

More Seats at the Table: An Action Research Approach to Improving Post-Secondary Transition

Planning for Students with Disabilities

Elizabeth Stone-Sterling

University of Massachusetts/Boston

**More Seats at the Table: An Action Research Approach to Improving Post-Secondary  
Transition Planning for Students with Disabilities**

**Introduction - Seeing Possibility**

One day in 2000, I found myself on the back of a tractor, thirty minutes from the Canadian border being driven along a bumpy farm road by “Jim”, a young man with Autism. As we stopped to see greenhouses, pigs, logging operations and more, Jim shared his knowledge; he interacted with other workers, and he demonstrated his passion for the work. Jim wasn’t accompanied by a job coach, he wasn’t driven by his mother, he wasn’t grouped with other people with disabilities – he was doing what he loved and he was doing it well. Jim was (and still is) an integrated member of his community.

Getting to that tractor ride was an even bumpier road through the public school system. A system that told his mother that Jim had “learned as much as he was going to” and needed to exit school despite continuing to be eligible for supports. His parents’ fight to keep Jim’s post-secondary goals at the center of his planning took them all the way to the State Supreme Court – where they did not prevail. The system was about “good enough” and Jim and his family could not accept anything less than meaningful community integration.

One of the defenses that the school had used for their lack of good post-secondary transition planning was that the resources that Jim needed simply did not exist in extreme rural Maine. This was certainly true about paid social services; but surrounded by generational poverty, rural Mainers have had to be resourceful and hard-working. Extremely independent and proud, the region’s citizens aren’t ones to ask for help, but they know how to support each other

Running Head: MORE SEATS AT THE TABLE

and Jim was one of their own. This support meant that to get to a job shadow twenty miles away, a neighbor would drive him. A brother served as a job coach to teach new skills. A retired teacher continued to work with him on his academic skills. None of these people had been on Jim's required special education transition plan – but they all were critical to helping him to move forward. Riding along in the back of the tractor, I began to have an epiphany about supporting young people with disabilities; maybe throwing more money and programs at the issue wasn't what was needed to fix the problem of isolation and poverty among people with disabilities – maybe the answer was as simple as looking at the “natural” supports that were hidden in plain sight.

This idea was germinating in my head as I enrolled in “Action Research for Educational, Professional, and Personal Change”. As a doctoral student in the School of Global Inclusion and Social Development, I already had 20 years of work with transition-age students with disabilities and the systems that support them. Research just for research's sake seemed to me - at my stage in life and career - a waste of time and resources. I knew I wanted to do something that could be useful to improve outcomes for young people through strengthened transition planning and I knew that rural people with disabilities living in poverty are a marginalized population that rarely attracts the scale of resources and technical assistance needed for systems change. Action research presented an alternative; here was a way to do meaningful research while engaging rural schools, students, and families in finding the solution to their own challenges (Schmuck, 2009).

### **Situation and Inquiry**

Students with disabilities who receive special education services are required under federal law (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA) (United States Department

Running Head: MORE SEATS AT THE TABLE

of Education, n.d. ) to have an Individualized Education Program ( IEP) that identifies the transition services that are needed in order for the student to reach those goals. Transition planning for students with disabilities in rural areas can be uniquely challenging due to lack of access to transportation, service providers and accessible programs. Work in the field of inclusion of people with developmental disabilities has given rise to the concept of *natural supports*. Natural supports can be defined (California Department of Developmental Services, n.d., p.1) as:

“personal associations and relationships typically developed in the community that enhance the quality and security of life for people, including, but not limited to, family relationships; friendships reflecting the diversity of the neighborhood and the community; association with fellow students or employees in regular classrooms and work places; and associations developed through participation in clubs, organizations, and other civic activities.”

I wondered if an action research effort to change school practices through standardization of the inclusion of natural supports in the IEP transition planning process could be a way to broaden resources and expand thinking for rural youth. Using the KAQF and Evaluation Clock exercises (University of Massachusetts Boston Critical and Creative Thinking Program, n.d.), I soon identified that research has established that students with disabilities in Maine are failing to meet national standards in transition planning. Maine Department of Education monitoring data (Maine Department of Education, n.d.) revealed more district level deficiencies but did not provide individual student level data. The National Longitudinal Transition Study- 2 (NLTS2) is a searchable database of variables collected on youth as they transitioned to post-secondary lives.

