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Post-School Transition Experiences of Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Walden University
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Abstract

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BS, La Salle University, 2008

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Educational Psychology

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Abstract

The post-school transition phenomenon has been examined using educational and vocational viewpoints. However, despite evidence-based practices and policies, individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) often experience unfavorable outcomes. This population needs a voice in existing literature because it tends to be aggregated with other participant groups. This qualitative study involved understanding how young adults with mild to moderate ID described their lived experiences regarding the post-school transition to adulthood, specifically in terms of their personal expectations of employment and functional independence. The social cognitive career theory was used to explore individual and environmental factors related to adulthood transitions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via videoconferencing, audio-recorded, and transcribed. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to analyze data thematically. Few participants reported successful outcomes involving secondary education or training, employment, and independent living. Most participants expected to stay home after high school, focusing on quality of life as well as friends and self-care. Findings showed varying degrees of readiness or preparedness for the post-school transition. Participants valued decision-making and independence in adulthood. Goals for the future was a salient theme that warrants further exploration concerning the adulthood transition experience. It is imperative to voice the personal perspectives of adults with ID and increase opportunities to participate in research. Thus, positive social change may result by reducing negative societal attitudes and stigmas regarding people with disabilities.

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Dedication

To my remarkable husband and sons, my motivational rocks, I am incredibly grateful for your unconditional love and unwavering support. I appreciate you taking this adventure with me and everything you sacrificed. Thank you for making all my dreams come true. I would not be here without you. Love you always and forever!

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My family and friends, especially my parents, thank you for your constant encouragement and understanding. A special thanks to my late uncle Fred and grandparents for the countless life lessons and real-world experiences I gained. You helped ignite my passion for special education and advocating for individuals with disabilities. I want to thank my former students, particularly my high school transition students. You changed my life and were the inspiration for this study. I am eternally grateful to every one of you. Last, I want to thank my committee members for their guidance throughout this journey.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The transition to adulthood has become a focal point of educational and vocational research. It refers to the period after high school when young adults transition out of the education system and become contributing members of society. A growing body of literature has examined the post-school transition (see Boehm et al., 2015; Henninger & Taylor, 2014; McCall, 2015; Salt et al., 2019), including the concept of *emerging adulthood*, a relatively new term to describe the period of development spanning from late adolescence through the twenties (Arnett, 2000; Lee & Waithaka, 2017; Meyer et al., 2015; Redgrove et al., 2016). Educational reform initiatives have been implemented to bolster successful transition outcomes for students with and without disabilities. However, despite evidence-based practices and mandated transition planning, individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) often experience poor post-school results (Blick et al., 2016; Bouck & Joshi, 2016; Siperstein et al., 2013). More specifically, these young adults face explicit challenges and barriers involving employment, independent living, postsecondary education, and social inclusion (Abbott & McConkey, 2006; Bouck & Chamberlain, 2017; Butterworth et al., 2015; Gilson et al., 2018; Hall, 2013; Salt et al., 2019). Discrepancies between transition policies, practices, and post-school outcomes have highlighted that individuals with ID need more preparation for the transition to adulthood.

The post-school transition phenomenon has been examined from various perspectives and environments. However, individuals with ID lack a clear voice in the current literature. Prior studies have incorporated aggregated data like multiple

participant populations, including peers with and without other disabilities (see Bouck, 2014; Cimera et al., 2015; Grigal et al., 2011; McCall, 2015; Rojewski et al., 2013), as well as collaborative responses from parents and service providers (see Blustein et al., 2016; Boehm et al., 2015; Kelley & Prohn, 2019; Skaff et al., 2016). Thus, there is a gap in literature regarding the research participation of individuals with ID, specifically regarding their post-school transition experiences. I sought to explore and voice personal and firsthand accounts of young adults with ID who recently exited public high school, with the goal of addressing their expectations and perceptions as they transition into adulthood. Findings of this study may contribute valuable insights regarding the post-school transition phenomenon from the perspectives of young adults with mild to moderate ID, a topic on which there has been limited scholarly research to date.

Chapter 1 includes an overview of the topic's background, including pertinent subthemes. The problem statement and study purpose are presented. This chapter also includes the research question, conceptual framework, significance, and an overview of the methodology. Study assumptions, delimitations, and limitations are also discussed. Lastly, the chapter concludes with a summary and overview of Chapter 2.

Background Information

This section includes background information related to the adulthood transition experiences of individuals with ID. A historical overview of pertinent disability legislation is provided. I explain educational reforms that have impacted inclusion and transition outcomes of young adults with ID. Discrepancies between transition policies,

practices, and outcomes are addressed regarding continued poor post-school outcomes of individuals with ID.

Disability Legislation

Legislative reform initiatives and government programs have been established in recent decades to promote equality and inclusion for people with disabilities. However, individuals with ID have historically experienced social injustice and discrimination. During the 19th and 20th centuries, for instance, individuals with ID were institutionalized and subjected to forced sterilization because of their cognitive deficits; they were also referred to as *mentally handicapped* or *mentally retarded* (Harbour & Maulik, 2010). In the 1960s, disability rights became a prominent social issue as a result of President Kennedy's Presidential Panel on Mental Retardation and his *normalization principle* advocating for deinstitutionalization and improving community-based services for people with disabilities (American Association of People with Disabilities [AAPD], 2015; Braddock, 2007). Moreover, the term *intellectual disability* only recently replaced *mental retardation* after the establishment of Rosa's Law in 2010.

Additional legislative initiatives, including the Social Security Act and Developmental Disabilities Act, led to new advocacy groups, training opportunities, and community-based services for people with disabilities. For example, the Vocational Rehabilitation Act and subsequent Amendments of 1965 focused on the needs of people with profound or severe ID (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities [AAIDD], 2020). Social rehabilitation was promoted across governmental agencies, including the Department of Education and Department of Health and Human

Services. These initiatives were intended to facilitate self-sufficiency and community inclusion for people with disabilities while reducing their reliance on government programs for financial assistance and institutional care (Reed, 1992).

However, individuals with ID and their families have encountered barriers to government support services, housing programs, and access to transportation (Hewitt et al., 2013; Kessler, 2015). This vulnerable population has also experienced poor outcomes in terms of employment, education, and independent living (Bouck, 2014). The poverty rate for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) is three times the national average (Nye-Lengerman & Nord, 2016). Individuals with ID have faced multiple challenges during the transition to adulthood that warrant further exploration, particularly from their perspectives. It is essential to explore participants' post-school transition expectations, outcomes, and overall experiences in terms of how prepared they felt to exit the public school system and become contributing members of society as adults.

Educational Reforms

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act enhanced special education programs and services for students with disabilities, standardizing the concepts of free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and least restrictive environments (LREs; Reed, 1992, p. 403). This act was later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 and mandated individualized education plans (IEPs) for special education students. As a result of the IDEA, schools had to start transition planning by incorporating vocational goals on students' IEPs before their 16th birthday. Transition

planning was aimed to better prepare students with disabilities for adulthood and employment, postsecondary education, and independent living. Although earlier transition planning is correlated with better employment outcomes for adolescents with disabilities (Cimera et al., 2014), individuals with ID continue to experience low rates of integrated or competitive employment (Butterworth et al., 2015). However, parental dissatisfaction with transition planning has happened due to it occurring too late in students' academic careers (Hetherington et al., 2010).

The IDEA mandates that students with IEPs in the American public school system have the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment based on their academic and behavioral needs. Individuals with mild to severe ID are often educated in self-contained or vocational settings. These settings include career or community-based instruction, standardized academic curriculum, and assessments. This combination of life skills and standardized instruction is intended to be tailored to unique abilities of students with special needs. Thus, transition programs should enhance students' academic and nonacademic skills to prepare them for employment or postsecondary education.

Individuals with ID are often unprepared for the post-school transition to adulthood. Therefore, this study involved exploring gaps in current literature related to limited research participation of individuals with ID, explicitly regarding the post-school transition phenomenon and their personal experiences when transitioning to adulthood. This study involved using the social cognitive career theory (SCCT) and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to address young adults with ID and their concerns with post-school transition outcome expectations and experiences.

Problem Statement

Despite current policies and instructional practices, individuals with ID tend to experience adverse outcomes following the post-school transition, partly due to limited resources, employment experiences, and support services (Blick et al., 2016; Bouck & Chamberlain, 2017; Cimera et al., 2015; Mamun et al., 2018; Park & Bouck, 2018). Thus, young adults with ID are often unprepared for the school-to-work transition, hindering career development and future employment opportunities. Jobs are usually acquired based on availability and accessibility rather than personal interest or self-efficacy.

Adults with ID continue to encounter social stigma and discrimination, especially in terms of employment (Chan & Kregel, 2019; Lysaght et al., 2017). As a result, they are subsequently forced to be financially dependent on other people or institutions, including family members, local agencies, and government-based programs. Current post-school transition literature lacks firsthand accounts of individuals with ID in terms of how prepared they felt to leave the public school system and their subsequent transition goals or expectations, often incorporating multiple participant populations and collaborative responses from parents or service providers. Therefore, findings from this study may contribute personal insights regarding unique transition experiences and outcome expectations of individuals with ID while promoting advocacy and research participation for this vulnerable yet under researched population.

Purpose of the Study

I aimed to understand how individuals with mild to moderate ID described the post-school transition experience in terms of their perceptions of adulthood, functional

independence, and employment. The central phenomenon was shared experiences involved with leaving the school system and transitioning to adulthood. Individuals with ID lack a clear voice in transition research and are often aggregated with other populations, including peers with other disabilities and those without disabilities. Therefore, I sought to understand lived experiences of young adults with ID by exploring individual and environmental factors related to the post-school transition phenomenon, including their perspectives and expectations of adulthood, without aggregated data from other participant populations.

Research Questions

Two research questions guided this study:

RQ1: Based on their personal expectations of employment, how do individuals with mild to moderate ID describe their lived experiences in regard to the post-school transition?

RQ2: Based on their personal expectations of functional independence, how do individuals with mild to moderate ID describe their lived experiences in regard to the post-school transition?

Theoretical Framework

The SCCT served as the theoretical foundation for this study. It stems from Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT), an influential theory involving cognitive and motivational processes affecting human agency. The SCCT involves interactions of personal and environmental variables concerning individuals' career development and decision-making. Self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goal setting are this

theory's essential components (Lent et al., 2006). Students' experiences, expectations, and interests are directly influenced by school resources and services, which subsequently impacts in-school and post-school experiences. The SCCT was appropriate for exploring the post-school transition phenomenon and unique experiences of individuals with ID regarding their personal expectations of adulthood, functional independence, employment, and post-school transition outcomes. A disability interpretive lens was also used to help construct an in-depth understanding of the post-school transition experience based on personal experiences of individuals with mild to moderate ID.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative research involves a range of epistemological viewpoints and has been applied across disciplines to explore concepts with limited insight and seek understanding from vulnerable populations, including individuals with ID. I used a qualitative design and phenomenological approach to explore the post-school transition experiences of young adults with mild to moderate ID. Phenomenology involves constructing meaning or building the essence of participants' experiences based on their accounts or descriptions. Using a disability interpretive lens and SCCT as part of the theoretical framework will foster an inductive methodology with emergent ideas to create meaning and enhance knowledge of the post-school transition phenomenon. The transition to adulthood will be explored from the unique perspectives of young adults with ID, a topic that has not been sufficiently explored. Using the SCCT, individual and environmental factors and participants' conceptualizations of adulthood, employment, and functional independence were examined.

Qualitative research involves interpretation, deconstruction, reflexivity, and critical analysis (Brantliner et al., 2005). IPA was used to understand the post-school transition experiences of individuals with ID, a topic with limited information. This methodological approach involves determining participants' personal experiences, reflections, and perspectives. IPA is also used to generate context from a psychological perspective, although post-school transition experiences cannot be generalized across populations (Larkin et al., 2006).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and audio-recorded for subsequent transcription. Data were analyzed thematically using computer coding and constant comparison to generate contextual understanding regarding the post-school transition phenomenon. IPA was used to facilitate flexible collaboration between me and participants and construction of their in-depth perspectives. It has been found to be an valid methodology for research involving individuals with ID. Furthermore, member checking was used to enhance trustworthiness of this study, allowing me to seek clarification and ensure accuracy of participants' responses by using probing and open-ended questions. This flexible and collaborative approach helped foster rich, textural, and structural depictions to generate contextual understanding of the post-school transition phenomenon and perspectives of young adults with mild to moderate ID.

Definitions

Emerging Adulthood: the period between late adolescence and young adulthood, or approximately 18 to 29 (Meyer et al., 2015).

Functional Independence: The capability of a person to perform daily tasks across environments or settings in terms of communication, mobility, and self-care (Bouck, 2010).

Developmental Disability (DD): An umbrella term that includes ID and other severe chronic disabilities that may be cognitive, physical, or both (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities [AAIDD], 2020).

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): A detailed document outlining academic, behavioral, social-emotional, and functional performance levels of students with disabilities. It includes short-term and long-term goals for academic standards and transition planning. IEPs are composed by teachers, administrators, service providers, parents/guardians, and individual students before the age of 16 (Flannery & Hellemn, 2015).

Intellectual Disability (ID): A disability characterized by significant impairments in cognitive functioning and adaptive behavior. This term replaced mental retardation (AAIDD, 2020).

