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Journey to College from Special Education: A Case Study of Transition Support in a Cyber-Charter School

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JOURNEY TO COLLEGE FROM SPECIAL EDUCATION:

A CASE STUDY OF TRANSITION SUPPORT

IN A CYBER-CHARTER SCHOOL

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania
School of Graduate Studies and Research
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Title: Journey to College from Special Education: A Case Study of Transition Support in
a Cyber-Charter School

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This qualitative case study sought to identify the perceptions of students diagnosed with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, or a Specific Learning Disability regarding the transition planning process at a cyber-charter school in preparing them for transition to two and four year traditional and blended colleges. This study also sought to explore transition services within a cyber-charter school environment. In addition, this study examined the role parents and learning support teachers play in student transition experiences and post school goal attainment.

The study was conducted at a cyber-charter school in Pennsylvania and included data from students diagnosed with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, and Specific Learning Disability, as well as, parents and guardians and learning support teachers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students, parent/guardian, and learning support teachers, and information from students' individualized education plans was included in the analysis.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Preparing students to transition to post-secondary settings requires understanding what components of their education helped them to attain their goals and reach a level of autonomy and independence. Self-determination, self-awareness, familial support and influential teachers are noted as important factors (Zhang, Wehmeyer, & Chen, 2005). For students with disabilities, effective transition planning is an important part of the journey to life after high school. Transition planning includes communication with families and students, post-secondary goal setting and activity development, and active inquiry into realistic post-secondary options that meet the interests of the student. Students with disabilities in cyber-charter schools preparing to enter college classrooms present a unique challenge to transition planning teams because the planning process takes place virtually.

Background of the Study

Historically, students with disabilities have struggled for inclusion and equality. Students are sometimes faced with opposition from peers and institutions and must develop the skills necessary to be self-determined and self-reliant. Although there have been great strides in rates of school completion, employment, and post-secondary education for students with disabilities, the gap between special education students and their non-disabled peers remains substantial. According to Newman, Wagner, Knokey, Marden, Nagle, Shaver, & Wei (2011), 60% of young adults with disabilities continued on to post-secondary schooling and 67% had obtained full-time employment within 8 years of leaving high school. Additionally, of the students with disabilities exiting high school, only 51% do so with a high school diploma, compared to 90% of peers

without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). These statistics show the importance of continued persistence in preparing students for transition to adult life and post-secondary options such as career training and college.

Transition services are designed with the goal of successful post-school outcomes in three areas: post-secondary training, employment, and independent living. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that every student with a disability ages fourteen and older have a transition plan included in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The transition plan is focused on improving academic and functional skills and movement from school to post school goals, based on individual needs, strengths, preferences, and interests, and includes instruction, related services, community experiences, and the development of employment and post school adult living objectives (IDEA, 2004, PL 108-446, Sec. 602[34]).

Although IDEA requires transition planning as part of the IEP process, Park (2008) interviewed six special education teachers in a district in Winnipeg, Canada and reported that while special education teachers were aware of transition planning services, many noted that these services had only been developed within the district over the past few years. In a survey conducted in 2007 with teachers in ten school districts in south Texas, Young reported that many of the districts were not engaging in best practices for transition such as person centered planning, student preparation for life after high school, and self-determination instruction (Young, 2007). Baer, Daviso, Queen, and Flexer (2011) conducted interviews with 4500 students in a north-eastern state who had graduated or aged out of special education between 2005 and 2008. They found that transition services differed based on disability classification, gender, ethnicity, and school setting. This discrepancy leads to ineffective transition planning and misalignment with student goals and post-graduate needs.

In a study conducted by Powers, Gil-Lashiwabara, Geenen, Powers, Balandran, and Palmer (2005), the researchers examined 399 individualized education plans in two large, urban school districts in the western United States. They found that the two most common goal areas included in the transition plans were integrated employment and community participation. However, almost all of IEPs examined lacked support in development of these areas with students left to research and investigate employment and community opportunities independently. Another area of concern was a lack of instruction in career planning and self-determination. With students with disabilities trailing behind their peers in the general population in all categories of post school achievement, it is important that effective transition planning services are understood, developed, and implemented (Kellems & Morningstar, 2009). An important factor to consider is the relationship between student involvement and family involvement in the IEP process and student empowerment in transition to post-secondary settings (Morningstar, Frey, Noonan, Ng, Clavenna-Deane, Graves, Kellems, McCall, Pearson, Wade, Williams-Diehm, 2010).

Transition to college for students with disabilities is a complex process because parents and educational professionals must come together to identify students' needs in post-secondary educational settings, independent living, and careers. Self-determination and self-awareness are key components in the success or failure of students with disabilities (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2008). Familial support and influential teachers are also noted as important factors, which enhance students' self-determination (Zhang, Wehmeyer, & Chen, 2005). Effective transition planning includes communication with families and students, post-secondary goal setting and activity development, and active inquiry into realistic post-secondary options that meet the interests of the student. The purpose of this study was to discover how self-determination, self-

awareness, and family support emerge in a cyber-charter school environment to support post K-12 transition.

Within the past decade, cyber schools have gained national attention and become part of a heated debate over the settings and environments most suitable for learning. Cyber schools can be either private or public and offer education for students grades K-12, in both synchronous and asynchronous formats. Students attend school within the comfort of their own homes and are provided with computers, textbooks, certified instructors for each course and after school tutoring. Cyber schools offer many of the same amenities of bricks and mortar schools such as lessons in real time, comprehensive curriculum, clubs, activities, and field trips. Since 2000 there has been an increase in online schooling as an educational option because charters have made this free, public choice possible (Carnahan & Fulton, 2013; Cyber-charter Schools; Miron, Horvitz, & Gulosino, 2013). If parents and families are dissatisfied with their neighborhood school, they have the option to change. While data showing the rate of enrollment for students with disabilities in cyber schools are scarce, research does show that students with disabilities represent approximately 7.2% of students enrolled in cyber schools within the United States (Miron, Horvitz, & Gulosino, 2013). According to Beck (2014), "due to limitations in state level data systems, little is known about what kinds of special education students attend cyber-charter schools and there is little empirical work that makes use of the opinions of special education students and parents" (p. 72).

Cyber-charter schools are a unique phenomenon and have emerged in Pennsylvania over the course of the past decade. Little research has been conducted into this type of schooling and its educational outcomes. By definition, cyber-charter schools are fully online schools also known as virtual schools and serve students who may have some barrier to attendance at a brick

and mortar school (Marsh, Carr-Chellman, & Sockman, 2009). Online charter schools are alternatives to brick and mortar schools and parental choice plays a large role in student attendance. Parents choose cyber schools to educate their children for a variety of different reasons. However, parents with disabilities often choose cyber schools because traditional programming was not meeting their student's needs or bullying was a issue in the bricks and mortar schools. Marsh et. al (2009) also mentions three reasons why parents choose cyber schools: customization of curriculum, no cost, and it provides hope for a better educational future for students.

Conversely, skeptics of the cyber-charter school movement cite many reasons why cyber-charter schools might not be meeting the needs of students with disabilities, which include concerns about how students with disabilities are served in virtual environments, inconsistency from state to state and district to district, gaps in accessibility, minimal training for educators working with students online, and an absence of national data describing the extent to which students with disabilities are engaged in online learning (Shah, 2012).

While these concerns are valid, it seems that many of these same issues are also seen in traditional brick and mortar settings. Demographics are crucial to understanding the dynamics of cyber-charter schools. Public cyber-charter schools in the state of Pennsylvania serve students from the entire state in suburban, rural, and urban environments. Students come from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The demographics of the cyber-charter school chosen for this study are 51% free and reduced meal eligible, 18% students with IEPs, and 30% minority students. Cyber-charter schools face the same challenges as bricks and mortar schools, but must find unique ways to meet students' needs in remote locations.

Transition planning for students with disabilities is constantly evolving and must be reshaped to suit the unique students it is designed to serve and the educational environments in which they learn. According to Thompson and Fulk (2000), "the transition planning process should yield a vision for students' lives after high school and should enumerate steps leading to post school goals. Both the visions and plans should be shared and understood by the students, family members, educators, adult service providers, and any other individuals who will support the students after they leave high school" (p. 4). Creating documents in which all IEP team members have provided input and clear goals and objectives have been developed facilitates smooth transitions from secondary to post-secondary settings.

This study builds on research conducted by Field and Hoffman (1994) and Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Little, Garner, & Lawrence (2008). Field & Hoffman (1994) identified five steps to enhance self-determination which are 1) Know yourself, 2) Value yourself, 3) Plan, 4) Act, and 5) Experience outcomes and learn. Shogren, et al. (2008) identified the following factors as being influential in developing students' self-determination and self-reliance: individual capacity, opportunity, supports and accommodations, and students' perceptions and beliefs. These theories examine both individual and ecological predictors in self-determination and self-reliance.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of students with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, or a Specific Learning Disability towards the transition planning process in preparing them for transition to two and four year traditional or blended colleges. This study sought to explore transition services in a cyber-charter school environment. In addition, this

study examined the role that parental involvement and learning support teachers play in student transition experiences and post-graduation preparation.

Research Questions

By using a descriptive single case study with embedded units to examine the transition experiences of students with disabilities, the following questions will be explored:

1. How do students with disabilities perceive the transition planning process?
2. What factors influence the student's ability to self-advocate?
3. What factors have contributed to or inhibited the student's ability to exhibit self-determination?
4. How do families and learning support staff impact students' success?

Research Design

The research design for this study was a descriptive single case study with embedded units. According to Yin (2003), a descriptive case study is used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred. This study was conducted in one cyber-charter school with three students with different disabilities within the high school environment. Participants included students who have been diagnosed with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, or Specific Learning Disabilities. The study examined perceptions of high school students with disabilities towards the transition planning process. Interviews were conducted with the three selected students, their parent/guardian, and their learning support teachers. Additionally, other documents such as the students' individualized education plan and transition plan were analyzed.

Assumptions

Based on the literature, one assumption is that increased positive parental involvement will likely increase student self-determination and self-advocacy skills (Geenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2001). Additionally, positive experiences with learning support teachers during the transition process may increase self-determination, self-advocacy, and motivation. Conversely negative parental involvement and teacher experiences or a lack of parental involvement may negatively impact the students' perceptions of the transition experience.

Limitations

Although the researcher has chosen to use a multiple case study research design, generalizability is still limited. The setting for this study includes one cyber-charter school in Pennsylvania. Currently, there are fourteen cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania. The cyber-charter school chosen for this study has an enrollment of approximately 8,600 students, 1,500 of whom are students with disabilities. Disability categories for the study were selected based on the frequency of students attending post-secondary college programs who had been diagnosed with Autism, Emotional Disturbance (ED), and Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). The sample was not representative of all fourteen disability categories as outlined by IDEA.

The researcher is an employee of the school district being studied. The researcher obtained informed consent from all participants and ensured that participants understood that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they may choose to leave the study at any time. Participants were able to contact the researcher via telephone or email at any time to opt out of the study. No student who was known to the researcher prior to the study was included and students were selected from the pool of teacher nominated students.

Definitions of Terms

In this section, key terms used in special education and transition planning will be identified. Unless otherwise noted, all definitions come from the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 34 (CFR, 2014).

*ADA-"*The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in employment, State and local government, public accommodations, commercial facilities, transportation, and telecommunications." It also applies to the United States Congress (ADA, 1990, PL 101-336, Sec. 104 [328])

*Autism- "*Autism is a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communications and social interaction, generally evident before age three, that adversely affect a child's educational performance" (34 CFR 300.8).

Cyber-charter School- "Cyber-charter schools operate as independent school districts, delivering instruction through computer based formats" (Cyber-charter Schools).

Emotional Disturbance- "Emotional disturbance means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance: An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors, an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers, inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstance, a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression, or a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems" (34 CFR 300.8).

High Incidence Disabilities- There are 13 federal disability categories for school-aged children. "High Incidence Disabilities refer to those categories of disability that are more prevalent in the overall school-aged disability population. The high-incidence categories

comprise 90% of all identified school-aged children with disabilities." These categories include Specific Learning Disability, Speech-Language Impairment, Emotional Disturbance, Other Health Impairment, and Autism (Twenty-sixth Annual Report to Congress, 2004).

Indicator 13- "Percent of youth with IEPs aged 16 and above with an IEP that includes appropriate measurable postsecondary goals that are annually updated and based upon an age appropriate transition assessment, transition services, including courses of study, that will reasonably enable the student to meet those postsecondary goals, and annual IEP goals related to the student's transition services needs." There also must be evidence that the student was invited to the IEP Team meeting where transition services are to be discussed and evidence that, if appropriate, a representative of any participating agency was invited to the IEP Team meeting with the prior consent of the parent or student who has reached the age of majority. (20 U.S.C. 1416(a)(3)(B))

Individualized Education Program- Once an individual is eligible for special education and related services, school districts are obligated to develop an Individualized Education Program or *IEP*- "An IEP is a written statement of the program for a child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a team-meeting format. The IEP specifies the individual educational needs of the child and what specific special education and related services are necessary to meet those needs" (34 CFR 300.22).

Parent or Guardian- The term "parent" as used in this document is a reference to the biological or adoptive parent or legal guardian of the student with a disability. Legal rights to make educational or IEP decisions are typically transferred from parents or guardians to students upon the age of majority, which is age 18. In some cases parents or legal guardians may be involved in the IEP process until a student exits or ages out of special education. This prolonged

involvement is especially true of parents or guardians of students with specific low incidence disabilities, such as mental retardation, who may require additional assistance in the educational decision-making process beyond age 18 (34 CFR 300.30).

*Section 504- "*Section 504 forbids organizations and employers from excluding or denying individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity to receive program benefits and services. It defines the rights of individuals with disabilities to participate in, and have access to, program benefits and services" (29 U.S.C. 794)

Special Education Teacher or Learning Support Teacher- "The special education teacher is the chair of the IEP team, and the person responsible for the oversight of the IEP implementation. The term learning support teacher refers to the special education teacher in this document." (34 CFR 300.39)

Specific Learning Disabilities "Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia" (34 CFR 300.8).

Transition Services "Transition services are a coordinated set of activities conducted by an IEP team for a student with a disability that is designed within a results-oriented process, which is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation." (34 CFR 300.43).

Universal Design for Learning "UDL provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone--not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs" (34.CFR 300.44).

Summary

This study is designed to investigate the perceptions of students diagnosed with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, or Specific Learning Disability towards the transition planning process in preparation for college. Self-determination, self-awareness, and familial support are noted as key determinants in the academic, emotional, and social success of students with disabilities. The purpose of this study is to examine transition services in a cyber-charter school environment and to discuss the role that parental involvement and learning support staff have in preparing students for transition experiences and post-secondary schooling opportunities. A descriptive single case study with embedded units will be used to analyze the transition experiences of three students with different disabilities in a cyber-charter school environment planning to attend college.

According to Dutta, Kundu, and Schiro-Geist (2009), "There are 6500 post-secondary institutions in the U.S. that enroll about 16 million full-and part-time students, i.e., 14 million undergraduates and 2 million graduates, only 9% of these students have a documented disability" (p. 10). This is not necessarily representative of all students with disabilities who attend college because students entering college classrooms have a choice to self-report. They are no longer required to be identified and labeled. However, if additional supports are needed, students must be able to self-advocate (Gil, 2007). The findings of this study will shed light on factors contributing to the decision making process of students diagnosed with high incidence disabilities who are choosing to attend college.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter seeks to provide an overview of the history behind transition services in special education, to describe student and family perceptions of the transition planning process, and to establish understanding of the transition experience for students diagnosed with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, and Specific Learning Disability attending college. According to Thompson, Fulk, & Piercy (2000),

> The transition planning process should yield a vision for students' lives after high school and should enumerate steps leading to post school goals. Transition plans should be shared and understood by the students, family members, educators, adult service providers, and any other individuals who will support the students after they leave high school" (p. 4).

However, surprisingly little empirical research has been conducted on the development and implementation of transition plans for students with disabilities.

Increasingly, students with all types of disabilities are entering two and four year college classrooms. However, they are still significantly behind their general population peers. The 10-year National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 found that students with disabilities are less likely to enroll in post-secondary programs and to become employed beyond graduation (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009). In order for students with disabilities to increase their post-secondary schooling and employment opportunities it is necessary for them to receive training in how to self-advocate and prepare for post-secondary options and employment (Gil, 2007).

A specific gap in the literature exists in the transition of students with disabilities from cyber-charter schools to both traditional and online college classrooms. Very little is known

about the post-secondary outcomes of students who attended cyber schools. For this reason, it is imperative to investigate the perceptions of students toward their transition planning experiences within a cyber-charter school and how this experience impacted their choice to attend postsecondary schooling.

The following is a review of literature pertaining to transition support services for students with disabilities, student and family perceptions of transition planning, and students with disabilities in higher education. It includes a theoretical foundation based in the work of Field & Hoffman, a history of transition support services in the United States, an overview of cyber-charter schools, and inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education.

Theoretical Framework

In 1994, Sharon Field and Alan Hoffman developed the Steps to Self-Determination Curriculum as a response to changes in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requiring transition planning as a part of the individualized education plan process. Field and Hoffman (2002) suggest that teachers must first be self-determined themselves in order to "creatively implement a new curriculum to meet the unique needs of students in their classrooms" (p. 93). Figure 1 is an illustration of Field and Hoffman's five steps to self-determination model for teachers and students.

The Steps to Self-Determination Curriculum is designed so that teachers become facilitators and engage in learning the curriculum with their students. The five steps promote student and teacher self-awareness, increase self-esteem, and encourage goal setting and long-term planning. Students who learn these skills in secondary settings are more likely to obtain employment, have successful careers, and pursue post-secondary training and education (Campbell-Whatley, 2008; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Scorgie, Kildal, & Wilgosh, 2010). It was

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also suggested that teachers need to develop these skills themselves, so that they can inspire

students and serve as role models (Field & Hoffman, 2002).

Table 1

Field and Hoffman's Five Steps to Self-Determination

Steps to Self-Determination	Best Practice
Step 1: Know yourself and your students	Teachers need to understand the strengths, weaknesses, and preferences of their students and have a solid grasp of their own strengths and weaknesses as teachers.
Step 2: Value yourself	Teachers need to believe in their assessment of their skills and their situation, and they need to be able to move forward with their curriculum implementation plans with confidence.
Step 3: Plan	Teachers put their knowledge and beliefs about the needs of their students and what they as teachers can offer to students into a plan. They need to undertake the necessary preparation that will help to ensure success for their curriculum implementation.
Step 4: Act	Teachers must put their plan into action.
Step 5: Experience Outcomes and learn	Teachers evaluate their implementation efforts, modify their plans for the future, if needed, and celebrate their successes.

Also crucial to fostering self-determination are individual capacity, opportunity, and

supports and accommodations (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Garner, & Lawrence,

2007). Students learn self determination skills throughout development, but must be given

opportunities to practice these skills in different types of environments. Self-determination is

greatly influenced by environmental factors (Shogren et al., 2007).

Since the development of self-determination skills and positive self image are not solely influenced by instruction in these areas, it is important to examine other potential ecological and environmental influences such as students' perceptions and beliefs about self-determination and parental involvement in developing these skills. Children who have high family involvement attain higher levels of employment and receive higher wages as adults (Geenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2001). The purpose of this study was to examine student, parent, and learning support teacher perceptions of the transition planning process through the lens of Field and Hoffman's model of self-determination. This model provided a means to discuss the impact of self-determined students, parental involvement, and special education teacher support on transition to college classrooms.

History of Transition Support Services

Secondary transition planning helps students prepare for life after high school and includes post-secondary education and training, employment, and community or independent living (Secondary Transition). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was revised in 2004 to seek to improve post-school outcomes for students with disabilities.

The revised law provides a better definition of transition planning, a clear starting point for when services should begin, and improved planning guidelines for creating goals (Cortiella, 2004). The current definition states:

The term 'transition services" means a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that 1) is designed to be within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, and employment. 2) Is based on individual child's

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needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences and interests, and 3) includes

instruction, related services, and community experiences (34 CFR 300.43).

