

ABSTRACT

KILLIAN, SUSANNE R. IDEA's IEP Transition Plan and Process: Perceptions of Secondary Students Identified with Asperger Syndrome. (Under the direction of Dr. Bonnie Fusarelli.)

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of three secondary-school students identified with Asperger Syndrome in reference to their Individualized Transition Plans and planning process. This research can be applied to the policy studies relating to mandated planning activities for all students with disabilities in the United States. In the course of this study, three participants are interviewed and two participants selected for follow-up activities, including interviews and participant journaling. Major themes emerged regarding student's perceptions and are documented, adding to the understanding of the primary stakeholders of the transition planning process.

Secondary students identified with Asperger Syndrome in this study were found to have similar educational and personal goals for the future as to neurotypical students and felt empowered by their participation in the ITP process. These students perceived their role in the development of the ITP as important and central to the plan. The participants in this study also expressed that they felt empowered by both the process and product of their Individualized Transition Plan in that they were listened to and their ideas considered valuable by the ITP committee. The subjects of this study were all capable of planning post-secondary educational and life activities for themselves. These findings therefore, should be useful and help guide school systems and governmental agencies in serving students with Asperger Syndrome.

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IDEA's IEP Transition Plan and Process: Perceptions of Secondary Students Identified with
Asperger Syndrome.

by
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DEDICATION

For my daughter Emmie who has inspired me to be the best I can be in all that I do. You are a shining star in my life and I wish you a wonderful future as you set off to share your light with the world.

BIOGRAPHY

Susanne Killian is a mother, teacher, student and lifelong learner. She is interested in encouraging educators to appreciate children regardless of their differences and to hold high expectations for all students. Susanne currently teaches Technology Education in middle school and promotes STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) learning principles through after school clubs and science competitions for middle school students. As often as possible, she recruits students with special needs to join in after-school science clubs as well as athletics. She believes that all students should have a chance to be a greater part of the school community, especially students identified with disabilities. In the future, Susanne hopes to continue working with students with social and learning differences.

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Thanks to all of my students who remind me every day that being different is a gift, not a hindrance.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO TOPIC

Contemporary research shows that students with disabilities presently are seeing improvement in postsecondary outcomes promoted by expectations concerning accountability and academic excellence (USDOE, 2004). Even considering these gains, students with disabilities in North Carolina, as well as nationally, still are not succeeding in their post-secondary outcomes in reference to employment, independent living, and education in contrast to their non-disabled peers, despite positive gains (Müller, 2004). Many students with disabilities still have discouraging post-school outcomes despite increased educational and vocational opportunities for youth with disabilities in the United States (NCDPI, 2006; Carr & Ratcliff, 1994). More needs to be done to equalize postsecondary opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities (deFur & Korinek, 2008). Many states have created initiatives to support the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which was developed in order to narrow the preparation gap between those with disabilities and non-disabled secondary school students in reference to post-secondary preparation and diploma-granting graduation rates. A relevant and functional transition plan developed by students between the ages of 14 and 21 can have a positive effect on individuals with disabilities as they strive to reach the goals of graduating with a diploma, further enhancing preparations to enter the post-secondary world of work or education (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

In the recent past, students with disabilities were segregated from their non-disabled peers in both school and in life (Karagiannis, Stainback, & Stainback, 1996). Today the practice of inclusion, placing students with disabilities in regular classrooms, supported by research as well as mandated by legislation, has become a mainstay of the educational landscape in the United States (Harrower, 1999). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142), renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990, is the federal law governing the rights of children with disabilities to receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (IDEA, 1990; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998; Wright & Wright, 2005). This legislation requires that public schools provide necessary learning aids, testing modifications, and other educational accommodations to children with disabilities by including these specifications in an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

The Individualized Education Program is the foundation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which ensures educational opportunity for students with disabilities. In addition, the Individualized Transition Plan is a mandated part of the IEP (Wehmeyer, Agran & Hughes, 1998). The Individualized Transition Plan is instituted in the first IEP re-evaluation after the student turns sixteen years old or as early as fourteen years old if deemed appropriate by the student's IEP committee. According to the IDEA, sec. 602[a][19], transition services are defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) as:

“ A coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome oriented process, that promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (included supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living or community participation.”