Post-school transition: The process of exiting high school, including termination of special education services and pursuing outcomes such as postsecondary education or employment. Students without disabilities usually graduate by the age of 18, while students with ID often continue special education services and age out, or transition, by 22 (Bouck, 2014).

Assumptions

I assumed that by participating in this qualitative study, participants volunteered willingly and demonstrated appropriate functional behaviors, including cognitive and communication skills. Participants were able to engage with me independently and appropriately without demonstrating any interfering behaviors, such as aggression, defiance, or anxiousness. In addition to expressive and receptive communication skills, I assumed that participants proficiently comprehended or understood the process of informed consent and assent, as well as interview and debriefing directions, using functionally appropriate materials and simple sentences to meet their individual cognitive and communication performance levels. I also assumed participants answered questions honestly and as independently as possible regarding their perceptions of the post-school transition experience. Individuals with ID are often eager to please and worry about disappointing other people, which can impact their level of engagement and response accuracy (Irvine, 2010). In addition to assuming all participants had a legally documented diagnosis of mild to moderate ID, I assumed they experienced the post-school transition and exited high school between 2018-2021. I assumed participants accurately recalled and shared their personal insights and transition experiences without coercion. Individuals with ID are considered a vulnerable yet under researched population with varying degrees of cognitive and communicative deficits; consequently, they may be subject to forced coercion from caregivers or service providers, whether directly or indirectly (Hall, 2013; Irvine, 2010).

Limitations

This phenomenological study had limitations due to its qualitative nature and the participant population. Due to the small and purposeful sample of individuals with mild to moderate ID, findings from this study cannot be generalized. Conducting research with this vulnerable population was difficult, specifically in terms of gaining access to participants via local agencies and organizations. Limited access to participants was addressed by expanding the search criteria from the state of Virginia to include Washington, D.C. and Maryland. A larger setting was necessary due to the explicit selection criteria and unforeseen challenges posed by the current COVID-19 pandemic, which limited data collection in terms of necessitating semi-structured interviews to be conducted virtually rather than in person. This hindered my ability to build rapport with participants, potentially increasing the need for a translator or proxy. To address this limitation, I facilitated prolonged exposure with participants before data collection. This approach helped minimize communication, language, comprehension, cognition, social skills, and technology barriers via observing participants' functional behaviors and connecting with their personal interests to establish friendly and professional relationships. Due to the range of cognitive and behavioral functioning issues for individuals with ID, it can also be difficult to accommodate each participant's abilities and needs, establish rapport, and ensure accuracy of responses. Reasonable measures were taken to address these limitations, including modified informed consent packets for participants and their parents or guardians, member checking, flexible scheduling, and semi-structured interviews to allow for followup questions and clarification.

Scope and Delimitations

The study includes young adults with mild to moderate ID and their parents or guardians who have experienced the post-school transition between 2018-2021 in the mid-Atlantic region. Individuals with severe cognitive or behavioral deficits were not included. Individuals with ID currently enrolled in high school were not selected for participation since they had not experienced the post-school transition. This study focused on perspectives of young adults with ID rather than perceptions of parents or service providers. Results of this study cannot be generalized or applied to other individuals with mild, moderate, or severe ID or across populations due to the small and purposeful sampling procedures. This study highlighted the unique and personal experiences of individuals with mild to moderate ID.

Significance

Current literature has acknowledged the limited participation of individuals with ID and stressed the importance of providing more opportunities for this specific vulnerable population in order to convey their personal opinions, experiences, and aspirations (see Bouck & Joshi, 2016; Hall, 2013; McDonald, 2012; Schuh et al., 2014). This study may help fill existing research gaps by explicitly focusing on unique experiences of young adults with mild to moderate ID who recently transitioned out of high school, thus promoting research participation and inclusion. Voices of individuals with ID were conveyed regarding their perspectives about the post-school transition phenomenon, functional independence, employment, and adulthood. In addition to advocating for this underresearched population and social change, this study could

generate valuable insights regarding the post-school transition, including personal expectations and outcomes of young adults with ID. Participants were asked to share their experiences regarding the quality and efficacy of vocational programs, support services, and school-based employment activities.

Existing studies have addressed personal perspectives of individuals with ID involving topics such as research participation (see Hall, 2013; McDonald, 2012), stigma (see Ditchman et al., 2013), and employment (see Akkerman et al., 2014; Cramm et al., 2009; Trainor et al., 2011). However, further insight is needed regarding their personal transition experiences and conceptualizations of career development, self-efficacy, functional independence, and adulthood. It is critical to understand the educational environment and post-school outcome expectations of individuals with ID in terms of how prepared they felt to leave the public school system.

This study involved addressing limitations of prior research regarding aggregated data among students with varying degrees of ID. This study was explicitly focused on the post-school transition experience and I used a phenomenological approach. Stancliffe et al. (2015) argued future research should incorporate open-ended inquiries to facilitate interviewing and subsequent self-reporting of individuals with ID. The SCCT and IPA were used to construct meaning regarding the post-school transition, thus building on prior research related to vocational preparation and outcomes of young adults with ID.

This phenomenological study may contribute to social change by expanding current knowledge and research pertaining to the post-school transition experiences of individuals with ID. As a result, family members, policymakers, educators, vocational

specialists, and researchers may hear the voices of individuals with ID regarding their personal accounts of this phenomenon. School systems may be called on to enhance transition services through earlier interventions and more comprehensive vocational programs.

Moreover, this study will support cross-disciplinary collaboration involving career counselors, educators, and policymakers to ensure successful transitions of individuals with ID. Incorporating local communities and businesses will also improve students' post-school transition outcomes, which is critical for social change. Promoting social change through employment and life skills may reduce negative and stigmatizing societal attitudes involving vulnerable populations (Chan et al., 2011). Providing individuals with ID more opportunities for career exploration and development may significantly impact their post-school transition experiences and functional independence as self-sufficient and contributing members of society. Exploring this transition to adulthood via unique perspectives of young adults with mild to moderate ID is essential.

Summary

Transition programs have been established to prepare students with special needs for the post-school transition to adulthood. Research on policy and practice, as well as educational reforms like the IDEA have directly impacted transition preparation and planning for students with ID. However, despite implementing these practices and policies, individuals with ID often experience poor post-school outcomes. Researchers have highlighted discrepancies involving transition programs, resources, and outcomes among students with ID compared to their neurotypical peers as well as peers with other

disabilities (see Cimera et al., 2015; Grigal et al., 2011; McCall, 2015; Park & Bouck, 2018). Perspectives on the post-school transition experience have primarily relied on parents and service providers rather than the young adults themselves (Bluestein et al., 2016; Hetherington et al., 2010; Rossetti et al., 2016). Additional research is needed to promote advocacy and address personal experiences and perceptions of individuals with ID. Understanding the shared post-school transition phenomenon is important for enhancing the efficacy of vocational programs and providing appropriate work-related support to effectively facilitate functional independence throughout adulthood. Chapter 2 includes current research on postsecondary transition and individuals with ID as well as the SCCT and IPA.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The transition to adulthood is an interdisciplinary phenomenon that has garnered attention from researchers, educators, and policymakers. Evidence-based practices and predictors of successful post-school transition outcomes have been empirically established and documented in recent literature (see Carter et al., 2012; Papay & Bambara, 2014; Holwerda et al., 2013; Mazzotti et al., 2016; Park & Bouck, 2018). However, despite recent educational research and policy reforms, individuals with ID often experience poor transition outcomes (Bouck & Chamberlain, 2017; Bouck & Joshi, 2016; Grigal et al., 2011; Gutman & Schoon, 2017; Lindstrom et al., 2014; Siperstein et al., 2013), specifically in the areas of employment, postsecondary education, and independent living (Bouck, 2014). Discrepancies in vocational programs and services in terms of overall lack of in-school work experience (see Cimera et al., 2014; Lindstrom et al., 2014; Wehman et al., 2015) and continued poor outcomes (see Bouck, 2014; Bouck & Chamberlain, 2017; Blick et al., 2016; Butterworth et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2015) indicate that students with ID tend to be unprepared for the post-school transition to adulthood.

Previous studies on the post-school transition have included multiple participant populations, often incorporating secondary data analyses or collaborative responses from parents and educators (see Blustein et al., 2016; Henninger & Taylor, 2014; Hetherington et al., 2010; Skaff et al., 2016). Due to various forms of aggregated data used in current literature involving individuals with ID, there is an overall lack of insight regarding their unique post-school transition experiences and perspectives. Therefore, I aimed to

understand how individuals with mild to moderate ID describe the post-school transition experience in terms of their personal expectations involving adulthood and perceptions of functional independence. In this chapter, I begin by describing strategies to locate research for this review of existing literature. I then discuss literature regarding transition-related practices, post-school outcomes, and perceptions of the transition experience. I also elaborate on this study's significance in terms of voicing the personal insights of individuals with ID while using the SCCT and IPA.

Literature Search Strategy

For this literature review, I searched numerous databases from Walden University's library and online publisher sites, including SAGE Premier, Wiley Online Library, ERIC, ProQuest, PsycArticles, and Google Scholar. Employment and transition-related data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Human Services Research Institute, and SRI International were also used. Printed sources were organized in a filing cabinet, while electronic sources were categorized and saved using Mendeley Desktop, a computer-based citation manager. My searches focused on the post-school transition, specifically for individuals with ID. Boolean searches were conducted to connect words or phrases using and/or. I searched for literature published between 2015 and 2020. Several pertinent keywords were used in the search, including *functional independence*, *adulthood*, *transition*, *social cognitive career theory*, *phenomenology*, *perspectives*, *intellectual disabilities*, *post-school transition*, *career development*, and *employment*. To ensure a thorough literature review, I generated automatic search alerts from educational and professional databases and Google Scholar.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

In the following section, I describe the underlying components of the SCT and SCCT. I discuss the origins of the SCCT in relation to the SCT and how the SCCT has been applied in current research. I explain why the SCCT was an appropriate theoretical framework for this study. I also elaborate on how IPA was used. Furthermore, I apply a disability interpretive lens to help construct an in-depth understanding of how individuals with mild to moderate ID describe the post-school transition experience.

SCT

Albert Bandura's theories on learning and human functioning have contributed valuable information across disciplines, particularly in education and psychology. The SCT highlights a shift in the research paradigm from a behavioral learning focus, including his social learning theory (SLT), to an objective centered on psychological functioning. Human agency is a core principle of the SCT, meaning people act intentionally to attain a desired outcome (Bandura, 2001). Cognitive processes like forethought directly influence human motivation and action (Bandura, 2001). Bandura (1989) mentioned individuals contribute to their own motivation and behaviors based on a system of triadic reciprocal causation, where individuals are neither independent nor mechanical agents in that judgment actions are partially self-determined. Self-efficacy, goals, and outcome expectations are also core constructs of the SCT. Bandura elaborated on self-efficacy as either self-aiding or self-hindering, and such cognitions directly impact individuals' decision-making, goals, and behaviors. Self-efficacy beliefs dictate motivation and effort when faced with stress.

Conversely, self-doubt may result in mediocre decision-making or problem-solving, as self-belief is important for knowledge and skill acquisition. Bandura further described implications of social and environmental influences in terms of continuously reinforcing values, interests, and perceived competencies based on prior experiences and performance feedback. The SCT is used to address the interconnectedness of personal and environmental factors in conjunction with cognitive and behavioral functioning.

SCCT

Lent et al. (1994) established the SCCT, a relatively new theory based on agentic variables of Bandura's SCT. The SCCT models involve the interrelatedness of personal and environmental factors pertaining to career development. Additionally, it is used to explore how academic and vocational interests develop, subsequent decision-making processes, and the attainment of academic and vocational success (Lent et al., 2006). Self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals are the fundamental elements of the SCCT, directly impacting students' interest development, decision-making, performance skills, and translating goals into actions (Lent et al., 1999). This study involved exploring contextual factors related to the adulthood transition, including participants' instructional environments, vocational interests, and employment experiences. Thus, the SCCT was appropriate for understanding unique perspectives of individuals with ID regarding the post-school transition into adulthood and their expectations involving employment and functional independence.

Several studies have used the SCCT to explore transition-related issues, particularly for people with disabilities (see Fabian & Pebdani, 2013; Murray & Doren,

2013; Nota et al., 2014; Sung & Connor, 2017). Murray and Doren (2013) studied implications of a vocational curriculum as an intervention program for adolescents with disabilities and found that students in the intervention group had improved vocational outcome expectations, occupational skills, and social skills. Sung and Connor (2017) used the SCCT to examine social-cognitive predictors of vocational outcomes for transition-aged youth with epilepsy and confirmed it to be a valuable framework for exploring the transition to adulthood. Fabian and Pebdani (2013) outlined historical disability policies and vocational initiatives for people with disabilities and described how the SCCT and other career development theories may be incorporated to improve vocational outcomes for youth with disabilities.

This study will fill a gap in current literature by applying the SCCT to a specific subpopulation of young adults who have recently experienced the transition to adulthood. The SCCT has been used to explore the role of school context in terms of cultivating occupational aspirations of high school students without disabilities (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2011). The SCCT will help generate context involving self-perceptions, career development, transition preparation, and implications of students' personal and educational environments, specifically for individuals with mild to moderate ID.