This new definition includes both academic and functional skill categories and insists that

educators utilize transition assessments to explore students' strengths, preferences, and areas of

interests. In previous versions of the law the starting date for services was age fourteen for some

requirements and age sixteen for others. IDEA 2004 changed the starting date for all services to

begin at age sixteen, however, states have the freedom to begin services earlier (U.S. Department

of Education, 2004). For example, Pennsylvania begins transition services at the age of fourteen

statewide. To improve planning and insure that students are provided with opportunities for

growth and advancement in post-secondary education, employment, and independent living,

special educators are required to create goals based on transition assessments for each of these

areas. Courses of study needed to improve in these areas must also be listed. Figure 2 provides a

sample transition grid as it might appear in a student's individualized education plan. As detailed

in the grid, special educators must also provide services such as assisting students in college

searches, providing access to transition and career inventories, assisting with SAT and ACT

registration, and arranging job shadowing experiences that will help students meet these goals.

Schools are responsible for bringing in outside agencies to provide students with the appropriate

services as needed.

Table 2

Sample Post-Secondary Transition Grid

Postsecondary Education and Training Goal: Upon graduation, student is interested in on the job training to become a home health aide.				Measurable Annual Goal **Yes** (Document in Section V)	

Courses of Study:

Spring 2014 Courses: American Government Foundations B, Career Planning 12, Consumer Math B, Digital Photography, Earth Science Foundations B, English 12 Foundations B, Sign Language I B

Student anticipates graduating in June 2014 based on successful completion of specified IEP goals for math and reading comprehension skills

Service/Activity	Location	Frequency	Projected Beginning Date	Anticipated Duration	Person(s)/Agency Responsible
Improve reading comprehension	General Education Setting/Home Setting	Weekly	2/14/2014	High school graduation	CCA Staff
Improve mathematic problem solving	General Education Setting/Home Setting	Weekly	2/14/2014	High school graduation	CCA Staff
Transition LiveLessons	General Education Setting/Home Setting	4x per month	2/14/2014	High school graduation	CCA Staff
Career Planning 12 Course	General Education Setting/Home Setting	2X per month	2/14/2014	High school graduation	CCA Staff
AHEDD is a private non-profit organization with a mission to serve the community as a catalyst in the employment and development of persons with special needs. www.ahedd.org	General Education Setting/Home Setting	Monthly	2/14/2014	High school graduation	CCA Staff

Postsecondary Transition

Post-secondary education and employment are the focal points of transition planning for student with high incidence disabilities. The National Longitudinal Study-2 (NLTS2, 2009) conducted by the National Center for Special Education Research found that:

1) Forty-five percent of youth with disabilities reported having continued on to postsecondary education within four years of leaving high school.

2) Fifty-five percent of postsecondary students who were identified by their secondary schools as having a disability did not consider themselves to have a disability by the time they transitioned to post-secondary school.

3) Thirty-seven percent of post-secondary students with disabilities identified themselves as having a disability and informed their postsecondary schools of their disability.

4) Twenty-four percent of postsecondary students who were identified as having a disability by their secondary schools were reported to receive accommodations or supports from their postsecondary schools because of their disability. In contrast, when these postsecondary students were in high school, eighty-four percent received some type of accommodation for support.

Youth with disabilities are less likely than their same age peers to attend college. However, students with disabilities are attending a variety of programs including both two and four year colleges, community colleges, and vocational training programs. The fact that over half of students identified as having a disability in high school did not feel that they had a disability once they reached college is puzzling and worth further attention. If students sincerely felt as if they no longer had a disability and could function normally without support, the special education department at their secondary schools did an excellent job of preparing them for

transition. However, it is also a possibility that these students no longer wanted to carry the label disabled, thus not receiving the supports they may need to succeed in college classrooms.

Another interesting finding is that only twenty-four percent of students were actually receiving some type of support from the post-secondary institution they were attending, but eighty-four percent had received supports and accommodations while in secondary school. This discrepancy may occur because the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which provides students with extensive supports and accommodations, only applies to secondary school settings (Duncan & Ali, 2011). Sufficient preparation in self-advocacy and self-determination become crucial to student success in college because learning support teachers and parents are not on campus to provide the support they once did in secondary settings. Students must learn how to access and utilize available resources such as tutoring services and academic support services independently.

Indicator 13: Postsecondary School Outcomes

Transition planning began with the first revision of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1990. At this time the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was established. In 1997, IDEA was amended to mandate transition planning at age fourteen with a transition statement including the students' course of study and potential career interest in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) (U.S. Dept of Education, 2004). The law also requires that at age sixteen a statement of transition services with links to outside agencies be included in students' IEPs (Prince, Katsiyannis, & Farmer, 2013). IDEA was further revised in 2004 and required each state to develop twenty indicators to improve outcomes of students with disabilities (20 U.S.C. 1416(a)(3)(B)) including postsecondary education, which is Indicator 13.

This indicator required states to become accountable for students' postsecondary school outcomes. The indicator requirement reads:

Percent of youth with IEPs aged 16 and above with an IEP that includes appropriate measureable postsecondary goals that are annually updated and based upon age appropriate transition assessments, transition services, including courses of study, that will reasonably enable the student to meet those postsecondary goals, and annual IEP goals related to the student's transition services needs. There must also be evidence that the student was invited to the IEP team meeting where transition services are to be discussed and evidence that, if appropriate, a representation of any participating agency was invited to the IEP Team meeting with the prior consent of parent or students who has reached the age of majority" (20. U.S.C. 1216 (a)(3)(B)).

Indicator 13 requires school districts to create postsecondary, employment, and when appropriate, independent living goals for students, and to provide students with services to assist them in attaining these goals. A key component of this process is that students become involved in developing goals that accurately represent careers and living arrangements that they would like to pursue. Students who are aged fourteen and older must be invited to participate in the IEP meeting along with their parents and guardians. Although students are invited to the meetings, it does not mean that they automatically become active participants. Often times students are not involved in the decision making process. Research shows that teachers and administrators often dominate the conversations occurring during IEP meetings (Geenen et al, 2001). Although students with disabilities may graduate from high school with anticipation of entering college classrooms and new careers, leaving students out of the planning already places them a step behind. Students and families should also be encouraged to assess the student's current skills and

abilities and provide input as to what is needed to transition to independent adult life (Peterson, Burden, Dedaghat, Gothberg, Kohler, & Coyle, 2013; Hetherington, Lorenz, & Trusty, 2010; Salembier & Furney, 1997; Thompson, Fulk, Piercy, 2000).

Transition and the Law

The discrepancy between a school district's choices for students in transition planning and what families feel is necessary has led to many challenging court cases. Both school districts and parents have prevailed in court, but there are several commonly cited violations of transition planning regulations outlined in IDEA, which have caused school districts to lose in court. Historically, when school districts have failed to "provide individualized services and appropriate education parents have prevailed" (Price, 2013, p. 287). In one such court case, Klein Independent School District and Texas Education Agency v. Per Hovem, Knut Hovem, and Signe Hovem (2010), the court ruled in favor of the family because the transition plan was not individualized and did not meet the student's needs beyond high school, thus the family was provided with reimbursement for two years of compensatory education (Klein Independent School District vs. Hovem, 2010)

Another powerful example of transition planning failures was a case with Caribou School District in Maine. The preliminary statement contended that the "school department failed to develop and deliver an appropriate set of transition services to student, resulting in the student's lack of preparation for his postsecondary educational career, and denial of a free appropriate public education" (Eggert & Minutelli, 2011). The family was awarded compensatory education in the form of college tuition, tutoring services, and costs of college attendance. The family won because they were not informed about the transition planning process, they were not involved in choosing the student's classes, transition planning was not mentioned at IEP meetings, and the

transition plans were developed outside of the IEP team process. The hearing officer noted that "transition planning for a student who intends to go on to college, must be much more than graduation" (Eggert & Minutelli, 2011).

Although very specific regulations are outlined in IDEA regarding procedures for conducting IEP team meetings and the requirements of transition planning services, school districts are still struggling to meet these demands and performance standards. Individualized education plans can be twenty-five to fifty pages long depending on the type of data that are included in the document. IDEA 2004 requires districts to provide students with transition assessments, which also must be incorporated into the IEP and used to develop appropriate transition goals and services in the transition plan. These tasks must be completed in addition to providing instruction for students, progress monitoring IEP goals, and analyzing evaluation reports to write IEPs. Special educators who lack training in the area of transition planning may not realize the detrimental effects that a poorly written transition plan can have on a student's life and on the district as a whole.

Special educators are tasked with the responsibility of creating IEPs and including detailed and well-developed transition plans. Educators possess differing opinions about the validity of the transition planning process because it can be a difficult task. Special educators have many responsibilities which include planning and preparation for instruction, progress monitoring, IEP writing, IEP meetings, one on one direct instruction, developing accommodations and modifications, and communicating with families. While the task of transition planning is part of compliance with IDEA, it is often a very lengthy and overwhelming task for teachers to accomplish (Peterson, Burden, Sedaghat, Gothberg, Kohler, & Coyle, 2013).

Herbert, Lorenz, and Trusty (2010) surveyed 400 transition personnel across the state of Pennsylvania to examine career service practices in high schools. Several categories emerged as top priority areas for career services. Among these were career interests, aptitude and achievement, and career decision-making skills. It also appears that services are implemented at different levels of high school and often occur later in students' high school careers.

Perceptions of Transition Planning

In theory, transition planning is designed to prepare students to move into adult life and to be able to attend postsecondary schools, attain employment, and live independently. Often, students seek competitive employment after high school, which prompts them to enter postsecondary settings to be trained for their career choices. Estrada-Hernandez, Wadsworth, Nietupski, Warth, & Winslow (2008) conducted a quantitative study to explore the relationship between severity of disability and employment outcomes. It was found that although many students had been able to obtain employment that matched their areas of interest, the positions that they were awarded were entry-level positions with entry-level pay. Options for more advanced positions and higher earnings can be attained, however, career interest and exploration is an area often missed in providing transition services to students.

Transition planning should provide students with an opportunity to assess personal strengths and weaknesses, identify areas of interest, and explore careers. It is important to guide students towards realistic goals. While no student should be told that they cannot attain their dreams, realism is a very important part of the transition planning process and IEP team decision making. Special educators often struggle with tough questions about what students aspire to do versus the skills that they possess to attain these goals. Peterson, Burden, Sedaghat, Gothberg, Kohler, & Coyle (2013), suggest triangulating annual goals to include post-secondary goals,

industry standards, and state content standards. Although a significant amount of time and effort is spent focusing on compliance regulations, the universal purpose of transition planning is create both transition goals and annual goals that are in alignment with students' future plans.

When IEP teams meet, it is to develop the IEP as a group and offer the opportunity for all members of the team to provide input. Members of the IEP team include the local education agency representative (i.e. principal, assistant principal, special education direction, manager of special education), the special education teacher, general education teachers, related service providers, parents, and the student. The law requires that both parents and students age 14 and older be invited to participate in the IEP team meetings. The IEP document contains information about the student's present levels of academic achievement, data collected from educational assessments administered by educational psychologists, teacher input from current courses, related service provider information, transition assessment and goals, measurable annual goals, state testing modifications and accommodations, and specially designed instruction. Far too often, families attend the IEP team meeting and are read information about their child and are not included in the process of providing input and asking questions (Weisharr, 2010).

Thompson et al. (2000) investigated whether student and parent perceptions regarding post school outcomes and support aligned with information recorded on Transition Planning Guides (TPGs) created by schools. The study was conducted in three high schools and students in the study had a primary classification of learning disability. This is considered the most common disability classification. Data were collected from transition planning guides, interviews with students, and interviews with parents. An interesting discrepancy emerging from the study was the differing views of students and parents regarding levels of support beyond high school. Parents felt that students would require higher levels of support than students suggested. This

discrepancy was evident in the areas of employment, postsecondary education, and independent living.

There was also a significant discrepancy found between levels of post school support indicated in the transition planning guide and levels of support anticipated by parents and students. According to Thompson et al. (2000), "only 9% of TPGs had any record of postschool service providers or informal natural supports, despite the fact that most parents and students anticipated assistance" (p. 16). Additionally, there was a significant difference between the data recorded in post school outcomes and the post school outcomes expressed by parents and students in the interviews. Parent and student post school goals did not match the information identified in the TPGs. In order for transition goals to accurately reflect the future plans of students it is imperative that students and their families become an active part of the process.

Student and Family Perceptions of Transition Planning

Involvement in the IEP process can be an intimidating experience for families, especially in the cyber-charter school environment. Unless the cyber-charter school has physical locations where it is possible to hold and face-to-face IEP meetings, these meetings are held via telephone conference and virtual classrooms. Learning Support Teachers must make it a priority to find ways to make families comfortable and encourage participation. This is necessary in both face to face and virtual meetings, but is especially important in virtual formats (Coy, 2014).

Unfortunately, many IEP meetings are conducted in such a way that alienates parents and makes them feel as if they are not an active part of their child's academic life. Fish (2008) surveyed 51 parents of students receiving special education services on their perceptions of the IEP process and found that parents felt that educators could improve meetings by "granting sufficient time to conduct the meeting, educating parents further, and allowing for increased

parental involvement and participation" (p. 13). Educators often create the IEP document prior to the meeting and do not offer ample opportunities for families and students to participate in the action of revising the document and providing relevant input. The special education teacher leads the meeting by reading through the different sections of the IEP and possibly allowing general education teachers the chance to provide input. This model leaves parents and students on the outside of a process where the student should be central to planning (Fish, 2006).

Several studies have found that while families do not recognize the term transition planning, they have been involved in the process in some way. For example, Hetherington, Durant-Jones, Johnson, Nolan, Smith, Taylor-Brown, and Tuttle (2010) found that while students could not recollect being part of the transition planning process, they had participated in a program called Circle of Support within their district. The students identified the Circle of Support as a group of individuals who helped them to identify their career path and provided opportunities for job shadowing. Hetherington et al. also identified that many families and students felt like outsiders in the process of transition planning and were given information about decisions made after the fact.

Parental involvement is instrumental in the IEP process and parents often serve as advocates for their children. However, if families are consistently muted and ignored throughout the process, continuity of advocacy could be threatened (Hetherington et al, 2010). If families are not adequately prepared before the meeting either through a conversation with the special education teacher or access to the IEP draft, they may feel alienated. Parents and students want to be involved in the process, but need guidance and a plan that sets clear expectations for both IEP and transition related meetings (Lo, 2012) . Parents and students also benefit more significantly from IEP and transition planning meetings if they are seen as equals and are provided with equal

opportunities to be heard and included (Fish, 2006). Transition planning should provide students with opportunities to explore career interests, discover post-school goals, and take steps towards beginning post-secondary education and employment. These crucial developments are often noted in the IEP, but are sometimes just empty promises.

Overall, the best way to include families and students is to invite them to be involved in the process before the formal meeting takes place. Meeting organizers should contact families prior to the meeting and allow the family's concerns and ideas to create the agenda for the meeting. Parents are more inclined to participate when they are fully informed of the procedures of IEP and transition planning and their legal rights in the process (Fish, 2006; Fish, 2008; Lo, 2012).

Research also shows that student-led meetings, as opposed to teacher-directed meetings, create positive experiences for families and students. Students are given the least amount of opportunities to speak and participate in the IEP process (Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). For students to fully participate, they must be privy to the same information that adults receive and have full knowledge of the IEP and transition planning process. One way to provide students with this knowledge is to instruct them in utilizing a student directed transition-planning curriculum (Woods, Sylvester, & Martin, 2010; Sylvester, Woods, & Martin, 2007). This type of instruction allows students to pre-plan for IEP meetings and to learn about each component of the IEP document and transition plan. Students also need to have knowledge about their IEP goals and objectives and understand what instructional levels and skills they possess (Pawley & Tennant, 2008). Part of the transition planning process should be to align students' future goals with their present academic and social skills. If students are not explicitly provided with an

explanation of the transition planning process and how it will serve them they cannot be expected to successfully participate in the process (Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007).

Person Centered Planning

The term person centered planning in the IEP process refers to making sure that students' needs, wants, strengths, weaknesses, and preferences are at the center of the planning process. Pressure to adhere to regulation and compliance can lead to a cookie cutter approach to writing IEPs. Well-written IEPs show clear evidence of attention to family and student needs and wants. A person-centered IEP meeting might begin by allowing the parent to provide the team with valuable information about the student and to voice any concerns. If the student is present, the beginning of the meeting is also a good time to allow the student to briefly express achievements and areas of difficulty. This establishes a conversational component that does not allow the IEP document to dictate the meeting agenda, but focuses on the family and the student in collaboration with professional staff. This begins with the special educator's approach to writing the IEP document (Chambers & Childre, 2005; Michaels & Ferrara, 2005; Thompson, 2005; Whitbread, Bruder, Fleming, & Park, 2007). Many times, IEP goals and objectives are developed without consideration of the families' values and priorities. This creates an immediate disconnect between the vision of the educator and that of the family.

It is also particularly difficult to develop a rapport between families and the IEP team in a cyber-charter school (Coy, 2014). Regular face-to-face interactions that take place between teachers and students in bricks and mortar settings allow teachers to gain valuable information about a student's background and interests without formal assessment. Cyber-charter school teachers must strive to find unique ways to get to know students and conduct informal assessments through video conferencing and telephone conferences in order to establish a

relationship with students. Although this may sound like a daunting task, consistent one on one interactions truly develop strong relationships and collaboration. Information collected from students can be used in the present levels section and transition sections of the IEP and provide a true representation of the student (Coy, 2014).

Chambers and Childre (2005) developed an adaptation of the Student Centered IEP Planning (SCIEP) model developed by Childre in 1998. The adoption is called the True Directions model and its purpose is to collect information from students, families, and team members in an effort to maximize participation in the IEP process. In this model, parents, students, and school support complete different forms, which allow all members of the team to provide meaningful information to meet the needs of students. The forms include such categories as life connections, dreams, goals, community, what works, and preferences. Each form is user-friendly and questions vary on parent, students, and school support forms. True Directions creates shared responsibility for IEP development between families and professionals, a practice that has not been sufficiently developed in traditional planning.

One way to promote collaboration with students throughout the IEP and transition planning process is to engage in steps leading to student run IEP meetings. Arndt, Konrad, and Test (2006) conducted a study with five high school students in inner-city schools which used an experimental design to determine a relationship between implementation of the Self-Directed IEP curriculum and student participation in both mock and real IEP meetings. The Self-Directed IEP is part of the ChoiceMaker instructional series, which is designed to teach self-determination skills to middle school and high school students with disabilities. A functional relationship was discovered between student participation in the Self-Directed IEP curriculum and instruction and student participation in IEP meetings.

Childre and Chambers (2005) conducted a qualitative study, which interviewed six families before and after the implementation of Student Centered IEP Planning (SCIEP). The SCIEP process uses family forms, student forms, and meeting forms to collect information from team members to create the IEP. Family forms are provided to families before the meeting takes place. Student forms are completed with the teacher facilitating the IEP team meeting. The team member forms were completed at the IEP meeting.

Data were organized into three distinct categories: family perceptions of traditional IEP planning, family perceptions of SCIEP, and implementation and future use of SCIEP. The pre-interview conducted assessed families' perceptions about the traditional IEP process. All of the families interviewed mentioned feeling like they listened more than anything else during the meetings and agendas for the meetings were pre-planned. This led to IEPs being created almost solely by professionals and applying to the school setting without real world extensions. Other common themes expressed by families were pressure to agree with a pre-set agenda, no consideration for family suggestions or requests, use of educational jargon and medical terminology, sensitivity to families adjusting to new special education placements, discomfort in the school setting, and lack of continuity between school programs.

A pre-set agenda is a very quick way to alienate a family from participating in the IEP meeting and to limit communication between the family and the IEP team (Heron & Harris, 2001). While review of evaluation reports, previous IEP documents, and teacher input are important components of preparing for an IEP meeting, the IEP should be considered a draft at the time the annual meeting takes place. Input provided at the meeting should be included in the IEP before the draft is finalized. IEPs are living documents reflecting a snapshot of the students'

academic, social, and community life. All parties involved should be able to view the document and provide necessary revisions (Childre & Chambers, 2005).

