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General and Special Educators' Perceptions of Transition for Students With Disabilities

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Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Doris Louise Rouson Butler

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

General and Special Educators' Perceptions of Transition for Students With Disabilities

by

Doris Louise Rouson Butler

EdS, Walden University, 2018

MA, University of Southern Mississippi, 2000

BS, Jackson State University, 1991

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

June 2021

Abstract

Students with disabilities (SWDs) require a transition process to support high school graduation and continuation to higher education or the workforce. In a rural district in a southern state, the problem investigated was only 37% of SWDs were graduating from high schools in the target district, compared to 79.9% of students without disabilities, which suggested that the transition design and implementation did not support SWDs' needs. Using a transition-focused conceptual framework, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of educators regarding the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at the high schools in the target district. The perceptions of general and special educators about the strengths of and barriers to the transition process were investigated through interviews with purposefully sampled participants from the target district. Six participants were general educators and special educators, including central office leaders who were experienced with the transition process for SWDs. Inductive analysis revealed patterns and themes including collaboration, systemic assessment, parent resistance, and a need for a more functional curriculum for SWDs. A white paper was developed to inform district stakeholders of the findings and offer recommendations for bolstering the transition planning process in the district. Implications for positive social change include strengthening strategic transition planning to better prepare SWDs for postsecondary outcomes by incorporating instructional content for transition in social, academic, independent living and employability skills which may result in increased independence as well as improved communication and coordination with parents and other relevant stakeholders.

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my family who supported me through this endeavor. To my children, who never complained when there was no dinner prepared on Sunday afternoons and encouraged me to continue by reminding me of my faith in God. And lastly to my mother, who always told us we can do whatever we want to do. Although she is not here to see me complete this journey, I will remember how she struggled to make sure we had everything we needed as children to grow into becoming responsible adults.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank God for giving me the strength to survive, as well as my family, friends, and coworkers who supported me with taking on extra tasks while I completed my educational journey. I want especially to thank Dr. Cathryn Walker White for her continuing support and encouragement when things were not going as planned. At times I wanted to give up due to physical, mental, and emotional hurts, but she encouraged and supported me all the way through to the end. Through her positive words and support, I began to believe I could complete this journey and still enjoy life for what it is meant to be. I began this journey in March 2013 and through the tragedies of losing my stepfather (2013), second oldest sister (2014), brother-in-law (2015), niece (2016), nephew (2017), youngest sister (2017), and lastly my mother (2018); two surgeries; loss of a job; and a divorce, I have persevered when life seemed hopeless. I know this is a lot to endure, yet continuing to try to maintain my focus, I can now see a halo of light at the end of the tunnel. To my second chair, Dr. Elizabeth Warren, I thank you for the strict in-depth comments you offered. Thank you to committee member Dr. Don Jones. I also want to thank Dr. Andrea Wilson for working with the committee to put the finishing touch on this project. This was a very humbling experience, and I have learned a great deal about perseverance and patience. Whenever I encounter obstacles that seem unending, I know to draw on the strength of those who care to support you. To all, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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Section 1: The Problem

Transitioning students with disabilities (SWDs) from high school to the community has been an area of focus to support the independence of this population since the inception of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) in 2004 (Wehman et al., 2015). Laws have been mandated to help SWDs in education, transition, and workplace settings (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142, authorized in 1975 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), was designed to assist students with special needs in the educational setting and to provide specially designed instruction and services in the environment that is least restrictive for the student (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). The IDEIA (2004) reflected that postschool transition plans must start for students at the age of 14 years. IDEIA requirements were that public schools must provide special education services for students between the ages of 3 and 21 years, and the statutes specified that SWDs were to have individual transition plans (ITPs) that included a process from high school to postsecondary life options. The ITP may include working full or part time; attending a local college within the community or a 4-year university; or living independently, with support, or in an adult group home setting (Mississippi Department of Education, Office of Special Education, 2021). Despite the legal focus on regulating the transition process for SWDs, the transition process continues to be implemented based on the interpretation of the regulations set forth in IDEIA, which has not always aligned with the intention of the law (Wrightslaw, 2020).

The goal of IDEIA is to make certain that every student has an equal opportunity to receive an education regardless of intellectual capacity and emotional or physical exceptionalities (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). As part of the IDEIA (2004) mandate, educators within the

school system are required to provide an individualized service plan—an ITP—to support students in thriving and participating in the community (IDEA Data Center, 2016). Stakeholders in the education sector include teachers, parents, school administrators, government, and other educational experts who have scrutinized enhancing the transition of SWDs to postschool options (Stanberry, 2010). Transition services for SWDs are a component of the law and require collaborative and proactive planning and evaluation of the transition system to assess benefits received by SWDs in workplace and community settings.

The Local Problem

In a school district in a southern state, administrative staff, teachers, and related service personnel have implemented ITPs required for SWDs to help them shift from the high school environment to postsecondary options. Transition services are necessary to enhance the success of SWDs as they work toward their educational and career goals (Wrightslaw, 2020). The problem investigated by this study is that only 37% of SWDs are graduating from high schools in the target district, compared to 79.9% of students without disabilities (SWODs), which suggests that the transition design and implementation does not support SWDs' needs. According to the Mississippi Department of Education, Division of Research and Development (2019), the 4-year graduation rate for SWDs in the target district in 2018 was 44%, compared to an 83% rate for all students, which suggests that the transition design and implementation did not adequately support SWDs' needs. In 2016, the 4-year graduation rate for SWDs in the target district was just 13.8%, compared to 77.2% for all students in the district (Mississippi Department of Education, Division of Research and Development, 2017). The transition process is intended to be a student-centered process that supports SWDs' needs in high school, thereby promoting positive postsecondary

outcomes. There is a gap between the percentage of SWODs graduating and SWDs graduating at the target site.

According to personnel in the target district, the overall transition process has not changed much from where it was 10 years ago in 2011. Many students are still being left without support for transition. As a special educator in the district noted in 2019, “We have to call and check on the students once a year, and that’s if you are able to locate them. Some have moved, phone numbers have changed; they seem to just disappear.” Another stated, “No evaluation of the transition process has been completed, and it seems the district is running around in circles trying to fix a problem that has no beginning and no end.” A special education teacher assistant explained, “Although we go through the process, it’s like it stops at a railroad track with the train coming, and the train never ends.” These statements reflected staff concern with the follow-up component of the transition process, as well as concern for the transition system as a whole. Staff remarks indicated the failure of the system to adapt over the years, which could have resulted in students’ transition needs not being met. Graduation rates provided further evidence of the SWDs’ needs not being addressed through the transition process.

Based on the information listed in Table 1, the 4-year cohort graduation rate of SWDs in the target district was 44% in 2018, 37.0% in 2017, and 13.8% in 2016, always dramatically lower than the graduation rates of all students in the district (Mississippi Department of Education, Division of Research and Development, 2017, 2018, 2019). In 2018, the cohort graduation rate was 83% for all students compared to 44% for SWDs (Mississippi Department of Education, Division of Research and Development, 2019). The gap in practice related to the design and implementation of the transition process needed to be studied to shed light on the challenges and strengths of the transition process in the local district.

Table 1

District 4-Year Cohort Graduation Percentage Rates, 2016-2017 Through 2018-2019

District student group	2016–2017	2017–2018	2018–2019
All students	77.2	79.9	83.0
Students with disabilities	13.8	37.0	44.0

Note. Data from Mississippi Department of Education, Division of Research and Development (2017, 2018, 2019).

Planning for the transition from high school to adulthood is a process that enables SWDs to engage in different areas of work and social interests (Morgan & Riesen, 2016; Riesen et al., 2014). According to researchers, SWDs are less likely to be engaged in activities after graduating from high school as compared to SWODs (Mazzotti & Rowe, 2015). Wei et al. (2015) reported that 32% of SWDs seek postsecondary training and gain employment. To help bridge the gap, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (2017) upheld the transition planning process required by IDEIA (2004) to help SWDs live, work, and participate in recreational activities in the community.

The transition planning process helps educators create ITPs based on students' capabilities (IDEIA, 2004). Evidence from the literature appears to have influenced a shift in policies and practices from being merely voluntary recommendations to legal requirements, resulting in further empowerment of students with intellectual disabilities (Harris et al., 2012; Maenner et al., 2020). Despite the IDEIA law and regulations guiding educators in the ITP

process for SWDs, district staff often continue to interpret and implement services in the manner that they see as appropriate (see Konrad et al., 2013; Maenner et al., 2020).

For SWDs, the process of making the transition to adulthood can be cumbersome if they do not have the necessary academic, employment, and life skills for success after high school (Banks, 2014; Y.-Y. Park, 2014; Pickens & Dymond, 2015). Educators in the special education sector have a significant role to play in determining the postschool outcomes of SWDs. The requirements of IDEIA (2004) have been beneficial to SWDs when the educators' perception of postschool outcomes for SWDs are realistically provided in Individualized Educational Program (IEP) planning and ITP planning outcomes for this population (Vaughn, 2014). More in-depth research is needed to explore SWDs' transition into the workforce, skills training, and academia (Maenner et al., 2020; J. Park & Bouck, 2018). Transition services should be examined to promote successful transition beyond high school, through plans and processes structured to promote a better quality of life for SWDs.

Rationale

Most SWDs have not exited high school with a standard diploma. Further, the majority of SWDs in the state enter employment following graduation rather than pursuing higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). SWDs enter college at a lower rate than SWODs. Y.-Y. Park (2014) noted that due to the gap in postsecondary outcomes between SWDs and SWODs, a review of the transition and preparation process while the student is still in school is necessary. Table 2 shows a comparison of graduation rates of SWDs and SWODs for the state in which the target district is located. As shown in Table 2, this gap is prevalent statewide.

Table 2

State 4-Year Cohort Graduation Percentage Rates of Students With and Without Disabilities, 2016–2017 Through 2018–2019

State student group	2016–2017	2017–2018	2018–2019
Students with disabilities	13.8	36.4	38.4
Students without disabilities	–	88.1	89.1
All students	82.3	83.0	84.0

Note. Data from Mississippi Department of Education, Division of Research and Development (2017, 2018, 2019).

In postsecondary life, SWDs have found difficulties gaining employment, having independent lives, and advancing in their education after high school (Banks, 2014; Morningstar, Kurth, et al., 2017). SWDs who graduated from high school in the state of the target district enrolled in institutions of higher learning at a lower percentage rate than the state's target, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2020). Table 3 identifies the graduation outcomes and reflects the low rates of higher education enrollment among SWDs statewide. The state department of education's response to the data was the following:

> The MDE [Mississippi Department of Education] is reviewing data and working with other agencies to determine the reason for the decrease in respondent youth enrolling in higher education, or in some other postsecondary education or training program, or competitively employed or in some other employment. The MDE OSE [Office of Special Education] plans to determine if there is a correlation between the increase in drop-outs and this area. The MDE continues to seek improvement in accurately tracking and

> reporting the number of respondent youth who enrolled in higher education and postsecondary opportunities with one year of leaving high school as well as how it can improve services and supports to prepare and connect youth to higher education opportunities and postsecondary opportunities. (U.S. Department of Education, 2020, p. 47)

Table 3

State Percentage Postsecondary Outcomes for Students With Disabilities

Measure	2016–2017	2017–2018
A: Students with disabilities (SWDs) enrolled in higher education within 1 year after high school	25.04	27.25
B: SWDs enrolled in higher education (included in A) and/or competitive employment within 1 year after high school	60.79	61.31
C: SWDs in A, B, or enrolled in some other education or training program or employment	77.75	76.26

Note. Data from U.S. Department of Education (2020).

These data reflect some areas of consideration and exploration due to the gaps in rates of regular diplomas gained, rates of students attending postsecondary training or college, and rates of employment after high school. An important component of an effective transition process is the follow-up or follow-along process that school system staff engage in to determine the effectiveness of the ITP process for the SWDs (Konrad et al., 2013). This view of the transition process is critical for SWDs. Kyzar et al. (2012) reported that SWDs might have a higher risk for unmet needs such as the availability of disability services and employment skills because of their family relationships, community support, and skill level to conduct tasks. Tracking SWDs' placement following graduation would support the evaluation of the efficiency of the transition process. The tracking process should be in place for at least 1 year from the students' graduation

date and should follow the students for at least 1 year. After 1 year, the students' relationship to the school district staff ends, and SWDs are left potentially without the knowledge to acquire referrals or resources for services, thus leaving the SWDs without the necessary information to secure their future (S. Franklin, 2014). According to Devlieger et al. (2016), longer follow-up periods are critical to ensure that the postsecondary transitional outcomes have been adequately met for this population.

Parents of SWDs have reported concerns about their children regarding higher education, training in understanding transition concepts and supports, and entrance into the workforce (M. Burke, 2013; M. Burke & Hodapp, 2016; Riesen et al., 2014). In a study conducted in the southeastern United States, data from 2013–2015 in a district showed that 67% of SWDs planned on attending a 2-year institution, 17% planned on attending a 4-year institution, and another 16% planned on gaining employment with local companies (DeLeo, 2017). Even though students had transition plans designating the transition option after high school, parents have expressed feelings of inadequacy about the transition process (M. Burke, 2013; M. Burke & Hodapp, 2016). According to Zhang et al. (2018), many parents were unfamiliar with the legal requirements of the transition planning process. Therefore, parents of SWDs participated in fewer IEP and ITP meetings that facilitated movement toward postschool outcomes (Zhang et al., 2018).

General and special educators reported concerns with the lack of transition services for SWDs, even after the reauthorization of IDEIA in 2004 (Banks, 2014). An analysis of the outcome data indicated that SWODs who completed high school with regular diplomas attended higher education institutions and gained employment at higher rates than SWDs (Mississippi Department of Education, Office of Special Education, 2021). In addition, failure to address the lack of success negatively impacted SWDs because educators questioned the accountability and

success of the transition process (Ayers et al., 2013; Kohler et al., 2016; Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2018). As a result, a need remains to enhance the success of disability services that SWDs receive (Cavendish, 2017; Y.-Y. Park, 2014). This study was an investigation of general and special educators' perceptions of the transition services for SWDs at the target site regarding their transition to adulthood. Note that central office administrators who were former special education teachers at the high schools and thus had knowledge of or experience with the transition process were included in the participant pool. A deeper understanding of the perceptions of general and special educators who had knowledge of the transition process would serve to inform decision makers or stakeholders about refinements needed to the transition process in the study district.

Understanding the needs of SWDs is critical to designing and implementing services for the transition from high school to postsecondary outcomes. A special education teacher in the target district stated in 2019,

> Since each student is different, we rely on the help of the parents to assist us in finding the supports their child needs when they are ready to leave high school. Many of the parents are not informed about transitioning, even when we have the IEP meetings at the end of the school year. We invite various people from the community such as vocational rehabilitation community/supportive living personnel, people from the health industry, etc. The students sort of fall through the cracks after they leave us. Then the parents stop looking for supports because they have found it to be too difficult to reach the right person to help them.

The postsecondary plan for each SWD should be based on needs-driven assessments of the individual student prior to graduation. When the transition plan is not clear, then SWDs leave high school and have challenges in attaining their postsecondary transition goals. If the

postsecondary needs of SWDs are made clear to educators, the transition to adulthood may be less challenging (Sprunger et al., 2017; Vaughn, 2014). As educators become more aware of the needs of SWDs, they may redesign the curriculum to provide an exemplary system of support and resources to enhance SWDs' successes as they transition to the larger community from the high school setting (Haager & Vaughn, 2013; Morningstar, Lombardi, et al., 2017). This study could generate information to help educators strengthen the systems required for a successful transition. Researchers who have studied transition for SWDs have found that the topic continues to be an area of concern for school personnel, parents, and community agencies supporting SWDs (Grigal, 2018; Noel et al., 2016). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of educators regarding the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at the high schools in the target district.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were used for this qualitative study:

Educators: For the purpose of this study, educators are certified general or special education teachers, including central office leaders who have knowledge of or experience working with the transition process for SWDs, and are employed in the target district.

Family involvement: Family involvement occurs when family members support a child's emotional, physical, academic, and career growth (National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition, 2010).

Individual transition plan (ITP): Designed to assist SWDs in the transition to life after high school, an ITP may include working full or part time; attending a local college within the

community or a 4-year university; or living independently, with support, or in an adult group home setting (Mississippi Department of Education, Office of Special Education, 2021).

Individualized Education Program (IEP): IEPs are plans aimed at assisting SWDs in accessing better education services and transitioning to adulthood. IEPs are created with a team of educators, the student, and the student's parents, beginning when the student is 14 years of age (IDEIA, 2004; Wrightslaw, 2020).

Interagency collaboration: Interagency collaboration is defined as collaboration between multiple agencies for the betterment of families (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2010).

Interdisciplinary collaboration: Interdisciplinary collaboration includes the act of working together between disciplines, including special and regular educators collaborating (Petri, 2010).

Other educational stakeholders: Many people are involved in the implementation of ITPs for SWDs making the transition into adulthood. Stakeholders include government agency representatives, related service providers, and employers (Wamba, 2014).

Postsecondary success: Postsecondary success includes the highest living standards being experienced by students who successfully integrate into adult life. Such individuals are characterized by having excellent employment, participation in community social and cultural activities, and better chances of advancing their education after high school (Gothberg et al., 2015).

Self-determination: For the purposes of this study, self-determination is the process whereby students who have completed their high school education freely make personal life

choices and decisions without external influence or interference from the public or the government (Power, 2013).

Special education teacher/advocate: This term refers to a professional other than an attorney who provides advice and representation regarding children with educational disabilities (Wamba, 2014).

Student development: Part of the transition framework by Kohler et al. (2016) is student development, which includes improving life skills, employability skills, social skills, and recreational skills as well as personal advocacy skills for postsecondary life.

Student-focused planning: According to Kohler et al. (2016), student-focused planning centers on the goals of the student and student assessments. The student should be included in the planning process.

Sustainability: This term is relative to the implementation of integrated transition plans regarded as a part of the school district responsibility of ensuring that SWDs efficiently transition to adulthood (S. Franklin, 2014).

Transition: Transition is a series of activities designed to oversee how SWDs are moved from school activities to postschool activities. These activities include postsecondary education, independent living, employment, and participation in community social and cultural activities (S. Franklin, 2014).

Significance of the Study

Banks (2014) and Morningstar, Kurth, et al. (2017) purported that SWDs are provided inequitable opportunities in school, which increase their challenges upon graduation pertaining to educational opportunities, employment, and earning potential. Negative perceptions toward

mental health agency personnel and the ability of those employees to effectively transition SWDs also may be a cause of lack of employment and education attainment (Gates & Statham, 2013). Therefore, when SWDs graduate and take on the responsibility of living as adults, they have not been prepared for the real world, and much of their lives are spent behind closed doors (Banks, 2014; Morningstar, Zagona, et al., 2017). These SWDs are often not prepared for long-term services and lack support (Brand et al., 2013).

This study is significant because providing SWDs with transition services as they leave high school and move into adulthood may help to meet SWDs' needs, whether they seek to enter the workforce, live in the community, or attain higher education. First, examining general and special educators' perceptions relating to the transition process, including curriculum or program development, may help to identify more details about the transition to adulthood. Second, this study focused on qualitative findings to offer an in-depth understanding of educators' perceptions about the transition system to support SWDs at the target site. Third, data from this study may offer new information that strengthens the knowledge base about SWDs' postschool outcomes. Bouck (2012) and J. Park and Bouck (2018) suggested that additional research is needed to address postschool outcomes for SWDs. Despite efforts to examine and redesign policies for successful outcomes, SWDs demonstrate difficulties in transitioning from high school to adult life (Y.-Y. Park, 2014). Fourth, the results of this study offer information to provide additional insight into facilitating the identification of proper supports for increasing successful outcomes for SWDs. Finally, this study provides information that may be used to increase societal awareness of the need for change by elucidating the importance of successful outcomes for SWDs and may contribute to the development of programs that create efficient transition services and social change.

Research Questions

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of educators regarding the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at high schools in the target district. Educators have concerns about the success of SWDs transitioning into adulthood after high school, so a need exists to gain an understanding of teachers' perceptions in how they advocate, plan, and recommend enhancing SWDs' transition success (Zhang et al., 2018). The information in this study could provide a greater understanding of educators' perceptions regarding transitioning SWDs from high school to the community setting. The research questions were designed to collect data on how educators perceived transition for SWDs and possible actions needed to strengthen transition services. I used an overall research question and two subquestions to guide the inquiry toward a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied: perceptions of the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs.

1. How do general and special educators perceive the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at high schools in the target district?

    1a. What do general and special educators perceive as strengths in the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at high schools in the target district?

    1b. What do general and special educators perceive as barriers in the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at high schools in the target district?

Review of the Literature

The primary focus of this literature review was reviewing and critiquing literature that establishes the national status of the transition for SWDs and the challenges that they face in their educational progression. Literature sources applicable to this study were reviewed, including peer-reviewed journal articles, published books, and reputable online publications. Search terms were used in various combinations to identify an initial list of sources. These sources were subsequently reviewed and narrowed by relevance. Search terms used included *students with disabilities, transition,* and *students with special needs.* The search terms were entered into search engines and databases from the internet, such as Education from SAGE, Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC), Google Scholar, ECHOST, WorldCat, Education Research Complete, and ProQuest, to help access any reputable online publications, journal articles, and relevant books. Over 100 sources were identified to have significant applicability to the topic under study, and these were narrowed to 50.

A review of the literature indicated that transitional programs for SWDs as they move from high school to adulthood need to be evaluated, due to suboptimal student success rates in the community and workforce. SWDs need experiences in inclusive settings to develop their social skills and acclimate to SWODs (M. Kramer & Davies, 2016). With increasing numbers of students graduating from high school with a disability, reviewing current strategies regarding transition practices is important (Maenner et al., 2020). The results from this study may benefit SWDs as they shift from high school to adulthood.

The literature review emphasized the transition of SWDs from high school to adulthood, referencing the curriculum, student-focused planning, employment skills, academic skills, and the social skills needed for success. The IDEIA (2004) mandated schools to include transition

processes for SWDs; therefore, the review of literature contains information about the implementation of the practices according to IDEIA regulations and curricula used to support educational progression and development of necessary transitional skills for SWDs (Ruppar et al., 2016). The literature review included a combination of transition-focused education theory, IDEIA, and identification of evidence from the literature to support a deeper understanding of the research regarding transition services and best practices in transition services for SWDs.

Conceptual Framework

This research study was based on the Kohler et al. (2016) transition-focused conceptual framework. The purpose of using this conceptual framework was to provide a comprehensive transition example for SWDs transitioning to community settings based upon important comprehensive components that serve SWDs' specific needs. The transition-focused theory described by Kohler et al. aligns with goals and objectives that may determine the successful transition of SWDs as they exit the high school setting into adulthood.

