additional immediate setting for youth and families. These students may consider a church representative (e.g., a youth group leader) to be an important part of their extended family and community. Such individuals may have an important perspective to bring to IEP meetings and may be able to assist in the transition planning activities for students. When transition teams do not examine the additional immediate contexts in which Latina students spend their time, they miss an opportunity to strengthen students' mesosytems. Given the extensive disadvantages faced by Latinas with disabilities, such missed opportunities can have a profound impact on an individual Latina student's transition success.

Exosystemic Influences

Transition planning legislation is an example of an exosystemic factor that affects the way in which transition planning is approached with Latinas in the school microsystem. Students receiving transition services in school meet the school definition for having a disability, and this identification process is part of the official procedure that the special education system follows to identify students for services. The HALA Project identified some important barriers at the exosystemic level related to Latina access to special education transition services. For example, the survey asked parents to indicate whether they believed their daughter experienced the disability that the school had identified. Sixteen percent of parents of Latinas responded no, compared with 2% of An-

glo parents. It has been noted elsewhere that Latinos may have different attitudes toward and definitions of disability (Harry, 1992). Such variations in perspectives on disability may be related to interpretation of stigma, folk beliefs, and supernatural explanations, and they vary, of course, depending on level of acculturation and other dimensions (Harry). This type of basic oversight around the definition of disability can set the stage from the beginning for a transition planning experience that is frustrating and impersonal for Latinas and their families. It is critical that transition teams look to the family and student to understand their perspectives on the disability. If there is a difference in definition between the school and family, the transition team should work with the family members to incorporate their perspectives so that the transition planning is meaningful and relevant.

Focus group recruitment for the HALA Project could not be completed solely through the school special education departments due to low enrollment of Latinas in special education, despite recruiting in districts with a visible and growing Latino community. Such low enrollment is not congruent with the rates of disability that have been noted among transition-age Latinas (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997). Recruitment efforts for focus groups included attending churches with Latino services, attending gang-prevention groups, and attending community youth and parent groups to announce the project, using culturally meaningful language and constructs. The fact that there were not enough Latinas within the special education system to participate in focus groups suggests that there are exosystemic barriers that continue to hinder Latina access to special education transition planning.

Macrosystemic Influences

The survey assessed a variety of macrosystemic issues by asking youth and parents to rate the extent to which they grappled with certain contextual issues (e.g., gender discrimination, disability bias) in the previous year. An important finding of this part of the survey pertained to racial and cultural stereotypes and biases. Specifically, parents of Latina students with disabilities were more likely than Anglo parents to endorse the statement "People expected less of her (my daughter) because of her race or culture." The negative impact of ethnic and racial stereotypes was also prevalent in the focus groups. Latina students expressed frustration with teachers who preferred students from other racial and ethnic groups. For example, one student mentioned the following about the way CLD students, including Latinas, are treated in school:

> Many times at schools how you get treated depends on how the teachers are, and the teacher's opinion of the race. So, some teachers are very helpful in many ways, and some will kind of exclude you from the group if you're Latina or another race.

Earlier in this section, we presented findings on the high value placed on education by Latina students with disabilities and their families. Other studies have also supported the desire for and value placed on education within the Latino community (Romo, Kouyoumdjian, Nadeem, & Sigman, 2006; Segura, 1993). Yet, national statistics show that Latina students are not graduating from high school or attending college at rates that correspond with a strong desire for education. This discrepancy may stem from teachers' beliefs that Latino families do not value education for their children. An unsubstantiated notion that has been put forth in the literature is that Latino parents discourage their daughters from pursuing educational goals (East, 1998; Romo et al.). Such inaccurate information is available to teachers, administrators, and others and only serves to foster damaging stereotypes about Latinas. These stereotypes make their way into day-to-day interactions with Latina students with disabilities. For example, if teachers believe that Latinas and their family do not value education, they are less likely to encourage their Latina students to pursue postsecondary education as part of their transition plan. Perhaps most disturbing about the role of macrosystemic influences in transition planning for Latinas is that such ethnic and racial stereotypes are often held unconsciously by professionals and are internalized by youth and their families, making it especially challenging to break down transition barriers for Latinas with disabilities.