## Running Head: MORE SEATS AT THE TABLE

The NLTS2 presents a picture of what happens for students (and their families) with certain characteristics after high school. This data will help to compare findings both pre-research and post. As my research will involve a variety of stakeholders (special education teachers, students and parents), I have also identified best practices in engaging parents (Family Empowerment and Disability Council, 2012) and have 10 years of raw data on use of Maine's federally-mandated parent training and information center.

Research benefits from a guiding framework or theory. I have selected two based on their applicability. The first is "Employment First" - "a framework for systems change that is centered on the premise that all citizens, including individuals with significant disabilities, are capable of full participation in integrated employment and community life" (United States Department of Labor, n.d.). The belief that people with disabilities can - and should - be active members of their communities is essential to any change effort involving students. When aspirations are low - outcomes follow (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, 2011). The second is Jolie Bain Pillsbury's "Theory of Aligned Contributions". Pillsbury's work in results-based accountability gave rise to this theory that "population level changes are most likely to occur if a core group of multi-sector-cross-agency leaders not only respond to a call to action, but also take aligned actions at scope and scale towards a result. Without alignment of actions the quest for change is just business as usual" (Pillsbury, n.d.,pp. 2-3). The success of this action research will very much depend on the alignment of stakeholders from the school with the actions of students and families. As I set out on my action research initiative, I will ask the core inquiry question of my research, "Could inclusion of non-traditional community supports in special education transition planning make a difference in post-secondary outcomes for rural students

Running Head: MORE SEATS AT THE TABLE

with disabilities?” If the answer is yes, we may be on our way to ensuring that young people with disabilities are valued members of their communities.

### **Proposing & Planning Actions**

During the proposing and planning phase of my research I will share my action research model and timeline for implementation (see the Appendix) with my three stakeholder groups so that I have buy-in to move forward with implementation of the inclusion of natural supports in transition planning. In this first stage of this first iteration, I am purposefully not including the natural supports as a stakeholder group. One reason is logistical (importance of keeping the project manageable) but the main reason is that I want to ensure that the voices of the stakeholder groups that are most directly impacted have a priority opportunity to make their needs and concerns known.

### **Special Education Teachers**

Building on the premise of my guiding theory (“Theory of Aligned Contributions”), I will adopt a “Collaborative Action Research” approach to engage special education teachers in the schools as co-researchers. For the purposes of this pilot, I will invite participation from rural high schools (preferably ones that have been identified as being in need of improvement by the Maine Department of Education). I will select two or three as pilot sites based on their responses to a brief survey sent to school administrators via SurveyMonkey. After selection, I will meet with administrators and teachers to invite engagement as co-researchers. Getting this level of buy-in from the teachers will ensure that teachers are one of the primary audiences of the research. It will also increase the buy-in of teachers who can see that the problem of poor transition-planning for students doesn’t end at the classroom door. Failure to assist young people to transition successfully translates into the community where the teachers are also residents. Calhoun (in Schmuck, 2009)

found that involvement of teachers in collaborative action research also means that the research will be shared more widely than just another dissertation in academia. One of the most promising benefits of this approach was identified by Cooley and Yovanoff (1996 in Schmuck, 2009, p.145) as the reduction of special educators' sense of isolation in doing this work with students (many of whom may have challenging behaviors and disabilities). Special education teachers understand the transition-planning requirements under IDEA, but may feel frustrated at not having the resources to meet the needs of their students. For teachers who have limited opportunities for professional development, participation in action research could be a win-win.

### **Students**

Students with disabilities who have no familiarity with the concept of natural supports will require some training on self-determination to be able to advocate for inclusion of the important natural supports in their lives as members of the transition planning process. Building self-determination skills can be done as individual or small group work using a curriculum like "Who's Future is it Anyway?" which is available free of charge from the Zarrow Center for Learning Enrichment .

