

The Perspectives of Transition Planning and Preparedness on Postsecondary Success
Among Students with Disabilities

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to examine the transition strategies and practices that most commonly led to successful postsecondary transitions for students with disabilities within a school district in East Tennessee. The study sought to identify the support services, skills, and limitations that most influenced the postsecondary success of these students. The research was guided by three research aims and data were collected using focus group interviews to determine the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the postsecondary transition planning process. The data collected revealed three key areas of focus to help students with disabilities succeed. They were (1) the promotion and fostering of self-efficacy, (2) the setting of appropriate transitional goals, and (3) connections with outside agencies. Students who were identified as successful postsecondary transitioners exhibited qualities in each of these areas. One major conclusion of the research was that students and their families should be introduced to agencies that help prepare them for both the social construct of life after high school and provide a more intricate system of support to aid in the transition to the postsecondary world. With attention to the goals and abilities of each student with disabilities, a framework of Person-Centered Planning can help establish a lens through which the postsecondary transition planning process completed by IEP teams can focus and succeed.

Keywords: students with disabilities, postsecondary transition planning, postsecondary success

Dedication

To my amazing wife, Heather, you are my constant encouragement in this life. Your love inspires me to become a better man, a man deserving of the honor of walking this life by your side. You are my very best friend, and I could not have finished the last two years without your belief in me. You are incredible, and whatever I am, it is because you believed in me first. I cannot begin to comprehend the sacrifices that you have made for our family as I traveled down this pathway. I can only say, "Thank you, and I love you more!"

To my kids, Addyson, Hudson, and Emmerson, being your father is my greatest adventure! I hope that one day, you realize what joy you bring to each and every moment of my life. Watching as you grow and become the remarkable individuals that God created you to be often leaves me breathless. Through this process, I hope that you have learned the value of big goals, bigger dreams, and the hard work that it takes to achieve them. But, more than that, I hope that you always remember to trust the plan that God has for you. You can accomplish more than you will ever believe if you just have faith in Him. When in doubt, love God, and love His people.

To my parents, Jeff and Pam. For longer than I can remember, you have always been my biggest fans! Without your example and foundation, I would not be where I am today. Wherever this life has led, I never had to wonder where you were...you were always right behind me. The only thing better than having the two of you for parents is the joy my kids get from having you for grandparents.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Tennessee Department of Education (2022) lists the beliefs that drive its work on its Special Education website. Central to this list is the statement that “special education is not a place. It is the most intensive intervention along the continuum of service defined by individual need, services, and placement.” Additionally, TDOE states that “all students are general education students first. Every student can learn, demonstrate growth, ...and all students can achieve postsecondary success” (Tennessee Department of Education [TDOE], 2022a). This final statement about the capacity for postsecondary prosperity among all students levied by TDOE, while simple in style and intent, carries a demonstrative weight when applying its promise to those students with disabilities served through special education departments across the state.

Madaus et al. (2017) state that the requirements set forth by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have required local education agencies to include transition planning for postsecondary education since 1990. Grounded in these IDEA requirements, TDOE’s beliefs set forth the expectation that each of the “more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities” in Tennessee should exit high school with a clear pathway to postsecondary success (2022). The guiding document published by TDOE (2018), *The Special Education Framework*, credits itself as a guidance document that “provides important information for IEP teams on developing IEPs that will set up students for success in their K–12 academic careers and open pathways for postsecondary and career options” (p. 7). Furthermore, it is

stated explicitly in IDEA 2004 that transition planning requires not a minimum of basic work skills but also the consideration of postsecondary education, vocational education, and continuing and adult education as future options for students with disabilities (Madaus et al., 2017).

Statement of the Problem

With the amount of emphasis placed on the postsecondary success of students with disabilities in landmark documents like those referenced above, the expectation for the success of these students should never fall far below the percentage of students with disabilities that graduate high school. Historically, however, this has yet to be true. Nationally, the percentage of students with disabilities accessing postsecondary education as recently as the mid-1990s was only 14%. Madaus et al. (2017) report that this figure rose drastically to over 60% over the following decade. However, they further state that “despite this progress, much work remains to be done to help students with disabilities not only to access but more importantly, to be prepared for the various demand of postsecondary education...” because “research has long highlighted that students with disabilities...are underprepared...” (p. 691).

Locally, the TDOE State Report Card for the cohort of the class of 2020 reports that only 73.1% of students with disabilities graduated high school (TDOE, 2022b). This data implies that 26.9% of students with disabilities missed the mark of postsecondary readiness before becoming eligible to be a member of that demographic. Further data disaggregation maintains the downward trend in examining the results beyond high school graduation. As a requirement of IDEA, Tennessee must annually report on its

performance related to federal and state requirements for students with disabilities in the Part B Annual Performance Report (APR). The APR includes information regarding graduation rate, dropout rate, state assessment, discipline, parent input, and high school transition. For the data represented in this final category of information, TDOE (2022a) reports about the percent of former students who are no longer in secondary school, had IEPs in effect at the time they left school, and were:

- (a) Enrolled in higher education within one year of leaving high school, (b) enrolled in higher education or competitively employed within one year of leaving high school, or (c) enrolled in higher education or some other postsecondary education or training program; or competitively employed or in some other employment within one year of leaving high school.

When analyzing this data from the 2015 cohort (the last year for which statewide information is currently available), only 22.1% of those students with disabilities no longer attending high school were presently enrolled in higher education. While an additional 36.12% were competitively employed, over 30% of the cohort reported “not engaged” in any higher education, competitive employment, or training program (TDOE, 2015).

While Madaus et al. (2017) acknowledge the evidence of significant progress in the past few decades regarding the desire not only for a postsecondary education among disabled students but an actual increase in enrollment, they state that “more work needs to be accomplished to help...more students with disabilities remain in and successfully complete postsecondary education” (p. 700). The core belief that every

student can be successful is not a reality in the present landscape, especially among the demographic of students with disabilities. While the data referenced above are discouraging when considered in a vacuum, there are encouraging developments in high school transition services, postsecondary programming, and work-based learning opportunities for eligible students under the 14 categories of disabilities recognized by TDOE.

The continued discussion and design of these programs are imperative to the success not only of public education but to the future of the students it serves. As Shaw and Dukes (2013) state, the gradual broadening of transition planning to include postsecondary education has not yet closed the chasm left by the countless years in which the central focus of transition planning was exclusively on the future employment of students with disabilities.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative case study examined the role of high school special education programs on postsecondary student success. Specific objectives were to discover commonalities in student services among various high school graduates identified as students with disabilities, to compare the academic pathways of those graduates by examining their curricular tracks, and to identify the types of supports and services that led students with disabilities to continued success in their postsecondary careers. In so doing, the theoretical framework of Person-Centered Planning was examined. This approach to the transition process explicitly places the student with a disability at the heart of the planning process. This allows them to set their own goals and identify their needed systems of support and accommodations. The emphasis, then, moves from

predetermined pathways to the importance of collaboration among the individual, their family, and their support team.

Research Aims

Aim 1: Explore the support services offered in high school that promote postsecondary success.

Aim 2: Identify the skills needed to contribute to postsecondary success.

Aim 3: Examine limitations that prevent students with disabilities from experiencing postsecondary success.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are crucial to understanding the research. For the purpose of this study, the definition of the terms is below:

- 1) *Student with disabilities* - a student identified with either a federally or state-defined educational disability who is provided with the services of the special education department of a school under an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).
- 2) *Special education teacher* - a licensed teacher specifically trained to provide services, modify the content or grade-level standards, and adapt that content for students with disabilities.
- 3) *Inclusive environment* - a general education classroom where students with documented disabilities and their typically abled peers learn and interact simultaneously.

- 4) General education diploma - the diploma bestowed upon a student who meets the documented requirements for high school graduation set forth by the state department of education.
- 5) Postsecondary success - meeting one of the following criteria within one year of leaving high school: (a) enrolled in higher education, (b) enrolled in higher education or competitively employed, or (c) enrolled in higher education or some other postsecondary education or training program, competitively employed, or in some other employment.
- 6) Higher education - any two-year or four-year school or training program with completion of at least one semester.
- 7) Competitively employed - students who held employment for a minimum of 90 days and worked over 20 hours per week while earning at least minimum wage.
- 8) Post-secondary education or training - programs that include vocational or technical school, a college program for intellectual or developmental disabilities, vocational rehabilitation, or a GED program.
- 9) Other employment - employment in a job paying below the minimum wage for at least 90 days.
- 10) Not engaged - lack of enrollment in educational or training programs and not presently employed.

