Early college high schools: A proposed solution to secondary transition services

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study examines the challenges facing rural secondary schools in transitioning youth from high school to post-secondary education and careers, and whether the interventions, strategies and support built into the Early College High School could offer a solution to this long standing challenge to better meet the needs of special education students.

Keywords: early college high school, secondary transition services, special education, rural schools

INTRODUCTION

Historically, students with disabilities have remained either underserved or unserved in our nation's schools. Students with special needs make up approximately 13% of the student population in the United States (Diamet, 2014). Transition services focus on post-high school outcomes, and are just one of many efforts focused on supporting special needs students once they matriculate from K-12 public school settings. Transitioning itself poses difficult challenges even in the most opportune situations. With rural districts making up 19% of our nation's schools (Hutchins & Akos, 2013), meeting the needs of rural special needs students' is further exasperated by the lack of available resources.

It has always been difficult for students with special needs to meet the requirements for a post-secondary education. To address this issue, Postsecondary Educational Programs (PSE) for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) have been implemented. The purpose of these PSEs is to support students with IDD in post-secondary educational opportunities. These programs are predominately available at community colleges or research universities. Problematic is the fact that only one-third of these programs are offered as dual-credit courses through high schools (Plotner & Marshall, 2015) which, according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act's amendments of 1997, transition services need to begin at the age of 14 (Kohler & Field, 2003). In order to transition these students earlier, especially in rural settings, post-secondary opportunities need to be made available earlier. Additionally, according to Plotner and Marshall (2015), directors of such programs have little research as a basis for program development with regard to developing PSEs and their integration with post-secondary educational opportunities.

In 2002, the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, along with other corporate and foundation sponsors, began the Early College High School Initiative. Initially, this program was designed to help students classified as "at-risk." These students are considered underrepresented (Berger et al., 2013), and are usually students of color, are first-generation college, or of low socio-economic status. This program has shown tremendous success, as shown by the research done by the American Institutes for Research.

Special needs students by law have to be treated as individuals. The appeal of the ECHS is that it offers the opportunity to educate or train these students, in a familiar setting, or in a setting with familiar people. The necessity of transitioning services is much more obvious for students with more "noticeable" issues. Often though, students that *just* suffer from some type of learning disabilities are in as much of a critical situation for postsecondary academic assistance, due to the fear of failure.

In an effort to respond to the problem facing rural secondary schools in transitioning youth from high school to post-secondary education and careers, this study investigated the feasibility of mirroring students with disabilities transitional process with that of the Early College High School.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this case study was to explore the perspectives of educators regarding whether the support and structure of the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI) could incorporate or provide the framework for rural transitional programs for students with special

needs. This study will potentially fill a void in the research literature has with regard to the integration of programs that would provide students with special needs transitional services in their post-secondary life (Plotner & Marshall, 2015).

Transitional planning, implementation, and success is emerging as one of the areas of concern and more litigious areas of special education. Transition services prove to be difficult to implement, especially in rural areas. In order for a successful transition to transpire in any school setting rural, urban or suburban, certain steps and intervention opportunities must take place. According to Kohler and Field (2003), these include "student-focused planning, student development, interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration, family involvement, and program structure and attributes." The focus of this study is on transition services in rural districts. Therefore the purpose of this study was: 1) To examine the strengths and limitations of the Early College High Schools; 2) To determine the feasibility of mirroring rural transitional services on that of the Early College High School.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was originally enacted in 1975, in order to address the educational achievement of special needs students. Through the years, IDEA has been reauthorized on numerous occasions. However, in spite of this stringent legislation, special needs students continue to fall behind in regards to employment and overall quality of life (Kohler & Field, 2013). In the 2011-2012 school year approximately 80% of high school students graduated, as compared to the much lower 61% graduation rate for students with disabilities. Across the nation, 13% of the high school student body is composed of special needs students. The actual graduation rate of these students varies significantly from state to state, from a low 24% in Nevada to 81% in Montana (Diament, 2014). Overall, the dropout rate for these special needs students is twice as high as their general education peers (Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2002).

With the reauthorization of IDEA of 2004, an explanation of transition services for students with disabilities was outlined. IDEA provides that students with special needs over the age of 16 are each required to have an Individualized Transition Plan (ITP). These plans are to follow a coordinated set of procedures that include the improvement of students' functional and academic skills in order to promote the effective transition from secondary schools to post-school life. In addition, the plan is to be based specifically on the student at hand, focusing on his/her strengths, interests and inclinations. Finally, IDEA provides that the transitional plan should include any necessary instruction, experience, related services, employment or other services needed to facilitate an easier and successful transition to adult life (Wells, Sheehey, & Moore, 2012).