(IDEA, 2004)

The 2004 amendment to the IDEA placed greater importance on the Individualized Transition Plan. The changes highlight the requirements of the plan to contain measurable post-secondary goals as well as the transition services which will support the student in reaching these goals (Wright & Wright, 2005). In addition, an increased emphasis on accountability is a common thread throughout the amended IDEA.

There are approximately 6,718,000 students ages 6-21 currently served by the IDEA nationwide, with over 191,000 of them residing in North Carolina (DANS, 2008). In 2006, 224,594 of those served under the IDEA were identified with the “autism” classification for special education purposes (IDEA DATA, 2008), an increase of more than 1700% over the number of students served in the 1991-1992 school year (Yazback, 2003).

A small percentage of these exceptional students are classified as having Asperger Syndrome (AS), an autistic disorder of individuals with normal to high intelligence and strong verbal abilities who exhibit many autistic tendencies relating to communication and social interaction. Many students identified with Asperger Syndrome are capable of reaching high academic standards, yet often lack requisite social and emotional skills necessary for

success in post-secondary education and work (Baron-Cohen, 2006). Recently there has been a growing interest in the need to support these students throughout their secondary education in order to ensure a transition to appropriate post-secondary education and training (Hossler and Stage, 1992). Researchers in increasing numbers are exploring the role of student participation in the IEP process (Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, Greene, Gardner, and Lovett, 2006).

Individuals with Asperger Syndrome frequently perform well academically, often equally to neurotypical peers, when provided with compensatory skills that offset areas in which they have deficits (Wing, 2005). Students with AS may require finely tuned transition plans supporting both their academic goals as well as their social and emotional goals. Ideally, these long-range transition plans include academic and social skill supports that create a holistic map for students to follow towards post-secondary goals. These plans can be very helpful in creating a well rounded plan for students with AS, many of whom have hopes of entering post-secondary education (deFur & Patton, 1999). Research suggests that students with AS and many other disabilities should prepare for post-secondary education and independent living, leading to gainful employment (Benz, 1997). To accomplish this goal, research has shown that early planning is necessary (deFur, 2003).

The IDEA emphasizes that preparation for future educational and employment, beginning in high school, is pivotal to students with disabilities and enforces the notion that transition planning for students with autism should begin early and be evaluated routinely. North Carolina policy requires that transition planning initially begin at age 14, with a formal

statement of transition beginning at age 16. The North Carolina Performance Plan for 2005-2010 for Exceptional Children supports the increased success of all students with disabilities by placing emphasis on improving rates of graduation with a diploma in addition to assuring adherence to policies relating to the development of transition plans. Benchmark tests, such as end of course tests, reading proficiency, and language arts exams, are included in the state's evaluation and performance plans, further emphasizing the preparation of students with disabilities (NCDPI, 2007).

Nationally, in the year 2003, children ages 12-21 who were identified with autism increased 29 times the rate from just 10 years before (Müller, 2004). In North Carolina there have been increasing numbers of students identified with autism and related Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), including Asperger Syndrome. According to data recently released by the Centers for Disease Control, referencing a population-based, multi-state study by the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network (ADDM) that surveyed 8 year olds in 2000 and 2002, 1 child in every 150 will be affected with autism or ASD (Autism Society of America, 2008). It is not understood if there is simply a higher incidence of autism and ASD, or if better screening methods and earlier diagnosis may account for the rise in the number of individuals dealing with these challenges.

In the not so distant past, the vast majority of the American public was unfamiliar with autism and related developmental disabilities. Today, autism has become a common part of America's daily vocabulary. Not only is autism in the forefront of the news, but also the diagnosis of autism recently has been associated with descriptors such as "epidemic,"

“increasing,” and “crisis,” bolstered by newly published data from the Centers for Disease Control promoting greatly increased media coverage. On February 8, 2007, the CDC released findings provided by the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network relating to the prevalence of autism in the United States. This data suggested that 1 in 150 children are autistic or have an autism spectrum disorder (Centers for Disease Control, 2007). The media and the public latched on to this newly published data, and we as a nation have found ourselves in the middle of an “autism crisis.”