Limitations of the Study

The qualitative nature of this study created some limitations. First, there was a small number of participants. This is attributed to the purposeful sampling of

participants. Further limiting the scope of perspectives was that not all invited participants accepted the invitation. These, along with the aforementioned purposeful sampling being conducted within a single school district, mean that findings may not be generalizable to some other districts' teachers, students, and special education programs.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Disability Categories and Eligibility in Tennessee

The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) established revised disability definitions and standards in the summer of 2017 (“Special Education Evaluation,” n.d.). Through that process, 16 distinct eligibility categories were defined. On its website, TDOE provides links to the definitions of each category, evaluation procedures for determining eligibility, and mandatory participants that must be consulted and participate as part of the team determining eligibility. Additionally, each eligibility category has links with guidance for appropriate documentation, key considerations, tips for avoiding procedural violations, assessment templates, and rating scales as appropriate for each category (“Special Education Evaluation,” n.d.). The categories established by TDOE in alphabetical order are as follows: Autism, Deaf-Blindness, Deafness, Developmental Delay, Emotional Disturbance, Functional Delay, Hearing Impairment, Intellectual Disability, Intellectually Gifted, Multiple Disabilities, Orthopedic Impairment, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disabilities, Speech or Language Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Visual Impairment (“Special Education Evaluation,” n.d.).

The Timeline of Transition Services

Including students with disabilities in public education was virtually non-existent until the last half-century. Dudley-Marling and Bridget (2014) state that “in the early 1970s, over one million children with disabilities in the US were completely excluded from public education, and another 3.5 million were not receiving appropriate services”

(p. 15). This changed with the passage and implementation of Public Law 94-142, which mandated a free and appropriate education (FAPE) in their least restrictive environment (LRE). Because of PL 94-142, most students with disabilities today spend at least a portion of their school day receiving an education alongside their regularly abled peers (Dudley-Marling & Bridget, 2014). Grounded in the guarantees of the 14th Amendment, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) followed PL 94-142 in 1990. Specifically, Part B of IDEA ordered the implementation of the procedures and processes that protect the educational rights of students with disabilities (Bleak & Abernathy, 2022).

The term “transition,” in its current application regarding students with disabilities gaining the skills needed for adult life, was first introduced nearly 40 years ago by the US Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services in 1983 as a policy paper (Johnson & Rusch, 1993). The concept later took root and blossomed as postsecondary transition planning for such students was added to the IDEA. These provisions were updated with amendments in both 1997 and again with the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 (Prince et al., 2013). The foundation for transition services occurred in the half-century prior through areas like work-study, career education, and employment training.

However, Johnson and Rusch (1993) posit that much of the prior work did not appropriately address the postsecondary needs of disabled individuals. It was not until the suggestion in 1983 that transition planning should function as a bridge crossing the chasm between the structure and safety of the school and the opportunities and risks that come with the step into adult life (Johnson & Rusch, 1993). These original thoughts on transition focused on a narrow set of “bridges” of transition between school and employment, a continuum between school and work, and the nonvocational aspects

between school and adult life (i.e., residential living, social networking, and interpersonal skills). While these skills are vital to independent adult life, they do little to increase the academic readiness of disabled students, leaving them ill-prepared for the demands of postsecondary academia (Madaus et al., 2017).

Through time and much trial and error, transition services are no longer a bridge, per se, but a “road map that facilitates the movement from high school to postsecondary. Through the formation of a high-quality transition plan, IEP teams develop actionable steps to make the student’s postsecondary goals attainable” (TDOE, 2018). Indeed, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), by the 2015-2016 school year, 19% of male and 20% of female postsecondary students surveyed reported a disability. These figures represent a more than sixfold increase in the reported percentage from 1978.

Today, organizations such as the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT), co-founded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and the US Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), exist to help with the provision of tools, information and supports to those who deliver services and instruction to secondary students with disabilities. NTACT defines transition planning as a process that “begins with the end in mind” and “is lifelong” (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition [NTACT], n.d.).

Locally, Transition Tennessee, the state’s online platform for training and resources on transition services, considers preparing a student for life after high school as a “blueprint” (TDOE, 2015). These visual representations of road maps and

blueprints of transitional services and skills demonstrate the complexity of the preparation for postsecondary success. Upon closer examination, Transition Tennessee offers three different types of blueprints. First, assistance is given to educators to design high-quality transition instruction, experiences, and partnerships in middle and high schools. Support for students and parents is present in the form of preparation steps for the workplace or further educational opportunities after graduation. Finally, transition service providers link to educational materials for delivering effective Pre-Employment Transition Services (pre-ETS) in collaboration with local schools and communities (Transition Tennessee, 2022). This database of services and training is maintained and updated by a continuing partnership among TDOE, the Tennessee Department of Human Services, Vanderbilt University, and the Vanderbilt Kennedy UCEDD to improve the transitional outcomes “for youth and young adults with disabilities by sharing research-based practices and policies.” It is accessible to all users (TransitionTN, 2022).

The shift from recommendation to requirement and from “bridge” to “blueprint” provides strong visual and verbal recognition of the vital role that effective transition services hold in unlocking the potential for students with disabilities in Tennessee to prosper in their postsecondary pursuits. “The economic, educational, and community adjustment difficulties of youth” with disabilities have both “historical antecedents” and ever-expanding future ramifications (Rusch & Phelps, 1987). If we are to make up the much-needed ground among the special education demographic, foundational supports and training like those provided by Transition Tennessee must continue to gain a

foothold in the pedagogy and professional development of special education teachers and school administrators.

Leveraging Capital and Strengths to Strengthen Transition Pathways

Trainor (2008) rekindles the earlier conversations about the bulk of the mountain still left to climb on the trek to postsecondary success for all students by saying that “despite evidence that adolescents and young adults with disabilities are making progress toward desirable high school outcomes such as graduation, employment, and postsecondary education enrollment, examination of outcomes and youths’ demographic characteristics reveals persistent inequity” (pgs. 148-149). This inequity, according to Trainor, exists across all disability categories and includes variables such as race, socioeconomic standing, immigrant status, and non-native English-speaking families, to name a few. She further extrapolates that “youth with high-incidence disabilities are especially vulnerable to dropping out; 27% of youth with learning disabilities (LDs) left high school without a diploma or certificate of completion, as did 53% of youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBDs)” (Trainor, 2008). It is not hard to see the correlation between these statistics and enrollment in higher education. Newman et al. (2019) explain that postsecondary students with LD comprise the largest concentration of disabled students but exhibit a significantly lower college completion rate than their nondisabled peers. They state the importance of transition planning that establishes academic support for LD students in college because it results in 77% of students who received supports either continued or completed their respective postsecondary programs. For comparison, only 50% of those without academic support showed the same resiliency.

Trainor (2008) further explains the disparity as it also extends beyond postsecondary education into the workplace:

Transition to employment differs among youth based on analysis of disability categories, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and immigration/English language proficiency. According to the second National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS 2) data, 74.3% of European American young adults with disabilities obtained paid employment during the first two years following high school. This rate was 61.7% for African Americans and Latinos 65.4%. 90% of European American youth with disabilities earned more than minimum wage (the only statistically significant gain for a group in over a decade), compared to 77.4% of African Americans and 68.6% of Latinos. (p. 149)

To offset these manifested disparities, the educational institution must use financial capital and dip into the wealth of social and emotional capital available to help disabled students climb into postsecondary success. Social capital can be defined as both tangible and symbolic and is derived from the ability of a student to make connections within society via social networking. The social experiences gained through networking provide a wealth that contributes to the individual's status and power while still establishing the foundational skills necessary to advance (Trainor, 2008).

This social and emotional capital students build through networking and experience with the postsecondary world before being "turned loose" is vital to foster and grow in the formative years of transitional skills and services. Backed by the results of Miller-Warren's study (2016), many parents "perceived their child's IEP secondary

transition planning process as inadequate in preparing graduates for postsecondary success,” especially in hindsight after their children had already left the high school setting (p. 31). Carter et al. (2008) suggest that compared to the basic skills of independent living and decision-making, the social capital skills required to self-direct these efforts are equally important. This self-advocacy, alignment of activities to personal goals, and the ability to make informed choices for themselves will ultimately allow the students with disabilities to prosper and develop self-determination after leaving the security of the high school realm. They say that “in addition to being associated with improved quality of life, self-determination also may be a key factor influencing the extent to which youth attain important post-school outcomes” (p. 56).

