

# The COVID-19 pandemic as a tipping point: The precarity of transition for students who receive special education and English language services

Audrey Trainor<sup>a,\*</sup>, Lindsay Romano<sup>a</sup>, Gracy Sarkissian<sup>a</sup> and Lynn Newman<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*New York University, New York, NY, USA*

<sup>b</sup>*SRI International, Menlo Park, CA, USA*

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## Abstract.

**BACKGROUND:** School closures and service disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted students' postschool transitions. Students with disabilities who were also members of historically marginalized groups including immigrant students, multilingual students, students of color, and those experiencing poverty, were disproportionately negatively impacted by pandemic-limited services.

**OBJECTIVE:** This paper examined the impact of the pandemic on the transition experiences of secondary students receiving both special education and English learner services.

**METHOD:** We collected and analyzed data from ethnographic interviews with 26 students, their parents, and teachers. A close analysis of a representative case illustrates how transition education and planning were affected by challenges introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic for some of the nation's most vulnerable students.

**RESULTS:** Despite postsecondary education goals and high parent expectations, evidence of minimal information sharing between school and family, specific plans for goal actualization, and interruptions to service delivery negatively impacted goal attainment, tipping precariously positioned transition plans toward missed opportunities.

**CONCLUSION:** The pandemic accentuated pre-existing inequities in transition and vocational rehabilitation (VR) services. Implications for practice and research are discussed, including the importance of supported family engagement, enhanced self-determination skills, and integrated VR services into high school special education programming.

Keywords: Transition, English learner, special education, postsecondary education, employment, pandemic, COVID-19

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically shifted many aspects of society, effectively upending the education system and significantly impacting the lives of students and families. The pandemic also highlighted

and even exacerbated inequities. Existing persistent patterns of poverty and discrimination have disproportionately affected communities of color over time, leaving family and student members to shoulder both high rates of COVID-19 infection and mortality, as well as pandemic-related school closures and disruptions (Lopez et al., 2021).

Preliminary studies suggest that the pandemic has also exacerbated racial disparities in education (Jones

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\*Address for correspondence: Audrey A. Trainor, New York University, 239 Greene Street, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10003, USA. E-mail: aat8@nyu.edu.

et al., 2021). For secondary students receiving both special education and English learner (EL) services, postsecondary transitions were impacted because education and vocational rehabilitation (VR) services shifted to remote access and work experiences abruptly paused or ended. These difficulties, in addition to the pandemic's unpredictable and uncertain health, social, and economic effects, made postschool planning and preparation difficult.

As part of a larger study, we examined transition planning and experiences of students who receive both special education and English learner (EL) services. In this single case study, we present an analysis of the pandemic's ramifications on transition experiences of a representative case of one dually identified student. We refer to students receiving both special education and EL services as "dually identified," recognizing the complexities and inaccuracies associated with identification particularly for students who also face the societal impacts of racism, ableism, and linguicism (Klingner et al., 2012). We then share our analysis of the parent and student interviews, which illustrate both the pandemic's deleterious effects on postschool transitions and expose pre-existing weaknesses in transition planning and education. Last, we present implications for improving and expanding services to ameliorate negative impacts of the pandemic and to increase alignment between planning and dually identified students' preferences, strengths, and needs.

### *1.1. Vocational rehabilitation and COVID-19*

Vocational rehabilitation programs play an important role in transition, connecting students with disabilities to continued career planning and preparation, work experiences, and postschool accommodations. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) requires that, at a minimum, 15% of each state's Title I-VR funds must be used for pre-employment transition services, including job exploration support, postsecondary education guidance, and self-advocacy instruction. Additionally, local VR offices are responsible for overseeing pre-employment transition coordination for students with disabilities, including attending IEP meetings as needed and working with schools to coordinate and ensure students receive adequate pre-employment transition services (WIOA, 2014).