RESEARCH AREA 2: YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE AND TRANSITION

Background and Significance

The number of children in foster care has nearly doubled over the past 2 decades, from 276,000 in 1985 to approximately 513,000 currently (U.S. Department of

Health and Human Services, 2006). At present, about 20,000 of these youth are discharged from the foster care system each year when they reach the age of majority (typically age 18). Many of the foster youth exiting the child welfare system experience disabilities, with data indicating that 30% to 40% receive special education services (Advocates for Children of New York, 2000; Courtney, Piliavin, & Grogan-Kaylor, 1995; Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service and the National Resource Center for Youth Services, 2000; Geenen & Powers, 2006a). These youth are placed further at risk because of life experiences that led to their removal from their birth families, such as abuse and neglect. Additionally, these youth have typically been exposed to difficult circumstances, such as poor nutrition and health, racism, discrimination, and poverty (Goren, 1996).

Concern over the outcomes of youth who are exiting foster care has been mounting on a national level, and legislation has been established in an attempt to meet their needs. For example, the 1999 Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) created the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program and doubled the amount of federal money available to states for providing foster youth with independent living services (Massinga & Pecora, 2004). Although states vary in how they use these funds, services are typically delivered through independent living programs (ILPs) and focus on education, employment, housing, and skills related to daily living. Another potentially important source of support is the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments (PSSFA) of 2001, which provide federal dollars for Chafee Independent Living Educational and Training Vouchers (ETVs) that can help pay the costs of attending college or another higher education institution. Furthermore, federal law now specifies that youth in foster care who are 16 years and older have a written IL plan that describes the services and supports that will assist youth in transition from foster care to adulthood (42 U.S.C. § 675 (1)(D), cited in Pokempner & Rosado, 2003).

While the disappointing outcomes for youth in foster care have become more visible, the transition of foster youth who experience disabilities has largely been overlooked. One notable exception is the National Evaluation of Title IV-E Independent Living Programs, which identified whether youth emancipated from care had a documented disability (47% did) and compared the outcomes of these youth with peers in foster care who were not designated as having a disability. The evaluation found that foster youth with disabilities were less likely to graduate from high school, be employed, have social support, and be self-sufficient than youth in foster care who did not have an identified disability (Westat, 1991).

This article describes a program of research encompassing four studies that addressed the transition experiences of youth with disabilities in foster care (see Table 1). Viewing salient findings from the four studies within an ecological framework brings to light the contextual factors that impede or facilitate the movement of foster youth with disabilities into successful adulthood.

Microsystem Factors

Youth with disabilities experience significantly more placements in foster care, or instability in foster care, than do foster youth without disabilities (Geenen & Powers, 2006a). This mobility creates instability in other areas of students' lives, such as a change in schools and neighborhood. In addition, this lack of placement stability often translates into a lack of ongoing, stable relationships with caregivers. Evidence of this has been seen in the My Life Study, in which many of the youth could not identify even one caring adult they could go to for help after they exited the child welfare system (Geenen, Powers, Hogansen & Pittman, in press). This is echoed in our Qualitative Transition Study, where youth lamented the absence of relationships with trusted adults and described the feelings of isolation and disconnection that they experienced as a result (Geenen & Powers, 2006b). In a very concrete way, this absence of a stable caregiver over time may be manifested in the IEP/transition plan (TP) document itself. In the transition plan study, for instance, we found that compared with peers not in foster care, foster youth were significantly less likely to have an advocate (foster parent, educational surrogate) participate in the IEP/TP meeting, with more than half of the students in foster care having no parent or parent figure present (Geenen & Powers, 2006c).

