

# Post-GED-Credential Employment Experiences of Adults with Special Needs

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

When transitioning to employment, students with disabilities who do not complete high school face multiple challenges; beyond which those who later complete a GED® credential face, especially in times of economic downturn and job instability. They cope with sometimes overwhelming struggles from disabling conditions. Thus GED passers with disabilities or other special needs likely need transitional support, perhaps even more than typical GED passers do.

This paper considers a subset of interviewee data from seven states and DC through the *Perceptions and Pathways* project of American Council on Education and GED® Testing Service in 2011. This study constituted the first nationwide follow-up study of GED credential recipients conducted to explore major questions on adult transitions. *Perceptions and Pathways* resulted from research recommendations made after the quantitative study of two national cohorts of GED test-takers who transitioned to postsecondary education (Zhang, Guison-Dowdy, Patterson, & Song, 2011). *Perceptions and Pathways* interviewees were selected so that their characteristics would reflect the population of U.S. GED credential recipients in 2006, approximately

five years after GED testing.

In a rich dataset of qualitative interviews, researchers observed that transitions involved not only education, but also employment, and that nearly one-fourth of interviewees described themselves as having special needs. These observations inspired the analysis leading to this paper.

## Transitional Challenges for Adults with Special Needs

Approximately 40% of students who do not finish high school have special needs (Higgins, Patterson, Bozman, & Katz, 2010); more young adults with learning disabilities may leave high school without graduating than stay (Payne, 2010). Many, but not all, students with special needs have learning or sensory disabilities. Disabilities are typically defined as physical or mental impairments (USDOE, 2013). Learning disabilities (LD), defined as a “broad array of disorders in information processing” (Corley & Taymans, 2002, p. 46), represent certain types of disability that affect learning basic skills. “Special needs” incorporates disabilities, and more broadly includes people with health conditions facing life barriers without meeting the narrower definition of disability.

Special needs remain with adults when they enter adult education (AE) programs. The national percentage of adults with disabilities in AE programs is not collected consistently (National Research Council, 2012); yet, adults with special learning needs may be overrepresented (Corley & Taymans, 2002), perhaps comprising at least half of adult learners (Mellard, Patterson, & Prewett, 2007). Sixty-two percent of programs reportedly serve adults with sensory disabilities and 80% report serving adults with LD (Tamassia, Lennon, Yamamoto, & Kirsch, 2007). Indeed, a recent study of 4,500 adult learners in 13 states indicated 90% visual stress syndrome, 48% visual function problems, 41% hearing loss, as well as 78% attention difficulties and 40% diagnosed LD (KET, 2008).

What these figures tell us is many, if not the majority, of adult learners in AE programs may have special needs. Whether their special needs have been identified in childhood is less relevant than the actual presence of special needs. Are adult educators fully prepared to recognize the signs of special needs, to refer adult learners for appropriate screenings, and to help them learn the basics they came to learn (KET, 2008)? As adult learners master basic skills, AE programs are charged with preparing learners with special needs for the continuing challenges they face after the AE program as well.

What challenges do adults with disabilities face? Research reports have consistently found that many adults with disabilities not completing high school lacked confidence, motivation, or persistence to continue education or get a job (Duquette & Fullarton, 2009; Payne, 2010; Roffman, 2000). Additionally, working-age adults with disabilities are less likely to be employed or more apt to be underemployed; consequently,

they tend to earn less than their peers without disabilities (Corley & Taymans, 2002; Duquette & Fullarton, 2009; Hsu & George-Ezzelle, 2008; Mellard & Patterson, 2008). Corley and Taymans (2002) highlighted underemployment of adults with LD in their review explaining “they also worked substantially fewer weeks per year, for lower wages, and in lower-status jobs” (pp. 50-51). Adults may resist disclosing a disability to an employer for accommodations; they may also struggle with on-the-job training (Duquette & Fullarton, 2009; Roffman, 2000).