Literature Related to Key Variables

This section includes different aspects of the post-school transition phenomenon. Current instructional practices will be outlined in conjunction with educational and employment settings for students with special needs. In addition to parents' and service providers' perspectives on the transition to adulthood, this section will describe the post-

school outcomes and employment experiences of individuals with ID. Key concepts related to transition preparation, employment, and functional independence will also be discussed.

Instructional Programs and Practices

Post-school transition research has guided instructional policies and practices, particularly for students with special needs (Papay & Bambara, 2014; Wehman et al., 2015). The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) was conducted from 2000 to 2010 to provide a national representation of special education students' transition outcomes, which includes students with ID and other disability classifications. Researchers have analyzed NLTS2 data to identify best practices that significantly predict successful post-school outcomes for students with disabilities (Carter et al., 2012; Mazzotti et al., 2016; Simonsen & Neubert, 2012) and found that the current employment status of individuals with ID directly correlates with in-school services and disability classification (Park & Bouck, 2018).

However, Bouck's (2010) secondary analysis of NLTS2 data revealed that students with ID received low rates of life skills instruction or training in school and post-school. In a similar study, Bouck (2012) found that while most students with moderate to severe ID received a combined functional and academic curriculum, they experienced poor outcomes in employment, postsecondary education, and independent living. Results also showed that functional or academic curriculum was unrelated to any of the three post-school outcomes examined. Bouck and Chamberlain (2017) analyzed NTLS2 data to explore the post-school experiences and services of individuals with mild ID. They

discovered a lack of post-school services and support for these young adults. Moreover, results indicated a lack of relationship between services and outcomes, meaning that individuals who did not receive post-school services, such as job training, had better outcomes than those with additional supports following the adulthood transition.

In their study, Papay and Bambara (2014) analyzed NTLS2 data using logistic regression to examine the relationship between best practices and post-school outcomes for students with ID. They identified five significant predictors of employment, post-secondary education, and quality of life outcomes, which include: youth involvement, family involvement, work experiences, life skills instruction, and interagency involvement. Parent expectations were the strongest predictors for employment and post-secondary education. Wehman et al. (2015) also analyzed data from this longitudinal survey of special education students in the United States (N = 2,900). They found in-school work experience and parental expectations of post-school employment to be the strongest predictors of competitive employment for students with disabilities. Researchers have stressed the importance of real-world or community-based work experience during high school (Bouck & Chamberlain, 2017; Carter et al., 2012; Holwerda et al., 2013; Joshi et al., 2012; Park & Bouck, 2018; Simonsen & Neubert, 2012). Studies have also shown gender to be a significant predictor of transition outcomes, with substantially less favorable employment and post-secondary education outcomes for women than men (Baer et al., 2011; Carter et al., 2012; Holwerda et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2015).

Non-academic skills were also determined to be significant predictors of transition outcomes (Carter et al., 2012; Holwerda et al., 2013). Vital self-care, functional independence, and social skills reflect agentic aspects of social cognitive career theory. Self-efficacy, goal-setting, and outcome expectations correlate with individuals' personal and environmental contexts about the post-school transition phenomenon. Holwerda et al. (2013) conducted a study on predictors for sustainable employment using data from 735 young adults with mild ID, ranging in age from 15-27 years old, that applied for disability benefits at the Dutch Social Security Institution. Their findings showed that personal factors, including motivation and future work expectations, were deemed more important than social factors when predicting and maintaining employment for young adults with mild ID. These results slightly contrast the predictive studies discussed previously regarding parental involvement and transition outcomes (Papay & Bambara, 2014; Wehman et al., 2015); however, the interconnectedness of personal and environmental factors directly correlates with prominent themes of SCCT and the evidence-based practices used to prepare students with ID for the post-school transition.

Post-School Transition Outcomes

As mentioned previously in this chapter, individuals with mild-moderate ID continue to experience poor post-school transition outcomes (Blick et al., 2016; Bouck, 2014; Bouck & Chamberlain, 2017; Siperstein et al., 2013). Despite evidence-based practices and person-centered policies, individuals with ID tend to be unprepared for the post-school transition to adulthood. Discrepancies between policies and programs have negatively impacted this vulnerable population's transition preparation and subsequent

outcomes. For instance, students with ID lack salient work experience and career development opportunities, thus hindering future job attainment (Lindstrom et al., 2014; Simonsen & Neubert, 2012). Limited resources and services have also contributed to poor transition outcomes (Bouck & Chamberlain, 2017; Cimera et al., 2015). Bouck and Joshi (2016) conducted a secondary analysis of NTLS-2 data explicitly focusing on individuals with mild ID rather than aggregating students with moderate and severe ID. They found inconsistencies between transition goals and goal attainment, or outcomes, for this young adult population. According to their results, alignment was demonstrated between goals and outcomes for employment but not for independent living. Consequently, similar discrepancies have been addressed in prior research about in-school work experiences, career development opportunities, and post-school outcomes (Joshi et al., 2012).

Unfortunately, individuals with ID often face discrimination, social stigma, and negative societal attitudes (Chan et al., 2011; Ditchman et al., 2013). The lack of employment experience, vocational skills, and career development opportunities subsequently forces individuals with ID to obtain jobs based on availability rather than interest or benefits (Nota et al., 2014). Hence, without effective transition planning and programs, students with special needs will be subjected to the cycle of forced dependence in terms of being financially or functionally reliant on government assistance or family support systems. Nord and Nye-Lengerman (2015) examined the effects of public benefits on individual employment regarding the number of work hours for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Data from the Rehabilitation

Service Administration 911 and Annual Review Report were attained, representing a sample size of 21,869 people with IDD, revealing a negative relationship between the number of work hours for individuals with ID and public benefits. The findings showed that public benefits limited access to employment and even restricted an increase in work hours usually attributed to high-paying jobs. Thus, individuals with ID face significant barriers throughout the transition to adulthood. These results further suggest that government reliance and segregation are incidentally promoted over self-sufficiency, functional independence, and employment.

Individual Perspectives

To date, little attention has been paid on the transition to adulthood for individuals with ID. Neece et al. (2009) examined what constitutes a successful transition for young adults with severe ID from the parents' perspective regarding their satisfaction with the transition process. They surveyed 128 parents, primarily mothers, of young adults with a severe ID that had exited the public school system, using independent sample *t* tests and chi-square analyses. Results indicated transition satisfaction related to individual, family, and environmental characteristics. Transition satisfaction pertained to young adult mental health and quality of life. Interestingly, transition satisfaction was not related to adaptive behavior. Their findings also showed that environmental characteristics, including instructional program, were the strongest predictors of transition satisfaction. Similarly, Henninger and Taylor (2014) surveyed 198 parents of young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities regarding their perceptions of a successful transition to adulthood. Findings revealed that families had a dynamic view of transition, placing less

emphasis on developmental tasks, such as independent living and employment, and taking a more balanced approach in terms of a person-environment fit perspective.

On the other hand, studies have also acknowledged parents' dissatisfaction regarding the post-school transition. Pallisera et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative case study on the transition to adulthood for young adults with ID and their families. Parents reported a lack of professional guidance from educators during the transition process and a lack of post-school training options for young adults with ID. These results are in alignment with existing research on in-school and post-school services for individuals with ID (Bouck & Joshi, 2016; Bouck & Chamberlain, 2017; Carter et al., 2010; Cimera et al., 2015) and further support the need to improve the transition preparation and outcomes of students with ID.

Pham (2012) examined the transition practices of 248 special educators in 20 states using multilevel modeling and descriptive statistics. The researcher developed the Promoting Transition Skills Inventory (PTSI) to explore how secondary special educators promoted nonacademic behaviors that predict successful transition outcomes for students with disabilities. Findings revealed significant variance in transition practices attributed to between-state factors. More specifically, Pham found that teachers frequently promoted instructional practices related to students' skills in disability awareness, goal setting and attainment, self-advocacy, and utilization of supports.

While these practices directly correlate with social cognitive career theory components and are essential to career development, Pham (2012) showed that teachers reported a significantly low level of employment-related practices. These results address

the more significant issues surrounding in-school services, transition preparation for special education students, resource discrepancies, and teacher competency or professional training. Thus, despite empirical evidence indicating that in-school employment experiences predict successful transition outcomes (Bouck & Chamberlain, 2017; Park & Bouck, 2018), students with ID often lack proper supports, services, and career development opportunities during the adulthood transition. Consequently, these young adults tend to experience poor outcomes in employment, secondary education, and independent living.

Research involving ID has often relied on collaborative responses from parents or service providers in conjunction with individuals with ID. For instance, Kelley and Prohn (2019) surveyed administrators, teachers, families, and students with ID ranging from 14-21 years old to evaluate their expectations of employment and postsecondary education. A total of 2,015 surveys were dispersed to four school districts by mail and online, with a final response rate of 33.6% (n=677). Results of their hierarchical regression revealed that students' expectations were higher than parents' expectations, specifically concerning post-secondary education, highlighting the importance of addressing both perspectives regarding the post-school transition.

Similarly, Holwerda et al. (2015) examined the work expectations of young adults with IDD, their parents, and their special education teachers and the extent to which individuals' expectations predicted future employment. Data on 341 adults with IDD were analyzed using logistical regression and a 95% confidence interval. According to their results, the expectation of teachers was the only perspective that significantly

predicted successful competitive employment, while a complementary effect was found for parental expectations. These results exemplify the need to focus on the perspectives of individuals with ID explicitly. Aggregated data like collaborative responses lack the first-person perspective of the individuals who experienced the post-school transition phenomenon and may incidentally skew the personal perceptions of young adults with ID. Therefore, additional inquiry is needed to understand the unique experiences and perceptions of individuals with ID.

Salt et al. (2019) conducted semi-structured interviews with eight young adults with mild to borderline ID. Data were transcribed and examined using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and interpretive thematic analysis, which resulted in two broad categories to describe participants' transition experience: (a) on a developmental trajectory and (b) negotiations in the environment. The first theme, on a developmental trajectory, focused on participants' self-perceptions and attitudes toward themselves about the transition experience. While participants expressed varying levels of self-perceived maturity, all eight discussed how they became more mature over time. Participants expressed concerns over their capacity to cope with responsibility but felt optimistic about their future adult roles. Salt et al. acknowledged that participants' concerns are similar to their peers without disabilities; however, these results speak directly to the fact that individuals with ID are often unprepared for the post-school transition to adulthood.

Nota et al. (2010) contributed valuable insight regarding the career interests and self-efficacy beliefs of 129 young Italian adults with ID using social cognitive theory and

structured interviews. According to their results, participants with ID were interested in and reported higher self-efficacy belief levels in low-to-mid-complexity occupations. Nota et al. were surprised to find no significant effect for ID level or gender on self-perceptions and vocational interests. These results illustrate the importance of career development opportunities for students with ID, in-school and post-school, to provide real-world experience in various contexts.

Blick et al. (2016) examined the effects of employment settings on quality of life for individuals with ID. They compared the quality of life of community-integrated workers, or competitive employment, with individuals participating in sheltered workshops and adult day care programs. Sheltered workshops provide vocational opportunities to people with disabilities by providing and facilitating the performance of routine tasks, such as assembling or manufacturing, outside of their residence in a structured setting. Blick et al. interviewed 477 individuals with ID, aged 18-90 years, who participated in Pennsylvania's Independent Monitoring for Quality (IM4Q) Program, including support staff and legal guardians. Results indicated that only 12.2% of the sample worked for pay in competitive employment. They also found significant differences in quality of life across daytime activities. Participants in community-integrated employment reported a more significant sense of inclusion or community integration, financial autonomy, and increased control in their decision-making. Interestingly, though, results also revealed that employment status had a minimal effect on the overall happiness of individuals with ID.

Akkerman et al. (2018) used the job demands-resources model and structured questionnaires to explore the association of job satisfaction with job characteristics and personality for individuals with ID. Their results aligned with the findings of Blick et al. (2016) and showed no significant differences between integrated and sheltered employment regarding job satisfaction. However, job resources and age were positively associated with job satisfaction. Collectively, these results illustrate the importance of in-school and post-school vocational supports and services for individuals with ID.

Nonetheless, individuals with ID face multiple barriers to inclusion and are subsequently forced to rely on other people for daily functioning, financial support, or advocacy. Abbott and McConkey (2006) held focus groups with 68 individuals with ID, including 16 service providers, to identify perceived barriers to inclusion. Participants reported barriers related to a lack of necessary knowledge and skills, professional guidance, residential location, and community factors, including limited amenities. Equally important, participants acknowledged the implications of negative societal attitudes within the community.

Chan et al. (2011) conducted a study using data from 40,585 vocational rehabilitation (VR) consumers attained from the Rehabilitation Services Administration Case Services Report, with an ex post facto design and the social-cognitive/attribution theory of stigmatization. Their findings supported prior psychosocial literature in terms of confirming a hierarchy of preferences for types of disabilities, meaning that consumers with mental disabilities were perceived by society as unstable and had lower employment rates than people with physical disabilities, who are viewed as more stable by society.

Although Chan et al.'s study did not directly include participants with ID, it addressed the challenges that vulnerable populations currently experience, including a hierarchy of discrimination. Individuals with ID encounter barriers to employment and research participation. Recent studies have explicitly advocated for increased research participation and autonomy for individuals with ID (Byhlin & Kacker, 2018; Hall, 2013; McDonald, 2012), thus promoting disability awareness and functional independence. Although the lived experiences of individuals with ID have been acknowledged, often in conjunction with other respondents or participant populations, there is a lack of understanding in current literature regarding their personal post-school transition experiences and expectations that warrants further inquiry.