Transition-Focused Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used for this study focused on the education and skills needed to facilitate transition for SWDs and was established by Kohler et al. (2016). Kohler et al. proffered that the foundation of the transition theory was focused on increasing the frequency of comprehensive follow-up to offer SWDs an equitable opportunity to engage in recreation and leisure activities related to community engagement; maintain full- or part-time employment; and access postsecondary training through technical support institutions, community colleges, or 4-year universities (Stephenson & Carter, 2011). Using this conceptual framework was beneficial because the conceptualized process within the theory contains components to support SWDs' transition to adulthood (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). The U.S. Department of Education (2017)

recommended a person-centered approach to an ITP for SWDs. Pawilen et al. (2018) also advocated for a learner-centered approach based on specific needs of the SWD. For this research study, I used transition-focused education theory as developed by Kohler et al. as the foundational conceptual framework for transition outcomes. Person-centered planning is the most significant aspect of this transition model because of the focus on addressing aspirations and realistic outcomes for SWDs by involving the student; parents; and, where appropriate, teachers and service providers.

The premise of this conceptual framework is that fundamental foundations integrate into the students' IEPs in the coordination of transition for SWDs, focusing on adult outcomes, which include career-oriented courses, functional academics, extracurricular activities to promote socialization and behavioral adjustment skills, and vocational instruction throughout the high school curriculum. All these foundations, as purported by Kohler et al. (2016), authenticate the development of transition skills through a set of activities and approaches by a team of service providers in the educational setting (Kohler et al., 2016). Some of the central components of the transition-focused framework are employment (part time or full time), technology skills, academic skills, and social skills. Having an IEP to guide transition processes from high school to adulthood has enhanced SWDs' success academically and in the workforce among their peers (Chen et al., 2019). The central component of this framework is the individual's positioning at the center of the process, which is what transition is about for SWDs.

Relationship of Conceptual Framework to Study

This research study could reveal strengths or deficits in the transition process for SWDs and the corresponding relationships that SWDs have with educators who are guiding the process. The conceptual framework also focused on the delivery of services based on the abilities of the

SWDs, advocacy, and quality of life following graduation from high school (Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2018; Turnbull et al., 2018). Five practices in transition-focused education related directly to this study: (a) student-focused planning, (b) student development, (c) interagency coordination and collaboration with school district staff, (d) interdisciplinary collaboration, and (e) family involvement (Kohler et al., 2016). The program structure in the target transition site or any site delivering effective transition services for SWDs should have these components present in the service delivery model for the transition to be effective (see Kohler et al., 2016). In the subsequent paragraphs, I describe each of the components of transition as noted in the Kohler et al. (2016) transition theory.

Student-Focused Planning. Kohler et al. (2016) stated that the primary practices of student-focused planning center on the goals of the student by using developmental information to create an action plan. One of the main focuses of these practices is the application of information from assessments and student evaluations to create the transition plan (Kohler et al., 2016). The student should be included in the planning process to make sure that the plan is centered on student-specific needs (Alghamdi, 2017; Hall et al., 2018). These practices help the student strengthen skills through application of skills in the community or school vocational setting.

Students who participate in the transition process as young teens may need assistance from teachers, parents, and other educators to set annual goals. Most importantly, student-focused planning practice designs focus on the student's vision of where they would like to be in the future regarding education, employment, and social interactions within the community (Coles-Janess & Griffin, 2020; Fernandez, 2019). School administrators incorporate an ITP into the student's IEP to create an action plan for postschool life (Common et al., 2017; Lombardi et al.,

2018). The ITPs are specific to the individual SWDs and support the SWDs in meeting their vocational, social, advocacy, and recreational needs during the high school years. An IEP team helps to create the ITP to guide their process through the high school setting (Satsangi et al., 2020). However, for a student to gain the most from an ITP, the student must be willing to engage in the practices recommended by the IEP team (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017). Furthermore, transition services must align with the student's preferences, needs, strengths, and interests (Shogren et al., 2017).

Student Development. The next practice that Kohler et al. (2016) focused on is student development within the categories that guide transition planning and are set as a priority by the SWD and the IEP committee. The category options on the transition plan include life skills, employability skills, social skills, and recreational skills as well as personal advocacy skills. Even though employment is a major theme, students should be aware of all of the categories, such as occupational skills, career skills, daily living, and social skills, along with gaining work-related behaviors for success (Akramova, 2020). Supporting SWDs in developing these skills is a major aspect of the success of SWDs in transitioning to adult life (Marita & Hord, 2017). To help SWDs clarify needs in job seeking and vocational preparedness, educators should help guide the decision-making process. A prevocational and vocational assessment determines the SWDs' strengths and limitations (Petcu et al., 2016). The students should be the center of the dialogue surrounding their work interests and what they want to pursue when leaving high school (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). This annual ITP process is necessary to help SWDs revise and clarify needs, whether the concerns are related to career, job seeking, or vocational preparedness; attending a trade or technical school; self-advocacy; or independent living (Cobb et al., 2013).

Interagency Collaboration. Collaborative service delivery is another practice that focuses on the involvement of businesses within the community to support the ITP process for SWDs (Kohler et al., 2016). Agencies within the community work together to assist SWDs' transition to life after high school by participating in the ITP meeting and signing an agreement that details the role of the organization and the terms of their commitment to support the student in the ITP process (Petcu et al., 2016). By involving community associations such as Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, and local businesses to assist with the ITP process, business owners are made aware of SWDs' needs and can support the SWDs postgraduation.

Businesses also help educators within the educational system to enhance services and reduce some of the challenges that students might experience if they did not have support (Lindsay et al., 2018). For example, when local businesses hire SWDs to help them with social and employment skills, the students are learning skills to help maintain and secure employment after graduation. Collaborating with educators and family members routinely, whether through face-to-face conferences, telephone calls, classroom visits, or attendance at open house events, helps to improve outcomes among SWDs related to goals and objectives of the action plan on IEPs (Wadlington et al., 2017). Stakeholders who help SWDs with the transition and IDEIA (2004) mandates include school psychologists, pathologists, general and special education teachers, school administrators, agencies, and parents or guardians.

Family Engagement. Engaging the family is a practice that prioritizes the involvement of family in supporting the SWDs' transition beyond the high school setting (Bell et al., 2017). Family participation in the ITP meetings enables SWDs to experience a more successful transition to the community from high school (Weatherton et al., 2017). Some of the most common activities that families may participate in are assessment, creating a plan for

occupational and community involvement, educational services, and personal decision-making to help increase the SWDs' success in transitioning (Shogren et al., 2018). One benefit of the help of parents and other family members is an enhanced rate of success for SWDs and a decreased need for additional assistance upon graduation (Devlieger et al., 2016). All of these components are critical in supporting SWDs in shifting from high school to the community environment effectively. Continuous revisions of IEP processes and structures help to maintain and support student goals (Biggs & Carter, 2016).

Program Structures. Effectiveness and efficiency within program structures are the overarching focus for educators, agency personnel, and family who provide the framework for the transition planning process to function effectively. The program is the basis for the conceptual framework (Kohler et al., 2016). Transition processes and policies for academic, social, and vocational support are central to the ITP design, which is revisited annually in the IEP meeting (Kohler et al., 2016). Schools may orientate the transition program to focus on community involvement, inclusion, expectations, skills, and outcomes to align with the IEP (Chen et al., 2019). During the initial orientation with SWDs, school staff should take into consideration the students' well-being and encourage them to be inquisitive about the transition from high school. As the SWDs' self-efficacy is enhanced in areas of planning and organization along with the expectations of adulthood, they should have a smoother transition (Francis et al., 2018; Rast et al., 2019). Additionally, as the SWDs' learning foundation strengthens with each skill, they should be moved to the next skill until they accomplish all of the requirements for success in adulthood.

Kaya (2018) noted that transition-focused education is based on several processes to aid students in meeting their educational and career goals. However, the process should be thoroughly implemented to reduce challenges for students as they make the transition from high

school to adulthood (Hall et al., 2018). Education laws and transition-focused education processes help minimize gaps and ensure that students, regardless of disability, are receiving services to enhance their success (Bumble et al., 2017). Program implementors should seek information from educators regarding processes, implementation, and recommendations for SWDs transitioning from high school to enhance overall student success (Kaya, 2018). Program structures may reveal the effectiveness of transition planning by acting as an outcome predictor. Therefore, when integrating the perspectives of all participating persons who know the student, chances for a successful move into adulthood may be substantial.

Review of the Broader Problem

IDEIA (2004) guidelines require that SWDs participate in planning their transition to adulthood. When students reach the age of 14, they can participate in transition planning. By the age of 16, students must be actively participating in IEP meetings focusing on transition planning through development of the ITP (J. Kramer et al., 2018). To provide clarity on the requirements for the transition plan, the IDEIA was designed to help SWDs and to reduce confusion among educators and other stakeholders related to transition. However, even with the passage of IDEIA in 2004, concerns remained among stakeholders (J. Kramer et al., 2018).

The IDEIA (2004) transition plan requires educators to emphasize education, employment, independent living, and the SWDs' participation in the transition planning process. The IEP transition focus helps SWDs make the shift from high school to adulthood as they participate in the development of employment, skills training, and academic goals. ITPs are action plans to assist SWDs and are created to help meet students' goals (IDEIA, 2004).

Types of Disabilities

Many researchers have focused on the ability of SWDs to learn, especially when they transition into new environments (Roux et al., 2018). However, because many differences exist in how various forms of disabilities affect learning capabilities, no single comprehensive study can adequately cover the whole spectrum of difficulties that SWDs may encounter when navigating the transition process (Devlieger et al., 2016). Syntheses of the literature by Bumble et al. (2017), Chen et al. (2019), and Gauthier-Boudreault et al. (2017) revealed that SWDs have common transition issues across disability types, geographic locations, and levels of disability severity. Disability types involve the areas of education, participation in community activities, employment, social networks, and supports (M. Franklin et al., 2019).

The severity and nature of the disability affects the level of support and transition services SWDs need to be successful when moving from school to the community (Kaya et al., 2018). SWDs with mild to moderate disabilities may have the capability to access the general education curriculum and may require less intrusive transition supports in the form of special instruction, daily living skills, and vocational and socialization skills (Gauthier Boudreault et al., 2018). Students with moderate to severe disabilities have access to the general education curriculum such as art, physical education, and choral music; however, they need more support during the transition and in the community (Devlieger et al., 2016).

Students with severe disabilities are usually placed in self-contained classrooms where the daily needs of the student are the focal point, paired with quality-of-life special education services (M. Franklin et al., 2019). On the continuum of placements for SWDs, some are more restrictive than others. Therefore, some SWDs have more access to general education settings.

Students with more severe disabilities often need more services and support to prepare for transition (Gauthier□Boudreault et al., 2018).

Even though learning disabilities are classified in general as mild, moderate, or severe, disability is a spectrum. The abilities of students to learn vary greatly, even in cases where students have the same disability (Feldman et al., 2016). The IDEIA or state-defined disability categories for SWDs should not drive the decision-making process regarding the transition proceedings; rather, the ITP team should consider each student based on their own strengths and limitations (Kaya et al., 2018). Therefore, educators and child disability experts should conduct series of observations on the SWDs and provide assessments over time, as opposed to conducting an assessment in a single session. Assessment of SWDs is important as it drives the ITP process and enables educators, teachers, and parents to fully understand students' potential. The ITP also allows educators to help in the academic and vocational development of the SWD preparing to move from high school to the community (Devlieger et al., 2016).

Assessment of SWDs

One of the best ways to gauge the abilities of a student is to assess both the academic and nonacademic skills of the student. According to Boyd et al. (2019), performance in five skill categories can be used to assess SWDs' learning ability: social, communication, behavioral, functional, and operational skills. Understanding how these skills affect the development of the ITP is critical (Trollor et al., 2018). Therefore, educators should cultivate an environment that will allow the development and reinforcement of specific sets of skills.

Social skills refer to the ability of the students to interact with peers as well as with adults within the learning environment. Social skills are a significant factor in determining whether SWDs will be able to use the social support in their community to optimize their learning

experience (Barkas et al., 2020). SWDs with advancing social skills are more capable of overcoming their limitations and asking for assistance from those around them (Turnbull et al., 2018). Social skills are nonacademic; however, social skills help influence the academic capacity of a student as well as the success on the job or in the community (Alghamdi, 2017).

Communication skills can be regarded as either academic or nonacademic, depending on the mode and context of the communication (Barkas et al., 2020). Communication skills closely relate to social skills and to how SWDs perform academically (Morningstar, Zagona, et al., 2017). A student with good communication skills may perform well in language, despite having a learning disability. Students with good communication skills are also more capable to express the difficulties they encounter in their learning processes. As a result, they have been able to more clearly express needs to other individuals, resulting in better care by educators, doctors, or counselors (Barkas et al., 2020). Good communication skills can serve as a bridge to help others understand the needs of SWDs, thus leading to appropriate support (Turnbull et al., 2018).

The behavioral skills characteristic of SWDs also can affect academic performance. Students with erratic behavior are less likely to receive help from those around them (Barkas et al., 2020). Fernandez (2019) suggested information from a functional behavioral assessment to design effective self-management procedures to reduce problem behaviors because these assessments identify the problem behavior and support the creation of a plan to replace negative behaviors with positive behaviors. The efficiency of self-management can increase when the information derived from the functional behavioral assessment is used to develop specific behavioral plans for SWDs (Hansen, Wills, & Kamps, 2014; Hansen, Wills, Kamps, & Greenwood, 2014). The functional behavioral assessment is a critical need for SWDs displaying inappropriate behaviors that would prohibit them from transitioning to the community. Further,

students who exhibit socially appropriate behaviors are more likely to receive attention from teachers and fellow students and have more productive learning experiences (Hansen, Wills, & Kamps, 2014).

Operational skills refer to the capability of a SWD to use learning aids and other equipment provided by the teacher in the classroom environment (Fernandez, 2019). Operational skills are the behaviors SWDs display related to skills being taught related and used in a work, academic, or social context. For example, a teacher may use cash registers, sorting machines, or punching machines in class to practically acquaint students with real-life operation rather than using the textbook approach. In many cases, students with moderate learning disabilities taught in inclusive classrooms using multiple teaching methods are successful (Lombardi et al., 2018). Therefore, the curriculum is describing an intuitive program method using concrete models, and real context situations are preferred for SWDs rather than using a set standard vocational training program (Boyd et al., 2019).

Functional skills denote the ability of a student to perform basic mental functions such as deductive thinking (Barkas et al., 2020). Functional skills are the most important of the five categories of skills to determine the capacity of a student with a disability to perform well academically. For example, for students with more significant disabilities, the teacher needs to address those needs at the present level of performance to ensure success in functional areas, such as tooth-brushing, grooming, self-feeding, and other skills that will lead to independence (Trollor et al., 2018). The College and Career Readiness and Success Center model (Brand et al., 2013) included nonacademic (functional skills) and academic skills needed for postschool success. Moreover, children with moderate learning disabilities have stronger functional skills than those

with severe learning disabilities (Barkas et al., 2020). Students who can perform at higher functioning skills tend to be more successful socially and at work.

Curriculum and Prospects of SWDs

According to Fernandez (2019), an individual curriculum provides SWDs with postsecondary transition needs. The study by Fernandez consisted of Grade 9–12 SWDs who received a functional curriculum to enhance skills outside the classroom setting. Students also implemented activities from a standard curriculum that developed basic knowledge and prepared SWDs for a viable career path that provided them future income options (Trollor et al., 2018). The curriculum design should include subject matter that allows SWDs to grasp the academic or career skill. The basic idea in the content delivery is to repeat the most essential concepts to increase the retention of that content, as opposed to going through voluminous material, which most SWDs will not be able to master (Barkas et al., 2020). Kohler et al. (2016) indicated that SWDs should receive all the necessary functional instruction. However, more research is needed to learn why functional instruction may be better for SWDs (Turnbull et al., 2018).

Alghamdi (2017) indicated that most SWDs can learn crafts as a source of income. Examples of crafting skills acquired by SWDs include tailoring, basketry, pottery, and design of everyday objects through the process of repetition. The curriculum used with SWDs must include language, basic sciences, basic mathematics, vocational skills, social skills, and physical exercises (Alghamdi, 2017). Engaging SWDs in physical exercises supports them in developing sporting skills; some SWDs may have talents in certain sports, which could provide a career path or recreation and leisure for them (Alghamdi, 2017). Recreation and leisure skills are an important component for SWDs to lead healthy lives (Coles-Janess & Griffin, 2020). Monitoring SWDs

after they transition from the high school setting is critical, and a systematized process is a key approach to this support system for evaluating the effectiveness of the transition services.

Monitoring SWDs

The transition processes for SWDs should have a standard procedure to monitor and document progress. Transitions for SWDs must be meticulously planned and carried out with precision to avoid difficulties for the student, which may result in an academic disadvantage if the IEP team has not individually planned and executed a plan (Y.-Y. Park, 2014). Each education plan should include an annual assessment to ensure the plan is adequate. To optimize the transition process, a follow-up system should be developed to monitor SWDs' outcomes (Coles-Janess & Griffin, 2020). Researchers have demonstrated how following up the SWDs after they transition into adulthood can be helpful (Connor & Cavendish, 2017; Kwiatek et al., 2016; Morningstar, Kurth et al., 2017). Connor and Cavendish (2017) found that the most effective follow-up process involved a collection of feedback from the student through self-determination and positive transition outcomes. The collection of student information benefits a detailed transition plan by directly supporting the student's needs. The academic performance of SWDs is a key metric to determine efficiency of the transition process (Kwiatek et al., 2016). A tracking system has proven to effectively monitor SWDs' success in the job market from academic life to career (Coles-Janess & Griffin, 2020). Morningstar, Kurth, et al. (2017) established a college- and career-readiness model to include the role of each stakeholder as well as a step-by-step checklist process to follow up with SWDs regarding the transition experiences and effectiveness of the transition process using the SWDs' perceptions.

Transition Supports for SWDs

SWDs need to develop skills and supports to transition successfully into postsecondary life. According to Qian et al. (2018), all workers in the 21st-century labor market should possess skills and knowledge to be economically competitive on a global scale. SWDs continue to fall behind in postschool outcomes when compared to SWODs (Qian et al., 2018). Programs that provide information and support to SWDs facilitate access to appropriate jobs, which can lead to careers (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017). Two types of programs are state-sponsored programs and nongovernmental programs, depending on the sponsorship (Keenan et al., 2019). Institution leaders, such as college officials, can implement programs online or through outreach events. Additionally, leadership officials of foundations may offer scholarships to SWDs. Some foundation leaders provide mentorship programs to SWDs to help them transition to the community. The idea behind the scholarship and mentorship programs is to offer support to students who have the potential to overcome the limitations of their disabilities for a successful transition to adulthood (White et al., 2017). Some of these programs, or support networks, include staff who provide instructional support in the community to SWDs to help them become financially independent and self-reliant, such as a general check-and-balance program to help with budgeting and financial transactions. Government, social agencies, and local businesses may have a role supporting SWDs in transition to a job or postsecondary school setting (Cavendish & Connor, 2018). Parents and family members also may play a pivotal role in transition as additional key stakeholders.

The Role of Stakeholders. Coles-Janess and Griffin (2020) explored the role of family support in SWDs' success as they transition to postschool life. Family support can include financial or moral support from parents or siblings. Family members who are

willing to support SWDs are more likely to help students who have better success both academically and in a career. In families with multiple children with disabilities, SWDs' needs are less likely to be met due to overwhelming family stress. However, SWDs can be helped by a support bond formed between the siblings to help each other to learn (Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2018). The transition process is an iterative process in which student goals for postsecondary transition are reviewed annually. Planning for transition involves assessment of SWDs' needs for the projected postsecondary goals.

Planning and Preparation. Planning and preparation for the future of SWDs require educators to provide SWDs access to the traditional, general education curriculum as well as additional curricular considerations to meet the individual needs of the students (Pacheco et al., 2018). SWDs should be provided an assessment of their talents and abilities to gain an understanding of their potential college or career paths after graduation from high school. The identification of talents involves exposing students to various environments and then evaluating their performance in different environmental contexts (Lombardi et al., 2018). Educators can then determine the areas of interest of each student based on their assessment of the skills to which the student has been exposed (Cavendish & Connor, 2018). Individual planning for transition is essential to maintain the student-centered process.

Lombardi et al. (2018) stated that the plan and preparation must be person centered, and the suggestion of a career path should occur after observing the SWDs' interest (Pacheco et al., 2018). The input of the student in determining their postschool career path is therefore important, and educators should seek to understand the desires, interests, and plans of SWDs. During the school years of SWDs, all the relevant stakeholders, including parents and teachers, need to

correspond frequently to assess student talents and to discover potential career paths (Satsangi et al., 2020). Educators who demonstrate concern at an earlier stage of transition planning may yield a better-planned career path and future for SWDs (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017). Motivation and support are the two important aspects in SWDs' transition planning process into adulthood (Bruhn et al., 2016; Pacheco et al., 2018)

Inspiration and Motivation. SWDs need support and sometimes continuous external motivation to sustain focus and remain determined during the transition process (Bruhn et al., 2016; Pacheco et al., 2018). Motivating students in the classroom can be challenging, so using computer applications to help engage SWDs can help maintain enthusiasm (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017). Giving SWDs challenging tasks that match students' material, interest, and knowledge helps maintain engagement (Bruhn et al., 2016). According to Brand et al. (2013), when students want to do something, they can learn new skills. SWDs need continuous encouragement to achieve their goals regarding the role they play in the community and family. When educators are encouraging, motivating, and supportive, the postsecondary transition process for SWDs is more successful (Qian et al., 2018). Collaboration is critical to overcoming barriers to successful transition.

Barriers to Successful Transitions

For the transition of SWDs from school to college or career work to be successful, barriers must be understood. Chen et al. (2019) stated that barriers influence the outcomes of the transition process for most SWDs. Barriers include failure to allow SWDs to have a functional role in the planning process and lack of collaboration of external agencies to improve success. Chen et al. found that, to overcome such barriers, educators first must identify the barriers and

then deal with them by collaboratively teaming with all parties in the student's life to reduce the effect of such issues. Additionally, barriers may be systemic (Pacheco et al., 2018).

