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Limited access to special education services for school-aged children with developmental delay[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Background: Current policy in Oregon limits eligibility of children diagnosed with developmental delay for school-based services. Due to eligibility definitions, children with developmental delay may face additional barriers transitioning from early intervention/early childhood special education into school-based special education services.

Aims: Examine the relationship between enrollment in school-based special education programs given a change in primary disability diagnosis.

Methods: Logistic regression models were fit for children who enrolled in early intervention/early childhood special education services with a primary disability diagnosis of developmental delay and changed primary disability diagnosis before third grade ($n = 5076$).

Results: Odds of enrollment in future special education were greater in children with a change in primary disability diagnosis after the age of five in comparison to children that had a change in primary disability diagnosis before the age of five, while adjusting for demographic characteristics (adjusted odds ratio: 2.37, 95% CI 1.92, 2.92).

Conclusion: Results suggest that children who are diagnosed with a developmental delay and exit early childhood special education due to maximum age of eligibility are more likely to enroll in special education compared to children without a gap in service access.

Implications: Gaps in service access during early development are associated with the need for supportive services later on in life.

What this paper adds?

Current policy in some states restricts the age that children with developmental delay are eligible to receive special education services. This manuscript reports on third grade enrollment for children within the state of Oregon who had a diagnosis of developmental delay from three to five years of age. Findings indicate that restrictive age policy may limit children's access to school-based special education services. Within the state of Oregon, children diagnosed with a developmental delay who exited special education due to restricted age of eligibility reentered special education later on in life. Many states have similar eligibility policies and may have similar outcomes for children diagnosed with developmental delay, in respect to likelihood of enrollment in third grade special

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[☆] Components of the current article have been previously presented in August of 2016, as a poster at the National Consortium for Physical Education for Individuals with Disabilities 2016 conference. Other components of the research will be presented in November of 2016, as a poster at the American Public Health Association 2016 Annual Meeting and Expo.

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education given a change in diagnosis after the age of five. Future research should examine if this association is observed in other states with similar eligibility criteria. If these findings are true throughout the nation, it would be beneficial to extend eligibility of service access for children with developmental delay to nine years if age, as allowed in IDEIA. This could increase children's likelihood of successful transitions out of IDEA when they no longer need services instead of exiting due to a restricted age range indicated in state legislature.

1. Introduction

Successful transition into elementary school impacts a child's growth and success during early years and into adolescence (Danaher, 2011; Giannoni & Kass, 2010; McConnell et al., 1998). The transition process from preschool into kindergarten is complex and a number of factors impact the success of the student (Rous, Hallam, Harbin, McCormick, & Jung, 2005). For example, teachers' implementation and knowledge about individualized and classroom support for children as they transition into kindergarten can impact early elementary school experiences (Daley, Munk, & Carlson, 2011; Rous, Hallam, McCormick, & Cox, 2010). A child's performance in kindergarten and throughout early elementary school predicts later academic success (Day, Connor, & McClelland, 2015; McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006). However, equitable transitions from kindergarten into early elementary school may be difficult to achieve due to state legislative policy. Within Rous et al. (2005) conceptual framework, the authors identify the state system as an influential factor in the transition process into formal schooling for children with disabilities. State regulations, as they relate to eligibility for services in Special Education, may make transitioning into school-based special education systems more difficult for children with developmental delay (DD).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) supports students with disabilities or DD to access the supports needed for equitable educational opportunities (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 2004). IDEIA has rules and regulations that are administered at the federal, state and/or local level. At the federal level it is indicated in SEC.602.3 that a child with a disability includes children aged three through nine with a DD, or 'any subset of that age range, including ages 3 through 5′ can be indicated by the state agency (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 2004). Therefore, state legislature determines the DD age range, within the state, and ultimately how children with this diagnosis will access services. Within the state of Oregon, and in 19 other states across the country, children with DD are only eligible for special education services from three through five years of age, which could make it challenging for children with DD to transition into the school-based system (Danaher, 2011; Oregon Department of Education, 2015).

Based on state legislation, children initially diagnosed with DD in the state of Oregon are evaluated annually to determine eligibility (Oregon Department of Education, 2015). Beyond the age of five, access to school-based special education services are only available to children with a new diagnosis beyond DD. For example, a child diagnosed with a DD at age three might be assessed and diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at age five, which is a disability category that qualifies a child for school-based special education services, unlike a diagnosis of DD. This change in diagnosis for children with DD is time-sensitive in states like Oregon, as it results in continued enrollment in IDEIA programs and continuity in special education service access (Giannoni & Kass, 2010). However, not all children with DD receive a new diagnosis at or before age five, thus they are ineligible for services in the state of Oregon at age five. Children ***without*** a new diagnosis at age five exit from special education services because they have met the 'maximum age of eligibility' for IDEIA services (Oregon Department of Education, 2015). Yet, it is during these early educational years that the achievement gap widens if the appropriate supports are not in place, like those accessible to students through special education services (Delgado, Vagi, & Scott, 2006; McConnell et al., 1998; O'Connor, 2000).

Early elementary education marks a child's first experience in formal education. Researchers have consistently found an association between a child's performance in early elementary school and their later academic achievement (Day et al., 2015; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Gutman, Sameroff, & Cole, 2003; McClelland et al., 2006). However, interventions targeting children birth to five years of age have shown little effect on academic outcomes beyond kindergarten (Puma et al., 2012). Children with DD may not be able to perform at the same level of their peers if supportive services are not accessible during early elementary years. Additionally, children tend to fluctuate in and out of special education before third grade, while after the third grade likelihood of transitioning out greatly diminishes (Jenkins et al., 2006). Jenkins et al. (2006) estimated that 41% of students who were identified as having a disability before kindergarten transitioned out of special education by grade three. However, only 26% of students with a disability in grade three transitioned out of special education services until age 19 (Jenkins et al., 2006). This not only increases the costs to the state to support children throughout primary schooling, but also can have a great influence on a child's likelihood of success later on in life (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Hadadian & Koch, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2006). There is major support within the state of Oregon to achieve success by third grade with the *P*-3 initiative, where six major institutions have come together to support success of students prenatally through third grade (Children's Institute, 2017). The emphasis on third grade success is within the sensitive period of brain growth and development in the first 8 years, it is deemed that this time period sets the foundation for future success (Grantmakers for Education, 2010; Hernandez, 2011; Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances, 2011). Few studies have investigated the third grade special education enrollment characteristics of children who exit special education programs with a DD diagnosis.

1.1. Objectives

The objective of this study is to determine if the timing of a change in primary disability diagnosis is associated with enrollment in special education at grade three, among children who received special education services under a primary diagnosis of DD from three