Summary

The post-school transition to adulthood is an interdisciplinary phenomenon that is explored across contexts and perspectives. Previous literature has focused on academic and vocational aspects, such as career-based instruction and life-skills, for students with ID (see Bouck, 2010; Bouck & Chamberlain, 2017; Murray & Doren, 2013; Park & Bouck, 2018). Several studies have documented best practices for transition and supported predictors of post-school success, including work experience and interagency involvement (see Carter et al., 2012; Holwerda et al., 2013; Papay & Bambara, 2014; Park & Bouck, 2018; Wehman et al., 2015). However, despite recent research and reform initiatives, individuals with ID tend to be unprepared for the transition to adulthood and often experience poor employment outcomes (Blick et al., 2016; Bouck &

Chamberlain, 2017; Butterworth et al., 2015; Cimera et al., 2015; Gilson et al., 2018; Kelley & Prohn, 2019; Siperstein et al., 2013).

This phenomenological study involved building on pertinent transition literature focusing on young adults with mild to moderate ID. To date, the post-school transition experiences of this population have not been explored using the SCCT and IPA. The methodology of this study involved open-ended inquiry and flexible interviews. In addition, this study will promote self-advocacy and research participation for individuals with ID, providing them with a platform to voice their expectations and perceptions of adulthood. Chapter 3 includes the study's research design. I also discuss the study sample, proposed data collection methods, and a data analysis plan.

Chapter 3: Research Method

A qualitative research paradigm was implemented to understand how individuals with ID describe the post-school transition experience. In Chapter 3, I outlined how a hermeneutic phenomenological design was used to explore their lived experiences and individual perceptions of adulthood, functional independence, and employment. This qualitative study also involved examining personal, environmental, and contextual factors that impact the post-school transition, including students' career development opportunities and outcome expectations. I addressed sampling, recruitment, and data collection procedures in this chapter. I also discussed data credibility measures, my role as the researcher, and ethical considerations for participant protection.

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

A qualitative research study design was used to generate insights regarding the post-school transition phenomenon. More specifically, shared experiences and perspectives of young adults with ID were explored using an IPA approach in conjunction with the SCCT. I addressed personal expectations, perceptions, and post-school outcomes of individuals with ID to construct knowledge related to the adulthood transition experience. The following research questions were examined:

RQ1: Based on their personal expectations of employment, how do individuals with mild to moderate ID describe their lived experiences in regard to the post-school transition?

RQ2: Based on their personal expectations of functional independence, how do individuals with mild to moderate ID describe their lived experiences in regard to the post-school transition?

Research Design

Qualitative research is essential for attaining multiple viewpoints on the post-school transition phenomenon and establishing effective transition practices for students with special needs. It is pivotal to understand perspectives and post-school outcome expectations of individuals with ID, as they are often unprepared for the post-school transition and subsequently encounter poor employment outcomes (Baer et al., 2011; Blick et al., 2016; Bouck & Chamberlain, 2017; Butterworth et al., 2015; Carter et al., 2012). Beail and Williams (2014) described inductive characteristic of qualitative research, justifying it as an appropriate methodological approach to address concepts with limited contextual insights, such as the post-school transition phenomenon. I used an IPA approach derived from hermeneutic phenomenology. Heidegger (1962) theorized that consciousness and human existence are interconnected, meaning that individuals' presuppositions and prior experiences cannot be separated or removed from reality. Dasein, or the concept of being-in-time, is a salient component of IPA. Heidegger also described the hermeneutic circle as the process of uncovering hidden essences or truths related to the phenomenon or shared experience at hand.

Interpretation and critical analysis are prominent attributes of qualitative research (Brantlinger et al., 2005). IPA facilitates idiographic and experiential perspectives (Rose et al., 2019); hence, it was used in this study to describe how individuals with ID perceive

the post-school transition experience. As Larkin et al. (2006) acknowledged, IPA involves providing an insider's perspective of a phenomenon that extends beyond description. It is a balance between representation, interpretation, and contextualization. The functional relationship between the researcher and participant fosters the cultivation of self-discoveries or emergent realities. IPA is a flexible approach allowing researchers to address potential barriers involving intellectual disabilities, including comprehension and processing deficits, limited communication, and poor reasoning skills (Beail & Williams, 2014). IPA and the SCCT were used to examine various personal, environmental, and social factors attributed to participants' perspectives of the post-school transition phenomenon.

This study was one of the first studies involving the post-school transition experiences of individuals with ID using the SCCT and IPA. As discussed in Chapter 2, the post-school transition to adulthood is influenced by the constant interaction of personal and environmental factors across contexts. Academic and nonacademic skills, parental support, disability services, self-perceptions, and outcome expectations are variables that impact individual transition outcomes. As Larkin et al. (2006) described, IPA combines idiographic and nomothetic aspects while concentrating on specific experiences or situations of individuals. The nomothetic component refers to the tendency to generalize knowledge, and the idiographic aspect pertains to the tendency to specify knowledge. IPA was appropriate for understanding the personal perspectives of individuals with mild to moderate ID regarding the post-school transition phenomenon. Rose et al. (2018) concluded it is a valuable methodology for this vulnerable population.

IPA was used to facilitate self-discoveries or emergent realities related to individuals' personal post-school transition experiences while supporting their unique needs and roles as research participants.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher in this phenomenological study, I was an observer-participant. I conveyed personal transition experiences of individuals with ID by conducting semi-structured interviews using flexible settings and scheduling. I used open-ended questions, simple phrasing, and followup probing for clarification or further insight as needed. Additionally, individual and environmental factors were examined to provide context regarding the post-school transition phenomenon. Heidegger (1962) emphasized human existence and consciousness are interconnected. I observed participants and interpreted their responses to reveal hidden meanings and essential themes. I facilitated discussions about the adulthood transition by prompting and probing participants as needed to understand their shared lived experiences. As the researcher, I provided a platform for participants with ID to explain their personal expectations and perceptions of the adulthood transition, a current gap in existing literature. My personal insights and opinions were withheld from this study and did not impact data collection or analysis.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, I maintained relationships with participants in this study and did not have any other or prior personal or professional connections. While I could not wholly remove my prior experiences as a special education teacher, I controlled for potential bias and ethical issues related to research involving individuals with ID by using a research journal to document my feelings and

thought processes throughout the study. Additionally, I reflected on participants' behaviors, dispositions, and responses to assess for possible signs of distress or inconsistencies. I conducted ongoing informed consent and assent with participants to document their continued willingness to participate in the study. Research involving young adults with ID may pose unique challenges due to their limitations in terms of cognitive functioning, behavioral regulation, and communication. However, as Taylor (2018) argued, excluding individuals with ID from research or public arenas is unjust and discriminatory based on misconceptions regarding lack of capacity to consent or the inability to communicate verbally. Precautionary measures were taken to ensure participants' wellbeing and confidentiality while meeting their needs and abilities.

Irvine (2010) discussed methodological and ethical considerations for conducting qualitative research with individuals with developmental disabilities (DD), stressing the importance of maintaining participant boundaries to prevent role conflicts. While it is essential to empower the participant, I remained consistent in my role as the researcher without coming across as a friend or peer to participants. Member checks and clarifying probes fostered effective communication, as individuals with cognitive deficits may have difficulty inferring or articulating abstract concepts, emotions, attitudes, or beliefs. Moreover, I scaffolded concepts and open-ended questions from concrete to abstract for the semi-structured interview protocol. Therefore, as Irvine discussed, reasonable measures were integrated into this qualitative study to ensure clear communication and comprehension, including building rapport through prolonged exposure or observation and rephrasing questions for clarification or additional inquiry.

Methodology

In this section, I discussed the methodology and how a criterion sampling approach was implemented to explore the post-school transition experiences of individuals with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities (ID). The participant selection logic, recruitment, and selection processes were described, as well as the instrumentation and pilot test for this study. Data collection and analysis were depicted regarding the study's research questions and instrumentation. Lastly, I addressed issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures, including institutional permissions and the protection of confidential data.

Participant Population

The target population for this study was young adults with mild to moderate ID between the ages of 18-25 who had recently experienced the post-school transition phenomenon. Participants completed or exited the public school system between 2018-2021, regardless of their instructional setting or placement. This age range reflected that special education students in self-contained programs, like individuals with ID, may not age out of or leave the public school system until they are 22.

Participant Selection Criteria

The post-school outcomes of individuals with disabilities have been examined immediately following the transition or within the first two years of exiting the school system (Baer et al., 2011; Simonsen & Neubert, 2012). Other studies have focused on longitudinal outcomes ranging from 3-5 years and 7-10 years after the post-school transition (Lindstrom et al., 2011; Lindstrom et al., 2014; Newman et al., 2011; Sanford

et al., 2011). Bouck (2014) acknowledged that longer-term outcomes of students with mild ID do not consistently improve or decline. With this in mind, a three-year criterion was implemented to concentrate on current transition-related policies and practices for students with special needs. This criterion also supported trustworthiness by facilitating response accuracy and limiting potential interferences from barriers attributed to intellectual disabilities, such as comprehension and language deficits (Beail & Williams, 2014).

Inclusionary Criteria

To be selected for this study, individuals must be between 18-25 and have a formal, primary diagnosis of mild to moderate intellectual disability. Participants experienced the post-school transition to adulthood between 2018-2021. Participants exited or transitioned out of high schools located in the mid-Atlantic region. While individuals with ID may demonstrate a range of cognitive and functional abilities, participants independently engaged with the researcher, thus demonstrating proficient communication and comprehension. Participant selection was based on individuals' self-reported information.

Exclusionary Criteria

Individuals without a prior disability status of mild or moderate ID were not allowed to participate. This study did not include individuals who graduated before or after the set time frame or who live outside the mid-Atlantic region.

Number of Participants

A sample size of approximately 15-20 participants was sought with an explicit goal of at least ten substantive interview transcripts. Previous phenomenological studies involving individuals with ID have ranged in sample size from 6-14 participants (Hall, 2013; Schuh et al., 2014). This study's sample size aligned with IPA research involving individuals with ID, where sample sizes ranged from four to ten participants (Beail & Williams, 2014; Corby et al., 2015), accounting for the possibility of participants not showing up or dropping out of the study. However, the number of final participants was contingent on reaching saturation. This study implemented an inductive thematic saturation approach, referring to the identification of new codes and themes (Saunders et al., 2018). Saturation was obtained when participant interviews no longer resulted in new, pertinent information regarding the post-school transition experience.

Sampling Procedures

A criterion sampling approach was utilized in this study to recruit participants from the target population, young adults with mild to moderate ID who recently experienced the post-school transition phenomenon. Data reports obtained from the Virginia Department of Education (2020) website were used to construct the sampling frame by identifying schools with special education and vocational programs and quantifying how many students with ID have exited the public school system since 2018. I also conducted an internet search of local organizations, programs, and companies that work with young adults with disabilities. Recruitment flyers were distributed to these

establishments via email, internet posts, mail, or in-person to be posted on a bulletin board (see Appendix A).

Procedures for Gaining Access

Following IRB approval, I contacted local agencies, businesses, support groups, and school districts for organizational approval before dispersing recruitment flyers to individual representatives. The flyer contained an overview of the study, sampling procedures, informed consent, and my contact information. Individuals interested in participating were asked to contact the researcher directly and share this information with people interested in participating. I scheduled one-on-one meetings with potential participants and their legal guardians to review the purpose and procedures of this phenomenological study, establish rapport, and obtain informed consent (see Appendix B). Informed consent and assent were ongoing in that participants and their caregivers were frequently reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any point and without consequence (see Appendix C and Appendix D).

Instrumentation

I reviewed current literature on using qualitative methods in research involving individuals with ID to develop an interview protocol and interview questions for this study (Beail & Williams, 2014; Brantliner et al., 2005; Byhlin & Kacker; 2018; Corby et al., 2015; Hall, 2013; Rose et al., 2019; Salt et al., 2019). I referred to Hall's (2013) qualitative study on the research participation of individuals with ID to help guide the structure or format of my interview protocol. More specifically, the protocol started with the most concrete concepts related to the post-school transition experience, then

progressed to more abstract concepts, including in-school and post-school relationships with peers, family, and other community members.

I also developed an observation sheet to monitor for any social-emotional or behavioral changes in participants and to facilitate note-taking and transcription during the semi-structured interview process. An electronic audio recording device was used for data collection to support accurate transcription and member checks. These approaches allowed me to modify or adapt the researcher-developed instruments according to the unique cognitive and communicative needs of individuals with ID, which enabled participants to share their personal experiences related to the post-school transition phenomenon.

Pilot Testing

The researcher produced interview protocol and interview questions were pilot tested to establish validity and minimize the participants' need for a translator or caregiver involvement (see Appendix E). The pilot test checked for clear, concise language and phrasing to facilitate comprehension and communication. A person-centered approach was implemented to accommodate participants' individual needs and functional capacities. The same participant recruitment procedures were used in both the pilot test and primary study. Walden University's approval number for this study is 02-11-22-0477635.