According to Childre and Chambers (2005), families should always be granted the opportunity to speak first at the IEP team meeting. Family and student input are extremely valuable in creating an accurate IEP and planning goals for the future (Morningstar, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 1995). Families have important insights into their student's welfare and home activities that could assist school personnel in programming and planning for the student. Ignoring the suggestions of families could also lead to dangerous legal issues. By law, families and students have the right to be present, ask questions, and refuse services that they feel are not meeting the needs of the student. Failure of the school district to acknowledge familial concerns is against the law and alienates families from feeling valued and participating in the IEP process (Childre & Chambers, 2005; Geenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2001; Whitbread, Bruder, Fleming, & Park, 2007).

Another common occurrence is the tendency for school psychologists and school personnel to use a significant amount of educational and medical jargon, as opposed to speaking to families in everyday language that is easily understood (Childre & Chambers, 2005). While it is important for the IEP document to accurately reflect data and findings from educational assessments and provide an accurate depiction of the students' diagnoses, the language used during the meeting does not necessarily have to adhere strictly to that language. Families should also be encouraged to ask questions for clarity (Whitbread, Bruder, Fleming, & Park, 2007). School personnel should be particularly sensitive to families and students entering special education programs for the first time. Families are experiencing an array of emotions and frustrations as they begin to grapple with understanding their child's disability. Similarly,

students must learn the process of interacting with new educational professionals such as the special education teacher, educational psychologists, and related service providers. Beginning special education services can be a very stressful and overwhelming time for new families, and school districts must be cognizant of this matter (Childre & Chambers, 2005).

Often families note feeling uncomfortable and not welcome in the school setting. This may be the result of the climate created by the IEP team (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). To increase collaboration and partnership between school personnel and families, schools should make the IEP meeting a welcoming school event (Lo, 2012; Hagner, Kurtz, May, & Cloutier 2014). Minor adjustments such as choosing a conference room or setting that allows all parties to have an equal position at the table or serving light refreshments can make families feel more welcome. This is difficult to do in the case of virtual meetings, but other changes can be made. The IEP team member conducting the meeting could be sure to introduce each person as they join the conference line or make friendly conversation with the parents and student while they are waiting for the meeting to begin. Weisharr (2010) suggests ways to incorporate the family and to create a more positive experience through preparation, presentation, and documentation such as explaining the purpose and structure of the meeting prior to meeting day, practicing reframing of negative terms that could alienate families (i.e. dysfunctional, emotionally disturbed, etc.), asking participants to first provide student's strengths and abilities, and focus documentation on observable and measureable outcomes. These small efforts are at the heart of student centered IEP planning and preparation.

In Childre & Chambers' (2005) study, post interviews were conducted after families had undergone the SCIEP process and it was found that families enjoyed the process because it allowed them to learn more about what was going on at school and for teachers and educational

staff to learn more about what they do at home. Everyone was able to benefit from this model because each team member's input was respected and viewed equally.

Students With Disabilities in Higher Education

Students with disabilities are entering college classrooms at a rapid rate. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), students with disabilities represent 11% of students enrolled in post-secondary education. Students with all types of diagnoses are included in this group. While high schools are required under IDEA to provide students with IEPs, specially designed instruction, related services, and agency involvement, colleges and universities are not bound by the same laws. Students entering post-secondary institutions receive special services via Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Services provided by high schools often differ from those provided in postsecondary institutions, so it becomes crucial for students and families to know their rights before the transition begins. Students in postsecondary settings must advocate for themselves and must be willing to disclose their disability in order to receive services (Gil, 2007).

In addition to the need to self-identify one's disability there are many other differences between services offered in high schools and those offered in postsecondary schools. For example, postsecondary institutions are not required to provide specialized devices or services which are not available to all students. The special services department at postsecondary institutions is required to notify professors of approved special accommodations, but these often do not reach beyond extended time and preferential seating (Gil, 2007).

Korbel, Lucia, Wenzel, & Anderson (2011) explain that students with disabilities often begin their college search early to identify schools providing the best services. All schools vary in programs provided to students with disabilities. However, some schools, like the University of

Connecticut, have created an extensive list of programs designed to help students with disabilities in a smooth transition from the high school experience. The University of Connecticut developed a Center for Students with Disabilities and offers extensive initiatives providing professional development to faculty as well as informative workshops for students and families (Korbel, Lucia, Wenzel, & Anderson, 2011). Students with disabilities must research institutions and the programs they offer to choose the most appropriate choice. Another suggestion to students is to request to sample classes with different professors or to have discussions with the faculty within the student's chosen department to identify how instruction is delivered. Although Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is relatively new and usually applied to secondary classrooms, some experimentation is being done in higher education (Pace & Schwartz, 2008). The goal of UDL is to shift from figuring out how to accommodate one student to adapting curriculum to meet the needs of all students. This instructional strategy can be very beneficial for students with disabilities and students with a variety of different learning styles.

Areas in need of improvement at postsecondary institutions may include note- taking services, services for the hearing impaired, counseling services, handicap parking, classroom accessibility, support groups, and disability awareness activities (Dutta, Kundu, & Schiro-Geist, 2009). While Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act do not require postsecondary institutions to provide students with personal devices and services, by law colleges and universities must provide students with equal access to the same opportunities and physical settings as their peers. Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act are both designed to insure equal rights for individuals with disabilities. Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act is a civil rights statute prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disabilities in activities and programs receiving federal funding. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted in

1990 and guarantees that individuals with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else. It provides equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Changing physical settings can also be a challenging experience for students with disabilities. Similar to their peers, students with disabilities form comfortable relationships with friends and school personnel and must begin the task of adapting to new surroundings and situations. Research suggests a difference in visibility of disability and adaptation to social situations (Olney & Brockelman, 2005). Visible disabilities focus on physical disabilities, whereas hidden disabilities might include learning disabilities, Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and emotional disturbances. Students with visible disabilities often have a stronger self -concept because they have learned to work through the physical and social limitations of their disability, while students with hidden disabilities often struggle with self-identification and ownership. Part of the struggle for students with hidden disabilities derives from self-acceptance and not feeling that one has a serious disability. Students who are unwilling or unable to come to terms with self-identification will also struggle to self-advocate. (Gil, 2007).

Students With Autism in Higher Education

For decades children diagnosed with Autism were stigmatized by the assumption that Autism and intellectual disabilities were comorbid. However, it has been discovered that those diagnosed with Autism can possess average or above average intelligence and functional skills (CDC, 2014). Students with high functioning Autism are increasingly making the choice to enter college classrooms. While high functioning students with Autism are often excellent critical thinkers and problem solvers, they also may possess impairments in communication and social

functioning, which may negatively impact the college experience (Ackles, Fields, & Skinner, 2013).

Due to difficulties with social functioning, students with Autism Spectrum Disorders may exhibit difficulties reaching out to faculty and staff at universities and colleges and finding the appropriate services and supports (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Early arrival programs as well as mentoring and coaching can help students with Autism to adjust to environmental changes and residential living. Programs like this can also help students find counseling and academic support services before actually beginning classes (Ackles, Fields, & Skinner, 2013). In Ackles, Fields, and Skinner's study, they examined the impact of a collaborative support model for students on the autism spectrum in a college setting and determined that a successful approach will include "intentional collaboration among staff, quality training and professional development for faculty of students with ASD, as well as developing mentorship programs" (p. 209).

Dente and Coles (2012) explain that students with Autism will struggle with the transition from high school to college campuses because of changes in structure and organization. Secondary schools are very predictable places with bells to notate class changes and predictable, regimented schedules, whereas postsecondary institutions place the responsibility of time management and organization solely on the student. With little parental involvement and the advocacy responsibilities falling on the student, advanced preparation is needed for success.

For students with Autism Spectrum Disorders to succeed in new settings and social situations they must first be able to develop a positive view of themselves. In order to move away from the label of Autism, some students refuse to engage in relationships with other people who are similarly diagnosed. It is an attempt to attain normalcy and separate oneself from the

connotations associated with the label. However, MacLeod, Lewis, & Robertson's (2013) qualitative study at the University of Birmingham has found that building positive relationships with others and developing an autistic identity can improve one's self-concept and lead to increased success. Choosing the right post-secondary institution is very important for all students. Students with Autism may prefer a smaller university or college because of decreased class sizes and a mild adjustment from high school classrooms, or they may prefer a larger university where they are able to explore a broader range of curricular choices and find like-minded peers (Vanbergeijk, Kiln, & Volkmar, 2008).

Students With Emotional Disturbance in Higher Education

According to Karpur, Clark, Caproni, & Sterner (2005), "the term emotional/behavioral disturbance (EBD) is used to encompass a variety of diagnoses and classifications that are applied differently to children and adults based on the system and state" (p. 36). Disorders considered under the diagnosis EBD may include mood disorders, anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, eating disorders, substance abuse, psychosis, and personality disorders (Singh, 2011). Family and student involvement in transition planning and attention to areas of relevance and interest in developing future goals are very important considerations for students diagnosed with EBD. Research suggests that students with EBD often have difficulty developing relationships with students and staff, exhibit increased dropout rates and academic failure, and have involvement in the criminal justice system (Wagner & Davis, 2008). Zigmond (2006) suggests that even students with the most severe emotional disabilities can have success in employment and post-secondary education with proper treatment. Zigmond's study focused on the post-graduation employment and education rates for students diagnosed with EBD and conducted

interviews with the 97 participants at 3, 6, 12, 18, and 24 months post-graduation. At 24 months, 45% of students held full or part-time jobs and 40% were enrolled in post-secondary education.

In secondary settings, to increase successful outcomes for students with EBD, school personnel should provide increased supports that apply to the school wide setting to assist students with EBD in staying in their neighborhood schools. Positive behavior support systems should be in place. Additionally, students with EBD who are in academically demanding school programs often exhibit the lowest grade point averages. This suggests a lack of sufficient support. Schools should strive to provide students with EBD with tutoring services and small group and individual instruction to combat behavior problems such as inattention and disruptive behaviors that inhibit learning (Wagner & Davis, 2006).

Common accommodations provided by higher education faculty for students with EBD may include extended time on assignments and assessments, breaks during tests and quizzes, quiet and distraction free testing areas, use of readers and scribes, permission to have food and beverages during class, and flexible attendance requirements (Singh, 2011). Students should continuously and consistently be preparing to self-identify and self-advocate for accommodations and modifications if they feel they are needed.

Cooper & Pruitt (2005) suggest a two-tiered intervention to provide students with EBD with the most fluid transition from high school to higher education. The first tier includes a strong transition-planning program in the secondary setting as well as self-identification once students have entered the college setting to attain appropriate supports and services. Tier two includes findings available resources and putting them to use. These services may include psychological counseling, campus disability support, connecting with college instructors and becoming part of the campus community. According to Mattison and Blader (2013), in

secondary education equal importance should be placed on academic interventions and behavioral issues, because overemphasis on emotional/behavioral issues in secondary can lead to more complicated circumstances that will not be addressed in a higher education setting unless resolved by the student.

Students With Learning Disabilities in Higher Education

Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) are the most common high incidence disability. A learning disability can cause difficulties in learning and may affect writing, listening, speaking, reasoning, and math skills. Dysgraphia, dyslexia, and dyscalculia are all examples of learning disabilities (NICHCY, 2011). Although many students with learning disabilities have goals that include postsecondary education, they often lack the preparedness to take the appropriate steps to enroll in college. Additionally, there is not a general consensus about the most appropriate transition planning for students with learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities often require remedial classes and smaller course loads, which increases the amount of time that they must attend postsecondary schools (Daviso, Denney, Baer, & Flexer, 2011).

Pre-entrance examinations to determine current reading, mathematic, and writing levels are a good way for colleges to identify students with learning disabilities and to plan college programs to best suit the needs of these students. According to Kane, Roy, & Medina (2013) "given that poor academic and cognitive skills are some of the leading causes of early departure from college, identifying students at risk for learning disabilities should be a top priority" (p. 29). College readiness is also an important factor to consider for students with learning disabilities. Conley (2007) refers to college readiness as academic content knowledge and writing skills, academic behaviors, such as study skills, cognitive strategies such as critical thinking, contextual

skills such as understanding college policies and coping skills. All of these areas must be addressed when considering transition to post-secondary schools for students with disabilities.

Although the college readiness factors listed above are definitely important components of preparing for college, they are not the only factors that contribute to student success and failure. Students with learning disabilities have noted that confidence, persistence, perseverance, resilience, self-determination skills, self-discipline, and self-regulation also play important roles (Milsom & Dietz, 2009). Many students with learning disabilities do not possess strong academic skills, but many still are very passionate and persistent in the goals they wish to attain. They may be required to take remedial classes and it may take them longer to complete the degree, but their persistence and drive will get them through.

Knowing one's personal learning style and coping mechanisms can also play a powerful role in the life of students with learning disabilities (Mytkowicz, Goss, & College, 2012; Uretsky & Andrews, 2013). Students with learning disabilities often require multimodal and sensory learning in order to grasp difficult concepts. Depending on the faculty member, college level instruction can be very lecture based and lack the type of aids and interventions to help students with learning disabilities to gain understanding. It is important for students to be able to devise ways to learn both inside and outside of the classroom, whether that is through mnemonics, online instructional videos, peer tutoring, or academic services. Additionally, students should build a support network, so that when academic frustrations arise they do not feel alone and are able to work through the problem (Mytkowicz, Goss, & College, 2012; Uretsky & Andrews, 2013).

Self Determination

Field and Hoffman (1994) define self-determination as "the ability to define and achieve goals based on the foundation of knowing and valuing oneself" (p. 164). Students with disabilities who are able to articulate goals, develop a plan of action, and possess a positive self-image have an increased chance of success in both employment and postsecondary educational settings. Ankeny and Lehmann (2011) suggest that there are four factors that influence the process of becoming self-determined, which include promoting self-knowledge, complementing the self-determination skills fostered at home, increasing the opportunity to take risks, and providing opportunities for reflective practice. These four areas are crucial in beginning and continuing the evolution of self-determination skills from secondary to post-secondary settings. Students can graduate from both high school and college without the skills necessary to live and work independently. A lack of self-determination and self-concept can easily cause this to happen. Transition planning and building self-determination skills should occur simultaneously (Ankeny & Lehman, 2011).

An important part of the college experience is building new relationships and learning to navigate new terrain. Students with disabilities may not be able to meet this challenge without proper transition planning in place. Additionally, the need to be self-determined in college is far greater than in high school classrooms. Students must develop their own organizational strategies, study habits, and self-advocacy skills because parents and teachers will not be there to assist.

<center>**Summary**</center>

This chapter presents an overview of transition planning for students with disabilities and strategies that can improve students' chances of success in postsecondary settings. Students with

different disabilities will have different strengths and limitations, therefore, transition planning must be individualized and seek to identify students' abilities, areas in need of improvement, preferences, and interests through authentic and ongoing assessment. Additionally, families and students should play an integral role in choosing postsecondary, employment, and independent living goals, and evaluating services that will best suit their unique needs. Training in self-determination is a valuable asset for students with disabilities in their transition to college because it allows them to learn what they need, their rights and responsibilities, and how to obtain services and supports in adulthood.

CHAPTER III

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodology selected for this study, which investigated the

transition planning process for college bound students with disabilities and the perceptions of

students, parents and guardians, and learning support teachers toward this process. An additional

purpose of this study was to provide the reader with a detailed portrait of three students

diagnosed with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, or a Specific Learning Disability. Chapter III

includes a description of the study design and methodology, study setting, selection of

participants, qualitative instrumentation, procedures of gathering data, and methods of data

analysis.

Research Questions

A qualitative research design was chosen to describe the intricacies involved in the

transition planning process and to illuminate the differences among students with different

disabilities throughout this process. The study was designed to collect data from semi-structured

interviews and existing individualized education plans to answer the following questions:

1.   How do students with disabilities perceive the transition planning process?

2.   What factors influence the student's ability to self-advocate?

3.   What factors have contributed to or inhibited the student's ability to exhibit

       self-determination?

4.   How do families and learning support staff impact student success?

To examine these questions, a descriptive single case study with embedded units was

used. In this study students with high incidence disabilities transitioning from cyber-charter

school environments to college classrooms were examined. Three students were selected for

inclusion in this study to illustrate the transition planning process for students with disabilities from a cyber-charter school to a collegial setting. In order to generalize between cases, the researcher "needs to select representative cases" to include within the study (Creswell, 2013, p. 100). The researcher chose students who would adequately represent the target population of students with three of the highest incidence disabilities.

Open-ended interview protocols were developed by the researcher to interview each student, parent or guardian, and learning support teacher involved in the study. The researcher designed each protocol by using Creswell's steps for interviewing. Creswell (2013) suggests determining the research questions, type of interview, recording procedures, interview protocol, and pilot testing prior to beginning any study.

Each interview protocol contained ten questions (Appendix E, F, & G). Interviews were conducted via telephone and Adobe Connect LiveLesson since participants were located in distant locations throughout the state of Pennsylvania. Additionally, a pilot study was conducted with one student, parent or guardian, and learning support teacher to test and refine each instrument. The pilot case was selected based on convenience and access (Sampson, 2004).

Selection of Participants

Participants for this study consisted of students aged 16-19 who attended a cyber-charter high school during their junior or senior year of high school and had indicated the intention of attending a two or four year college program during the 2013-2014 academic year. To identify participants for the study the investigator utilized a data report, which includes data for all students with disabilities within the chosen cyber-charter school. Permission was granted from the Director of Special Education to access the data report. There are approximately 1500 students listed in the report. The report was filtered to determine the number of students

diagnosed with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, and Specific Learning Disability, in 11th and 12th grade. The population is 245 student participants.

Using the Special Education Accountability Report for Enrolled Students with IEPs, specific students in 11th and 12th grade diagnosed with Autism, ED, and SLD were identified. Of the population of 245 students, 26 students have been diagnosed with Autism, 40 students have been diagnosed with Emotional Disturbance, and 179 have been diagnosed with Specific Learning Disabilities. Utilizing this population, purposive sampling was conducted. The investigator sent a letter via email to the 8 learning support teachers with 11th and 12th grade students. The letter asked the learning support teachers to identify and nominate students who had indicated an interest in attending a two or four year college.

Pilot Study

Once contact information was collected regarding the potential participants' intentions to attend college, the researcher selected a sample of 3 students for the pilot study. Permission was obtained from the Chief Executive Officer and Director of Special Education to conduct the study at the cyber charter school (Appendix H, I, J, & K). All participants were in either 11th or 12th grade, diagnosed with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, or Specific Learning Disability, and indicated that they plan to attend a two or four year traditional college. Purposive sampling was used to choose participants representative of the population that will encapsulate the case study (Patton, 1990). Letters for voluntary participation in the study were sent to the parent/guardians, students, and learning support teachers of each selected student. The researcher invited one student participant, one parent participant, and one learning support teacher for the pilot study. Once participation was determined the researcher scheduled and conducted interviews with

parent, student, and learning support teacher to test the chosen procedures and testing instruments.

The pilot study was used to determine if the interview protocols were suitable for the study. Interviews were conducted with the student, parent, and learning support teacher separately. The student, parent, and learning support teacher were asked not to discuss the interviews until after the researcher met with each participant to review the transcript. The researcher used Recordia Pro transcription services to purchase transcriptions of the recorded interviews. The researcher analyzed the data using NVIVO to determine if the interview protocols accurately addressed the research questions and focus of the study. The researcher determined that the interview protocols created accurately addressed the research questions.

Study Setting

The setting for this study was a cyber-charter school in Pennsylvania. Cyber-charter schools are public schools. The cyber-charter school chosen for this study enrolls students from all of the counties within the state of Pennsylvania. The number of enrolled students during the 2014-2015 school year was approximately 8,600 students, and the special education program enrolled 1,500 students. Within this setting approximately 90% of students are included in the general education environment for 100% of the day. Special education teachers act as case managers and deliver targeted instruction to students. Special education teachers, parents, guidance counselors, and transition coordinators assisted students in identifying post-school goals and created the necessary transition plans to attain these goals.

IEP Meetings in a Cyber-Charter School

The researcher had a unique perspective on IEP meetings in a cyber-charter environment. The cyber-school used for this study conducted meeting through conference lines and virtual

classrooms. Special Education Process Coordinators used Microsoft Outlook calendars to schedule meetings when all professional staff were available. Additionally, parents and families were invited via email and could request to change the meeting date and time if they have a scheduling conflict. Through this method there was greater participation in meetings from teachers, related service providers, and families.

