

Students with Disabilities' Lived Experience of Post-Secondary Transition into the University: A Journey of Promise

Habtamu Mekonnen¹

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to understand the lived experiences of post-secondary transition among students with disabilities. Specifically, it focuses on exploring supportive factors that helped students in their post-secondary transition into the university. The study assumes that students with disabilities are inherently at promise than at risk. Hence, a strength-based approach was followed. A qualitative phenomenological methodology guided the study. Purposive sampling was employed to select 23 students with disabilities (five females and 18 males). Data were collected from students with disabilities at Addis Ababa and Adama Universities through in-depth interviews. During the process of data analysis, seven common themes have been identified within participants' description. These were care and consideration, professional attitude, realistic understanding of the self, spiritual belief, peer experience sharing, family cohesion, and resilience. For any student leaving high school, the transition involves many changes that affect future endeavours. Transition has been identified as a challenging process, yet is promising to support students to succeed in their university education. Findings suggest the need to focus on the part of stakeholders and on the strengths of students that may communicate a sense of resourcefulness and resilience. There is also the need to focus on support systems for families who have children with disabilities

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¹ Social Work (PhD), St. Mary's University: zabish07@yahoo.com

Introduction

High school experience, the early periods in the university, and the choices students are making during the transition period have paramount consequences in students' educational career. The transition into the university is a critical stage in the lives of all students and students with disabilities, in particular. This is because of the transition into the university accompanied by adolescent developmental changes as well as the move from the relative support either from families or caregivers to independent living into the university. The transition also follows a change in friendship and environment.

Education is a right for children of any kind. Access to education, however, is a key concern for most children with disabilities in Ethiopia. Less than 1% of these children have access to education (Tirwsew, 2015). One reason to be believed is that students with disabilities are incapable of learning, no matter what their origin and types of disabilities are. They are often considered as an obstacle to other students without disabilities. This problem is further exacerbated by the lack of trained teachers in special education, appropriate teaching materials, and less willingness to include students with disabilities in the regular classrooms. These conditions limit access to education for large numbers of children with visual, intellectual, hearing impairments, mental retardation and other developmental disabilities.

Those students who have already joined schools and graduated from elementary and high schools are facing varieties of challenges. They face high risk of school dropout and failure. Perhaps, the primary reason is that their educational needs during transition period were rarely addressed

(UNICEF: 2012). These students should have received guidance from home and schools during the transition process in order to succeed in the post-secondary environments. Proper guidance and support prepare students for successful transition. Successful transition means an increase in competency, confidence and achievement (Benz, Lindstrom, Unruh & Waintrup, 2004).

Many studies have described positive changes in the lives of students with disabilities, but little research has been done to understand these positive changes to post-secondary transition within the school and the family system (Johnson, 2005). In a study about transition of students with disabilities into the university, the study reported that greater enthusiastic feeling to achieve their goals, an increased ability to see life from their own points of view, being more compassionate, and being strong were factors that were observed (Baltodano, Marthur, & Rutherford, 2015). These positive transition experiences emerged to enable students to better meet their educational needs.

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experience of transition into the university for students with disabilities, and to identify factors that facilitate transition. It is assumed that if more could be understood about transition experiences of students, it would be possible to identify strategies that could be used by educators and related professionals to enhance transition in different levels of schooling. The strategies would then be implemented by the actual experiences of those living with the situation (students with disabilities) rather than by a professional judgment made at a distance from the experience. Hence, the following research questions were investigated:

- How did students with disabilities experience high school-university transition?
- What were the supportive factors that helped students in their high school-university transition?

Framework of the study

The researcher has been one of those teachers who believe that more time should be spent on rectifying the weak areas. However, emphasis on this can communicate a sense of failure, helplessness, and low expectations. It may also create dependency on outside resources and school-created solutions, and discourage students from moving in the direction of positive outcomes of learning (Mackelprang, 2019). So, the researcher focuses on students' strengths instead of overcoming their weaknesses. The approach emphasizes the resourcefulness and resilience that exist in every student rather than dwelling on what has gone wrong or placed a student at risk. It affirms that students can grow and change, and that every student has a range of abilities and strengths, which with the right support, can be mobilized to give them a better future.

