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Perceptions and Expectations of Youth With Disabilities

A Special Topic Report of Findings From the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)

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August 2007

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Executive Summary

A considerable body of research explores the relationships between subjective aspects of youth's experiences—e.g., their attitudes, perceptions, motivations, and self-efficacy—and their achievements in school (e.g., Akey 2006; Anderson, Hattie, and Hamilton 2005; Liu et al. 2006; Tuckman 1999). The related recognition that youth's attitudes are a potentially important ingredient in the successful transition of youth to early adulthood is reflected in the *National Standards and Quality Indicators: Transition Toolkit for Systems Improvement* (National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition 2005). The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), funded by the National Center for Special Education Research at the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, was initiated in 2001 to provide a national picture of the characteristics and experiences of youth with disabilities, including their self-representations[1] of themselves, their schooling, their personal relationships, and their hopes for the future. This report presents findings drawn from the first time data were collected directly from youth on these topics; they were ages 15 through 19 at the time (2003).

The large majority of information reported in this document comes from responses of youth with disabilities either to a telephone interview or to a self-administered mail survey, which contained a subset of key items from the telephone interview.[2] Data from the two sources were combined for the analyses presented in this report. A few additional items are from in-person interviews with youth conducted in conjunction with a direct assessment of their academic skills. When similar data are available, comparisons are made between youth with disabilities and the same-age youth in the general population.

It is important to note that the subgroup of youth who could respond for themselves differs in several ways from youth who were unable to respond, according to their parents.[3] For example, youth respondents are significantly more likely to have higher cognitive and self-care skills and are less likely to have sensory, physical, or communication difficulties.

In this report, NLTS2 findings address the following questions:

- How do youth with disabilities describe the kind of people they are—their feelings about themselves and their lives, and their skills and competencies?
- How do youth describe their secondary school experiences?
- How do youth characterize their personal relationships?
- What are their reported expectations for the future?
- How do these factors differ for youth with different disability and demographic characteristics?

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[1] Self-representations are "attributes or characteristics of the self that are consciously acknowledged by the individual through language—that is, how one describes oneself" (Harter 1999, p. 3).

[2] This report includes only data from youth who responded for themselves.

[3] Only group differences that are statistically significant at at least the $p < .01$ level are mentioned in the text throughout this report.

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Youth With Disabilities' Descriptions of Themselves and Their Lives

Adolescents' self-descriptions have been found to be related to multiple social and academic outcomes. To ascertain their self-perceptions, youth with disabilities were asked questions about their views of themselves, perceptions of their disability, and feelings about their lives in general.

- Between 59 and 83 percent of youth with disabilities say that each of five positive attributes are "very much" like them—being nice, being proud of themselves, being able to handle challenges, feeling useful and important, and feeling that life is full of interesting things to do. Fifty-eight percent report that they enjoyed life in the previous week "most or all of the time."
- Similarly, about 60 percent report that in the previous week they "rarely or never" felt depressed, lonely, or disliked by others.
- Approximately three in five give themselves high marks on a broad measure of self-realization that assesses how youth perceive their strengths, limitations, and confidence in their abilities and interactions with others.
- In contrast, almost 1 in 10 youth with disabilities do not consider themselves to be useful or important "at all," and 12 percent say they "rarely or never" feel hopeful about the future.
- Fewer than one-third of those who had received special education services when they were ages 13 through 16 consider themselves to have a disability or special need by the time they are 15 through 19 years old.

Self-Evaluations of Strengths and Competencies

To document the self-representations of the competencies of youth with disabilities, youth were asked to report in telephone interviews how well they perform in six specific domains: athletics, computer use, mechanical tasks, creative arts, performing arts, and self-advocacy. In addition, two subscales from the Arc's Self-Determination Scale (Wehmeyer 2000) related to the broad concepts of personal autonomy and psychological empowerment were administered in in-person interviews with youth.

- More than half of youth with disabilities report they are at least "pretty good" in the areas of performing arts, creative arts, mechanical tasks, computer use, and physical or athletic performance.
- A comparison of parents' and youth's perceptions indicates that, overall, parents tend to hold higher opinions of their children's strengths than youth hold of themselves.
- More than half of youth with disabilities report being able to tell peers their feelings when peers upset them, and almost two-thirds say they can get adults to listen to them and get information they need.
- Among out-of-school youth who acknowledge that they have a disability or special need, approximately one-third report often providing professionals with feedback on those services.