Meetings took place via closed conference line and all participants were provided with the conference line number and access code to call in remotely. The learning support teacher conducted the meetings by opening the conference line for everyone to call in at the specified time and introduced each member of the team. Meetings were simultaneously held in an Adobe Connect LiveLesson room, so that all team members can view the IEP document throughout the meeting. This method of communication throughout the IEP process also allowed for greater collaboration among team members and families. Families are also more inclined to provide feedback, ask questions, and actively participate during meetings. The learning support teacher acted as a facilitator allowing time for the families to communicate their concerns and for teachers and related service providers to provide input.

Additionally, for the purposes of transition planning, learning support teachers had regular communication with families and students and conducted career assessments, college readiness assessments, independent living surveys, and interest profiles throughout the school year and leading up to the IEP team meeting. Students and families were an integral part of the transition and IEP planning process. The IEP team meeting was never the first time that students were asked to discuss future plans for postsecondary education and training, employment, and independent living. These conversations were taking place on a regular basis and data collected were incorporated into the students' transition grid.

Qualitative Data and Instrumentation

A qualitative research design was used for this study in order to examine the relationships between participants across a variety of disabilities. Case study research allows the researcher to closely examine the intricacies of individuals and phenomenon (Yin, 2003). It also allows the researcher to conduct interviews with participants and examine documentation such as individualized education plans to achieve triangulation of data (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011). A descriptive single case study with embedded units was chosen for this study because it allows to the researcher to explore differences within and between cases.

The interview protocols (Appendix E, F, & G) developed for this study were intended to document student, parent, and teacher perceptions of the transition process within a cyber-charter school. Separate interview protocols were developed for the students, parent/guardians, and learning support teachers (Table 1). Interview protocols are semi-structured in nature to allow the interviewer the opportunity to generate questions during the interview in response to participant responses (Hatch, 2002). This type of interview also requires that the researcher be a good listener and be able to create pertinent questions on the spot (Hatch 2002). A pilot study was conducted to establish the validity of each instrument. Procedures for the study mirror the identification, notification, and inclusion process conducted with the pilot participants.

Identification Process for the Study

The sample included students in three disability categories. Participants diagnosed with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, and Specific Learning Disability were represented within the study. For this reason, the investigator used purposive sampling to determine participants. One student from each disability category was selected for inclusion in the study.

Table 3

Research Questions and Data Collection Correlation

Research Questions	Student Interview Items	Parent/Guardian Interview Items	Learning Support Teacher Interview Items	Document Analysis of IEP
How do students with disabilities perceive the transition planning process?	1, 5, 6, 7	6, 7, 8	4, 5, 9	Section 1 and 3
What factors influence the students' ability to self advocate?	4, 5, 10	4, 9	2, 7	Section 1
What factors have contributed to or inhibited the students' ability to exhibit self-determination?	2, 3	2, 3	2, 3	Section 3
How do families and learning support staff impact students' success?	6, 8, 9	1, 5	1, 6, 8	Section 1

The researcher asked 11th and 12th grade learning support teachers to nominate students based on the selection criteria. Participant pools were created and students were randomly selected for participation from each pool. The researcher called each family to explain the study and discuss voluntary participation. Once participation was confirmed the researcher sent the parent and student assent letters via email (Appendix B and C). Additionally, corresponding learning support teachers were sent the learning support teacher assent letter (Appendix D).

Once individuals were selected, the researcher called each student participant and conducted a parent/guardian phone conference to confirm participation and clarify the procedure.

The student also needed to complete a capacity-to-consent screening tool in order to participate. This was to ensure that they understand the process and the requirements to participate in the study, as well as to confirm voluntary consent. Learning support teachers were also be contacted via telephone or LiveLesson to confirm participation and discuss the expectations and requirements of the study. Semi-structured interviews were scheduled with each student, parent/guardian, and learning support teacher and took place individually.

Informed Consent and Capacity to Consent Screening Tool

Since students in the study are between 16-18 years of age and have been diagnosed with disabilities it was necessary for the researcher to ensure that participants and their parents and guardians understand the study and the research process before volunteering to participate. In addition to sending participant letters to students and parents explaining the study procedures, risks, benefits, anonymity and confidentiality, compensation, freedom to withdraw, and responsibilities, the researcher also conducted a LiveLesson with each participant and his or her parent and guardian. During the LiveLesson the researcher explained the details within the participant letter and utilized the Capacity to Consent Screening Tool to determine participant's understanding of the study and potential eligibility (Appendix A). Parents, guardians, and students were offered the opportunity to ask questions about the study and the researcher addressed areas in need of clarification. The research asked for written consent at this time, which was included as part of the participant letter. Parent permission was also obtained. The researcher met with each student and his/her parents via Adobe Connect LiveLesson and recorded the Capacity to Consent Screening. The researcher recorded and transcribed these meetings.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Data were collected using a variety of methods. All interviews were conducted separately. Each interview was recorded using the Adobe Connect LiveLesson recording capabilities and Recordia Pro. Each recorded interview has its own web link where the researcher is able to access it. Additionally, the interviewer took detailed notes during the interview on copies of the protocol and also used these notes to record any non-verbal indicators or impressions that occur during the interview process (Hatch, 2002). According to Patton (1990), it takes about four hours of transcription for every hour of interview. The researcher estimates that that each interview was approximately 60 minutes in length. There were a total of nine interviews or approximately 9 hours of interview recording. Transcriptions were created using Recordia Pro.

Additionally, the researcher requested permission from the student and parent to access the student's current individualized education plan. These documents were analyzed with particular attention to present levels related to post-secondary transition goals located in section one and the transition planning grid located in section three of the IEP. This information was compared to data collected from the interview protocols relating to students' post-secondary plans for education, employment, and independent living.

The researcher used interpretive analysis as a framework (Hatch, 2002). In this model the following steps are outlined, which gives the researcher creative and artistic license in restorying and narrative writing.

1. Read the data for a sense of the whole.

2. Review impressions previously recorded in research journals and/or bracketed in protocols and record these in memos

3. Read the data, identify impressions, and record impressions in memos

4. Study memos for salient interpretations

5. Reread data coding places where interpretations are supported or challenged

6. Write a draft summary

7. Review interpretations with participants

8. Write a revised summary and identify excerpts that support interpretation

Coding is also a crucial step in this process. According to Saldana (2013), "a code is a word of short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 9). Codes were added to interview data, non-verbal data, and impressions collected by the researcher. Saldana also warns that it is rare for a researcher to get it right the first time and the process of coding is cyclical in nature. Therefore, after the initial coding the researcher further analyzed in search of patterns and changed codes completely when new ideas emerge. Creswell (2013) further explains that "coding involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in the study, and then assigning a label to the code" (p. 184). The researcher searched for themes that emerged during data collection and analysis. The researcher will also utilize Field and Hoffman's Steps to Self-Determination as the theoretical framework through which to analyze the data in relation to the research questions (Figure 1).

To ensure the trustworthiness of data collection the researcher took steps to establish credibility. Random sampling was used in participant selection. Data triangulation was also used to incorporate the interviews of students, parent/guardians, learning support teachers, and data included in the students' individualized education plans (Table 1). Participants were also

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provided with information about how to opt out of the study should they choose to withdraw and were informed that they could refuse to answer specific interview questions at any time. The researcher also utilized peer debriefing to develop a discussion and challenge assumptions (Shenton, 2004).

Summary

This study was a qualitative, descriptive case study with embedded units focusing on three students with disabilities planning to attend college. This chapter presented an explanation of the selection of participants and the school setting. The study population was described in detail, as well as the demographics of the school as a whole. The pilot study procedures were also outlined. Details describing how the qualitative instruments were designed and procedures for analyzing data once it was collected were included. This study used student, parent, and learning support teacher interviews, as well as, students' individualized education plans in data collection and triangulation. Chapter IV will analyze the results of the study.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of students with disabilities towards transition planning in preparation for attending college. The experiences of students diagnosed with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, and Specific Learning Disability were analyzed using an interview protocol of ten questions. Parent/guardians and learning support teachers were also interviewed using a nine question protocol. This chapter discusses the data analysis procedures used in this study and presents the findings in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework. The following research questions were examined:

1.   How do students with disabilities perceive the transition planning process?

2.   What factors influence the student's ability to self-advocate?

3.   What factors have contributed to or inhibited the student's ability to exhibit self-determination?

4.   How do families and learning support staff impact student success?

Review of the Interview Process, Data Collection, and Analysis

This study was designed as a descriptive case study with embedded units. Learning support teachers nominated five students from each disability category who had expressed their intention of attending a two or four year blended or traditional college. Purposive sampling was used to select one student from each disability category for this study. To ensure participation from the learning support teacher, student, and parent, the researcher first contacted the learning support teachers of the selected student participants. The researcher obtained all learning support, teacher, student, and parent email addresses, home addresses, and telephone numbers from the school's learning management system. Informed consent letters were sent and returned via email

to each of the three learning support teachers involved in the study. Once the learning support teachers had agreed to participate, the research contacted the parents and students via telephone to discuss the study and request voluntary participation. When participation was confirmed, the researcher sent the student and parent informed consent letters to the family via email. One family returned the informed consent letter via email within a few days of it being sent. The other two families did not return the informed consent letters via email. The researcher sent the letters through regular mail to these families with self-addressed stamped envelopes and they were returned in a timely fashion. The researcher also scheduled separate interview times with the learning support teacher, parent, and student during the initial contact.

The students were the participants in this study and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students (Appendix E). Prior to each interview, students were asked questions using the Capacity to Consent Screening Tool to confirm that they understood the subject of the study, as well as procedures for opting out (Appendix A). Parent/guardians and learning support teachers were also interviewed using the semi-structured interview format (Appendix F & G). All students, parents/guardians, and learning support teachers were asked interview questions from the protocols and the researcher asked additional follow-up questions to gain more knowledge. Three students, three parents, and three learning support teachers were interviewed using Adobe Connect LiveLesson and RecordiaPro to record the interviews. Adobe Connect LiveLesson was used so that the researcher was able to share the letters explaining the study and capacity to consent screening tool with both the parents and students. To have the interviews recorded and transcribed the researcher chose to use RecordiaPro. RecordiaPro is a service that uses a conference line to record each call. The researcher was able to listen to each recording and to request transcriptions through this service. Interviews were transcribed using

RecordiaPro's transcription services. Document analysis was also conducted using students'

individualized education plans to examine present levels of academic and functional

performance and transition plans. The researcher utilized the parent/guardian interviews, learning

support teacher interviews, and IEP document analysis for data triangulation.

The researcher entered all transcribed interviews and IEP documents into NVIVO 10 for

Windows. The researcher also utilized NVIVO to code each interview using priori codes

developed from the research questions and initial impressions of the data. This type of coding is

referred to by MacQueen & Guest (2008) as structural coding. The researcher used structural

coding as a first round coding method (Saldana, 2013). Structural coding "applies a content-

based or conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data that relates to a

specific research question used to frame the interview (See Table 2). Similarly coded segments

are then collected together for a more detailed coding and analysis" (MacQueen et al., p. 124).

Field and Hoffman's Steps to Self-Determination

Field and Hoffman (2002) assert that "students who were involved in the planning,

decision making, and implementation of their educational programs performed better than their

peers" (p. 90). There are five components to the Steps to Self-Determination Model which are

Know Yourself, Value Yourself, Plan, Act, and Experience Outcomes and Learn (Field &

Hoffman, 1994). Field and Hoffman (2002) describe Know Yourself and Value Yourself as

"internal processes that provide the foundation for self-determination" and Plan, Act, and

Experience Outcomes as "specific skills that evolved from the foundation and are the action

stage of the model" (p. 91). The researcher used this model as a theoretical framework for data

analysis during second cycle coding.

Saldana (2013) refers to this type of coding as theoretical coding. The following categories were identified throughout the analysis process: current academics and community life, post-school goals, self-advocacy, school and community awareness, contributions and inhibitions, parent advocate, college support, and academic support. The categories developed into the following themes: transition planning, self-advocacy, self-determination, and family involvement/school support. According to Saldana (2013), "a theme is an extended phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means" (p.175). In addition to Field and Hoffman's Self-Determination Model, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) was also used to examine research question 4 (See Table 2).

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section was organized into vignettes to provide a profile of each student included in this study. Sections two through five focused on the research questions, emerging themes, and the corresponding Field and Hoffman Steps to Self-Determination (Table 2). Section 2 focused on transition planning while Sections 3 and 4 focused on self-advocacy and self-determination. Section 5 focused on family involvement and student support. Each section includes subheadings, which the researcher carefully chose to illustrate the experiences of each individual student.

Table 4

Structural and Theoretical Coding Map

Research Questions	Field and Hoffman Theoretical Framework	Themes	Categories	Codes
How do students with disabilities perceive the transition planning process?	Step 3-Plan	Transition Planning	Current Academics and Community Life Post-school goals	Post-secondary education Employment Independent Living Learning Styles
What factors influence the students' ability to self advocate?	Step 4/5- Act and Experience Outcomes and Learn	Self-Advocacy	Self-Advocacy School and Community Awareness	Self-advocacy IEP Participation Social Life
What factors contributed to or inhibited the students' ability to exhibit self-determination?	Step 2/5-Value Yourself and Experience Outcomes and Learn	Self-Determination	Contributions Inhibitions	Motivation Academic Strength
How do families and learning support teachers impact students' success?	Step 1/3-Know Yourself and Plan	Family Involvement and School Support	Parent/Advocate College Support Academic Support	School/College Support Areas of Need Family Involvement

Description of Participants

In this section, vignettes have been created to capture the unique experiences of each

student and their relationships with their parent/guardian and learning support teacher. The

researcher developed these vignettes after "reading the data for a sense of the whole and reviewing impressions from protocols and memos (Hatch, 2002; Stake, 1995). A pseudonym was assigned to each student, parent/guardian, and learning support teacher to assure anonymity and confidentiality. The name of the school setting and formal names of other businesses and organizations were also given pseudonyms. In this study the students are referred to as Jeremy, Adam, and Tammy. Parent/guardians are referred to as Ms. Natale, Ms. Moreli, and Ms. Gainer. Learning support teachers are referred to as Mrs. Goslan, Mrs. Kelly, and Mrs. Roland. The school setting where all students attended is referred to as Hope Cyber-Charter School.

Table 5

Student, Parent, and Learning Support Teacher (LST) Participants

Student Pseudonym	Grade/Age	Disability Classification	Parent Pseudonym	LST Pseudonym
Jeremy	12th/ 17	Autism	Ms. Natale	Mrs. Goslan
Adam	12th/ 17	Emotional Disturbance	Ms. Moreli	Mrs. Roland
Tammy	12th/ 17	Specific Learning Disability	Ms. Gainer	Mrs. Kelly

Jeremy

Jeremy was a 17 year old, 12th grade student who has been diagnosed with Autism. On the day of our interview, Ms. Natale, Jeremy's mom, gave him a ride home from his part-time job at Fry Burger. Jeremy was very articulate and self-aware. He explained the different tasks at his job such as preparing buns, frying, and getting the grill station ready. He took pride in his work. Jeremy was interested in pursuing a career in pet massage, but had also considered veterinary medicine as a field of interest. He was planning to attend a two year program for massage therapy and then plans to pursue pet message with the intention of starting his own

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practice. Ms. Natale felt that being a veterinarian may not be the right career for Jeremy because he has difficulty with the "biology and ethics" involved in that type of career. According to Mrs. Goslan, Jeremy's learning support teacher, Jeremy was also interested in having his own small business. Mrs. Goslan described Jeremy as compassionate and an excellent student. Ms. Natale expressed that Jeremy struggles socially and this is something that they are striving to work on. Jeremy felt that the biggest challenge he has faced is connecting with others emotionally.

Adam

Adam was a 17 year old, 12th grade student at Hope Cyber-Charter School. He had been diagnosed with Emotional Disturbance. In addition to attending cyber high school full-time, Adam was also taking college course work through both an online school and traditional college campus. He planned to attend a four year college for mechanical or electrical engineering. Adam was soft-spoken and admitted that he is not interested in doing anything that is going to require a lot of work. He said "if I don't have to do it, I try not to." However, by the time he graduates from high school in June 2015, he will have completed 30 college credits. Adam's mom, Ms. Moreli, has a very strong presence. I expressed my excitement for Adam's academic accomplishments, but Ms. Moreli nonchalantly said, "I'm not impressed." She felt that Adam strives to get out of hard work, yet she cited a plethora of community activities that he also participates in such as volunteer work at church, basketball, chess, and a summer camp to fight illiteracy. Adam mentioned his parents as the catalyst behind engaging in non-preferred activities. Mrs. Roland, Adam's learning support teacher, mentioned that Ms. Moreli runs her own tutoring business through a community church. Since Adam attends cyber-school he participated in classes and completed schoolwork at the church. Ms. Moreli's tutoring services occurred during the regular school day and into the evening hours. Both Ms. Moreli and Mrs.

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Roland said that the most difficult situation for Adam is being told "no" and dealing with it. Ms. Moreli felt that Adam will need more support as he moves into the work force.

Tammy

Tammy was a 17 year old, 12th grade student who has been diagnosed with a Specific Learning Disability in the area of Written Expression. She was bubbly and eager. Tammy had begun the process of applying to college and intends to major in Marine Biology. She applied to a few colleges in December and was waiting for responses. In addition to high school coursework, Tammy had a part-time job at a local sporting goods store where she worked on weekends. Tammy's mom, Ms. Gainer, mentioned that she has had issues with number and letter reversal since she was in third grade and notes Algebra as Tammy's least favorite subject. Ms. Gainer has accompanied Tammy to several college visits and supports her interest in attending college. Tammy mentioned that "mum and dad always encouraged me to continue my schooling and get the job I like rather than settling for something." Mrs. Kelly, Tammy's learning support teacher, mentioned that Tammy is "driven, independent, and has a plan" and that Ms. Gainer is "always available" for phone calls. However, Mrs. Kelly felt that Tammy may need more support in developing a financial plan for her future.

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Analysis of Emerging Themes

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During data analysis, the researcher began with themes which emerged from the research questions. The researcher developed priori codes to begin the coding process using the research questions, interview transcripts, and researcher memos. The researcher also reviewed each student participants' IEP document during the coding process. Throughout the analysis process additional codes were added, categorized, and the data were themed. This section examined the

following emergent themes: perceptions of transition planning, self-advocacy, self-determination, family involvement, and school support using Field and Hoffman's Steps to Self-Determination (1994) as a theoretical framework.

Research Question One: Student Perceptions of Transition Planning

Jeremy, Adam, and Tammy were all viewing transition planning from a different perspective, because they are all at different stages in the process despite each of them being 12th grade students. Field and Hoffman's (1994) Five Steps to Self-Determination was used as a theoretical framework for this study. Step 3 of the framework was planning. For students to be successful in creating a plan for the future they must have assistance and instruction in developing a plan and identifying what they will need to execute their future goals. Field and Hoffman (1994) indicated different steps in the planning process such as "setting goals, planning actions to meet goals, anticipating results, being creative, and visually rehearsing" (p. 165).

Each of the students in this study played an integral role in the development of their transition plans, as did their parent and learning support teachers. All three students were at the stage in the planning process where they have set their post-secondary education goals and they were working on developing a plan that will help them to get there. Jeremy planned to attend a two-year program, and Adam and Tammy were both interested in attending four year programs. Both Adam and Tammy were ready to apply to colleges and worked with their parents and learning support teachers towards this goal. Although Jeremy had a good indication of his field of interest, he is still exploring career possibilities.

In terms of employment, both Jeremy and Tammy had part-time jobs, but viewed their current positions as stepping stones to save for college or vehicles. Adam was focusing on his academics, but would like to get a part-time job once he graduates from high school. All three

students were unsure of their future independent living plans, since they have been focused on finishing school and planning for post-secondary schooling.

Jeremy felt that he is at the center of the IEP and transition planning as a process. He has attended his IEP meetings from an early age and has exhibited self-advocacy throughout. He valued communication with his learning support teacher and his transition agency because both have allowed him to move forward with his career goals. He was an integral part of the process and communicated his needs for more social and emotional support, as well as independent living skills.

