

Establishing, Pursuing, and Renegotiating Career Goals at the Post-School Transition Among Young Women with Learning-Related Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Young women with learning-related disabilities (LRD), like specific learning disorder and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, face significant academic, social, and institutional barriers in their post-school transition. Using thematic analysis, this study examined the profiles of 12 women in Quebec with LRD interviewed four and eight years after exiting high school—most without a high school diploma. Common themes were identified among young women having transitioned into meaningful occupations in early adulthood, highlighting the value of contextual school-based supports and the importance of setting and adhering to clear and specific individual vocational goals, both in the short and long term. Findings also underscore the pitfalls of pursuing general academic paths without a well-chartered plan, while advocating the potential of vocational programs as promising avenues toward employment or further education for women with LRD for whom traditional post-school trajectories pose challenges.

Keywords: learning disabilities, post-school transitions, post-secondary transition, education, gender

RÉSUMÉ

Les jeunes femmes présentant des troubles liés à l'apprentissage (TLA) font face à d'importants obstacles éducatifs, sociaux et institutionnels lors de la transition postsecondaire. Cette étude emploie une analyse thématique pour examiner les parcours éducatifs et professionnels de 12 jeunes femmes québécoises ayant un

TLA, rencontrées après 4 et 8 ans suivant la fin du secondaire, dont la majorité ne détient pas de diplôme. Les résultats mettent en évidence l'importance de soutiens scolaires adaptés et d'objectifs professionnels bien définis pour accéder à des occupations satisfaisantes à l'âge adulte. Ils soulignent également les limites des parcours scolaires généralisés sans but précis et le potentiel des programmes de formation professionnelle comme alternative viable pour celles pour qui les contextes éducatifs traditionnels posent des défis.

Mots-clés: troubles d'apprentissage, transition postsecondaire, éducation, genre

INTRODUCTION

The post-school transition marks a pivotal life stage when adolescents leave compulsory education and choose among further schooling, work, or other pursuits (Dietrich et al., 2012). Successfully navigating this transition involves identifying and pursuing a career path aligned with one's needs, preferences, and goals. This process requires psychological resources, including a well-developed sense of identity to define specific and attainable career and life goals; institutional supports, such as access to relevant educational programs or employment opportunities; and ongoing adjustment of goals in response to evolving experiences and circumstances over time. Without these resources, supports, and flexibility, this transition period can be riddled with risks of cycling through unsatisfying occupations or, alternatively, remaining stagnant with little progress.

This is often the case for young women (i.e., 15 to 25 years old) with high-incidence learning-related disabilities (LRD), a term used here grouping specific learning disorders and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (see Literature Review). For these women, compulsory education is often fraught with difficulties, and many leave school without the credentials needed to enter tertiary education directly—limiting access to the post-secondary education that has become their gender-normative post-school pathway (Statistics Canada, 2021). As a result, these women must forge non-traditional career paths with limited guidance, fewer role models, and often constrained socio-economic

resources (Homsy & Savard, 2018). Yet, little research has examined how these young women's career goals, educational choices, and employment situations evolve as they navigate this crucial life stage. This study addresses this gap using a qualitative lens.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Post-School Transition

The post-school transition is a pivotal and developmentally demanding period during which youth begin to formulate and implement their career plan, guided by their goals, interests, values, and skills (i.e., “vocational identity”). Although informed by individual aspirations, this transition unfolds within institutional and social structures that shape access to opportunities. For instance, post-secondary institutions provide structured pathways and timelines that facilitate entry into employment, whereas transitions not involving these kinds of institutions tend to be more variable and less organized (Akkermans et al., 2021). As Dietrich et al. (2012) noted, research has focused on university-bound youth, leaving the alternative pathways of those for whom direct entry into tertiary education is either not feasible or not desired largely unknown. Particularly underexplored are the trajectories of young women with LRD, underscoring the need for research that addresses this gap. To better understand how these young women's trajectories unfold and why, a combined Sustainable Career and Phase-Adequacy framework is proposed.

A Combined Sustainable Career and Phase-Adequacy Perspective

Sustainable career theory conceptualizes career development as a dynamic process shaped by individual agency, contextual opportunities, and broader social structures (De Vos et al., 2020). Extending beyond objective indicators of employment attainment, it emphasizes career–person fit, employability, and well-being as key elements for sustaining motivation and meaningful engagement over time. From this perspective, the post-school transition marks a critical launch point for constructing viable and fulfilling careers. To better understand how youth navigate this process, integrating a self-regulation lens such as phase-adequate engagement theory is valuable (Blokker et al., 2023). This framework examines how individuals set, monitor, and adjust their goals, emphasizing that during the post-school transition, youth must continuously evaluate and recalibrate their goals in response to evolving personal and contextual conditions (Dietrich et al., 2012). Failure to do so—whether through persisting with unrealistic aspirations, resisting adjustment, or disengaging entirely—can result in frustration, stagnation, and recurrent instability.