Finding good employment opportunities is a challenge for SWDs. According to Hall et al. (2018), employment is a key defining factor for all adults, including students with learning disabilities, and finding employment is more difficult for SWDs than for the average adult. This difficulty occurs, in part, because SWDs rarely receive vocational training (Bumble et al., 2017). SWDs who receive vocational training in the high school setting have a better opportunity of acquiring employment once they transition to the community and adulthood. Experience and training are key requirements for employment, and SWDs therefore should be exposed to normal work environments to help them gain and maintain employment (Bumble et al., 2017; Pacheco et al., 2018). SWDs should experience part-time employment opportunities as part of their transition training, thereby increasing the possibilities of obtaining part- or full-time employment upon graduation (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017).

The Influence of Part-Time Employment on Future Success

Gauthier-Boudreault et al. (2017) reported that SWDs who were able to maintain a job while still in school had a higher chance of having productive employment as adults than those who did not have a job while in school. SWDs need to learn the importance of securing a job at a young age. Internships are one avenue by which SWDs can gain information on future career possibilities. Evidence has shown that SWDs who participated in internships strengthened their skills and increased their chances of actual employment following the transition to the community from high school (Chen et al., 2019). When high school SWDs maintained employment and internships, they cultivated a sense of responsibility and obligation towards the community and

were more likely to pursue career opportunities, thus creating a more successful transition to the community (Kurth et al., 2017).

SWDs who can maintain a job are likely to be self-directed in future exploration of job and career possibilities. Nolan and Gleeson (2017) suggested that maintaining a job in high school often indicates a career path for SWDs. Having a job often builds character for young people, including those with disabilities. Even jobs that do not fundamentally relate to the future career of the students have been found to contribute to their success as adults, which means that the benefit was more about the character of the students than about their intelligence or skills (Francis et al., 2018). The review process for curriculum career preparation in the high school should be systemically appraised and transition outcomes evaluated to determine the effectiveness of transition preparation services.

Overview of Curriculum Revision in Recent Years

The education system for SWDs is under consistent review and reformation. To improve the education system for SWDs, continuous review of the strategic planning process design to enhance the overall career and academic skills for students is necessary. According to a study by White et al. (2017), the best reforms in education for SWD are evidence based. To improve students' transition, it is important to analyze historical data on the rates and reasons for effective transition, so researchers are knowledgeable regarding effective methods (Boyd et al., 2019).

The Role of Civic Organizations and Advocacy Groups

SWDs, as a civic group of individuals, require self-advocacy and civic representation for their concerns to be addressed by society. According to Mazzotti et al. (2018), self-advocacy plays a key role in educating and training SWDs. Advocacy groups and civic organizations also help inform decision-making for stakeholders and legislation that affects public policy on

education for SWDs (Trollor et al., 2018). Representation for SWDs from educators, service providers, the community, and family can have a positive influence to expand opportunities in developing educational goals and employment skills for SWDs (Francis et al., 2018).

Importance of Formal Evaluations

In contrast to summative evaluation, formative evaluation is key and most applicable to SWDs. Formative evaluations are useful in that they provide guidance throughout the course (Alba-Dorado, 2016). Formative evaluation also ensures that the instructor does not lose the audience. This form of evaluation helps guide the students' next course of action and therefore is intended to inform and not push the students. Formative evaluation provides the tutor with a variety of data through observing, interacting, and testing the students after every topic or subtopic is taught. Students can identify mistakes and quickly make corrections to achieve the goal. Students gradually adapt to exam questions and consequently come to an agreement that tests are not meant to scare students but to provide feedback. These small quizzes done at the end of topics provide students with better techniques for tackling problems. In this regard, the feedback from the tests also guides the ITP design process by providing individualistic information on the transitional curve for individual students (Alba-Dorado, 2016).

Implications

The review of literature included a discussion of the transition services suggested for SWDs to have a successful transition to adulthood. The review also included the perceptions of educators in the community regarding the transition process, providing a foundation for this study. By examining the design and implementation of the transition process from the perspectives of general and special educators, I identified emerging themes from the data, which could be connected to previous literature. This information increased my understanding of

potential issues within the academic curriculum and how vital helping SWDs effectively transition is to the community.

Several implications result from this study. First, this study provides information to inform stakeholders about general and special education teachers' perceptions relating to the design and implementation practices in the transition process with SWDs. Second, the research study results provide educators with recommendations to enhance inclusion design and implementation practices. Third, this study reveals potential barriers and areas to address in the transition process for SWDs. Results can be used to create processes to help SWDs better adapt to the demands of modern work environments and shift from school to a community context.

The initial findings from this research study led to the development of a white paper that I will use to inform the transition practices by providing knowledge and recommendations on how instructors and related service personnel and outside agency personnel can effectively help SWDs transition into adulthood. Additionally, after data analysis, these data supported themes resulting in findings that entailed the creation of new processes and disability-based programs that may be used in the transition process to support greater independence for SWDs and higher graduation rates. The study results could help educators to become more knowledgeable regarding the transition needs of SWDs. With these findings, education personnel can function as stronger advocates for SWDs to help them use community or higher education supports after high school. Lastly, information from the findings from this study can support school officials in coordinating services with civil groups, policy makers, and advocacy groups towards improving SWD graduation rates and the success of SWDs' transition processes in the target district.

Summary

The literature review provided the foundation and context for understanding the problem addressed in this study, which was that only 37% of SWDs are graduating from high schools in the target district, compared to 79.9% of SWODs, which suggests that the transition design and implementation does not support SWDs' needs. Statewide, SWDs have not obtained postsecondary outcomes at a comparable rate to SWODs. Kohler et al. (2016) provided the conceptual framework through the transition-focused education theory, which indicated that strengthening comprehensive follow-up systems for transition outcomes is essential to supporting SWDs in pursuing recreation and leisure activities, engaging in the community, maintaining full- or part-time employment, and accessing postsecondary training and education. Transition activities are a coordinated set of activities specifically designed for SWDs, which focus on adult outcomes and include career-oriented courses, functional academics, extracurricular activities to promote socialization, and behavioral adjustment skills, provided through the high school curriculum and community settings. Researchers indicated that creating a transition plan with objectives is key to helping SWDs develop and solidify skills needed for transition from the high school to the community (Barkas et al., 2020; Kohler et al., 2016; Trollor et al., 2018). A prevocational and vocational assessment determines SWDs' strengths and limitations (Petcu et al., 2016). The students should be the center of the dialogue about their work interests and the ITP process necessary to help SWDs revise and clarify needs related to careers, job-seeking, vocational preparedness, attendance at a trade or technical school, self-advocacy, or independent living (Chen et al., 2019; Kohler et al., 2016).

General education and special education teachers must inform other stakeholders such as family members and community organizations about the transition framework that supports the

students to achieve a successful transition into postsecondary options following high school. Practices in transition-focused processes include (a) student-focused planning, (b) student development, (c) interagency coordination and collaboration with the school district staff, (d) interdisciplinary collaboration, and (e) family involvement (Kohler et al., 2016). Designing and implementing a local transition framework reflecting best practices such as the guidance provided by the Kohler et al. (2016) framework is essential to support the agreed-upon outcomes such as graduation, job attainment, and enrollment in postsecondary education institutions for all SWDs.

Educators need to implement a transition framework that focuses on the components of transition systems such as the transition-focused education theory developed by Kohler et al. (2016). The conceptual framework of this study emphasized the transition-focused education of SWDs. According to Kohler et al., the purpose of examining the transition from high school to adult life for these students is to gain an understanding of their needs for a more successful shift to a new environment. The implications of the study were that SWDs may improve their graduation outcomes and attainment of postsecondary goals as they transition into adulthood, if information gleaned from the study is used to improve the design and implementation of the transition process at the target site. Reviewing the important qualitative data from educators may lead to refining the transition system used at the target high schools so that SWDs may be successful in adulthood.

Section 2 of this project study includes a discussion of the methodology used to respond to the research question and subquestions described in Section 1. Also, I describe the qualitative design, the sampling procedures, data collection, and data analysis methods to answer the research questions so that the local gap in practice and local problem may be addressed. The other areas of the research study described in Section 2 include the results of the data analysis and

conclusion. Section 3 describes the project developed as a result of the study and presented as the Appendix. Finally, Section 4 contains reflections and conclusions.

Section 2: The Methodology

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of educators regarding the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at the high schools in the target district. The transition process relates to SWDs transitioning to adult life after high school. Transition processes for SWDs have been a topic of interest in the United States for years (Zhang et al., 2018). In this study, I focused on the perceptions of the general and special educators at the target site regarding the transition process for SWDs as they transition to postschool life. The study involved semistructured interviews with educators at the target high school site as well as district special education staff who had knowledge of the transition process for SWDs. To investigate the perceptions of the general and special educators regarding the transition planning process, one research question and two subquestions were used.

1. How do general and special educators perceive the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at high schools in the target district?

    1a. What do general and special educators perceive as strengths in the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at high schools in the target district?

    1b. What do general and special educators perceive as barriers in the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at high schools in the target district?

Within Section 2 of this project, I begin with a description of the basic qualitative design that I used to conduct this study. Next, I describe the sample, participants, and interview process, focusing on interviews with general and special educators with experience with the transition

process for SWDs at high schools in the target district in the southern United States. I explain the procedures used to collect and analyze the data as well as the instrumentation. Through general and special educator interviews, I determined how educators perceived transition services provided in the target high schools as SWDs transition from high school to postsecondary options. By employing a basic qualitative design, I collected rich data to provide detailed accounts of the perceptions of general and special educators in the district. I present the results from the data and discuss the evidence of quality. Finally, I describe the project developed based on the findings (see Appendix).

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

A qualitative design was chosen to align with the research questions and the processes in gaining the information needed to answer the research questions and address the problem that was investigated by this study, which was that only 37% of SWDs are graduating from high schools in the target district, compared to 79.9% of students without disabilities, suggesting that the transition design and implementation did not support SWDs' needs. The gap in practice was related to SWDs' graduation and postsecondary outcomes as compared to SWODs. The alignment of the design included interviews with general and special educators with knowledge of and experience in the transitioning of SWDs from high school to adulthood. A qualitative design was selected to help me gain an understanding of teachers' perceptions of the transition process for SWDs, using participants' views, opinions, and perceptions in their natural settings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Data collected using a qualitative design also provided a brief overview of the educators' insight about the transition processes as SWDs transition to adulthood. With this qualitative design, I gathered feedback from educators to gain a better understanding of the perception of the transition process. The research questions guided the development of interview questions, which were used to collect information from educators who assist in transition implementation processes for SWDs.

In this study, the aim was to understand the perceptions of educators of the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs as they graduate from high school. The method chosen for this study allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of a problem in transitioning SWDs from high school to community settings. After reviewing several qualitative methods, I chose a basic qualitative design as the most appropriate method to employ for this research study to gain a better understanding of the perception of the transition process as SWDs transition to adulthood, based on the context of the data (Creswell, 2018; Lodico et al., 2010; Yin, 2018).

Other qualitative methods, such as a phenomenological design, grounded theory, ethnography, and action research, were considered and rejected for specific rationales. A phenomenological approach was not considered as appropriate for this type of study. Researchers use this approach when participants share their experiences with the phenomenon being studied. Creswell and Creswell (2017) argued that a phenomenological approach focuses on exploring the experiences of individuals regarding a given phenomenon. A grounded theory approach was considered in the beginning stages of this study's development; however, a grounded theory approach was not a logical choice for this type of study, as a grounded theory approach develops a theory from the ground up or from the narrative data produced in a study (Lodico et al., 2010). I

did not plan to create a new theory, and using a grounded theory approach would have required systematic, in-depth repetition of the data, as Yin (2018) also posited; therefore, grounded theory would not have been appropriate for this type of study. I also considered an ethnographic design for this study but found it not to be appropriate because I would be spending limited time with the participants, and information obtained from the participants would not have qualified as a culturally intact unit (Lodico et al., 2010). Furthermore, the participants of the study were not considered a culture-sharing group of people. Thus, their beliefs, language, and shared behaviors were not indicative of a culturally knit unit of people (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Action research would not have been appropriate because information gained from the data would not have produced a quick change in the participants' immediate setting (Lodico et al., 2010). In other words, educators were not required to change their methods or instructional strategies (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Additionally, educators use action research to produce new strategies in their classroom instruction; therefore, action research was not an appropriate design for this research study. Based on the distinctions of other methods in research, a basic qualitative design was the most appropriate method to explain the perceptions of educators—their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings—about the transition process for SWDs.

According to Lodico et al. (2010) and Creswell and Poth (2018), using multiple perspectives and sources is an essential element in using a narrative or verbal means of discovery. Therefore, this research study was structured to seek a better understanding from educators' perspectives as they related to the transition process for SWDs at the target site. I made efforts to understand the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs by interviewing general and special education personnel at two high schools as well as the district office in the target district.

Participants

In this section, I describe the population of the study, the target population of secondary-level educators, and the criteria for sample selection. I justify the small sample size and explain sampling procedures and access to participants. I describe rapport building during the interviews and outline the ethical protections for all participants.

Population

The setting for this study was a rural public school district in the southern United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), the district enrolled 2,724 students in the 2019–2020 school year, of whom 686 had IEPs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 8.4% of children enrolled in the public school district have a disability. The district has 10 schools, including two high schools, two middle/junior high schools, three elementary schools, one career/technical center, one alternative school, and one attendance center. During the 2019–2020 school year, 17 SWDs received services at the secondary level, according to the district special education director.

The target district had 437 staff, including 272 certified educators and 46 special education teachers. I included participants at the two high school campuses and special education central office staff due to the small size of the district and small population and the focus of transition planning for SWDs. The target high schools employed 13 general education educators and 10 special education educators, for a total of 23 educators who were potential participants at the target high schools. Additionally, two central office leaders who formerly taught special education at the target high schools, and who had knowledge or experience with the transition process for SWDs, were asked to participate. Therefore, the recruitment pool consisted of 25 potential participants.

Criteria for Participant Selection

I used the following criteria to select participants: (a) general or special educators, (b) knowledge or experience with the transition process for SWDs, and (c) employed in the target district. The demographic questionnaire was used to confirm that participants who self-selected into the study met the study criteria. The invitation was sent to 23 educators at the high schools. From the 23 invitations sent to the high school participant pool, eight participants responded to the invitations by returning their consent and demographic questionnaire and were screened to obtain the required sample size using inclusion criteria. Of those, two teachers then opted not to participate. Then, two central office leaders who were former special education teachers at the target high schools agreed to participate by returning their consent forms and the demographic questionnaire. The participants who returned their consent form and demographic questionnaire indicated that they had experience or knowledge of the transition process for SWDs; therefore, they met the criteria for participating in the research study. Demographic details, such as years of teaching special education, years of serving as an administrator, knowledge of or experience with the transition process for SWDs, and degrees obtained, were requested for potential data analysis purposes.

Sample Size

Qualitative research designs only require a small number of cases to explore a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A purposeful sampling of the target population of 23 general and special educators at high schools in the target district served as the main participant sample for this study; two former special educators at the high schools currently working in the central district office were recruited as well. The desired sample size was 12–16. The final sample size was six. The sample included two central office leaders who had served as special educators

at the high schools in the target district and thus had knowledge of or experience with the transition process for SWDs, two current high school special educators, and two current general educators at the high schools. The small number of participants allowed me to examine the perceptions of educators in an in-depth manner and to focus on the experiences of each participant, thereby allowing the development of descriptive data (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Vasileiou et al. (2018) noted that smaller samples are used for qualitative studies and allow for saturation to be reached, which is often signaled when redundancy is observed. Small sample sizes are appropriate for qualitative studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2017); this study involved six educators, which is adequate for a qualitative design.

Sampling Procedures

Purposeful sampling was used in this qualitative design because of the need to obtain rich information about the transition process by selecting participants who met the qualifications set forth in this study. In purposeful sampling, the goal is to select participants who may be able to offer information related to the research questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2001). Therefore, purposeful sampling was the most applicable sampling method for this study because of the small size of the school district in which the study took place as well as the limited number of participants involved with the transition process in the target district. Through purposeful sampling, I gathered rich, informative data that provided information to formatively assess the transition process as perceived by the educators, which allowed me to identify possible strengths and areas for improvement regarding the transition process.

Participants self-reported knowledge or experience on the demographic questionnaire, which followed the consent form. The participants within this study provided pertinent

information about their experiences with SWDs and the postsecondary transition process, and therefore they needed knowledge and experience of the transition process.

Eight of the high school educators invited agreed to participate and returned their notice of consent and demographic questionnaires. Additionally, two central office leaders who met the participant criteria as educators responded to participate in the study. I followed up with an email to schedule the interviews. At that time, two of the high school participants indicated that they would prefer not to participate in the study. Consequently, I removed them from the study as they rescinded their consent. Thus, the final sample was six: two central office leaders who used to be special educators at the high schools, two current high school special educators, and two current general educators at the high schools. One participant was employed at the first high school, and one central office leader participant formerly worked at the first high school. Three participants were employed at the second high school, and one central office leader participant formerly worked at the second high school.

Access to Participants

I completed and obtained an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application through Walden University and received approval through Walden IRB with the approval number of 01-24-20-0411227. Once the Walden IRB approval was obtained, I sent the IRB approval to the district gatekeeper. I obtained official approval from the district gatekeeper to conduct the study. Next, I emailed the district gatekeeper approval to the administrators of the two high schools to seek permission to send the Letter of Invitation to the educators to conduct the study. I arranged a meeting with the principals in the target district high schools to answer any questions that they had regarding the study. The initial call was in August 2019. I took a leave of absence and was not enrolled from May 2019 until November 2020. In June 2020, I visited personally with the

principal of one high school and emailed the principal at the second high school. The target school site principals were informed of the recruitment process and the purpose of the study. The school administrators gave permission to proceed by contacting potential participants.

I obtained the names and email addresses of the educators at the two high school sites and central office leaders who had been special educators at the high schools in the study district from the human resources director. I invited the participants via email by sending the Letter of Invitation containing an embedded link to the notice of consent followed by the demographic questionnaire. Only I knew the identity of the participants who returned the notice of consent and demographic questionnaire. To ensure that educators understood how the interviews were to be conducted, I explained the process in the notice of consent that was sent electronically to the sample participants. The notice of consent described the nature and the purpose of the study, the length of the interview, the time that it would take to complete the demographic questionnaire, and the member-checking process. In the notice of consent, I informed the participants of the voluntary nature of the study and their ability to withdraw at any time with no consequences. The minimal risk of the study as well as participant confidentiality and privacy were described. I monitored the responses from the educators frequently. After 1 week elapsed with no response to the Letter of Invitation from an invited educator, I emailed the potential participant again, as approved by the IRB committee process.

Researcher–Participant Relationship

The way that the invitation and informed consent process were managed served to build a positive researcher–participant relationship through transparency. I explained the protections and rights of the participants, confidentiality, and member checking. I shared sample interview questions to promote understanding and transparency of the data collection process. The informed

consent process ensured that all participants understood their expected commitment to the research study and expectations as participants in the study.

A researcher–participant relationship was developed prior to conducting the interviews to ensure that participants were comfortable providing their perceptions about the transition process with me. At the beginning of each interview, I reminded each participant that their contribution was valuable, that their identity would be protected, and that they could be honest with me. I followed an interview protocol so each interviewee was asked the same basic questions. I have never worked at the district and was never a supervisor of any of the teachers interviewed; therefore, I had no position of power.

Maintaining good relations with the participants is vital to gaining trust and credibility (Lodico et al., 2010). I strived to create a comfortable environment by building rapport with the participants. The conversations were light hearted and nonjudgmental. Initial discussions included the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) virus pandemic and the impact the virus would have on the educational setting. Finally, interviews were not conducted during students' instructional time and did not interfere with the teachers' academic protocols because interviews were conducted over the phone, as COVID-19 protocols were being followed throughout the United States.

Protection of Participants

Participants were reminded that participation was voluntary. I reviewed information about the study, consent, and the confidentiality process with each participant individually at the beginning of the interview and provided each participant a copy of the informed consent form for their files. In this study, participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study any time during the research process. I safeguarded each participant's identity by assigning numeric pseudonyms prior to each interview. A pseudonym was used to obscure the names or

identification of the participants to protect their identity when reporting the findings from this study. I made every effort to ensure the confidentiality of each participant by also using their personal, nonwork emails following the invitation process. The participants were reminded that they could withdraw their consent at any time during the interview or research process.

Electronic data are protected in password-secure files on my home computer, and all nonelectronic data are stored securely in my home desk, which only I can access. I will store these data for 5 years, per Walden University protocol. I used numeric pseudonyms rather than personal identifiers in all reporting of this study. Additionally, personal or career details about the participants were not provided to protect their identities in this small district.

Data Collection

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of educators regarding the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at the high schools in the target district. Data collection methods used for this study were key to understanding educators' perceptions of the transition design and implementation process for SWDs. The data collected in this study were retrieved from semistructured interviews with general and special education educators who had knowledge or experience with the transition process for SWDs. Two of the six participants were central office leaders who had knowledge or experience of the transition process and had been employed as special educators in the target high schools.

Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic questionnaire was used to confirm participants who self-selected into the study met the study criteria. Demographic details, such as years of teaching special education, years of serving as an administrator, type of knowledge of or experience with the transition

process for SWDs, and degrees obtained, were requested for potential data analysis purposes. Contact information such as nonwork phone number and email address were requested to promote confidentiality. All participants provided their nonwork phone and email address for communication.

Interview Protocol

Interview data were collected for this study, which provided abundant information and were analyzed to discern patterns from the participants' responses (Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). Interviews are intentional and planned conversations with an individual or a group of individuals (Lodico et al., 2010). Creswell (2018) contended that interviews are useful when participants cannot be observed. Interviews also afford the advantage of allowing the researcher to structure and control information obtained from the participants (Creswell, 2018). In addition, Yin (2018) noted gaining multiple participants for a qualitative study to consent to the interviews allowed for more valuable data to be collected. Merriam (2009) suggested that interviews are valuable when an interest in past events cannot be replicated.

In this study, I interviewed six participants to explore their perceptions of the transition design and implementation process in the target district. Participants could respond freely to the interview questions, as the interviews were semistructured to facilitate a robust response (S. Franklin, 2014). The goal of the interview was to obtain rich data in the participants' words, as each participant was allowed to respond without premise or misunderstanding of this study's purpose. The protocol was designed to align with the research questions and to address the purpose of the study.

With the assistance of experts, I developed a qualitative interview protocol to gather participants' interview responses. An interview protocol is used to collect relevant data from the

participants in a consistent manner (Creswell, 2018). To minimize bias within the questions being asked, I asked two PhD experts in education, who were not participants in the study or members of the dissertation committee, to examine the research questions and draft interview questions. The experts had 5–10 years of experience assisting SWDs during the transition phase of their education. I asked the experts to review the questions and provide feedback regarding the quality of the interview questions. I received feedback and made all necessary revisions for clarity and to address the research questions. I used one protocol for both general and special education teachers. Questions asked, for example, about respondents' perception of interagency collaboration and the transition process and parents' understanding of the transition process. Interview questions focused on each of the five practices in transition-focused education: (a) student-focused planning, (b) student development, (c) interagency coordination collaboration with the school district staff, (d) interdisciplinary collaboration, and (e) family involvement.

