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Shannon Simonelli:

All right. I'd like to welcome our listeners back for Part Three of our interview with Dr. Robert Stodden from the Center on Disability Studies, and we're talking about transition and transition supports.

So, Bob, maybe you could talk a little bit about some of the issues and challenges that remain when we're attempting to provide transition supports for youth with disabilities.

Robert:

Sure. I'd be happy to. And you might think that after thirty years of experience in this field and activity in the field that there wouldn't be any challenges anymore. But this seems to be one of those areas that that really isn't true. So I'd like to touch on a couple of different areas and kind of see where that goes.

One of the things that has happened, actually over the last eight years or so, that has seriously impacted quite a bit of the work that was done in the eighties and nineties in the field of transition was the passage of No Child Left Behind, which is the Elementary and Secondary [Education] Act that was passed after the year 2000. In that piece of legislation, major focus was placed on academic achievement, particularly in core subject areas such as math, science, reading, those areas that sort of the three R's that it was felt that students in America's schools we're lagging, and particularly students that had learning difficulties, including many students with disabilities. That there were tremendous lags in these basic skills, and that for those students, that were having learning disabilities, particularly, there should be a refocusing of education on the three R's and on those critical academic content areas. So this federal policy that came down in early 2000 and the expectations placed on schools that students would achieve in those critical three R areas, placed a lot of pressure on schools to focus very narrowly on those basic academic subjects, with very little attention being given to other types of skills such as school-to-adult transition skills, or even using those academic skills in a way that might support students to make the transition to adulthood.

So one of the results of No Child Left Behind has been that in most of the states in the United States there's been somewhat of a de-emphasis on implementing transition skills, or focusing on transition skills, in particular in the early high school years or middle school years, of focusing students on developing awarenesses of the adult world and exploring adult environments, beginning to think about what they might want to do after school. Instead of focusing on those things, there's been a focus on developing basic skills, basic reading skills, basic math, science, and other academic subjects, often in a very unrelated way to post-school environments and things of that sort.

One of the results, or one of the negative impacts that has occurred, is that schools are doing less transition planning. Many of the things that were learned over the previous twenty years have kind of been put aside. Focus is being placed on core academics and testing students in those academic areas. And this probably has

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been a detriment to students with disabilities, and a lot of students who have been having learning difficulties.

A kind of net effect has been that teachers in schools have [kind of] seen this as an either/or situation. It's either "I prepare students for adulthood and to transition out in to employment and to be functioning adults," or "I train them in basic core academic areas."

So the focus has not been on how to bring these together, or how to use basic academics to be a highly qualified functioning adult. Instead it's become an either/or type of situation.

In the field of special education you hear discussions that either "I'm going to train my student in functioning skills, how a student is to function as an adult," or "I'm going to address No Child Left Behind requirements." But both won't occur. This has been somewhat discouraging, and it seems to be throughout the field.

So, one of the challenges I think we face today is that it's very difficult for educators, particularly special educators, to see ways of integrating academics into functional kinds of activities and skills and behaviors, doing things like thematic learning, integrated curriculum. These are things that require teachers to rethink what they do, why they're doing it, and how they do it. That's been a very difficult process, and probably the results have not been very good up to date.

Shannon:

So, like, there's been a lot of resistance from teachers to make that kind of a shift?

Robert:

Yes. I think what teachers have done is kind of dug in one direction or the other. They've decided to teach isolated academics and do drill and practice and try to improve students' performance on test scores. Or they've decided to ignore, because a certain percentage of students with disabilities can be waived from the statewide academic testing, particularly those students that have high need, but have low functioning skills. So, teachers of those students often have written off their students' participation in No Child Left Behind testing and just focused then on functional skill development.

So to some extent, students lose out a little in both directions. Either you're losing out in academic preparation and obtaining your functional skills for adulthood, or you're acquiring your core academic skills but getting no understanding of how those skills might relate to anything in adulthood, or any preparation for transitioning as an adult.

Shannon:

Right.

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Robert:

So that's a little bit of a challenge that hasn't been completely addressed in the field, even though there are some efforts to attempt to do integrated skills types of packages and things like that.

Shannon:

Is it that the issue hasn't really been put on the table in such clear a way as you've just described it? Or are people avoiding it? What would you say that is?