### **Parents**

Education of parents on the value of including natural supports in their children's transition planning IEP meetings may take place through partnership with the state's Parent Information and Training Center (Maine Parent Federation). Having partnered frequently with the Center for training events in the past, and sitting as a representative on their multi-state grant advisory committee, I do not anticipate having any difficulty to conduct these educational events.

### **Constituency Building Epicycle**

The Proposing and Planning Phase laid the groundwork that will be built on now during the Constituency Building epicycle. Revisiting the KAQF tool - and the “Q” and “F” points of inquiry that were identified earlier - I will undertake specific activities to engage my three main stakeholders in the action research. Using strategies from Collaborative Action Research, I will engage special education teachers actively now as co-researchers in this initiative. Activities like a gallery walk of data followed by time for pair-share reflection will help the teachers connect with their own feelings about the data, and work through their own resistance that may arise. This can be particularly true when data - rather than illuminating the situation - serves to shame teachers for poor outcomes. Other activities like the “Jigsaw” could be useful as teachers read articles describing best practices in inclusion of natural supports and share their learning with each other. Release time to conduct research-related activities is a way the school administration can offer their support. Teachers from the pilot schools will also meet together to share learning, with each school’s teachers getting recognition for their involvement in the research. My past experience with building alliances with teachers has shown me that recognition for their efforts as well as “office hour” face-to-face time with the researcher can all be very useful in developing buy-in. Uncovering competing commitments (Kegan and Lahey, 2001 ) can also help to address the real reasons for resistance. These may include a teacher’s fear that his lack of skills in an area may be exposed, or that her participation this time will lead to required further activities.

Constituency-building with students can occur naturally in the school environment but it also will be useful to invite their participation in the feedback that shapes (formative evaluation) what the ultimate form of inclusion of natural supports looks like. It may be that the majority of the constituency-building comes with students at a later date after implementation when they have experience with natural supports from which they can draw. Bringing students from the



Running Head: MORE SEATS AT THE TABLE

pilot schools together for activities like the development of transition SNOW (Strengths, Needs, Opportunities, Worries) charts (a variation on the SWOT strategic planning tool) can be a way to help students think and plan for their futures while collaborating with their peers. The charts can then be brought in to IEP meetings to help guide the conversation.

Building a constituency with families can be done through follow-up open dialogue sessions, where parents can talk together about transition planning and also have opportunities to self-reflect on who they would identify as natural supports in their child's life. A variation of the multifamily psychoeducation (MFG) model (in which I have been trained) may be a structured way to demonstrate for families how best practices in transition planning may be shared and then applied within their own lives. MFG lets families uncover their own strengths and solve real problems through using each other as a network and sounding board (in effect as natural supports for each other!).

### **Implementation**

Following planning and constituency building, it is time to implement the practice of including natural supports in student transition planning. The teachers who have been identified as the co-researchers will develop letters that will go to parents and students to encourage them to invite individuals who are natural supports to the youth to participate in the IEP transition planning meeting. The letter will include an additional flyer that the parent can share with the natural support to explain the purpose of their involvement and what they can expect at the meeting. IEP meetings happen throughout the year but many typically fall in the spring for transition-age youth. This timing will work well as it will allow the fall and winter to prepare for putting the activities into practice. At the conclusion of the IEP meetings, participating parents will be sent a brief survey to gather their feedback on the new format of the meetings. During the

meetings, the special education teachers who are the co-researchers will take turns as observers and will use a rubric to collect qualitative data on meeting elements including contributions by natural supports.

### **Evaluation**

As the school year draws to a close, it will be time to revisit the Evaluation Clock and ensure that my questions, methods, and data collection have been systematic and thorough. In particular, I will examine my initial inquiry question in light of the experience of the year and new learnings gained through the inclusion of the teacher co-researchers. To evaluate the success of the implementation, I will examine the type and number of transition strategies reflected in transition plans before and after the inclusion of natural supports. In conjunction with my co-researchers, I will also conduct qualitative analysis of the parent surveys and teacher observations from the IEP meetings. Lastly the participating teachers will be invited to a structured dialogue activity to share their experiences over the life of the pilot. Once all the evaluative data is gathered, the researchers will invite all stakeholders (and the natural supports) to attend a debriefing where the school administration will hear the preliminary findings and results of the initiative. The evaluation will also identify if my guiding theory's premise held up (were the actions aligned, did that alignment result in positive change).