Sufficiency of Data Collection Instrument to Answer Research Questions

As mentioned above, two PhD experts with experience in the transition process for SWDs reviewed the interview questions to clarify any ambiguous or rhetorical questions. The experts stated that the questions from the interview protocol were appropriate and aligned with the research questions formulated for the study. The interview protocol contained 17 questions relative to answering the research questions for the study. Interview data were obtained and analyzed from the study participants to answer the research questions. Research and interview questions aligned with the Kohler et al. (2016) transition-focused conceptual framework. To answer the research question and subquestions, information obtained from the participants' interviews would be sufficient to obtain their perceptions of design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs in the target site.

Specifically, Interview Questions 1, 2, and 15 asked about strengths in the process, addressing Research Subquestion 1a regarding strengths. Interview Questions 3–14 aligned with any of the research questions, depending on whether participant responses indicated strengths or barriers. Responses to Interview Question 17 aligned with Research Subquestion 1b regarding barriers. All interview questions related to the design and implementation of the transition process.

Interview Process and Gathering and Recording Data

To gain the information needed for the research study, one-on-one phone interviews were scheduled. The interviews were scheduled with each participant with the expectation of up to 45 min in a private place. All interviews were scheduled via email and held via phone; the educators could call from their home or work site. The interviews were semistructured to allow participants to answer open-ended questions to solicit conversational responses. Respondents were asked to examine their perceptions of the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs. The open-ended inquiry allowed me to insert additional probing questions if needed (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). All questions were focused on obtaining general and special educators' perceptions of the transition design and implementation process for SWDs from high school to the community. Data collection involving semistructured interviews allows for the use of probes during the interview process while adhering to the protocol. According to Lodico et al. (2010), a probe is a follow-up question asked for clarification about a response. As the study was focused on learning about general and special educators' perceptions about the transition processes for SWDs, it was important that these participants openly discussed their perceived role, actions, and recommendations. Probes were used depending on the participant's response to questions. A

slight pause between questioning was also taken for notetaking regarding the participant responses.

Recording the interview preserved the integrity of the data (Lodico et al., 2010) so that the participants' responses were captured exactly as they responded. The audio recording was the primary source used to write the responses from each participant. None of the participants objected to audio taping during the interview process. I also took notes that reflected the participants' responses. The taped recording was used to ensure accuracy and data integrity; additionally, approval was granted on tape by the participant to voluntarily participate in the interview (see De La Paz & Butler, 2018).

At the beginning of the interview process, I provided a copy of the informed consent form for the participants' files and reviewed the purpose of the study, procedures, and assurance of confidentiality. I reviewed with all participants how a numerical pseudonym would be given for confidentiality. At the conclusion of the interview process, I reiterated the confidentiality of the participants' interview and thanked the participants for their time and participation in the research study. I allowed time for the participant to ask for clarification for any part of the interview process they might not have understood during the interview, as well as offering additional time for them to reflect on the process.

The audio recordings of the interview sessions were transcribed within 2 days of the interview by a professional transcription service. To uphold the confidentiality and privacy of participants, the transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement. All recordings and transcriptions used a coded number rather than the participant's name. Transcripts were verified by the researcher prior to analysis. I verified each transcript by reading it twice while listening to the

audio recording. During the researcher verification process, I redacted any potentially identifying information, including any references to persons, organizations, and locations.

Systems for Keeping Track of Data

The data were organized by numbering the data file from each participant. The numbers assigned to participants were not assigned in the order of the interviews to further protect confidentiality. Only I had a list of participants' names and contact information, which I used for member checking. I also took field notes and personal logs during interviews.

Access to Participants

Following IRB approval, the district gatekeeper gave approval to conduct the study. I contacted the two high school administrators for permission to recruit participants. The human resources director gave me email information for potential participants so I could invite them to participate. I invited the participants via email by sending the Letter of Invitation containing an embedded link to the notice of consent followed by the demographic questionnaire. Following positive responses, I scheduled phone interviews with participants.

Role of the Researcher

My role in this study was to interview the recruited participants who met the criteria through conducting face-to-face semistructured interviews. I am not a current or former employee of the school district of this study. During the time this study was conducted, I had been employed for 19 years at a state agency that services people with developmental disabilities. The facility is recognized as an intermediate care facility for individuals with mental retardation (ICF/MR). I taught preschool for 7 years before taking the position of special education teacher in a middle school in a central school district. I taught at the middle school for 3 years before taking the position at the ICF/MR in 2001. After leaving the middle school to begin at the ICF/MR, I

had no further contact with anyone in the school district since my departure. As the study site is about 40 miles from my previous district, I had no previous interaction with the participants in this study.

I also have a family member with a disability, so I endeavored to avoid letting personal biases interfere with data collection and analysis. As Yin (2015) suggested, I remained observant and mindful of my potential for bias to surface at any point. I noted my potential bias in a field journal, as described in detail in the Confirmability section. Corbin and Strauss (2015) implied that it is virtually impossible to become immersed in research data and not be affected by information revealed in the data. Reflective notes helped to keep my focus on the research study while collecting and analyzing the data. I have not supervised any of the participants, and I did not know any of the recruited participants. In the next section, I discuss the data analysis methods used in this study.

Data Analysis

I used a basic qualitative design to explore the perceptions of general and special educators in the target district regarding the transition design and implementation process. Implementing a qualitative design was appropriate for this study because of the lack of understanding of perceptions of general and special educators in the transition planning process for SWDs in the target district. A qualitative design was vital to this study to reveal information acquired through analyzing qualitative data in the participants' own words (Merriam, 2009). Using this design to analyze the data allowed the researcher to search for patterns in the data to develop themes (Lodico et al., 2010).

The interview sessions were recorded, transcribed, assigned a numerical ID, analyzed, and stored for future research use. Participants were made aware of the recording of the interview

in the consent form. However, if participants did not want the interview recorded, they could have signed consent for me to take copious notes of their responses. All participants consented to the audio recording of the interview. Recording the interview also reduced bias and maintained ethics. The audio recording was transcribed and used as the primary source to minimize bias. The recording also verified ethical conduct and that approval was granted by the participant to voluntarily participate in the interview (see De La Paz & Butler, 2018).

After conducting the semistructured interviews, the participant's transcript was assigned an identification number and coded. The first step was to read the transcripts thoroughly to gain familiarity with the data, as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2007). The responses were used to find common codes and categories (Rimmerman, 2013). After the commonalities among the data were discerned, I completed coding and categorizing of these data gathered in the interviews with the participants. I sought to identify themes as I reviewed all these data by examining patterns and relationships within and across participants' interview data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

I totaled the codes retrieved during the review of interview data to obtain categories. I included field notes and personal reflections recorded during each interview under the designated theme and category. Reflective notes help me maintain my focus on the research study while collecting and analyzing the data. I revisited sections of reviewed data for emerging categories that might have been overlooked during the initial review. Saturation was achieved when no additional themes emerged with additional of new data.

Coding of the interview data yielded the codes presented in Table 4. Then, the codes were combined into categories. Dominant categories were combined into overarching themes. Table 5 shows how the codes were combined to create the themes of the study.

Table 4

Data Analysis Codes

Code	Participants contributing ($N = 6$)
Integrating collaboration with outside organizations	5
Navigating the adult world	5
Assessments determine progress and potential	4
Curriculum and learning strategies	4
Interdisciplinary collaboration central to student support	4
Lack of parental involvement and understanding	4
Self-advocacy and interpersonal skills	4
Assessing student vision	3
Centering student interests and needs	3
Connecting interests to skill development needs	3
Connecting students to resources	3
Daily living and meeting basic physical needs	3
Hands-on opportunities	3
Improving parental involvement	3
Potential service needs	3
Practical exposure shapes realistic vision	3
Resistance from parents	3
Transition services designed to empower	3

Table 5

Development of Themes From Data Analysis Codes

Theme	Codes
1. Educators perceive collaboration as a strength of the transition planning process.	Assessing student vision Centering student interests and needs Connecting interests to skill development needs Integrating collaboration with outside organizations Interdisciplinary collaboration central to student support Practical exposure shapes realistic vision
2. Educators perceive the use of student data and engagement of supports are strengths of the transition process.	Assessments determine progress and potential Connecting students to resources Daily living and meeting basic physical needs Hands-on opportunities Navigating the adult world Potential service needs Self-advocacy and interpersonal skills
3. Educators perceive that underinformed or resistant parents can present barriers to collaboration on behalf of the SWDs in the transition process.	Improving parental involvement Lack of parental involvement and understanding Resistance from parents
4. Educators perceive that curriculum that emphasizes academics over practical skills can impede transition success.	Curriculum and learning strategies Transition services designed to empower

The primary research question used to guide this study was the following: How do general and special educators perceive the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at high schools in the target district? The primary research question was answered by answering the two subquestions derived from it related to strengths and weaknesses in the

transition process. This presentation of the results is organized by research subquestion. Within the discussion related to each subquestion, results are organized by emergent themes. Themes 1 and 2 answered Research Subquestion 1a. Themes 3 and 4 answered Research Subquestion 1b.

Results for Research Subquestion 1a

What do general and special educators perceive as strengths in the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs in high schools in the target district? Two major themes emerged during data analysis to answer this subquestion: (a) Educators perceive collaboration as a strength of the transition planning process, and (b) educators perceive the use of student data and engagement of supports are strengths of the transition process.

These themes are discussed in separate subsections.

Theme 1: Educators Perceive Collaboration as a Strength of the Transition Planning Process

All six participants described the collaborative nature of transition planning as a salient strength. Transition planning incorporated ongoing and frequent communication and cooperation between the SWDs, educators, community businesses, and often families. Student involvement was ensured through interviews and assessments, conducted at least annually, to assess the SWDs' interests, aspirations, and expectations. Educators used student input to develop specific objectives of transition planning. Parental collaboration was gained in some instances through interviews and conferences to obtain input about the SWDs' strengths, interests, and support needs as well as the parents' needs, goals, and expectations. Ongoing parental collaboration was described by some participants through frequent teacher-to-parent communications and through educators' availability to address questions, concerns, or information. Interdisciplinary

collaboration also occurred between educators to ensure coordination of supports in alignment with the evolving transition plan and the IEP for each student. However, one participant noted uncooperative agencies were a problem.

The SWDs' collaboration in transition planning involved providing input about goals, interests, and preferences to contribute to directing the planning process. Participant 1 (P1) stated that the development of a transition plan began with soliciting the SWD's input: "We always start with the students. . . . We interview them. We get an interest inventory." The only exceptions to this practice, P1 stated, were in instances when the SWD was unable to provide the needed information: "When we have students with severe and profound disabilities, we have to get a lot of input from the parents." P6 described the interest inventory as an assessment administered either electronically or on paper, depending on the SWD's capabilities, and added that the assessment matches the student's preferences with suitable jobs. P3 expressed a similar understanding of the interest inventory, stating, "It looks at the students' strengths and weaknesses and it tries to place them in an area where they could be successful."

P1 described the application of the interest inventory results, stating that educators used them to focus instruction on strengthening skills the SWD's goals required: "We will work on those skills that he might be lacking to help him to do the best thing he can do in order to achieve his goal." As a specific example of how teachers applied interest inventory results to guide transition planning, P1 reported, "If [the SWD] really wants to go to college, then he's going to have to take the ACT. And so, we need to do some vocabulary development. We need to put him in an ACT prep class."

Although interest inventory results were an important consideration for teachers when developing a transition plan, teachers would work to steer students away from unrealistic aspirations toward more feasible ones. P2 explained,

> A kid with a 75 IQ, and they tell you they want to be a doctor, well, that's not realistic. So, we say there's other things you can be in the medical field. We try to redirect them in a positive way.

P3 described the inclusion of the SWD as a collaborator in transition planning as a process of developing a definition of success that was appropriate for a specific student, given their individual wants and strengths: "When you look at success as being in different forms, it doesn't look the same per student. . . . You look at what he can do, and you place him in that area where he can succeed." P1 expressed a similar perception of the need to help students adjust unrealistic expectations while redirecting them toward positive alternatives, stating that incorporating interest inventory results into transition planning could involve "helping [the SWD] see that sometimes they're not on that path [they would like to be on], but giving some alternative."

Parents were the second key collaborator in transition planning, but their role was different from that of the SWD. Although parents' goals and expectations were assessed and taken into consideration, P1 stated that the SWDs' interests and goals took precedence in directing transition planning: "We really want families involved in the whole process, . . . but we tell the parents that it's not always about what you want." P1 elaborated on the questions asked parents as transition-planning collaborators:

> Does he know how to go to the grocery store and take a look and buy groceries? Does he know anything about budgeting? What areas do you think your child really needs help in?

> And we give them a list. We're looking at his social skills, the ability to communicate with other people, his independence level. Is he a self-starter? Can he follow directions? So, just a long list of things that we asked the parents. A lot of times, we get some good information from them. Most of them have a very clear picture of what their child needs.

To promote the SWD's autonomy, parental collaboration in transition planning was typically limited to providing input on support needs, with the student's interests guiding the development of overarching goals. P1 emphasized, "The focus is really on the student and what the student says they want to do." P2 stated that even though parental goals were subordinated to the SWD's interests, parental pushback was rare, with most parents trusting educators to work in the student's best interests: "[SWDs' parents] trust us. They've told us we trust you; we know you're helping our kid."

Parent collaborators also performed the role of implementing the ITP and IEP in the home, as P3 indicated: "I guess you can say [transition plan implementation is] a wraparound service at home as well as at school because the parents work with [SWDs] as well." To coordinate in-school and at-home supports, teachers communicated frequently with parents, P3 said: "We're constantly communicating back and forth with the parents to let them know what [SWDs] need, what's going on, how they did today, what's happening. We send home the progress reports as well." To ensure smooth collaboration between parents and educators, teachers invited parents to reach out at any time with questions or concerns, as P4 stated: "If a parent has an issue, they can call me anytime, day or night. I want them to be as comfortable as they can. They need to know something, call me, email me, or text me."

The third form of collaboration involved in transition planning was the interdisciplinary coordination of supports between SWDs' teachers. P3 described the nature of interdisciplinary

teacher collaborations: “As a team, we get together and discuss the areas to focus on. . . . We talk to each other; we see where the weaknesses are and the strengths.” P4 added that teacher collaborations were guided by goals and benchmarks described in the SWD’s IEP, saying that team meetings involved “going back to IEP, making sure that those needs are met, and every other team meeting, the team agreeing that this student is well prepared.”

According to responses from participants in this study, collaboration is key to developing strong transition plans for SWDs. Frequent communication between teachers, SWDs, parents, and team members to address the goals, interests, and preferences of the SWD must be included in transition planning. Several participants noted that interest inventories listing the students’ strengths and weaknesses assist in guiding SWDs into a field of interest where they may be the most successful.

Parents were included as a vital part of the collaborative efforts of the interdisciplinary team. Parents could implement important aspects of the transition plan in the home environment to make the transition plan stronger to allow the students to maintain a cohesive engagement of transition components in the school setting as well as in the home. SWDs need collaborative interdisciplinary supports that allow the transition process to be cohesive in focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of the SWD.

Additionally, SWDs with unrealistic aspirations could be redirected to positive alternatives, as noted by two participants in the study. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of educators regarding the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at the high schools in the target district. Communication between all stakeholders is central to the effective implementation of the transition planning for SWDs. Communication between all parties involved to address the design and implementation of the

transition processes could offer a more consistent plan for the successful move of SWDs to adult settings. Understanding the transition process while determining the needs and employing appropriate supports SWDs need to be successful strengthens the transition process, as discussed in Theme 2

Theme 2: *Educators Perceive the Use of Student Data and Engagement of Supports Are Strengths of the Transition Process*

All six participants described using assessments, student data, and the early engagement of supports to meet SWDs' needs as salient strengths of transition planning. As P1 stated, "We are always looking at the different pictures and types of data." The interest inventory described earlier was only one of several assessments used. Participants described assessments to determine progress and potential, assessment of daily living and meeting basic physical needs, and assessment of needs connected to employment. Thorough transition assessments were conducted annually to identify and monitor support needs. P1 stated, "We always have to do what's considered a transition assessment with our kids. We have to do something every year. . . . We are always looking at the different pictures and types of data." P1 also referred to the use of transition assessments to guide preparations for continuity of support: "We look at our kids and we determine other services are you [the SWD] going to need once you leave, the services that you're actually going to need." P1 described in more detail some of the specific, potential support needs educators assessed to guide transition planning:

> Are they [the SWD] going to need some help figuring out how to have a balanced life, that recreational piece? Are they going to need help with daily living? . . . Are they going to need help with figuring out where they want to go, what they want to do; what are their

> financial needs going to be? . . . Are you [the SWD] going to need some support on the job? Are you going to need a job coach? . . . What are your physical needs like today?

P5 emphasized the importance of ensuring continuity of supports in preparation for the expiration of school benefits when the SWD reached the age of 21. The overall purpose of transition assessments was to ensure that transition planning would "cover those areas that are important to their lives and groups that they can reach out to," P5 stated. P5 added that the foci of assessments were often determined by other aspects of the SWD's ITP, as when the plan included commuting to a job: "If a student relies on a bus, we have to talk about, 'When you're out of school, the bus is not going to pick you up, so if you have this job, how are you going to get there?'" P5 added that future needs often could be assessed and anticipated based on current support use, giving the following example: "Say somebody receives speech services in school. Well, when talking to them about once you get out of school, [you say,] 'If you're having trouble with this, maybe some organizations are out there that you could reach out to.'"

P2 was the participant who spoke the least about assessment. This participant equated the word *assessment* with the interest inventory and IEP. However, P2 did not the importance of determining a student's needed functional skills.

The purpose of detailed assessments and use of student data was to ensure continuity of support across a range of life domains to ensure the SWDs' needs continued to be met after school supports expired. Assessments are collected from various individuals on the IEP team and may include an orthopedic evaluation, physical therapist evaluation, educational assessment, vocational rehabilitation representative assessment, psychologist assessment for behavioral interventions, and parental assessments of student needs. For example, P1 described the parent transition survey:

> Some of the questions that we asked on the survey would be, you know, where do they see their child in 5 years? Where do they see their child in 10 years? What is their child interested in? What do they really see them doing? You know, what are the child's strengths? What are some of his weaknesses? Has he ever held a job? If he had, how does he do on the job? Does he know anything about banking? Does he have any chores at home? Does he know how to go to the grocery store and take a look and buy groceries? Does he know anything about budgeting? . . . Is he a self-starter? Can he follow directions?

Further, P1 described assessment of learning styles and reading and math skills. P2 also described learning style assessment, the interest inventory, and IEP-related assessments. P4 noted informal parent assessments as well as assessments of functional skills, in addition to the interest inventory and IEP assessments.

Additionally, educators asked questions to help assess students' needs related to employment help and functional skills. Participants expressed that the early engagement of those supports according to comprehensively assessed needs was a major strength of the transition planning process. P6 expressed how comprehensive assessments influenced the engagement of comprehensive supports, describing assessment as "an opportunity to outline the needs for children once they exit high school and putting them in touch with resources that will help them." Based on assessment of SWDs' interests and needs, P1 stated, "We try to reach out to those other agencies that can actually help the kids do whatever it is that they want to do." P1 added that future supports were engaged in advance to ensure continuity as the SWD neared the final year of high school: "We start reaching out to other agencies to say, "Hey, we have this kid, can you help

him?" It might be a place where they evaluate his job skills [or] where we know he will get vocational rehabilitation."

Teachers worked throughout the transition planning process to assist parents and SWDs in accessing appropriate outside resources for continuity of support after graduation. P1 stated, "Our goal is always to get our parents connected with some of the outside agency. And over the years, I think we've done a fantastic job." As an example of educators' role in connecting parents to outside agencies, P1 said, "I talk with people at the agency and I get information from them. And then I would always share that information with parents. We say [to parents], 'You contact this person, contact that person.'" P3 emphasized the need for proactive identification and contact with agencies to meet SWDs' support needs by referring to the substantial delays that could occur before support became available: "It's really important for [SWDs] to be linked up with the agencies out there that they can turn to for help, housing, the waiver. The waiver, I think right now it's about a 10-year waiting list." P3 reported that for this reason, she often had to surprise parents of elementary school children by advising them to add the SWD to the waitlist immediately, a decade in advance of the support need.

Teachers also connected students to postgraduation supports indirectly, by teaching students to communicate effectively enough to express needs and find supports independently. P5 described effective communication as many SWDs' most urgent need: "The most basic need is communication skills. If they have a particular need, they'll be able to express that need to others." P3 agreed with P5 in describing effective communication skills as many SWDs' most urgent need for ensuring continuity of support after exiting high school: "Communication is one of the biggest factors that a student needs for transitioning." P3 added adding that many SWDs struggled with "not really knowing what to say, when to say it, or how to say it."

In addition to the ability to communicate needs, participants stated, SWDs needed to know how to self-advocate when they had support needs after exiting high school. P2 spoke of SWDs' need for self-advocacy skills: "They've got to know where to find services and just be able to speak up for themselves." P6 expressed the same perception as P2, stating, "You have to know how to advocate for yourself." P5 reported that teachers prepared SWDs to self-advocate by encouraging them to practice the skill in school settings such as IEP meetings or by "explaining what self-advocacy is about and the purpose of it and why it's important for them to speak up during the meetings."

A different but potentially more important support teachers cultivated for transitioning SWDs was the capacity for independence and self-support. Depending on SWDs' individual strengths and needs, their capacity for self-support might range from using a restroom hygienically to holding long-term employment. P2 described successes in finding employment for graduating SWDs because of long-term cooperation between schools and local businesses:

> A lot of the local businesses, if they need someone, they'll contact us. So, we have helped some kids get jobs in the community. Our local pharmacy, they have a little ice cream bar. And the lady that owns it called us and asked if we have a student that would be good. And so, [the student's] got a job now. We have a little grocery store. We've had a couple of our kids work there. There's a restaurant that a couple of our kids work in now.