Adam perceived the process from a much different perspective. Although his post-secondary plans are evident in the IEP document, he did not directly communicate his goals during IEP meetings. Since Adam felt that disability labels and accommodations are interchangeable, he allowed Ms. Moreli, his mother, to take the lead in many ways. He voiced his need and concerns to Ms. Moreli and she communicated them to his learning support teacher and other members of the IEP team.

Tammy's perception of transition planning was that it focused on finding her learning style and aligning her goals and specially designed instruction with her unique style of learning. Although Tammy participated in her IEP meetings, she did not vocalize her views unless called upon to do so. Ms. Gainer, Tammy's mother, participated in a similar fashion, making sure that she offered her ideas, but only when called upon to do so.

Two of the students in this study participated in the IEP meeting, while all three students participated in the IEP planning and transition planning process. Students in the study also had direct communication with learning support teachers on a bi-weekly basis throughout the IEP and transition planning process. It is clear that there is a connection between collaboration and

communication during the transition planning process and student perceptions of how it has helped them prepare for the future. Providing students with opportunities to explore interests and communicate college, career, and independent living goals helps them set realistic goals for the future and plan accordingly.

Life Hop: Agency for independence. Jeremy was a straight A student, held down a part-time job, and truly enjoyed offering his time to help others. He has been a student at Hope Cyber Charter School since 2009. Jeremy had a clear vision of his capabilities and his career path. He stated "I want to be an animal massage therapist. First, I wanted to be a vet. I always wanted to be one, but then I learned more about it and decided that I would not be able to do it. I want to help animals, not see them suffer." He had done some significant research in this area and tells me "it looks like a good fit for me…it is a new field and I would help the animals relax. Like preparing racing horses for races or dogs for dog shows or sledding." Jeremy had also looked into post-secondary school options in this field and decided that it would be best to attend massage school for humans before going to school for animal massage therapy.

Mrs. Goslan, Jeremy's Learning Support Teacher, said that Jeremy works with a transition support agency, Life Hop, that supported him in career exploration and independent living skill development. Jeremy indicated that he works with the agency 1-2 days per week and has found a promising school that he would like to attend for massage therapy. Jeremy explained that at Life Hop he is "learning about transition, grocery shopping, prices of apartments, and how to search for a massage therapy school." He feels that it is helping him to build his career plans.

Mrs. Goslan also indicated that agency involvement was not considered by Jeremy and his parent when it was first offered. She noted,

Mom mentioned that part of the reason we ended up getting him involved with an

agency later was because initially in the school year they didn't feel like he needed it, but I guess he started working and was having some issues socially at work that Mom didn't foresee happening. That's why we ended up getting him involved with Life Hop to kind of help with that. I guess he wasn't able to transfer some skills.

Ms. Natale also indicated that Life Hop has been of great assistance to Jeremy as he began to shift his career focus from veterinary medicine to animal massage. She noted that,

He's trying to figure out what career paths are available in his field of interest and what would his college experiences need to be. Is it like a whole degree in some area or is it that I want my own pet grooming, pet massage business? Do I need to go to massage school? Do I need to go to business school? Do I need a vet tech program? Where do I need to draw from learning experiences? Do I need to go to dog grooming school? What do I need to be able to put together this career path for myself is kind of where he's at right now and all that he's exploring.

Jeremy was at the stage in Field and Hoffman's Steps to Self-Determination where he is "setting meaningful goals and appropriate long-range goals comprised of short range goals and steps." He was working with LifeHop to develop and explore career options, search for applicable college programs, and begin the application process.

Jeremy's employment goal in his IEP stated, "Upon graduation from high school, Jeremy is interested in obtaining competitive employment in his area of interest." Jeremy held a part-time job at Fry Burger where he began working in August 2014. His goal was to get a job to be able to save money to buy a new gaming system, but now he wants to save for the future as well. He indicated that he views this position as a stepping stone and a way to get started in the job world.

Jeremy's IEP indicated that "the IEP team has determined that an independent living goal is not required at this time." Ms. Natale and Jeremy confirmed that he does exhibit a level of independence in self-care, household chores, cooking, driving, and banking. Ms. Natale said that she does not foresee Jeremy having a problem living on his own. As to where he would like to live after high school, Jeremy stated, "I haven't thought much about that. I'll probably stay close to my family or maybe move into an apartment." Ms. Natale indicated that he is really trying to remain focused on what he would like to do about college before making living arrangements. Ms. Natale and Mrs. Goslan collaborated with Jeremy to create an effective transition plan that reflects his current and post-graduation goals. When asked about his IEP meetings, Jeremy said, "I attend and ask questions and become a part of it. My mom has made sure that I have been a part of it. She wanted me to understand what is going on." Since Jeremy has taken part in the planning process, he has been able to be an active part of setting both short and long term goals. His short term goals included improving his socialization and emotional connections in the work place and career exploration. His long term goal was to complete a college program that allows him to become an animal massage therapist with the hope of eventually owning his own pet wellness center.

The power of dual enrollment. In addition to being a full-time high school student, Adam was a full-time college student. He has attended an online college and a bricks and mortar college since September 2013. He was taking general education courses and will have completed 30 credits by the time he graduates from Hope Charter School in June 2015. His long-term goal was to attend the bricks and mortar college that he was currently enrolled in for mechanical or electrical engineering. Adam mentioned that he became interested in this career because his dad is a boiler engineer and he likes the kind of work that is included in the field. However, Ms. Moreli said that Adam's interest in engineering lies in the fact that he does not want to work with people. She mentioned, "He picked engineering because he thinks that he will make enough money to give him the lifestyle which he has become obsessed with." Although Adam had begun taking college courses, he was still in the planning stage or Step 3 of Field and Hoffman's Steps (1994). He thought that he may have found the right program, but had not completely solidified a major or applied to a mechanical or electrical engineering program.

Mrs. Roland spoke about Adam's future plans as well. She had been able to work with Adam for past two years, so she has a solid grasp of his transition plans. She said,

> He wants to go to college. He has a very high goal of becoming a mechanical engineer. Like I said, for the most part, Adam is driven to take the next step. At one point he was also talking about MIT, for graduate work, so we are talking about a kid who is doing that planning stage. He knows what he wants and he is basically laying the ground work to get it done. He's been participating 100% on his own decisions.

Upon examining his IEP, Adam was enrolled in the following courses for the semester: Career Planning 12, English 12, Psychology, Environmental Science, Introductory Astronomy, and Spanish II. Additionally, he was enrolled in two classes at the online college and additional

two classes at the bricks and mortar college. The post-secondary and employment goals listed in Adam's IEP accurately match his current goal of becoming a mechanical or electrical engineer.

Adam knew that a program in engineering would take at least four years with the possibility of graduate school as well, but he does not seem phased by this reality. Of college, Adam said, "Ever since I was little, I knew college is there and I would either be forced to go by my parents, well, not forced but encouraged to go by parents. Or get a job directly. I knew that's not an option anymore. It's really hard to get a well-paying job to live on your own."

Adam's post-secondary plan was strong, but he was still working on developing his employment and living arrangements. Adam was preoccupied with both secondary and post-secondary education and a plethora of extra-curricular and volunteer activities. Outside of school Adam played basketball and chess competitively, volunteered in children's programs at his church, and assisted in coordinating a summer camp for at risk students. There was no room for a part-time job in his schedule. However, he would like to work once he starts attending college full-time in the fall. He also planned to commute since the college he has chosen is only 10 minutes from his house, a decision that he made due to its proximity.

Mrs. Roland, Ms. Moreli, and Adam collaborated to create his transition plan. Adam did not like to take a very active role in IEP meetings. He said, "I actually know very little about my IEP. That's something I always just let my mother do. I know sometimes it gets me extended time on tests and stuff. But that's about all I know." Adam's participation in the process has essentially occurred without him knowing it was happening. He had many conversations with mom and Mrs. Roland about his major in college, applying to his program of choice, and staying active in the community. Both Ms. Moreli and Mrs. Roland easily articulated Adam's current educational and social activities and his future plans. Consistent communication with both Ms.

Moreli and Adam over the past two years made it easy for Mrs. Roland to develop his transition plan.

For Adam, the transition planning process was something that was taking place without his direct participation in the IEP process. His goals for post-secondary education, employment, and living are threaded throughout the IEP and are quite clear to Mrs. Roland. However, Adam did not participate in IEP meetings and did not view his role in the process as active. He saw his mother Ms. Moreli and Mrs. Roland as the active participants in the IEP team. Ms. Moreli was sure to convey his thoughts and ideas. She said, "How do I participate? I let them know what's going on. I take him to the psychologist, to the doctors, and I follow what they tell me. Then I relay that to the teachers." Mrs. Roland brough all the pieces of the puzzle together into one document which includes parent and student transition surveys, career assessments, and discussions about post-secondary plans. She described her interactions with students throughout the transition planning process. She stated, "I start immediately with that welcome call, asking the student first of all what they are thinking about doing after they graduate. I also like to discuss their independent living skills. I always talk to the parent as well because 9 times out of 10 what the students tell me they can do, and what the parents say they can do, they're two different things." This was evident in Adam's and Ms. Moreli's interviews as well. Adam was not as forthcoming about his emotional and behavioral concerns as his mother. Ms. Moreli explained situations that may impact Adam's transition experiences in full detail and noted that Adam was very private about those issues.

Kinesthetic career choice. "Whenever I am working hands-on, I actually do better in school," Tammy said. Tammy's strength in sciences and laboratories has driven her to want to become a Marine Biologist. Attending a four year college and majoring in Marine Biology is a long-term goal for Tammy stage of the model. She expressed that she had interests in oceanography and fresh water fisheries, but her passion seems to be in studying marine life. She submitted her application to her college of choice, but is waiting to hear of acceptance. She explained how she became interested in Marine Biology as a career. She said,

> It started with me going to swim in the summer. I always loved to swim. I was a regular fish out of water and then what really got me started was finding out about fisheries. I love turtles and so being able to work with all kinds of marine life really, really caught my interest.

Tammy also mentioned, "I want to go to college because I really want to get that secondary learning because then it is more catered to what I want to do for my career." Tammy had a distinct career choice in mind and she possessed the skills to get there.

Ms. Gainer, Tammy's mom, mentioned that in order to prepare for college Tammy has also taken many science classes while in high school such as Marine Science, Earth Science, Biology, Physical Science and Environmental Science. Tammy started attending Hope Cyber-Charter School in 2008 and took two science classes during her freshman year, even though students are only required to take 3 science classes throughout their high school career.

Tammy also has a part-time job at a local sports center. Of her job, she stated, "Currently, I do have a part-time job and because of that it makes me really want to strive for college that much more that way I can get a job that I really want to do." She viewed this opportunity as a way to earn money to pay for college. In preparation for her transition to college, Tammy also

visited several college campuses and decided on a university. She applied in December and was waiting for acceptance.

Tammy was also very self-aware about her potential for independent living. She mentioned that she would like to start out with an apartment and eventually own her own home. She said, "for four years of my life I will be living in a dorm rather than an apartment, and the dorms are actually included in the tuition." She also had a driver's license and was working on saving up for her own car.

Tammy was at the step in planning where she is "anticipating results" (Field and Hoffman, 1994, p. 165). She was considering living arrangements, financial planning, and potential to complete college coursework. She recognized her areas of need such as procrastination, written expression, and Algebra, and was considering ways in which she can work on developing those weaknesses throughout her transition to college.

Research Question Two: Factors Influencing Self-Advocacy

Each of the student participants in this study were functioning as self-advocates at a different level. Jeremy was encouraged to participate in IEP meetings and add his essential input since he was first diagnosed as a child. Adam, although he understands the process, did not participate in the IEP meeting itself and allowed mom to take the lead in that area. Tammy and Ms. Gainer participated equally in the meetings and feel that participation is essential to be sure that everything is individualized. Self-advocacy can be viewed through Field and Hoffman's Steps to Self Determination framework (1994) in Steps 4 and 5. Step 4 was putting a plan into action and Step 5 was experiencing outcomes and learning from those experiences in order to reassess the plan. Several smaller steps are outlined for each category. Step 4 of the framework was Act, which includes taking risks, communicating, accessing resources, negotiating, dealing

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with conflict and criticism, and being persistent. Step 5 of the framework was Experience Outcomes and Learn, which includes comparing outcomes to expected outcomes, comparing performance to expected performance, realizing success, and making adjustments.

Communication with adults and peers was an area in which all three students struggled. Adam attended counseling sessions to work on his behavioral concerns and coping skills. He had a tendency to overreact and needs guidance in how to cope and problem solve in community settings. Jeremy had difficulty recognizing the emotions of others and expressed that it causes him difficulty in developing relationships socially and in the workplace. If Tammy was struggling with a project or assignment, she does not always access her available resources such as tutoring or learning support. Instead, she waited for her learning support teacher to come to her.

All of the three students in this study exceled in accessing their resources because of consistent communication between parents, students, and learning support teachers. Although parents have assisted along the way, these students were more independent in asking for help, seeking out general education and special education support, and researching potential career and college opportunities. An area where all three students needed increased engagement is in making adjustments to their current goals as conflicts arise.

Many students with disabilities struggle with communicating with adults and asking for help when needed. A key component of self-advocacy is being aware of available resources and utilizing them at the appropriate time. Students in this study received support from both families and learning support teachers in finding available resources for tutoring and skill development. However, in order to be successful in college, students will need to be able to use their self-advocacy skills to self-identify and connect with disability services as adults.

Concrete vision, abstract world. When Ms. Natale was asked to discuss Jeremy in terms of his academic, social, and emotional life, the first item mentioned was self-advocacy. She stated,

> Everything we've always done has been based around him having a voice for himself. Ever since kindergarten he's gone to all of his IEP meetings. My thought was, he's the one who knows what it's like to be in school, not me. In kindergarten, he probably couldn't articulate that very well. He was in the same physical space with all these people who in essence, were making decisions about him. I didn't want the "him" to be lost in that and it to become a one size fits all IEP type thing. As the years passed, he spent more and more time participating in the IEP process and articulating for himself, 'You know, I don't really need that piece of my IEP anymore. I think I'm good, but what I'm having a hard time with is this.' Then we would develop plans around how to address what he was struggling with at that point in time. He's always been a part of that.

Ms. Natale was integral in helping Jeremy develop the skills necessary to identify his strengths and weaknesses and to speak about them openly and honestly. Jeremy felt that socialization and understanding the emotions of others is something that inhibits his ability to connect and make meaningful relationships. He understood that this is due to his Autism diagnosis, but it is definitely something that he continued to struggle with regularly. In Jeremy's words, "emotionally connecting with people is different for me. It's hard for me to figure out a person and to get to know a person. I act nice and try to be a good guy because it is hard for me to understand what other people want. I guess I need to have more conversations with people and get to know different people. I learn from hands on experience and training." The remarkable part about Jeremy's statement was that he is able to identify an area of need and provide a way to

improve in this area. Ms. Natale expressed a similar concern during her interview. She said. "He sat me down one day and expressed his frustration with me as a parent who didn't essentially force him to have social relationships when he was younger. It was really hard for me obviously as a parent for everything I did to be called into question." Although Ms. Natale was upset by Jeremy' remark, she took it seriously because he was crying when he brought it up. Ms. Natale reflected on the first time Jeremy cried as a child and realized what was happening. Jeremy said, "Wait, Mom. Why is this water in my eyes?" Ms. Natale had to explain what tears are and how they connected to emotions. It took her back to a place where she remembered how concrete his thinking is and how abstract most of our world is.

Jeremy developed the skills necessary to self-advocate in the high school setting through participation in the IEP process and interactions with his learning support and general education teachers. However, in order to transfer those same self-advocacy skills to a work or college environment, Jeremy required more training. Although Ms. Natale did many things right in raising Jeremy to be independent and thoughtful, Jeremy felt that he missed out on the social piece. To address that, they are meeting with a team of teachers from one of Jeremy's previous schools to explain his current social concerns and what he can do to develop these skills further.

Walk a mile in my shoes. Adam was on track in both his high school courses and his college courses. The main area of concern for Adam was behavior and emotional functioning. His ability to self-advocate hinges on this fact. His mom, Ms. Moreli, noted that at times "he gets frustrated, loses focus, and it takes a short period of time for him to be back to working on assignments; however, it was also noted that this has greatly improved since last school year." His IEP mentions that he is actively working with a counselor on how to self-regulate his

behaviors and take responsibility for his actions. Adam receives counseling services every other week for 45 minutes.

When Adam was asked to identify his areas of need, he was both frank and honest. Adam said that he was not self-driven and that his parents were the driving force behind his motivation to complete tasks and do well in school. Then he said, "I try to be kind, but sometimes I come off as rude or mean." Ms. Moreli discussed this in her interview as well. She mentioned two different issues that she sees with Adam. One was the taking responsibility for his actions and the other was handling social situations. She said,

> If something's not right it's always somebody else's fault and never the choice that he makes. I have to point it out to him and I hate doing that. These are the choices you make. Then I hear, 'Fine, I admit it. I screwed up. Now what do I do?' I say, 'Get yourself out of the situation you've put yourself in. Make a choice.'

Although Adam had a difficult time being accountable, he was learning how to make his own decisions. Ms. Moreli recalled a time when Adam was taking a calculus class and was failing the course even though he had a tutor. Ms. Moreli pointed out that he just wasn't taking the time to review. Adam chose to withdraw from the course, so that he did not risk a failing grade. He took it again the next semester and ended with a 92%. The other issue that Ms. Moreli mentioned as an area of concern is Adam's lack of patience with other people. Ms. Moreli noted that he is a natural leader and has won a leadership award; however, his approach with daily interactions with peers could use some improvement. Ms. Moreli described Adam as "having no filter, being very sharp to the point, and sometimes very rude about things." Mrs. Roland mentioned that she did not think Adam has much of social life at this point because he is involved heavily in academics and extra-curricular activities.

Social development was an area that support may be needed as Adam transitions to college. Adam felt that the areas he will need the most support is Calculus and upper level math courses, as well as foreign language courses. When Ms. Moreli was asked to discuss college level support she mentioned both mentoring and tutoring as areas of need. Since Adam was already enrolled in college level courses, the family has was in touch with disability services. Adam does not self-identify, but mom supplied the college with his information for extended time accommodations. Just as Adam did not like to take part in his IEP, he was not comfortable with accommodations. He felt "that people get labeled with learning differences." Even though the college was accommodating, Adam was not comfortable with using the accommodations available to him. He was comfortable with talking to Ms. Moreli about assignments that he struggles with, but she was supplying support either through herself or a tutor to assist. However, Adam did discuss a tutoring list supplied by the school and other learning center resources. He definitely knows where to go if he needs academic support.

Experiencing outcomes. Working at a local sports center has allowed Tammy to gain knowledge about fisheries from a different perspective. However, she had to show persistence to get the position. She explained, "I actually had applied there once before, but didn't get it the first time. I went back and applied again for this other job, which was basically general cleaning, but you then have to doing other things as well. Once I got the job and my first day of work was probably was the scariest day. Whenever you are just starting out as being a new employee you don't know the rules yet, it was a really interesting experience for me." Tammy found the job in the newspaper and chose it because it related to her career interests. She was working in the fishing and archery department and felt that this was a good fit considering her interest in Marine Biology. However, she described herself as a jack of all trades.

Ms. Gainer said that Tammy had also visited four colleges to which she accompanied her before deciding on a college. Tammy researched and chose them herself and Ms. Gainer set up the visits. By the time Mrs. Kelly began working with Tammy in September, she had already chosen a college and was planning to have her application in by December.

When Tammy was asked about her roles in the IEP and transition planning process, she said, "I really don't do much talking unless I'm being asked direct questions, which is about what I want to do. Like the whole transition thing is whenever I actually start talking but most of the time my mom is the one answering questions." Tammy also described different things that she recalled being discussed in the meeting, "we went over things like finding out ways I learn best. The teachers also put input in about my participation, how I am getting my assignments in, things like how my grades are doing, but the biggest part was figuring out which way I learn." Tammy shared her kinesthetic and visual learning style with teachers, so that they understood how to help her when she needs it. Ms. Gainer's hope was that her ability to self-advocate will increase as she transitions to college classes. At times, Ms. Gainer was still the catalyst behind Tammy's ability to reach out for help.