Through targeted career development and support, the aim of VR is to enable individuals with disabilities to access and maintain competitive employment

that aligns with their life goals (Chan et al., 2009). Partnering with high school educators to support students in transition, VR counselors provide expertise and education related to postschool support necessary for actualizing transition goals and plans (Frentzel et al., 2021). Vocational rehabilitation counselors are taught to challenge deficit-oriented models of disability and to circumnavigate biases about the limitations of disabled young adults' capacity to fully engage and participate in society as socially and financially contributing members (Chan et al., 2009). Partnerships between VR counselors and students, families, and educators bridge high school to postsecondary options.

In the wake of COVID-19, emergent research suggests that VR services, like many other support services, were severely impacted by the upheaval of the pandemic. For instance, unemployment during the pandemic was far worse for individuals with disabilities compared to their peers without disabilities and, as a result, an increase in services is required to support a successful reintegration into the workforce (Strauser et al., 2021). Pandemic-related employment disparities were greater for employees with disabilities who were also people of color than their White peers (Schall et al., 2021). Recent research has also found that transition-aged youth with multiple VR services delivered in a shorter period of time are more likely to have positive outcomes in employment, suggesting that correcting a pandemic-related absence of services could be redressed (Kaya et al., 2021).

While the limitations of VR services during the pandemic exacerbated disparities, limitations in secondary transition services may also be contributing to the problem (Dong et al., 2016). Across disability categories, only 38% of high school students with disabilities reported that any community agency staff, including VR, attended their transition planning meetings (Lipscomb et al., 2017). Studies of interventions designed to increase VR involvement in transition show that amelioration efforts have remained inconsistent. Multiple studies have found that urbanicity, race, and socioeconomic factors impact access to and successful outcomes of early work exploration for transition-aged youth (see Gold et al., 2013; Osmani et al., 2022, for examples). This research suggests that VR and transition services have yet to effectively actualize aims to improve postschool outcomes and to facilitate the full integration of individuals with disabilities into postsecondary college and career opportunities. Preliminarily, the impact of the pandemic on transition

outcomes has intensified limitations associated with a lack of optimal pre-pandemic services (Strauser et al., 2021).

### 1.2. Transition services and COVID-19

While sparse, several studies have recently examined transition for students with disabilities during the pandemic. For instance, Chugani & Houtrow (2020) found that college students with disabilities experienced a range of challenges during the pandemic, leading them to call for concerted efforts to address exacerbated disparities in college and career preparedness and diminished employment opportunities. In another study, researchers examined access to accommodations and services for college students with disabilities during the pandemic and found that students were unable to access pre-existing services, such as testing accommodations (Gin et al., 2021). These authors also found that online learning posed additional challenges related to service provision and differentiated instruction. Findings from both studies implicated the pandemic as a contributing factor to inequitable college access and outcomes for students with disabilities. Both studies also point to the need for additional and novel approaches to aiding successful college matriculation and completion for this population.

Examining the impacts of COVID-19 on the transition experiences of high school students with disabilities during the pandemic, Rowe and colleagues (2020) identified barriers associated with transitioning to and engaging in remote schooling, uncertainty about employment, and missed opportunities for career development and exposure. Increased accessibility and additional support for engaging with vocational activities aligned to students' transition goals and plans were identified as strategies to remedy pandemic-related challenges (Rowe et al., 2020). Providing opportunities for skill development in self-determination was identified as essential to postsecondary goal attainment and increasing efforts to support students' related skills set may help them navigate the additional pandemic-related challenges they face.

### 1.3. Dually identified students and transition

The focus of the present study addresses a gap in the knowledge base. Following a thorough review of the extant literature, we found no studies examin-

ing the pandemic's impact on transition for dually identified students. Dually identified students face additional barriers in transition compared to their peers who receive EL services without special education and/or students with disabilities who do not also receive EL services (Trainor, Newman et al., 2019). Because special education and EL services function as two separate systems, dually identified students may experience what is considered an intersectional gap whereby services are insufficiently integrated (Stinson, 2018). Limited integration is attributed to multiple factors including the siloing of special education and EL educators and the complex logistics of dual services delivery (Miranda et al., 2019). For example, one recent study found that dually identified students' transition planning often occurred with parents outside of school, disconnected from school transition planning (Trainor et al., 2022). Despite the identification of evidence-based transition interventions such as early work experiences and family involvement in planning (Mazzotti et al., 2015), dually identified youth have not consistently been included in intervention studies; both their individual characteristics and educational contexts are in need of further research (Trainor, Carter et al., 2019). Results suggested that leveraging home experiences to inform and guide school-based transition planning could reduce preparation gaps.