These frameworks emphasize that while career development progresses at different paces, youths' efforts must align with external deadlines and developmental expectations. Supportive environments, such as educational institutions, are viewed as essential in facilitating the transition by providing structure and guidance. They also highlight the role of subjective evaluation of one's post-school situation, such as satisfaction, and the interplay between personal resources and contextual constraints (De Vos et al., 2020; Dietrich et al., 2012). From this perspective, a successful transition requires agency grounded in a well-developed vocational identity. However, youth with fragile academic histories (e.g., dropout, prolonged difficulties) often struggle to build these foundations. In this respect, young women with LRD face a double disadvantage: excluded from mainstream post-secondary pathways and left to navigate non-normative routes without the necessary academic or vocational levers. Recent studies, reviewed below, document these

challenges within Quebec's educational and employment systems, where the present study was conducted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Young Women with Learning-Related Disabilities in the Quebec School System

High-incidence neurodevelopmental disorders—particularly specific learning disorder (SLD; also referred to as learning disabilities, LD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)—are often examined together in disability research (e.g., Schimmele et al., 2021a, 2021b). While SLD primarily affects academic skills (e.g., reading, writing, math) and ADHD disrupts attention and executive functions (e.g., planning, working memory), both are associated with similar academic challenges and predict poorer educational and employment outcomes (Espinete et al., 2022; Learning Disabilities Association of Canada [LDAO], 2020). Their high comorbidity and shared school-based supports (e.g., individualized education plans [IEPs], accommodations) also make it practical to address the two disorders together in educational practice and research. Accordingly, they are referred to here as learning-related disabilities (LRD; Stamp et al., 2026).

Educational and vocational challenges during compulsory schooling. Learning-related disabilities are typically diagnosed during compulsory schooling, prior to the post-school transition. Both SLD and ADHD affect roughly 8.5% of Canadian children and adolescents, with higher prevalence among boys (Statistics Canada, 2025b, 2020). Although girls are diagnosed less frequently, the impact of LRD on their educational and vocational development is no less significant. For one, LRD in girls are often identified later than in boys, delaying access to services and negatively affecting academic outcomes and self-perceptions. Because girls are more likely to internalize rather than externalize hyperactivity or attentional difficulties, their challenges often go unnoticed by school personnel (Haddad, 2020; Mowlem et al., 2019; Young et al., 2020). When recognized, these difficulties are frequently misattributed to low

motivation or underachievement rather than an underlying disability (Little & McLennan, 2010; Quinn & Wagner, 2015). Consequently, girls are less often referred for assessment or receive support only once academic delays become severe, limiting timely access to vital services such as IEPs. These barriers contribute to lower high school graduation rates among girls with LRD compared to non-disabled peers (Cheatham & Randolph, 2022). Even when they do graduate, many leave school with lower grades, reduced motivation, and persistent learning or attentional difficulties that continue to hinder their post-school transition (e.g., reduced access to competitive post-secondary programs; LDAO, 2020; Murray et al., 2021).

Beyond academic challenges, LRD can undermine adolescent girls' self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-determination, shaping how they approach—or avoid—opportunities, particularly in the vocational sphere (Lindsay et al., 2021; Lindstrom et al., 2020). Under-representation in higher education and competitive employment can foster disengagement, as positive post-school outcomes may seem unattainable. Consequently, adolescent girls with LRD often hold lower employment aspirations and participate less in career-development activities, missing opportunities to develop foundational competencies essential for vocational identity and phase-appropriate goal engagement (Dietrich et al., 2012). Stunted vocational development can thus exacerbate existing educational difficulties and lead to problematic patterns of engagement, like unwanted prolonged inactivity and cycling in and out of educational programs or precarious work.

Young Women with LRD: Potential Post-School Pathways

As they leave compulsory schooling and approach early adulthood, young women with LRD must navigate multiple post-school options. However, they face significant barriers that make it difficult to keep up with their peers, regardless of the path chosen.

Pathways in education. Educational pathways after high school can take several forms, depending on young women's academic experiences, qualifications, and goals.

Pathways involving higher education.

For young women in general, enrolling in and graduating from post-secondary education is a common and often necessary route to competitive employment. In Quebec, college (i.e., CEGEP) is considered the first stage of higher education, whereas in other Canadian provinces and across North America, this typically begins with university. Regardless of structural differences, women consistently demonstrate higher rates of participation in higher education than men. In Quebec, over 80% of women aged 25–34 hold a college or university degree, versus roughly half of men (Statistics Canada, 2025a). However, women with disabilities are less likely to pursue such credentials, and those who do often complete shorter programs with lower qualifications (e.g., certificates rather than diplomas; Burenkova et al., 2021; Lindstrom et al., 2012; Schimmele et al., 2021a). Still, many young women with LRD aspire to enroll in higher education. Those who graduate high school on time with sufficient grades can do so directly, and some admitted but lacking prerequisites can begin in a general curriculum until they meet program requirements. Once enrolled, maintaining good academic standing throughout their studies remains challenging for students with LRD (Lavoie et al., 2021; Lindsay, Cagliostro, & Carafa, 2018).

While few may transition directly into higher education, most seek alternative routes, typically by enrolling in a secondary equivalency program (i.e., general adult education, GAE) or vocational education and training (VET).