Furthermore, Payne (2010) points out that adults with LD rarely have access in GED® preparation programs to transition planning, an avenue to employment. She argues that adult learners with LD who miss transition planning may not gain adequate self-advocacy skills, which could in turn affect living and working independently.

## **Skills and Characteristics of Adults with Special Needs**

The literature on adults with special needs offers limited information on their skills and characteristics. Adults with disabilities, who obtain a GED credential, appear to have literacy skills (measured via National Assessment of Adult Literacy assessments) comparable to high school graduates with disabilities (Hsu & George-Ezzelle, 2008). Among GED candidates with disabilities, 41% of adults with LD and 59% of adults with physical disabilities passed the GED test, close to the national pass rate of 60% (Lohman, Lyons, & Dunham, 2008).

Payne’s (2010) study carefully described characteristics of 10 Washington adults with LD who transitioned to college. Seven interviewees participated in AE; three chose to go directly to GED testing. Payne noted a lack of targeted

interviewing and transition services in the AE programs the seven interviewees attended. Four interviewees were employed (Payne, 2010).

### **Supports and Attributes of Transitioning Adults with Special Needs**

What supports and attributes do adults with special needs have who transition successfully to jobs? A potential theory that may provide a framework for this question is resilience (Quigley, Patterson, & Zhang, 2011), a greater chance for success in “life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997, p. 46). Numerous life events and circumstances, as well as an individual’s personal strengths and weaknesses, may affect psychosocial development from childhood into adulthood (Ou & Reynolds, 2008). Factors strengthening resilience include social and academic competence, problem-solving skills, and autonomy. Other factors are the adult’s goals, self-efficacy, locus of control, and sense of purpose (Waxman, Gray, & Pardron, 2003). While these authors did not address adults with special needs specifically, the role of resilience in their transitions is worth investigating.

Resilience implies action and self-advocacy on the part of the adult with special needs. Successful adults with disabilities from the studies Corley and Taymans (2002) reviewed not only exhibited the ability to plan, but the capacity to act on their plans. They demonstrated an ability to learn from experiences and capitalize on strengths. Roffman (2000) found that adults with LD, who experienced job success, showed self-advocacy as well as tenacity.

Response to the support of others is another component of resilience. Corley and Taymans (2002) reviewed several studies that pointed to

the emotional or financial support of significant others, family, and mentors as contributors to adult success. Personal support from “intimate or work relationships” (p. 51) boosted resilience.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The paper’s purpose is to describe the employment experiences of adults with a GED credential and with special needs, in terms of challenges, supports, attributes, and characteristics.

From the literature review, four research questions were developed for this paper. These questions were developed to further investigate experiences of adults with special needs and with GED® credentials in the workplace. These questions seek to add more information about the attributes and supports for adults with special needs as they transition.

1. What are the demographic characteristics and educational background of adults with special needs?
2. What challenges do adults with special needs face as they consider their post-GED-credential future?
3. Were they employed when interviewed? How did their special needs reportedly affect their job, or their prospects for a job? Who encouraged them during their employment experiences?
4. What attributes of resilience on the job were evident among adults with special needs?

## **DATA AND METHODS**

### **Research Sample, Locations, and Participants**

After piloting in DC and West Virginia, researchers selected six additional states to represent diverse

geographic regions, primary AE program type, and statewide postsecondary enrollment. Interviewees from those six states were sampled from GED® Testing Service's database via a multi-stage sampling process including stratification to ensure an even distribution of age (16-24 years vs. 25 years and older), gender (female and male), and ethnicity (African-American, Hispanic, and white). Adults in each category were then selected randomly; local GED® testing centers recruited interviewees from the randomly selected list. Seven state agencies for GED testing and 13 testing centers participated.

In spring 2011, researchers visited six states to conduct one-on-one interviews: California, Connecticut, Kansas, North Carolina, Texas, and Wyoming. In addition to the author of this paper, the interviewer team consisted of Canadian researchers Sue Follinsbee and Allan Quigley, and former GED Testing Service researchers Wei Song and Jizhi Zhang. Open-ended interviews lasted 1-2 hours, and participants were offered a \$40 giftcard as an incentive for interviewing.