The limited research that is available has shown that districts with limited funds and opportunities for these students face compounded challenges specifically in rural areas. Issues include: a lower priority on actual job placement (Morgan & Openshaw, 2011); lack of exposure to post-high school options; limited knowledgeable professionals; limited course options, and, limited access to governmental services, and geographic barriers (Baugher, Manila, & Nichols, 2008). This resource deficit extends to include inadequate transportation for students to receive any type of trade training (Collet-Klingenberg & Kolb, 2011).

Currently, although 20 years in the making, PSEs are beginning to surface, and, as of 2013, approximately 220 programs exist. This has been achieved in part by the financial,

legislative and philosophical support they have been given. Originally PSE's were not available to students with intellectual or developmental disabilities this in part was due to the lack of support available for these students. Today though, they can be found in community, technical, and liberal arts colleges, and large universities. Approximately one-third of PSE's are opting for a dual enrollment situation for special needs students from the ages of 18 to 21 (Plotner & Marshall, 2015). According to Plotner and Marshall (2015), many schools struggle with the integration of PSE programs, and "there are few, if any, researched-based guidelines to help program developers prepare and plan adequately for the postsecondary programs" (Plotner & Marshall, 2015, p.59).

Declining graduation rates among general education students, along with students graduating and not being "college ready" called for a reform of the current high school model. In 2002, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, along with the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation and the Kellogg Foundation began the implementation of the Early College High School Model. This program was designed to bridge the gap between high school and college for students that were either underrepresented or disadvantaged. These students would include first generation college attendees, low socioeconomic students, minorities, or students deemed at risk (McDonald, & Farrell, 2012). Currently, according to the website Early College High School Initiative, there are approximately 240 ECHS in the United States, 107 in Texas alone (although in Texas this number is growing rapidly). While still relatively in its infancy, the ECHS has been shown to have a statistically significant increase in high school degree attainment, high school achievement in English/language arts, college enrollment, college degree attainment, and developmental education (Berger et al., 2013). As part of the ECHS program, students are enrolled in small classes – no more than 100 per grade level, the curriculum and instruction is carefully designed for both high school and college courses, ample support and personalization with an emphasis on individualized student needs (Berger et al., 2013).

Since the vision of ECHS is to help those students underrepresented in the college world, it would stand to reason that this may be the opportunity to correct a long standing issue with transitional services for students with special needs. This proposal has yet to be made so current research is non-existent. For the purposes of this study, research has focused on transitional services for students with special needs in rural areas, the lack of resources for these rural districts, and the interventions and strategies the ECHS is geared towards.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This qualitative case study (Patton, 2003) was originally begun to try and focus on the Early College High School and its impact on the different types of at-risk youth. Having known little about the ECHS, the researcher looked to the Texas Education Administration (TEA) for the definition of "at-risk" as based on the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). The TEA website was able to provide all the at-risk indicators. As the researcher continued to collect and research data with regard to the ECHS initiative, the magnitude of the project was soon realized, and then started to falter in the overall process. It was in reading Lincoln and Guba (1985), that the researcher realized this was indeed, part of the process, and noted that, "Designing in the naturalistic sense, as we shall see, means planning for certain broad contingencies without, however, indicating exactly what will be done in relation to each" (p.226).

It wasn't until the end of looking at all the research that the problem so muddied in the researcher's brain, began to clarify itself and focus on students with special needs. In effect, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) "a problem is more than a mere question" and is "resulting from the interaction of two or more factors…that yields a perplexing or enigmatic state"(p. 226).

ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

The role as a researcher began strictly as an "observer," being firmly on the outside of the observation, gathering facts and sorting through information. As time continued and more information was dispersed, the researcher's position began to slightly shift towards the role of observer-participant. This happened as a personal bias towards special education began to interfere. The researcher began to see how the ECHS could serve as a pivotal point in secondary transition services. The researcher than approached the norm of observer-participant, as noted by Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen (1993), "in most instances the naturalistic researcher will choose a role in the middle …as either participant-observant or observant-participant" (p. 96).