Despite the increasing interest in the concept of transition, the nature and importance of transition in the domain of people with special needs has been given less emphasis in the Ethiopian context, as far as the knowledge of the researcher goes. So, there is a pressing need to understand the transition experience from high school into the university.

The assumption is that students are inherently 'at promise' rather than 'at risk', and the task of transition becomes to help them find and build on the strengths in themselves, their families and environments for optimal outcomes and positive transitions.

Research Method

A research design is a plan or strategy for conducting research (Yegdis & Weinbach, 2012). This research used a qualitative design to study lived experience of transition among students with disabilities into the university. Transition is a new phenomenon that has not been researched much in academia, at least in the Ethiopian context. This study employed a qualitative phenomenology method. The method allows the researcher to understand the meaning of students' experiences of transition. The researcher believes that students' experience of transition can only be understood as a subjective reality in their time and place. The best way researchers can understand student's transition experience is to entirely and thoroughly understand their' realities.

Participants and Data Collection

Student participants for the interviews were selected through purposive sampling from *Addis Ababa* and *Adama* Universities. A total of 23 students (five females and eighteen males) have taken part in the study. They were in the age range of 17-24 and presented with two types of impairments (visual and physical). Of the methods of data collection in qualitative phenomenological study, in-depth-interview is one of the most commonly used tools (Creswell, 1998). Hence, the current study employed interview to gather data. Interviews were conducted after having obtained oral consent from the potential participants. To keep its credibility, the researcher forwarded his understanding back to participants, in each of interviews, in order to make sure their ideas are clearly understood by the researcher.

An interview guide was prepared as a framework for the data collection. Interviews were transcribed and analysed by coding and categorization

(Kruger and Neuman, 2006). At first, an individual case analysis was done to understand each case by searching for student patterns and themes. Secondly, a search for patterns of the different cases was conducted to identify common themes from participants' descriptions. There were no predetermined assumptions into which the data were structured to fit. Similar responses of participants helped to determine major themes of the study. Common themes were reflected and substantiated with individual narrations.

Results

The analysis of students' interviews depicted that each student's experience of transition is unique in relation to their specific circumstances. The circumstances include the nature of their disability, the intensity of support both from the family and professionals, the coping strategies they used, and self-acceptance. The experience was described as difficult, frustrating, shocking, and challenging, but these experiences were metamorphosed into emotional and psychological strength, meaningfulness in life, and overall personal strengths with the passing of time. Many elements of the experience of transition were common among most of the participants. The following seven themes were identified as experiences of transition derived from the data provided by the students' descriptions of their personal experiences.

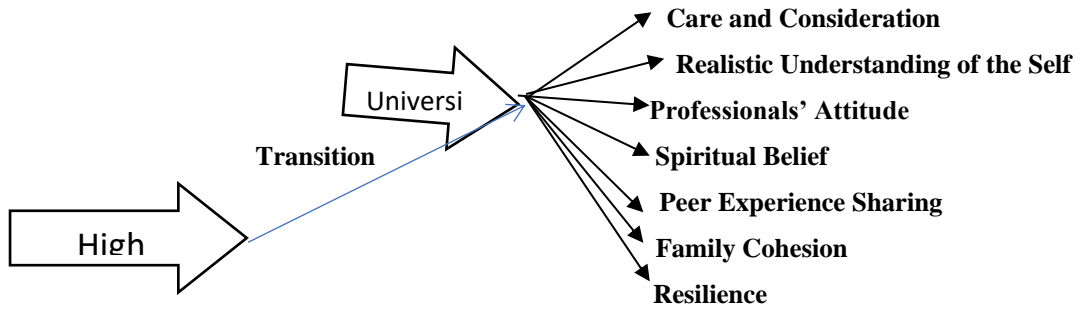


Figure 1. Major Identified Themes

Care and Consideration

Experience of transition into the university enabled students with disabilities to feel compassion, love, care, and value for life regardless of their impairment. The care and support from family and school members enriched their lives. A student with physical disability narrated his experience as:

“A high school counsellor was a generous person who made me believe I have the skill and talent. He pushed me to achieve. He made me recognize that everybody might have something very hard to do, but he expected me to do it successfully. I realized that I might not be good at some things, but I wouldn’t let myself to use my disability as an excuse [not to succeed]. The counsellor was always advising me whenever I had the chance to talk. I felt comfortable in the school. He made me realize what I was capable of and indeed I was successful”.