The 85 interviewees participating ranged in age from 21 to 79 years when interviewed. Interviewees included 52 females and 33 males; 62 interviewees were native speakers of English and 23 were immigrants from eight countries. Approximately one fourth each were African American or Hispanic, and half were white. The median total GED test score for the full sample was 2,570. Further detail on the sample and general participant characteristics is available in Quigley, Patterson, and Zhang (2011). Of the 85 adults interviewed, 20 adult learners indicated having a health, learning, or other special need.

## Context of Interviews and Coding

To maximize interview findings, *Perceptions and*

*Pathways* researchers approached interviews as an open conversation with follow-up questions rather than following a structured interview protocol with standardized questions. Each interview began with the interviewer showing a sample "life map" (McPherson, Wang, Hsu, & Tsuei, 2007). The interviewer then asked the interviewee to draw a one-page life map of educational events and situations leading the interviewee to take the GED® test, and either go on to postsecondary education or choose not to go. The life map started the story of the interviewee's education and framed the interview conversation. Some life maps consisted of boxes and arrows in chronological order; others included non-sequential circles or phrases representing life events of importance to the interviewee. Interviewers followed up on life map drawings with clarifying questions to ensure the interviewer had a clear understanding of interviewee pathways taken since secondary school and perceptions that evolved.

While drawing the life map, interviewees were not initially asked about employment or special needs; rather, if the interviewee disclosed his or her employment or disability status to the interviewer voluntarily during the conversation. The interviewee had the opportunity to continue speaking about the status if desired. Interviewee statuses were identified during the subsequent coding process.

Recorded interviews were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. Researchers established a framework for coding qualitative data inductively (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2011), resulting in 71 themes revealed from interviews. To enhance trustworthiness of coding, pairs of researchers coded the data manually. These data and codes were then entered in NVivo 9 software, and the pair analyzed the data independently. Coders were

asked to reach full agreement in order to further ensure inter-researcher reliability in coding for each transcript. Any discrepancies between coders were resolved by a third researcher.

## Research Approach

As noted earlier, the purpose of this paper is to qualitatively describe employment experiences of transitioning adults with a GED® credential and with special needs, and do so in terms of four criteria: characteristics, challenges, supports, and attributes. Using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2009), initial analysis categories were created following coding, with successively higher ordered categories ultimately identifying abstract themes. A recent article on the experiences of adult learners in AE programs (Zacharakis, Steichen, Diaz de Sabates, & Glass, 2011) thoughtfully explained the value of “recursive strategies” (p. 86) to refine traditional content analysis. An iterative process guides the analyst from initial categorization through to the final abstract theme as inductively as possible.

## RESULTS

Four research questions were presented earlier in this paper and are addressed in the results sections that follow. The research questions are:

1. What are the demographic characteristics and educational background of adults with special needs?
2. What challenges do adults with special needs face as they consider their post-GED-credential future?
3. Were they employed when interviewed? How did their special needs reportedly affect their job, or their prospects for a job?

4. Who encouraged them during their employment experiences? What attributes of resilience on the job were evident among adults with special needs?

## Demographic Characteristics and Educational Experiences

The first research question was concerned with interviewee demographics and educational background. The 20 interviewees with special needs reflect diverse backgrounds, geographic locations, and educational experiences. Interviewees ranged in age from 22 to 56 years when interviewed in 2011. All selected states except Kansas were represented; one each came from California and Connecticut, nine from North Carolina, two from Texas, one from DC, three from West Virginia, and three from Wyoming. Eleven were women and nine were men. Six were African American, one was Hispanic, and 13 were white. Eighteen were native speakers of English.

The 20 interviewees voluntarily disclosed the following special needs: physical disabilities, such as vision impairments and disabilities resulting from injuries or accidents; learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, attention disorder, and memory impairment; chronic health conditions, including lupus, cancer, migraines, and asthma. Five interviewees reported more than one disability or special need.