An additional form of direct support educators provided to SWDs to facilitate a smooth transition process was on-site support in developing daily living competencies. P3 stated, "We take the students out into the community, and we have teachers that go with them, and [students] have to show [teachers] any activity that they may try to engage in." Students would perform day-to-day tasks such as grocery shopping, filling out employment applications, and obtaining

transportation under the oversight of a teacher, who would provide coaching and encouragement, thereby preparing the student to address relevant, real-world problems. P3 described this arrangement as "almost like a job shadow or job coach that's there with them grading them based on their skills. Afterwards, we tell them, 'This is what you did; this is what you weren't supposed to be doing.'" P4 also referred to teachers' shadowing of SWDs to prepare them for self-support after transition, stating that examples of activities in which students might be supported in this way included "how to go into the bathroom and clean themselves well. If they wipe themselves, wash their hands and make sure they leave the bathroom appropriately."

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of educators regarding the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at the high schools in the target district. This theme revealed the participants' perceptions of the importance of collaborating with outside agencies that may offer supports to SWDs after they reach 21 years of age. To navigate through portals of support, the SWDs must be able to self-advocate as well as engage in direct support from the teachers in the actual community setting. Performing basic skills throughout the transitioning process may help SWDs become more independent and self-sufficient while maintaining a continuity of services. Although SWDs are not quickly closing the graduation gap beween themselves and SWODs, securing the proper supports, self-advocating, and consistent trainging in areas of need provide the skills necessary to help SWDs succeed after high school and therefore may alleviate or reduce perceived barriers in the transitioning process. Barriers are discussed in the following section.

Results for Research Subquestion 1b

What do general and special educators perceive as barriers in the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs in high schools in the target district? Two

major themes emerged during data analysis to answer this subquestion: (a) underinformed or resistant parents can present barriers to collaboration, and (b) a curriculum that emphasizes academics over practical skills can impede transition success. These themes are discussed in separate subsections.

Theme 3: Educators Perceive That Underinformed or Resistant Parents Can Present Barriers to Collaboration on Behalf of the SWDs in the Transition Process

Four participants described a perceived lack of parental involvement and understanding; three cited resistance from parents, and three noted the need to improve parental involvement. As discussed in relation to Theme 1, participants described parents as having two roles in collaborative transition planning. First, parents were an important source of information about SWDs' strengths and support needs. Second, parents provided in-home support to SWDs to complement school-based supports, based on communication and coordination with educators. Underinformed or resistant parents could present barriers to this collaboration if they refused to implement recommended afterschool supports. This information shared by participants is perception data about how they perceive the parents and their involvement in the transition process for their student. The varying realities experienced or reported by participants must be considered to understand a complex phenomenon (Patton, 2002). As this information is reported as perception data, it should be addressed in the findings, as these perceptions of resistance, involvement, and understanding of the transition process were reported by participants as their realities that they had experienced with parents. For example, P1 described parents as involved and a valuable source of information about students. P3 expressed that parents understood the transition process and described strong parent involvement.

Conversely, P5 reported that some parents' passive resistance to contributing to transition planning presented an insurmountable obstacle to early engagement of resources for continuity of support. Parents could have their child evaluated and waitlisted for a waiver of costs for ongoing supports after high school, but as mentioned in relation to Theme 2, the waitlist was as much as a decade long, so parents needed to be highly proactive in engaging this essential support resource. Educators could not initiate the process because that authority lay exclusively with the child's legal guardians. P5 found that when she tried to explain the process of applying for a waiver and the urgency of doing so immediately to parents, some appeared disengaged and subsequently took no action: "One of my main focuses to help my parents is to explain about applying for the waiver and to be evaluated. And as much as I would talk to them, they still wouldn't do it." P5 added, "I feel like there are these obstacles because [parents are] not [applying]. We can help them, but that's something they have to do, . . . and you still have parents who are not doing it."

P2 also described parental resistance to active collaboration as a barrier, expressing the perception that some parents might prefer to be disengaged because of their own negative experiences in school settings: "I think for a lot of [parents], if school was not a positive place, they don't want to deal with it. So, they just come, you know, 'You take care of my kid, I can't deal with it.'" In P1's experience, some parents resisted supports that would increase their child's capacity for independence for financial reasons, because having a dependent adult child increased the amount of state financial assistance they received. P1 stated that preparing SWDs to enter the workforce was a priority for educators: "We keep pushing: 'Let your child go to work. . . . He needs to get out of that environment that he is in sometimes. You don't want him sitting at home every day once he leaves school.]" P1 stated that parental resistance based on financial interest was frustrating to educators: "It just bothers me when parents don't want [SWDs] to work

because they think it's going to interfere greatly with their [government] check that they get every month."

Parents also could be resistant because they were underinformed. Parents who were underinformed often became so not because the information they needed was withheld, but because they could not assimilate the quantity of detailed procedural knowledge educators presented to them. P5 stated, "You [the educator] are explaining it, but it's just too much information." P5 said of some parents' reaction, "You can see they are overwhelmed with what you're equipping them with. Most of them are very appreciative, but it's just so overwhelming, the steps they need to take even to think about what's next." P6 described the challenge of assimilating a large amount of detailed information as resulting in some parents having inadequate knowledge of how to participate in the transition process: "I don't know that parents really understand the transition process. . . . They don't understand that there are options out there for your child. . . . Parents don't really know what all is available."

As a potential solution to remediating some parents' informational deficits, P5 recommended a reference manual that parents could resort to on their own time or at need: "I wish sometimes there was a reference to go to for parents that had these needs, kind of like a *Cooking for Dummies*," referring by example to the branded series of primers designed to introduce readers with no prior knowledge to specialized skillsets. Although some parents are active in their child's education, some parents become overwhelmed or unengaged when searching for supports for SWDs. This theme disclosed educators who work with SWDs perceived resistant, underinformed, or misinformed parents as barriers to the transition process by educators who work with SWDs.

Understanding the design and implementation of the transition process by parents could offer a uniform strategy for implementing the transition process for SWDs throughout their formative school years. Parents provide an important source of information and support to SWDs when they understand and assist in implementing consistent support in transitioning SWDs. If parents do not take advantage of transition information processes or are passive in implementing supports after school, many SWDs may have debilitating results in their journey to independence. Educators also stated they perceived parents as becoming alarmed that public financial assistance may be affected if their child becomes engaged in the workforce. Another barrier perceived by educators is that parents are resistant is applying for waiver assistance for the SWD. Although educators can direct the parent to the proper resources for assistance, it is the ultimate responsibility of the parent to apply for needed services. For this reason educators perceive parents as sometimes being passive in applying for suitable services for the SWD. A limitation of this study is only educators were interviewed, so results do not include parent perceptions. Alternately, as parents are perceived as barriers, Theme 4 emphasizes the school curriculum that may hinder transition success as the curriculum focuses on academics rather than essential life skills and job training for SWDs. The academic curriculum and practical skills are discussed in the next section.

Theme 4: Educators Perceive That Curriculum That Emphasizes Academics Over Practical Skills Can Impede Transition Success

All six participants expressed the perception that the emphasis of the curriculum associated with the transition planning process was not optimal for SWDs. Participants indicated that SWDs needed hands-on, practical skills rather than theoretical knowledge. Requiring students pursuing an alternate diploma to be proficient in subjects like algebra took valuable time

away from hands-on instruction in necessary, practical skills, participants suggested. In a representative response, P3 described the situation as follows:

> With the alternate diploma students, it requires [students] to take algebra or a variation of algebra and history. When you look at the students, they'll never be able to tell you what five eggs plus two eggs equal. I think you need to be more about life outside the school, with life skills and job skills. They're never able to tell you what the Civil War is or any of these other things, but you put these [academic requirements] in place . . . I would say that it stifles them.

P5 expressed the opinion that classroom instruction in general was not an optimal use of time for students who urgently needed "hands-on experience, and of course you can't get that in the classroom. [SWDs] need to be not just at school, they need to shop in the community, they need to be in the community doing those jobs."

P2 also expressed that theoretical knowledge was not an appropriate instructional focus for SWDs and that time should be dedicated instead to practical life-skills training: "We're focused on the educational side . . . [but] these kids are not abstract thinkers, that's one of their issues. They need hands-on training." As recommended topics for hands-on training, P2 mentioned, "[SWDs] need to know how to wash their clothes, how to cook, how to speak on the telephone, how to make a doctor's appointment."

Participants recommended that the focus of instruction for SWDs be shifted from theoretical or academic knowledge to hands-on skills training. P3 recommended that the curriculum be developed with the collaboration of parents, the student, and educators to ensure each SWD's educational needs were met: "We would need to get all of the stakeholders involved and allow them to be able to come up with the curriculum that would best fit what's needed for

those students." P6 cited the importance of social and communication skills for SWDs as an overriding consideration: "I think our learning strategies classes are geared so much toward academics, . . . but in addition to your knowledge, you have to know how to interact with people." P6 recommended social skills training: "If the schools offer social skills classes, that may help, or incorporate that into the classroom where [SWDs already] are." P1 recommended a broader focus on hands-on training in a variety of essential, practical skills. P1 stated the curriculum should be developed by educators asking the following questions:

> What skills do these children need to be able to be the cashier at McDonald's? And not just to be able to operate that cash register, but what social skills would they need to be able to have? What kind of communication skills will they need to be able to have in order to be successful at this job?

P1 also recommended that teachers be empowered to go out into the community to assist SWDs in finding and adapting to jobs, but P1 acknowledged that this support would increase personnel needs: "Helping find jobs for children or being able to visit children on jobs or being able to go out and job schedule or work with the child until he learns the job, that takes manpower."

Based on the perceptions of educators interviewed during this study, emphasis on the academic curriculum rather than life skills training and job accessibility was perceived as another barrier for SWDs when transitioning from the school setting to adulthood. Again, communication and social skills were mentioned as priority skills needed for SWDs by educators during this study. Based on educator interviews, the academic curriculum hinders the design and implementation of the transition process because educators felt that academics is not the most favorable track for SWDs. Educators stated that theoretical knowledge presented a hindrance to those SWDs who would never be able to calculate algebraic computations or use historical

knowledge in the correct context. Regardless of the students' learning style, SWDs would struggle when their challenges were based on academics rather than skills training during the design and implementation of the transition process, thereby creating difficulty for future success after high school.

Evidence of Quality

To make sure that the information collected from the respondents was accurate and credible, discrepant cases were searched for. I used member checking and other procedures to ensure accuracy of the data and analysis, as described in the following sections. The trustworthiness of the findings in this study was strengthened through procedures that enhanced the four components of trustworthiness originally identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The four components of qualitative trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Procedures used to strengthen each component are described in the following subsections as well.

Discrepant Cases

No discrepant cases were identified in the data. The six participants had mostly the same perceptions about the transition process. No outliers were noted in interview responses. Discrepant cases may include incomplete or data or responses on some interview questions (Gast & Ledford, 2014; Merriam, 2009). Incomplete data were not an issue. Only complete and verifiable responses were used in data analysis (Rouet et al., 2016). The next section present section presents that data analysis results.

Member Checking

Member checking was used to solicit participants' input on the analysis (Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2009). I emailed the draft of findings to the participants to determine whether the interpretation of their input was seen as accurate (see Yin, 2018). The educators involved in the transition process for SWDs at the target site were provided the opportunity to review the findings and email me regarding any input or concerns. The member-checking procedure was conducted after the thematic analysis. I sent each participant a list of the defined codes and themes as well as the narrative results and requested that they either confirm the accuracy of my interpretations or recommend modifications. All participants confirmed the accuracy of my interpretations.

Credibility

Data and findings are credible when they accurately describe what they are intended to describe (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Threats to credibility include bias and inaccuracy in participants' responses, errors in the recording or transcription of the data, and inaccurate researcher interpretations of these data. The credibility of the data in this study was strengthened by audio recording the interviews and having the recordings transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. Credibility was further strengthened through researcher verification of the accuracy of the transcripts. These procedures contributed to ensuring that these data were not rendered inaccurate through errors in the recording or transcription processes. I verified each transcript by reading it twice while listening to the audio recording.

The credibility of the data also was strengthened by assuring participants that their identities would remain confidential, thereby reducing the likelihood that participants would consciously or unconsciously distort their responses because of anxiety about the consequences of

identity disclosure. Use of a thematic analysis procedure to identify emergent themes that incorporated the experiences of all or most participants strengthened the credibility of the findings by minimizing the likelihood that individual participants' biases or errors would distort the themes. Lastly, the member-checking procedure described in the previous subsection strengthened credibility by allowing participants to independently assess the accuracy of my interpretations of their data.

Transferability

Findings are transferable when they hold true for other settings or populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The small sample size and limited geographic scope of the study setting are likely to limit transferability. However, thick descriptions of the data are provided in the presentation of results to assist readers in assessing transferability. A detailed description of the setting of the study also has been provided in Section 2 of this project to assist readers in assessing the transferability of the findings to other settings and populations.

Dependability

Findings are dependable when they are replicable in the same research context at a different time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Threats to dependability include any transient condition unrelated to the phenomenon being studied that alters the data in ways unlikely to be repeated later. Such conditions many include mistakes in recording or transcribing the data that would be unlikely to recur if the study were replicated, so the procedures used in this study to record, transcribe, and verify the data strengthened dependability in addition to credibility. Transient participant biases resulting from circumstances unrelated to the study also might threaten dependability if they caused participants to express perceptions that were unlikely to remain stable over time. Using a thematic procedure to analyze the data to identify themes across

multiple participants strengthened dependability by minimizing the potential influence of individual participants' transient biases or errors. Lastly, dependability in this study was strengthened through the presentation of a detailed description of the study procedures, which will assist future researchers in replicating the study if necessary.

Confirmability

Findings are confirmable when they represent participants' opinions and perspectives rather than the researcher's (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The member-checking procedure used in this study contributed to confirmability by allowing participants to verify that my interpretations of their data represented their perspectives. To further enhance confirmability, direct quotations from the data are provided as evidence of the findings in the presentation of results so the reader can assess confirmability independently.

Corbin and Strauss (2015) stated that it is virtually impossible to become immersed in research data and not be affected by information revealed in the data. Reflective notes helped to keep my focus on the research study while collecting and analyzing the data. Creswell and Creswell (2017) stated that continually reflecting on questions and data and writing notes throughout the study are an ongoing process that may offer additional information.

I remained objective and pleasant to not influence the participant when responding to the interview questions. I modulated my tone to avoid showing bias. As I was the primary instrument for gathering data (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I made efforts to prevent bias from impacting data collection and analysis.

I prepared to make the participant comfortable by engaging in conversation before asking any of the interview questions. Building rapport was necessary for each person who agreed to participate

in the research study to help make the person comfortable in answering the questions. I reviewed the nature of the interview, including the problem and purpose, and informed the participant they could keep a copy of the consent form on their personal computer or print a copy for their records. I reminded them of their right to excuse themselves from the study at any time without any penalty or retribution. By developing rapport on a professional level and informing them of their rights as well as reminding them about their rights, I was hopeful that I received more open and honest responses from the participants.

Summary of Findings

Transition-focused education provided the framework for understanding the specific transition process for students, including student-focused planning, student development, interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration, family involvement, and program structure and attributes (Kohler et al., 2016). The literature review synthesis established the core elements of transition-focused education theory, such as student development, interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration, and family involvement influence (Barkas et al., 2020).

The primary research question used to guide this study was the following: How do general and special educators perceive the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at high schools in the target district? The primary research question was answered by answering the two subquestions related to strengths and weaknesses in the transition process. Educators perceived collaboration as a strength of the transition process. Additionally, educators perceived the use of student data and engagement of supports are strengths of the transition process. Use of assessments of students aided in determining student strengths, areas of needed support, and interests. However, despite noting collaboration as a strength, some educators also perceived that parents often did not understand the transition process or were even reluctant to

support their child's independence. Further, educators stated the curriculum should not emphasize abstract academics over practical, functional skills needed for transition.

Strengths in the Transition Process

The first subquestion asked what general and special educators perceive as strengths in the design and implementation of transition for SWDs in high schools in the target district. Two major themes emerged during data analysis to answer this question. First, educators perceive collaboration as a strength of the transition planning process. This finding corroborates Coles-Janess and Griffin (2020). Findings indicated that transition planning incorporated ongoing and frequent communication and cooperation between the SWD, educators, and sometimes the student's guardians. Student involvement was ensured through interviews and assessments, conducted at least annually, to assess the SWD's interests, aspirations, and expectations. Educators used student input to develop specific objectives of transition planning. Parental collaboration was sought through interviews and conferences to obtain input about the SWD's strengths, interests, and support needs, as well as the parents' needs, goals, and expectations. Ongoing parental collaboration was gained in some instances through frequent teacher-to-parent communications and through educators' availability to address questions, concerns, or information. Additionally, as also revealed by Coles-Janess and Griffin, interdisciplinary collaboration occurred between educators to ensure coordination of supports in alignment with the evolving transition plan and the SWD's IEP.

The second theme that emerged to answer the first subquestion was that the use of student data and engagement of supports are strengths of the transition process. Detailed transition assessments were conducted annually to identify and monitor support needs. Their purpose was to ensure continuity of support across a range of life domains to ensure SWDs'

needs continued to be met after school supports expired. Petcu et al. (2016) noted a prevocational and vocational assessment determines the SWDs' strengths and limitations. Kaya et al. (2018) recommended a series of observations and assessments, rather than a single session. Teachers worked throughout the transition planning process to assist parents and SWDs in accessing appropriate outside resources for continuity of support after graduation. Teachers worked with local businesses to find employment for SWDs. Similarly, Lindsay et al. (2018) described collaboration with businesses to help SWDs learn employment skills. Teachers also connected students to postgraduation supports indirectly, by teaching students to communicate effectively enough to express needs and find supports independently. Students with good communication skills can self-advocate and express their needs better in adulthood (Barkas et al., 2020). An additional support teacher cultivated for transitioning SWDs was the capacity for independence and self-support.

Barriers in the Transition Process

The second research subquestion asked what general and special educators perceive as barriers in the design and implementation of transition for SWDs in high schools in the target district. Two major themes emerged to answer this question. First, underinformed or resistant parents can present barriers to collaboration. Findings indicated that such parents could present barriers to transition planning collaboration if they refused to implement recommended afterschool supports. P2 expressed the perception that some parents might prefer to be disengaged because of their own negative experiences in school settings. Additionally, parents could be resistant, according to P1 and P5, because preventing their adult child from becoming independent made them eligible for increased governmental assistance. Further, P5 and P6 described perceptions that parents often were underinformed or overwhelmed by the information

provided about transition. Parents who were underinformed typically had been provided with the information they needed but had been unable to assimilate the large amount of detailed procedural knowledge that optimally supporting their child required. The literature supports that parents often feel inadequate in understanding the transition process (M. Burke & Hodapp, 2016) or are underinformed, resulting in less parental involvement (Zhang et al., 2018). However, the finding that some parents were reluctant to support their children's independence was not noted in the initial literature review. Further research could examine parental barriers to contributing to the transition process, a topic to be investigated in the white paper project for this study.

The second major theme for the second subquestion was a curriculum that emphasizes academics over practical skills can impede transition success. All six participants expressed the perception that the emphasis of the curriculum associated with the transition planning process was not optimal for SWDs. Participants indicated that SWDs needed hands-on, practical skills rather than theoretical knowledge. Requiring students pursuing an alternate diploma to be proficient in subjects like algebra was perceived as taking valuable time away from hands-on instruction in necessary, practical skills. Participants therefore recommended that the focus of instruction for SWDs be shifted from theoretical or academic knowledge to hands-on skills training. Previous researchers (Barkas et al., 2020; Boyd et al., 2019) described the need to involve concrete models and real-life contexts when teaching functional skills. This finding is supported by the literature regarding the need to redesign the curriculum to provide individualized and appropriate supports for SWDs in the transition process (Morningstar, Lombardi, et al., 2018).

Moreover, the literature supports a student-focused approach to determine the skills each SWD needs to improve (Kohler et al., 2016). The IEP and continued assessment should be used

to guide the transition process from high school to adulthood (Chen et al., 2019). Depending on the disability and its severity, SWDs need different skills and supports, and thus the ITP team should tailor the plan to each student (Kaya et al., 2018). Person-centered planning is the most significant aspect of this transition model to include the SWD's aspirations and realistic outcomes by involving the student as well as parents and educators (Alghamdi, 2017; Hall et al., 2018). Turnbull et al. (2018) concluded more research is needed to learn why functional instruction may be better for SWDs, as noted by the teachers in this study. The next section presents the project description, involving further research.

Project Deliverable

Section 3 of the research study includes insight gained from the participants responding to the research questions guiding this study. The project resulting from this study is a white paper to inform educators in developing a comprehensive inclusive process for transitioning SWDs from the school setting to adulthood. Section 3 includes the goals, rationale, review of literature, implementation, and research evaluation from the collection of data. The second literature review provides information that shows relative documentation of how the data align with current research. Identification of resources and barriers will assist school districts in identifying any potential threats or supports in the transition process. The implications of social change also are discussed in Section 3. Lastly, additional steps to future studies are incorporated as to how this study may advance the transition process.

Section 3: The Project

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of educators regarding the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at the high schools in the target district. In a school district in a southern state, administrative staff, teachers, and related service personnel have implemented ITPs required for SWDs to help them shift from the high school environment to postsecondary options. The problem investigated by this study was that only 37% of SWDs are graduating from high schools in the target district, compared to 79.9% of SWODs, which suggests that the transition design and implementation did not support SWDs' needs. The study involved semistructured interviews with six educators at the target high schools as well as district special education staff who had knowledge of the transition process for SWDs. Results showed perceived strengths as well as weaknesses in the transition process at the study district. Four themes emerged:

1. Educators perceive collaboration as a strength of the transition planning process.
2. Educators perceive that the use of student data and engagement of supports are strengths of the transition process.
3. Educators perceive that underinformed or resistant parents can present barriers to collaboration on behalf of the SWDs in the transition process.
4. Educators perceive that curriculum that emphasizes academics over practical skills can impede transition success.

The perceived barriers to a successful transition process (Themes 3 and 4) were relatively broad, such as a curriculum lacking hands-on learning, which did not suggest any specific

solutions such as professional development or simple, specific policy recommendations for the district. Therefore, a white paper was the appropriate project for this study (see Appendix).

Project Description

The purpose of the white paper is to provide thorough, relevant data on additional strategies to add to the transition program so district leaders can make informed choices to improve transition and graduation rates among SWD in the district. The white paper includes a summary of the study findings and a review of relevant literature to address barriers to a successful transition process in the district related to the findings (Ibrahim & Benrimoh, 2016).

The white paper was developed from the literature reviewed in this section. Section 3 of the project contains a description of the how the search for the literature review was conducted, including key terms and databases accessed that resulted in an exhaustive review of the literature to support the findings and project selected. I reviewed the literature to outline recommendations connected to the evidence specific to the audience of district stakeholders. The white paper is the project deliverable based on the findings from this qualitative study. I conclude Section 3 with a brief outline of the project recommendations, implications, and conclusions.