Due to the continued poor post-school outcomes of individuals with ID (Bouck & Chamberlain, 2017; Butterworth et al., 2015; Park & Bouck, 2018), it is critical to understand their personal transition experiences without compromising the honesty or

openness of their responses. Individuals with ID tend to dislike confrontation and worry about upsetting others, which may impact their willingness to engage or respond accurately (Irvine, 2010). Therefore, instruments were pilot tested with a participant, ensuring each item's clarity and efficacy. No changes or modifications were made to support participants' understanding or comprehension further.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions were used to obtain participants' descriptions of the post-school transition phenomenon. This instrumentation simultaneously provided structure and flexibility, enabling the researcher to meet the needs of individuals with ID by rephrasing questions and inquiring further to clarify or explore participants' responses (Hall, 2013). Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were practical approaches for researching this vulnerable population (Corby et al., 2015; Hall, 2013; Stancliffe et al., 2015). As Irvine (2010) discussed, using probes or follow-up questions fosters accurate data collection to bolster comprehension and communication for individuals with ID, thus reinforcing trustworthiness. Clear and concise interview questions were posed to minimize potential barriers attributed to cognitive deficits, including recall and expression.

Due to the current pandemic, including local restrictions and individual health concerns, the semi-structured interviews were held in a virtual setting by videoconferencing via Zoom. Following proper consent and assent from participants, using developmentally appropriate language, each interview was recorded using an electronic audio recording device. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately

30 minutes in duration. This flexible timing reflected participants' specific emotional, physical, and behavioral needs based on their current level of engagement with the researcher (Beail & Williams, 2014). Audio recording devices and flexible timing and settings supported accurate data collection, transcription, and member checks, thus advancing the study's trustworthiness (Beail & Williams, 2014).

Although one parent needed to consent, this study explicitly focused on the perspectives of young adults with ID rather than the combined perspectives of guardians. To my knowledge, guardians were not involved in the interviews. I explained confidentiality measures and mandatory reporting standards as part of the informed consent process, which was reviewed frequently with participants and guardians to foster transparency and minimize unforeseen risks or harm.

Data Analysis Plan

This study's analytic process was constructed collaboratively by the researcher and participants. As Larkin et al. (2006) explained, IPA seeks to understand individuals' perspectives by using contextual factors to cultivate detailed descriptions of an experience or phenomenon. Distinct analytical strategies were implemented to construct an in-depth perspective of the post-school transition phenomenon. I wanted to understand how individuals with ID describe the transition experience regarding their perceptions and expectations of adulthood, functional independence, and employment. The potential implications of environmental, personal, and contextual factors on the transition experience were examined in conjunction with participants' post-school expectations and outcomes.

In alignment with current qualitative research involving individuals with ID (Corby et al., 2015; Hall, 2013; Schuh et al., 2014), I used interview notes and transcripts to record participants' experiences effectively. These items were then compared to participants' audio recordings to check for accuracy. I identified and collected significant statements to establish patterns of meaning. Emergent themes related to the post-school transition phenomenon were grouped via descriptive coding. The iterative process of acquiring themes provided meaning and contextual understanding regarding participants' personal experiences, expectations, and transition outcomes. Themes were compared constantly until no new themes or meanings emerged from the data.

The computer program NVivo was used to code, analyze, and securely store data effectively. Electronic files were secured on the researcher's private computer under password protection. Participants' privacy and anonymity were protected by replacing individual names with pseudonyms. All data were stored securely and locked in a private office for further protection. Walden University's ethical standards and requirements will store data securely for five years. At that future point, electronic files will be deleted and erased from the researcher's computer. All physical files will be destroyed or shredded before being discarded in the trash.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Research involving a vulnerable population requires careful consideration of ethical concerns and trustworthiness issues. In addition to an expert review of current literature on the research participants and post-school outcomes of individuals with ID, I engaged in prolonged contact to build rapport with participants (Hall, 2013; Irvine,

2010). To the best of my ability, I showed genuine interest in the participants' lives and stories, thus promoting rapport and open and honest dialogue. This aided with communication regarding understanding participants' expressive and receptive language skills, making them feel comfortable and reducing their need for a parent or guardian to translate (Irvine, 2010). Saturation further supported the credibility of this study in conjunction with member checks and reflexivity.

Additionally, I used member checking, or participant validation, to check for understanding and response accuracy (Beail & Williams, 2014). I also used detailed descriptions of participants' first-hand accounts to understand their experiences. Transcribing responses and incorporating direct quotations bolstered support for the main themes found in the data (Beail & Williams, 2014). Furthermore, I demonstrated reflexivity regarding my background as a special education teacher by taking notes in a research journal. I also made notes in the computer program NVivo throughout the study. I frequently reflected on my own experiences and the well-being of participants concerning the integrity and outcomes of this study.

Ethical Concerns

The privacy of individuals with ID and their guardians was protected according to the ethical principles outlined in The Belmont Report (1979). In addition to obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I tailored the informed consent and assent process to meet the unique needs of individuals with ID. Participants provided informed consent or assent, while informed consent was acquired from participants' parents as needed. Informed consent and assent were ongoing and discussed throughout

the study, reminding participants and legal guardians of their right to withdraw or stop an interview at any time and to skip any questions that make them uncomfortable. Using developmentally appropriate language, phrasing, and questions was salient to meet the complex needs of research participants with ID.

Furthermore, I developed a rapport with participants through prolonged contact by facilitating multiple email correspondences about the ethical treatment of participants. Semi-structured interviews and flexible scheduling and settings further supported participants' cognitive and communicative abilities. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to enhance data accuracy and subsequent member checking. Follow-up questions and probes were used to elicit detailed accounts of the transition experience, further facilitating response accuracy by accommodating individuals' functional abilities.

All data were treated and stored securely in this study to maintain ethical compliance and participant privacy. Security measures were taken to protect data and participants' confidentiality, thus limiting potential exposure to risk or harm. Participants' personal and demographic information was coded using pseudonyms to protect their privacy and confidentiality. Thus, no identifying information was included during data collection. All data, including electronic computer files, audio recordings, notes, and other materials, were kept under lock and key in my secure home office that no one else accessed. Equally important, I utilized member checking to facilitate response accuracy and transcription. Member checking, or participant validation, facilitated trustworthiness by allowing participants to amend or clarify responses to represent their experiences honestly and accurately (Birt et al., 2016). Participants were debriefed electronically at

the end of the study. Each individual was emailed a 1-page summary of this study and the opportunity to review the results with me via videoconference if desired.

Summary

This qualitative study involved exploring the post-school transition phenomenon from the perspectives of young adults with mild to moderate ID. This study generated personal insights regarding their shared experiences and expectations regarding the transition to adulthood. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed thematically for patterns of meaning. IPA was used to address the overall essence of transition experiences. Procedures for protecting confidentiality and other ethical considerations were implemented. In Chapter 4, I discuss the study's findings and any methodological concerns.

Chapter 4: Results

This study involved understanding the post-school transition phenomenon from the perspectives of young adults with ID who have recently exited high school. The following two research questions are explored:

RQ1: Based on their personal expectations of employment, how do individuals with mild to moderate ID describe their lived experiences in regard to the post-school transition?

RQ2: Based on their personal expectations of functional independence, how do individuals with mild to moderate ID describe their lived experiences in regard to the post-school transition?

This chapter includes the pilot study process, data collection methods, and data analysis. Additionally, I examine evidence of trustworthiness and research results using participants' firsthand accounts of the post-school transition experience.

Pilot Study

I conducted a pilot study to test the researcher-produced interview protocol and interview questions. Flyers advertising the study were posted online on various social media sites and emailed to advocacy groups, organizations, high schools, and colleges in the mid-Atlantic region. I also distributed flyers in person to local businesses with bulletin boards. Individuals who responded to the advertised flyers contacted me directly and privately, via phone or email, without the knowledge of any person or organization. I emailed consent and assent forms for the pilot study to the first person who contacted me and asked whether parent/guardian consent was needed. This individual replied, "No,"

therefore, I emailed a separate consent form designed for self-consenting participants back to the participant and asked for questions or concerns. No questions or concerns were raised. Following informed consent, I interviewed this participant for about 20 minutes and emailed a brief written summary to them following the interview. After member checking, which lasted 5 to 10 minutes, the participant reported that all questions were understandable and comfortable to answer. As a result, I determined that the interview protocol and questions were appropriate for this specific population, and no modifications were necessary. However, the participant requested a gift card from Amazon instead of Target as an incentive. Thus, study participants chose either Amazon or Target gift cards to further promote independence and autonomy.

Demographics

The 11 participants in this study self-reported they were between the ages of 20 and 25 and formally diagnosed with mild to moderate ID. They exited high school between 2018 and 2021 and thus recently experienced the post-school transition phenomenon. This study took place in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. One participant provided assent and guardian consent, while the other 10 provided their consent as they did not have a legal guardian. All participants were interviewed independently for this study (see Table 3).

Table 3

Participant Demographics and Vocational Interests

Pseudonym	Age	Vocational Interest
Lily	24	Management + Advocacy
Annabelle	24	Fashion

Eleanor	24	Paid Mom + Investor
Margie	25	Acting + Drama
Penelope	23	Management
Fletcher	24	Cooking
Jo	24	Educator/Professor
Cameron	24	Makeup Artist + Fashion
Quinn	24	Cooking
Rowan	22	Management/Anything
Walter	20	Digital Creator

Data Collection

I was contacted directly by 20 individuals with self-reported mild to moderate ID who volunteered to participate in the study. Several individuals did not meet inclusion criteria and were thanked for their time. Of the 11 final participants, one completed the informed consent and assent process, and 10 completed the informed consent process. I conducted each semi-structured interview using the videoconferencing platform Zoom in my private home office. Most participants declined to use the video function on Zoom and preferred to stay off-camera. However, my camera was on for each interview. An interview protocol and observation sheets were used to document participants' significant statements and my reflexive notes.

Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted approximately 25 minutes. This short duration was a study limitation and is discussed further in the next chapter. Overall, participants answered interview questions using brief responses ranging from a few words like "I don't know" to several complete sentences. Even with prompting and scaffolding questions from concrete to abstract topics, extracting comprehensive descriptions from participants was sometimes difficult. Throughout interviews,

participants were frequently asked about their comfort levels and if they had questions or would like a break, and were also reminded of the study's voluntary nature. All 11 participants reported feeling comfortable and willing to volunteer without force or coercion. Each young adult received a $10 gift card for participating in the interview process. Participants were emailed brief and written summaries of their interview responses using clear and concise language. Each participant was allowed to debrief further via email, phone, or videoconferencing. No additional requests or concerns were made by participants following member checking. The computer program NVivo was used to transcribe interviews, document notes, and store data files. Files were stored securely with locks and password protection.

Data Analysis

I analyzed data using an IPA approach and thematic analysis to construct knowledge regarding the post-school transition experiences of young adults with ID. I used Braun and Clarke's six-phase method to complete an inductive thematic analysis. First, I transcribed interviews using NVivo. I compared each transcript to the corresponding audio file, edited as needed, and repeated the process to ensure accurate transcription. Then I familiarized myself with data by reviewing all interview notes, written summaries, audio recordings, and transcripts multiple times with equal attention. I documented reflective thoughts in NVivo and by using a research journal. However, my presuppositions and prior experiences could not be entirely removed from reality., I used bracketing to put aside my biases and experiences as a former special educator. I implemented reflexive journaling throughout the analytical process.

Second, I generated initial codes by identifying significant words, statements, and points that caught my attention. For example, I noted that only one participant exited high school during the global pandemic. I worked systematically through the data, giving full and equal attention to each item. I compiled a list of 62 codes from the entire data set, including advocacy, anxiety, bullying, friendships, PST expectations, daily life, decision making, hobbies, life skills, and work experience.

During the third phase, after coding and collating all data, I looked at findings through a broader lens. I identified themes and made sense of their connections using hierarchical coding and mind maps. The codes living arrangement, employment, and postsecondary education were grouped under the category outcomes. The category "classroom environment" emerged based on the following codes clustered together: class size, classmates, classroom description, curriculum, inclusion, and teachers. At this point, I established candidate themes and subthemes related to the post-school transition, including adulthood expectations, transition outcomes, perspectives on leaving school, and support system.

Braun and Clarke (2006) articulated that the fourth phase involved reviewing and revising themes on two levels. I read all coded extracts and looked for patterns within each theme and the entire data set. During this process, I recoded data and modified themes as needed. For instance, the code teachers moved from classroom environment to support system because data extracts focused on how participants felt emotionally supported by teachers during the post-school transition rather than the learning environment, classroom setting, or instructional approach. I used thematic maps to

diagram connections between themes and subthemes, which helped to establish alignment across themes and the entire data set (see Appendix I).

During the fifth phase, I defined themes based on their individual factors and pertinence to the post-school transition phenomenon. I compared themes and codes constantly until no new themes emerged or overlapped with another theme to establish clear boundaries. The first overarching theme, perspectives on the post-school transition, pertained to participants' feelings and reflections on exiting high school. This included how prepared or ready they felt for the adulthood transition. The subtheme in-school experience centered on participants' learning environment in terms of classroom setting and instruction. The second subtheme, sources of support, referred to family members, friends, teachers, and other community members who helped participants during the transition experience.