PARTICIPANT SELECTION

Purposive, convenient, sampling was used to select the two initial participants for interviews (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993). As previously stated, the researcher initially chose to study the ECHS model, in regards to specified at-risk youth. Through connections and the new implementation of an ECHS campus in the researcher's geographic area, an administrator and counselor were asked and agreed to interviews. The opportunity to continue interviewing a third party, consistent with the selection of the original two participants through the use of the snowball or opportunistic sampling "following new leads during fieldwork" (Erlandson, et al., 1993), was utilized. This occurred when the counselor suggested another party that would be able to offer additional information. However, as the purpose of study shifted, so did the choice for the third interview. This occurs naturally, as explained by Guba and Lincoln (1989), "respondents are selected "serially" (one at a time) and "contingently" (based on what has been learned from previous respondents)" (pp. 91-92). For this reason, the third respondent, a rural transition specialist, was chosen in order to better understand and explore the potential connections between the transition process and the ECHS.

SITE SELECTION

The site selection for the interviews was done predominately for the convenience of the respondents. The first two interviews were conducted on the respondents' home campuses in their offices. Although done for convenience, the sites chosen allowed the researcher to enter into the realm of the respondents' world and "maximize the opportunity to engage" (Erlandson, et al., 1993). While waiting for the respondents and during the time of the interview the researcher was able to observe the setting of an ECHS, including the offices themselves, the students, and the "personality" of the various stakeholders of that particular campus. Field notes and personal journaling supported the triangulation and hence the trustworthiness and credibility of the data collection.

DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

The data collected for this small-scale study included both interviews and document and records analysis. In pertaining to the interviews, three respondents were chosen based on the focus of the study. The interview data was gathered through digital recordings and transcription. The use of the recordings insured fidelity, which allows "the investigator later to reproduce exactly the data as they become evident," and is "clearly the greatest fidelity" that "can be obtained using audio or video recordings" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 240). The second half of the data collection process entailed formatting the research into documents usable and relevant to the study. In discerning the information, a synthesis matrix was created in order to focus on three specific areas in order to identify overlapping features. These identified areas included: rural schools lack of resources, secondary transition services, and ECHS's comprehensive support systems.

DATA ANALYSIS

According to Erlandson, et al., (1993), "the researcher him- or herself becomes the most significant instrument for data collection and analysis… this allows data to be collected and analyzed in an interactive process" (p. 39). Data analysis is not an inclusive phase, happening at a single point in time, it is constantly emerging and adjusting, initially at the beginning and developing until the end (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was evident in this study. Upon completion of the first interview, the focus began to move towards the essentials of the special needs transitional students that weren't being met, but yet were readily available in the ECHS programs. Going into the second interview, while relying basically on the original set of questions, the researcher probed deeper with regards to the presence of special needs students in the ECHS. Upon conclusion of the second interview, the emphasis in documentation and artifacts changed to focus on the rural school district's transitional problems. It was with this focus that the final respondent was chosen. This respondent reiterated the issues focusing on the rural schools lack of abilities to provide legally obligated programs to special needs students transitioning to the post-high school life.

TRUSTWORTHINESS AND CREDIBILITY

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness is a combination of qualities. There are four primary criteria for establishing trustworthiness. These include: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Within these qualities there are various techniques that can be used in order to create trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

For the purpose of this small scale study the information received during the interview process was triangulated with the information gathered during the documentation process. During the evaluation of the available literature on ECHS, the realization came that the information available was not, in some instances current with regards to the ECHS. For example, the types of ECHS operating as of 2015, and noted during the interviews, is not consistent with the prevailing definitions found in the available research. Finally, although not prolonged engagement, in regards to the interview/study itself – a professional relationship did exist with one of the interviewees; this allowed the interviewee to speak freely and honestly.

FINDINGS

Respondent #1

Respondent #1 currently serves as an early college high school counselor in a rural, predominately low socioeconomic, Hispanic school district. She began her educational career as a high school social sciences teacher. She taught for ten years in various urban high schools in Houston, Texas. Her educational opportunities consisted of teaching at charter, public and early college high schools. In addition to teaching at several types of high schools, she also taught at opposite ends of the economic spectrum, both affluent districts, and urban, Title I, 100% African-American schools. Respondent #1 has a vast amount of experience in dealing with a wide array of educational programs.