Pathways involving GAE. General adult education (GAE) provides youth a second chance to earn a high school diploma, potentially improving access to post-secondary education or the job market. However, GAE programs in Canada face numerous challenges: resources are limited, and LRD-specific supports are often absent (Walker, 2022). These programs are typically unstructured, with self-paced curricula in core subjects like mathematics and language arts. Primarily designed for mature learners who can independently and flexibly manage their learning, this format can be unsuitable for youth with LRD, who often enter GAE straight out of high school at ages 16–17 and require structure and support to manage learning and orga-

nizational challenges (Marcotte, 2012; Walker, 2022). Young women face additional personal and contextual hardships, such as childcare responsibilities, reducing their chance of success in GAE; consequently, many who pursue GAE continue to struggle and may eventually drop out (Marcotte et al., 2010; Marcotte, 2012). Alternatively, some opt for the General Development Test (GDT), a standardized exam that does not confer a diploma but allows entry into certain vocational or post-secondary programs under adult admission (Gouvernement du Québec, 2025).

Pathways involving VET. Vocational education and training (VET) programs—shorter, skill-focused programs—offer an alternative route to career integration, particularly for youth seeking rapid employment. Research suggests VET can lead to stable, well-paying, and satisfying careers (Middeldorp et al., 2019; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023). Many programs are accessible without a high school diploma, making them appealing for youth who struggle in general education. Despite this potential, only 3.4% of Canadian women aged 20–24 hold vocational degrees (vs. 7% of men), with women with disabilities further under-represented; though research specifically on women with LRD is limited (Anderson et al., 2014; Statistics Canada, 2022). Though VET may alleviate some educational barriers associated with LRD, gender barriers persist. For instance, women represent 12% of students in Quebec's most prominent vocational centre, but represent only 3% of the workforce and cluster in health, commerce, and administrative programs, leading to lower-paid positions compared to male-dominated fields (e.g., welding; Ministère de l'Éducation, Québec, 2024).

Pathways involving entry into the job market without a post-secondary diploma. Some young women with LRD attempt to bypass academic challenges by entering the workforce directly after high school. However, finding rewarding employment without credentials is challenging for all young people, who are often funneled into low-skilled, low-paid roles and may cycle through unrewarding employment, choosing positions by accessibility rather than interest (Koen et al., 2012; Lavoie

et al., 2021). Adding salt to injury, opportunities for young women with limited education are concentrated in sectors such as service, administration, and childcare, which have lower status and pay (Lindstrom et al., 2012; Mazzotti et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2018; Schimmele et al., 2021b; Ray & Zarestky, 2021). These disparities, persisting across all education levels, are more pronounced among young people without post-secondary qualifications, a group in which women with LRD are overrepresented. Women, regardless of disability, are less likely than men to secure full-time, stable, well-paid jobs even with equivalent or higher credentials (Jehn et al., 2019; Lindsay, Cagliostro, Albarico, et al., 2018; Morris et al., 2018; Schimmele et al., 2021b). While shorter career-oriented programs may mitigate some post-secondary challenges, young women—particularly those with LRD—still face compounded gender and educational barriers, heightening their risk of long-term financial, social, and health difficulties.

Pathways involving occupations outside of education or employment. Some young women with LRD may pursue paths outside school or work altogether. For example, approximately one third of Canadian youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET) report caring for children, over 90% of whom are women (Davidson & Arim, 2019). However, long-term NEET status carries health, social, and financial risks like those linked to low academic attainment and unemployment, particularly for youth unable to access education or employment due to barriers rather than by personal choice (Davidson & Arim, 2019).

Current Study: Agency in Multiple Post-School Pathways Among Women with LRD

Young women with LRD face numerous challenges, still, they can exercise agency to pursue paths that align with their needs and goals, all within the bounds of contextual support, opportunities, and structure. Guided by their career aspirations and the ability to monitor and adjust their goal pursuits, they navigate the post-school transition in diverse ways: some prioritize entering the workforce, others remain in education, and many move between both, with

varying degrees of success. This study examines these trajectories—often marked by late starts, diversions, and interruptions—to better understand the factors shaping post-school outcomes for young women with LRD.

To date, most studies group LRD with other disabilities and rely on conventional success metrics without considering youth's subjective evaluation of their situations (e.g., degree completion, employment), often using homogenous samples and quantitative methods (Chan & Hutchings, 2023; Lindsay et al., 2021; Schimmele et al., 2021a, 2021b). This study applied a combined sustainable career theory and phase-adequacy model to explore how internal and external factors shape post-school transitions for young women with LRD. This was done by qualitatively examining the profiles and post-school trajectories of 12 young women with LRD who were interviewed four and eight years after high school—most without a diploma—who were in career-related education or employment, temporary work, or NEET. It was hypothesized that shared themes would be identified across participants' educational and occupational experiences, reflecting LRD-related challenges, and between participants who did, and did not, integrate into satisfying occupations in early adulthood.

METHODS

This study used data collected as part of an ongoing longitudinal project (for more information, see Dupéré et al., 2018). The Institutional Review Board of the first author's university approved the present study, and informed consent was obtained from the participants at all stages.

Research Design

Using a rich pre-existing dataset of detailed interview reports, qualitative thematic content analysis was used to examine the post-school education and employment trajectories of young women with LRD in a Franco-Canadian context. Given the uniqueness of the sample and the limited literature, an exploratory approach was adopted to allow patterns and themes to be inductively identified from the data.