Robert:

Both of those things are happening.

I think the easiest route for teachers, and often school districts to take, is just to avoid it and not discuss it a whole lot. In cases where I've seen it discussed in professional meetings, it's an issue that tends to polarize people in one camp or the other, so you're either in the functional skills camp or you're in the academic skills camp. And getting people to kind of bridge those two and see that they maybe could go together, which may require the teacher to obviously change their instructional methods and how and what they teach and things like that, that's a big step, typically, for a teacher to make. And so it's not being made without a lot of assistance. Typically school districts kind of take the least restrictive path and don't address it.

Shannon:

Mm-hmm. And unfortunately the kids are the ones that are suffering in the long run.

Robert:

Yeah. The students are the ones that are kind of caught in this bind then and are probably not getting the full deck of cards in terms of the skills that they need to successfully transition.

Shannon:

Yeah. And the thing that I see from a therapeutic perspective, because I do work with some clients who are dealing with these kinds of issues, is that transition times are like a window. It's like we have this window of opportunity, and if we miss the window and go on to something else in our next steps in life, it's nearly impossible to come back and hit that window again, or should we decide to create another window of opportunity for ourselves to go back to school or something like that, it becomes more difficult than if we would've addressed it at that initial opportunity. For people struggling with this, it's difficult if you miss the window. It's like you got the window, and that's the time to really hit it.

Robert:

Yeah. And typically help that's made available, you know, support to people, is support that fits the window. So once you miss it, it becomes somewhat difficult. It's a little bit like, and you see this happening now quite a bit in postsecondary

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education, I know a lot of community colleges, the average age of students is like in the thirties. And so typically this is a group of people who are either called "late bloomers", or they're people that missed their initial window when they came out of school to go in to higher ed. And they're trying to come back. What we're learning is that their experience is very different. They're typically people that might have families, they have full-time job, and they're trying to come back to that window and pick up pieces on a part-time basis so they can improve their status in life.

Shannon:

Yeah. It becomes more difficult.

Robert:

Yeah. It's more difficult all around I think, for people providing supports and services, as well as the person attempting to do that. So anyway, that's kind of one challenge.

Another challenge that has never really been solved even though there's been a lot of solutions offered is the linkage portion of this. It seems that each of the agencies involved in the school-to-adult transition, each of them have different requirements. They obviously have different personnel. They have different funding streams, and they have different roles and functions. And given all the different things we've attempted to do, --we've been involved in several projects that are referred to as interagency team projects, where the attempt is to bring all of these linking agencies and the young person with a disability and their family together within a team, and have everyone share where they're at and try to put the puzzle and the pieces together through a teaming process. What we've found, even though there's been some success with that, is that's not a natural behavior for any of the people participating in these agencies to partake in. And, they typically don't have the skills, or any of the skills needed for this, and people do not see it as part of their role or their function. So it's very difficult to get people to actively participate in these processes and to become competent in them.

So we continue to have the challenge of students transitioning out into adulthood that have to deal, in a very disparate way, with each of these different agencies, their different requirements, different procedures, different forms, different types of services and supports that they might offer. And it remains a near impossible responsibility on the part of the student and their family members to try to figure this out and to make these linkages and put together a package that really works for a young person with disabilities. So that's a continuing challenge.

And I know there's been a lot of efforts to try to solve this, and it seems like every time you turn around you're revisiting it again, revisiting the challenge.

Shannon:

So none of it's really taken, or kind of become implemented within the system?

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Robert:

Yeah. And we actually know why in a lot of cases now, I think, why different agencies within the system don't acquire or pick up the pieces of these teaming processes, don't view this as a critical part of their role and function, and also don't naturally have the skills and behaviors that might be required, or they're not willing to acquire those skills to participate in an interagency teaming process. So it's been a very difficult one, and I think we've made some progress. A lot of models are out there, and a lot of materials have been developed, but we're still a long ways from being real successful in that.

Shannon:

Mm-hmm.

Robert:

Just to wind up, a third challenge that also a lot of energy has been placed in, is that when looking at the receiving environment, and primarily post-secondary education and employment being viewed as two of the critical reception environments,, in both of these environments there still is a tremendous lack of awareness of people with disabilities in general, the needs of persons with disabilities, the response that's important or required by those individuals to adequately receive the person with a disability. There still is a lot of work to do in both of those areas, in the employment sector and in post-secondary education.