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- Half of youth with disabilities score in the high range on the measures of personal autonomy, and more than 8 in 10 have high scores related to psychological empowerment.
- Receiving instruction in transition planning and youth's level of participation in the transition planning process are not associated with higher personal autonomy or psychological empowerment scores.

Views of Secondary School

Research has demonstrated that the way youth feel about school can be related to their behavior and performance in school, outside of school, and in the years after leaving school (Albert et al. 2005; Finn 2006; Fredricks and Eccles 2006). However, little research has addressed the perceptions youth with disabilities hold of their experiences in secondary school. NLTS2 addresses this gap in the knowledge base by reporting the perceptions of youth with disabilities regarding academic challenges, interpersonal challenges, school safety, services and supports received at school, affiliation with school, and enjoyment of school.

- On virtually all measures, positive views of school predominate, and strongly negative views are held by a minority of youth with disabilities.
- The majority of youth with disabilities report not finding school particularly hard, and most report having no more than occasional problems completing homework, paying attention, or getting along with teachers or other students.
- Most find school at least "pretty safe," and most report feeling at least "pretty much" a part of their school.
- Almost half agree "a lot" that they receive the services and supports they need to succeed at school, and the majority report enjoying school at least "pretty much."
- The most negative views (e.g., having daily problems at school, finding school "very hard," or not liking or feeling part of school "at all") are held by 1 percent to 11 percent of youth with disabilities across measures, with one exception—3 in 10 youth with disabilities report they do not become involved at school, even when they have the chance.

Personal Relationships

Personal relationships can be "protective factors" against a variety of adolescent risk behaviors. NLTS2 provides the first opportunity to examine the views reported by youth with disabilities regarding their relationships with their families and friends and with other adults, and the extent to which, despite these relationships, youth report being lonely.

- For the most part, youth with disabilities report having strong, positive relationships with their parents. Parents also are the people youth with disabilities are most likely to turn to for support.
- About half of youth with disabilities report they feel very cared about by friends, and three-fourths say they can find a friend when they need one and can make friends easily. Friends are an important source of support for 4 in 10 youth with disabilities.

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- Despite these overall positive findings, a small minority of youth with disabilities report quite negative views of their personal relationships. For example, 3 percent report they feel their parents care about them very little or not at all, and more than twice that percentage say they are paid attention to by their family that little.

Expectations for the Future

NLTS2 has documented the perspectives of 15- through 19-year-olds regarding their future adult roles and their academic, occupational, and independence expectations.

- Most youth expect they will graduate from high school with a regular diploma. They are less confident they will attend a postsecondary school.
- The majority of youth with disabilities expect they will get a paid job, but they are less certain that these jobs will pay enough for them to be financially self-sufficient.
- Most youth think they "definitely" or "probably" will live independently in the future. Among youth who think they will not be able to live independently without supervision, half do not expect to be able to live away from home even with supervision.
- Expectations are related, in that youth who hold high expectations in one domain tend to hold high expectations in other domains.
- Youth tend to hold higher expectations for themselves than their parents hold for them. Despite this difference, parents' and youth's expectations are related to each other in that youth who hold higher expectations for their own futures also tend to have parents who hold higher expectations for them.

Disability Category Differences

Disability category differences are apparent on many of the self-representations examined in this report. Some of the perceptions or views youth report are consistent with the fundamental nature of their disabilities. For example:

- Youth in the other health impairment category, to which youth with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder as a primary disability typically are assigned, are more likely than those in several other disability categories to report having daily trouble paying attention in school.
- Those with orthopedic impairments are less likely to report having strong athletic or mechanical skills than computer skills.
- Youth with autism, which typically affects the ability to establish relationships with others and engage in daily activities, are less likely than those in most other categories to be involved in activities at school; they also are among the least likely to report they make friends easily or feel cared about by friends "a lot."
- Youth with emotional and/or behavioral challenges often can have relationships in which conflict is common. Consistent with this, reports of infrequently having trouble getting along with others at school and of being cared about by other adults "a lot" are

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less common among youth with emotional disturbances than among youth in many other categories.

- Youth with disabilities such as deaf-blindness, visual impairments, or orthopedic impairments are much more likely to report having a disability than youth with learning disabilities or speech/language impairments, for example.

More positive perceptions and expectations are apparent for some categories of youth with disabilities and more negative ones for others. Youth with visual impairments and those with mental retardation illustrate these differences.