Participants

General sampling procedures. Data were collected in three phases: one during high school (T0) and two during the post-school transition (T1, T2). Phase 1 (2012–2015) recruited students aged 14–18 from 12 French-language public high schools in and around Montreal, including regular and some special education classrooms (excluding moderate to severe physical, mental, developmental, or intellectual disabilities). Participants completed a screening questionnaire on demographics (including age, gender) and dropout risk ($N_{\text{screening}} = 6,773$; participation rate >97%). About six months later (T0), a subset ($N = 545$; $M_{\text{age}} = 16.3$) participated in detailed semi-structured interviews, prioritizing students who had dropped out or were at high risk, comprising two-thirds of the interview sample (for details, see Dupéré et al., 2018). Follow-up interviews were conducted four years (T1, $n = 386$) and eight years (T2, $n = 302$) later, when participants were roughly 20 and 24 years old.

Case selection. An initial participant pool ($n = 21$) was selected based on three criteria: being female, having SLD and/or ADHD diagnosed before or during high school (from sociodemographic or interview data), and having complete post-school interview data (T1 and T2). Interview reports were screened for quality and consistency. Participants with comorbid psychological disorders (e.g., depression; $n = 8$) or incomplete interview reports ($n = 1$) were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 12 participants (24 T1 and T2 interview reports).

Data Sources

Confirmation of LRD. At T0-HS, an abridged Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-5 (SCID-5; Dupéré et al., 2018) was administered and used to confirm diagnoses, including ADHD and SLD. Between T0 and T1, participants completed full KID-SCID modules (Matzner, 1994) by phone to identify any missed diagnoses. This process confirmed LRD status for all 12 participants: all had ADHD, and seven had comorbid SLD diagnosed prior to or early on during high school.

Interviews. Each T1 and T2 interview lasted about 90 minutes and covered participants' educational and employment histories, short- and long-term goals (within one and four years),

and the alignment of their current situations with these goals. Based on this information, participants were classified at the eight-year follow-up as being in satisfying (career-related) or unsatisfying (temporary) occupations. An adapted Life Events and Difficulties Schedule (LEDS; Dupéré et al., 2018) examined challenges across life domains, including mental health diagnoses and their functional impact since high school, as well as past and current use of services (e.g., LRD-related supports). Following qualitative procedures (Brown, 2004), recordings and notes were synthesized into comprehensive narrative reports (referred to henceforth as “vignettes”), verified by a second research assistant using interview notes and recordings, and revised multiple times before finalization. Final narrative T1 and T2 reports for selected participants ranged from six to 11 pages and were eight pages on average.

Analyses

Content related to education, employment, and LRD was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase thematic analysis: (1) familiarization, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. This flexible, inductive approach allowed codes to emerge organically. Vignettes were iteratively coded and tracked in Excel, with a codebook documenting all revisions. A second researcher independently coded the data to enhance credibility, and themes were finalized once conceptually distinct and representative.

Methodological Integrity

Data validity and reliability were verified at multiple checkpoints. First, audio recordings for a subset of participants ($n = 8$) were reviewed to confirm vignette accuracy. Second, vignettes were independently coded by a second researcher using the codebook. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved, yielding a final intercoder agreement of 93%.

RESULTS

Profile Descriptions

At T2, the eight-year mark, participants were 24 years of age on average. Nine participants were in satisfying career-related occupations: full-time college (i.e., CEGEP) studies ($n = 3$); full-time, career-related employment ($n = 3$); and part-time VET while employed part-time in the same field ($n = 1$). Two were NEET by choice, caring for their children full-time; no other participants had children. The remaining three were in unsatisfactory, temporary occupations, holding jobs unrelated to their long-term goals. Only one participant earned a high school diploma during compulsory schooling, three via GAE, and the other three via GDT. Half of the participants had obtained a VET diploma.

Themes

Thematic analyses yielded four themes: (1) barriers to graduation and persistent challenges in GAE, (2) barriers in employment without post-secondary training, (3) contextual sources of support, and (4) individual levers and post-school goal-setting. As hypothesized, common themes were identified among participants in unsatisfactory versus satisfactory occupations, including those NEET by choice. Themes are presented in detail below, organized to reflect these contrasts. In some cases, interview excerpts have been included. Note that these have been translated from French to English by the main author, Julia Stamp.

Theme 1: Barriers to graduation and persistent challenges in GAE. This theme captures the academic challenges associated with LRD, barriers to obtaining a high school diploma, and the shift some participants made from GAE toward alternative training. All participants cited LRD as contributing to significant high school difficulties, with most ($n = 11$) leaving before graduation. Many ($n = 9$) described symptoms such as trouble concentrating and keeping up with coursework, while several ($n = 8$) reported declining motivation and growing discouragement. For some ($n = 5$), these challenges were exacerbated by insufficient or inaccessible services and accommodations. For example (P denotes Participant):

School was definitely one area where it [referring to LRD] had a major impact. I had a pretty difficult high school experience. I was placed in a self-paced class, but as soon as I was returned to a regular classroom, it did not work at all. (P1)