Educationally most interviewees went to high school and had some exposure to college, with eight graduating from postsecondary programs. On average interviewees completed 9th grade\*. Nineteen dropped out of high school; four were homeschooled\*. Nine were employed when interviewed, and three were employed during their high school years.



Many indicators of interviewees' educational experiences were collected at the time of GED® testing. The most frequently reported reason (from five interviewees) for not finishing high school was "trouble with math"; also commonly reported were poor grades, poor test scores, emotional problems, being absent too much, or not enough money for school\*. Six took the GED® test for a better job\*. Nine had learned about GED testing from a family member or friend, and 14 studied before GED testing. Total GED test scores\* ranged from 2,260 to 3,560 (median = 2,660).

## Challenges

Challenges facing adults with special needs in employment settings inform the second research question. Like other GED® passers, those with special needs may grapple with balancing work and family needs, with securing a job in a tough economy, and with transportation to work. Most interviewees with special needs described their choices about employment positively or neutrally, despite commonly having experiences that could overwhelm an adult without special needs. Challenges they dealt with were perceived forced choices in employment, responses to the effects of disabilities, and inter-generational caregiving despite their own health concerns.

In some instances, circumstances forced an interviewee to take a job rather than attend college; sometimes interviewees with special needs could do neither. A young male interviewee related a difficult choice he made while caring for his seriously ill father:

"My dad ended up getting a disease where his immune system attacked his nerv[ous] system. So I returned home to help out with the house...On my winter break, I was

asked to be promoted to assistant manager at the same [fast-food restaurant], and I took it. I took that, pushing off college."

This young man perceived needing to work rather than continue education; because of his special needs as well as his father's, he felt obligated to remain in the fast-food industry.

Some adults with special needs experienced disabling conditions that they felt barred them from work or college. Two middle-aged male interviewees were challenged with vision impairments that dramatically affected their lives. One stated:

"If I wanted something, I could study and learn it, but since I was colorblind, I never really thought I could get any further in life than this. Yes, that [being color blind] stopped me from all kinds of... lots of money, lots of good jobs."

The other described how a degenerating vision impairment sidelined him from the construction trade after more than three decades:

"I was born with just one eye. I was born blind in my left eye. So, I've just got one eye to see with...[From] '72 till 2006 [I worked construction]. That's when my vision started going bad. I guess I can still drive. But I can't see enough to work. There's a big difference, especially in construction because it's a dangerous job."

Both men described a direct connection between their visual impairments and the perception that they could not work.

Not surprisingly, the challenge most often faced

is dealing with the effects of illness or a disabling condition. These effects frequently include chronic pain and inability to drive. A female interviewee described how she needed to overcome the painful effects of long-term depression for herself and her children:

“I have [had] depression for years. For years, I couldn’t even wake up. I couldn’t even wake up for my child[ren] because I had to feed them, take them to school, their activities after school. ‘Oh my God, I have to wake up!’....”

Like this woman and the young man (above) who remained in the fast-food industry, several interviewees had to cope with inter-generational health or caregiving challenges. They felt pressed to care for families – such as parents, siblings, or children – on top of their own special needs. Four interviewees had a parent who was hospitalized. One young female interviewee explained her caregiving role for her younger siblings:

“[When my mother was in the hospital,] I had to make sure my sisters did their homework and ate and had clean clothes. I basically took over my mother’s role...”

While many GED passers experience caregiving responsibilities, this young woman did so while dealing with “uncontrollable diabetes and hypertension”; for those with special needs, the caregiving role becomes even more intense and potentially debilitating.

Transportation was another frequent challenge for interviewees with special needs who could not drive. A few interviewees had never driven or could no longer drive because of physical

impairments. Many relied on family members or friends to get to work. The challenge was even more daunting for those in pain.

“[My mother] stayed in the hospital for two months. I was struggling because my mother was my main means of transportation. I didn’t have a dependable ride... I pushed myself and kept on going.”

The transportation barrier was not simply lack of a vehicle or gas money as experienced by many GED passers; these interviewees couldn’t have driven a vehicle even if one were available. Simply having a dependable ride was the only way they could keep going, literally.