The Role of the School

When considering how to combine the knowledge of what is needed, the student's social capital, the desires of the parent, and the availability of resources, the local school has a daunting task. The best way to begin down the road to successful transition plans lies in the form of transition assessments. According to Mazzotti et al. (2009), “transition assessment is the ongoing process of collecting data on the student's needs, preferences, and interests as they relate to the demands of current and future working, educational, living, personal, and social environments” (p. 46). The transition assessment aims to assist the student in making informed decisions based on their prior experience and future desires. Mazzotti et al. suggest three direct questions help guide this process: (1) Where is the student presently? (2) Where is the student going? (3) How does the student get there?

Additionally, secondary schools must consider and offer those elements of vocational rehabilitation, such as pre-employment transition services (pre-ETS), to students with disabilities. Carlson (2022) discusses the role of pre-ETS in the affordance of job exploration and training they provide for disabled students as part of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014. The WIOA amended the Rehabilitation Act of 1998 by launching revised workforce initiatives.

Similarly, the school-based teams providing transition planning for students with disabilities should explore the options afforded through work-based learning (WBL). TDOE (2023) defines WBL as a “proactive approach to bridging the gap between high school and high-demand, high-skill careers” (para. 2). TDOE (2023) further explains the premise of WBL in that it allows students to build on their in-school instruction by developing employability skills through apprenticeships, paid work experience, and internships.

The transition planning process that includes all the above elements, and more, should begin in middle school. It should be revisited in detail frequently with the input of the student, family, and teachers. It is ongoing and serves as a map for the decision-making process as the student progresses and gains further independence (Mazzotti et al., 2009). Furthermore, to lead the student with disabilities through a successful transition planning process, these results should directly impact the Person-Centered Planning theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 1. Viewing the results through the lens that keeps the individual at the epicenter of the planning process maintains the integrity of a truly individualized education plan.

Summary

There is no cookie-cutter conclusion to best prepare a student to transition from high school to postsecondary life. The pathway is as different for each student as it is for each end result, whether in higher education, military service, trade school, or competitive employment. Kohler and Field (2003) might summarize it best by stating that “the transition practices literature recognizes that educators, service providers, and families must help students develop their skills and abilities, provide services and supports that enhance and facilitate these abilities, and develop opportunities through which students can apply those abilities.

‘One size fits all’ and ‘check the box’ transition planning strategies do not effectively prepare students with disabilities - who all have unique needs - for successful, fulfilling adult roles” (p. 183). The best practice is the continued attention to establishing transitional services that are flexible enough to meet individual needs yet rigid enough to provide a scaffold of support that assists the students as they build their intellectual and social capital needed to succeed independently. For the school building staff, this means constantly keeping one eye on the future of what is available while the other firmly rests on the malleable student walking through the door daily. It means keeping one ear on the track, listening for the trains of opportunity on the way while focusing the other on the plans and goals of the students who, after all, are at the center of all these discussions.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

Rationale for Study

The mandatory inclusion of transition planning as a part of IEPs for students with disabilities above the age of 14 in Tennessee dates back over 30 years to its inclusion in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. The requirements for the provisions of transition planning were further in both 1997 and 2004 in the adopted updates to IDEA (Prince et al., 2013). The importance of effectively preparing students with disabilities for their postsecondary careers, whether in higher education, trade schools, or the workforce, has been significantly researched and supported (Carter et al., 2008; Johnson & Rusch, 1993; Mazzotti et al., 2009; Rusch & Phelps, 1987). However, minimal research exists to understand what effective planning, curricular, and support services are considered to be most impactful by postsecondary students with disabilities and their families.

This study aimed to examine the experiences of students with disabilities in high school to determine which most frequently led to their ability to transition to postsecondary life effectively. The three research aims discussed in Chapter 1 (exploring support services, identifying skills, and examining limitations) are examined. This chapter outlines the methodology used in the implementation of the study.

Research Design

A qualitative method was chosen because of the highly individualized information desired to answer the research aims. The in-depth opportunity for the researcher to understand scenarios through the lens of those who experienced them is a significant component of a qualitative study. It also has the unique ability to aid the researcher in developing and defining a theory through the study process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In order to fully grasp the complexity of the organic experiences that molded the ability of the participants to experience postsecondary success, a case study method was deemed necessary.

Site Selection

Research for this study was conducted in a northeast Tennessee school district that serves approximately 2,500 students. The high school in this district employs approximately 70 teachers, five of whom are special education teachers. The mean size of its graduating cohorts of seniors is roughly 200, and the district typically has approximately 17% of its students identified for special education services through an IEP. As a public school system receiving federal funding, transition planning for all students with disabilities must commence by age 14 and be revisited annually in the annual IEP meeting.

Participants

After receiving an exemption from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the approval of the school district, eight former students with disabilities who had graduated

from the high school, along with their parents/guardians, were sought to participate in one of four semi-structured focus group interviews (Appendix C). The researcher contacted potential focus group participants directly and provided the invitation to participate and informed consent (Appendix B).

All four focus groups were conducted as semi-structured interviews (Appendix C). The only difference in the focus groups was the level of postsecondary success experienced and the type of diploma earned from the high school.

Researcher's Role

The primary role of the researcher was facilitating the focus group interview. A series of semi-structured interview questions were asked in each focus group (Appendix C) in companion with any follow-up questions deemed necessary for clarity and data saturation. The researcher digitally recorded audio and video responses while taking handwritten notes about responses, emotions, and other participant cues.

All interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. This allowed for a review of both the participants' verbal responses and the emotions expressed during the interviews after the conclusion of each focus group. Focus group participants were invited to review the list of questions immediately prior to the interviews.

Data Collection Methods

For this study, data were collected through four focus group interviews. The participants were invited to bring prepared summaries of their high school and postsecondary experiences to provide background information and establish comfort at

the beginning of the interviews. These summaries were not examined or collected by the researcher. Participants were informed that should the need arise, they may be contacted for clarification.

Strategies for Data Management

The researcher recorded all focus group interviews and transcribed them using software by Sonix. The transcription software was independent and had no affiliation with the participating school district. Files were transmitted digitally through email and file-sharing platforms that were password protected.

The confidentiality of the participants was maintained during the interviews through processes such as providing anonymous codes for personal names (e.g., Student 1, Student 2, Parent 1, Parent 2, etc.). If a participant unintentionally gave identifiable information, it was redacted from the written transcript. Transcripts of the interviews were forwarded to participants for their review and final approval.

All digital recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected device that is only accessible through a password-protected account. After three years, all transcripts, research notes, and files will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

Merriam and Tisdale (2016) further explain that a hypothesis emerges from gathering and analyzing data. Transcripts of the interviews were examined and reviewed for emerging themes and patterns through the Atlas software. Through labeling and color-coding, this software allows the researcher to analyze and code data.

In review, the transcription sections that were labeled and color-coded were categorized by the researcher. These themes were then compared and examined for global themes. Any identified themes were shared with participants to ensure accuracy.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

The researcher made attempts to curb potential bias. However, some participants and the researcher had previously established relationships and knowledge of each other. To offset this, the need for confidentiality was established before each focus group interview. Upon completion of transcription, member checking was used to ensure credibility. The transcription for each interview was emailed to the participants along with a key for identifying their individual contributions. Participants were asked to verify the transcriptions or suggest any errors to the researcher. After transcription and member checking were concluded, the researcher used Atlas software to code the interviews and identify common themes and sub-themes from the focus groups. Furthermore, a secondary coder was used to increase trustworthiness when coding the information gained through the focus group interviews. Additionally, a letter of informed consent (Appendix B) that participants read, reviewed, and signed stated their ability to discontinue participation, decline to answer any question, and emphasized confidentiality measures to be taken during the research. The informed consent was also directly discussed with the participants by the researcher, and any questions were answered prior to the onset of the focus group interviews.

The questions in Appendix C reveal the semi-structured nature of the focus group interviews, which lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes each. When clarification was needed, follow-up questions were asked by the researcher.

Ethical Considerations

Participants received a letter in advance providing the details and purpose of the study and inviting them to participate. Participants could opt not to participate. Each signed a statement of informed consent (Appendix B) stating their ability to remove themselves from the interview at any time without penalty. No compensation was offered to participants.

Safeguards for maintaining confidentiality were put in place to ensure that the researchers prior established relationships with some participants did not jeopardize the study. The informed consent document was thoroughly reviewed with each participant, emphasizing the measures protecting subject confidentiality, and subjects were allowed to ask any questions about the study at that time.