Mesosytemic Factors

Youth with disabilities in foster care are interfacing with multiple systems, and a prominent theme running through our research findings is the lack of partnership and communication these systems demonstrate. As mentioned earlier, federal law requires that transition-age foster youth have a plan that describes the skills and supports needed as they move into adulthood. Similarly,

IDEIA requires that an IEP have a description of needed transition services beginning at age 16. As a result, youth with disabilities in foster care may actually end up with two separate transition plans. In the My Life Study, one component of the intervention was student-directed, collaborative transition planning. Often, when agency representatives (e.g., school staff and caseworkers) were brought together for this coordinated planning, they were meeting each other for the first time. In contrast, youth within the comparison group often had two sometimes divergent transition plans created separately through special education and child welfare, reflecting a duplication in services and a missed opportunity for resource leveraging (Geenen, Powers, Hogansen, & Pittman, in press). In the transition plan study, in which school-based transition planning was evaluated, we found that the child welfare caseworker was present for only 31% of the IEP/TP meetings involving youth in foster care. The presence of caseworkers at the IEP/TP had a clear impact on the quality of the transition plan; in these instances, the plans were significantly more likely to acknowledge and address foster care issues that would affect a student's transition, such as emancipation from the child welfare system, or emphasize foster care resources, such as the independent living program. Unfortunately, most IEP/TP meetings did not include the caseworker, and most plans demonstrated little or no awareness of transition challenges related to foster care, or that a student was even in foster care. A lack of interagency collaboration emerged as an important theme in our qualitative study as well. Across participants (youth, foster parents, school and child welfare professionals), there was strong recognition that despite (or perhaps because of) the numerous professionals involved in the lives of foster youth, a lack of partnership among the providers often rendered services ineffective. One caseworker in the transition plan study noted the following:

> I find that if you have a lot of helpers in a child's life, a PO, a caseworker, a court worker, a therapist, sometimes all their helpers, you know, sort of disagree on the course they should take and—it has nothing to do with the kids. There's just a lot of turf stuff. So I find that the more helpers they have, the harder.

E*xosytem* F*actors*

In our research, the negative impact of child welfare policies on the transition experiences of youth moving into adulthood was painfully obvious. For example, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 makes a child's health and safety paramount, overriding any other concerns or issues (Allen & Bissell, 2004). Unfortunately, the foster care system's emphasis on safety and protection often occurs at the expense of adequately addressing the needs of youth preparing for independence and emancipation from foster care. In the qualitative transition study, youth provided numerous examples of instances in which providers (e.g., caseworkers, foster parents) failed to solicit their input when important decisions were being made about their own lives. Although caseworkers and foster parents agreed that providing youth with more opportunities to practice decision making and other skills essential for independence is important for successful transition, these same participants were quick to describe a foster care system that held them accountable for any mistakes a young person made. As a result, many professionals who were participating in the focus group described themselves as needing to protect youth by limiting their risk taking and autonomy.

In addition to an overall emphasis on safety and protection at the expense of supporting individuals' burgeoning independence, foster care policies also emphasize a professionally driven approach that makes caseworkers the "gatekeepers" of information and access to services. For example, in Oregon youth cannot refer themselves directly to the independent living program; they need permission from their caseworker to access these services. We have learned through the My Life Study that caseworkers sometimes refuse to refer a youth with a disability to the independent living program because they feel he or she would not benefit from it (e.g., the necessary accommodations cannot be provided) or, even more concerning, because they believe the young person is not capable of ever living independently.

In stark contrast to policies that limit the opportunities that youth have to practice skills of independence (e.g., informed decision making, accessing services themselves, developmentally appropriate risk taking), the foster care system expects youth to make a sudden and complete transition to adulthood once they reach the age of majority. As mentioned earlier, in typical U.S. families the transition to adulthood is much more gradual, and there is growing recognition that it is developmentally inappropriate to expect an 18-year-old to assume complete independence in today's society. If this is the case, it is even more inappropriate for child welfare policy to expect foster youth with disabilities to make such a transition, as they have had less opportu-

nity to learn and practice the skills that are necessary for independence. In addition, child welfare policy offers these youth no safety net after they exit care. While youth in typical families often have a revolving door that allows young adults to move back and forth between living independently and getting help from their parents, this option is not available to youth who age out of care, where support from the foster care system typically ends when a young person is emancipated. The detrimental effects of this policy was all too clear in the My Life Study, in which transitioning youth in the control group were often eager to leave the child welfare system but then found themselves without support and ill prepared to meet the demands of adult life. As a result, a sizeable number of these youth became homeless or incarcerated, dropped out of high school, or—in order to survive—reunited with their birth parent(s) in unhealthy, unsafe relationships.