I always feel like I've failed because there are too many mistakes in my writing. In French, I've never really gotten good grades, it feels impossible. It's not because I'm stressed or anything like that, it's because I struggle to organize my ideas when writing a text. Reading comprehension is difficult too.... But I've always liked school, even though it's difficult. (P2)

I wish I had had that in high school [referring to LRD supports] because, honestly, I didn't. I would sit in class and see everyone else finishing their exams and getting up to leave, while I was feeling anxious because I hadn't even started yet. (P3)

At T1, the four-year mark (age 20), nearly all ($n = 9$) participants attempted to obtain their high school diploma through GAE. The three in temporary jobs had particularly unstable trajectories, repeatedly enrolling in and withdrawing from GAE due to low motivation and dissatisfaction with the program's lack of structure. By T1, only one had earned their diploma but had since started and dropped out of several college programs. This pattern persisted until T2, at which point these women were still in and out of education while in unsatisfying employment. For example:

Four years ago, I was still attending adult education, trying to finish my Grade 11 French and Grade 10 History courses.... Last time I spent two semesters trying, but I stopped because it was really discouraging.... I still think about going back...and finally finish it once and for all. (P4)

I wanted to complete at least Grade 9 so that I could get a more professional type of job, but it was long and difficult, so I decided to go to work instead. (P5)

Young women in satisfying occupations had also struggled in GAE. Although two eventually earned their diplomas, most concluded that GAE was not a good fit and redirected toward other qualifications. By T1, one had completed her diploma through GAE and pursued VET before enrolling in college; another obtained it soon after and then entered college. Meanwhile, the remaining women either completed the GDT and transitioned into VET ($n = 3$) or enrolled in VET directly ($n = 3$) within the first four years of leaving high school; by T2, they were either in career-related employment ($n = 4$; including one in part-time education) or childcare by choice ($n = 2$). As one participant stated:

I dropped out of high school...and then I went to complete the General Development Test...which allowed me to enroll in vocational training programs. I didn't drop out to do nothing—I dropped out so that I could go directly into vocational training. (P6)

Theme 2: Barriers in employment without post-secondary training. This theme captures how lacking a secondary-level qualification limited access to stable, satisfying work. Of the three women in unsatisfying jobs at T2, two had not earned a high school diploma and one held only that credential. Their employment histories involved low-skilled, minimum-wage positions, with particularly unstable trajectories for those without a diploma. Both described repeated cycles of precarious, poorly paid work and identified the missing diploma as the main barrier to better opportunities. One felt confined to service jobs lacking alignment with her interests. All three recognized that returning to school was necessary to improve their prospects, though the two without diplomas viewed this as unlikely given their academic struggles and repeated failed GAE attempts.

The three young women in satisfying full-time jobs had obtained vocational degrees despite not finishing high school and held stable, satisfying, and specialized positions. Two considered returning to school to earn a diploma for career advancement but did not see it as essential. Similarly, both NEET participants with vocational degrees had stable jobs before transitioning to full-time childcare. Their decision to stay home

was driven by personal factors—such as limited childcare access and caregiving duties—rather than educational or employment barriers. While they recognized that lacking a diploma posed some limits, they did not view it as problematic and had no plans to return to school.

Theme 3: Contextual sources of support.

This theme captures the external supports that shaped participants' trajectories during and after high school, namely direct support from school-based services and indirect support provided by VET that facilitated integration into satisfying occupations.

School-based LRD services. Just over half of participants received school-based LRD services in high school, ranging from general accommodations (e.g., extra time on exams; $n = 2$) to individualized supports (e.g., laptop access, specialized instruction, or professional help; $n = 5$). For example:

I saw a speech-language therapist and a special education teacher, and I've been receiving support since elementary school. (P2)

I still had some accommodations in high school, such as support from a special education teacher, but extra time did not exist, and I was never allowed to use a computer. That's why I struggled in high school, I didn't know what was going on. (P7)

Most received support throughout high school ($n = 5$), while two began only in their final year, by which point difficulties were too severe to graduate. Only one participant with individualized supports graduated on time.

Only those who had received school-based services in high school reported accessing support afterward, though experiences varied. Participants in unsatisfying occupations faced challenges: at T1, all three were enrolled in GAE without LRD-specific support. One linked her struggles to the lack of services and long delays in getting help from teachers, a situation that persisted years later for the two participants still cycling through GAE. The third, who earned her diploma, later attempted multiple post-secondary programs but dropped out or was expelled due to poor grades, citing inadequate and

inconsistent accommodations as contributing to difficulties.

The three participants in career-related education benefited from individualized support. One participant who had graduated on time continued receiving similar accommodations in college. Another obtained individualized accommodations in GAE by T1 and maintained them upon entering college after. For example:

It's not that it's demanding [the program], but it's difficult for me because, in French, spelling and reading comprehension are really complicated.... Because of my diagnosis, I get an extra 30 minutes on exams, and I'm allowed to use my computer for writing and everything else. That helps. (P2)

It helped me, especially when I was able to take my Grade 11 French exam in adult education. I was allowed to use Antidote [a French-language writing assistance software] and other accommodations, and I finally got good grades. (P7)

I was diagnosed when I was young, but school was not easy.... When I got to CE-GEP, that's when I finally received support. Everyone was there for me. There was the learning support centre, and it was really great. I felt really supported. (P3)

A third benefited from career guidance and transition planning during VET and later enrolled in college, though she did not report ongoing services. The women in satisfying employment or NEET did not mention school-based supports after high school.