## Job Experiences

Experiences in employment were addressed in the third research question. Nine adults with special needs were employed when interviewed, and two were volunteering. Five adults were unemployed. Four adults with special needs did not talk about employment during interviews.

Most interviewees talked about their work lives matter-of-factly, with each individual in different, but often negative, circumstances. Issues they raised included exploitation on the job, financial loss due to special needs, and empathy on the job.

Approximately half of employed interviewees described experiencing some form of exploitation on the job, the most frequent employment experience interviewees mentioned. Some interviewees perceived they could only work part time due to their special needs, while others were asked to work more than full time by employers who recognized they needed money. Several openly doubted their work skills or their eligibility for promotions and occasionally refused a promotion.

While only one interviewee allegedly experienced job discrimination—where a company refused to hire him because of his disability—interviewees did report feeling supervisors took advantage of them or paid them less than the job should be compensated.

One interviewee detailed a series of jobs where he perceived employers in a high-cost region taking unfair advantage:

“The reason I quit that [name of company 1] job is because I wasn’t getting paid enough, and my boss was using me to go out and pick up the wine, which I never did before... [Picking] up individual cases... kind of got to be back-breaking. (PAUSE)...He told me that was just going to be temporary, but he wasn’t hiring anybody, wasn’t even looking for anybody to replace me. I kind of figured he was taking advantage of me, and it wasn’t that much [pay]. It was, like, \$11.50 an hour... I met somebody ... [who] was working for [name of company 2]. He said, “[Name of interviewee], why don’t you come over and work with us?” I said okay. I went over, signed up, and they hired me. (PAUSE) I would have stayed with them. They were a good company, but they were making me work double shifts. I was working 18-hour days back to back. I’m getting, like, four hours of sleep a night. That’s not enough to stay alert.”

A middle-aged female interviewee working as a CNA replaced a temporary worker and was paid less for the same work. A young male interviewee relayed how he received a promotion to an assistant manager position that wasn’t as much of

a promotion as he’d thought:

“[It was] a lot more responsibility... a ploy to get me to work full-time... It was probably the worst summer working there because I worked 11 to 8, and most of the time, the manager after me who would close would always call out, so I would always be stuck doing 11 to 12, like 11 a.m. to [midnight].”

These interviewees described feeling not only underemployed but expected to do more than was reasonable. Even though the employers appeared to recognize their capabilities, the employees perceived exploitation due to their disabilities.

When a formerly healthy individual experiences an illness or accident that ends in permanent disability, the loss can also be financial – and devastating. A middle-aged interviewee described substantial loss of income after developing heart disease:

“I was ... in the same business [for 26 years]... HVAC, heating and air-conditioning. ...So, I had to go from making over a thousand dollars a week to drawing unemployment, which I was only making [\$]325. ...I even found out I can’t physically do that job no more.”

A nerve injury and injured shoulder barred a young male interviewee from continuing work. When asked if he still worked in construction, as drawn on his life map, the now homeless young man replied, “No. I got this nerve injury back in ‘06 and it kind of put a damper on things... I got into a motorcycle wreck. Head-on... I can’t move my hand enough [to do construction].”



His employment specialist from rehabilitative services had just resigned, so he was waiting for a new specialist to be hired to provide services. He lived day to day and interviewed in part to get the giftcard incentive to buy food and gas.

A few interviewees believed their special needs led to empathy for those they served. A school district employee who works with children with special needs told of her feelings about her job: "I like working with the kids that I work with. I don't always have the best patience, they wear me thin, but it's just the kids. I think, 'They all have disabilities and they don't act like that on purpose.'" An interviewee who was a CNA said: "I get attached [to the patients] though. That's the problem because they become a part of me. It's a job, but then it becomes a part of you, too. When you're in there [at work], you get to be grateful that you can walk, even if you're hurt. But you're walking, and you see someone who can't [walk] at all. You get to experience and know what life is about." Their perceptions of life with special needs made them more empathetic in the workplace.