### **Reflection / Dialogue**

Reflection and dialogue will occur throughout the research but before engaging in a future iteration or expansion of the number of pilot schools it will be important to fully reflect on the experience of the first year. Will the inclusion of teachers as co-researchers have gone according to design? What unexpected learnings will have occurred? What will remain to be done to make this change in school practice sustainable?

### **Conclusions/Next Steps**

The promise of action research is its real-world solution-focused approach. The findings of the “More Seats at the Table” project are first and foremost important for their relevance in meeting the needs of rural students as they transition to post-secondary life. A secondary - but nearly equal - byproduct is the reinforcement of the idea that marginalized rural communities hold within themselves much strength - including the ability to solve their own problems. After the conclusion of the first iteration of the research, I will be using the findings to write (or co-write with my teacher colleagues) an article or two for publication focusing on a particular aspect of the research. I will make opportunities to present the work to date at national conferences to elicit peer feedback.

As I now prepare to move forward to prepare to undertake this research, one of my first tasks will be to find some allies for this work. They may arise naturally from the stakeholder groups that I have identified but it is more likely that I will need to be more intentional and spend some time with individuals who I trust and know to be like-minded – talking out the model, getting feedback – and importantly creating the space for dialogue and reflection. From the germ of an idea, a full-blown action research project has developed that will be a major component of my doctoral dissertation work. While action research may still be developing as a field of education inquiry (Schmuck, 2009, p.36), it is a non-traditional approach that fits for this non-traditional researcher.

## References

- California Department of Developmental Services. (n.d.). *How to develop natural supports: Natural supports...they're all around you* [White paper]. Retrieved April 22, 2016, from [http://www.dds.ca.gov/Publications/docs/Natural\\_Supports.pdf](http://www.dds.ca.gov/Publications/docs/Natural_Supports.pdf)
- Family Empowerment and Disability Council. (2012, May). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and parent participation [Issue Brief]. Retrieved from [http://www.efrconline.org/myadmin/files/fedc\\_Parent\\_Participation.pdf](http://www.efrconline.org/myadmin/files/fedc_Parent_Participation.pdf)
- Heifetz, R., Grashow, A. & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*, Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business Press.
- Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2001). The real reason people won't change. *Harvard Business Review*, 85-92.
- Maine Department of Education. (n.d.). Data warehouse. Retrieved from <http://dw.education.maine.gov/DirectoryManager/>
- National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. (2011, September). *Engaging youth in work experiences* [Practice Brief]. Retrieved from <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/innovative-strategies/practice-briefs/engaging-youth-in-work-experiences>
- National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHY). (2009, April). Questions and answers about IDEA: Parent participation. Retrieved from <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/qa2/>

Running Head: MORE SEATS AT THE TABLE

Newman, L., Wagner, M., Cameto, R. and Knokey, A.M. (2009). The Post-High School Outcomes of Youths with Disabilities up to 4 Years After High School. A Report From the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) (NCSE 2009-3017). Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Available at [www.nlts2.org/reports/2009\\_04/nlts2\\_report\\_2009\\_04\\_complete.pdf](http://www.nlts2.org/reports/2009_04/nlts2_report_2009_04_complete.pdf) .

Office of Disability Employment Policy. (n.d.). Employment First. Retrieved from <http://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/EmploymentFirst.htm>

Pillsbury, J. B. (n.d.). *Theory of aligned contributions - an emerging theory of change primer* (V. Goddard-Truitt, Ed.) [White paper]. Retrieved from <http://www.sherbrookeconsulting.com/products/TOAC.pdf>

Schmuck, R.A. (Ed.). (2009) Practical action research: a collection of articles (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

United States Department of Education. (n.d.). Individualized Education Program. Retrieved from <http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/%2Croot%2Cdynamic%2CTopicalBrief%2C9%2C>

University of Massachusetts Boston Critical and Creative Thinking Program. (n.d.). Evaluation Clock. Retrieved May 1, 2016, from Critical and Creative Thinking Program website: <http://cct.wikispaces.umb.edu/EvaluationClock>