Vocational training. The LRD-related challenges experienced in high school and in GAE, for most, lessened among participants who pursued VET ($n = 7$). They reported minimal impact of their LRD on their success despite having received no formal services. Unlike direct, compensatory supports offered in school, VET provided an indirect pathway to satisfying employment by bypassing the obstacles of GAE or rapid workforce entry. Whereas participants in unsatisfying occupations cycled through GAE and temporary jobs, participants who enrolled

in VET without a high school diploma or GDT secured stable, fulfilling work in their field and remained employed at T2 ($n = 3$) or left to care for children ($n = 2$). For two others, VET served as a bridge to further education: one combined part-time VET with part-time work after completing her GDT, while another, who was expelled from college due to poor grades, was able to re-enroll after improving her academic standing via VET. As one participant shared, “In my vocational training program, because it’s hands-on and I’m constantly on my feet, it [referring to LRD] doesn’t cause me any problems at all” (P6).

Theme 4: Individual levers and post-school goal-setting. This theme captures how the specificity, realism, and individualization of participants’ short- and long-term plans related to their post-school outcomes.

Participants in unsatisfying occupations articulated clear short-term but vague, unrealistic, or absent long-term plans. At T1, short-term goals focused on maintaining their current trajectory, typically continuing in GAE. Long-term plans were ill-defined or misaligned with their qualifications—such as pursuing unspecified college studies or specialized work without the necessary credentials ($n = 2$) or seeking employment without credentials or clear field of interest ($n = 1$). By T2, little progress had been made toward long-term goals and participants’ situations and plans remained largely unchanged. Short-term plans still centred on re-enrolling in general programs either in GAE or college ($n = 2$) or were unknown ($n = 1$), while long-term plans remained vague or unrealistic, such as pursuing post-secondary programs or careers for which they lacked prerequisites.

Participants in satisfying occupations reported similar short-term plans but clearer, individualized, and attainable long-term goals. At T1, short-term plans focused on maintaining their current path: continuing in GAE ($n = 2$), completing post-secondary or VET ($n = 3$), remaining in desired jobs ($n = 2$), or staying home with children ($n = 2$). Long-term goals were concrete and purposeful, such as enrolling in specific post-secondary or vocational programs ($n = 4$), advancing within a chosen career ($n = 2$), entering the workforce after completing studies ($n = 1$), or continuing full-time caregiving ($n = 2$). Participants showed consistency in pursuing these

goals in the four years between interviews, including one who changed vocational programs to reflect evolving interests while remaining in education, as originally planned. By T2, short-term plans still centred on ongoing education, employment, or caregiving, while long-term goals remained realistic and personalized, yet flexible. Those in education ($n = 3$) planned to pursue further studies leading to specialized careers; those employed ($n = 4$) aimed to progress within their field while remaining open to new opportunities; and those NEET ($n = 2$) intended to continue their current roles but expressed interest in returning to work depending on family or financial circumstances.

DISCUSSION

Qualitative analyses were used to examine post-school trajectories of 12 young women with LRD (diagnosed prior to or at the onset of high school) interviewed four and eight years after leaving high school. Overall, participants faced ongoing academic and employment challenges during the post-school transition, though difficulties tapered for those who eventually pursued vocational or, in rare cases, post-secondary programs. Those in career-related education or employment at the eight-year mark had set clear, realistic and individualized goals at four years, while those with vague or unrealistic plans remained in temporary work. Most young women pursued VET, despite these being traditionally male-dominated programs, which was closely linked to long-term occupational success.

The Individual, Their Context, and Time: A Combined Phase-Adequacy and Sustainable Career Perspective

Findings are interpreted through a combined phase-adequacy and sustainable career framework that considers career development as a fluid, context-sensitive process shaped by evolving individual circumstances. This framework emphasizes the joint roles of individual adaptability and supportive environments in shaping the post-school transition, both of which emerged as key levers among the young women who integrated into satisfying long-term occupations (De Vos et al., 2020; Dietrich et al., 2012).

Persisting barriers to post-secondary education and satisfying employment for young women with LRD. Findings reflect well-documented short- and long-term challenges for women with LRD, including academic delays, difficulty re-engaging in education, and unsatisfying employment (Lavoie et al., 2021; Marcotte, 2012). All participants experienced significant high school difficulties despite the use of IEPs, with the accessibility and effectiveness of supports varying widely. Some benefited from individualized, intensive supports such as specialized instruction, whereas others received generic accommodations that were less helpful, and, in some cases, only accessible or intensified once delays were insurmountable. Findings highlight disparities in the availability and equity of LRD services, particularly in lower-SES schools with limited resources (Haddad, 2020; Mowlem et al., 2019; Towle, 2015). Still, supports were generally insufficient to overcome academic challenges, as nearly all participants left high school without a diploma. After leaving high school, the young women who continuously attempted GAE without eventually redirecting toward other pursuits were met with the same academic and motivational barriers that contributed to dropout in the first place and, without secondary credentials, were funneled into low-skilled, low-wage employment determined by accessibility rather than aspirations (Lavoie et al., 2021; Lindsay, Cagliostro, Albarico, et al., 2018).