Research Question Three: Self-Determination

Self-determination theory is "based on the assumption that people have inborn tendencies to grow and develop psychologically, to strive to master challenges in the environment, and to integrate experience into self-concept. This theory holds that these human tendencies are fully expressed only within a supportive social context and that key people in the person's life provide context" (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Self-determination in one's life shows itself through independence, motivation, ambition, drive, and self-awareness. This definition of self-determination is seen most effectively in Steps 2 and 5 of Field and Hoffman's model. Step 2 is

mentions that students should accept and value themselves, admire strengths that come from uniqueness, recognize and respect rights and responsibilities, and take care of themselves. Step 5 explains that students need to experience the outcomes of their choices and learn from them through reflection and change.

Each of the students in this study was confident in his or her strengths and was also able to identify certain areas of weakness. Adam and Tammy noted mainly academic areas of strength, but Jeremy focused on attributes outside of education. Jeremy had the strongest sense of self-awareness, perhaps because his mother made that a crucial part of his education and IEP involvement. Adam and Tammy were aware of their disabilities and the support that they receive, but did not view it the same way that Jeremy did. Jeremy had to consciously work at improving his social and emotional understanding. Conversely, Adam had taken on a "take me as I am attitude," and Tammy was at a point where she felt strong in her ability to move forward with future goals without much needed assistance.

Adam, Tammy, and Jeremy all have characteristics that may inhibit their abilities to be self-determined. Adam sometimes allowed his anger or frustration to hold him back. Jeremy was still working on learning the intricacies of social interaction. Tammy admitted that she procrastinates and sometimes does not work as hard as she can. Additionally, both Jeremy and Tammy were very self-motivated, but Adam admitted that he is not.

Abilities versus disabilities. When Jeremy was asked to identify areas of strength he indicated that he was good at physical labor, organization, and helping others. He said that he was able to do a lot of heavy lifting and helped neighbors and friends with projects if they needed him. Jeremy sought out these opportunities because he enjoyed helping others. Both his mom and his learning support teacher described him as compassionate and kind. Ms. Natale

mentioned that Jeremy will offer to complete odd jobs for friends and relatives and loves to do volunteer work. Jeremy also identified himself as "a nice guy." At the end of the interview Jeremy was asked if there was anything else that he would like to add and he said, "I want people to know that I have Autism and that it has been a big challenge for me, but I have learned a lot about life. I have learned things that I can experience and learn in the future. I've learned how to live." Jeremy definitely values himself and his struggle to understand how to live with Autism.

Upon examination of Jeremy's IEP it was also evident from teacher input that he excelled academically. Jeremy was currently enrolled in Engineering, Environmental Science, Consumer Math, Anatomy and Physiology, Psychology, and English 12. All of his teachers indicated that he was on track in all courses and many remarked that he was doing a wonderful job. Mrs. Goslan stated,

> Academically, he's an excellent student. He very much keeps up with his work. He rarely has any issues with anything. As of right now, he has a 92% overall. He struggles a bit in math, but he's bringing that up this year. He is very good at being organized, staying on top of his work. He is very independent with his schoolwork. He doesn't really have, as far as I know for what mom has told me, she's not on top of him all the time with his schoolwork. He basically takes care of that himself.

Although it may appear that Jeremy was very self-sufficient, he has had many external supports that have helped him develop this skill set. Jeremy was asked to identify the person in his life who has been most influential. He indicated his mom because she has helped him so much in life and has taught him how to be a good person. Jeremy did possess self-awareness, motivation, and carried out the plans he made for himself. Examining this situation through Self-Determination Theory, Ms. Natale was the "supportive context" that has allowed Jeremy to

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thrive. Ms. Natale has grounded him in a way that has allowed him to understand a world that operates in a realm outside if his understanding.

Jeremy knew where his areas of strength and weakness lie and was working to address the social aspect of his life that he longs for. Even though he struggled with social understanding, Jeremy did not quit, but pushed through the challenges and identified new strengths. He felt confident in his job at Fry Burger and knew that he was capable of all of the tasks that he was asked to do. His mom was also trying to support him in developing his social skills and understanding certain aspects of socialization that we take for granted. Ms. Natale described a recent incident at their church in which a senior boy tried to start up a conversation with Jeremy. He was asking Jeremy questions like "What's your name? How old are you? Where do you go to school? Are you a senior?" trying to find a place where they had something in common. This is a typical technique that we use all the time when we meet new people. Jeremy was lost to this process. About an hour after the interaction, Jeremy told his parents, "I don't understand why he threw a battery of questions at me." His parents had to help him to understand that the boy was trying to find out where there was a commonality was so they could have a conversation. Even though this may seem like a limitation for Jeremy, he sees it as an opportunity to grow, learn, and change his plan.

A born leader. Adam was very humble about his strengths. He mentioned math and science and followed that by naming writing as a weakness. However, Adam was involved in many extra-curricular and community activities that he did not mention. He said, "I'm ok at sports, but I wouldn't call that a strength." Speaking with Ms. Moreli, shed some light on his strengths outside of academia. Ms. Moreli noted,

He's starting point guard in basketball. He just got all kinds of numerous senior awards

and plays for a Christian school. He got Most Valuable Player and he got a leadership award there. He played with a left rotator cuff torn and a dislocated shoulder. I tried to get him not to play, but he wanted to finish the season.

Adam also played chess competitively. He took first place in the collegiate division of the Pennsylvania state chess tournament. He was one of the top 100 players in the state for his age group.

When asked about Adam's strengths, Mrs. Roland said, "his cognitive and academic abilities are exceptional and he does have full independent living skills. He is a very good thinker. His reasoning and working memory are spot on." Adam was also excellent at learning by experience. He offered advice to students who are considering taking a year off before attending college: "Don't take a break. Go right after high school, that your break will really hurt you. My second oldest brother, he actually waited a year and half and he regrets it so much." He also mentioned learning about what can happen when you try to make a living without attending college. He said, "My two older brothers are like 9 and 7 years older than me. When I was about 12, one stopped going to college temporarily and he tried to get a job. I just watched him fail terribly. That really made a difference. I think that's where I picked it up the most."

Mrs. Roland discussed how wonderful it is to witness the family working together to create a post-graduation plan for Adam. She mentioned that with most students she is the driving force in the transition process, but for Adam it was different. She stated,

Ms. Moreli has got the lead and I'm the supplement and that's wonderful. I'm the person who can kind of sit back and say try this tool, try this, let's look at that. She's got it. She's been the one directing him and now this year he has just really taken the lead and he is

directing his own transition. He wants that. That to me is a win-win and I would love it if more students and their families were like that."

Driven to succeed. Mrs. Kelly described Tammy as very independent and noted that "she would call when she need help." She also mentioned that academically Tammy does very well and that she is motivated about her goals and confident when she speaks about her future. She stated, "as far as being a learning support teacher and planning transitions, she's kind of a dream because I could encourage her to take a career survey and I could discuss with her what she wanted to do and how she planned to get there." Mrs. Kelly also mentioned that "she is very independent and she would call when she needed help. She works part-time and goes to school full-time." Tammy struggles at times to balance both her academic life and her job, but she always bounces back.

Tammy's IEP explained that her strongest areas of academic strength are in reading, math, and science. Ms. Gainer explained that Tammy's learning disability first surfaced in 3rd grade. They said that she had dyscalculia and dyslexia. Ms. Gainer said that Tammy will "take a 2 and say it's a 5." Tammy continued to struggle with these learning disabilities, but has learned how to manage it.

One remarkable thing about Tammy was that she does not get easily frustrated when she does not understand a concept. She was a problem solver. If she struggled in a course, she had the motivation to reach out for help to her parents, learning support teacher, and even friends. However, Tammy did self-identify as a procrastinator. Working on a deadline because she had waited too long to complete an assignment was not her strength, but the powerful part was that she recognized this and admitted that she was trying to work on it. Tammy described herself as "having a big ambition" and attributed this factor to her parents' continued encouragement.

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Two of the students in the study were very self-aware and realized the areas of their lives in which they needed to work harder because of their disabilities. Transition agencies are excellent resources for students with disabilities to build resumes, find job coaches, explore careers, and practice job skills. This resource was imperative in helping one of the students to develop the skills he needed to go to college. Additionally, having the motivation to seek out opportunities and solve one's own problems is crucial for independence. Another student had very strong family involvement, which both motivated him and inhibited him. A balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation needs to be made for students to be successful in college environments. Intrinsic motivation is an essential component in adjusting to college life and independent living.

Research Question Four: Family Involvement and School Support

Academic excellence was a common thread among Jeremy, Adam, and Tammy. As seniors in high school, in many ways they were independent academically and working towards the next phase of their lives as scholars. However, academic success was a long and sometimes tedious journey. Family involvement and school support fall into Field and Hoffman's Self Determination framework in Steps 1 and Step 3. Step 1 of the framework is Know Yourself, which is important in being able to identify your own unique strengths, weaknesses, and preferences. Step 3 of the framework is planning. Parents and learning support teachers have played a crucial role in the lives of each student's academic and social journey. Jeremy, Adam, and Tammy all noted that their parents' influence had impacted their decisions to consider college. Jeremy and Tammy both mentioned their mother as the most influential person in their lives. Adam said that his father had made a significant impact in his career choice and decision to attend college.

Additionally, school support has played a different role in each individual students' life. Mrs. Goslan, Jeremy's learning support teacher, described her role being that of a mentor. Mrs. Roland, Adam's learning support teacher, and Mrs. Kelly, Tammy's learning support teacher both described themselves as a facilitator throughout the IEP and transition planning process. Each student received varying degrees of school support. Jeremy seemed to receive the most school support through his participation the Life Hop transition program. Adam received little academic support, but did receive counseling services. Tammy received academic support for math and writing, in addition to financial planning.

When families are involved in their students' lives great things can happen. Each of the families in this study impacted their students by supporting them academically, emotionally, and sometimes socially. Families were also involved in the IEP process and helped teachers and other IEP team members to better understand their student and their student's needs. Engaging families in the IEP and transition planning process is essential to helping students become prepared for their future.

Learning support teachers throughout this study met with students regularly to discuss their coursework, progress, and career goals. Regular communication allowed the teachers to find out how students career goals had changed or progress that was made toward current transition goals in postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. The process was ongoing and ever changing. Additionally, teachers provided students with a variety of transition assessment tools via email and online learning programs to assist them in career exploration.

Each of the students in this study had difficulty identifying supports that would be available once they were enrolled in college. One of the most important concepts for students

with disabilities to learn in secondary education is how to navigate adult services and resources. Although students in this study were nearing the end of their high school careers and preparing for college life, they were unaware of what they would have to do in order to receive disability related services on a college campus. Education in available resources is necessary for students with disabilities to thrive in new environments beyond high school.

Parent as advocate. Ms. Natale, Jeremy's mother, had an interesting professional journey. She informed the researcher that she was a social worker and taught classes at two local colleges as an adjunct, but she was currently working in financial services. When asked about her involvement in the IEP process Ms. Natale said,

> I think it ultimately depends on the school system and the parent's ability to advocate in a non-confrontational way. If you're asking me as a professional, I would speak to it very differently than as a mom. As a mom, I have the professional skills to be able to navigate the system and probably one of the better approaches people can use. I used to act as advocate for other parents at IEP meetings. I'm familiar with it in a broader context. For him and for us, it was always about him.

Even as a young child, Jeremy was encouraged to participate in his IEP meetings and to understand that the process was meant to help him and guide him through the educational system.

Jeremy and Ms. Natale both mentioned a time in middle school when Jeremy was faced with a difficult classroom situation. He was in a history course that was primarily lecture based. In Ms. Natale's words, "Jeremy's ability to hear the spoken word and translate that into 'what did that person mean' is very hard. Teachers use a lot of the same kind of slang and idioms and sayings that don't translate concretely to what they actually mean." Jeremy said that he had

approached a teacher after class for clarification on certain part of the lecture and the teacher refused to help because it was already covered during class time. This type of occurrence is what led them to choose cyber-charter school. Ms. Natale mentioned that switching to a cyber-school was Jeremy's decision, but she made him produce a pros and cons list and meet other students and parents who attend cyber-charter schools. She wanted him to understand what he was signing up for. She also did not allow him to switch mid-year because "that would look like you're just giving up on something that wasn't working for you. It was my approach that you can't just give up. You have to see it through."

Since Jeremy had transitioned to cyber-charter school, he had developed a new set of life skills that were transferrable beyond the high school classroom. Jeremy indicated that he is involved in his IEP and understands how to participate and why it is important. However, it was a learning curve experiencing the IEP process in a cyber-setting and learning how to navigate the system. Ms. Natale stated,

> The IEP process at Hope Charter School is somewhat different because you're not in a
> bricks and mortar school and you're not with teachers in that physical environment
> day to day. When he got to Hope Charter School it was more about how to use the system
> and how to use the available tools to be successful to communicate with teachers who
> are afar.

Jeremy learned how to contact his teachers for help, leave a voicemail, and send an email. He also learned how to understand what someone is saying to him when the person is not physically present. These were all skills that he would be able to transfer to the work force and had already begun using at his part-time job.

Learning support teacher as mediator. Mrs. Goslan described her interaction with Jeremy and Ms. Natale as primarily transition based. Jeremy is such a strong student academically that learning support was not her primary role. Jeremy participated in the Life Hop program, which was a program designed to provide students with job shadowing opportunities, career exploration, interview skills, resume building, and life skills. Of her interactions with Jeremy, Mrs Goslan said, "We talk about what he wants to do after high school. He's involved with an agency, so they're doing job shadowing with him, so we talk about his job shadowing experiences, what that means to him, and what that might turn into for secondary education." Mrs. Goslan was very aware of Jeremy's strengths and weaknesses and the families' interest in building his social skills.

Mrs. Goslan worked with Jeremy for the past two years. When asked how she viewed her role in Jeremy's transition plan, she explained,

> I was more or less the mediator and the person who helps them make decisions about whether they wanted to work with an agency really. He really wanted to go to veterinary school and after talking with him and talking with his mom, it opened up the conversation to maybe there's other things out there as well. Basically, I was mediating the conversation and the process.

She also described getting in touch with various transition coordinators at the school to set up transition services with agencies local to Jeremy's area. This was the process that led Jeremy to work with Life Hop.

Mrs. Goslan also spoke about Jeremy's academic accommodations. She identified that he receives specially designed instruction such as chunking and extended time. Section 6 of the IEP outlines specially designed instruction that students receive. According to the IEP, Jeremy can

receive extended time for lesson completion, study guides for content area subjects, longer tasks broken into smaller chunks, graphic organizers, modeling and repetition, and use of a calculator for written expression. Additionally, since writing was an area of weakness for Jeremy, he received the following: writing rubrics provided in advance, graphic organizers outlining the stages of the writing process, and submission of a rough draft to his learning support teacher for feedback prior to grading. However, both Jeremy and Mrs. Goslan confirmed that Jeremy does not use these accommodations. Jeremy said that from time to time he has used the writing support option, but he that he no longer needs the other accommodations.

Even though Jeremy was extremely strong academically, he will need additional support socially as he transitions to college life. In terms of support needed to transition to college, Mrs. Goslan said,

> I think more or less for him it's going to be having the ability to have maybe a student who's at the school with him who can show him around, get him used to the environment, and maybe help him understand how to self-advocate. Those skills will be important, especially in a college environment.

When asked about what types of support he might need in college, Jeremy said that he was unsure. Mrs. Goslan said, "He doesn't really reach out for help. He does if he really needs help, but I feel like he may be less apt to do that in a college environment, maybe he feels like he shouldn't." Mrs. Goslan was also specific that she thinks that peer support would be most beneficial for Jeremy to adjust to college socially.

If God gives you talent, you have to do it. Ms. Moreli said that she believes "if God gives you talent, you have to do it. You do it for him, you don't do it for yourself. There's no self-glorification here." Perhaps this was why Adam did not see the things that he does as extraordinary or noteworthy enough to mention. His talents were something that he has and should use, so he does. Ms. Moreli had a full-time tutoring business that she owned and operated, and often times Adam participated in his schooling from this location.

Ms. Moreli admitted that Adam is intelligent and possessed many talents including being an excellent bass player, soccer player, photographer, and poet. He has won scholarships for both digital photography and poetry. Ms. Moreli encourages him to be well-rounded, but has stopped pushing Adam to participate in all of the activities he once did. She wanted him to find his own path. She said,

> I don't give him as much support. I've tried to raise my boys that the world is not
>
> going to accommodate you. You better step up and do what's required and they
>
> will tell you that. They said I'm harsh, but I'm being the way the world is, it does
>
> not say 'I'm sorry, you having trouble? Let's give you extra pay.' If you want something,
>
> you have to work for it. You get nothing without working for it. If I don't teach them to
>
> have a good work ethic, if I don't teach them to work hard, I'm afraid that it will eat them
>
> alive.

Ms. Moreli also believed in a clear line of consequences for actions. Adam had a tendency to avoid doing difficult assignments, and Ms. Moreli took video games and other privileges away if things were not complete. She mentioned, "I have to fight him to do his school work. I refuse to do it for him but I do have to shout, yell, scream. He'll say 'I think I am going to skip class today.' I say, 'You're not dead. You are still alive. You drag your corpse to class, go."

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Driving Mrs. Roland. Mrs. Roland was Adam's learning support teacher for the past two years. She recalled her initial interactions with Adam and realized "pretty early on this kid was definitely above grade level." Adam was passing all of his high school courses with As and Bs, with the exception of a C in Spanish. Areas in need of improvement outlined in his IEP included task completion, written expression, and behavior regulation. His specially designed instruction included sending a written draft to his learning support teacher for review and critique, reasonable extended time, study guides and guided notes. However, both Ms. Moreli and Mrs. Roland mentioned that Adam rarely uses these accommodations.

Adam felt that his strongest area of continued need was in writing. This was something that he continued to struggle with at the college level, but he has not reached out the university writing center. Ms. Moreli had been assisting him with these assignments at her tutoring center. Ms. Moreli noted, "When it comes to his IEP, he does not use it too much. He will use it when it's to his advantage, if he gets behind or something he'll try that and I try not to let him do that either. The only thing he does really use is extended time."

Mrs. Roland was also reflecting back to last year during our interview and said, "last year I definitely was more involved, definitely had more conversations with Mom and Adam. We were touching base a minimum of twice per month. This year, I can barely get them on the phone. They are very attentive of doing their own thing." In terms of college support, Mrs. Roland felt that to start Adam is going to need to continue being able to touch base with his mom. She said, "Mom has really been the driving force for this kid. He could also possibly use counseling services. He may still need that emotional regulation piece."

Adam also mentioned his independence from both his learning support teacher and Ms. Moreli. He said that his learning support teacher mainly contacts him to "keep me on track if I

am behind in a class. She makes sure that I am doing my work." Time management seems to be an issue for Adam. Wanting to do things to the best of his ability caused him frustration. He mentioned writing as an area where he struggled and that he froze when he got to an assignment like that. Ms. Moreli's response, "Get over it. Nobody is perfect at everything. Get over it." Adam was driving his educational choices due to Ms. Moreli's encouragement to keep on moving, even when things get tough.

Encouraging confidence. Ms. Gainer, Tammy's mom, described her daughter as "a very caring child from day one towards anything and anybody." She said that Tammy has always been very concerned about the wellness of others and that she is "coming out of her shell" in her teenage years. Ms. Gainer said that Tammy's learning disability gave her some setbacks when she attended a bricks and mortar school, but the individualized instruction and attention to Tammy's learning styles in cyber-charter school has helped her to excel.

Tammy described her parents as a strong influence in her decision to attend college and want to further her education. She said that her mom has been the most influential person in her life. She said, "She might get on my nerves whenever she constantly nags on me about scores, but I know she does it because she cares and she wants me to succeed. She's always been there for me whenever I need her for help."

Ms. Gainer encouraged Tammy to keep up with her Career Planning course because they gave them assignments that required researching careers and colleges. She also helped Tammy to set up her college visits and to get the academic help that she needs when she falls behind. Ms. Gainer also encouraged Tammy to apply for the job that she currently holds at the sports center.

Identifying a learning style. When speaking about her IEP experience at Hope Cyber-

Charter School, Tammy said,

"Here I can learn in different ways rather than just one way. I can learn hands-on, visually,

or I can also learn through verbal. Somebody is telling me how to do it sometimes if it's simple

enough they easily explain it in the proper way then I can understand it verbally. I can learn that

way too." Tammy knows the ways that she learns best and this can work to her advantage as she

transitions to college classrooms.