Unintentionally, some participants would reveal identifiable information during the course of the interview. This information was redacted during transcription. The focus group interviews were transcribed using Sonix digital software.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis and Findings

This study investigated the postsecondary transition planning process for postgraduate high school students with disabilities. Many strategies, services, and programs from the school, in partnership with the postsecondary goals of the students and their families, play a vital role in the effective transition from high school to postsecondary life. Identifying common themes and traits among those students who successfully make that transition and their unsuccessful peers can aid schools in the transition planning process. This study included participants who had graduated from high school within the last three years and, when possible, included one family member who was a part of the educational planning process for each student in high school. As discussed in Chapter 3, a qualitative approach was utilized to collect data from those students and their family members sharing their experiences with the transition planning process and their lives in the immediate years following graduation.

The qualitative research performed collected data from focus group interviews. As discussed by Merriam & Tisdell (2016), focus groups are acceptable for use in qualitative research when gleaning the personal recollections and experiences of a group of individuals is the most effective way to gather the data needed to answer research questions or aims. The researcher grouped study participants by the type of high school diploma they earned (general or special education). Of the eight graduate participants, six were recent graduates with general education diplomas. These students fulfilled the mandated requirements for graduation set forth by the state of Tennessee. The remaining two graduates earned a special education diploma,

indicating that they were “students with disabilities who have not met the requirements for a regular high school diploma, received special education services or supports and made satisfactory progress on an individualized education program (IEP), and have satisfactory records of attendance and conduct” (TDOE, 2015). Although the researcher initially scheduled all interviews in a group setting, one particular interview occurred with only one student and the researcher due to a last-minute scheduling conflict.

The participants of the focus groups, who all graduated from the same high school in northeastern Tennessee, shared experiences, ideas, and conversations about their services and transition planning concerning their experiences with life after high school. The interviews took place virtually through Zoom and were 30-60 minutes long. The collective group of participants included five females and three males.

Analysis of Data

Analysis of the interviews occurred through the step-by-step process recommended by Merriam & Tisdell (2016) including “naming the categories, determining the number of categories, and figuring out systems for placing data into categories” (236). Each interview session was recorded via Zoom. The digital software, Sonix, was used for transcription. Transcription occurred twice for each recording to verify accuracy and consistency.

Additionally, member checking took place with the participants for each transcription. Once participants verified the accuracy of the transcriptions, Atlas digital software was utilized for coding and analysis purposes. After individual analysis, the transcriptions were analyzed collectively to determine the consistency of reported themes. Upon initial completion of the coding process, a second coder was used to

increase the reliability of the study. While certain themes were specific to the individual interviews, several were repeated throughout the groups.

Research Aims

Aim 1: Explore the support services offered in high school that promote postsecondary success.

Aim 2: Identify the skills needed to contribute to postsecondary success.

Aim 3: Examine limitations that prevent students with disabilities from experiencing postsecondary success.

Focus Group Interview Questions (Appendix C)

All focus group sessions were completed and recorded on Zoom with accompanying transcriptions completed by digital software by Sonix. After completing the transcriptions with the digital software, the researcher listened to the recording and visually compared it with the transcriptions to confirm accuracy. Upon confirmation of the transcriptions, the coding of the data was completed. The researcher initially sorted the data into multiple categories. The focus group questions were also created to provide specific themes based on the research conducted on this topic (see Chapter 2). A second coder was used as an additional tier of reliability once all data was coded and sorted into themes.

Through the process of coding the data, multiple themes are evident. The most common themes are (1) Self-efficacy, (2) Special education programming, (3) Outside Programming, and (4) Workforce preparation. In the following data analysis, participants are identified as “Student” followed by their participation number (i.e., Student 1,

Student 2, Parent 1, Parent 2, etc.). All proceeding statements from participants are from the transcriptions of the focus groups.

Self-Efficacy

One of the most frequently discussed areas by students and family members when considering the aspects of their time spent preparing for the postsecondary transition and their perceived success, or lack thereof, in life after high school. This theme includes things within the students' power to control and the internal drive they had to achieve their postsecondary goals.

Sub-themes from this area include (1) student independence, (2) time management and (3) response to external barriers. Every participant and family member discussed at least one sub-theme in their responses to the interview questions, and three of the five subgroups discussed at least 60% of them. Table 1 provides a visual representation of the reference to the sub-themes by the participant units. For Table 1, each student and their family member count as one unit.

Table 1*Self-Efficacy as a Theme Among Focus Groups*

	Student Independence	Time Management	Response to External Barriers
Focus Group 1	2/2	2/2	1/2
Focus Group 2	1/1	1/1	1/1
Focus Group 3	2/2	1/2	0/2
Focus Group 4	2/2	0/2	2/2
Focus Group 5	1/1	0/1	0/1

While not all elements of self-efficacy are evident in the discussions of each focus group, there is explicit agreement that the greater a student and family's belief in the capacity of the student to function with a high level of independence and accountability, the more likely they are to succeed in the postsecondary world. The broader sub-theme of student independence is unanimously considered to be of importance. While two focus groups did not indicate that student response to external barriers was important, the participants who did identify external barriers provided considerable elaboration on this topic. All four participants discussing their response to external barriers are either classified as unsuccessful in their transition to postsecondary life or have been able to succeed despite the barrier.

Independence

The discussions about student independence vary but are present in multiple areas of the participants' high school and postsecondary lives. Specifically, those participants who received the majority of their service hours through a support class in which they received help on current coursework and intervention for deficit areas reported a much higher level of success if they utilized that service as a way to gain an independent understanding of the curriculum and take on an independent level of ownership of their education. Student 2 responded that she “tried not to rely on that class...I always wanted to try to do it on my own first.” Considering how much the special education teachers and staff had to motivate her to stay on top of her studies, Student 1 said, “I mean, they were always there to push me...but I don’t think that I relied on them a ton to get my stuff done.” She continued, “I’m also not afraid to ask for a teacher to help me out.” This concept of taking control and representing themselves to their general education teachers was a common theme among those participants who exhibited successful postsecondary transitions. In the words of Student 4, “Yeah. They’d always be on me about being independent (and) talking to my teachers about my problems and things I didn’t understand.”

Student 2 also shared, “I feel like I was allowed to be independent, and they want you to be independent, especially if you’re in those classes to make sure you know how to go on with life.” When asked if all students in the support classes were allowed to function as independently as possible, Student 3 offered, “So, you kind of saw that the kids who needed an extra push or a more strict environment got it more than I did, but they were also there if I needed them.”

Family responses regarding the need for independence were also mentioned. Parent 5 recalled, “I’ll even go back to middle school for her first IEP meeting there. They asked for her specific goals and what courses she was interested in. When she responded and opened up to them, I was amazed because she would never have done that earlier in her life.” The parent continued that even though it was a hard battle at times, “I found it so encouraging that they definitely encourage kids to do that (speak up for themselves). They don’t baby them...they can’t.” One family member of a student who struggled with postsecondary transition reflected, “I think she was handheld too much. She didn’t have to do enough...independence-wise.” Parent 1 echoed that sentiment. “I advocated for that hand-holding because I am a hand holder. I wanted to keep her with me (safe) as much as I possibly could. But, you know, those last years (of high school), I probably should have asked that they back off that.”

For Students 6 and 7, who were students placed in a self-contained classroom for their special education services in high school, the pressure to be independent took on a different context than the ability to self-motivate and speak up. For them, independence meant “learning how to live on your own,” according to Student 7. In agreement, Student 6 added that teachers pushed him to learn about “housing, how to get a job, how to keep a job, and how to pay bills on time. While this type of independence looked different than what was described by the other participants, it played a tremendous role in the postsecondary transition for these two students. When asked about the importance of these skills, Student 6 continued that learning them made him feel ready to “have my own and move to adulthood.”

Those students who reported a high level of independence reported less reliance on others. It was one of the critical characteristics that family members spoke of as a source of pride and a predictor for achievement. For those students who struggled when representing themselves, the need for additional services that would have improved self-efficacy was one of the most popular responses when asked what skill would have been beneficial in postsecondary life.

Time Management

The ability to manage one's time was another consistent theme in the focus group interviews. While it did not receive the number of mentions as independence, it was a key factor among those participants who successfully transitioned. Parent 5, in a discussion of what allowed her student to experience success:

I think your organizational and time management skills that you learned...up through high school helped you. I know that's not necessarily an academic strength, but as far as keeping up with what is due and when, you were always very prepared through all your classes.

Student 2, who did not continue on her college path but is still considered a postsecondary success because of her immediate move to full-time employment, offered, "Time management is a big thing! Learn how to manage your time because that's where I struggled." She said that allowing herself to get behind quickly made her realize that "you're never going to get caught back up with the schoolwork." Student 1, in reflecting on her success in a college environment, credited her high school special

education teachers because “all they want you to do is plan for it and make sure that you know when your upcoming dates are. That’s a big thing in college.”