The second overarching theme, "navigating adulthood," consisted of participants' expectations of adulthood. The first subtheme, "outcomes in employment, secondary education, and independent living" pertained to reported transition outcomes. The second subtheme, "functional independence" exemplified participants' perceptions of their daily lives as adults, specifically regarding decision-making and engaging in the community or transitioning around settings. The final subtheme, "future goals," embodied participants' aspirations and goals in adulthood and their vocational interests. Hence, I finalized all themes in relation to the research questions and overall study.

Lastly, in the sixth phase, I selected compelling quotes for each theme and organized them by salience to produce the final analysis. I chose quotes that exemplified

the definition and scope of each theme, regardless of length, with additional quotes to bolster support. The extracts were grouped and coordinated to illustrate participants' post-school transition experiences. Thus, my analysis described individuals' adulthood expectations and outcomes. Further, I argued that most participants were unprepared for adulthood and lacked employment experience as young adults. This highlighted a discrepancy between current transition-related practices and policies, including evidence-based predictors of success and participants' post-school outcomes.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I used several strategies to promote trustworthiness in this study, including an expert review of existing literature. To support credibility, I implemented prolonged engagement with participants and data to the greatest extent possible. I established rapport with participants by facilitating multiple correspondences before interviewing and showed genuine interest in their personal lives by facilitating informal discourse at the beginning and end of each video conference. Member checks were also conducted to ensure participants' accounts were accurately represented, thus reinforcing credibility.

Additionally, I recorded my thoughts throughout the research process in a reflexive journal to ensure transferability, dependability, and confirmability. An audit trail was compiled to document the research process, including methodological notes, data analysis, and synthesis of findings. Despite participants' brief responses and the short duration of interviews, I attempted to generate thick descriptions of individuals' post-school transition experiences, specifically regarding their perceptions of adulthood

and subsequent outcomes. However, since the perspectives of individuals with ID were unique, the results of this study cannot be transferred or generalized across populations.

Results

The post-school transition phenomenon was explored from the first-hand accounts of young adults with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities. They discussed several topics related to the transition experience, including adulthood, functional independence, and employment. The themes have been separated into two broad categories: *Perspectives on the Post-School Transition* and *Navigating Adulthood.* Themes within the first category focus on participants' feelings and reflections about the post-school transition, explicitly describing what it was like to leave high school, how prepared or ready they felt to transition, their in-school learning experience, and sources of support during the post-school transition. The second category of themes pertains to individuals' expectations of adulthood, subsequent outcomes, functional independence, and future goals. The overarching themes and corresponding subthemes are presented below, along with supporting quotes from participants. Pseudonyms were used for all participants to protect their anonymity (see Table 2).

Table 1

Summary of Transition Outcomes for Individuals with ID

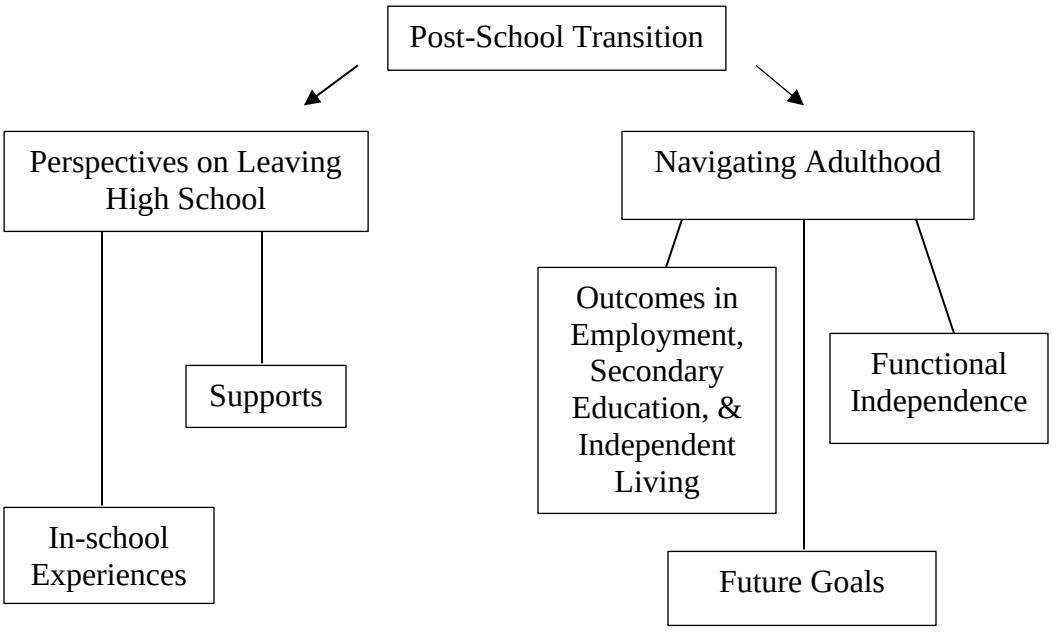
Transition Outcome	Percentage of Participants	Number of Participants
Employment Experience	36%	4
Currently Employed	27%	3

Secondary Education or Counseling	36%	4
Independent Living	27%	3
Life skills Instruction	55%	6

Note. $n = 11$.

Figure 1

Themes and Subthemes



Perspectives on the Post-School Transition

Individuals with ID described the post-school transition experience with mixed emotions and readiness. The phenomenon was most frequently described as “exciting,” occurring in five out of the 11 transcripts, followed by “amazing,” “anxious,” and “scary.” As one participant summarized, “I was very anxious. I think it was overwhelming. I was not very ready.” Similarly, Cameron stated, “I was happy. I was excited. No more classroom.” Most participants shared positive and negative feelings about leaving school and entering a new development phase. Annabelle highlighted this emotional conflict elicited by the post-school transition, stating:

> My experience was amazing, but it had its own challenges. I really struggled with my condition. I felt like I was missing my friends. I felt like adulthood at that point was lonely. So it’s quite frustrating. If you are not used to that kind of life outside of school. I think I was just scared.

Additionally, four other participants discussed feeling sad about leaving friends behind after high school. While Eleanor was “very excited” and “looked forward” to the post-school transition, she reflected on losing relationships with peers after exiting high school: “I think after the transition being processed now, it’s kind of like I broke up with some of them. But my experience was a bit good. There were definitely highs and lows.”

Another participant also expressed conflicting feelings regarding the post-school transition, specifically in terms of the social implications and missing friendships. “Leaving high school, I think I struggled.” When prompted, Rowan continued, “I was nostalgic about leaving friends behind, but I was looking forward to a better life after.”

According to Fletcher, “I was very happy and was well-prepared and knew it wasn’t going to be easy out there. I knew I would want to see my friends, but at the same time, it involves a lot of sacrifice.” While only “somewhat” prepared for the post-school transition, Margie explained, “I was excited to have freedom and getting to go places.”

One participant had a unique perspective of the post-school transition due to the global pandemic known as COVID-19. Walter described his transition experience as “very restrictive” and that “it certainly wasn’t one to remember to say the least.” When asked how he felt leaving high school, he replied, “I was fine. It’s kind of sad to say bye because I loved everybody.”

In-School Learning Experience

Participants were asked to describe their learning environment and experiences to provide background context of the post-school transition. Six participants described an “inclusion” classroom setting and “mostly academics” curriculum or instructional approach. As one participant stated, “We were around other people that weren’t all autistic. I learned about managing stress and investing.”

Several participants recalled learning academic and non-academic skills in high school, including disability awareness and self-advocacy. Cameron articulated, “I learned so many things pertaining to classwork and at times, I found it a bit overwhelming. But also, I learned about advocating for myself and knowing when to say that I’m not OK.” Similarly, Annabelle learned about “being a person who is properly planned, who has objectives in life, and not letting the condition or anyone tell you that you cannot do things.”

Other participants echoed the sentiment of self-awareness and self-regulation. Rowan shared, “I learned to be taking care of myself mentally.” Additionally, participants reported “learning about the virtue of patience and sharing what you have” as well as “making connections and relationships.” Lily professed, “I learned about controlling my mood.”

In another case, a participant described learning about “coping mechanisms,” adding that “it seems odd to me; it is hard to do.” Although when asked about any specific learning experiences related to life skills or employment, Fletcher answered, “No, I think we should have done it.”

Moreover, only four participants explicitly recalled learning about life skills in high school. Penelope explained, “I learned them from the class setup. I also learned them from my parents.” When asked to describe the type of instruction they received, two participants were prompted further about what they learned in school. One individual acknowledged “it was pretty much both” in response to having life skills and academic classes prior to the post-school transition. Quinn recalled that “the classroom was a lively one” and that they learned “a bit of both academics and life skills,” including “relationships and cooking.”

Interestingly, Walter had a strong reaction when asked about life skills instruction. “Life skills, I would say the school didn't do enough about that. My mom can tell you a whole lot about that, but that's a conversation best left with her.” I inquired further about different types of life skills to confirm my understanding and asked Walter if he had any prior experiences in-school related to jobs or cooking. He sharply

emphasized, “no, that was part of the problem.” Walter continued explaining, “There was a whole thing about that,” referring to the lack of life skills instruction and the school’s special education program “not doing that like they should have for me.”

Sources of Support

Participants identified relatives, peers, teachers, and community members as sources of support during the post-school transition experience. All 11 participants referred to their “parents” or “family.” One participant described how their “parents and elder siblings” were supportive. Fletcher recalled:

> Every time I would get frustrated, every time I thought I wasn’t good, they would tell me I’m ready. They would tell me the progress I have made. They would tell me I’ve improved in communication; I have improved in so many things. And that coming from people around you, like a support system, is so amazing.

According to Quinn, “the teachers, my parents, my friends, classmates” were supportive “by helping me deal with anxiety that comes along with this transition, by encouraging me to be bold, and to air out everything that I feel.”

Similarly, several other participants articulated how their families facilitated positive transition experiences. Participants expressed how their parents “encouraged,” “gave advice on what to do,” “protected their interests,” and “helped make decisions related to job, career, finances, and school.” Penelope described her parents as “the kind of parents who are very religious, who are really wanting to know how you’re coping, what’s not working, so they really molded me.” With additional prompting she

continued, “They taught me about the company to keep and not to keep and things I have to look out for, like better opportunities to work or for school.”

Seven participants also acknowledged “friends” or “classmates” as supportive. For instance, Cameron stated, “I believe mostly my friends and my family. By helping me know the things that really matter in life and advising me whenever I feel frustrated.” Another participant elaborated as to how her family and friends demonstrated emotional and logistical support “in terms of getting to know what exactly I want and what exactly my needs are and advocating for me in case I need something.” Lily added, “I just need help to make calls,” and that her support system “they would want to do a follow-up” and “they also want to know what things I’m interested in.”

Two participants expressed having sources of support within the community. Walter mentioned his friends from “the college-aged group at church.” Eleanor also reported having support from her church, health care providers, and her relatives. “They were very much involved in wanting to know the transition process. They kept contact. They have also enabled me to know that I’m not a lesser person than others out there.”

Teachers were described as “very encouraging,” “motivating,” and “sacrificing.” One participant explained, “I feel like they helped me boost my confidence, and I think I really struggled with that.” Cameron professed, “I think they contributed to the advocacy,” while Rowan proclaimed, “It felt like they dealt with us students as an individual.” Another participant “felt like my teachers, most of them understood me. They let me just talk on my own behalf. They understood me. And they really contributed to who I am.” Penelope recounted “my teachers were very supportive, very encouraging.

And I remember one of them was very into my business like she really wanted to know how I'm coping." Overall, participants revealed positive and person-centered relationships with their teachers. Furthermore, they disclosed feeling accepted and supported by family, friends, teachers, and members of the community.

Navigating Adulthood

Most participants expected to "stay home" and "relax" following the post-school transition to adulthood. As Fletcher mentioned, "I expected to have some time to relax, try out new recipes, and learn whatever I need to so I can do more cooking." Similarly, another participant explained, "I just needed a break." In terms of adulthood, Margie "wasn't really sure what it meant" and "just wanted to learn things about it." Eleanor expressed wanting to travel, "I knew I wanted to visit people I had not seen in a while. Basically, that was what was on my mind." Thus, most participants expected minimal responsibilities as young adults.

However, two participants expected to pursue secondary education and employment. Lily conveyed personal and professional expectations, "I just wanted to keep contact with friends that I made. Some of them were very understanding. I also wanted to prepare for a job and go to school." Additionally, Annabelle described "trying to focus more on my spiritual growth and discovering myself and what I really wanted to do. And that's when I realized I actually love fashion and being around people." Overall, participants expected to explore their personal interests and identity in adulthood.

Outcomes in Employment, Secondary Education, and Independent Living

Outcomes related to employment experience and status, secondary education or counseling, and independent living are depicted in Table 1. Most participants were "just home" and "didn't do much." Of the 11 participants, four individuals reported having employment experience. Three of those four individuals with work experience were employed during this study and had previously engaged in some form of post-secondary education or counseling. Another participant attempted community college, struggled with virtual learning, and did not complete the program. Four individuals answered "no" or "never" regarding employment and educational experiences in adulthood.