Along with the media declarations and increasing public and political support came high profile campaigns to further autism awareness. From cutting edge media blitzes such as VH1’s Rock Autism campaign to the many new books by celebrity parents of children with autism or ASD, the nation has been bombarded with this message: Autism is an important issue that needs to be explored. This is not a new message, however. Many organizations dedicated to the awareness of autism and ASD have been active for decades, including groups such as Autism Speaks Inc., CAN (Cure Autism Now), and the NAAR (National Alliance for Autism Research). Even though the word “crisis” currently has been affixed to the subject of autism, there have been individuals living with these developmental disabilities for years. It is the thought of many medical professionals and scholars alike that the increased rate of identified cases of autism may be due to the heightened awareness of the disability, in addition to changes in the diagnostic criteria for autism and ASD. Be it a higher incidence or more astute diagnosis, there is an apparent concern in support of a growing population of American youth diagnosed with autism and ASD. As more and more students

in the United States are diagnosed with autism and ASD, they will all become intertwined in the disability policy, including the ADA and the IDEA, currently available as a support to them. In this paper, I will not attempt to declare the true root of the issue of diagnosis, the causes of autism, or the discovery of a new treatment or policy. Through this research, I hope to explore the educational policies currently in place that will serve this burgeoning population of diagnosed individuals by observing how these policies support the future outcomes of students with autism and ASD and how students with these differences perceive policies.

As an educator who has worked with special student populations for many years, I was not surprised with the new findings from the CDC. Along with my colleagues, I have been well aware of many individuals, diagnosed and undiagnosed, who currently exist in our communities and who exhibit autistic characteristics. It has been both a privilege and a struggle to be part of the lives of people with autism. The fact that these individuals are a growing population in our public school system supports the current concerns for their future as productive citizens and members of our community.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In the current educational era, which is focused on “Leaving No Child Behind” and is paired with the reauthorized IDEA and its refocused emphasis on outcome-based special education services, the transition activities available to students in public schools take on a heightened importance for educators and researchers alike. The Federal No Child Left

Behind Act requires schools to make adequate yearly progress toward student proficiency in math and English, while emphasizing local accountability measures in addition to timelines for student progress (NCLB, 2001). An examination of the current educational policies that support students with autism in gaining independence as productive and successful citizens after they leave the secondary school system should provide better understanding of transition planning and its part in the IEP process. My interest has been amplified by my involvement as a Career Development Facilitator and Career Education Instructor in the North Carolina public education system and my connection with many children served through special education services, particularly those with ASD.

The issue of educating individuals with autism and preparing them for life after high school has become very real for parents and school districts alike as the number of students diagnosed with autism and ASD has increased (Steuernagel, 2005). With the current trend in early diagnosis as well as emphasis on intensive treatment, many more students identified with Asperger Syndrome will be entering high school where they will require support and intervention. In 1994, the population of the United States was estimated at 260,204,000; it increased by 14.7% , to 298,444,215, in 2006. During the same period, the number of students aged 6-21 with autistic spectrum disorders known to the U.S. Department of Education increased by 885%, from 22,780 to 224,415. According to the Volume 27 of the North Carolina Report on the IDEA legislation, the number of students ages 3 - 21 with autism who attend school in North Carolina has increased statewide to 6,590 for the years 2006-2007, of whom qualify as students with disabilities (NC School Report Cards, 2007).

This report also states that the number of students graduating with a diploma is lower for those with disabilities than for those students in the general population (NC School Report Cards, 2007).

In reference to independent living and employment, post-school outcomes for youths with disabilities are still discouraging (Stilington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000). The US Department of Education has found that in the 2006-2007 school year, 42% of students identified with a disability under the IDEA graduated with a diploma, while 40% dropped out of the public school system. These findings have prompted North Carolina legislators to focus on the issue and pass legislation that requires students with disabilities to adhere to the same rigorous standards as all North Carolina general education students (NCDPI, 2007). With this notion in mind, it is important to understand the process for creating transition plans for individuals with disabilities as well as the student perception of the importance of such plans. Students with Asperger Syndrome can prove to be a great source of information concerning transition planning, the inclusion of disability and ability specific recommendations in the inclusion plan, and the subsequent perceptions of future success.

As a result of the IDEA's increasing emphasis on transition-oriented IEP planning, it has become evident that researchers must support further investigation into the dynamics and usefulness of the policy's transition processes. According to Martin, Christensen, Van Dycke, Greene, Gardner & Lovett (2006), current literature provides only a limited examination of the internal dynamics as well as participant perceptions of the IDEA policy's transition planning components. Researchers also describe the need for additional research

in reference to the student-centered activities within the IEP arena (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001) as well as the need to explore the views of the children (Lewis, 2002).