Alternative trajectories to success: Adequate goal engagement and supportive environments as levers among young women with LRD. While participants experienced similar challenges during and shortly after high school, an alternative trajectory emerged among those who eventually integrated into satisfying occupations. Compared to peers remaining in temporary work with repeated unsuccessful GAE attempts, these young women's trajectories were shaped by distinct external and internal factors reflective of phase-adequate goal-setting and supportive educational environments.

The importance of setting clear, specific, and individualized long-term vocational goals. Phase-adequate engagement emphasizes that successful post-school transitions require pursuing goals that are both developmen-

tally appropriate and structurally feasible, while continuously monitoring and adapting them in response to changing conditions (Dietrich et al., 2012). Vocational goals among those in temporary occupations were vague or poorly defined, such as "returning to education someday," pursuing work in loosely specified fields, or aiming for specialized roles without attaining prerequisites. Though a return to education or securing employment may align with the developmental expectations of early adulthood, these aspirations may falter when not anchored in personal values, interests, and contextual realities (Branje, 2022; Dietrich et al., 2012). This pattern mirrors findings in adolescent girls with disabilities, who often struggle to identify abilities and interests after years of academic challenges and may develop negative attitudes toward post-secondary opportunities, further hindering phase-adequate goal-setting and pursuit (Dipeolu et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2021). These difficulties likely persist over time—evidenced here by repeated poorly construed long-term plans and unfruitful goal pursuits. These accumulated obstacles likely reduce their expectations for finding satisfying employment and may even foreshadow long-term disengagement from post-school efforts.

In contrast, the young women in career-related occupations distinguished themselves from those in temporary jobs by the specificity, individualization, and realism of their long-term vocational goals. By age 20, those who recalibrated their educational strategy to anchor it on phase-adequate, contextually grounded goals—often by moving toward VET rather than rigidly re-engaging in GAE after repeated unsuccessful attempts—were more likely to achieve stable, meaningful occupations. Similarly, the two NEET adapted their goals to prioritize caregiving over workforce participation as a more favourable long-term path. Furthermore, these young women, who have set personally meaningful vocational goals, tended to follow through with their plans over time. Their situations at age 24 aligned with goals set four years earlier, and their new long-term goals projected them further along a consistent vocational trajectory. Interestingly, it was not the timing of young women's move away from temporary occupations that mattered, but the fact that they

eventually *did* so. For some, progress may follow a “late bloomer” pattern relative to traditional, gender-expected pathways, yet they can still ultimately achieve comparable success.

Contextual support provided by post-secondary institutions and VET. Supportive environments are essential in shaping successful post-school transitions by enabling individuals to develop and pursue goals that are developmentally adequate and sustainable. Educational institutions, specifically, provide guidance, supports, and ongoing feedback, allowing individuals to track and adapt goals as they progress. The young women who successfully entered career-related occupations combined phase-adequate goal pursuits with a boost from supportive environments, either through direct LRD-related services in post-secondary education or the structured nature of VET.

School-based LRD supports in post-secondary education. While high school services did not appear to shape later occupational trajectories, young women who persevered in post-secondary education—each with comorbid ADHD and LD—explicitly credited accommodations as supporting their success. With post-secondary enrolment among LRD youth on the rise, these findings highlight the importance of inclusive practices and the effectiveness of current post-secondary services in addressing individual needs (Larose et al., 2022). However, findings also highlight disparities between conventional post-secondary settings and GAE (Marcotte, 2012, Walker, 2022). College students benefited from tailored accommodations, whereas those in GAE—limited to general career counselling or lacking supports entirely—struggled to access assistance, perpetuating academic difficulties and demonstrating that orientation services alone are insufficient without concurrent individualized academic support.

Vocational training as a promising alternative for young women with LRD. A parallel career-bound trajectory emerged among participants who eventually opted for VET. These women enrolled without a high school diploma, either via the GDT or direct entry, bypassing educational barriers associated with traditional post-secondary pathways. Vocational training facilitated transitions into career-related

employment that was both objectively (meeting needs) and subjectively (personally satisfying) rewarding, with opportunities for advancement. While this remains a qualitative finding that may not be generalizable to other contexts, this runs counter to extant findings that women with disabilities are confined to lower-status roles (Lindsay et al., 2021; Lindstrom et al., 2012; Pham et al., 2020). For some, VET also served as a bridge back to post-secondary education, and others remained open to further training, indicating that these programs increasingly support broader, long-term career development rather than serving solely to develop skills to enter a specific profession.

In lieu of direct school-based supports, these young women appeared to benefit from indirect support embedded in VET, which provides a structured, accessible, and supportive environment that fosters phase-adequate engagement by aligning training with individual skills, interests, and labour market demands. Unlike general programs characterized by broad, academics-focused learning that is often disconnected from employment, VET offers specialized curricula and practical experiences that render goals more concrete and attainable. This targeted approach may help students develop realistic plans grounded in their personal and contextual realities, which is particularly critical for young women with LRD, whose vocational identity formation and goal-setting are often challenged by repeated difficulties in traditional education.