### **Encouragers for Employment**

Interviewees with special needs who spoke about employment tended to have few encouragers in their lives. Two interviewees had no encouragers or close family and described themselves as self-reliant. The homeless young man (above) relayed a story of virtually no parental support growing up; his mother left and his alcoholic father had little positive involvement in his son's life. "My whole life, I've pretty much raised myself," the young man related matter-of-factly. When his interviewer empathized that raising himself must have been difficult, he replied confidently, "Yes, it was, but it made me who I am." When interviewed, he had no family to turn to for encouragement.

The middle-aged male interviewee with heart disease (above) who indicated his health no longer allowed him to pursue the HVAC trade recognized no encouragers in his life. He declared a hope to learn computer skills to work with computers professionally. He did not yet have a certainty that he was "good with" computers even though he knew how and where to learn more. Both men expressed hope, despite their uncertainties, for future employment. They both relied on state agency services, vocational rehabilitation, or career centers for transitional support.

Two additional middle-aged interviewees reported no encouragement from family nor awareness of employment-related resources. One interviewee considered himself unable to work in his previous trade, construction, because of genetic vision impairments and knee replacements. "I'm considered legally blind... I just can't work... I hate staying at the house. Housecleaning and cooking. I'd rather work." Though frustrated, he seemed resigned to not working.

### **Attributes and Resilience**

Interviewees with special needs discussed multiple attributes and aspects of resilience as they talked about work. They repeatedly brought up the topic of tenacity and spoke about positive attributes of the self: self-acceptance, self-reliance, and self-protection. Interviewees frequently had learned to accept themselves for who they were or were in the process of doing so. Some interviewees relied on themselves, often with an accompanying strong sense of self-efficacy. Other interviewees learned how to protect themselves and to persevere even when they felt discouraged or under attack.

The attribute most frequently mentioned in interviews was tenacity. Interviewees talking about tenacity emphatically described themselves as "not

quitters”, “determined”, “stubborn”, “a fighter”, and “persistent”. Interviewees discussing tenacity were a variety of ages, but tended to be college enrollees or graduates. Tenacity did not imply a lack of challenges; in fact, several interviewees talked about how they regrouped when their plans were derailed.

Interviewees with special needs also spoke about positive attributes of the self. The first theme was self-acceptance, particularly of learning styles and approaches to life challenges. A middle-aged male interviewee who reported dyslexia and a back injury considered himself “very stubborn” about his learning preferences and his way of coping. He remarked:

“I’m the type of person I have to do something before it sinks in... As long as I touch it and I do, I learn.... I have to work on me first before anything else. Instead of projecting what I feel toward people and situations, I need to do me first and then see... then everything else around you, like I said, it will fall into place.”

In accepting his own learning and coping styles, he could move toward his goals.

Self-reliance was a second theme among positive attributes of the self. Self-reliance was sometimes tied with self-efficacy in interviewee stories. An interviewee in nursing said: “I thought as I saw the other LPNs at work, I’m like, ‘I’m just as intelligent as they are. I know the charts like they do.’ I said that I can give the medicine to the patient and they could take it a whole lot better from me.” She clearly believed she could nurse patients effectively. A middle-aged male interviewee who felt barred from career advancement because of colorblindness had learned to rely on himself and

employment in a variety of low-paying jobs to get by.

A middle-aged female interviewee, who later became an accounting supervisor, related how she had learned self-reliance as a young girl in a family with an alcoholic father: “I had to pretty much... rely on myself to go in the right direction...” After passing the GED® test, she added, “I knew that I had the ability to make my own destiny.”

A final attribute of the self was self-protection. Some interviewees with special needs believed themselves to be under attack and felt the need to protect themselves or to develop a “thick skin”. For these interviewees, personal and emotional safety was a prerequisite to resilience.

## DISCUSSION

### Assistance with Challenges

Several types of challenges that adults with special needs reported—perceived forced job choices, inter-generational caregiving, and reliable transportation—are common to many adult learners considering employment. However, these challenges came on top of the effects of a disabling condition(s). Adult educators can provide assistance in accommodating learners when need is apparent.