Project Goals

A white paper typically includes a discussion of research related to a local or industry problem, concluding with recommendations by the authors (Carnegie Mellon University, 2021; Purdue University, 2021). Providing an insightful, research-based background for the topic can help the audience of a white paper make strategic decisions (Purdue University, 2021). The goals of the white paper developed from this research study were the following:

1. Provide a research base for strategies to alter the curriculum for some SWDs to focus on hands-on and functional learning.
2. Provide a research base for strategies to educate and involve parents more positively in the SWD transition process in the district.
3. Use data from the literature as well as the findings of the study to recommend an annual evaluation of the transition program in the district. This evaluation could include a survey to maintain a degree of reliability and accuracy in the transition process throughout the year.

Rationale

The findings from the interviews conducted with educators and district staff in the district revealed strengths and weaknesses of the district transition process for SWDs. Educators perceived collaboration as a strength of the transition planning process (Theme 1). Transition planning incorporated ongoing and frequent communication and cooperation between the SWD, educators, and often the student's guardians. Student involvement was ensured through interviews and assessments, conducted at least annually, to assess the SWD's interests, aspirations, and expectations. Involving SWDs in the transition process may help students establish a positive attitude concerning their future (Cavendish, 2017). Educators used student input to develop specific objectives of transition planning. Parental collaboration, described by some of the participants, was incorporated through interviews and conferences to obtain input about the SWD's strengths, interests, and support needs, as well as the parents' needs, goals, and expectations (Theme 2). This finding was supported by Bumble et al. (2017). Ongoing parental collaboration was ensured by some educators through frequent teacher-to-parent communications and through educators' availability to address questions, concerns, or information. Pawilen et al.

(2018) pointed out that curriculum development for a transition program for special learners should include an educational package of curriculum and policies that support the educational needs of SWDs. Interdisciplinary collaboration occurred between educators in this study to ensure coordination of supports in alignment with the evolving transition plan and the SWD's IEP.

Additionally, the district and schools conduct regular needs assessments. Educators perceive that the use of student data and engagement of supports are strengths of the transition process. Detailed transition assessments were conducted annually to identify and monitor support needs. Assessments included an interest inventory, IEP data, parent data, and functional skills assessments. Teachers worked throughout the transition planning process to assist parents and SWDs in accessing appropriate outside resources for continuity of support after graduation. Teachers worked with local businesses to find employment for SWDs. Teachers also connected students to postgraduation supports indirectly, by teaching students to communicate effectively enough to express needs and find supports independently.

However, two barriers or problems emerged from the interview data. The areas of concern were educators' perceptions of parents' understanding of the transition process and the curriculum. Educators perceived that underinformed or resistant parents could present barriers to collaboration. Parents could be resistant because their own negative experiences in school made them oppositional, as P2 noted; because preventing their adult child from becoming independent made them eligible for increased governmental assistance, as P1 described; or because they were underinformed, as P5 and P6 indicated. Parents who were underinformed typically had been provided with the information that they needed but had been unable to assimilate the large amount of detailed procedural knowledge that optimally supporting their child required. Some

parents were reportedly reluctant to support their children's independence, perhaps even from a tax or financial standpoint.

Additionally, educators perceived that a curriculum that emphasizes academics over practical skills can impede transition success. SWDs needed hands-on, practical skills rather than theoretical knowledge. Requiring students pursuing an alternate diploma to be proficient in subjects such as algebra was perceived by participants in this study as taking valuable time away from hands-on instruction in necessary, practical skills; this finding from the participants in this study was supported by Wegner (2017). The IEP and continued assessment should be used to guide the transition process from high school to adulthood (Chen et al., 2019). Depending on the disability and its severity, SWDs need different skills and supports, and thus the ITP team should tailor the plan to each student (Kaya et al., 2018). Turnbull et al. (2018) concluded that more research is needed to learn why functional instruction may be better for SWDs, as noted by the teachers in this study.

The findings from the interviews also suggested the benefit of an annual, confidential survey with open-ended questions to gain teachers' input in improving the transition process. This survey could be part of an annual evaluation of the transition program. The participants noted the need to integrate teachers' perceptions in designing and implementing a transition process for SWDs because teachers may provide more effective practices regarding business–school partnerships and knowledge of school-based practices. According to K. Burke et al. (2020), including participants in a project increases its chances of success because stakeholders can provide expertise on how to implement the project; including stakeholders also reduces barriers or resistance to change because participants are included as a part of the process.

The perceived barriers for a successful transition process (Themes 3 and 4) were relatively broad, such as a curriculum lacking hands-on learning, which did not suggest any specific solutions such as professional development or simple, specific policy recommendations for the district. Therefore, a white paper was the appropriate project for this study (see Appendix). A white paper presents research on a topic and recommendations that may help the audience of the white paper choose strategies (Purdue University, 2021). I selected the white paper genre to provide the findings of my study as well as research literature related to the findings. The white paper concludes with research-based recommendations for district leaders. In the next section, I will discuss the literature and research that support the project genre and considerations from recent studies between 2017 and 2021.

Review of the Literature

As noted, the findings of the study indicated barriers for a successful transition process that could be helped through research-based strategies related to transition planning as well as collaboration and communication with parents. Additionally, the transition planning component that needed strengthening pertained to the integration of skills needed by SWDs for transition beyond high school. Participants described issues with an abstract curriculum inappropriate for SWDs who responded better to hands-on learning and potentially more functional skills. They also indicated that parents could be a barrier to student transitioning. I chose a white paper to provide research related to these topics.

Literature Search

The literature review included peer-reviewed sources published between 2017 and 2021. I used the Walden University Library and Google Scholar to locate various databases for scholarly articles, books, and other publications deemed relevant to the topic of study. I then

searched different databases, including PubMed Central, Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects, PsycINFO, UpToDate, PubMed, PsycARTICLES, ProQuest, PsycINFO, Academic Premier, Sage, JSTOR, ResearchGate, EMBASE, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, Cochrane Library, Emerald, EBSCO, and Elsevier. The search terms included *self-determination skills*, *transition services, student attitudes, SWDs transition plans, college preparation, goal planning, self-advocacy skills, postsecondary education, federal education policies, students with learning disabilities, disability support services, white paper, white paper goals, education white papers, parents of students with disabilities, teacher professional development, functional curriculum, standards and students with disabilities, transition curriculum*, and *Social Security benefits*.

The White Paper Genre

In a white paper, authors present research on an issue and recommendations for the audience of the white paper (Carnegie Mellon University, 2021; Purdue University, 2021). For example, Bennett and Bennett (2019) wrote a white paper exploring how university students and professors were using educational resources. The authors provided an introduction, described the methodology of a survey study, listed 25 survey findings, and then presented possible recommendations for university stakeholders (Bennett & Bennett, 2019). Noting the continual changes in social science technology and software, Duca and Metzler (2019) wrote a white paper on the tools available. First, they interviewed students and researchers to learn the challenges of social researchers, the types of tools available, and user characteristics. In response to the interview findings, Duca and Metzler reviewed 418 tools and software used in social science research. They detailed the development and technical support for the tools as well.

The ASCD (2021) publishes a library of white papers specific to the education field. For example, the Committee for Children (2021) developed a white paper to recommend a holistic

approach to social-emotional learning. The authors described the benefits of teaching social-emotional skills to students through community resources. The researchers detailed four recommended strategies: providing social-emotional learning continuously through the day, providing social-emotional learning throughout a student's education from kindergarten through Grade 12, supporting social-emotional learning and well-being among educators, and providing a positive environment for implementation of social-emotional learning (Committee for Children, 2021).

A policy or white paper should provide background on a problem and propose recommended solutions (Ibrahim & Benrimoh, 2016). According to Bardach and Patashnik (2019), the first part of any position or white paper defines the problem and objectives. Then, data are gathered and alternative strategies or recommendations made (Bardach & Patashnik, 2019) Stakeholders are offered research-based alternatives to choose from to solve the problem addressed. Possible outcomes of suggested policy are described and considered from a realistic perspective (Bardach & Patashnik, 2019).

White papers typically combine expository information with persuasion (Graham, 2013). The format is particularly popular in business-to-business marketing (Graham, 2013). White papers are in various formats, including basic background, numbered lists, or the problem-and-solution variety (Graham, 2013) used in this study. Graham noted that poorly written white papers focus too much on selling and hype and not enough on information and evidence. White papers are often used in marketing to promote products; however, they can use evidence to promote solutions as well (Graham, 2013).

White papers may provide data and potential solutions to stakeholders in education. Humphreys and Blenkinsop (2017) gathered data from articles in five major journals on the

philosophy of education to understand the current environment-related issues discussed. The researchers then sorted the information to find limitations and opportunities for further discussion about the environment and philosophy of education. They concluded their 21-page white paper with recommendations for future research directions in the field.

In a white paper, Deal and Yarborough (2020) presented recommendations to develop student leadership in higher education. Beginning with a brief, one-page, abstract-like executive summary, the researchers then described five current practices that they found to effectively develop student leadership (e.g., formative student evaluation and coaching). Five final recommendations were made in the form of a concise one-page list, such as "Evaluate students before, during, and after leadership experiences" and "consider the power of coaching" (Deal & Yarborough, 2020, p. 13).

To gather consensus on core competencies for global training in health education, Withers et al. (2019), researchers for the Association of Pacific Rim Universities Global Health Program, gathered 30 university administrators, students, and faculty for a workshop. From the data gathered in the workshop, the researchers refined the list, created broader domains, and proposed a plan for implementing the competencies into university curriculum. After identifying 19 competencies in five main domains, the plan included recommendations for coursework, internships, research, mentoring, and evaluation. Specific recommendations were "additional institutional strategies such as maximizing collaborative research opportunities, international partnerships, capacity-building grants, and use of educational technology to support these goals" (Withers et al., 2019, p. 1). Similar to the current study, the researchers combined the workshop data with literature to create the final recommendations for the field.

I developed the white paper (see Appendix) from findings of a basic qualitative study and additional literature reviewed focused on the findings. The following topics were reviewed to support content of the white paper: curriculum for SWDs transitioning to life after secondary school, and parents of SWDs and the transition process.

Curriculum for SWDs and the Transition Process

The results of this study indicated teachers felt the curriculum needed more emphasis on hands-on instruction and functional skills. Transition planning is defined as how teachers and instructors develop a roadmap for students after graduation (Noel et al., 2016). According to Kurth et al. (2017), the transition period should include at least 2 years of skill preparation for SWDs for postsecondary education. Skills to be considered include self-determination, self-advocacy skills, independent living, and social skills (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017). Ali et al. (2017) compared the academic performance of undergraduate dental students with known learning disabilities to the performance of their peers. Ali et al. identified six core skills to help SWDs achieve independence: social skills, self-determination and self-advocacy, parent and family participation, general education, postsecondary education, and work competence. Ali et al. determined that students within the population with learning disabilities were not disadvantaged in knowledge-based assessments based on the students' performance data on five applied dental knowledge progress tests. However more research was suggested to determine how to generalize the findings.

Self-Determination in the Curriculum

As expressed by Wegner (2017), self-determination entails the capacity to choose and to act based on those choices. Many SWDs lack self-determination because these students do not see the significance of mapping out what they need to do in the future. Wegner also described

self-determination as the ability to make personal selections related to education, independent living, and vocation and explore how it can positively affect the postschool outcomes of people with disabilities.

In their longitudinal study to investigate transition planning requirements involving students with learning disabilities, Mazzotti et al. (2018) established four factors are likely to determine self-determination among individuals: capacity, opportunity, support and accommodations, and perceptions or beliefs. Instruction promoting components related to self-determination must be integrated into all phases of the curriculum (Marita & Hord, 2017). Research has shown that factors improving self-determination skills should be integrated into transition planning for students with disabilities (Kurth et al., 2017). In particular, for SWDs who wish to further their education, the capacity to realize self-determination skills, as well as self-advocacy skills, could mean the difference between succeeding in college and dropping out (Lombardi et al., 2018). Previous research such as that of Feerasta (2017) also has demonstrated that adolescents with disabilities who are more self-determined when they complete their high school education were more likely to be employed and live independently than are their peers who are less self-determined. Self-determination refers to an individual's ability to self-manage by making confident choices and decisions (K. Burke et al., 2020). Feerasta interviewed individuals with disabilities working in a restaurant as well as their manager. Self-determination is related to the ability to set goals and make choices (K. Burke et al., 2019; Wegner, 2017).

Encouraging SWDs to make choices, set goals, and self-evaluate-key aspects of self-determination models may promote their successful transition into adulthood (K. Burke et al., 2019). Such acts help them plan their transition if they know what they want to do after high school (Jolley et al., 2018). K. Burke et al. (2019) noted using a self-determination model took 2

years before students showed significant improvement. Therefore, educators should begin to encourage student self-determination early in the IEP process. Wegner (2017) stated students need to learn to self-manage their IEP meetings by first partaking, then learning to develop the IEP, and leading or managing the IEP process for their efficient transition from high school to further employment or education. Students should not be passive in the IEP process, but rather use the process to learn self-determination (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Jolley et al. (2018) conducted a literature review related to SWDs and transition in West Africa and opined that student passivity could result because the meeting atmosphere is often more agenda oriented and adult focused than student centered or student directed. The case manager may forget that the meeting is about the student's best interests and may dominate the meeting, without encouraging the student to express their opinions or feelings (Feerasta, 2017). The U.S. Department of Education (2017) advised that transition programs be student centered and help students learn decision-making skills. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education recommended use of peer mentoring for instruction in self-advocacy in transition programs prior to employment.

Self-Advocacy in the Curriculum

Self-advocacy is also an imperative skill for SWDs as they leave high school and no longer have an IEP team. In high school, students have an IEP to advocate for them. Researchers for the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2018) reported 94% of SWDs receive support in high school yet only 17% do in college. In higher education, SWDs with self-advocacy are more likely to achieve a degree than students who do not self-advocate for support services (Koch et al., 2018; O'Shea & Kaplan, 2017; Squires & Countermine, 2018).

The seven skills of self-advocacy are choice making, problem solving, decision-making, goal setting and attainment, self-awareness and self-knowledge, self-advocacy and leadership,

and self-regulation and self-management skills (Raley et al., 2020; Shogren, Burke, et al., 2018; Shogren, Shaw, et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2020). An estimated fourth of SWDs do not request support in college due to stigma, lack of preparation or knowledge of the supports available, or lack of confidence (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). The U.S. Department of Education (2017) recommended students and parents visit postsecondary campuses to become familiar with the disability support services and staff. SWDs also may lack confidence in communicating with faculty. Yet those SWDs who interact with their instructors have more success in college (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). SWDs need to develop communication skills and self-advocacy skills as they are critical for success in college and the workplace. For example, In the next section I will describe the importance of the development of social skills for SWDs as part of the transition design and implementation process.

Social Skills in the Curriculum

Social skills must also be integrated into the transition plan to allow students to obtain the required socialization skills. Mazzotti et al. (2018) posited that research is limited for the evaluation of the effectiveness of improving SWDs' self-awareness, self-advocacy skills, and knowledge for transitioning to adulthood, which includes social skills. Social skills are important in the curriculum when implementing a transition program for SWDs to interact well with other people in the environment (Ledford et al., 2018; Lombardi et al., 2018). Ledford et al. (2018) suggested increasing prosocial interactions for SWDs that included verbal and nonverbal interactions. Social skills prepare youths for success as they transition from childhood to adulthood (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017). Social skills also enhance learners' communication capabilities with peers and adults and support teamwork (Wegner, 2017).

As described by K. Burke et al. (2020), social skills entail being able to speak to adults and peers and carry on a conversation. K. Burke et al. (2020) stated that demonstrating appropriate social skills and behavior in a range of social circumstances can significantly affect successful outcomes at home, in the community, and the workplace, especially when peer buddies can be involved. Students demonstrating positive social skills are more likely to be successful in a profession because of their ability to ask questions if they do not understand or are confused and because they could be more at ease at the workplace because they have made friends (K. Burke et al., 2020). In a comparable study, Walsh et al. (2018) established that social competence skills, such as having good interpersonal skills and getting along with others, are vital to a successful life. These researchers concluded that poor social skills are likely to be caused by increased levels of anxiety.

Poor performance of anxious students, as noted by K. Burke et al. (2020), is an outcome of problems with attention and focus, preoccupation with self-oriented and undesirable thoughts, and concern about competence. K. Burke et al. (2020) reported SWDs who demonstrate poor social skills are more likely to demonstrate poor academic achievement in high school. Poor social skills exhibited by some SWDs are the main barrier to success in everyday life, whether at the workplace or in the classroom.

The U.S. Department of Education (2017) noted the importance of social-emotional learning in the transition curriculum and offered strategies to teach social skills. Role playing is a strategy to practice social skills in different contexts or settings, such as higher education, community settings, or the workplace. A positive school climate also supports the development of social skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Academic Standards Versus Functional Skills in the Curriculum

Educators often perceive a challenge is teaching both functional skills to SWDs as well as academic standards (Scott & Puglia, 2018). In my study, educators complained that the curriculum was too abstract with topics such as algebra, taking instructional time away from functional training in life skills.

Bartholomew et al. (2015) and Scott and Puglia (2018) described how to create a curriculum supportive of functional skills while including the Common Core State Standards. To meet these U.S. college- and career-readiness standards, SWDs may receive extra supports and accommodations. However, teachers, like those interviewed in my study, are challenged to find time to teach standards as well as functional skills. Bartholomew et al. recommended relating standards-based academic skills to real-life needs and contexts. Educators may use two approaches. First, they can identify the academic standard and then devise a way to connect the standard to the student's transition skills. The second approach is to identify the functional skill and then determine the standard to match. For example, using the first approach, writing skills can be taught to improve self-determination, IEPs, and later self-advocacy. Math and chemistry skills can be connected to cooking, choosing weather appropriate clothing, and computing taxes. The second, functional approach is best for students with more profound disabilities (Bartholomew et al., 2015). Cooking and fractions are an example of combining academics with life skills (Bartholomew et al., 2015). Math skills can be taught in relation to personal finances (Scott & Puglia, 2018). Science lessons can be related to caring for plants (Scott & Puglia, 2018). Hands-on learning, such as teaching science through caring for plants, benefits all students, not just SWDs (Munkel-Jimenez et al., 2020).

Pawilen et al. (2018) described a transition curriculum with five domains: livelihood, academic skills, enrichment, prevocational preparation, and care. The researchers commended practitioners consider each domain as a package that could be interconnected with other domains in the framework. The curriculum is based on teaching functional skills for independence after high school and is learner centered. Pawilen et al. developed the framework after a roundtable discussion with 28 educators and school administrators in the Philippines. The livelihood domain includes vocational skills like crafts and cooking, leading to possible entrepreneurship. Enrichment is special interests of the student. Care refers to life skills and motor skills for students with profound disabilities.

Educators, central office leaders, and campus administrators may need training on how to combine functional and academic skills in the curriculum. The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (2019) has provided online resources to help educators implement research-based, effective practices to promote high-quality postsecondary outcomes for SWDs. The various documents describe lesson plans for teaching all core subjects to SWDs. Plans include peer tutoring or use of graphic organizers in science, math and cooking skills, and reading comprehension to follow instructions to clean the house.

Parents and the Transition Process

A dominant theme throughout the literature is the vital importance of parent and family involvement to ensure a successful postschool outcome for SWDs (Ali et al., 2017; Hirano et al., 2016; Talapatra et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Parental involvement is multidimensional and requires various approaches (Hirano et al., 2016). Several educator participants in this study said parental collaboration was incorporated through interviews and conferences; frequent teacher-to-parent communications; and through educators' availability to

address questions, concerns, or information. Apparently those efforts were not adequate, however, as other participating educators also noted parents were a common barrier to the transition process. Parents were often resistant or passive when contributing to the transition planning process. Parents also refused to implement afterschool supports, which would aid in collaborative efforts to transition outcomes. As suggested by Maenner et al. (2020), special educators facilitate the transition process of students with disabilities by encouraging parent–student participation in an effective transition process that suits each student's specific needs. While families may use different support programs to facilitate the transitioning of students with disabilities into adulthood, educators must provide such families with valuable information required to help them make informed decisions aligned with the unique needs that students have (Kramer et al., 2018). Hirano et al. (2016) used an exploratory factor analysis of measurement scales with 149 parents of high-school-age students with disabilities. The research resulted in seven parent motivators: future expectations; general school invitations; specific teacher invitations; specific child invitations; knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy; role construction; and perceived time and energy. In the next subsection I describe literature related to providing parents with knowledge. Subsequent sections include motivation and parent outreach and overcoming parent resistance.

Providing Information to Parents and Families

Some educators in this study described parents as unable to absorb the massive amount of information regarding SWDs and transition. The U.S. Department of Education (2017) recommended parents understand the transition services available, how to access local resources, and vocational services and supports. The U.S. Department of Education Rehabilitation Services Administration (2021) also offers a grant to school districts to create and support a Parent

Information and Training Program. The grant funds support training for SWDs and their families to navigate transition needs to support independent living.

School counselors and educators can ensure parents have access to information in a variety of formats. Recommended by the U.S. Department of Education (2017) as a resource, HUNE offers tips for families in simple language in English and Spanish (HUNE, 2021). The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (2017) published a report listing research-based best practices for families of SWDs, with training modules to involve parents. Methods included video dramatizations in parents' native language, explaining and then role playing parent practices, question-and-answer sessions, brochures, and follow-up (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, 2017).

Parents and SWDs often are uncertain of services available at colleges. For SWDs attending college, parents should visit the campus with the student to become familiar with the office of disability support services and accommodations available (Taub, 2006). The visit could include a peer also planning to attend the college (Taub, 2006).

Motivating Parents and Families

As SWDs (and SWODs) enter high school, parent involvement typically recedes; however, during Grades 11 and 12, SWDs need high levels of parent involvement and support (Hirano et al., 2016). Collaboration between the family, SWD, school staff, and community members is ideal (Talapatra et al., 2018). The U.S. Department of Education (2017) recommended school staff working with transition programs "create and maintain a system that supports family involvement and empowers families to support the self-determination of their sons and daughters" (p. 36). The U.S. Department of Education as well as Talapatra et al. (2018)

recommended outreach to families by school counselors. Taub (2006) recommended counselors find support groups for parents.