The interrelated influence of microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem factors on youth in care with disabilities is evident in the entangled web of placement instability, restricted academic achievement, and lack of access to postsecondary education support. Although youth in care are eligible for education and training vouchers for postsecondary education through the 1999 Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA), we have consistently observed that many youth with disabilities, as a result of frequent foster placement and school changes, do not acquire the credits needed for graduation within the time typically allotted (i.e., by the age of 18). As a result, they are awarded modified diplomas or certificates of completion, which makes them ineligible to receive education and training vouchers. These youth simply run out of time to obtain general diplomas; as a result, they are denied further support to advance their education and training after high school. Furthermore, because they have reached age 18 and are not continuing their education, these foster youth become ineligible for foster placements. They are on their own, with insufficient preparation and support.

Macrosystem Factors

Cultural and social biases about disability, race, gender, sexual orientation, and social economic status all influence the expectations of society for youth in foster care. Indeed, discrimination related to poverty and race may have contributed in significant ways to a young person's assignment to foster care. As Chipungu and Bent-Goodley (2004) pointed out, "Poverty and poverty-related challenges, structural inequality, and racially biased decision making are some of the factors that have contributed to the disproportionate representation of children of color in child welfare" (p. 79). Added to these layers of bias and discrimination are public perceptions of the foster care system. When information about the child welfare system is released through the general press, often it is about the traumatic stories of children in foster care and the terrible things that have happened to them. This contributes to the public's general sense that "nothing works" and that society is helpless to change such an intractable problem (Allen & Bissell, 2004). This in turn contributes to societal apathy and serves to extinguish any public outcry for real system change. Expectations for youth in foster care are diminished, as society settles for the belief that the foster care system is broken and therefore the children are as well.

In our research, we have found that reduced expectations for youth with disabilities in foster care can be both obvious and insidious. For instance, in the transition plan study we found that foster youth in special education were significantly less likely (compared with students in special education not in foster care) to have a goal listed on their transition plan relating to postsecondary education. Even more concerning, we found that youth in foster care were more likely to have no goals listed on their transition plan (20% of the sample). Furthermore, in the same study, foster youth were more than twice as likely to be slotted for a modified, rather than standard, diploma. It should be noted that in this study, stratified sampling was used to ensure that our groups were similar in terms of disability, so this does not appear to be a contributing factor in the group differences between students in special education who were in foster care and those in special education who were not. As we discovered in the academic achievement study, youth in foster care also earned fewer credits and were more likely to attend an alternative school rather than receive their education in a typical setting (Geenen & Powers, 2006c). Through the My Life Study, we are learning firsthand that these findings may all reflect lowered academic expectations for youth in foster care. There often appears to be a general sense among foster parents, caseworkers, and school staff that a student's education is less important than the student's life circumstances and the need to simply get by and survive.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this article has been to examine, through an ecological analytic lens, findings and issues that have

been identified through our research on the transition planning for youth with disabilities from two particular marginalized groups (i.e., Latinas and youth in foster care). An ecological approach provides a useful framework for examining differing single and multilevel influences on the transition planning process and outcomes.

The findings document multiple influences on these groups of youth that uniquely disadvantage them in the transition planning process and in their overall transition success. At the microsystem level, sources of disadvantage include lack of opportunity and support for youth self-determination; incongruence between what youth desire for their futures and the preferences and expectations of their families and teachers; lack of access to successful mentors; and challenges such as unstable housing and language barriers.

At the mesosystem level, lack of interagency collaboration presents particular barriers for these youth, who often have unique requirements for connection with multiple agencies and informal networks that offer essential services and supports. For example, lack of connection between schools and community entities, such as churches and cultural organizations, may result in the delivery of culturally incongruent support as well as missed opportunities to work with key individuals who can positively influence a youth's life.