Response to External Barriers

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the belief that every student with disabilities will move on to experience postsecondary success requires interventions and supports. This was evident in the discussion among the focus groups surrounding the number of external barriers they encountered. Considered a postsecondary success because of her full-time employment, Student 2 openly discussed her desire as a high school student to attend college. However, her family did not have the financial security to help pay for her to attend college. She explained:

I always wanted to go to school, you know, but I just realized that sometimes if you go to school, you really don’t have the money for it. You get put in really bad debt. I just didn’t want to do that to myself...The only thing I could see myself going to college for now is for something like a business class as I move into management at the restaurant where I work.

Student 2 reflected on the barrier created by her family dynamic. Although she was academically successful and driven to be independent, she received very little guidance or support from her family. The fractured relationship with her family that she went on to describe painted the picture of her challenging climb to postsecondary success:

They were more involved with my brother than they ever were with me. So, I didn’t really have that support. It was really, “Pick whatever you want at this point;

I don't care." I mean, they showed up to my IEP meetings, but they didn't really pay attention or care about what was going on with me. That's why I moved out and got adopted at the end of my junior year...by different people who cared.

The participants of Focus Group 4, set apart by their placement in a self-contained classroom and the awarding of a special education diploma, also relayed the barriers they faced. Both students, eligible to remain in high school through age 22 to continue receiving services, decided to leave early. Student 6 stated that his original postsecondary goal was to become a teacher's assistant. However, he stopped the path to earn enough credits for a general education diploma because he needed to do "more responsible stuff...I'm helping take care of my family and paying the bills." Student 7 shared a similar sentiment about needing to "take care of my papa." His grandfather could no longer work to support their family, so Student 7 felt the need to fill that void.

Special Education Programming

Another critical theme discussed among each focus group was the types of special education programming and services that proved most effective in preparation for postsecondary success. Three distinct areas repeatedly were credited with an impact on the transition process. They were (1) support classes, (2) IEP transition goals, and (3) extracurricular and elective opportunities. Each of the eight students and their families discussed at least one of these three sub-themes. Table 2 represents the number of units (one student and family member) to discuss each sub-theme.

Table 2*Special education programming as a theme among focus groups*

	Support Classes	IEP Transition Goals	Extracurricular and Elective Opportunities
Focus Group 1	2/2	2/2	2/2
Focus Group 2	1/1	1/1	0/1
Focus Group 3	2/2	2/2	1/2
Focus Group 4	2/2	2/2	0/2
Focus Group 5	1/1	1/1	0/1

Support Classes

Except for Focus Group 4, all participants shared a common special education service, a support class. These classes, 45- or 80-minutes in length, were dependent on the service hours dictated by the IEP and provided a time for students to receive a variety of supports. The most common supports are tutoring and curriculum support for the student's general education classes and intervention in an area of academic deficit.

Six of the eight participants reported the need for enrollment in a support class each semester of high school. Student 2 discussed a key course planning strategy related to her support classes. She always tried to schedule the academic courses that were most reading-intensive (i.e., English and Social Studies) together and vice versa for the math-intensive courses. She said:

I think it is helpful because then the special education teacher who specialized in reading could provide my support one semester, and the other one could for my math courses the next semester. That was a big help for me.

One topic of conversation focused on keeping the support classes to a minimum when possible so that other elective options are available. Student 1 felt this was the best practice because “If I did end up needing any extra help, I could always stay after school or come in early. My case manager was always willing to help me like that.”

Another discussion surrounding the support classes was their use for maintaining current grades to pass courses and stay on track for graduation versus a more intensive skills remediation. For those like Student 4, who worked a part-time job and participated in extracurricular sports while in high school, “support class was great because it helped me when I would go to my regular classes and then support to get help. Then all my homework would be finished before the rest of my day started.” However, some participants, like Student 3, wished the support classes spent more time on skill recovery than “credit pushing.” She said that because she had time at home for homework:

I spent my time there just goofing around because my grades in class were fine. At the time, it was awesome, but once I started at community college and realized that my math skills weren't good, I wish they would have pushed me harder.

Student 8 reported that she found a happy medium between the two sides. She only needed math help because “I didn't really rely on them for English and science, but I did

heavily with math...I still struggle with math.” Once she received help with math, the rest of the period allowed her to decompress from the rest of the day.

IEP Transition Goals

In the discussion of the yearly IEP meetings for the participants, it was clear that their teachers valued the chance to discuss transition planning during IEP meetings. All eight students reported at least half of their IEP meetings were dedicated to goals and plans for the future. Student 1, who is on track to earn a 4-year degree, remembered that “obviously, we would make sure I was on track to graduate, but I feel like most of my meetings were meant to talk about college and how I was going to get there.” Parent 2 reported that the opposite was true for her daughter because “she already knew that she didn’t want to go to college. They spent most of the time discussing future careers and how best to help her recover her math skills.”

Parent 5, while she reported that she was happy with the planning in the IEP meetings, suggested additional time be spent planning visits and sample experiences for the places the student lists in their transition goals. She said:

It would have been helpful if they could have helped her sample the work from the different places that she was considering after school. Maybe they could give them a practice assignment from the local college to work on without support and services since those go away. Maybe they could arrange a more hands-on meeting with the TCAT (Tennessee Center for Applied Technology). That way, they know what they are getting themselves into.

Extracurricular and Elective Opportunities

Another common sub-theme, especially among participants experiencing postsecondary success, was student involvement in extracurricular and elective activities. One job responsibility of every special education case manager is to help students in their charge map out a four-year plan. It is noteworthy that half of the participants reported that the most impactful activity, class, or support they received in high school came from a non-academic activity. Whether singing in the choir, playing a sport, or becoming a CTE concentrator, the students found value and meaning in these activities.

Students 1 and 2 credited their relationship with the chorus teacher for much of their high school and postsecondary success. “She (the teacher) would spend time talking with us about how you need to be and act in life,” remembered Student 1. “I was always quiet before I began in Chorus,” says Student 2. “But she would always tell me that I can’t just stay in a shell...that I needed to break free. Eventually, I did!” Parent 1 echoed the sentiment of the students. She recalls watching her daughter participate in a chorus performance in Washington, D.C. “They learned so much more than the song they sang on that trip. They learned responsibility, teamwork, and reliability.”

Student 4 credited two different extracurricular activities with his continued growth. As a member of the football team, he learned “that I’ve got to care of my business if I want to achieve my goals.” Similarly, his experiences in the CTE program with Agriculture helped confirm his desire to attend a trade school and begin working as soon as possible.

Outside Programming

Participants also repeatedly pointed out some of the outside agencies and supports that were coordinated by the school as part of the postsecondary planning process. While some of these groups partner or contract directly with the school to provide services in the classroom, others exist outside the realm of high school to assist students transitioning to life after high school. The two sub-themes discussed most frequently by the focus groups were: (1) The Access Program and (2) Postsecondary Supports. The participating units that referenced these sub-themes are represented in Table 3.

Table 3

Special education programming as a theme among focus groups

	The Access Program	Post-Secondary Support
Focus Group 1	2/2	2/2
Focus Group 2	1/1	1/1
Focus Group 3	2/2	2/2
Focus Group 4	2/2	1/2
Focus Group 5	1/1	1/1

The Access Program

The outside agency most frequently referenced by the participants was The Access Program (TAP). This program aims to support students preparing for

postsecondary transition through the instruction and application of soft skills. The curriculum includes time management, learning styles, career interests, communication with employers, critical thinking, problem-solving, self-advocacy, application processes, interviewing skills, and more. While every student spoke about TAP, the implications of its impact varied among participants. Students 4 and 5 both spoke with praise about the program. Student 4 stated, "They would come in and talk to us about working hard, time management, and money skills. I thought it was very helpful." Student 5 agreed and added, "I definitely think it should be done more frequently." Students 6, 7, and 8 also gave the program positive reviews for its impact on their transition skills. Students 6 and 7 spoke of lessons on finding housing, what to do when you get paid, and how to live independently or with a roommate. Student 8 felt that the program was beneficial because of the role-playing activities. She recalled, "Sometimes we would act out job interviews or work scenarios with conflict." While Student 2 did not expand on specifics, she did agree with the assessment of the others regarding the usefulness of TAP.

Students 1 and 2, however, did not necessarily agree that the programming offered by TAP should be required for all students with disabilities. While they acknowledged the curriculum's positive impact on some students, both felt they could have used the time allocated for TAP better. Student 1 stated, "For me, I already knew those things, to be honest. I felt like I could have spent my time doing homework or studying." Student 2 agreed, "It was kind of irritating because they wouldn't let me do my schoolwork. I felt like they were taking time away from the class that is supposed to help me academically to force me to do something I didn't think was very useful."