When a student with disabilities is in middle school, current IDEA policy recommends greater student involvement in the development of their future educational and life plans (IDEA, 2004). Middle school students identified with a disability begin to develop an Individualized Transition Plan during their 8th grade year. The transition plan must be prepared by the time a student is 16 years of age, but is initiated at age 14, in accordance with IDEA guidelines (Wright & Wright, 2006,) and supported by North Carolina regulations (NCDPI, 2007). The Individualized Transition Plan document is meant to support students in the planning of their high school curriculum and course choices and, later, to function as an addition to documents produced in support of goals preparing a student for post-secondary life, including educational goals, career development, and needed services.

As our society becomes more aware of Autism Spectrum Disorders, multiple institutions will require greater knowledge and increased program availability and efficacy. In order to serve a burgeoning population of individuals with these disorders, researchers must explore current and future policies in order to provide data supportive of improving life-long outcomes for those with autism.

As a public educator, I have become increasingly interested in the future outcomes of my students with disabilities who are served by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the guiding legislation for Special Education in the United States. Through my

involvement in the IEP/ITP development process, I have become aware of the significance of the Individualized Education Program and its importance in adherence to IDEA policy. I currently teach middle school, and it is at this point in a student's education that current IDEA policy recommends greater student involvement in the development of their future educational and life plans. Middle school students identified with a disability begin to develop an Individualized Transition Plan during their eighth grade year. The transition plan must be prepared by the time a student is 16 years of age, but is initiated at age 14, in accordance with IDEA regulations (Wright & Wright, 2006). The initial ITP document is meant to support students in the planning of their high school curriculum and course choices and, later, as an addition to documents produced in support of goals preparing a student for post-secondary life including educational goals, career development, and needed services.

Research suggests there is a distinct discrepancy between the goals students have for their future and their actual educational and life outcomes (Kato, Nulty, Olszewski, Doolittle, & Flannery, 2006). As an educator and student of educational policy, this impression led me to explore more intensely the IDEA mandated transition process, particularly the Individualized Transition Plan (ITP), which is created to guide students in preparation for further education, employment opportunities, and eventual independent living (Centers for Educational Networking, 2008). Through my examination of current education disability policy pertaining to the ITP and transition policy, I began to discern a marked gap in the literature supporting the perceptions of students in relation to the disability policy and related issues (Wittenberg & Loperst, 2007, Lightfoot, Wright, & Sloper, 1999). This observation

led to further study of the issue: How do students perceive their Individualized Transition Plan?

I have decided to focus my research on students with autism, particularly those with Asperger Syndrome. The recent increase in the identification of students identified with this form of autistic spectrum disorder will provide me with a number of students with Individualized Transition Plans containing goals pertaining to educational outcomes similar to those of peers not served under IDEA policy. In addition, through inquiry with experts in the field of autism, I surmise that this population of students will welcome having their stories told and will be able to express first-hand accounts of their interactions with the IDEA, ITP, and the overall transition process.

Through the exploration of special education policy and its place in the lives of individuals who rely on these policies to support them in their educations and future employment, researchers can better inform all involved in policy function, including policy makers, teachers, service providers, administrators and, most of all, the students, concerning the need to understand current policies.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of students identified with Asperger Syndrome, in relation to the IDEA mandated transition planning process. The study is based on research and legislation supporting transition planning for students over the age of 14 in preparation for post-secondary employment and education.

It is estimated that more than 1.5 million Americans live with some form of autism, including 100,000 children, many of whom are served under the IDEA (Autism Society of America, 2006). This unparalleled growth in the number of students currently identified with autism, Asperger Syndrome, and other Autistic Spectrum Disorders (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) has led to an increase in the need for transition services for a unique population of students with disabilities. Asperger Syndrome and autism in general have recently received greater recognition, creating new challenges for policy makers, school systems, and families in regard to creating and instituting programs supportive of post-secondary outcomes of individuals with disabilities.

The recent policy response to transition planning, inclusive of students with autism and related autistic spectrum disorders, is still in its primary stages (Steuernegel, 2005). Current IDEA legislation and local policy support an increased emphasis on the transition component of the Individualized Education Program for students with disabilities (deFur & Patton, 1999), including those identified with Asperger Syndrome. Research supports transition planning as an important part of the process for the successful transition of students from the safe haven of secondary school to adult life. Few inquiries have been made concerning the academic outcomes for students with autism resulting from their secondary educational plans (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001) or their perceptions of the transition plans as a part of their overall educational preparation.