Hirano et al. (2016) identified seven motivators to involve parents of SWDs. Three of them included invitations: general school invitations, specific teacher invitations, and child invitations. The National Center for Learning Disabilities (2017) reported 45% of parents of SWDs indicated most goals were set by school staff. The more outreach efforts, the more the parent will feel like a contributing team member with valued opinions. As part of the IEP process, parents should be encouraged to attend IEP meetings and have advance notice of scheduling (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). IEP team members should take into account parents' work and transportation issues and develop additional systems to include the parents, such as phone conferences (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Further, educators need to understand parents' perspectives, particularly parents from traditionally marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities, non-English-speaking parents, or low-income families (Wilt et al., 2020). Parents may lack confidence in their knowledge of transition, may not speak English well, or may have overwhelming schedules (Taub, 2006). Understanding parent perceptions contributes to a student-centered, individualized approach to transition. Parent input also will help educators overcome potential parent resistance during transition.

Parent Resistance

Educators in this study reported parents sometimes resisted efforts to transition SWDs to independent life after high school. Understanding the source of parent resistance is important to address the source of the resistance. Parents of SWDs often seem overprotective and are concerned for the child's safety, both physically and socially (Taub, 2006). However, parents

may be concerned that giving up guardianship will prevent them from helping in medical decisions (National Council on Disability, 2019). School staff should convince parents of the need for self-determination for long-term success (National Council on Disability, 2019). Taub (2006) recommended counselors refer parents to Klein and Kemp's (2004) *Reflections from a Different Journey: What Adults With Disabilities Wish All Parents Knew*, a set of essays by adults with disabilities written specifically for parents of SWDs.

Further, SWDs with a network of friends, mentors, and community members will not rely solely on parents for decision-making help (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Adults in the community and educators can help SWDs make work- and education-related decisions in the transition process (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). A supporting adult, whether or not a family member, can help the SWD remain resilient amid social or academic challenges (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). Strong community connections, extracurricular activities, and friendships are important and help the SWD expand friendships in next contexts, such as college or the workplace (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). Community and work activities can expand the SWDs' interests in postsecondary work. Additional sources of support include job counselors, who can recommend internships or other opportunities and help with workplace readiness skills. Peer mentoring can help SWDs in job exploration and self-advocacy (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Self-determination is a dominant theme in the literature to help SWDs transition to postschool life (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Involving the student early in the IEP process helps develop such self-determination. A strengths-based approach can help parents support self-determination of the SWD, rather than focusing on the SWD's limitations (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). Emphasizing shared decision-making to support self-

determination may prevent families from feeling guardianship is necessary (National Council on Disability, 2019).

Counselors may find community financial planners, case workers, or other individuals to help parents understand the financial implications and services available to the SWD after the age of 18 (National Council on Disability, 2019). Educators in this study perceived some parents were reluctant to lose government benefits as their child achieved more independence. This finding is rarely mentioned in the literature. School staff can help parents or find community resources to help parents navigate and understand resources such as the Social Security Administration (2021) document outlining benefits for individuals with disabilities as they reach the age of 18. Families may not understand whose income is considered or the limits before benefits are reduced.

Parents and families also need to receive comprehensive information about alternatives to guardianship. Leuchovius and Ziemke (2019) stated,

> Some families pursue guardianship because they mistakenly believe or have been told that it's required in order to show their youth's eligibility when being assessed for developmental disabilities services, other governmental programs, or medical care. However, guardianship severely limits an individual's right to make independent decisions. (p. 2)

Parents need information on the potential consequences of guardianship, including less favorable treatment of college applications and discrimination for the individual with disabilities (Leuchovius & Ziemke, 2019; National Council on Disability, 2019). The National Council on Disability (2019) recommended offering training to educators and school staff as well as parents on less restrictive alternatives to guardianship. Educators asking parents about guardianship without mentioning alternatives may unintentionally bias parents to assume guardianship is the

best option (National Council on Disability, 2019). Discussing students' strengths is a more unbiased approach to deciding on appropriate options to support adults with disabilities.

Helping parents understand the resources available also requires school staff receive training and information. In the next section, I provide literature relevant to staff professional development as well as evaluation of the transition program for continued improvement.

Professional Development and Program Evaluation

Teachers need to be educated and trained on transition services to support learners to achieve their goals effectively (Kurth et al., 2017). School staff may not have comprehensive information on issues such as alternatives to guardianship (National Council on Disability, 2019). Additional topics for potential professional development include motivating parents. Effective professional development is typically both external and job embedded (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). For teachers, effective professional development is collaborative, is active, and includes feedback and reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Information should provide practical strategies educators or school staff can readily use, such as ways to engage parents.

Interviewing educators at the target site about the transition program revealed barriers for a successful transition process. Continued evaluation of the transition program, including educator input, would contribute to identifying future needs and improve the program. Transition programs should be evaluated regularly to ensure success (Hirano et al., 2016; Talapatra et al., 2018). Parents and students also could be included in a survey to determine how the program is meeting their needs.

Project Description

Resources and Potential Barriers

To fulfill the intent of this study, several concerns must be addressed for the distribution of recommendations. Providing training, as recommended in the white paper, requires resources to distribute materials and provide training to general and special educators and parents. Businesses, vocational counselors, and community developers may also be invited to the trainings. I am making recommendations that the district special education administrative department be responsible for implementing the strategies and recommendations for this training. Barriers such as mandatory meetings and professional development days may be seen as an unwillingness to cooperate by some teachers, which may hinder a successful move to a more efficient transition process. School budgets are often a concern as financial resources are limited.

Based the data presented as well as the resources relevant to training, the recommendations can be implemented with the expectation of success. Stakeholders include SWDs, parents, general and special educators, central office leaders, and administrators involved in the transition process. Stakeholders can rely on the data to make informed decisions to develop alternative solutions (if needed) after reviewing the solutions provided in the white paper.

Implementation

At the completion of this project, I will report the analysis of the data collected from this study to the district stakeholders, beginning with the district superintendent and then connecting with the target site principals. To be as expedient as possible, I plan to complete distribution of the project within 4–6 weeks after the approval of the final study. Planning for the presentation to stakeholders may take another 4–6 weeks to navigate through suggestions for making the

transition process more effective for SWDs' outcomes. The school district will be responsible for integrating recommendations to the special education department personnel regarding the transition process and other stakeholders. Integrating project recommendations could be provided during the summer months aside from regular school attendance.

Roles and Responsibilities

The goal of this evaluation is to ensure optimum outcomes for SWDs based on the transition process in their high school. Stakeholders within the target school district are asked to evaluate, cooperate, and collaborate with this transition process, with the final decision to be determined by the school district superintendent. My role is to present research-based information and strategies that may help the district improve the transition process for SWDs.

The principal, parents, SWDs, special education teachers, special education administrators, central office leaders, and general education teachers involved with transition planning for SWDs from the target school will have the opportunity to review the project after being accepted by the central office school district superintendent. I suggest that the school district executive personnel be responsible for the implementation the project and the annual recommended systemic continued professional development.

The change to focus on is to incorporate annual assessment as well as professional development for district stakeholders to guide the transition process by developing visions and goals of the evaluation's successes and failures during the transitioning process of SWDs. I suggest that administrators and central office leaders support the teachers in their effort to incorporate the necessary functional skills for successful transition outcomes for all SWDs.

Project Evaluation Plan

Walsh et al. (2018) noted the importance of evaluation in the ongoing improvement of projects. As Walsh et al. expressed, the input of stakeholders is also imperative in the evaluation of professional development programs. In my research, teachers reported different perceptions concerning transition programs for SWDs. As described by Winkler et al. (2020), an evaluative element to improve transition programs for SWDs at the target high school would increase understanding of their role, students' needs, and successful implementation of transition programs for SWDs. A formative evaluation will offer immediate feedback for suggestions made in the white paper. Formative evaluations determine whether a design process works well or whether it does not (Joyce, 2019). Administrators, central office leaders, general and special educators, parents, and students may provide their insight on the strengths and weaknesses of the recommendations in the white paper. A final evaluation may be used to request additional training, request more resources, or determine whether the recommendations are on target and will provide needed information to make the transition process more expedient and successful.

Project Implications

Results obtained from this study may influence social change by providing general and special educators, parents, students, campus administrators, and central office leaders with the necessary recommendations to advocate effectively for changes in the transition process. Such changes may result in better outcomes for SWDs after high school. With a more effective process, SWDs in rural areas (such as where this study was conducted) may have more opportunities to engage in employment, recreation and leisure activities, self-advocacy, self-determination, and educational decisions that will help them become more self-sufficient. This change in the implementation of the recommendations could strengthen the transition services

and process to help SWDs transition to well-matched postsecondary outcomes with skills developed to be successful in their chosen setting. Outcomes for SWDs can include daily living skills, employment skills, and self-determination skills. Using a more effective transition process designed with the student in mind, and systematically advocating for research-based practices such as the integration of transition skills into the curriculum and best practices for collaboration and communication with parents, are implications from the information collected from district stakeholders in this study. Implementing recommendations from this study may influence the transition process in this rural district and lead to SWDs being matched with appropriate postsecondary outcomes to support their independence and living in the community.

Section 4: Reflection and Conclusions

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of educators regarding the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at the high schools in the target district. The target population for the project included general and special education teachers in the selected high schools, as well as two central office leaders who were former special educators at the high schools and had knowledge or experience of the transition process. In this section, I reflect on the discussions and conclusions that were obtained from the study findings. To achieve this objective, Section 4 is divided into different parts. The main areas discussed in this section include project strengths and limitations, recommendations for alternative approaches, project development and evaluation, reflection on the importance of the work, implications and applications, and directions for future research.

Project Strengths and Limitations

The first goal of this project was to provide a research base for strategies to alter the curriculum for some SWDs to focus on hands-on and functional learning. Educators can take part in curriculum design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs. Understanding curriculum design and implementation to help the successful transition process for SWDs is the primary goal of stakeholders in the education sector and is centered on students' needs. By directly involving educators in this project, I ensured that firsthand information from educators would be used to inform the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs. Collaboration and gaining input provided an opportunity for me to use stakeholder perceptions related to designing and implementing a suitable curriculum to support the transition process of SWDs.

The second goal of the project was to provide a research base for strategies to educate and involve parents more positively in the SWD transition process in the district. A strength of the project, again, is its basis in stakeholder perceptions, combined with in-depth recent research literature. The white paper includes research-based approaches to help meet the gap in practice noted by the teachers in the study.

The third goal of the project was to use data from the literature as well as the findings of the study to recommend an annual evaluation of the transition program in the district. This evaluation could include a survey to maintain a degree of reliability and accuracy in the transition process throughout the year. A strength of this goal is the incorporation of educator input to implement a transition process evaluation, including feedback and required support.

Another strength of this project is the project's alignment with the needs of the stakeholders affected by it. In particular, I ensured that educators who had experience with SWDs participated in the study to determine gaps in practice and areas needing improvement in the transition program. A subsequent literature review for the white paper yielded research-based suggestions for a curriculum design that effectively supports the transition process for SWDs.

Although the white paper project had several strengths, some limitations are important to underscore. The white paper contains recommendations but does not offer a detailed plan for professional development or a curriculum. The nature of the project yielded a research-based plan but not a specific, detailed course of action such as a professional development project.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

I designed this study to gather teachers' perceptions to show areas of need in the transition process for SWDs; noted barriers to a successful transition program were then

addressed through a research-based white paper. The white paper includes suggestions based on weaknesses that educators perceived in the transition program as well as literature on those gaps.

In this regard, the project could have been addressed differently using the professional development option. A professional development project would have created a specific outline of training for both educators and parents. Such professional development and parent training should be developed with more concrete input from district leaders and other stakeholders.

Another approach that could have been used for this project was a curriculum plan. A curriculum plan refers to developing a plan for a unique program that is used in school. This project would have also been undertaken through a curriculum plan to effectively initiate and implement a unique program to help SWDs transition into postsecondary settings effectively. However, a curriculum must be implemented in alignment with state standards and requires district and administrator input. Thus, after careful consideration of the alternative approaches and in line with this project's purpose, I selected a white paper with policy recommendations for this project.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

This study project has been a milestone journey toward scholarship. At the initial stage of my program, I would have automatically addressed the current concern differently, engaging in limited data analysis. By undertaking this program, I gained substantive analytics that are evidence based to address the current problem. Gaining hands-on practice using data analysis techniques for decision-making has been valuable. I used data analysis techniques and decision-making techniques to investigate the current problem effectively with new information and knowledge. In summary, understanding a research problem using different data analysis methods has been the significant strength of undertaking this project.

Another area of scholarly growth for me has been writing skills. Prior to undertaking this project, I was not a good writer. However, after applying the knowledge gained in this project, I witnessed a significant improvement in my writing and research skills. Equally, before enrolling for this scholarly project, my research skills were limited to using multiple sources and synthesizing key ideas on the topic. However, after this project, I had gained enough skills to continue growing in research through the synthesis approach. Having acquired these valuable skills in conducting research, I will continue to enhance my skills by using them regularly. Although I am by no means as proficient as I should be, I am slowly developing into a research scholar.

Writing a white paper for me was one of the most daunting tasks of my life. I came to understand how to conduct a study from formulating a problem statement, to designing research questions, to conducting a literature review on the topic, to planning for data analysis methods, to collecting data, to analyzing the data to provide informed conclusions for the white paper. Through my learning process, I gained valuable skills that can be used to create an engaging conversation with stakeholders. I developed the ability to use effective communicative skills to create dialogues and conversations to present study findings to stakeholders. I used the research format to understand the needs of the target stakeholders and key aspects that they considered important, combined with existing research, to offer recommendations.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

Research suggested that SWDs are provided with inequitable opportunities in schools compared to typical students, which make their transition process less effective. Limited opportunities and support negatively affect educational opportunities, career growth, and employment status for SWDs (Wrightslaw, 2020). At the target district, only 37% of SWDs

graduate from high school, compared to 79.9% of SWODs; nationally, the gap is similar (see Wrightslaw, 2020). These data show that the current transition designs do not adequately support SWDs' needs. Through this project, I sought to address this gap by conducting a basic qualitative study to document educators' perceptions of the transition process for SWD as they graduate from high school. The study findings are significant because they provide valuable information that can be used to support equality of educational opportunities and career growth for SWDs.

Additionally, examining the perceptions that general and special educators have of the transition program to implement improvements is important because additional information from educators can be integrated into the transition program to improve outcomes for SWDs. Lastly, the study findings are important because they provide recommendations for specific changes to be made in local policy to improve outcomes for SWDs.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

I conducted this study to offer a white paper with recommendations that could be used to address the low graduation rates of SWDs in high school. The transition process for SWDs from high school to further education or careers can be either a significant barrier or a facilitator of their career goals. Based on the study findings, integrating social skills, functional skills, self-determination, and self-advocacy into the curriculum for SWDs could help improve the transition process.

The implications include the use of different skills, such as self-awareness, problem-solving, decision-making, goal setting and attainment, self-knowledge, self-management, and self-regulation to help SWDs gain necessary skills for their transition process. Moreover, the study findings imply that including social skills for a curriculum design plays an important role in helping SWDs gain solid social skills required for career growth. The study findings also imply

that including key components of a transition process for SWDs, such as self-determination, will help the affected students have a strong sense of self-reliance as they transition in their lives.

Additionally, training for parents combined with teacher professional development on parent outreach could improve parents' role in the transition process and support for their children's independence after high school. An important finding of the study was parent resistance. A combined teacher and parent training program could increase partnership and parent engagement as well as help parents navigate the wealth of complex information on transition for SWDs.

In terms of applications, the study findings can be applied in different settings, particularly in learning institutions that have learners who have physical or cognitive disabilities. The white paper recommendations can be used to support policies that encourage equality of opportunities for SWDs. Policymakers can also use the study findings to initiate radical changes that support equal resource allocations for SWDs to facilitate their transition process after high school.

Regarding directions for future research, I recommend using the professional development option to investigate the current problem. In this study, I only used a white paper approach, which has limitations in the practicality of the study findings. Stakeholders may not implement the recommendations of the white paper. However, developing a specific professional development plan approach, as is recommended in the white paper, combined with parent training, will allow study findings to be practically tested and implemented through training programs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of educators regarding the design and implementation of the transition process for SWDs at the high schools in the target district. Based on the study findings, a white paper was developed to address gaps in practice using current research. Based on these policy recommendation findings, it was established that an effective transition process for SWDs requires training of parents combined with professional development of teachers on parent outreach. Additionally, an effective transition program requires teacher professional development on how to incorporate functional skills into the regular standards-based curriculum. Integrating skills such as self-determination, self-advocacy, and social skills into the curriculum is important in preparing SWDs for the transition to a career or further education. The project deliverable could have far-reaching implications by influencing policy to improve transition programs for SWDs.

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Appendix: The Project White Paper

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of educators regarding the design and implementation of the transition process for students with disabilities (SWDs) at the high schools in the target district. In a school district in a southern state, administrator staff, teachers, and related service personnel have implemented individual transition plans (ITPs) required for SWDs to help them shift from the high school environment to postsecondary options. The problem that was investigated by this study was that only 37% of SWDs are graduating from high schools in the target district, compared to 79.9% of students without disabilities (SWODs), which suggests that the transition design and implementation does not support SWDs' needs.

The study involved semistructured interviews with six educators at the target high schools as well as district special education staff who were former special education teachers at the high schools and had knowledge of the transition process for SWDs. Results showed perceived strengths as well as weaknesses in the transition process at the study district. Four themes emerged:

1. Educators perceive collaboration as a strength of the transition planning process.
2. Educators perceive the use of student data and engagement of supports are strengths of the transition process.
3. Educators perceive that underinformed or resistant parents can present barriers to collaboration on behalf of the SWDs in the transition process.
4. Educators perceive that a curriculum that emphasizes academics over practical skills can impede transition success.

The goals of the white paper developed from this research study are the to inform the stakeholders regarding the following key considerations to strengthen the transition process for SWDs:

1. Provide a research base for strategies to alter the curriculum for some SWDs to focus on hands-on and functional learning.
2. Provide a research base for strategies to educate and involve parents more positively in the SWD transition process in the district.
3. Use data from the literature as well as the findings of the study to recommend an annual evaluation of the transition program in the district.

As described in more detail at the conclusion of this paper, the final recommendations are related to potential actions to strengthen the process:

1. Create a Transition Task Force for the district.
2. Annually evaluate the transition process.
3. Implement parent outreach combined with teacher professional development.
4. Create a parent handbook.
5. Provide teacher professional development on a functional curriculum for SWDs.

Brief Background of the Problem

According to the Mississippi Department of Education, Division of Research and Development (2019), the 4-year graduation rate for SWDs in the target district in 2018 was 44%, compared to an 83% rate for all students. In 2017, the graduate rate for SWDs was 37%,

compared to 79.9% for all students. These data suggest that the transition design and implementation does not adequately support SWDs' needs. Personnel in the target district have expressed that the transition process has not changed over a decade or been evaluated. Staff remarks indicate a failure for the system to adapt over the years, which could result in students' transition needs not being met. The graduation rates provide further evidence of the SWD' needs not being addressed through the transition process.

Methodology

Data for this basic qualitative study were collected through interviews of six purposefully sampled participants from the target district who included general and special educators from district high schools and two central office leaders who were formerly special educators at the high schools. Data were analyzed inductively to identify patterns and themes that included collaboration, communication, systemic assessment, and curriculum. Findings indicated that a more strategic process for transition was needed.

Findings

The findings from the interviews conducted with educators and district staff revealed strengths and weaknesses of the district transition process for SWDs. Collaboration is a strength of the transition planning process. Transition planning incorporated ongoing and frequent communication and cooperation between the SWDs, educators, and often the student's guardians. Educators sought partnerships with local businesses for internships and job opportunities for SWDs. Student involvement was ensured through interviews and assessments, conducted at least annually, to assess the SWD's interests, aspirations, and expectations. Educators used student input to develop specific objectives of transition planning. Parental collaboration in many instances was incorporated through interviews and conferences to obtain input about the SWD's

strengths, interests, and support needs, as well as the parents' needs, goals, and expectations. Ongoing parental collaboration involved frequent teacher-to-parent communications and through educators' availability to address questions, concerns, or information. Interdisciplinary collaboration occurred between educators to ensure coordination of supports in alignment with the evolving transition plan and the SWD's Individualized Education Program (IEP) and ITP.

Additionally, the district and schools conduct regular needs assessments. The use of student data and engagement of supports are strengths of the transition process. Detailed, rigorous transition assessments were conducted annually to identify and monitor support needs. Teachers worked throughout the transition planning process to assist parents and SWDs in accessing appropriate outside resources for continuity of support after graduation. Teachers worked with local businesses to find employment for SWDs. Teachers also connected students to postgraduation supports indirectly, by teaching students to communicate effectively enough to express needs and find supports independently.

However, two barriers or problems emerged from the interview data. The areas of concern perceived by educators were parents and the curriculum. Some educators perceived underinformed or resistant parents can present barriers to collaboration. Parents could be resistant because their own negative experiences in school made them oppositional, because preventing their adult child from becoming independent made them eligible for increased governmental assistance, or because they were underinformed. Parents who were underinformed typically had been provided with the information they needed but had been unable to assimilate the large amount of detailed procedural knowledge that optimally supporting their child required. Some parents were reportedly reluctant to support their children's independence, perhaps even from a tax or financial standpoint.

All educators interviewed indicated a curriculum that emphasizes academics over practical skills can impede transition success. SWDs needed hands-on, practical skills rather than theoretical knowledge. Requiring students pursuing an alternate diploma to be proficient in subjects like algebra was perceived by participants in this study as taking valuable time away from hands-on instruction in necessary, practical skills. The IEP and continued assessment should be used to guide the transition process from high school to adulthood (Chen et al., 2019). Depending on the disability and its severity, SWDs need different skills and supports, and thus the ITP team should tailor the plan to each student (Kaya et al., 2018). Turnbull et al. (2018) concluded more research is needed to learn why functional instruction may be better for SWDs, as noted by the teachers in this study.

The findings from the interviews also suggested the benefit of an annual, anonymous survey with open-ended questions to gain teachers' input in improving the transition process. This survey could be part of an annual evaluation of the transition program. The participants noted the need to integrate teachers' perceptions in designing and implementing a transition process for SWDs.

Review of the Literature

As noted, the findings of the study indicated gaps in practice that could be helped through research-based strategies. Participants described issues with an abstract curriculum inappropriate for SWDs who responded better to hands-on learning and potentially more functional skills. Some participants indicated parents could be a barrier to student transitioning. I chose a white paper to provide research related to these topics. The following topics are reviewed: conceptual framework of a person-centered transition process, curriculum for SWDs transitioning to life after

secondary school, parents of SWDs and the transition process, and literature on professional development and evaluation to implement change in the education setting.