Postsecondary Supports

A common sub-theme discussed at length by every focus group was the availability of postsecondary support. Three of the students, Students 2, 3, and 8, alluded to the fact that they dealt with some trepidation about postsecondary education because they felt like they would not be able to handle the academic demands without the support they had relied on during high school. Parent 2, after hearing about the benefits of the student services offered to another participant at the local community college, was shocked and exclaimed to her student, “ We didn’t know anything about those options when you were considering going!” Student 2 agreed with her parent and admitted that one of the main reasons she shied away from college was because “I was kind of scared to go without having any help or anything.”

Students 1 and 5, on the other hand, raved about the benefits of the services still available to students with disabilities when they attended community college. Student 1 recalled getting “first dibs on tutoring that was free, help registering for classes, and really answering any questions or concerns that I had. Student 5 said she was appointed a mentor who helped her manage her coursework and arranged some tutoring options. Both families echoed the praise of their students. Parent 1 said, “They helped every step of the way. I mean, it didn’t matter if it was a question about financial aid or about a specific class. We had a really good relationship with them; they helped her a ton! They have been a lifesaver for us!”

The portion of each focus group focusing on student supports at postsecondary institutions led to some of the most involved dialogue as the students and their families

often began conversing with each other and offering advice about the options that several did not know about.

Workforce Development

It was interesting how many participants chose to forgo postsecondary education to become directly involved in the workforce. Whether for the reasons discussed above concerning the external barriers that required it or because the student was simply ready to get a jump on adult life, this theme was prevalent in each focus group. Table 4 shows the number of participant units that discussed each of the three sub-themes of this section. They were (1) Transition School to Work (TSW), (2) early employment, and (3) desire to enter the workforce.

Table 4

Workforce development as a theme among focus groups

	Transition School to Work (TSW)	Early Employment	Desire to Enter the Workforce
Focus Group 1	0/2	1/2	1/2
Focus Group 2	1/1	0/1	1/1
Focus Group 3	1/2	1/2	1/2
Focus Group 4	2/2	2/2	2/2
Focus Group 5	0/1	0/1	1/1

Transition School to Work (TSW)

Similar to TAP, referenced above, TSW is a grant-funded program within the school system which works with students with disabilities to help prepare them for life after high school. The grant service provider works directly with the students and is a go-between for other outside agencies like Vocational Rehabilitation. While not all students used or even remembered the program, others found it useful and spoke of its benefits.

Parent 5 spoke favorably about TSW and how the program helped with “all the overwhelming steps of moving beyond high school. Things like the FAFSA...it was just nice to have someone guide us through that. It was a huge, huge, huge help!” Student 5 agreed, saying, “She was super helpful in getting us in contact with somebody at Northeast State. She helped push us to seek out the resources that were available.”

Student 4 spoke about how the grant service provider helped him set up a campus visit at TCAT so he could fill out his application and financial aid paperwork there instead of at home. He said, “It was really cool that I got to leave school, go there early, and get help at the place where I would be getting all my training for my career. It helped me establish contacts there, and I even met my mentor.”

Early Employment

Three of the four participants who qualified as successful postsecondary transitioners discussed the confidence and abilities they gained from working in high school. One participant, Student 4, even discussed how holding a part-time job from when he was 16 helped him choose his postsecondary pathway. He changed transition

goals from the college to the trade school pathway because “I didn’t really need any more clarity...I had already seen what the real world was kind of like.” He completed his program at TCAT and gained employment as a millwright within a year of high school graduation. Most students who reported pursuing a job while still in high school also spoke in great detail about the benefit of independence. Parent 4 reiterated this point when describing why her daughter wanted to work from an early age: “She loves that she can work for her money and go out to buy her nails and all that.”

Desire to Enter the Workforce

The final sub-theme in this category derived from several discussions about the participants’ willingness to begin a career quickly rather than spending time in a two-year or four-year college postsecondary education program. As discussed above, Students 6 and 7 left their programs early to begin working to support their families. Student 2, who immediately started a full-time job after graduating high school, maintained a consistent work ethic when, “She started working as soon as she turned 16, and she loved just being her own person. That just kind of followed her after school. Instead of going to college, she wanted to start a career.”

Student 4 also spoke about his goal to begin his future soon after high school. When he switched from college to trade school, he intended to find a “quicker way out into adult life with a good career and a good paying position.” Upon completing his program at TCAT, he even missed graduation to start working sooner when his employer gave him that option. He explained, “I was definitely ready for the workforce. I’ve always been a hard worker and been really good at working.”

Chapter 5

Summary of Findings, Discussions, Recommendations, and Conclusions

In the 2020-2021 school year, more than 7.2 million students received special education services under IDEA. Those students accounted for 15 percent of all public school students in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). In the 40 years since the term transition was first introduced by the US Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services in 1983, the evolution of postsecondary expectations for those 7.2 million students with disabilities has radically changed. With the changing expectations, the special education departments of public school systems have continually adapted to meet the needs of the students they serve.

This study investigated the transition planning strategies and best practices that are most common in students with disabilities who successfully transition to postsecondary life. The qualitative study comprised interviews with five focus groups of graduates served through high school special education departments and the family members who most commonly helped guide them through the transition from high school to the world beyond. The groups were assigned based on the type of diploma awarded to the participants. The researcher led the focus groups through a discussion of the services, supports, and planning strategies that guided their transition planning process while in high school, in addition to their experiences in postsecondary life. Three research aims guided the focus of the study:

Aim 1: Explore the support services offered in high school that promote postsecondary success.

Aim 2: Identify the skills needed to contribute to postsecondary success.

Aim 3: Examine limitations that prevent students with disabilities from experiencing postsecondary success.

The focus group interviews were recorded, transcribed, analyzed, and coded through the lens of these aims to find common themes.

Summary of Findings

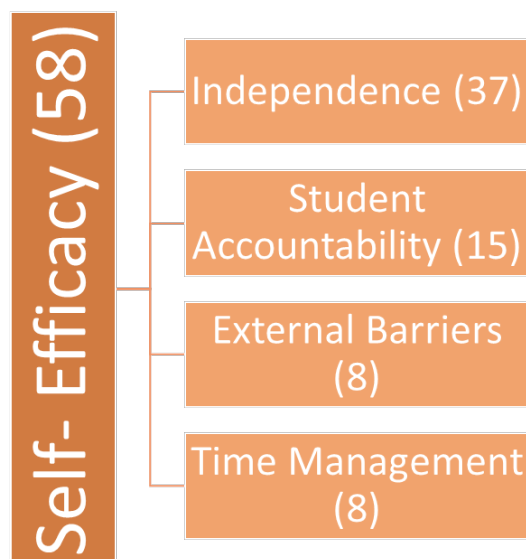
When analyzed, four common themes emerged from the data gathered in the study. Each of these is discussed in the following section. They are the direct result of participant responses. A more detailed outline of the qualitative data and how it was divided into these four themes is found in Chapter 4.

Themes regarding self-efficacy among students with disabilities

The most prevalent theme uncovered in the focus group discussions was tied to the student's ability and desire to gain self-reliance through the process of transition with the desire for independence a key finding. This manifested through varied practices including but not limited to student voice in the scheduling of classes, self-advocacy with teachers, and student expression of goals for postsecondary life. Additionally, students who exhibited a strong grasp of time management and individual accountability were often found to succeed in postsecondary transitions. The final sub-theme in this category corresponded to a student's ability to overcome external barriers that inhibited their path to postsecondary success.

Figure 1

Coded Themes Regarding Self-Efficacy Among Students with Disabilities.



**Note: Parenthetical numbers indicate the number of codes for the theme and each sub-theme.*

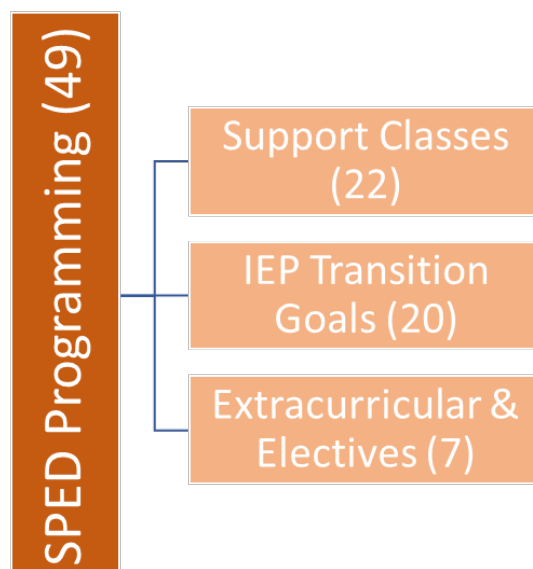
Themes regarding special education programming

The second theme that emerged from the focus group interview analysis was special education programming. The most discussed sub-theme of this category was student services offered through enrollment in support classes. Designed to be multifaceted in their ability to offer services, these courses provided students with opportunities to receive homework assistance, tutoring, intervention for academic deficit areas, and progress monitoring, among others. While student responses to the level of its impact vary, overall, they were positive concerning the ability of these support classes to help students with disabilities maintain their current graduation track while simultaneously preparing for the transition to postsecondary life.