Given the limited knowledge base on the experiences of dually identified students in transition, both generally and during the pandemic, we conducted interviews with students, their parents, and their teachers. The following question guided this analysis: *What were the experiences of dually identified students in transition during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

## 2. Method

This ethnographic interview study is part of a mixed-methods multiyear study of the transition to postsecondary education of dually identified students in a large northeastern city in the United States. For this analysis, we focused on one purposefully selected case, an appropriate approach when a closely bounded set of data is representative of a larger theme (Patton, 2015). This case was representative of the challenges faced by a dually identified student who was transitioning out of high school during the pandemic.

### 2.1. Procedure

In the fall of 2017, researchers received permission from both university and school district review boards to conduct research in a large metropolitan school system where 19% of all students receiving special education services also received EL services. In the first year, data collection consisted of preliminary interviews of principals and other educators from six schools whose leaders voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. During the following two years we visited these schools and interviewed participating students, parents, and teachers. In the final stages of data collection, the COVID-19 pandemic began.

### 2.2. Sample

As researchers, we were able to confirm participants' receipt of special education and EL services, however, we were not granted access to disability- and EL-specific documents. This case study is based on the interviews of Zerlina, one of 26 dually identified students in the qualitative study, and her mother, Ms. Cabrera. Mother and daughter used general terms to describe learning challenges and having an IEP, but neither focused on a specific disability category of service. Zerlina was interviewed when she was a senior in high school and her mother was interviewed about a year later, as Zerlina embarked on postsecondary education at a local community college. The family, originally from Ecuador, spoke mostly Spanish at home.

### 2.3. Data collection

Student participants were interviewed twice, once in the fall and once in the spring. Student participants were asked to nominate teachers and parents or guardians who knew them well and could speak to their transition planning. Adults were interviewed once and all interviews were between 45 minutes and one hour. We used an open-ended interview protocol that included the following example question, "What are some of your goals for life after high school?" Questions based on the extant transition literature included, "What are some of the accommodations on your IEP and do you see yourself using this support in college?" We also asked students about bilingualism and related educational and career goals. Interviews conducted after the pandemic-related school closures also included questions about how students were navigating transition during the pandemic. In the larger

study, participants' languages included Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, English, and Spanish; each selected the language in which they were interviewed. A bilingual member of the research team interviewed Zerlina in English and Ms. Cabrera in Spanish.

### 2.4. Data analysis

Our team approach to analysis, following transcription and translation, included multiple readings of interviews during which we created a codebook of terms and associated operational definitions (Miles et al., 2014). We conducted both inductive and deductive coding, analytic memo writing, and iterative reviews of emergent themes that are associated with a grounded theoretical approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During the coding process, we met weekly and discussed coding until consensus agreement of codes and their application was reached. Once initial coding was complete, we conducted a constant comparative analysis for the purpose of identifying the relationships among codes and across interviews (Miles et al., 2014). During this second-level, relational coding (Miles et al., 2014), Zerlina's case emerged as an important, representative case because it demonstrated the challenges many dually identified students experienced as they planned postschool transition. Zerlina's case was also a "critical case" (Patton, 2015, p. 243), because it illuminated a phenomenon (i.e., transition during the pandemic) in ways that provided insight into what likely occurred across other cases with a common set of circumstances and contexts.

We took multiple measures to ensure the trustworthiness of our analysis. We employed reflexivity throughout the project, examining our positionality in relation to the participants, being explicit about our use of theory, and working as a team to identify multiple and contradictory perspectives of team members, participants, and mentor texts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Due to the stoppage of data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic, member-checking was limited. We were able to triangulate student and parent interviews and we used field notes to confirm contextual details.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Case study: Zerlina and Ms. Cabrera

As the first wave of the pandemic surged throughout 2020, Zerlina Cabrera was one of nearly 6.3

million American high school students with disabilities (U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services [OSERS] and U.S. Department of Education, 2021), many of whom were transitioning out of high school and into adulthood. Similar to approximately 12% of all youth with disabilities (OSERS and U.S. Department of Education, 2021), Zerlina was identified as a student who qualified for both special education and EL services.