- Youth with visual impairments are more likely than those in several other categories to report a strong sense of being able to handle things that come their way and to report rarely or never feeling depressed. They report little trouble getting along with others at school and a strong sense of affiliation with and level of involvement there. They tend to have high self-advocacy skills, confidence in their ability to find a friend, and a strong sense of being cared about by their friends.
- In contrast, compared with youth in several other categories, those with mental retardation are less likely to report there is an adult at school who knows and cares about them. They also are less likely than most categories of youth to be active participants in organized activities at school. Reports of feeling not very or not at all useful, not able to deal well with challenges, and rarely or never enjoying life are more common among youth with mental retardation than among those in most other categories. In addition, reports of feeling hopeful about the future most or all of the time are less common among these youth.

Despite these differences, there are some dimensions on which youth express similar views, regardless of their disability category. For example, there are no statistically significant differences across categories in the percentages of youth who report enjoying life most or all of the time and identifying strongly with a statement that their lives are full of interesting things to do.

Demographic Differences

Differences among youth with disabilities who are distinguished by gender, age, household income, or race/ethnicity are not common. For example:

- There are no differences between demographic groups in their scores on measures of personal autonomy or psychological empowerment or their feelings of competence in expressing their feelings, getting adults to listen to them, or finding information they need.
- Different demographic groups share common views of being cared about by parents, friends, and other adults and being paid attention to by their families.

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Some differences are apparent, however:

- Girls are more likely than boys to report being very sensitive to others' feelings, whereas boys are more likely to report being good athletes and having strong mechanical abilities.
- Adolescent girls with disabilities are more likely than boys to say they frequently turn to friends and to siblings for support, as are White youth relative to African American youth with disabilities.
- Youth from middle-income households more frequently turn to friends for support than do those from lower-income households.
- Employed older youth are less likely than younger peers to report turning frequently to their bosses or supervisors for support.
- Older youth are less likely than younger students to participate in activities at school.

Comparisons With the General Population

The picture of youth with disabilities presented in this report is similar to that of youth in the general population on several dimensions. For example:

- Youth with disabilities and those in the general population are about equally likely to report being cared about by parents and actively turning to them and to siblings or a boyfriend or girlfriend for support.
- The two groups also report similar levels of feeling safe at school and are about equally likely to expect to receive a regular high school diploma.

However, in several respects, youth with disabilities express somewhat more negative views, experiences, or expectations than their general-population peers.

- Youth with disabilities are more likely than youth in the general population to report having daily trouble paying attention, completing their homework, and getting along with teachers and students.
- They also are more likely to have little or no sense of affiliation with school and to report strong disagreement that they enjoy school.
- However, youth with disabilities also are more likely to strongly agree that they enjoy school.
- They are less likely than youth in general to expect to attend or complete postsecondary school.
- Regarding their relationships in general, youth with disabilities are more likely than others to report pervasive feelings of loneliness and of being disliked by others, although a minority of youth with disabilities do so.
- Nonetheless, compared with youth in the general population, those with disabilities are more likely to say they receive "a lot" of attention from their families and to report enjoying life and feeling hopeful about the future most or all of the time.

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Cautions in Interpreting Findings

Readers should remember the following issues when interpreting the findings in this report:

- The analyses presented in this report are descriptive; none of the findings should be interpreted as implying causal relationship, nor should differences between disability categories be interpreted as reflecting disability differences alone, because of the confounding of disability and other demographic factors.
- The report addresses the "self-representations" of youth with disabilities—i.e., how they describe themselves to others. The extent of discrepancy between the perceptions youth report holding and their "true" views is unknown. "Self-representations" as measured by NLTS2 should not be interpreted as objective assessments of abilities.
- Although discussions in the report emphasize only differences that reach a level of statistical significance of at least $p < .01$, the large number of comparisons made in this report will result in some apparently significant differences, even at this level, being "false positives"—i.e., Type 1 errors. Readers also are cautioned that the meaningfulness of differences reported here cannot be derived from their statistical significance.

Looking Ahead

This report provides the first national picture of the self-representations and expectations of youth with disabilities, how they differ across disability categories and demographic groups, and how they compare with those of youth in the general population. NLTS2 will continue to solicit the views of youth as they age, which will provide information to examine, for instance, how later achievements mesh with expectations and how views might evolve over time.

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