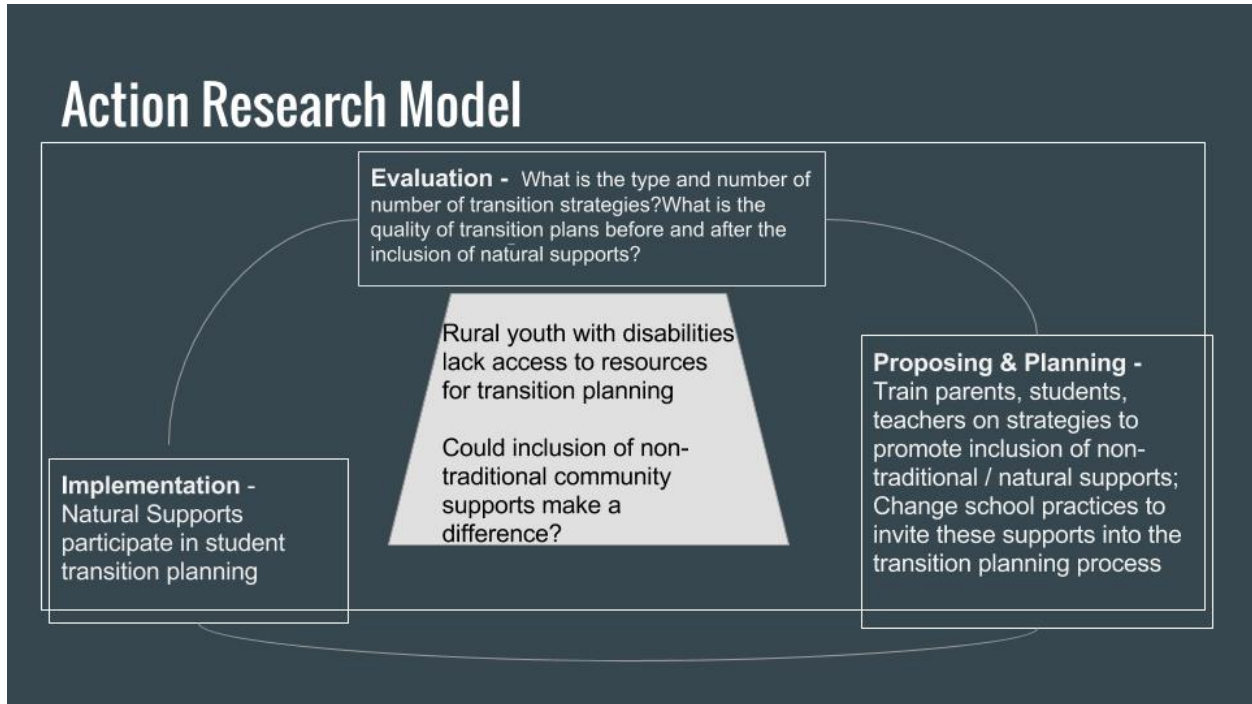
University of Massachusetts Boston Critical and Creative Thinking Program. (n.d.). KAQF. Retrieved May 1, 2016, from Critical and Creative Thinking Program website: <http://cct.wikispaces.umb.edu/KAQF>

Running Head: MORE SEATS AT THE TABLE

Zarrow Center for Learning Enrichment. (n.d.). *Whose future is it anyway?* [curriculum].

Retrieved April 22, 2016, from <http://www.ou.edu/content/education/centers-and-partnerships/zarrow/transition-education-materials/whos-future-is-it-anyway.html>

Appendix



(Figure 1: Action Research Model)

Timeline

Summer 2016 – Recruitment of pilot school districts

September 2016 – Engagement of special education teachers as co-researchers

September – December 2016 – Stakeholder engagement and training, dissemination of practice

January –February 2017 – Stakeholders practice skills

March – May 2017 – Implementation of inclusion of natural supports

June 2017 – Evaluation activities with stakeholders

July – August 2017 – Analysis by researcher/co-researchers, draft report of findings

Fall 2017 - Presentation of findings to stakeholders and school administrators, launch of V.2