Respondent #2

Respondent #2 is a female administrator, employed by a rural district. According to a previous Texas Education Agency Report Card, this district had approximately 400 high school students, of which approximately 92% are Hispanic. In her educational career, Respondent #2 spent twelve years as a high school teacher, before being promoted into an administrative position as Dean of Instruction for a middle school campus. The following year she was promoted to assistant principal, and subsequently to principal – while remaining at the same middle school campus. During the summer of 2014 she was offered the position of principal of the newly formed Early College High School, which is where she is today.

Respondent #3

Respondent #3 spent seven years as a classroom teacher, serving in resource, inclusion, and life skills settings. She currently serves as a first year transition specialist for a rural special education cooperative. This cooperative serves nine rural South Texas districts. As a first year transition specialist, although limited in her experience, her training is current and factual. One interesting point made during the interview is that special education secondary transitioning is on areas of concern with regard to special education litigation facing schools today. As a transitioning specialist it is her job to provide instructional and transitioning support to special education teachers.

RESULTS

The focus of this case study was to ascertain as to whether the early college high school would be appropriate to help provide rural transition services for secondary special needs students. Upon completion of the interviews and research documentation a few themes began to emerge. The two themes concentrated on are ultimately the same, yet decisively different. Both themes are centered on "supports." The positive includes the built-in supports offered with the ECHS, encompassing the additional intermediary step that is so desperately needed to evoke a successful transition for the special needs students in their postsecondary adjustment. On the negative for the special needs student is that the ECHS is a rigorous, pre-collegiate experience

that requires dedication and hard work, which necessitates the current built in supports for the general education student to be successful, yet alone the students with special needs.

The ECHSs offer additional comprehensive and supplemental support systems to their administrators and students than that of a regular high school. In addition to a regular high school counselor and specified ECHS principal there are auxiliary parties available to help ensure student success. In the rural district served by the participants who were interviewed in this study, the ECHS has a higher education liaison, who according to Respondent #2 will:

> go between us (the ECHS) and the professors about individual students…
> anything that we need for them to understand about our kids…, let the
> liaison know and they'll call us so we can work with the student and the
> parent…

There are special needs students currently enrolled in some ECHS programs. According to Respondent #2, there are 3 special needs students of the thirty-seven students enrolled in that district's program. These students present with differing levels of difficulty and progress has been made with all. The ECHS program has offered with the additional supports the ability for social growth and acceptance. Special emphasis was made in regards to one of the students:

> …he's struggled in middle school… this year I've seen him... GROW.
> He's adjusted, he understands what's happening at the high school, what he
> needs to do for the future …the kids have really adjusted well to him, and
> work with him. They understand his gifts, and what he can do…. So
> they're now using him to help them… And so, it's been really neat to see
> those kids come along.

Furthermore, Respondent #1 shared her experiences with a program similar to ECHS in its support, but offered through a larger state institution of higher education. This program is parallel to the PSE currently being implemented to try and solve the transitional crisis. According to her, this program called PATHS, offers higher functioning special needs students the opportunity to "go to that program, live on campus, live in the dorm, and go to college." Students in this program may choose to "learn how to work as a nursing assistant in a nursing home" and be certified as a Direct Support Professional. She had a student who went through this program, who is now employed by a nursing home and living on his own – all because of this program.

On the negative side - for the special needs student is that the ECHS is a demanding, pre-collegiate environment that involves perseverance and hard work. This rigor necessitates the current built in supports for the general education student to be successful. The ECHS would likely have to work in conjunction with the existing special education program offered by the district in order to facilitate a greater success rate in transitioning the majority of these students. In supporting any students it's a fine line, as ardently expressed by Respondent #2...

> So we also have to be very careful. And while I was talking about supports
> and interventions, and while we do need to offer those… [we] were also
> being very careful, and were designing those interventions considering
> that we need to give them their opportunity to grow and to learn, and to be
> responsible… What we do for them or what we don't do for them, we don't
> want them to fail, but at the same time we need for them to be able to do
> this on their own.

Due to the lack of research on this topic, the negatives for the students with special needs, are not specifically supported by any available evidence. This negative theme is derived from the

research which requires supports for the general education student due to the rigor and demands associated with the ECHS programs.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that through the proper implementation and supports students with special needs can be aided in post-secondary transition services through the ECHS programs. This rural district in Texas, although new to the world of the ECHS shows that with a concerted effort this may truly be a solution to a long standing problem with transitioning services for special students.

The research into the use of the ECHS programs to aide in the successful development and implementation of transition services for students with special needs is non-existent. This small scale study shows that it is feasible to incorporate students with special needs into ECHS programs. Further research on a larger scale is warranted based on these results.

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