



Study focuses on success of CEGEP students with disabilities

By Catherine S. Fichten, Jennison Asuncion, Maria Barile, Shirley Jorgensen and Alice Havel

The Adaptech Research Network of Dawson College, McGill University, the Jewish General Hospital, the Center for the Study of Learning and Performance and the Lady Davis Research Institute have been studying issues of relevance to Canadian college and university students with all types of visible and non-visible disabilities since 1996. Here we want to highlight some of our findings that will be of interest to everyone who would like to see students with disabilities succeed.

One of our key findings indicates that once they enter CEGEP, students with and without disabilities graduate at the same rate. The only difference is that students with disabilities take one extra semester. We also found that students with disabilities, when they received needed accommodations, got good grades. For example, our data indicates that the first semester grades of students with learning disabilities did not differ from those of non-disabled students, while the grades of students with other disabilities (e.g., mobility, sensory, psychiatric, medical) were significantly higher than those of their nondisabled peers. We also found, in a relatively small sample of CEGEP students with disabilities who graduated from three year career/technical programs, that the rates of employment of graduates with and

without disabilities were comparable.

Several of our studies have to do with computer technologies that can help students at school. Concerns noted by students in this realm include the high cost of adaptive software (e.g., software that reads what is on the screen) and hardware (e.g., an adapted mouse), not knowing what potentially helpful technologies are out there, where to buy these, and whether these technologies can help the student succeed. In response to these concerns we have gathered a list of free and/or inexpensive (\$200 or less) hardware and software alternatives that might be useful. Some are long-running demos, while others are fully functional. These are not meant to replace the higher end hardware and software currently on the market. However, as a short-term solution, or for the purposes of trying out different specialized technologies, we think they are a good place to start. You can check these out, and view brief videos of some of our favorites, on our bilingual web page at www.adaptech.org.

In another study we looked at those areas that help or cause problems for college students with disabilities. We found that what was most helpful was being able to enroll with the school's services for students with disabilities. Among accommodations students may be eligible to receive by signing up for disability related services are: additional time for exams, preferential timetables, note takers, and alternate format materials for students with print impairments.



The Adaptech Research Network study is inspirational to those who wish to see students with disabilities succeed.

One of our studies showed that graduates with disabilities who registered with their school to receive disability related accommodations reported significantly more helpful aspects, and fewer obstacles, than graduates with disabilities who did not do so. It is important to note that accommodations in high school and at college can be dramatically different, as several studies show that services for students with disabilities at the post-secondary level tend to be more extensive than those at high school.

We are very optimistic about what happens once students enter the post-secondary system. But our data also show that when it comes to the number of students with disabilities in colleges and universities, Quebec lags behind the other provinces. As

a result, we would like to see more high school graduates with disabilities enroll in college.

We believe that policy-makers need research to allow them to make sound decisions. It is in this spirit that we want to tell you about our current research: "Study on the Postsecondary Education Experience of Persons with Disabilities in Canada." It is carried out by researchers at Dawson College and McGill University. The purpose is to identify

environmental, financial, personal and other factors that help or that pose barriers to students with disabilities pursuing higher education in Canada. We are also interested in the transition to employment.

If you want to know more about our findings, our listing of free and inexpensive computer and information technologies, or about our ongoing research, visit our web site at www.adaptech.com.

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Preparing to integrate your child in a regular kindergarten

By Despina Vassiliou, Ph.D.

It is time to think about elementary school and your child has special needs to be addressed. Where do you begin?

Prepare your child

Children can become unsettled with starting at a new school, particularly for those with autism, and they need help to alleviate some of their worries. Begin with

a discussion of their new school, its name, drive by it, and discuss starting school in general (there are several children's books on this topic). The next important step is to visit the new school and meet the teachers before the school year begins. A scrapbook of this visit can be created using pictures of the school building from the front and back, the schoolyard, classroom, locker area, hallways, as well as important individuals (e.g., teachers, principal, and secretary but obtain permission before). Review this scrapbook over the summer to keep the experience fresh in your child's mind. You may also include a copy of the school's schedule to review and adjust your child's sleeping routine accordingly. Being rested when he or she starts school can have a significant impact on his/her school experience.

Prepare the school

Meeting and sharing relevant information is critical. A meeting should be

coordinated which includes yourself, the school team (e.g., principal, teacher(s), psychologist, occupational therapist, speech and language pathologist, and the special education consultant), as well as those who have been working with your child already. In order to facilitate the school in preparing to receive your child and set up a program for him or her, it is up to the parent to bring any reports from professionals (e.g., medical, psychological, psychiatric, speech and language, etc.). Such documents generally outline the services received, your child's level of functioning, and areas of strengths and needs. The other goal of this meeting is to establish a trusting relationship with the school personnel, through which you can facilitate the communication between you and the school regarding your child's progress and/or to address any concerns that may arise.

Prepare yourself

As parents, we spend so much time worrying about everything we need to do for our children, especially if they have special needs, and allowing someone else to take charge is often very difficult. Being open and allowing your children to experience a regular school, including going on a bus and school trips is a vital component in learning. As scary as it might be to you as a parent, it is usually an exciting event for a child that he or she can accomplish. Remember, elementary school is an opportunity for your child to learn and to develop self-sufficiency skills that can help build self-confidence. Cherish every accomplishment your child makes along this journey—whether large or small.

Despina Vassiliou is an English Montreal School Board psychologist.