It is apparent that there are a number of gaps in the literature pertaining to the student perspective concerning transition planning, especially regarding those with Asperger

Syndrome. The lack of research literature investigating the internal dynamics of the IEP meeting, including the formation of the ITP, may impede policy reform efforts and compliance issues relating to transition (Martin et. al., 2006). As the focus on the IDEA and its role in special education has increased, few researchers have concentrated on participant perceptions of the IEP process and its outcomes. Student-centered perceptions and concerns relating to transition planning have been overlooked in much of the literature (Johnson & Rusch, 1993). The intent of the ITP, to support students in their development toward greater independence while teaching students to take control of their own lives, has become an integral part of the comprehensive special education program (Karvonen, Test, Wood, Browder & Algozzine, 2004). It is only through the eyes of those children identified with autism and who are currently creating ITP plans that we can better understand the impact of such policies and thereby support effective policy implementation.

Research Question and sub-questions

How do high school students identified with Asperger Syndrome perceive the usefulness of their IDEA-mandated Individualized Transition Plan and Process in reference to their post-secondary education and life goal planning?

Sub-questions

1. What goals do students with Asperger Syndrome have for their post-secondary futures?

2. How do high school students identified with Asperger Syndrome utilize their Individualized Transition Plans in preparing for post-secondary education, training and independent life experience?
3. How do these students perceive their role in the transition planning process?

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

The current cohort of students identified with Asperger Syndrome is much larger in elementary schools than in high schools (Steuernagel, 2005). As Eva Müller (2004) suggests, “The bubble has not yet reached the high schools” (p. 5). This statement refers to the many toddlers who were identified with Asperger Syndrome and autism in the mid to late 1990’s who are moving through to the secondary school levels presently and in the coming years.

School systems and families alike will require and demand research-based and outcome-oriented methods supporting the successful development of their students with Asperger Syndrome and autism in general. The 1997 and 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act amendments communicate a challenge to enhance post-school outcomes for all students with disabilities, including those with autism (IDEA, 1997; IDEA, 2004). Transition planning, inclusive of student preferences and interests, has been found to improve post-secondary success in students with disabilities (Wehmeyer, Agran & Hughes, 1998).

Therefore, a closer examination of student perceptions and the usefulness of transition documents will prove to aid main stakeholders in the planning process. These stakeholders,

including students, parents, and school personnel, who make up collaborative teams, together create transition plans. Students with Asperger Syndrome, due to their higher level of ability and capacity for future academic and employment success (Cohen, 1998, Wing, 2005), will require programs and support systems specific to their disabilities.

In addition, those with Asperger Syndrome can provide an expressive insight into the perceptions of the ITP process and its implications. Many individuals with Asperger Syndrome are more able to express ideas and perceptions than those with other types of autism or ASD. This population is well aware of their potential in their post-secondary lives and can aid researchers in their desire to understand the impact that the ITP may have in the educational development of those with disabilities.

A Brief History of Disability Policy

Now, more than ever, the American public is cognizant of governmental overspending and the lack of accountability in relation to policy development and implementation, particularly in the hotly debated field of education. Researchers and public citizens alike are calling for change in the realm of special education policy (Fox, 1994), as well as in education as a whole.

The function of current policy should be explored and the value of existing legislation evaluated before considering new policies for special education (Halloran, 1992). First it is essential to understand the history of special education policy as researchers attempt to explore current policy and future policy issues. The following is a brief overview of the development of special education policy in the United States.

The improvement of public education has been the focus of governmental attention in the United States for well over a century. As America began to transition from an agrarian society to an industrialized nation, the population found it necessary to garner higher levels of education in order to satisfy the burgeoning need for skilled workers in a workplace focused on increased technology and productivity. With the increased rigor of the improved general education curriculum came the realization that a number of students would require specialized education in order to succeed in the new, modern America. The proposition of specialized education became evident in this era; as Tomlinson (1995) explains, “Special education can be analyzed as a part of a political response to a crucial dilemma facing educational systems in late twentieth century technical societies” (p.126).