Although formal transition planning is a required part of the individualized education program (IEP), interviews with Zerlina and her mother revealed that information about both special education and EL services during the transition to further education and employment appeared to be incomplete and shared inconsistently between home and school. Instead, Zerlina stated that she sought support from the college counselor at her school to get clarity about the pathway to reaching one of her career goals—becoming a film director. Another one of Zerlina’s goals was to become a pastry chef and Zerlina’s bilingual special education teacher mentioned that she might be eligible for a VR program in baking. According to Zerlina, her mother wanted her to pursue a career in nursing. Overall, Zerlina considered herself to be an engaged student; she participated in film club and maintained a job during the summer months.

Separately, both daughter and mother acknowledged that Zerlina’s career goals concerned Ms. Cabrera. Yet Ms. Cabrera did not mention that she had connected with the college counselor for additional information about Zerlina’s postsecondary options. She agreed that she had concerns about Zerlina’s career pathway to movie director, but she had not been present when Zerlina met with a college counselor. Also, while she had familiarity with VR services, she was unsure about the availability of the VR baking program. For her part, Zerlina, preferring a two-year community college option in preparation for movie directing, did not pursue the VR baking path. As indicated in the interviews, both mother and daughter shared some ideas about the future, but the specific information about objectives or next steps in planning seemed elusive.

Additionally, the divergent opinions about the best path forward during transition did not receive full attention in formal transition planning meetings. From Ms. Cabrera’s perspective, concerns stemmed from the financial stability of Zerlina’s career choice. Zerlina interpreted her mom’s concern differently. She said, “I tell [my family] about the program for being a director and they say that it’s not a good

career because it’s difficult for a female director to get into the movies, that it’s tough and stuff like that.” At home, rather than in an IEP meeting, mother and daughter had discussed many aspects of further education including which of her career interests were most likely to result in personal fulfillment and financial stability, the pros and cons of attending college away from home, and attending a community college. Still, planning that occurred prior to the pandemic was disjointed; home- and school-based conversations diverged and occurred separately.

Despite differing goals during her senior year, Zerlina and her mom thought her secondary grades were strong and indicated that Zerlina was on the path to college. Zerlina picked up some information about postsecondary education and services for students with disabilities. She said,

They tell me that there’s an office but I don’t know where the name... Yeah but it helps you to accommodate or or in college or in your classes because you need to tell them that you have an IEP in high school so you can have the accommodations.

Subsequently, Ms. Cabrera revealed that she was also unsure about the availability of postsecondary accommodations and how to locate and secure them. With regard to EL services, Zerlina said she had not considered how being bilingual would factor into her career trajectory or postsecondary education. Ms. Cabrera would later say that although she considered Zerlina to be a strong English speaker, she thought EL services in college would be very helpful for her daughter. Interviews did not evidence transition planning about EL services or accommodations, or the advantages of bilingualism in postsecondary education and employment. As high school was drawing to an end for Zerlina, she sought advice from an older sibling in college and pursued her goals, with her mother’s support and without much formal transition planning, somewhat independently.

After the pandemic began and it was clear that closures would be lengthy in duration, Ms. Cabrera observed that her daughter needed both academic and social emotional support. Ms. Cabrera worried about her daughter and saw that barriers to regular contact with school personnel, both at the secondary and postsecondary levels, meant that any effort toward progress was “up to her [Zerlina].” Ms. Cabrera not only found it difficult to locate support services after high school, but she also wondered whether this was her role. Ms. Cabrera said, “...in high school they explained to me that when they [students] enter the

university she would have to do her own thing by herself. ... I was always telling her, if you need help, go ahead and do it." Yet, almost immediately, Ms. Cabrera noticed that the content of online college courses overwhelmed her daughter. She thought that her daughter would benefit from EL services at the community college, but she was not sure what would be available and she was not familiar with the typical college courses. She said, "I don't know directly when it comes to being in a [postsecondary] school what kind of vocabulary they use. If on any occasion it was difficult and she does not say it or does not understand it, that is when she may get stuck."