A question asked earlier in this paper was whether adult educators were fully prepared to recognize the signs of special needs and to refer adult learners accordingly. Realistically, some AE programs may not have the wherewithal to train staff to screen adults. Adult learners may be reluctant to disclose special needs initially or to ask for accommodations (Duquette & Fullarton, 2009). While acknowledging these realities, adult educators can invite learners to confidentially share their needs in the context of setting goals for what brought them to AE. With a pencil and sheet

of paper, they can employ the life map technique described in this paper (sample life maps are in Quigley, Patterson, & Zhang, 2011) and begin a confidential one-on-one conversation with the adult.

Spending half an hour with a new adult learner, having them draw their education or employment “story”, and engaging them to describe what they have drawn helps to connect their experience to what they hope to gain from AE. It can be a powerful way to begin setting instructional goals and to inform the instructor on how to work with or accommodate them. It can also be a first step in transition planning (Payne, 2010) with objectives of boosting self-advocacy skills and the ability to live and work independently.

To participate in AE services, adult learners unable to drive may need an AE program’s assistance with identifying transportation vouchers or ride sharing. Flexible scheduling of classes and assignments would provide much-needed accommodations for learners who are not only in pain themselves, but caring for others who depend on them. Also, information on adult daycare for the elder generation would assist adult learners responsible for intergenerational care.

AE programs can also help by pointing adults with disabilities to low-cost or free healthcare providers or screening resources—such as psychiatrists who offer complimentary diagnostic services or optometrists who screen for vision difficulties as community service. If free or affordable services are not available locally, AE centers could offer information about time banks (the reader is referred to [timebanks.org](http://timebanks.org) for further information), through which adults from various walks of life “trade” hours of service. For example, an adult learner with many years of construction experience could bank three hours of construction

expertise toward a specialist offering three hours of diagnostic services. Adult learners may also benefit from referrals to rehabilitative service providers for assistance with identifying employment and training options. Providing accommodations and referrals not only reduces the burden on the transitioning adult learner but enables them to see AE as a go-to resource and a place to refer peers.

## Employment Experiences

About half of adults interviewed were employed, often while in college—this proportion was similar to what Payne (2010) found. They were capable adults with solid basic skills—all had passed the GED® test. When testing, adult interviewees with special needs demonstrated skill levels comparable to all adults, as found in earlier studies (Hsu and George-Ezzelle, 2008; Lohman, Lyons, & Dunham, 2008); the median total GED test score of 2,570 for the full sample was very close to the median 2,660 of the special needs sample. A few interviewees in the helping professions added empathy to capability in describing how special needs made them empathetic to patients or students in need at the workplace.

As capable as they are, some adults believed they could not work at all because of disabling conditions. Interviewees with special needs who spoke about employment tended to have few encouragers in their lives and described isolation. Only one adult reported being barred from a job because of a disability, although multiple employees described exploitation in the workplace, often from employers who recognized their capabilities. Descriptions of employers taking advantage of adults with disabilities—by offering demanding jobs for little pay and playing into employees’ fears about their skill levels and promotability—may help explain findings in previous studies where

adults with disabilities were underemployed (e.g., Corley & Taymans, 2002). While a general lack of discrimination and the matter-of-fact descriptions of their work lives were encouraging, employment experiences of adults with special needs were clearly not as positive as they could be.

Adults with special needs willing to disclose their status would benefit from opportunities to discuss minimizing workplace exploitation in a safe small-group setting and to learn how to advocate for themselves as employees. As Roffman (2000) found, enhancing the ability to advocate for themselves, along with the tenacity they clearly possess, would improve potential for success on the job. Those willing to participate in such discussions would gain not only information on curtailing exploitation, but also the realization that they are not alone in a negative work experience. They could gain much-needed encouragement and support, which could in turn increase resilience (Corley & Taymans, 2002).