This particular theme revealed that students with disabilities were helped to develop a transitional attitude, empathy, love, and compassion within the family and schools’ systems.

Realistic Understanding of the Self

The other theme that surfaced from students' transition was an acceptance of the reality regarding their disability. One student expressed his understanding of his own disability based upon realistic understanding:

"I remind myself that every human life is valuable and important, that people who are physically disabled or any types of disability for that matter have a lot to do, learn and live, and that my disability is as valid as non-disabled students. I try to think myself up to just "equal" with others".

Another student gave the credit to her own strength:

"Realizing my disability strengthened my belief in myself. It has made me a tolerant person. I have become emotionally more stable and I can see that most of the experiences I have had a positive influence on me. Further she explained, in the very beginning whenever I saw my classmates [without disability], I had a deep strange sense of loss that is not easy to describe, but now I thank all who made me believe as a person of worth that enabled me to understand the reality of life".

Students' accounts provided credence to the view that a hopeful picture of the self was a reward of their realistic understanding of what they were capable of doing.

Professionals' Attitude

Different reactions toward the attitudes of professionals were found in the descriptions of participants. A student stated his feeling as:

“A few of my teachers were not happy [about my presence in the class]. There were also teachers who gave me just a wonderfully supportive.”

Another student conveyed that, *“In my high school period, teachers and others supportive staff have been very helpful in providing information and other professional help to reduce the difficulties created by the disability”*.

This theme revealed a mix of reactions among students toward professionals that indicate the need to increase professional sensitivity, empathy and understanding about disability. Yet, some of the accounts indicated that professionals had helping attitude whenever students were in need of support.

Spiritual Belief

Participants' spiritual beliefs and a sense of purpose in life offered a way for students to define, change or interpret their disability in a positive way. Their life philosophy and faith led them to believe that they had been especially selected to provide comfort and care to their own disability.

A student expressed her belief, *“I believe that I have never given anything in life that I can't manage it. I think God has a purpose in my life. I don't want to attribute to the cause of my disability to misfortunes or a punishment for wrong deeds as some people used to think. Rather my belief made me strong and visionary”*.

A student with visual impairment expressed her belief as:

“I feel that I am a gift to my family and God has his own purpose in doing that [disability]. In society's eyes, I may not perfect but I feel I am

just as perfect as others [who don't have impairment]. I enjoy my achievements”.

The students' belief system and spirituality served as a coping mechanism for the challenge of transition into the university.

Peer Experience- Sharing

The availability of peer support and the sharing of common experiences were reported to be major contributors to personal resilience and change for the students with disabilities in this study. A student with physical disability expressed his feeling, *“I usually got together with other students who have disabilities particularly similar to mine and I find it valuable because we usually talk, play and support each other. It helps me keep on track”*. This theme indicated that students with disabilities did not perceive themselves to be socially isolated. The social network of students sharing compassion and similar experiences were strong support for them.

Family Cohesion

It was clear from students' narratives that they understand their disability to be a source of unification and cohesion within the family despite challenging situations. One student described the condition of her family members: *“My mother and sister are appreciative and encouraging my commitment. We have togetherness in our family and we basically share”*. For another student, support was a distinct coping mechanism to deal with the challenge of his disability condition: *“I think that my disability made my parents closer. They celebrate my accomplishments with our extended family. I guess it made us more conscious of things like family togetherness and doing things together”*. The present theme goes along with the notion

that family support and family's positive attitude, sharing, and practical help were source of transition and satisfaction for the students' accomplishments. In return, students' accomplishment helped the family to function well.