Ms. Cabrera's concerns were heightened when she noticed changes in Zerlina's self-motivation and shifting goals. Zerlina stopped attending an online course in psychology from the community college and returned to her previous interest in baking. Partly in response to the pandemic's constraints on her employment, Zerlina started baking for neighbors to earn money. She began to shift her career focus to catering baked goods, a career that she could pursue from home. Ms. Cabrera worried about the changes in her plans but in an effort to be supportive, she and Zerlina watched YouTube videos on baking techniques and put this knowledge to use. Early successes, however, failed to transfer into a sustainable business model. Ms. Cabrera encouraged her daughter but she wanted her daughter to return to postsecondary education in the future. She said,

When the whole pandemic started, she began to be interested in baking and everything. I support everything she wants to do, because it's important to me that when she's an adult, for her to have something to sustain herself ... for me the most important thing, that she also finishes her university or college or whatever she can to have a good.... a higher education. But many times I don't know if it's because she can't keep trying or if sometimes she is regressing.

Ms. Cabrera also found it worrisome because she observed that Zerlina seemed reluctant to seek help. She was particularly concerned because Zerlina seemed to avoid asking for assistance and self-advocating during the online community college course and when requesting and following through with job applications. According to Ms. Cabrera, ongoing local pandemic-related closures of businesses, institutions, and public spaces began to factor heavily in Zerlina's postschool decisions and subsequent experiences. When she noticed that Zerlina

became isolated from both high school and community college peers and teachers, Ms. Cabrera worried about Zerlina's preparedness and fit with the remote community college experience. Ms. Cabrera's inexperience in higher education, however, made her cautious about advising Zerlina on the topic. Her concerns about Zerlina's learning challenges resurfaced. Ms. Cabrera stated that her contact with school personnel had been minimal during high school and entirely absent during the pandemic. Despite Zerlina's intentions to restart her studies next year, Ms. Cabrera was unsure, "Having almost a year out of being out of school right now, I really don't know."

The pandemic impacted the end of Zerlina's high school career and the first years of her transition into adulthood. Ms. Cabrera said that Zerlina seemed to lose sight of her goals and become less focused on her future. Ms. Cabrera said, "How do I tell you? She was a bit unenthusiastic because she was no longer doing anything." At this point, Ms. Cabrera was worried that Zerlina would give up. As the pandemic surged and retreated, both transition and vocational services seemed to be out of Zerlina's reach. Ms. Cabrera recalled that teachers had connected Zerlina to vocational services, but they had yet to receive any responses following an initial meeting. Meanwhile, as Zerlina waited, she lost direction and traction in pursuit of her goals. Ms. Cabrera, concerned about the future, wondered if additional support services existed. She said what her daughter needed was "a type of counseling that can explain to her what awaits her when she is more adult."

#### 4. Discussion

The findings from this representative critical case study present both a challenge and an opportunity to the field regarding VR and postsecondary preparation for dually identified students. First, while the pandemic has exacerbated issues of unemployment and access to postsecondary education for individuals with disabilities, our results suggest that these issues did not begin in the pandemic. Rather, this case illustrated that formal planning at school did not provide a strong foundation of resources and connections for students and families to use independently after leaving school. Further, transition planning and support for dually identified students may need to be fine-tuned to address how both disability and language should be addressed in postsecondary education settings. Identifying potential postsecondary

supports in both disability and language learning may address unanticipated challenges and changes, such as preparing for language and disability supports in postsecondary settings. Communicating this with immigrant parents who have not experienced US postsecondary education firsthand is a key contribution to parents' ability to support their children.

The difference between secondary entitlement and postsecondary eligibility presents confusion for parents, further complicating students' and families' approach to accessing postsecondary education and other transition services (U.S. Department of Education and OSERS, 2020). As with previous studies of family involvement in transition planning (Trainor, 2010), this case study provides evidence of this confusion specific to immigrant families and it underscores the need for using transparent and culturally responsive information and communication tools so that students and parents understand their changing roles after high school graduation. Secondary educators may consider how to educate students and families on what rights and resources are available after graduation and also how to provide explicit instruction in self-advocacy. Educators may consider, for example, possible barriers to accessing services, and work with students to role play and problem solve through these barriers so that students are prepared to navigate them.