When discussing her IEP and her needs, Tammy was able to articulate areas where she

felt she could grow. Although her learning disability reflects a need in writing, Tammy identified

Algebra and History as her weakest areas. When speaking about Algebra she mentioned, "I

really wish it wasn't a requirement for schools because I don't do so well in it and I do better in

geometry than I do Algebra so it's kind of messed up if you think about it because Geometry

actually has Algebra in it, but I understand it. It's confusing." Ms. Gainer, Tammy's mother, also

said that Algebra was a difficult subject for Tammy and that she tries to avoid it at times and gets

behind. Ms. Gainer also said that "she is lagging behind a little in some classes, but she is

working on getting them back to where they need to be. She is not adept when it comes to

Algebra, but I can't blame her, I never was either."

Both Tammy's IEP and Mrs. Kelly confirm Tammy's struggles with Algebra. She was

currently enrolled in Algebra 2 and has a 56% in the course. Mrs. Kelly said that Tammy had

reached out to her for help in this subject area, but that she was unable to assist her in that course.

Mrs. Kelly referred Tammy to the afterschool program and to the content area teacher for help

with Algebra. Ms. Gainer also encouraged Tammy to use these two resources for help. Ms.

Gainer and Tammy also said that Mrs. Kelly is in touch biweekly.

In discussing current academic and transition support, Tammy said that she had communicated her post-secondary goals with Mrs. Kelly and that she followed up with that topic when they spoke. Tammy also commented on ways that Mrs. Kelly is available to help her. She said, "If I ever need help with a specific class she is there to help me understand what I am supposed to do. She also helps me get in contact with teachers if they are unresponsive or I keep missing them. She helps me connect."

Tammy felt that as she enters college courses she may need her professors to assist occasionally. She also noted, "I'd like to find someone to show me the ropes and how things work at college." She said that her college of choice has a mentoring program that assigns upper classmen to help freshmen transition to college life. She said, "I really think that I am going to need that because I have a hard time grasping a large change. I have to have somebody as a guide to get used to it."

Mrs. Kelly felt that academically Tammy is a strong enough student that she will not require much in terms of academic support. Tammy currently receives extended time, alternate assignments and assessments as needed and writing accommodations that allow her to submit her writing to her learning support teacher for editing support. Mrs. Kelly felt that an area of transition support that needs to be addressed is financial planning. Tammy said that she planned to have a part-time job while in college to absorb some of the cost. Mrs. Kelly said, "When I approached her about the subject, she had not even considered it and didn't have a direction on how to get there. I suggested that she contact the financial aid office to see how they could help her and we discussed the different types of grants and loans."

Summary

This chapter analyzes and presents the qualitative data collected through student, parent/guardian, and learning support teacher interviews. Each research question was examined using qualitative analysis. The qualitative data allowed for students to provide an in-depth view at their perceptions of the transition planning process. All research questions were answered by compiling data from the student, parent/guardian, and learning support teacher interviews and the students' individualized education plans. The narratives developed by the researcher presented the findings to allow for a deeper understanding of each student and their journey to college.

Chapter 5 will present an interpretation of the data and implications for future practice in developing transition plans and supporting students with disabilities as they make the transition to college classrooms.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final chapter will summarize the content of previous chapters and will reexamine the research questions, literature, data collection, and analysis. Qualitative data included collecting and reviewing interview data and student participant individualized education plans (IEP). Students, parent/guardians, and learning support teachers participated in semi-structured interviews. Recommendations for students, families, and special educators and suggestions for future research are also included in this chapter.

Review of Methodology

This study was a descriptive case study with embedded units, which sought to identify the perceptions of the transition planning experience for students with disabilities with a plan to enroll in 2 or 4 year college programs. The following research questions were examined:

1) How do students with disabilities perceive the transition planning process?

2) What factors influence students' ability to self-advocate?

3) What factors have contributed to or inhibited the students' ability to exhibit self-determination?

4) How do families and learning support teachers impact students' success?

To begin the study, criteria for student participation in the study was sent to 11th and 12th grade learning support teachers. Criteria were outlined to include currently enrolled juniors and seniors in high school, students enrolled for at least one year, students 16 and older, students who were considering applying to a two or four year traditional or blended program, and students who had been diagnosed with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, or Specific Learning Disability.

Learning support teachers nominated students in each disability category and the researcher selected a total of four students for participation. One student, parent, and guardian was interviewed as a pilot study to test the interview protocols and capacity to consent screening tool. Original testing instruments created by the researcher were used without revisions, since the researcher determined that the protocols would provide sufficient information to address the research questions.

Each parent/student was contacted via telephone to request voluntary participation in the study. Once participation was confirmed a time was scheduled to interview the student and parent separately. A separate time was also scheduled to interview each student's learning support teacher and request voluntary participation. A total of 12 interviews were conducted including the pilot study. Each interview was transcribed using RecordiaPro transcription service and entered into NVIVO10 for coding and analysis.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of students with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, or a Specific Learning Disability towards the transition planning process in preparing them for transition to two and four year colleges. This study sought to explore transition services in a cyber-charter school environment. In addition, this study examined the role that parental involvement and learning support teachers play in student transition experiences and post-graduation preparation. Students with disabilities are increasingly entering college classrooms. The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (2011) was a ten year study of approximately 12,000 youth with disabilities throughout early adulthood. Researchers reported that 8 years post-graduation from high school, 19% of students were enrolled in 4 year colleges and universities, 32% in vocational, business, or technical schools, and 44% in 2 year or

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community college programs. Due to these statistics, it necessary to consider what factors influences students with disabilities choices to attend different types of collegiate programs and how students perceive the secondary transition planning process. Student perceptions of the transition planning process include their ability to assess self-advocacy skills and self-determination and to identify and utilize available support systems.

Research Question 1

How do students with disabilities perceive the transition planning process?

This question explored student perceptions of participation in the IEP team and the transition planning process. Transition services focus on three main areas of support which are improving academic and functional skills, providing a person-centered plan based on students' strengths and needs, and providing instruction, related services, and community experiences (Cortiella, 2004). Participants in the study received academic support, functional support, and community related services. The transition plans presented in student IEPs included improvement in academic areas, transition related activities, and post-secondary education, employment, and independent living goals. Participants reported that their personal goals were reflected accurately in the transition plans and that their learning support teachers offered support throughout the transition planning process. Students discussed attention to individual learning styles, career and college exploration, and plans for post-graduation living. The strongest area of focus for students throughout the process was securing post-secondary schooling plans to attend college. Jeremy was receiving the most intensive support in this area due to his need to develop social and emotional understanding and to continue exploring post-secondary schooling options in his field of interest. Adam and Tammy both had solidified their college choices and were

receiving assistance from family and learning support teachers in deciding levels of support needed beyond high school and how to access resources in higher education.

IEP team meetings are a time during which transition planning is discussed and corresponding activities are put in place. It is often noted that parents and students do the least amount of talking during the IEP team meeting (Fish, 2006; Fish, 2008; Martin, Van Dycke, Green, Gardner, Christensen, Woods, & Lovett, 2006). Findings of the present study refuted the literature in that most participants and their parent/guardians reported that they were actively involved in the IEP team meeting and were given sufficient time to speak. The data seem to suggest that students felt the most involved during transition planning discussions. At Hope Cyber Charter School, students and families were given a conference line to call into for the meeting and also were asked to login to a virtual classroom to view the IEP document. Research suggests that there is an intimidation factor that occurs in face-to-face meetings with administrators and teachers, perhaps eliminating that component allows for more communication from families and students (Hetherington, Durant-Jones, Johnson, Nolan, Smith, Taylor-Brown, & Tuttle, 2010). Additionally, families and learning support staff are not restricted by place and are able to attend IEP team meetings remotely, thus increasing participation.

It was also noted that students in the study could not directly recall being a part of the transition planning process (Hetherington, Durant-Jones, Johnson, Nolan, Smith, Taylor-Brown, & Tuttle, 2010). A simple reason for this is that transition planning often takes place in the form of career surveys and assessments and conversations with special education teachers (Herbert, Lorenz, & Trusty, 2010). It seems likely that students are unfamiliar with "transition plans" as a term because the career exploration and discussions that they have are asking them questions about post-secondary plans, but are not referring to the transition to college. Participants were

able to recall conversations with parents and learning support teachers that asked them to state their post-secondary plans for education, employment, and independent living. The conversational approach taken by the learning support teachers allowed the students to provide their ideas about future goals and allowed teachers to guide students as needed. The ongoing approach made it possible for students to change their minds and for teachers to offer new ideas and opportunities throughout the process.

Post-secondary education and employment are two of the areas included in a secondary transition plan (Secondary Transition). Document review indicated that all three participants had both post-secondary education and employment outlines in the transition plans within their IEPs. Additionally, it has been found that students seek out post-secondary education as a result of unsatisfactory experiences in competitive employment (Nietupski, Warth, & Winslow). In agreement with the literature, two of the participants in this study viewed their experiences in part-time employment as stepping stones for their interest in post-secondary education. Adam has not secured part-time employment, but has a short-term goal of doing so in the summer months. His intention for working is consistent with Jeremy and Tammy in that he plans to work as a way to secure finances for college tuition.

Research Question 2

What factors influence students' abilities to self-advocate?

Students who are most successful in post-secondary environments are those that receive training in self-advocacy and self-determination (Gil, 2007; Field & Hoffman, 1994; Field & Hoffman, 2002; Campbell-Whatley, 2008; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Scorgie, Kildal, & Wilgosh, 2010). Several factors influenced the students' ability to self-advocate such as social, communicative, and behavioral issues as well as family support.

Jeremy received formal instruction or training in self-advocacy and self-determination through his work with the transition agency Life Hop. Jeremy's Autism diagnosis caused him to need more development in socialization and long-term planning for future goals. Students diagnosed with Autism may have impaired social and communication that makes it difficult for them to develop relationships (Ackles, Fields, & Skinner, 2013; Adreon & Durocher, 2007) In Jeremy's case, transition services practicing social interactions and developing relationships in the community were necessary components in preparing him to advocate. Additionally, Jeremy's mom played a large role and his ability to self-advocate by preparing him to participate in his IEP meetings. When parents are involved in their child's education, students show improvements in academic and social competence and increased interest in post-secondary education and employment (Whitbread, Bruder, Fleming, & Park, 2007).

Adam's situation differed because he has allowed his mom to act as advocate and communicate his academic and functional needs to the IEP team. However, Adam was aware that this would ensure that all parties involved would know of his transition plans. Students are required to self-identify disabilities when they enroll in post-secondary institutions if they plan to receive special services (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2004). Students with emotional and behavioral disorders must provide a copy of a current psychological evaluation, academic testing, and a current IEP (Cooper & Pruitt, 2005). With help of his mom, Adam has already taken this step when he began taking college classes at brick and mortar college. Because Adam is independent when he is on campus, he has been in contact with the special services department at the college and with professors if he has needed the extended time or use of an alternate test setting that his accommodations afford him.

Emotional and behavioral issues often inhibit students being prepared for post-secondary classrooms and the workforce (Marder, 1992). Adam did not openly discuss counseling services that he received for anger management and developing coping skills, but both his parent and learning support teacher discussed his improvements in attitude and behavior due to his participation in counseling. Research also suggested that college retention may increase for students participating in psychological services (Cooper & Pruitt, 2005). Adam's learning support teacher recommended counseling services as he transitions from high school to college.

Tammy's need for self-advocacy lies in the area of academics. Tammy's Specific Learning Disability is in the area of written expression. For students to be ready for college they need to show academic content knowledge and writing skills, study skills, and critical thinking (Conley, 2007). Additionally, many students with learning disabilities who are lacking academic skills are able to compensate with persistence (Milsom & Dietz, 2009). Since Tammy is currently in secondary school she knows that her learning support teacher and an afterschool program are available if she needs assistance. However, she often requires encouragement from her mom and her teacher to utilize these resources. If Tammy attends a college and lives independently, she will need to learn to self-advocate for academic assistance.

Research Questions 3:

What factors have contributed to or inhibited the students' ability to exhibit self-determination?

Field and Hoffman (1994) stated,

> self-determination occurs only when a range of options are available from which to choose, including the ability to choose none of the available options. One way to increase the range and number of options from which to choose while increasing self-knowledge, is through the medium of "dreaming" for what one

wishes or wants. Dreaming permits the individual an opportunity to overcome the

barrier of socialized expectations limiting both choice alternatives and perceptions

of self-efficacy (p. 166).

Students in this study are definitely "dreaming" of the possibilities to come. Each student

expressed that they have interests in specific fields and gave reasons why these options are of

interest to them. However, each student is still exploring options available to them and ways in

which they will get there. Ankeny and Lehmann (2010) also highlight areas of practice that

influence one's ability to be self-determined. These areas include promoting self-knowledge,

complementing the self-determination skills that are fostered at home, increasing opportunities to

take risks, and providing opportunities for reflective practice.

Jeremy has a strong sense of self-awareness in terms of his areas of strength and

limitations due to his disability. He noted that he is an organizational genius and that this

strength allows him to excel in his schoolwork and otherwise. He is also aware of his need for

more social development because he does not understand others emotionally. Students with

Autism Spectrum Disorders often times have above average IQs and exceptional talents in

specific areas that make them likely candidates for college (Dente & Coles, 2012). Jeremy has

excellent academic skills, study skills, and organizational skills, but admits that his most needed

area is development of emotional understanding and social interactions with peers and

coworkers.

Adam is more lackadaisical in his self-knowledge and possession of identification of his

areas of strength and weakness. He noted that he was strong in math and sciences and weaker in

the area of writing. He mentioned that he was decent at sports, but that he would consider that

an area of strength. His mom elaborated on his community activities and reported that he plays

collegiate level chess, has won awards for leadership in basketball, and is also an exemplary soccer player. Adam seems to lack confidence in his strengths and does not acknowledge weaknesses outside of academics. Wagner and Davis (2006) noted that students diagnosed with Emotional Disturbances have not been widely supported in developing person-centered planning. While Adam's IEP and transition plans do reflect his current goals, it appears that continuity in familial support will play a large role in his ability to remain self-determined. Adam is able to affirm his goals and seems determined to reach them, but he lacks confidence in his ability to identify specific areas of strength and weakness. Adam also does not openly acknowledge his emotional needs, which is common among students diagnosed with emotional disturbances.

As a student with a specific learning disability, Tammy has a stronger sense of self-awareness and less struggles with developing her self-determination. Mytkowicz, Goss, & College (2012) noted that students with learning disabilities often require multimodal and sensory learning in order to tackle difficult concepts. Tammy is able to identify her learning style, which she notes as an area of strength and this contributes towards her ability to be self-determined and a self-advocate. She is a kinesthetic learner and has chosen a career path that matches with her learning style. Science fields usually include laboratories and hands-on activity. Tammy has taken many science classes during her high school career to prepare herself for these types of activities in her field on interest. However, Tammy definitely needs to work on building a support network to help her with her academic frustrations and challenges (Uretsky & Andrews, 2013).

Research Question 4:

How do families and learning support teachers impact student success?

Many different types of family members influence students throughout their high school careers from immediate family to extended family members (Morningstar, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 1995). All of the students in this study noted that immediate family members had directly impacted or influenced their success throughout their high school careers. Tammy and Jeremy said that their moms were the most influential figures in their lives, while Adam mentioned his father as the strongest figure in his life.

Ms. Natale, Jeremy's mom, noted that she possesses the skills to act as advocate for Jeremy and to "navigate the system." Parents are able to become active participants when they are aware of the legal procedures involved in IEP and transition planning (Fish, 2006; Fish, 2008; Lo, 2012). Ultimately, Ms. Natale has trained Jeremy to make his own educational decisions with her guidance. Jeremy made the decision to attend a cyber-charter school on his own and was responsible for learning how to navigate the system and succeed in a new educational environment.

Jeremy has received support from his learning support teacher, Mrs. Goslan, in the form of assistance with utilizing available resources, career exploration, and transition assessments. For students to be successful in participating in their IEP meetings and transition planning activities they must have knowledge about the goals and objectives included in the plan and the skills that they possess (Pawley & Tennant, 2008). Mrs. Goslan noted that Jeremy is very aware of his own strengths and weaknesses and areas of need, so she has acted as a mediator to offer resources in deficit areas.

Although Jeremy requires support in social and emotional development, he possesses strong organization, study skills, and time management skills that are essential in college (Ciccantelli, 2011). Jeremy and his mom and learning support teachers feel that a mentoring

program in college would be essential to his success in a new educational environment. Ackles, Fields, and Skinner (2013) recommend early arrival programs for students with Autism because it allows them to prepare for challenges they may face in both social and educational collegiate environments.

Ms. Moreli, Adam's mother, is a strong influence on his ability to show self-determination and maintain academic excellence. Although Adam has excellent grades, Ms. Moreli is continuing to encourage Adam's study skills and habits in both his high school and college courses. However, Adam has taken a step towards self-advocacy in communicating with teachers and professors about accommodations and reaching out to the disability services department at his college. Students with disabilities in college settings need to be able to self-advocate and disclose disability to receive services (Gil, 2007). Adam does both of these recommendations, but still would prefer not to self-identify.

In terms of school support while in high school, Adam's main area of need has been counseling services. Although was recently discharged from receiving district counseling services, he still receives counseling outside of the school environment. Adam's learning support teacher and mom were in agreement that counseling services would be something that Adam would benefit from as he entered college as a full-time student. A common occurrence in secondary education is to overemphasize emotional and behavioral support and to neglect academic support (Mattison and Blader, 2013). While Adam does not receive extensive academic supports at this time, prior to this year his secondary school was placing equal emphasis on both areas. It was not until Adam was ready to lessen these supports that they were phased out or eliminated.

Adam feels that a strong area of needed support for him continues to be writing. He has worked with his learning support teacher and used his written expression accommodations in order to develop his pre-writing strategies and editing and revision techniques. Using his available resources on campus, as opposed to going to his mom, is something that Adam will need to develop to gain independence. Copper and Pruitt (2005) suggest that an important part of students with EBD planning for college is locating resources and putting them to use.

Families have very important insights into students' academic, social, and emotional lives that can help the learning support teacher create an appropriate individualized education plan and transition plan for the student (Childre & Chambers, 2005). Tammy's mom, Ms. Gainer, has helped Tammy to build her self-esteem and establish both social and academic confidence. Ms. Gainer has been a strong influence on Tammy's decision to attend college and has supported her throughout the process. In most areas of academic life, Tammy is college ready. She mentioned that she feels she may need support with writing, more advanced levels of math, and sometimes history. Similar to Adam and Jeremy, Tammy felt that having a peer mentor would be beneficial as she transitions to college. Peer mentoring may be beneficial in understanding the demands of college related to self-discipline and self-regulation (Milsom & Dietz, 2009). Tammy noted that procrastination tends to be an area in need of improvement. Lastly, Tammy will likely need to develop ways to understand difficult material that is not presented in a kinesthetic or visual way (Kykowicz, Goss, & College, 2012; Uretsky & Andrews, 2013).

Discussion

In this section, findings are explored in more depth with particular attention to the following interpretations: the relationship between family involvement and academic success, the role of school support in development of self-determination skills, and peer mentoring to

support transition to college. Each of the students in this study were supported by parents and learning support teachers throughout high school and reported that continued academic, emotional, or social support would be needed as they transitioned to college campuses and student life.

Relationship Between Family Involvement and Academic Success

Research question four focused on how families and learning support staff impact students' success. The findings of this study show that each student had familial support, which directly impacted their performances in school and their decision to go to college. Two of the parents interviewed described their professional roles. One parent was a business owner running her own tutoring business and one parent was previously a social worker currently working in financial planning services. Both parents possessed a set of skills that allowed them to assist their students with academics and college planning. Parents who are familiar with the special education process, laws affecting special education, and person-centered planning have a stronger voice throughout the IEP planning process and a larger impact on students' success (Whitbread, Bruder, Fleming, & Park, 2007).