Resilience

Each interviewed student conveyed a spirit of bravery when faced with difficulties in and outside the class. A student with visual impairment said, *"I had a terrible time with a few of my classmates at school, because they were bullying through my disability, and I am grateful I had support from the school counsellor."* Although the participant students recognized their limitations, it was important to note that they did not overstate them, and instead, showed obsessive determination in using their remaining abilities.

A sense of determination that people with disability possessed was clearly evident to make decisions for transition. This was clearly stated in descriptions such as, *"I push myself at class and home with my family, and do more than a person who doesn't have anything wrong with him."* Clearly, these students acquired understanding and insight about their education and possessed lived knowledge of how to manage difficult times. One student said, *"Some teachers did not recognize our problem, and I know directly how bad it was in my life."* Cognizant of the need from others, students acknowledged guidance and support as essential to coping with difficulties. A student described, *"I constantly study, put my trust in my teachers, and ask them to help me with my education, and that's the best way I've coped"*.

Discussion

The findings revealed that transition into the university is a complex and challenging phenomenon which requires working collaboratively among stakeholders. Yet, with appropriate support and guidance, students with disabilities can develop the sense of self-belief and resilience that may help them to succeed in their stay at the university and future endeavours.

Participants reported that their experiences of transition and the supports from families and school members enabled them to feel compassion, love; and care. They are helped to develop a transitional attitude, empathy, love and compassion. This notion is supported in Eisenman' (2003) research that the existence of disability may contribute to personal and spiritual growth, family stability, and personal hopefulness. Students' descriptions also revealed that a hopeful picture and realistic understanding of the self, have shaped their overall experience of transition in to university. For the participants of this study, transition was strengthened by both their internal (belief system, motivation, understanding) and external (family, professionals and peers) resources. Recognizing inner abilities and what they are capable of have served as a coping resource for the challenges posed by the disability. This process provided them a sense of strength, emotional stability, and meaning in their stay at the university.

A mixed reaction toward professionals was also reported in this study. Few professionals' evaluations of their disability reportedly made students feel hopeless for their future. On the other hand, family and friends' support enabled students to better meet the needs of their stay at the university. As a result, students developed a strong motive to share and acknowledge the

rewards of their success. They frequently acknowledge these gains with family.

Although students' negative experiences have been the focus of other studies, more research is needed to determine the ways to increase positive and hopeful interactions between students with disabilities and the professionals. The findings presented here suggest that transition and positive change are importantly interrelated in the lives of students with disabilities, and that further research exploring the positive attributes of transition may be highly valuable for these students and for professionals in the field of special education.

Conclusions

This study attempted to understand the transition experiences of students with disabilities at *Addis Ababa* and *Adama* Universities. Transition is a complex process which incorporates many ideas that cannot be easily addressed. However, this study tried to address a particular aspect of it. It tried to understand the supportive experiences for students with disabilities when they have transitioned into the university. The results showed that high school to the university transition was a frustrating, but promising experience. Care and consideration from different stakeholders, personal resilience to difficulties, family and professional support and positive attitude, acceptance of the self and recognizing one's ability and identity, peer support, and spiritual belief were among the major positive factors that helped students to succeed in their educational transition.

From the study, it can be said that the transition experience of students with disabilities is an excellent lesson to all people who have direct or indirect relations with the issue under discussion. The positive transition experience of students with disabilities can be taken as a basis to other students who have similar problems. Parents of the participant students can be a model for other parents having children with disabilities. Professionals with supportive and positive attitude towards these students can be exemplary for others.

The present study does have its limitations. The time of data collection coincided with students' vacation time, so data was collected on the available students with disabilities. Doubts can also be raised on the validity of the assessment. Furthermore, owing to various constraints, the collected data were heavily dependent on the memory of students, and some variations of students' course of transition may exist. Further research needs to address these issues and examine the relevance of school into the university transition by more rigorous design.

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