Practical Implications

Findings highlight gaps in service provision and the need for targeted, early interventions. In high school, supports were inconsistent and mostly generic, like supplemental time for exams rather than individualized, LRD-specific interventions. After high school, services became even less accessible in GAE, where resources were minimal in an already unstructured environment. In contrast, those in post-secondary institutions benefited from tailored supports that fostered success. Yet, students who most require such services often face barriers to entering these institutions. These findings echo those of other large-scale projects, emphasizing the

importance of interventions that build vocational identity and career competencies during compulsory schooling, when access to support is greatest and before opportunities diminish, especially for vulnerable youth (Lindstrom et al., 2020; OECD, 2024). One such intervention program for high school students recently implemented in New Brunswick, Hopeful Transitions, shows promising preliminary results: increased student engagement and a framework explicitly designed for equity and inclusiveness (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2023). Early intervention may also foster the self-awareness and self-advocacy skills required to seek support later, as only those who received LRD services in high school continued to access them in adulthood (Lindsay, Cagliostro, & Carafa, 2018). Despite shortcomings experienced by young women in the present study, non-traditional educational school settings such as GAE represent an appealing venue for service reform, integrating career guidance with individualized academic supports to help young women develop the critical skills needed to identify individualized, values-aligned goals and concrete steps to achieve them. Because it reaches students regardless of where they are in the post-school transition, GAE could play a pivotal role for youth with LRD whose educational and vocational progress unfolds more gradually.

Second, findings identify VET as a promising yet underutilized pathway for young women with LRD, as these remain heavily male-dominated. Vocational programs offer a structured, career-focused environment that fosters phase-appropriate goal engagement and supports sustainable career development. For young women with LRD—who often struggle to establish a clear vocational identity—these programs provide concrete, skill-based pathways that make goals more attainable and aligned with individual strengths. Expanding access and promoting the visibility of VET not only challenges the perception of these programs as a “last resort,” but also aligns with governmental efforts to increase young women’s participation in these fields. Greater visibility can also generate a positive cycle, as women’s success stories expand the frames of reference available to guide future cohorts of young women with LRD during

their post-school transitions.

Finally, findings shed light on the non-linear trajectories that are characteristic of young women with LRD, offering important insights for future educational research and practice. The varied career pathways observed mirror the non-traditional routes often seen among vulnerable groups and underscore the need for longitudinal research that captures flexible, evolving outcomes over time (Akkermans et al., 2021). Understanding how young women with LRD navigate, revisit, and alternate between education, training, and employment can inform interventions that foster adaptive and sustainable career development. In this study, success did not depend on *when* participants transitioned out of temporary occupations (e.g., GAE), just that they eventually did. Thus, despite delayed progress, it is never too late to reorient toward meaningful training and achieve comparable occupational outcomes to peers. Recognizing these diverse pathways highlights the importance of longitudinal, context-sensitive, and holistic approaches that consider long-term career–person fit.

LIMITATIONS, STRENGTHS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the study drew on a small, context-specific sample, which may limit the generalizability of results to broader populations of young women with LRD. Second, data were based on retrospective vignettes, reflecting participants’ self-reported perceptions that may be subject to recall bias or subjective interpretation. Third, although the analysis identified key academic and career-related factors influencing post-school transitions, these are shaped by a broader range of contextual and individual influences beyond those considered in this study, such as parental and cultural expectations, social support, resilience, and intrinsic motivation (Dietrich et al., 2012; Pham et al., 2020; Lent et al., 2016). Fourth, the eight-year follow-up means participants’ experiences were embedded in specific educational, economic, and policy contexts that may have evolved since. Finally, as the qualitative design prioritizes depth over breadth, further longitudinal,

mixed method research is needed to examine how multiple factors alongside LRD influence young women's career development.

A key strength of this study is its longitudinal design, tracking participants over eight years and providing rare insights into the post-school trajectories of young women with LRD. Narrative-based vignettes offered rich, nuanced accounts of individual pathways, capturing complexities often missed in quantitative research. By including participants across diverse contexts—education, employment, or neither—the study presents a more comprehensive view than research confined to a single setting and illustrates the fluidity with which young women navigate between them. Beyond conventional success, participants' own appraisals emphasized career-person fit and long-term fulfillment. The extended timeline further revealed delayed but meaningful successes, underscoring the potential for positive outcomes even after periods of instability. Future research should build on these strengths by examining larger, more diverse samples; exploring the impact of early, school-based interventions; and assessing how supports can be adapted across settings—including non-traditional programs like GAE and VET. Attention should also be given to broader influences, such as social support networks, community resources, and evolving labour market conditions, to ensure interventions remain relevant and effective.

While findings reflect persistent educational and employment barriers for young women with LRD, those with trajectories anchored in structured contexts—particularly VET—and guided by clear, long-term goals appeared to overcome some barriers, highlighting the importance of a future-oriented vision aligned with one's strengths and circumstances. Using phase-adequacy and sustainable career frameworks, results suggest that non-traditional pathways can still foster adaptive, meaningful engagement and long-term career sustainability. Vocational programs, especially for those not entering post-secondary education directly, are often pivotal in providing opportunities to set attainable goals, leading to stable and satisfying occupations in early adulthood, either directly, or by providing a path toward higher education.

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