With developing educational needs came concerns for federal policy and the financial burden it sustained for policy implementation. The first federal funds were appropriated to cover maintenance and tuition of students who were designated as handicapped as early as the mid- 1800's (LaVor, 1976). This was just the beginning of the expansion of the special education movement. The 1950's saw the federal government becoming more involved with a massive overhaul of the American educational system along with the burgeoning civil rights movement. As mainstream education took a central position in the political limelight in relation to racial equality, the needs of those with disabilities became increasingly apparent. The 1970's saw an increase in federal policies enacted to truly improve the educational outcome of those with disabilities. After 1972 a number of amendments were introduced to authorize new bureaus and commissions supportive of special education (Ornstein, 1978). The Vocational Rehabilitation Act was set into place in 1972 and served as the precursor to 1975's (P.L. 94-142) The Education of All Handicapped Children Act, the foundation of today's IDEA.

As special education became a mainstay in public education, the need for transition support from secondary school to adult life became apparent. This fact led to the implementation of (P. L. 98-199), The Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1983. This public law promoted support for students in their postsecondary transition to the world of work while furthering the ultimate goal of the IDEA, eventual transition and the support of post-school outcomes (Wright & Wright, 2007). The goals for transition were further expanded by the 1990 reauthorization of the IDEA (P.L. 101-476) by broadening the

scope to include not only post-secondary employment but also independent living, recreation, and additional education or training (Destefano & Wermuth, 1992; Wittenburg & Loperst, 2007). Today, the transition component of the IDEA mandated IEP is an important element of the special education program supported by both federal and state legislation.

The legislation previously mentioned was enacted out of a response to public need and the requirements of a changing society. The socio-political climate in American history, along with strong advocates of the individual, facilitated public policy supporting the needs of those policy actors most influential in special education policy development, the students themselves (Keogh, 1999).

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following is a list of terms used in this study:

Accessibility: This term refers to the removal of barriers that can prevent an individual from accessing educational content due to their disability (Wright & Wright, 2006).

ASD: An Autistic Spectrum Disorder is a complex, lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them. The whole spectrum is defined by the presence of impairments affecting social interaction, communication, and imagination, known as the triad of impairments (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Asperger Syndrome- Asperger Syndrome is one of five Pervasive Developmental

Disorders characterized by less severe autistic symptoms and the absence of language delays. Children with Asperger Syndrome may be only mildly affected and commonly have good cognitive and language skills. Individuals with Asperger Syndrome often appear very average and may seem only slightly different than non-autistic individuals. These children, in addition to a lack of social skills, also have a limited ability for interactive conversation and, often, repetitive behavior patterns or intense interests. AS individuals frequently possess motor skill delays and may appear clumsy or awkward (Baron-Cohen, 2006).

Autism: Autism is a developmental disorder characterized by significant and pervasive impairment in the following developmental areas: communication skills, reciprocal social interaction skills, and the presence of restricted and/or repetitive behaviors, interests and activities. Autism may be referred to as ASD or Autism Spectrum Disorder and may include the following: Autistic Disorder, Asperger Syndrome, Rett's Disorder, Atypical Autism (Pervasive Developmental Disorder—Not Otherwise Specified, PDD-NOS), Childhood Disintegrative Disorder or Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

FAPE- (Free and Appropriate Public Education) All children who are determined eligible for special education in the United States are entitled to a “free, appropriate, public education.” Appropriate is defined through the evaluation of the individual child’s needs according to an assessment of the student’s strengths and weaknesses, in

addition to the development of an individual education program that meets the educational needs of the student (Schwartz, 2005).

IDEA- “The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its amendments are federal laws that establish the rights of children with disabilities to be educated. IDEA establishes the guiding principles that protect the rights of children with disabilities by defining the way in which school systems identify and evaluate children, and plan and deliver services.” (Schwartz, 2005).

IEP- (Individual Educational Program) The IEP is the planning medium for employing the transition requirements specified in IDEA. This document, by law, must be implemented for all students identified with disabilities under the IDEA and must contain statements outlining special education and related services the school district will provide. The statement of a child’s present level of performance that reflects the child’s academic achievement and functional performance as well as academic and functional goals must be included. The program also includes the formation of an IEP team(inclusive of school personnel, the parent and student) that will review and update the program annually in addition to providing periodic reports concerning the child’s progress toward his/her annual goals. Accommodations and modifications necessary for the student to achieve annual goals will be included as well. The IEP as a whole considers the child’s strengths, parental concerns for the improvement of the child’s education, results of the initial or most recent

evaluations, and the child's academic, developmental and functional needs.