Other elements of special education programming that elicited responses from the participants included transition goals set in annual IEPs and the impact of extracurricular and elective programs on student transitional success. While the goals for transition were documented in the IEPs, participants reported that these goals were discussed and developed not only in IEP meetings but also in conversations with and guidance from teachers, counselors, and parents. Regarding extracurriculars and electives, these looked different for each participant, but their impact was universal. Whether participating on a sports team, singing in the school choir, or participating in clubs like FFA, the mentorship and values instilled in the students through these programs carried over into both academic effort and work ethic.

Figure 2

Coded Themes Regarding Special Education Programming



**Note: Parenthetical numbers indicate the number of codes for the theme and each sub-theme.*

Themes regarding outside programming

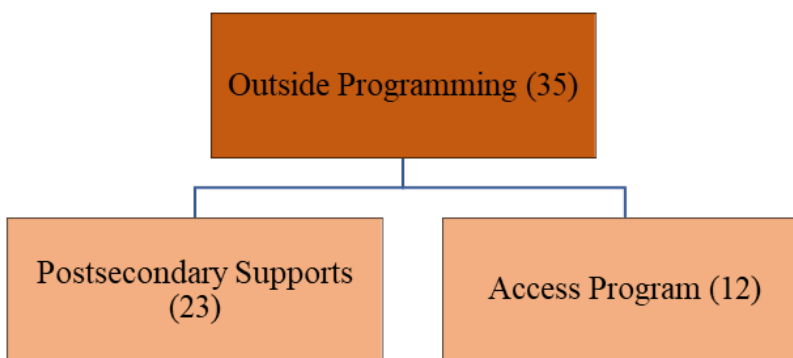
The third common theme uncovered pertained to the involvement of outside programming to help students prepare before the transition and succeed during the move to postsecondary life. For this study, outside programming referred to any support system or agency that originated outside of the school district's governance. Every focus group discussed the influence of The Access Program (TAP). This contracted service provides a guided curriculum to help students bridge the gap between high school and an independent life afterward. Depending on need, representatives from the program meet with students once every one to two weeks. In meetings, lessons on various life skills ranged from finding job openings to budgeting to resolving conflict with coworkers. Lessons provided by TAP include both a presentation and an interactive element that allows students to practice the skills in a mock environment.

The second sub-theme in this category elicited some of the strongest reactions among participants. It centered on the supports that are available to students with disabilities in their postsecondary careers. Several participants referenced a lack of academic support as a restricting factor for not attempting a two- or four-year college postsecondary education program. Multiple comments were made about the lack of “hand-holding” available in college. However, two participants talked at length about the services that were available to them through the Office of Accessibility Services (formerly called Disability Services at many institutions) at their schools. Participants who had elicited the services of this program raved about the support they received. While the services do not necessarily rise to the level of a high school special education program, multiple participants reported that they made their time in college much more

manageable. Several students exhibited genuine shock that those services were available.

Figure 3

Coded Themes Regarding Outside Programming



**Note: Parenthetical numbers indicate the number of codes for the theme and each sub-theme.*

Themes regarding the desire to enter the workforce

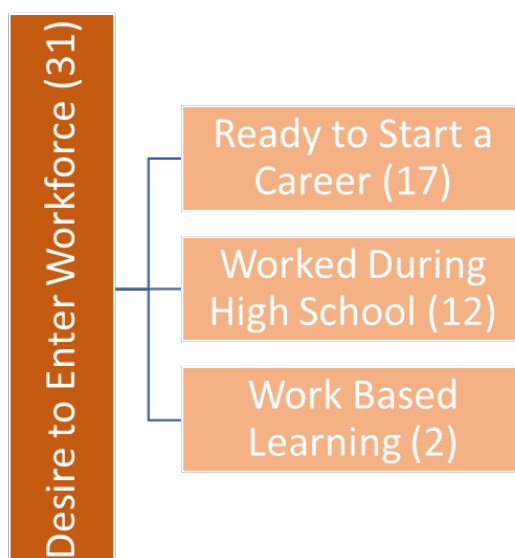
The final common theme revealed through analysis of the focus group transcriptions was the desire of participants to move into the workplace to begin a career as soon as possible. In modern educational society, the norm expectation seems to be that any student who does not attend college or university is not successfully transitioning to life after high school graduation. However, half of the study participants qualified as postsecondary transition successes because of their employment status. They each have stable, long-term, competitive employment that has allowed them to live mostly independently or contribute to their family finances if they choose. One student with a history of working even during high school earned his millwright certification, procured a liveable-wage position at one of the region's largest employers,

and chose to skip graduation to begin working all within two years of leaving high school.

Another participant, after beginning at a local community college, realized that she could finish a program at Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) faster than she could finish her degree and made the switch. All of the students who meet the criteria for postsecondary success because of their employment spoke of establishing a work ethic while still in school, either through a program like Work Based Learning (WBL) or their own initiative.

Figure 4

Coded Themes Regarding Desire to Enter the Workforce



**Note: Parenthetical numbers indicate the number of codes for the theme and each sub-theme.*

Discussion of Findings

When the most recent annual performance report available for the district in which the study was conducted was released for the school year 2019-2020, only 57.14% of those students with disabilities who received a diploma were either enrolled in higher education or competitively employed (TDOE, 2023). The goal of the discussions around the findings of this study is to improve upon that statistic. To that end, the core areas of this discussion of findings are (1) student self-efficacy, (2) setting appropriate transitional goals, and (3) connections with outside programming.

The theoretical framework for this study was Person-Centered Planning (PCP). Tondora et al. (2020) define PCP as a process that “recognizes that people grow, change, and can realize personally valued goals” while focusing on “the universally valued goal of living a good life as defined by the person” (p. 5). They further identify five competency domains that should guide all PCP. They are (1) Whole-Person Focused, (2) Cultivating Connections, (3) Rights, Choice, and Control, (4) Partnership and Teamwork, and (5) Documentation, Implementation, and Monitoring. When each of these five competencies is upheld by the IEP team of a student with disabilities, the team must keep the student firmly entrenched in the middle of all decisions. This type of person-centered planning promotes independence.

Self-Efficacy

Research indicates many students with disabilities lack the needed self-efficacy for academic success (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Grounded in Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory, self-efficacy is the theory that positive human functioning must

include mutual encounters among individuals. It only stands to reason that special education departments must prioritize the need to help students gain positive interactions and experiences in the encounters that impact their postsecondary transition planning and, further, success. The team must make the student's goals the lens through which the search for future success is aimed. Whether that aim is preparing for the academic demands of higher education or the rigor and expectations of a full-time job, teams may want to consider the positive encounters that will build the independence and self-actualization of those goals.

Setting Appropriate Transitional Goals

Building upon the foundation of self-efficacy, the transition goals set by the IEP team are vital to the potential postsecondary success of students with disabilities. Peterson et al. (2013) discuss the necessity of conducting and reviewing transition-related assessments for students in high school before writing postsecondary goals. They argue that “developing annual goals that realistically and clearly link to the student's postsecondary goals requires more than checking a box to meet compliance regulations” (p. 48). Unfortunately, this point is applicable to many high school IEPs. Teachers are burdened with the tasks of teaching, monitoring, and maintaining the legal status of each student on their caseloads. Going beyond the compliance regulations means more work, so professional development around the importance of postsecondary goals may be worthwhile.

Connections with Outside Agencies

The disbelief that the majority of the participants of this study had when hearing about the benefits of accessing Student Services at higher education institutions should not come as a surprise. Lalor et al. (2020) report that only 35% of students with disabilities enrolled in colleges and universities self-disclose to student service agencies. Our high school postsecondary transition plans must prioritize connecting with these offices for those students considering the leap to higher education. The three participants of the study who experienced the greatest levels of success in higher education all reported on the benefits of working with these departments.