At the exosytem level, numerous local, state, and national policies and service design factors, often designed with majority culture youth in mind, function to disproportionately constrain or impede the success of these marginalized groups. For example, child welfare policies that frequently put safety ahead of preparation for self-sufficiency hinder youth in foster care from learning how to navigate the realities of adult life.

At the mesosystem level, common barriers for each of these marginalized groups are numerous biases that affect interactions with youth, lack of interagency coordination, and development of policies that incorporate low expectations for their success and stereotypes about their preferences, challenges, and capabilities. For example, many Latinas are stereotyped as caring more about marriage and childbearing than going to college; subsequently, postsecondary education is not encouraged in their transition planning. Likewise, child welfare caseworkers often have little knowledge of the capacities of young people with disabilities and may decide that they do not have the capacity or require too much support to be served by independent living programs. As a result, they do not refer them for these services as legally required.

Implications for Practice and Research

Numerous ecological factors interrelate to influence the transition planning success of marginalized youth with disabilities. While multiple strategies are required to address these influences, we wish to emphasize a few essential approaches. First is the need to help service providers, caregivers, and, foremost, young people themselves, to recognize and address the impact of these influences on the young persons' lives. In many cases, youth must be assisted in becoming aware of the biases and misunderstandings that restrict their opportunities and supports and in implementing strategies to insulate themselves from such barriers. Accomplishing this requires educating youth about their opportunities and rights (e.g., all youth 14 years of age or older in foster care have a right to independent living services, Latinas do not have to give up their dreams of attending college if they also value building family); ways to advocate for themselves by naming and challenging biases; and ways to work proactively with caregivers, service providers, and other allies to achieve their goals.

For youths' efforts to be successful, individuals who are involved in their lives must consider the culture of marginalization and disenfranchisement within a broad perspective of diversity when developing transition plans. They must also provide truly individualized supports that respond to youths' goals and dreams, acknowledging and insulating themselves from biases that often insidiously affect their judgments of what youth want and can do. Transition planning teams must attend to each youth's phenomenological perspectives, assets, ambitions, prior experiences, and so on. Critical to accomplishing this aim is increasing the emphasis on educating teachers, other youth workers, and administrators in ecological perspectives and incorporating diversity and social justice perspectives within education and transition practices and policies. Special educators must have a thorough understanding of ethnicity, culture, homelessness, foster care, gender, sexual orientation, and so on, all of which interrelate with disability in shaping a youth's educational and transition experience. General educators, child welfare workers, and other community professionals who work with youth must likewise have a detailed understanding of these factors, in addition to an understanding of disability—the evolving history of how disability has been defined, perceived, and treated; the challenges facing youth with disabilities; and evidence-based and promising practices for guiding youth toward optimal success.

Within the domain of research, it is essential both that investigation of education and transition for youth as a whole include young people with disabilities and that research related to youth with disabilities focus on both majority youth and subpopulations of minority youth, who could be negatively affected by solutions identified for majority youth. It is critical that funding agencies prohibit the systematic exclusion of youth with disabilities from research on youth as a whole. Likewise, research on youth with disabilities must extend beyond simply ensuring representation by disability type. Such research must also provide for increased oversampling of marginalized groups of youth who may have unique circumstances, as findings related to these youth may be divergent.

Conclusion

Underlying each of these recommendations is the acknowledgment that although important transactions affecting youth transition planning occur at the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem levels and that these levels are currently the primary focus of research, practice, and policy efforts, ultimately the greatest improvement in the quality of transition planning among marginalized youth will be influenced by the often unspoken understandings and biases at the macrosystem level. Such macrosystem perspectives are reflected in attitudes, practices, and polices that become the basis for expectations and treatment of youth at the other levels. Addressing these misunderstandings and biases is a complex undertaking that necessitates changing the hearts and minds of youth, caregivers, professionals, policymakers, and the general public. To achieve substantial improvement in the transition success of marginalized youth, many of whom have very little hope of or chance for success, will require everyone to recognize and discard stereotypes and biases in favor of attitudes, practices, and policies that provide genuine opportunity and support for youth to realize their dreams.

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