Staples and Diliberto (2010) offer six components to parental involvement, which include parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. For example, Ms. Natale, Jeremy's mom, was previously a social worker. Through that career she was able to learn about special education and the intricacies involved in IEP development and planning. She also felt that her skills assisted her in helping Jeremy become a better self-advocate. Ms. Moreli, Adam's mom, developed a tutoring business in the rural area in which they live. She serves as a tutor for several students who also attend Hope Cyber-Charter School. Adam attends the center, so she has been directly involved in his

schooling on a daily basis. Being an active participant in students' lives may significantly improve their performance in school. Additionally, all parents in this study had conversations with their students about post-secondary education and the types of options this would afford them. Providing students with opportunities to "dream" and think about post-secondary options increase their ability to envision the future and plan accordingly (Field & Hoffman, 1994).

The Role of School Support in Development of Self-Determination Skills

Herbery, Lorenz, & Trusty (2010) identified several categories of exploration important for special education teachers to implement. These included career interests, aptitude and achievement, and career decision-making skills. All three learning support teachers included in this study participated in this same type of development with students to varying degrees. Jeremy's learning support teacher assisted him most in providing him with additional transition resources as he began to struggle with existing social and emotional issues. Adam's learning support teacher was of most assistance to him in recommending counseling services. Tammy's learning support teacher offered her opportunities to expand her knowledge of financial planning for college, such as filing the FAFSA and researching grants and scholarships. Additionally, each learning support teacher discussed utilizing a virtual transition-planning program in which students are able to explore careers, search and apply for jobs, and research and apply for college. Each teacher was also using the results of assessments taken in the program to assist in development of the transition plans for students and to guide students toward their goals.

Students most often mentioned teachers contacting them on a bi-weekly basis to help them stay on track, assist with schoolwork, and discuss their future plans. According to Field and Hoffman (2002) teachers must model the steps to self-determination for students. Field and Hoffman (2002) also developed ten cornerstones central to the Steps of Self-Determination

curriculum, which are "establishing teachers as co-learners, modeling instructional strategies, cooperative and experiential learning, using inclusive environments, accessing support from family and friends emphasizing listening interdisciplinary teaching, using humor, and capitalizing on teachable moments" (p. 91). Perhaps one of the most important roles for a learning support teacher is helping students with disabilities maximize their strengths, develop their weaknesses, and access their resources. Interestingly, all of the learning support teachers in this study work with students in fully inclusive environments and offer students many opportunities discuss and develop their post-graduate transition plans. This is an area of discussion that needs further development in all types of learning environments and should be the focal point of IEP teams for students in grades 9-12 (Herbert, Lorenz, & Trusty, 2010).

Peer Mentoring for Transition to College

According to Ackles, Fields, and Skinner (2013), "mentoring, in its broadest sense, involves encouraging those further advanced to lend advice and support to those with less experience" (p. 205). Some research delineates between mentoring and coaching, explaining that coaches are aware of student strengths and weaknesses and provide individualized support (Hart, Grigal, & Weir, 2010). Students, parents, and learning support teachers throughout this study acknowledged that in order for students to have a successful transition to college they would most likely benefit from a peer mentor. All of the students mentioned that they had a difficult time adjusting to change. Peer mentors can help ease students into challenges in campus life such as student housing and disability services. Students with different disabilities could also receive more specialized peer mentoring services or coaching services depending on their needs. Students diagnosed with Autism and EBD would likely require more support in the social realm, while students with Specific Learning Disability would probably need more academic support

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and tutoring services. It is important for students to research colleges of choice and to find out what types of programs are available to assist with transition. Early arrival programs should also be examined as an option for students to adjust to campus life before the school year begins (Ackles, Fields, & Skinner, 2013).

Implications for Practice

Through the findings and discussion of this study several areas were identified that may help students, families, and teachers to develop a smooth transition plan for students with college plans. These implications for practice include:

- **Providing students with opportunities to complete career and college assessments.** Learning support teachers in this study utilized different types of transition and career assessments, which allowed students to measure and identify unique strengths and weaknesses, areas of interests, and possible career paths. These assessments were used to guide the transition planning process and to help students further explore their options. Students found these opportunities very useful.

- **Assisting students in finding colleges with mentoring and early arrival opportunities.** All of the students in this study mentioned that they would want to find out if their college program offered a peer-mentoring program to help them adjust to student life.

- **Teaching about disability services in higher education.** Two out of three students in this study were unable to identify specific services that they would receive in college, were unaware of the process, and did not identify the office of

disability services as an available resource. This knowledge is something that both parents and special educators can assist with.

- **Providing teachers with professional development opportunities in teaching self-determination.** While teachers were providing students with many of the instructional strategies and steps present in Field and Hoffman's Steps to Self-Determination model, more explicit professional development in this area would benefit both students and teachers. Additionally, it would provide a framework for providing instruction in transition planning.

- **Involving families fully in IEP planning.** Parents in this study all attended student IEP meetings and provided team members of the student plans if their students chose not to participate. Parents also communicated areas in need of improvement. Their knowledge was invaluable in making sure the student transition plans were accurate and reflected student needs.

- **Holding IEP Meetings Via Conference Line and Virtual Classroom.** Families and IEP team members in this study were able to meet on a conference line and in a virtual classroom to conduct the meetings. Increased participation from families and professionals was noted as strength of this model. Also, parents and students participated mote actively in this environment.

- **Suggesting student-led IEP meetings.** Most of the students in this study took active roles in their IEP meetings. Students in 11th and 12th grade are preparing to move into the adult role. Providing them with the opportunity to self-advocate by running an IEP meeting could be an empowering experience.

Recommendations for Future Research

There were several findings from this study that warrant future research. The scope of this study was somewhat limited in generalization due to its focus on the disability categories of Autism, Emotional Disturbance, and Specific Learning Disability. However, thcere were definite variations in the types of secondary and post-secondary support cited by students, parents, and learning support teachers. Future research may benefit in focusing on other disability categories and types of transition experiences available.

Additionally, it may be interesting to conduct research specifically on the educational/inclusive experiences of students with disabilities in cyber-charter schools as well as and special educators roles in this environment. Students, parents, and learning support teachers offered some insight into nuances in special education within a cyber school, but this topic was not explored in depth in this study.

Another important area of research may include the use of peer mentoring to support students with disabilities in college. Many students with disabilities struggle to adjust to life changes and would benefit from a peer to guide them through this process. It would be interesting to study see peer mentoring and coaching from a student perspective.

Summary

Chapter 5 of this study presented a summary and interpretation of the findings. In addition, implications for students, parents, and learning support teachers were discussed, and areas of future research were suggested. This study sought to provide a clearer depiction of the transition planning process for students with disabilities and to show factors contributing to students' decisions to attend college. The findings suggest that student participation throughout the IEP and transition planning process, family encouragement, and strong learning supports are

important factors in student transition planning. Since students with disabilities are attending college at an increased rate, this study has identified areas that will help students, parents, and special educators in preparation and planning. This study has shown the important role that both parents and special educators play in helping students with disabilities develop effective plans for the future.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Capacity to Consent Screening Tool

Researcher: Sasha A Reese

Student Participant Name:_____

This screening tool was developed by Dr. Julie Ann Ligon. She utilized this tool in her

dissertation which was a case study of the community integration experience for adults with

intellectual disabilities. It was designed to ensure that participants in a study understand the study

and how they will be participating. It will be used to ensure that the participants in this study,

who are under age 18 and diagnosed with disabilities, are able to provide voluntary consent

through verbal response and are fully aware of the procedures and purpose of the study.

1. Why were you asked to participate in this study?

2. Can you tell me something about the study?

3. Will real names be used?

4. What are the risks you might face by helping with this study?

5. Where will we meet for interviews?

6. Will you be compensated for talking with me?

7. How long will you work with me?

8. If you do not want to, do you have to participate in this study?

9. If you do not want to answer a question, do you have to?

APPENDIX B

Student Informed Assent Letter

Investigator: Sasha A. Reese
Student Participant Name:_____

Dear_____,

This study is about how young people with disabilities get ready for the transition from high school to college life. You will be asked to share your story because you intend to go to college and you have had an IEP in high school.

You will be asked to answer questions. You will be interviewed for approximately 60 minutes. You will be asked questions about your Individualized Education Plan, transition services, and your life at this time. After the interview session, you may provide your ideas or ask me questions.

You do not have to share your story with me if you do not want to. You are a volunteer in this study, and this means you can decide if you want to share your information. We will discuss what the study is about in Adobe Connect LiveLesson and I will ask you questions to be sure that you understand all of the steps involved in participating.

Your real name will not be used in the interviews or in the study. If you use the names of friends, teachers, and parent/guardian/guardians, those names will be replaced with those names that the researcher will make-up. Made-up names will also be used for your high school and the community. This study may help teachers learn about transition services.

Although I am a teacher with Commonwealth Connections Academy, this research is not related to my employment. Rather, I am conducting this research as part of my doctoral training at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Flurie, CEO of Commonwealth Connections Academy, has approved this study.

It is unlikely that you will experience any discomfort while participating in this study. If you should choose to withdraw at anytime any data collected will be destroyed. Your withdrawal from the study will not negatively impact your relationship with Commonwealth Connections Academy or Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please respond by replying to this email. The researcher will follow up with you to confirm participation and answer any questions you may have. Thank you for your assistance.

Subject's Responsibilities

I freely agree to help with this study. I have the following responsibilities:

- To participate in one 60 minute interview
- To review the interview data for accuracy

Subject's Permission

I have read the participation letter and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent. :

_____   _____

Student Signature   **Date**

As the parent/guardian of_____**I hereby give my permission for him/her to participate in the research study.**

_____   _____

Parent/Guardian Signature   **Date**

_____   _____

Researcher Signature   **Date**

If you have questions about this study, please contact:

You may opt out at anytime by contacting Sasha Reese via telephone or email and indicating that they would like to discontinue participation.

Research Student: Faculty Sponsor:
Sasha A. Reese, Investigator   Dr. Jennifer Rotigel
Doctoral Candidate, Curriculum and Instruction Professor
Dept. of Professional Studies   Dept. of Professional Studies
Phone: (412) 996-1891   Davis Hall 111
Email: kbfs@iup.edu   Indiana, PA 15705
                                               Phone: (724) 357-2400

The project has been approved by the Indiana University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-357-7730)

APPENDIX C

Parent/Guardian Informed Assent Letter

Investigator: Sasha A. Reese
Student Participant Name:_____

Dear Parent or Guardian,

You are invited to participate in a study which will describe the experiences of your child as a student who receives special education services and transition services. The purpose of this study is to examine and describe factors which contribute to students' with disabilities choosing to attend college.

Through this project, you will help the researcher learn more about certain aspects of the IEP process and how it might benefit or hinder students with disabilities in their transition to college classrooms. This study will examine factors contributing to students' success and the students', parent/guardians, and learning support teachers' perceptions of the IEP process and transition services. The information provided will assist educators and other professionals in understanding the transition process in special education.

As a parent or guardian of a student with a disability, you are asked to review the consent form with your child to ensure understanding and determine potential participation in the study. All participants must provide informed consent. To meet this requirement, you will be asked and your child will be asked a set of screening questions related to information provided to you about the study. With your permission, the researcher will seek informed consent from your child if he/she demonstrates understanding of the study and its requirements for participation. Permission will also be asked to review your child's IEP.

Each student and parent/guardian participant will complete one 60 minute interview. The interview will discuss personal experiences with the IEP process, transition services, and daily and community living. In addition to interview questions, you may be asked to clarify or supplement the information provided by the student participant following his/her interview session.

Each interview will be conducted via Adobe LiveLesson and will require that you use the audio and video equipment provided by the researcher and the school to participate. If you do not have a webcam and headset, the researcher will provide these items to you. Participation is voluntary and you or the student may opt out at anytime. All sessions will be recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy by each participant. Pseudonyms will be used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Although I am a teacher with Commonwealth Connections Academy, this research is not related to my employment. Rather, I am conducting this research as part of my doctoral training at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Flurie, CEO of Commonwealth Connections Academy, has approved this study.

It is unlikely that you will experience any discomfort while participating in this study. If you should choose to withdraw at anytime any data collected will be destroyed. Your withdrawal from the study will not negatively impact your relationship with Commonwealth Connections Academy or Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please respond by replying to this email. The researcher will follow up with you to confirm participation and answer any questions you may have. Thank you for your assistance.

I freely agree to help with this study. I have the following responsibilities:

- To participate in one 60 minute interview
- To review the interview data for accuracy

Subject's Permission

I have read the participation letter and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent. :

_____   _____

Signature   **Date**

_____   _____

Researcher Signature   **Date**

If you have questions about this study, please contact:

You may opt out at anytime by contacting Sasha Reese via telephone or email and indicating that they would like to discontinue participation.

Research Student:	Faculty Sponsor:
Sasha A. Reese, Investigator	Dr. Jennifer Rotigel
Doctoral Candidate, Curriculum and Instruction	Professor
Dept. of Professional Studies	Dept. of Professional Studies
Phone: (412) 996-1891	Davis Hall 111
Email: kbfs@iup.edu	Indiana, PA 15705
	Phone: (724) 357-2400

The project has been approved by the Indiana University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-357-7730)

APPENDIX D:

Learning Support Teacher Informed Assent

Investigator: Sasha A. Reese
Student Participant Name:_____

Dear Learning Support Teacher,

You are invited to take part in a study which will describe the experiences of a student with a disability on your caseload. The purpose of the study is to investigate factors contributing to students' self-reliance and self-determination in relationship to transitioning to college. The narratives provided will assist educators and other professionals in understanding the transition process in special education.

Each participant in the study will be complete one 60 minute interview. The student, parent/ guardian, and learning support teacher will be interviewed. During the interview sessions participants will be asked questions about the student, the IEP process, transition services, and daily and community life. In addition to interview questions, you will be asked to clarify or supplement the information provided by the student participant following his/her interview session.

Each interview will be conducted via Adobe LiveLesson and will require that you use the audio and video equipment available to participate. Participation is voluntary and you or the student may opt out at anytime. All sessions will be recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy by each participant. Pseudonyms will be used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Although I am a teacher with Commonwealth Connections Academy, this research is not related to my employment. Rather, I am conducting this research as part of my doctoral training at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Flurie, CEO of Commonwealth Connections Academy has approved this study.

It is unlikely that you will experience any discomfort while participating in this study. If you should choose to withdraw at anytime any data collected will be destroyed. Your withdrawal from the study will not negatively impact your relationship with Commonwealth Connections Academy or Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please respond by replying to this email. The researcher will follow up with you to confirm participation and answer any questions you may have. Thank you for your assistance.

Subject's Responsibilities

I freely agree to help with this study. I have the following responsibilities:

- To participate in one 60 minute interview

- To review the interview data for accuracy

Subject's Permission

I have read the participation letter and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent. :

_____   _____

Signature   **Date**

_____   _____

Researcher Signature   **Date**

If you have questions about this study, please contact:

You may opt out at anytime by contacting Sasha Reese via telephone or email and indicating that they would like to discontinue participation.

Research Student: Faculty Sponsor:
Sasha A. Reese, Investigator   Dr. Jennifer Rotigel
Doctoral Candidate, Curriculum and Instruction   Professor
Dept. of Professional Studies   Dept. of Professional Studies
Phone: (412) 996-1891   Davis Hall 111
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                                                      Phone: (724) 357-2400

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APPENDIX E

Student Interview Protocol

1. What are you interested in doing when you graduate high school?

2. What are your strengths?

3. What are your areas of need?

4. Tell me about your IEP.

5. How do you participate in your IEP meetings?

6. How does your learning support teacher support you?

7. Were you involved in developing your transition plan?

8. Who do you feel has been the most influential person in your life?

9. What do you feel helped you decide to go to college?

10. What supports do you receive now and what supports do you think you will need in

college?

APPENDIX F:

Parent Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about _____'s current situation in school, home, and the

   community.

2. What are _____'s areas of strength?

3. What are _____'s areas of need?

4. Tell me about _____'s IEP.

5. How do you participate in _____'s IEP meetings?

6. What are _____'s goals for life outside of school?

7. When_____shared his or her future goals or dreams in the IEP meeting, how

   was this information incorporated into the program?

8. What type of academic support has _____received in high school?

9. What type of supports do you think _____will need to transition to college?

APPENDIX G:

Learning Support Teacher Interview Protocol

1. Describe your interaction with the student and family.

2. How would you describe the student academically, socially, and emotionally?

3. What are the students' strengths and weaknesses?

4. Explain the transition planning process at this school.

5. How do you view your role in _____transition planning process?

6. What type of academic support has_____received?

7. What type of support will be needed for _____to transition to college?

8. Describe your participation in the creation of the students' IEP.

9. In your opinion, how has _____'s participation in the IEP process and transition services prepared him/her for life after high school?

Appendix H:

Letter to the Chief Executive Officer

Dear Dr.xxxxxx,

I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Curriculum and Instruction program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Jennifer Rotigel is my dissertation chair. Although I am an employee of xxxxxxx, this research is not related to my employment. Rather, I am conducting this research as part of my doctoral training at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I am currently working on completing my dissertation and need assistance with this process. The purpose of my study is to identify the perceptions of students with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, and Specific Learning Disability towards the transition planning process in preparing them for transition to 2 and 4 year traditional or blended colleges. This study seeks to explore transition services provided in a cyber-charter school environment.

In order to complete my study, I will need access to the selected student's email addresses and student participants' parent/guardian/guardians and learning support teachers email addresses. I am requesting permission to use Adobe Connect LiveLesson to conduct interviews with the students, parent/guardian, and teachers included in the study. I am requesting permission to collect data from teachers regarding their students. Lastly, I am requesting permission to interview students, parent/guardian, and teachers.

All student participants will be required to complete a capacity to consent screening and permission from their parent/guardian will be required for participation. Participation is voluntary. To ensure confidentiality the names of schools, places within the community, and all people will be replaced with pseudonyms. No identifying information will be released.

I would like to complete my study between December 2014 and December 2015. I am requesting your written permission to conduct my study within your school setting. I will gladly share the results of the study upon completion. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Sasha Reese
Doctoral Candidate, Curriculum and Instruction
Department of Professional Studies
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

APPENDIX I:

Permission Letter from CEO

Dear Sasha,

I acknowledge that your research is a multiple case study with a subgroup of students diagnosed with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, and Specific Learning Disability and that you will be focusing on three specific student cases.

I grant permission for you to utilize the selected students, parents, and learning support teachers email addresses to contact potential participants. Adobe Connect LiveLesson may be used to conduct interviews with the student, parent, and teacher participants. You have permission to interview student, parent, and teacher participants and to discuss student information with the teachers in your study.

Sincerely,

Dr. xxxxxx

APPENDIX J:

Letter to the Director of Special Education

Dear Mrs. xxxxxx,
I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Curriculum and Instruction program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Jennifer Rotigel is my dissertation chair. Although I am an employee of xxxxxxx, this research is not related to my employment. Rather, I am conducting this research as part of my doctoral training at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I am currently working on completing my dissertation and need assistance with this process. The purpose of my study is to identify the perceptions of students with Autism, Emotional Disturbance, and Specific Learning Disability towards the transition planning process in preparing them for transition to 2 and 4 year traditional or blended colleges. This study seeks to explore transition services provided in a cyber-charter school environment.

In order to complete my study, I need access to the students' email addresses and student participants' parent/guardian/guardians and learning support teachers email addresses. I am requesting permission to use Adobe Connect LiveLesson to conduct interviews with the students, parent/guardian, and teachers included in the study. I am requesting permission to collect data from teachers regarding their students. Lastly, I am requesting permission to interview students, parent/guardian, and teachers.

All student participants will be required to complete a capacity to consent screening and permission from their parent/guardian will be required for participation. Participation is voluntary. To ensure confidentiality the names of schools, places within the community, and all people will be replaced with pseudonyms. No identifying information will be released.

I would like to complete my study between December 2014 and December 2015. I am requesting your written permission to conduct my study within your school setting. I will gladly share the results of the study upon completion. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Sasha Reese
Doctoral Candidate, Curriculum and Instruction
Department of Professional Studies
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

APPENDIX K:

Permission Letter from Director of Special Education

Dear Sasha,

I grant permission for you to access student's individualized education plans for the purposes of your study. I also grant permission for you to utilize student, parent, and learning support teachers email addresses to contact potential participants. Adobe Connect LiveLesson may be used to conduct interviews with the students, parents, and teachers. You have permission to interview student, parents, and teachers, and to discuss the student information with the teachers in your study.

Sincerely,

Mrs. xxxxxx