Table 2

Participant Descriptions

Pseudonym	Work Experience	Employed	Post-secondary Education or Training	Living Arrangement
Lily	Restaurant	Yes	Counseling	Family
Annabelle	Retail	Yes	Counseling	Independent
Eleanor	Receptionist	Yes	Online Class	Roommate
Margie	No	No	No	Partner
Penelope	Retail	No	No	Family
Fletcher	No	No	No	Family
Jo	No	No	No	Family
Cameron	No	No	No	Family
Quinn	No	No	No	Family

Rowan	No	No	No	Family
Walter	No	No	Counseling + attempted college	Family

Annabelle described her work experience: “At one point, I worked in a library. Also, I have worked in a cosmetics shop.” She received “counseling” through “the private sector” and “getting mentorship on issues about what I want to do and also by getting to know how to adjust because life out there is quite different.” Annabelle also expressed “living in a rented apartment” and that her “parents help pay the rent.”

Another participant engaged in community mentorship within her church and described “a training like for two weeks about life skills, about cooking, and drug abuse.” Lily continued, saying, “The type of work experience that I currently have is at my mom’s restaurant, and I feel like it has been like two years now.”

Eleanor described similar employment and educational outcomes, participating in “an online course through a community college for secretary management.” She discussed “working as a receptionist” and explained that “a receptionist is someone like an office manager.” Eleanor reported “living alone currently.”

Penelope mentioned having experience “working in a setup of her parent’s business, a clothes store,” but did not have any other experience “really being employed.”

Walter attempted community college using an online or virtual learning format. Walter said he “tried college, but that didn't really work.” When asked why, he explained, “Effort. Me being struck with the realization that it is an incomprehensible amount of

writing. But also, we did it at home. That was part of the mistake right there because the focus aspect…I could be easily distracted by electronics and all those other things." This viewpoint reflected implications of the global pandemic regarding school systems having to rely on distance or virtual learning rather than in-person instruction.

Margie's outcomes were slightly different in the sense that she "has been in a relationship so it's been too busy to work." She professed, "I have a partner. We aren't legally married. But we live in a rented apartment setup. Just the two of us." She was the only participant to live with a partner or roommate.

Functional Independence

This subtheme pertains to participants' daily life in adulthood, specifically in terms of the tasks and routines performed related to mobility or going places in the community and self-care. Participants detailed what independence means and how they demonstrate independence in daily life. As one participant explained, it means "being able to function in a way that you can make your own decisions and be able to be accountable for them."

All 11 participants referenced "decision making" in some capacity when discussing independence and daily life in adulthood. Three participants expressed being independent as "making decisions on your own," one of whom continued "without being forced or lured." Two more individuals described it as "influencing your own decisions." Moreover, participants characterized independence as "not answerable to anyone," "self-reliant," and "being able to do things on my own." Hence, participants depicted self-

governing attributes and individual choice as salient descriptors of adulthood independence.

Similarly, Quinn portrayed an independent adult as being "in a position where you are in control of your life, and no one is making decisions. They are just consulting." This account further supported participants' expectations of choice and control in their daily lives through independent decision-making and autonomy.

Equally important, participants shared various ways they exemplify independence to function in daily life and across settings. They reported deciding on things to do, places to go, and self-care routines. For instance, one participant revealed going "all the way to the supermarket" and "shopping whenever I can with my friends." Quinn discussed going "to church and to movies either alone or with friends." Three other participants talked about completing errands like grocery shopping either "alone," "with family," or "with friends." Lily described going out in the community "mostly by myself." Fletcher echoed this sentiment "I leave mostly by myself, most of the time. When I'm going somewhere. Because others are also very busy doing other things like working."

Several participants described "busy" daily routines that included "preparing myself," "house chores," and "cooking." Penelope mentioned, "I take care of the house," and that she independently gets ready in the morning "any point from my waking up, preparing myself, and doing some chores." According to Margie:

> My day is busy, my day is fun. It's going to be more engaged when I join college. I go to my friend's place. I love doing house chores. Most of the time I lay during

> the afternoon hours so during the day, I'm pretty much indoors working out, preparing food. I love cooking and eating.

Similarly, most of Jo's daily routine is spent at home "I am an indoor person. I don't go out so much unless it's necessary, so basically getting busy with house chores or watching or reading books. I go with my mom that time to the grocery store. Basically that." Therefore, most participants independently accomplished self-care and functional well-being tasks, including waking, dressing, exercising, cooking, and cleaning.

Although participants shared similar household responsibilities and self-care practices, they had varying degrees of engagement within the community. Rowan stated, "Basically my day is less busy because I am not working or doing school" and "I go with friends and family to the malls or playgrounds." Fletcher's day was depicted as "not very busy. I want to be more busy. I want my schedule to be entirely booked. I love getting busy, honestly. I meditate. I do housework. I link up with friends. I take care of family the duties." Fletcher described other independent activities like "going to the movies and traveling. I also drive at times. And also, meeting people. I really like meeting people when I'm alone or with a group of friends." This was not the only participant that expressed being able to drive.

Eleanor discussed her daily routine living independently in an apartment, work schedule, and driving. "I decide the places to visit. I decide what work to do…and I love making a plan." She reported, "my day is kind of busy. And whenever I'm working, I wake up quite early, around 7:30 to meet up with my parents or friends." I asked how she

gets from one place to another, and Eleanor explained “by means of walking. But luckily my parents gave me a car. So, it really helps.”

On the other hand, one participant was particularly critical of his functional independence and lack of motivation to drive. When asked to describe his day and what he does independently Walter answered, “I wouldn’t say too much. It’s just because there hasn’t really been a whole lot that’s been happening.” After being prompted on his daily routine, he remarked, “In terms of chores, I tend to not do them every now and then. I get in lots of trouble for that. It has to do with the electronics. I get distracted. That happens.” When asked about going places in the community, Walter said:

> Well not on my own. I can’t drive. Not so much because I’m incapable because I have never really got around to practice. Yeah, my sister went through and got her license and all that. Meanwhile, I just got my permit, and that was it. I just never really had the motivation to drive because it was one of those like unless I really needed to. For whatever reason, like I was, [unless I] have an absolute necessity, there’s really no motivation to do it.

Although Walter was less confident than the other participants, this account points to the interconnectedness of self-efficacy, motivation, and independence. Overall, participants expected independence in adulthood to focus on decision-making, choice, and control throughout their daily lives. Collectively, they exemplified functional independence specifically through self-care routines and household chores.

Future Goals

I asked participants about their personal aspirations as adults and, if they could choose anything, what they would like to do now or later in adulthood. They responded with a range of goals, including employment and financial independence and vocational interests. For example, Cameron announced wanting "to be able to provide for myself, to grow intellectually, to make friends. I think also getting my own house. Go to school. Get a job. Or employ myself. Stuff like that." Overall, eight participants desired gainful employment in adulthood.

Several participants expressed "wanting to get a job to be independent" and "not have to borrow money." Fletcher articulated "I am looking forward to having a good paying job. I don't like, want to be stuck on unemployment. Like I want purpose. I want to be employed. By me!" Penelope discussed finding a job "to be able to take care of my financial needs." Similarly, Quinn stated, "when I get to work, I get to have my own place." Therefore, individuals desired gainful employment to be self-sufficient and financially secure to avoid relying on others.

Moreover, participants wanted to pursue other socially accepted outcomes in adulthood. Three participants explicitly mentioned post-secondary education. Margie stated, "I would love to be able to work and to be able to further my education. I love to be able to go places." In addition to "school" and "working," Rowan revealed, "and maybe a family." Hence, individuals conveyed aspirations related to education, employment, traveling, and relationships. Interestingly, another participant aspired to start a family in adulthood as well.

Pertaining to her vocational interests, Eleanor declared, “I think a mom. A paid mom. I think I would also want to be mainly in a set up where there are investments, maybe real estate.” Participants shared vocational interests related to “fashion,” “cooking,” “anything to do with acting or drama,” and “a lecturer like at a university or something.” Two participants discussed “managerial positions” and wanting “to do something for the community.” Lily explained, “I don’t know. Just something to do with management. And also, be in a position to advocate for people with intellectual disabilities because most of them in the workplace barely get recognized.” Hence, individuals portrayed various career interests and aspirations.

Some participants “honestly don’t really know” what they want to do in adulthood and required additional prompting. Walter stated “I don’t think I’ve ever really been asked that question before” in terms of what he wants to do in adulthood. He continued “probably something involving like making something. Doesn’t have to be anything super complicated, just something involving creating. I want to be a YouTuber.” This account highlighted the importance of career development opportunities. However, collectively, participants described a variety of vocational interests that reflected modern media and entrepreneurship like self-employment.

Summary

Most participants expected to stay home after the post-school transition and still lacked employment experiences in adulthood. Few participants reported successful outcomes in the areas of employment, secondary education, and independent living. Although most participants anticipated adulthood for the sense of independence and

autonomy, they were unprepared for the post-school transition. Thus, they focused on functional independence and decision-making in their daily lives as well as hobbies and self-care routines, including dressing, exercising, and household chores. These results are discussed further in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This qualitative study involved understanding how individuals with mild to moderate ID describe the post-school transition experience. Participants' firsthand accounts about their perceptions of adulthood, functional independence, and employment were explored. I aimed to address the meaning of the post-school transition phenomenon using a disability interpretive lens and the SCCT. Young adults with ID tend to be aggregated with other populations and lack a clear say in existing transition literature. I sought to understand participants' unique perspectives of the post-school transition experience in conjunction with their adulthood expectations, outcomes, and aspirations. Moreover, this study was conducted to voice personal perspectives of individuals with ID, an underresearched and vulnerable population, without relying on collaborative responses or aggregated data.

Participants described the post-school transition experience with mixed feelings. Overall, they entered adulthood with minimal expectations and without employment experience. Few participants reported successful transition outcomes in the areas of employment, secondary education, and independent living. While unprepared for adulthood responsibilities, participants wanted to be perceived as self-sufficient adults and desired purpose in life. Further, they valued decision-making, control, and functional independence in their daily lives, which were primarily exemplified through self-care routines and household chores.

Interpretation of the Findings

This study was focused on the post-school transition experiences, expectations, and outcomes of individuals with mild to moderate ID, a topic and population with limited information to date. Results showed that most young adults with ID were emotionally ready to leave high school and anticipated the next life phase; however, they were unprepared for adulthood responsibilities related to employment, independent living, and secondary education. This finding confirms existing research regarding poor transition outcomes often experienced by individuals with ID (see Alsaman & Lee, 2017; Bouck, 2014; Bouck & Chamberlain, 2017; Cimera et al., 2015; Joshi et al., 2012). Few participants were employed and lived independently in this study.

Moreover, findings revealed that participants with ID lacked in-school work experience, career development opportunities, and functional life skills. About half of participants received life skills or vocational instruction. Their results indicated that participants reported hands-on work experience least and primary disability, in terms of mild and moderate/severe ID, correlated with current employment status. Findings showed that in-school services for individuals with ID were associated with current employment status. Participants with mild ID who received vocational instruction were less likely to get a paid job compared to those who did not receive the intervention. Prior studies have differed regarding the efficacy of transition programs and vocational curriculum in terms of preparing students with disabilities for adulthood (see Bouck, 2010; Cimera et al., 2014; Joshi et al., 2012).

This study involved highlighting discrepancies between in-school transition preparation, specifically regarding evidence-based practices and policies, and post-school outcomes of individuals with ID. According to results, few participants reported successful post-school outcomes. Those few participants also participated in secondary education or private mentorship after high school. Most individuals with ID lack post-school services and supports related to job training, life skills, and postsecondary education (Bouck & Chamberlain, 2017).

Another salient finding pertained to participants' expectations of the adulthood transition and subsequent outcomes. Almost all participants expected to stay home following the post-school transition. They are primarily expected to socialize and complete self-care routines. Few participants expected to pursue secondary education or employment following high school. Students with ID had higher expectations than their families regarding post-school outcomes (Kelly & Prohn, 2019). This study explicitly voiced personal accounts of young adults with ID without relying on collaborative responses or aggregated data. Therefore, it is essential to better understand participants' self-perceptions and expectations as adults to bolster successful transition outcomes.

Additionally, findings revealed that participants characterized adulthood based on self-governing attributes, including decision-making and independence. Individuals with ID desired acceptance and autonomy. They wanted to be in control of their daily lives and perceived as self-sufficient adults. While participants were eager to make their own decisions and life choices, they ranged in terms of functional independence and maturity. Participants differed significantly in terms of independence levels but mutually yearned

for trust and respect in adulthood. Thus, they desired more autonomy as adults yet opposed responsibility. Salt et al. (2019) indicated that transitioning to adulthood is often a more protracted process for individuals with ID, which may influence their perceptions of adulthood responsibilities.

Lent et al. (1994) acknowledged the SCCT is used to affirm constant interactions of personal, contextual, and environmental factors. This constant interaction of variables subsequently impacts individuals' self-efficacy beliefs, actions, outcome expectations, and goal attainment. Personal inputs, like predispositions and disability status, are interconnected with individuals' learning experiences, self-perceptions, and performances. Skill proficiency or aptitude, gender, and socioeconomic status also influence educational and vocational experiences. The SCCT was used to provide a social-cognitive view of the post-school transition experiences of individuals with ID, including their perspectives, expectations, and outcomes in early adulthood.

I found that individuals with ID were unprepared for the post-school transition to adulthood. Few participants expected to pursue secondary education, independent living, or employment immediately after high school. Equally important, few participants successfully attained employment and lived independently. From a SCCT standpoint, several factors directly and indirectly influenced participant outcomes, including their personal inputs or attributes, environments, self-perceptions, and outcome expectations. Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs or perceptions regarding their ability to engage in a task or behavior. Positive self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations directly impact a person's engagement, effort, and persistence (Lent et al., 2006). Those

individuals with successful outcomes exemplified strong self-efficacy and were confident in terms of their abilities to perform specific actions and overcome obstacles. However, low self-efficacy and minimal expectations of adulthood might have contributed to most participants' limited transition outcomes.