We've done a lot of work in both of those areas, and I think one of the things we're finding in the employment sector is that often the solution probably lies with employers themselves. There are things or entities that are now emerging around the country called business leadership networks, which are groups of employers that work with other employers, so it's peer to peer, and they share information with each other about the needs of people with disabilities in employment positions or in different employment contexts. They also share what it means to be accommodating and supportive, and how that works. And that seems to have a lot more promise than having the disability community attempt to work with the employment community . And so that's maybe one promising direction; support can be given to employers to work with each other on a peer basis so that they become more familiar with the needs of people with disabilities, and more familiar with ways to respond in terms of the supports and accommodations.

The same thing is true somewhat in the higher education or post-secondary ed environment. There's been a lot of work done with assisting faculty and admissions and other counseling groups within higher ed to become more familiar with people with disabilities, more familiar with their needs and to have a better understanding of the types of accommodations and supports that might be provided so that a person with disabilities can be successful. Many projects have been funded to work on this, and some progress is being made, but there's obviously a long way to go, I think, for universities to be truly receptive and welcoming environments, supportive environments for people with disabilities.

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Shannon:

Yeah. I was going to ask you how significant that change or shift was in terms of that receiving at the university level. So it sounds like there's still quite a ways to go.

Robert:

Yeah. We currently are working on a project in the University of Hawaii system that works with faculty and faculty development offices so that we provide basic materials, we provide workshops, training sessions, information guides and things like that that are made available to faculty in all the different departments and schools and colleges in the university. But the major problem is getting faculty to see this as something important to them. I think most faculty see it as something maybe someone else might think about, or they don't have an interest or a need until they have a student in their class and they don't know what to do, or they make a bad judgment and a complaint's filed against them or something like that. Then they're interested.

Shannon:

Right. Of course.

The unfortunate thing, and this is true at all grade levels, but I teach at the university level, and what I know is that when I am creating a learning environment that is more conducive to people with disabilities learning, I'm also creating a learning environment that's more conducive for all students to be learning.

So it's really not the special case. It's really something that is good for everybody.

Robert:

Yes. And we preach that very strongly, kind of through the use of the Universal Design for Learning, or universal accommodations. And somewhat I think the lack of interest on the part of faculty reflects the broader picture, that faculty often aren't that interested in their teaching methodology; they're more focused on content, and they don't see it as equally important. So it's a little bit of a hard nail to drive home in higher ed.

Some of it has to do, I think, with looking at responsibility across the teaching and learning paradigm, that in higher education faculty tend to feel students are responsible for learning, and they, faculty, are responsible for teaching, and the two don't necessarily have to be on the same page.

Shannon:

Right.

Robert:

So it's a little bit different than what we might think in lower ed, I think, where teachers and student responsibility is in teaching and learning.

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Shannon:

Right. Well, our time is pretty much up, but I'm wondering if you could name one thing that comes to mind that you feel is a big success in the field of transition. What would that be?

Robert:

Well, there've been several projects funded that have followed students after they left high school in to the adult world. There's one project that's following five to ten years to look at success. And probably the biggest success is that we see those numbers improving tremendously over the last ten years, that young people with disabilities are entering post-secondary education at a much higher rate than ten or twenty years ago today, and students with disabilities are retaining in post-secondary education, meaning they're staying with the class and not dropping out; they're retaining at a much higher rate than ten and twenty years ago. And there's some similar data in employment. It's less, not documented quite as closely. But definitely the employment experience of a young person with disabilities today is very different than it was twenty or thirty years ago, and there's a lot of data to reflect that. So on one hand, I think we can say we've made a difference. On the other hand, there's still a lot, we could do a lot better. A lot of challenges remain.

Shannon:

Right. I hear that. Well, I so appreciate your time, not only today, but your dedication to the field. It's a very important piece in helping kids grow up. So I really appreciate it.

Robert:

Yeah. I appreciate you doing this, Shannon, and I appreciate the opportunity to be able to talk to you and to get this out in various means.

Shannon:

Wonderful. Thank you so much.

Robert:

Okay. Thank you very much.

Shannon:

Okay.