Curriculum for SWDs and the Transition Process

The results of this study indicated teachers felt the curriculum needed more emphasis on hands-on instruction and functional skills. Transition planning is defined as how teachers and instructors develop a roadmap for students after graduation (Noel et al., 2016). The skills taught during the transition period must ensure that the SWDs are prepared for postsecondary education (Kurth et al., 2017). Functional skills to be include self-determination, self-advocacy skills, independent living, and social skills (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017). Ali et al. (2017) identified six core skills to help SWDs achieve independence: social skills, self-determination and self-advocacy, parent and family participation, general education, postsecondary education, and work competence.

Self-Determination in the Curriculum

Self-determination is related to the ability to set goals and make choices (Burke et al., 2019; Wegner, 2017). As expressed by Wegner (2017), self-determination entails the capacity to choose and to act based on those choices. Many SWDs lack self-determination because these students do not see the significance of mapping out what they need to do in the future. Wegner (2017) also described self-determination as the ability to make personal selections related to education, independent living, and vocation and explored how it can positively affect the postschool outcomes of people with disabilities.

In their longitudinal study to investigate transition planning requirements involving students with learning disabilities, Mazzotti et al. (2018) established four factors are likely to

determine self-determination among individuals: capacity, opportunity, support and accommodations, and perceptions or beliefs. Instruction promoting components related to self-determination must be integrated into all phases of the curriculum (Marita & Hord, 2017). Research has shown that factors improving self-determination skills should be integrated into transition planning for students with disabilities (Kurth et al., 2017). Feerasta (2017) demonstrated that SWDs who were more self-determined when they completed high school were more likely to be employed and live independently than their peers who were less self-determined. Feerasta interviewed individuals with disabilities working in a restaurant as well as their manager.

Encouraging SWDs to make choices, set goals, and self-evaluate-key aspects of self-determination models may promote their successful transition into adulthood (Burke et al., 2019). Such acts help them plan their transition if they know what they want to do after high school (Jolley et al., 2018). Burke et al. (2019) noted using a self-determination model took 2 years before students showed significant improvement. Therefore, educators should begin to encourage student self-determination early in the IEP process. Wegner (2017) stated students need to learn to self-manage their IEP meetings by first partaking, then learning to develop the IEP, and leading or managing the IEP process for their efficient transition from high school to further employment or education. Students should not be passive in the IEP process, but rather use the process to learn self-determination (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Jolley et al. (2018) conducted a literature review related to SWDs and transition in West Africa and opined that student passivity could result because the meeting atmosphere is often more agenda oriented and adult focused than student centered or student directed. The case manager may forget that the meeting is about the student's best interests and may dominate the meeting, without encouraging the student to express their opinions or feelings (Feerasta, 2017). The U.S. Department of

Education (2017) advised that transition programs be student centered and help students learn decision-making skills. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education recommended use of peer mentoring for instruction in self-advocacy in transition programs prior to employment.

Self-Advocacy in the Curriculum

Self-advocacy is also an imperative skill for SWDs as they leave high school and no longer have an IEP team. In high school, students have an IEP to advocate for them. Researchers for the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2018) reported 94% of SWDs receive support in high school yet only 17% do in college. In higher education, SWDs with self-advocacy are more likely to achieve a degree than students who do not self-advocate for support services (Koch et al., 2018; O'Shea & Kaplan, 2017; Squires & Contermine, 2018).

An estimated fourth of SWDs do not request support in college due to stigma, lack of preparation or knowledge of the supports available, or lack of confidence (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). The U.S. Department of Education (2017) recommended students and parents visit postsecondary campuses to become familiar with the disability support services and staff. SWDs also may lack confidence in communicating with faculty. Yet those SWDs who interact with their instructors have more success in college (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). Curriculum needs to be designed to support students' development of both communication and self-advocacy skill sets, as these skills have been found to affect successful transition to employment of postsecondary setting such as community colleges or university settings (Raley et al., 2020; Shogren, Burke, et al., 2018; Shogren, Shaw, et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2020). For example, In the next section I will describe the importance of the development of social skills for SWDs as part of the transition design and implementation process.

Social Skills in the Curriculum

Social skills also must be integrated into the transition plan to allow students to obtain the required socialization skills (Mazzotti et al., 2018). Social skills are important in the curriculum when implementing a transition program for SWDs to interact well with other people in the environment (Lombardi et al., 2018). Positive social skills provide SWDs a greater opportunity to be successful in transitioning to employment or postsecondary college certificate or degree programs.

As described by Burke et al. (2020), social skills entail being able to speak to adults and peers and carry on a conversation. Burke et al. (2020) stated that demonstrating appropriate social skills and behavior in a range of social circumstances can significantly affect successful outcomes at home, in the community, and the workplace, especially when peer buddies can be involved. Students demonstrating positive social skills are more likely to be successful in a profession because of their ability to ask questions if they do not understand or are confused and because they could be more at ease at the workplace because they have made friends (Burke et al., 2020). In a comparable study, Shogren, Burke, et al. (2018) established that social competence skills, such as having good interpersonal skills and getting along with others, are vital to a successful life. These researchers concluded that poor social skills are likely to be caused by increased levels of anxiety.

Poor performance of anxious students, as noted by Burke et al. (2020), is an outcome of problems with attention and focus, preoccupation with self-oriented and undesirable thoughts, and concern about competence. Burke et al. reported SWDs who demonstrate poor social skills are more likely to demonstrate poor academic achievement in high school. Poor social skills

exhibited by some SWDs are the main barrier to success in everyday life, whether at the workplace or in the classroom.

Academic Standards Versus Functional Skills in the Curriculum

Researchers have recommended approaches for integrating functional skills for SWDs into the Common Core State Standards. Bartholomew et al. (2015) and Scott and Puglia (2018) described how to create a curriculum supportive of functional skills while including the Common Core State Standards. To meet these U.S. college- and career-readiness standards, SWDs may receive extra supports and accommodations. However, teachers, like those interviewed in my study, are challenged to find time to teach standards as well as functional skills. Bartholomew et al. recommended relating standards-based academic skills to real-life needs and contexts. Educators may use two approaches. First, they can identify the academic standard and then devise a way to connect the standard to the student's transition skills. The second approach is to identify the functional skill and then determine the standard to match. For example, using the first approach, writing skills can be taught to improve self-determination, IEPs, and later self-advocacy. Math and chemistry skills can be connected to cooking, choosing weather appropriate clothing, and computing taxes. The second, functional approach is best for students with more profound disabilities (Bartholomew et al., 2015). Cooking and fractions are an example of combining academics with life skills (Bartholomew et al., 2015). Math skills can be taught in relation to personal finances (Scott & Puglia, 2018). Science lessons can be related to caring for plants (Scott & Puglia, 2018).

Pawilen et al. (2018) described a transition curriculum with five domains: livelihood, academic skills, enrichment, prevocational preparation, and care. The researchers recommended practitioners consider each domain as a package that could be interconnected with other domains

in the framework. The curriculum is based on teaching functional skills for independence after high school and is learner centered. Pawilen et al. developed the framework after a roundtable discussion with 28 educators and campus administrators in the Philippines. The livelihood domain includes vocational skills like crafts and cooking, leading to possible entrepreneurship. Enrichment is special interests of the student. Care refers to life skills and motor skills for students with profound disabilities. This transition curriculum could be integrated as it is designed or adapted to meet the specific needs for SWDs in any school setting.

Parents and the Transition Process

A dominant theme throughout the literature is the vital importance of parent and family involvement to ensure a successful postschool outcome for SWDs (Ali et al., 2017; Hirano et al., 2016, 2017; Talapatra et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Parental involvement is multidimensional and requires various approaches (Hirano et al., 2016). Educator participants in this study said parental collaboration was incorporated through interviews and conferences; frequent teacher-to-parent communications; and through educators' availability to address questions, concerns, or information. Apparently those efforts were not adequate, however, as participating educators also noted some parents were a barrier to the transition process. As suggested by Maenner et al. (2020), special educators facilitate the transition process of students with disabilities by encouraging parent–student participation in an effective transition process that suits each student's specific needs. While families may use different support programs to facilitate the transitioning of students with disabilities into adulthood, educators must provide such families with valuable information required to help them make informed decisions aligned with the unique needs that students have (Kramer et al., 2018). Hirano et al. (2016) used an exploratory factor analysis of measurement scales with 149 parents of high-school-age students

with disabilities. The research resulted in seven parent motivators: future expectations; general school invitations; specific teacher invitations; specific child invitations; knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy; role construction; and perceived time and energy. In the next subsection I describe literature related to providing parents with knowledge. Subsequent sections include motivation and parent outreach and overcoming parent resistance.

Providing Information to Parents and Families

Educators in this study described parents as unable to absorb the massive amount of information regarding SWDs and transition. The U.S. Department of Education (2017) recommended parents understand the transition services available, how to access local resources, and vocational services and supports. The U.S. Department of Education Rehabilitation Services Administration (2021) also offers a grant to school districts to create and support a Parent Information and Training Program. The grant funds support training for SWDs and their families to navigate transition needs to support independent living.

School counselors and educators can ensure parents have access to information in a variety of formats. Recommended by the U.S. Department of Education (2017) as a resource, HUNE offers tips for families in simple language in English and Spanish (HUNE, 2021). The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (2017) published a report listing research-based best practices for families of SWDs, with training modules to involve parents. Methods included video dramatizations in parents' native language, explaining and then role playing parent practices, question-and-answer sessions, brochures, and follow-up (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, 2017).

Parents and SWDs often are uncertain of services available at colleges. For SWDs attending college, parents should visit the campus with the student to become familiar with the

office of disability support services and accommodations available (Taub, 2006). The visit could include a peer also planning to attend the college (Taub, 2006). High school educators and special education service personnel may also invite the college representatives, parents, and SWDs to school-sponsored events specifically designed to support transition for SWDs to community colleges, junior colleges, trade or technical schools, or employment in the immediate community. Maintaining motivation and engagement to support transition is a priority for SWDs and their families.

Motivating Parents and Families

As SWDs (and SWODs) enter high school, parent involvement typically recedes; however, during Grades 11 and 12, SWDs need high levels of parent involvement and support (Hirano et al., 2016). Collaboration between the family, SWD, school staff, and community members is ideal (Talapatra et al., 2018). The U.S. Department of Education (2017) recommended school staff working with transition programs "create and maintain a system that supports family involvement and empowers families to support the self-determination of their sons and daughters" (p. 36). The U.S. Department of Education as well as Talapatra et al. (2018) recommended outreach to families by school counselors. Taub (2006) recommended counselors find support groups for parents.

Hirano et al. (2016) identified seven motivators to involve parents of SWDs. Three of them included invitations: general school invitations, specific teacher invitations, and child invitations. The National Center for Learning Disabilities (2017) reported 45% of parents of SWDs indicated most goals were set by school staff. Parents view outreach as a form of collaborative communication on behalf of their children. The more outreach efforts, the more the parent will feel like a contributing team member with valued opinions. As part of the IEP process,

parents should be encouraged to attend IEP meetings and have advance notice of scheduling (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). IEP team members should take into account parents' work and transportation issues and develop additional systems to include the parents, such as phone conferences (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Further, educators need to understand parents' perspectives, particularly parents from traditionally marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities, non-English-speaking parents, or low-income families (Wilt et al., 2020). Parents may lack confidence in their knowledge of transition, may not speak English well, or may have overwhelming schedules (Taub, 2006). Education officials should be prepared to bridge the gap in parents' knowledge or access to the transition process. Understanding parent perceptions contributes to a student-centered, individualized approach to transition. Parent input also will help educators overcome potential parent resistance during transition. Open and consistent communication with parents regarding transition needs will support the development of a collaborative partnership between the parents, SWDs, and education support personnel.

Parent Resistance

Some educators in this study reported parents sometimes resisted efforts to transition SWDs to independent life after high school. Understanding the source of parent resistance is important to address such resistance. Parents of SWDs often seem overprotective and are concerned for the child's safety, both physically and socially (Taub, 2006). However, parents may be concerned that giving up guardianship will prevent them from helping in medical decisions (National Council on Disability, 2019). School staff should educate and structure communication in order to support parents' understanding of their children's need for self-determination for long-term success (National Council on Disability, 2019). Taub (2006)

recommended counselors refer parents to Klein and Kemp's (2004) *Reflections from a Different Journey: What Adults With Disabilities Wish All Parents Knew*, a set of essays by adults with disabilities written specifically for parents of SWDs.

Further, SWDs with a network of friends, mentors, and community members will not rely solely on parents for decision-making help (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Adults in the community and educators can help SWDs make work- and education-related decisions in the transition process (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). A supporting adult, whether or not a family member, can help the SWD remain resilient amid social or academic challenges (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). Strong community connections, extracurricular activities, and friendships are important and help the SWD expand friendships in next contexts, such as college or the workplace (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). Community and work activities can expand the SWDs' interests in postsecondary work. Additional sources of support include job counselors, who can recommend internships or other opportunities and help with workplace readiness skills. Peer mentoring can help SWDs in job exploration and self-advocacy (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Self-determination is a dominant theme in the literature to help SWDs transition to postschool life (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Involving the student early in the IEP process helps develop such self-determination. A strengths-based approach can help parents support self-determination of the SWD, rather than focusing on the SWD's limitations (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). Emphasizing shared decision-making to support self-determination may prevent families from feeling guardianship is necessary (National Council on Disability, 2019).

Counselors may find community financial planners, case workers, or other individuals to help parents understand the financial implications and services available to the SWD after the age of 18 (National Council on Disability, 2019). Educators in this study perceived some parents were reluctant to lose government benefits as their child achieved more independence. This finding is rarely mentioned in the literature. School staff can help parents or find community resources to help parents navigate and understand resources such as the Social Security Administration (2021) document outlining benefits for individuals with disabilities as they reach the age of 18. Families may not understand whose income is considered or the limits before benefits are reduced.

Parents and families also need to receive comprehensive information about alternatives to guardianship. Leuchovius and Ziemke (2019) stated,

> Some families pursue guardianship because they mistakenly believe or have been told that it's required in order to show their youth's eligibility when being assessed for developmental disabilities services, other governmental programs, or medical care. However, guardianship severely limits an individual's right to make independent decisions. (p. 2)

Parents need information on the potential consequences of guardianship, including less favorable treatment of college applications and discrimination for the individual with disabilities (Leuchovius & Ziemke, 2019; National Council on Disability, 2019). The National Council on Disability (2019) recommended offering training to educators and school staff as well as parents on less restrictive alternatives to guardianship. Educators asking parents about guardianship without mentioning alternatives may unintentionally bias parents to assume guardianship is the best option (National Council on Disability, 2019). Discussing students' strengths is a more unbiased approach to deciding on appropriate options to support adults with disabilities.

Helping parents understand the resources available also requires school staff receive training and information. In the next section, I provide literature relevant to staff professional development as well as evaluation of the transition program for continued improvement.

Professional Development and Program Evaluation

Teachers need to be educated and trained on transition services to support learners to achieve their goals effectively (Kurth et al., 2017). School staff may not have comprehensive information on issues such as alternatives to guardianship (National Council on Disability, 2019). Additional topics for potential professional development include motivating parents. Effective professional development is typically both external and job embedded (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). For teachers, effective professional development is collaborative, is active, and includes feedback and reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Information should provide practical strategies educators or school staff can readily use, such as ways to engage parents.

Interviewing educators at the target site about the transition program revealed barriers to a successful transition process. Continued evaluation of the transition program, including educator input, would contribute to identifying future needs and improve the transition program. Transition programs and the continuum of transition services should be evaluated regularly to ensure success (Hirano et al., 2017; Talapatra et al., 2018). Parents and students also could be included in a survey to determine how the program is meeting their needs.

Recommendations

Creation of a Transition Task Force for the District

A Transition Task Force could be the vehicle through which these recommendations are implemented, monitored, and evaluated. The task force should include all stakeholders in the ITP

process, including parents. The representation of key stakeholders in the transition process will support ownership and accountability of the transition processes suggested for piloting or implementation.

Researchers have established that principals seeking to initiate successful change should promote "cooperative collective psychological ownership" (Benji-Rabinovitz & Berkovich, 2020, p. 83). When navigating change, principals may use collaborative structures to promote trust, sharing, reflection, and value of the process of any change considered (Benoliel & Berkovich, 2017; Shaked & Schechter, 2017). Policymakers should consider the how to orchestrate change through the use of collective reform efforts and by emphasizing collaboration (Benji-Rabinovitz & Berkovich, 2020). Creating a strong bond within the team, or task force, has been found to facilitate change by supporting the development of psychological ownership of the change process (Chakrabarty & Woodman, 2009; Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2017). Ownership by teachers is particularly important to promote change that is integrated into the culture of the school organization (Coburn, 2003; Hess, 2010).

Annual Evaluation of the Transition Process

Each year, the transition process should be evaluated by surveying teachers as well as graduating SWDs to determine whether the transition process as designed and implemented needs changing. Transition programs should be evaluated regularly to ensure continued success (Hirano et al., 2017; Talapatra et al., 2018). Evaluation would indicate areas for teacher professional development to support the transition planning for SWDs. Ongoing needs assessment is necessary to adapt the program to meet the needs of SWDs as well as teachers.

Parent Outreach Combined With Teacher Professional Development

A combined teacher–parent training program would instill trust among parents and communicate the value of parents as part of the transition team. Effective professional development is typically both external and job embedded (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). For teachers, effective professional development is collaborative, is active, and includes feedback and reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Information should provide practical strategies educators or school staff can readily use, such as ways to engage parents.

Initial training of teachers could encourage cultural awareness and ways to establish partnerships with parents. The U.S. Department of Education (2017) as well as Talapatra et al. (2018) recommended outreach to families by school counselors. The more outreach efforts, the more the parent will feel like a contributing team member with valued opinions (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017).

Both teachers and parents could be encouraged to use a person-centered, strengths-based approach. Parents and teachers both could be trained on alternatives to guardianship (National Council on Disability, 2019), as described in the section on Parent Resistance. Training should help parents understand their children's need for self-determination for long-term success (National Council on Disability, 2019).

Training could help parents navigate the wealth of information regarding SWD resources after high school. Rather than simply providing links or masses of print information, the idea of parent training is to think positively about future outcomes and career planning for their children. Parents could be encouraged to visit college campuses with the student. As described in the literature review section on Parent Resistance, parents could be provided information indicating that encouraging their child's independence would not necessarily be a financially inappropriate decision. School staff can help parents or find community resources to help parents navigate and

understand resources such as the Social Security Administration (2021) document outlining benefits for individuals with disabilities as they reach the age of 18.

Parent training needs to be offered in a variety of formats and times to accommodate varied work schedules. District leaders could apply for the U.S. Department of Education Rehabilitation Services Administration (2021) grant to school districts to create and support a Parent Information and Training Program.

Parent Handbook

The combined training format would allow for parent input. Parent input could be used by the Transition Task Force to develop a handbook or parent resource tool to meet parent needs. For example, parents and SWDs often are uncertain of services available at colleges. Such a handbook should not take the place of in-person group training of parents but rather serve as a resource. An online version of the handbook or hard copy of the parent handbook would be available at any time, regardless of parent schedules. The handbook should be provided in English, Spanish, and other common languages in the area.

Possible resources include the HUNE (2021) website, which offers tips for families in simple language in English and Spanish. The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (2017) also published a report listing research-based best practices for families of SWDs, with training modules to involve parents.

Teacher Professional Development on Functional Curriculum for SWDs

Professional development should be provided to teachers on how to incorporate hands-on teaching and learning into the school day for SWDs. Given state standards and accountability, teachers need professional development on how to link functional skills with more abstract

standards. Teachers need the support of campus administrators and central office leaders in this area. Additionally, elective courses could include study skills or other specific needs of SWDs. Vocational electives should be provided for all students, including SWDs. The findings of this study, literature review, and white paper recommendations provided examples of how to fill the identified gaps in the transition process by injecting self-determination, self-advocacy, social skills, and functional skills into the curriculum, and through intentional professional development and training of teachers and parents to strengthen the transition process.

Skills to be considered include self-determination, self-advocacy skills, independent living, and social skills (Nolan & Gleeson, 2017). The seven skills of self-advocacy are choice making, problem solving, decision-making, goal setting and attainment, self-awareness and self-knowledge, self-advocacy and leadership, and self-regulation and self-management skills (Raley et al., 2020; Shogren, Burke, et al., 2018; Shogren, Shaw, et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2020). Wegner (2017) described self-determination as the ability to make personal selections related to education, independent living, and vocation.

Instruction promoting components related to self-determination must be integrated into all phases of the curriculum as well as transition planning (Kurth et al., 2017; Marita & Hord, 2017). For SWDs, self-determination and self-advocacy skills could mean the difference between succeeding in college and dropping out (Lombardi et al., 2018) or improve their likelihood of being employed and living independently (Feerasta, 2017). The IEP process is an opportunity to increase student goal setting and decision-making, leading to self-determination (Wegner, 2017).

Social skills must be included in the curriculum and transition planning as well (Lombardi et al., 2018; Mazzotti et al., 2018). The U.S. Department of Education (2017) noted the importance of social-emotional learning in the transition curriculum and offered strategies to

teach social skills. Role playing is a strategy to practice social skills in different contexts or settings, such as higher education, community settings, or the workplace. A positive school climate also supports the development of social skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Educators often perceive a challenge is teaching both functional skills to SWDs as well as academic standards (Scott & Puglia, 2018). In my study, educators complained that the curriculum was too abstract with topics such as algebra, taking instructional time away from functional training in life skills. Bartholomew et al. (2015) and Scott and Puglia (2018) described how to create a curriculum supportive of functional skills while including the Common Core State Standards. Bartholomew et al. recommended relating standards-based academic skills to real-life needs and contexts. Further, hands-on learning, such as teaching science through caring for plants, benefits all students, not just SWDs (Munkel-Jimenez et al., 2020). Educators and central office leaders, and campus administrators may need training on how to combine functional and academic skills in the curriculum. The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (2019) has provided online resources to help educators implement research-based, effective practices to promote high-quality postsecondary outcomes for SWDs. The various documents describe lesson plans for teaching all core subjects to SWDs. Plans include peer tutoring or use of graphic organizers in science, math and cooking skills, and reading comprehension to follow instructions to clean the house.

Conclusion

Based on the findings in this study of educators in the district, the transition process for SWDs has gaps. Most notably, parent engagement and involvement were barriers to transition for SWDs. Additionally, educators deemed a curriculum focused on abstract concepts as inappropriate for many SWDs. Based on these findings and a review of related literature, I have

made recommendations for the target district to improve the transition process for SWDs. A strategically designed and regularly evaluated transition process will allow SWDs to become better prepared for postsecondary outcomes focused on social, academic, independent living, and employability skills required for adult life.

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