This case study provides additional evidence that the pandemic created obstacles to transition services. Preliminary research demonstrates that remote services delivered in a relatively brief time period can support positive postschool outcomes, underscoring the importance of deliberately designing services with both disability and remote technology in focus (Kaya et al., 2021). This case study showed that although families may have accessed information independently online, remote connections with schools were limited for recent graduates. Rowe et al. (2020) suggested that remote technology for the purpose of communication could provide a conduit for redressing opportunities to plan that were missed during the pandemic. Community-based agencies, educators, and families may find that remote meetings could be a tool to reconnect with students who left school during the pandemic. Identifying recent graduates and providing them with the adequate resources to reacclimate into their postsecondary education or career goals and opportunities is key. Moving into new systems of support can be difficult in the best of times and efforts to correct lost opportunities should be made (Rumrill et al., 2021).

Finally, our findings, in alignment with the work of Chavira and colleagues (2016), point to the strength of immigrant families as a source of support and encouragement for one another when striving for postschool success. Particularly during the pandemic, family members, though isolated from adequate services, remained connected with a heightened awareness of their children's struggles. The strength of familial ties and support presents an opportunity for more closely aligning home and school transition planning (Romano et al., 2023). Robust supports in the transition process during high school are needed to support preparedness and self-determination during transition, whether during a crisis such as the pandemic or during regularly occurring transition contexts. Productive home-school collaboration requires that families have insight into the school-based conversations that are occurring about a student's future. This case demonstrated that when transition planning efforts between home and school diverge, familial support of young adults' goals may be diminished. Research has long advocated for educators' and VR counselors' increased awareness and skill in understanding both cultural preferences with regard to communication, self-determination, and futures planning, and the systemic barriers faced by students from historically marginalized groups who continue to face discrimination and under-resourced secondary schools (Trainor et al., 2019). As illustrated in this case study, the pandemic exacerbated these hardships for historically marginalized communities (Lopez et al., 2021). Bolstering self-determination is evidence based and ways that are culturally sustaining can strengthen goal attainment as young adults leave school (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2017).

#### *4.1. Limitations and implications*

This study has several limitations. First, interviews provided important insights into individuals' perceptions and experiences prior to and during the pandemic, but we did not have access to students' transcripts or IEPs. This information would help contextualize the interview content. Second, we were limited to pre-pandemic teacher interviews and did not have access to interview VR counselors. Additional data would allow for greater depth when analyzing this case and enhance our understanding of the impact of the crisis.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite the limitations, this study is useful in shaping practice. The findings underscore the importance of developing self-determination and culturally sustaining family engagement during times of crisis such as a pandemic. First generation immigrant families may need pointed transition and postschool VR access guidance. Our study points to the importance of VR programming and sustained communication with educators and families during transition. Workplace supports and transition planning are in the purview of VR; preparing for pandemic-altered work environments, such as hybrid or remote careers, may require new tools (Kaya et al., 2021).

This study also informs further research. Examining how VR services are connected to secondary special education programming is needed. Dually identified students who resist labeling may forgo services and/or may be ineligible in adult service systems. We need to know more about postschool VR eligibility and use and how schools can make the transition from entitlement programs to eligibility programs easier for all families to understand, including those whose parents may not have experienced US schools firsthand. Our findings showed that additional collaboration is needed, but more research is needed to ascertain whether VR counselors are prepared to address systemic barriers experienced by multilingual and immigrant populations. Understanding specifically what targeted supports are needed is essential at this moment as we identify strategies for supporting students in the transition process.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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## Ethics statement

This research was approved by New York University's Institutional Review Board and University Committee on Activities Involving Human Subjects, Office of Research Compliance in response to application IRB-FY2017-957.

## Informed consent

Participants were fully informed and provided written consent to participate in this research.

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