Limitations of the Study

The central limitations of the study are generally focused on the purposeful sampling practices utilized. The sampling procedures intentionally led to a small number of participants. The participants also all attended the same smaller high school in Northeast Tennessee and did not represent a cross-representation of cultural or ethnic diversity. Due to the nature of the study discussing why students might have failed in their attempts at postsecondary participation, getting commitments from the demographic who were not considered successful was difficult. These limitations mean the study may not be generalizable to all high schools in other districts.

Further limits of the study include that all participants were high school graduates, and most were successful transitioners or “engaged” in the postsecondary world. Seven of the eight participants were successful. While this proved beneficial for identifying and coding impactful strategies to help students succeed, it did little to

provide a detailed view of barriers to postsecondary education for students with disabilities. Reasons for the small sample of participants in this category could be all participants were volunteers with no compensation offered for participation.

The segmentation of participants also presents as a limitation of the study. As discussed in Chapter 2, the state of Tennessee identifies 14 eligibility categories for students with disabilities. This study did not focus on procuring participants from every eligibility category. In fact, disability category was not taken into consideration at all within the confines of the study. The only qualifying condition was that each participant held eligibility in one of the aforementioned categories.

Additionally, the only method of data collection used was focus group interviews with students and their families. There were no teachers included among the participants. This means that the word of the graduates and their parents must be taken at face value.

Recommendations for further study

This study could be expanded in the following ways. First, duplicating the research in other districts across the region and the country could determine if the results are representative of other populations or limited to the selected school. This would also help provide a broader look into varying cultural and demographic participants.

Secondly, the methodology for future studies could be expanded. The inclusion of such practices as time spent in the physical school buildings observing transition

planning in first person and the inclusion of teachers as participants in the study would provide both sides of the transition planning narrative.

Additionally, a greater sampling of students who earned a special education diploma but not one for general education would yield a greater insight into the demographic of students educated primarily through self-contained classrooms. The two participants from this demographic for this study provided some quality insight into the benefits of training and planning for life skills and work based learning. It would be good to explore the impact of these elements further.

Finally, this study focused solely on students with disabilities who achieved a diploma, whether general education or special education. The intent was to find themes among those who were successful in transitioning to postsecondary life. However, additional research that involved participants who did not complete high school to the point of a diploma would potentially increase the knowledge of both real and perceived barriers among those students with disabilities who do not successfully transition to life after high school.

Recommendations for Future Practice

As discussed throughout this study, certain practices and transition planning focuses are better able to assist students with disabilities to traverse the bridge to postsecondary life successfully. Additionally, steps can be taken to further assist both students with disabilities and their families prepare for life after high school. The following recommendations can be utilized by the student, family, and IEP team to more adequately prepare students with disabilities for postsecondary life:

- Plan positive encounters and tasks that will build independence and self-reliance.
- Help students with disabilities set and plan for the self-actualization of those goals in order to experience success and build self-efficacy.
- Engage the help of outside agencies to partner with school districts to provide curricula that foster theoretical and practical experience with life skills such as job seeking, interviewing, conflict resolution, and more.
- Take time to learn what goals a student with disabilities has for postsecondary life and then keep those goals the focus of discussions and IEP meetings.
- Connect students with disabilities and their families early with Vocational Rehabilitation to begin discussion of financial assistance for college or trade school expenses.
- Develop and promote programs like Work Based Learning to introduce students with disabilities to the workforce.

Summary

This study aimed to investigate effective postsecondary transition planning and service strategies for high school students with disabilities. The participants chosen for inclusion in this study are all graduates from a small school district in East Tennessee, serving approximately 2,600 students. The eight participants were all recent graduates who still live in close proximity to the school district. The study provided insight into postsecondary transition planning strategies and the services most likely to promote postsecondary success in higher education and work-related fields.

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Appendix A



Date: March 17, 2023

Principal Investigator: Joshua Boatman, Graduate Student, Milligan University
From: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Milligan University
Project: *The Impact of Transition Planning and Preparedness on Postsecondary Success Among Former Students with Disabilities*
IRB Tracking Number: 2023-09
IRB Approval Number: Exe2303171610
Subject: Declaration of Exemption

The Milligan University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your research application and has determined that your proposed research is exempt from further review based on federal guidelines provided in 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2)(i) in that you have demonstrated your research to be:

Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) and The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot be readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subject.

You are expected to conduct your research in accordance with the research plan that was presented for review. Substantive modifications to your research plan will require another formalized review of your plan by our office. Please remember that while we are not specifically reviewing your informed consent, all researchers should provide potential participants with an informed consent statement that includes all pertinent information.

Best wishes as you conduct your research! Please feel free to contact the IRB office by email should you have any questions; IRB@milligan.edu

On behalf of the IRB Committee,

David D Gibbons, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Milligan University



Appendix B

Informed Consent for Participation

Information and Purpose: The interview in which you are being invited to participate is part of a research study that is focused on examining the impact of transition planning and special education services on postsecondary success. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how high schools can better prepare students with disabilities for life after high school.

Your Participation: Your participation in this study will consist of an individual interview lasting up to 30 minutes or a focus group interview alongside one other student and a family member lasting up to 60 minutes. You will be asked a series of questions about your services and high school academic experiences, especially in terms of the amount and types of postsecondary transition planning you received. You are not required to answer the questions and may decline to answer any question. At any time, you may notify the researcher that you would like to stop the interview and your participation in the study. There is no penalty for discontinuing your participation. There is no compensation involved in participation in this study.

Benefits and Risks: The benefit of your participation is to contribute information to the school system directly, as well as the field of education, about the need for adequate transition planning. This may assist school leaders and teachers in providing more targeted support to improve the postsecondary outcomes for students. There are no risks associated with participation in the study, as all identifying information will be kept confidential.

Confidentiality: The interview will be digitally recorded for analysis. Your name will not be used during the interview or included in the recording. All identifying information, including your name, the name of your school, and the name of the school system, will also not be associated with any part of the written report. All information and interview responses will be kept confidential. The researcher will not share your individual responses with anyone other than the research supervisor. The recording and transcription of the interviews will be maintained securely by the researcher for a period of 3 years, at which time it will be securely discarded.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher, Josh Boatman, at (423) 423-297-4627 or jsboatman@my.milligan.edu , or the research supervisor, Dr. Mark Dula, at medula@milligan.edu .

By signing below, I, (print name) _____,
acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information. I would like to participate in the study and am aware that I can discontinue my participation at any time without penalty.

Signature

Date

Appendix C

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little about your experiences since you graduated high school.
2. As you moved beyond graduation into the first days of college, work, or life after school, how confident were you that you were ready?
3. Can you point to any specific difficulties you had adjusting to your new way of life after high school?
4. Are there aspects of life after high school that you were worried about that you ended up being more prepared for than you thought?
5. If you could give one piece of advice to current high school seniors sitting where you did just a few years ago, what would that be?
6. Looking back into high school life for you now, how involved were your parents in helping you plan classes and navigate through high school?
7. What similarities can you point out between your time in high school and life afterward?
8. What differences can you point out between your time in high school and life afterward?
9. What was your class structure like in high school? How many Gen Ed classes versus support classes did you have?
10. How much did you rely on your support classes in high school? Were they more like guides and supports for you, or did you depend on those supports to make it through your more challenging classes?

11. Thinking about the process of your annual IEP meetings in high school, how much time do you feel was spent discussing your plans and goals after graduation?
12. Thinking about more than just the IEP meeting, what activities or coursework do you remember doing with teachers and other school staff that helped prepare you?
13. Were there things done in those same settings that you feel could have been more helpful?
14. Did you ever meet with any outside agencies about post-high school planning?
15. If you could meet with your IEP team again and give them advice for helping their current students, what would that be?

Appendix D



Overview

For the millions of students with disabilities enrolled in public schools, transition planning is the process of identifying goals for life after high school and mapping a path to successfully achieve them. This study explores the most successful strategies implemented by a high school in East Tennessee for helping these students find postsecondary success.

Strategies That Work... *And What They Look Like*

	What Is It?	What Does It Look Like?
Foster Self-Efficacy	A person's belief in his or her ability to competently achieve a goal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization skills • Time management • Self-reliance • Independence
Set Appropriate Transition Goals	The work of an IEP team to establish meaningful, personal goals for a student's life after high school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic readiness • Postsecondary pathway options • Work Based Learning • Networking
Connect with Outside Agencies	The connection of students with disabilities and those agencies that provide the needed social, financial, and academic assistance in their postsecondary lives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application to Vocational Rehabilitation • Office of Student Support Services • Access programs offering social and soft skill curricula and training.