Only one of four unemployed adults described in the Encouragers for Employment section had awareness of employment-related resources. A lack of transition services in AE programs was noted earlier (Payne, 2010). To begin to fill this gap, what connections can AE centers make to encourage adults with special needs toward employment resources? Adult educators could consider pairing adults with special needs with peer mentors or counselors for employment support and referrals. They could invite employers and rehabilitative services staff to the center to describe available jobs and services. Policymakers could ensure that AE centers that are not already working with rehabilitative services or one-stop employment centers are notified of employment-related events and services.

## Attributes and Resilience

Several attributes and aspects of resilience supported adults with special needs as they talked about employment. Persistence is particularly needed in times of high unemployment and pervasive reductions in job training. Interviewees frequently referenced positive attributes of the self that relate to resilience (Quigley, Patterson, & Zhang, 2011; Waxman, Gray, & Pardron, 2003): self-acceptance, self-reliance, and self-protection.

AE could encourage adult learners to use attributes of the self to their advantage. Open discussions about their understanding of themselves as employees could occur among groups of adult learners with special needs who are willing to participate and to encourage each other. Such discussions may guide them toward goals for the future as well as continuing toward self-acceptance. These group discussions can further develop problem-solving skills and sense of purpose (Waxman, Gray, & Pardron, 2003). Sharing excerpts from the stories of adults with special needs in this paper (additional interviewee quotes are online at [researchallies.org](http://researchallies.org)) and asking how each story relates to their strengths and needs could start the discussion. Asking what interviewees gained, how did this interviewee protect himself, or how was that interviewee resilient, may facilitate adult learners' self-understanding and goal setting as they see how interviewees' transitions compare with their own circumstances. Indeed, many interviewees participated with an expectation that discussions like these might benefit future learners.

Educators can also invite visits of employers, employment agency staff, or former adult learners who transitioned to the workplace. Employers and employment agency staff can share how they recruit, provide accommodations, and draw upon strengths of employees with disabilities. In return,

with permission of those involved, they could gain insights from the employment experiences of adults with special needs to improve employer practices. Former adult learners experiencing job success could be invited to the AE center to relate how they drew upon their attributes and were resilient in the workplace. They could “plant a seed” in the minds of current adult learners on what positive employment experiences could be. These potential role models might later become mentors to transitioning adults.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

One limitation of findings in this paper is the status of adults with special needs was not identified in advance; special needs were identified afterwards during coding, and some interviewees likely did not voluntarily disclose their status. A future study explicitly designed to understand the employment experiences of adults with known special needs could certainly contribute further insights.

Another limitation is that adults with LD appear to be under-represented in the broader study, especially given the suspected incidence of LD in previous studies (Corley & Taymans, 2002; Mellard, Patterson, & Prewett, 2007). Fewer adults with LD in this study may reflect interviewee reluctance to disclose, a lack of LD diagnosis, or lower GED test pass rates (Lohman, Lyons, & Dunham, 2008). Future researchers could consider Payne (2010)’s recommendation for further study comparing transition services for adults with and without LD, as well as comparing outcomes for adults with LD who do or do not receive AE transition services.

Also, the majority of interviewees came to share their successes and their joys as well as their trials, which tends to positively bias the findings. The workplace may potentially be even more

challenging for non-interviewees. Future research needs to acknowledge this reality and identify ways to be as inclusive as possible of participants with both positive and negative views. Clearly many challenges lie ahead for this subpopulation, and more resources are essential—both to continue research on this under-resourced, critical topic and to boost the chances of adults as they tackle challenges.

In considering the post-GED® credential experiences of adults with special needs, it is tempting to take a “glass half empty” view and conclude that employment experiences of adults with special needs have far to go. Yet, to do so would be disrespectful to the impressive energy and tenacity of many adults with special needs. Where these findings and recommendations can be applied, employment prospects are promising, and reflect the resilience of adults with special needs who persist in the workplace.



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\* Note: Three interviewees from West Virginia and one interviewee from Washington, DC, who participated in a pilot, lacked complete demographic and background data.