Environmental factors related to individuals' home and school settings also contributed to their post-school transition expectations and outcomes. The level of support received from both environments might have impacted their learning experiences, self-beliefs, interests, choices, and performances. While all participants reported having family for support, the relationship's degree of involvement or dynamic might have contributed to their experiences. The few successful individuals had support from members of their community, such as church groups and mentorship programs. This additional support positively influenced participants' experiences and outcomes by focusing on employment skills and independent life skills. The number of supportive people in one's environment and the level of involvement demonstrated by those sources of support might also have positive or negative implications. A more hands-on support system might have contributed to higher self-efficacy, personal expectations, and outcome attainments.

The level of hands-on support from family and service providers also applies to individuals' educational environments. For instance, teacher and program proficiency could positively or negatively affect learning experiences. Additional factors influencing learning include the classroom setting, curriculum, local resources, and educator training. Individuals with ID received a primarily academic curriculum in inclusion classes, and

about half reported some exposure to life skills instruction. The constant interaction of these environmental factors and other personal and contextual variables affected individuals' self-efficacy, motivation, skill acquisition, and decision-making. However, most participants lacked salient life skills, career development opportunities, and employment experience in adulthood. This finding highlighted another discrepancy between evidence-based predictors of success and individuals' transition outcomes.

A lack of career development opportunities and employment experiences, both in-school and post-school, might have impacted the transition expectations and outcomes of individuals with ID. Findings revealed that most participants entered adulthood without cultivating vocational skills or real-world experience. These young adults were unprepared for employment, despite existing research on the positive correlation between early vocational interventions and later outcomes for students with special needs (Cimera et al., 2014; Gutman & Schoon, 2017). This barrier might impede their self-esteem, future goals, performances, and outcomes. The few individuals with successful transition outcomes demonstrated higher confidence or self-efficacy, motivation, and outcome expectations than most participants. Moreover, the lack of career development and employment experience might have hindered individuals' functional and financial independence in adulthood. Without gainful employment, young adults with ID might be forced to rely on other people and government programs. Consequently, this unpreparedness perpetuates a cycle of forced dependency rather than functional independence.

In relation to SCCT, the home and school environments provided further context on individuals' transition experience regarding their self-perceptions, learning opportunities, supports, and barriers. These young adults encountered bullying in-school that might have skewed their self-perceptions and learning experience. This negative interaction can shape a person's motivation, engagement, goals, and later outcomes. Participants felt stressed, anxious, and scared, which might have negatively impacted their performance, expectations, or self-beliefs. On the other hand, a few individuals demonstrated self-awareness and self-advocacy by recognizing barriers and asking for help when needed. These non-academic skills were salient for functional independence and successful outcomes in adulthood.

SCCT acknowledges the direct and indirect implications of barriers and supports on career development. According to Lent and Brown (2013), the career-management model emphasizes adaptive behaviors based on significant developmental periods over the life span. In the growth stage, children learn behaviors such as self-regulation, social skills, interests, and decision-making. In the exploration phase, adolescents cultivate work readiness and employment skills. The following stages pertain to establishing and maintaining employment throughout adulthood. However, as the results have shown, few individuals with ID were established workers in early adulthood. Managing barriers is an essential component of SCCT regarding coping skills, self-advocacy, and conflict resolution. Stress and anxiety were examples of contemporary barriers that participants experienced during the post-school transition. Thus, career adaptability and resilience are essential to attain successful outcomes in adulthood.

Findings from this study correlated with SCCT regarding the post-school transition experiences of young adults with ID and their perceptions, expectations, and outcomes. They demonstrated a range of self-efficacy beliefs, vocational interests, and adulthood outcomes. Collectively, individuals desired autonomy and independence as young adults, which coincides with SCCT's agency and choice components. This analysis also highlighted the relationship between SCCT and individuals' learning environment, barriers, support systems, and real-world experiences about the adulthood transition. Moreover, this interpretation contributes to contextual understanding of SCCT and the post-school transition experiences of individuals with mild to moderate ID.

Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations. First, due to the small and purposeful sample of individuals with mild to moderate ID, the results of this study cannot be generalized. The post-school transition experiences were unique to this participant group and thus did not transfer across populations. The inclusion criteria for this study were also limiting in terms of formal diagnosis, age, location, and graduation year. Consequently, considering the global pandemic Covid, I had difficulty accessing participants locally in Virginia and expanded the radius to the surrounding mid-Atlantic region. I encountered a lack of responses from disability organizations and advocacy groups, leaving me unsure whether my fliers were distributed as initially agreed upon.

To further facilitate participant accessibility and account for recent Covid restrictions, this study utilized videoconferencing rather than in-person interviews to collect data. Therefore, additional limitations pertained to technology access and

computer skills. To the best of my knowledge, participants in this study scheduled and completed interviews independently, without assistance from a translator or guardian. However, some participants refrained from using the video function during the interview and relied on audio communication. While this hindered my ability to observe participants visually, it did not impede the interviews in any way. To address this limitation, I focused on verbal cues to indicate signs of discomfort or uneasiness in participants, such as pauses or hesitations, and changes in voice tones or vocabulary. Moreover, I built rapport with participants by engaging in prolonged exposure to the greatest extent possible, multiple email correspondences, informal dialogue, and validating and affirming individuals.

Finally, the brevity of the interviews was another limitation of this study. Individuals with mild to moderate ID differ in mental capacity, intellectual functioning, and adaptive behaviors like conceptual and practical skills. Participants might have responded with short answers for various reasons, such as deficits in cognitive efficacy, expressive or receptive language, or working memory. They might have encountered barriers to abstract thinking, comprehension, and recalling detailed experiences. Further, individuals might have been motivated by the participation incentive, focusing more on gift cards than their post-school transition experience.

Recommendations

This study focused on the personal transition experiences of young adults with ID. Findings acknowledged the importance of real-world experiences and support systems involving home, school, and community environments. However, additional research is

needed to understand the discrepancy between the evidence-based practices documented in current literature, including updated predictors of post-school success, and the unfavorable outcomes often experienced by individuals with ID (Mazzotti et al., 2020). While the transition to adulthood has shaped policy and practice for students with special needs, there is a disconnect between in-school transition preparation and the subsequent post-school outcomes lived by these young adults. Thus, future research should explore ways to improve the transition process for individuals with ID, including employment opportunities and functional life skills like stress management.

A larger sample size and national representation of young people with ID may provide further insight regarding how to better support their post-school transition to adulthood, specifically in terms of setting and attaining goals focused on functional independence, like secondary education or training, independent living, and employment. It is also important to understand why most individuals with ID did not expect to work after the post-school transition. This topic should be explored about individuals' beliefs of self-efficacy and self-determination, the expectations of their support systems, and their environmental settings. These attributes align with SCCT and should be investigated further in conjunction with career development and employment opportunities for adults with ID. That said, IPA was an effective approach to data analysis for the purpose and population of this study. Therefore, additional research should incorporate IPA and individuals with ID to expand our understanding of their lived experiences.

New policies have led to more vocational and educational programs for young adults with ID. However, individuals with ID are less likely to experience positive

transition outcomes than their peers without disabilities. In alignment with current research, this study found that participants were unprepared for certain aspects of adulthood, including employment and post-secondary education. Future research should inquire as to how individuals with ID can be better prepared for adulthood responsibilities related to career development, life skills, and functional independence.

Implications

This study conveyed the personal transition experiences of individuals with mild to moderate ID, an under-researched and vulnerable population. Existing literature involving these young people has often relied on aggregated data, including participants with and without disabilities and collaborative responses from caregivers or service providers. Hence, this study sought to provide this vulnerable population with a platform to voice their personal perceptions of the adulthood transition. This study may promote acceptance and advocacy for people with disabilities, especially those with cognitive impairments.

This positive impact may occur at the individual level for participants regarding self-determination, self-awareness, and self-efficacy. It may also impact the family, organizational, and societal levels by fostering collaboration and inclusion. Inter-agency collaboration, including home and school environments, is critical for successful transition outcomes. Thus, incorporating local businesses and communities may facilitate career development and employment opportunities for individuals with ID. Promoting functional independence and life skills through employment will make these young adults self-reliant and less dependent on other people or government assistance programs. This

may also lead to social change by reducing negative societal attitudes and stigmas directed toward individuals with ID.

This phenomenological study may contribute to social change by expanding current knowledge and research pertaining to the adulthood transition. School systems, policymakers, educators, and vocational specialists may be called to strengthen the transition preparation process for students with special needs. Enhanced transition services may occur inside or outside the classroom through earlier interventions and more comprehensive vocational programs, potentially increasing real-world experiences and developmental opportunities. Moreover, results from this study establish further support for the research participation and societal inclusion of individuals with ID. These findings may reinforce using social cognitive career theory and interpretive phenomenological analysis to explore the post-school transition to adulthood.

Conclusion

The post-school transition experience is a complex phenomenon when young people are expected to transform into self-reliant adults and attain successful outcomes, specifically related to functional life skills, independent living, secondary education, and employment. This journey requires a collective effort from parents, educators, service providers, and policymakers. However, the perspectives of individuals with ID are often veiled by aggregated data or collaborative responses. The results of this phenomenological study may contribute to the growing field of transition research involving young adults with ID by voicing their perspectives on the post-school transition experience. This vulnerable population's expectations and aspirations warrant further

exploration to improve their transition preparation and subsequent outcomes in adulthood.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

FOR RESEARCH STUDY ON THE POST-SCHOOL TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

I am a doctoral student at Walden University looking for young adults with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities (ID) to share their perspectives on the post-school transition experience.

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted via videoconferencing, lasting 60-90 minutes each, over a period of 1 to 3 days, with breaks as needed.

* Individuals with ID who have participated in an interview will receive a $10 Target gift card via email (1 per person)*

In order to participate, you must be:

- Diagnosed with mild to moderate intellectual disability
- Age of 18-25
- Former high school student that exited between 2018-2021
- Live in Virginia, Maryland, or Washington, D.C.
- Able to interact independently or with minimal assistance
- Able to attend and answer questions for required length of time
- Able to communicate verbally about in-school and post-school

  experiences

Appendix B: Interview Questions and Protocol

Interview Protocol and Questions

"Opener" question to warm up – what shows/movies do you like to watch?

Informed Consent/Assent
Procedures of study, interview, & debriefing
Start with concrete topics & move to more abstract themes (Hall, 2013)
Frequent breaks/check-in's (rapport & clarification/accuracy)

Topics:

- School Environment/Classroom Setting
    - Student population (peers with and without disabilities)
    - Instructional programs/practices
        - Lifeskills
        - Functional Independence
        - Academic & Non-academic skills
        - Career development/Employment Opportunities & Outcomes
- Support Systems
    - Home
    - School
    - Community
    - Employment
- Quality of Life

Questions:

- Tell me about your school.
- What was your classroom like?
- What did you like best/least?
- What kind of activities did you do?
    - What did you learn about employment?
        - Getting a job, types of jobs, skills needed, etc.
    - What kind of jobs would you be interested in?
- How did you feel about leaving school? (scared, excited, happy, sad)
    - Did you feel ready to leave?
- What did you expect to do after you left school?
- What did you do after high school?
- How would you describe your day now? What kind of things do you do?

    - Stay home, go to work, volunteer, etc. (where & who?)
- What do you think it means to be an adult? What do they do?
    - What would you like to do as an adult?
    - Where would you go? Who would you go with?
- Tell me about where you live. What is it like? Who lives with you?
    - How do you feel about that?
    - Would you like to change anything?
- Tell me about your family and friends. Who do you talk to or visit?
    - Home, school, community supports
    - Do you use the phone or computer with friends/family?
    - What other things do you do together?
    - How do they make you feel?
- What makes you happy?
- What do you want to do now, as an adult, and later in life?
    - Job, travel, friends, move, etc.
    - What can you do to make it happen? Is there someone you ask to help?
- What does it mean to be “independent”?
    - What things can you do by yourself, or independently?
    - What would you like to do?

- “Fun” closing question to end on positive note – What is your favorite color/animal/place?

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Table 3

Summary of Transition Outcomes for Individuals with ID

Transition Outcome	Percentage of Participants	Number of Participants
Employment Experience	36%	4
Currently Employed	27%	3
Secondary Education or Counseling	36%	4
Independent Living	27%	3
Life skills Instruction	55%	6

Note. $n = 11$.

Table 4

Participant Descriptions

Pseudonym	Work Experience	Employed	Post-secondary Education or Training	Living Arrangement
Lily	Restaurant	Yes	Counseling	Family
Annabelle	Retail	Yes	Counseling	Independent
Eleanor	Receptionist	Yes	Online Class	Roommate
Margie	No	No	No	Partner
Penelope	Retail	No	No	Family
Fletcher	No	No	No	Family
Jo	No	No	No	Family
Cameron	No	No	No	Family
Quinn	No	No	No	Family
Rowan	No	No	No	Family
Walter	No	No	Counseling + attempted college	Family

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Figure 2

Themes and Subthemes