(IDEA, 1997, IDEA 2004, Wright & Wright, 2006).

ITP- (Individualized Transition Plan) The Individualized Transition Plan is a plan focused on the successful transition of the individual with disabilities to the adult world.

The ITP must be created during the first IEP meeting after the child has turned 16 or as early as age 14, if determined appropriate by the IEP team, and must be updated annually (IDEA, 2004). The transition plan must contain a focus on academic and employment outcomes while including social and developmental goals supporting movement from secondary-school to post school activities (Wehmeyer, Agran & Hughes, 1998).

Neurotypical (NT) – A designation developed to describe individuals not identified with autism or Autistic Spectrum Disorders. Often used by autistic individuals and throughout the autistic community (Timeforafuture, 2007).

Self-Advocacy - Self-advocacy allows individuals to advocate for their personal rights and their futures in relation to education, employment, and social activities. Self-advocates speak out for their beliefs and make choices and decisions that guide their lives toward independence (Johnson, 1999).

Self-Determination – Wehmeyer (1996) describes self determination as “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life free from undue external influence or interference” (p.

24). Self-determination allows students to control their own destinies as partners in the planning of their futures.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant considering that existing legislation contains many transition planning practices that inhibit student choice, self-determination, and student involvement (Wehmeyer, Agran & Hughes, 1998). Individuals with Asperger Syndrome are at greater risk of facing transition planning procedures that may create anxiety or discount their personal interests, preferences, and future goals. As society becomes more aware of the abilities of those with Asperger Syndrome, autism, and other disabilities, changing perceptions promote acceptable inclusionary practices that encourage students to contribute to the planning of their futures (Wehmeyer & Sands, 1998).

Through the exploration of inclusive and collaborative transition models and procedures that support student-centered transition planning for post-secondary life, educators, administrators, parents, and legislators alike can begin to assess the needs of all students with disabilities. Understanding of these needs can lead to better opportunities and post-secondary outcomes for youth with Asperger Syndrome as they become functioning and important members of our global society. The exploration of transition planning issues through the perspective of the very individuals most impacted by these issues will be a significant addition to the research that is currently available. It is imperative for those

creating and enforcing policies to assess the usefulness of the policies that they are implementing.

In light of the current findings of numerous CDC studies (Autism Society of America, 2007), confirming that the occurrence of autism and autistic spectrum disorders has produced an urgent concern in the United States and beyond, the research into the policies supporting those with autism seems warranted. This research on educational and lifelong outcomes for those with autism should be a valuable segment of a holistic approach to the intervention process for adolescents with disabilities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study is constructed on the basis of educational freedom and choice supported by self-advocacy and student-centered planning. Beginning in the 1700's with both the American and French Revolutions, a spirit of individual civil rights emerged as a central theme that has influenced today's legislation concerning disability rights (deFur & Patton, 1999). The 1900's brought sweeping changes to the public's perceptions of those with disabilities, driving policy to protect the rights of the disabled. The legislative mandates as well as the emerging civil rights movement of the 1960's brought about efforts to include those with disabilities in the public educational system, while promoting self-determination and self-advocacy as support mechanisms toward independence. The changed perspectives of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, support the civil rights of individuals with disabilities, affirming their rights to choice, self-determination, and self-advocacy (Field & Hoffman, 1999).

This study also follows a socio-political model (Scotch, 2002) rather than the medical models often seen in disability, special education, and disability policy research. This model recognizes that "disability" is created in the social context and that the voices of those with disabilities must be brought forth since there is no singular disability experience (Ferguson, Ferguson & Taylor, 1992). Recent literature has shown a distinct shift from a generalized medical model of research to a naturalistic and individual exploration of the personal journeys of those with disabilities. This study will expand beyond the generalizations of past

studies and focus on the multi-dimensional aspects of the social model of disability (Gabel, 2005; Ware, 2004).

In addition, a pragmatic view and a phenomenological focus will also enhance this research study. As a researcher, I support a practical and democratic approach to the exploration and analysis of collective data. In my opinion, there is a need for the focal point of disability policy research to transcend that of the authoritative researcher to that of the collaborative partner along with the participants (Danforth, 2006). A phenomenological focus will further develop this study by encouraging the researcher to employ methods of data collection that will capture the experiences of the individual participants (Patton, 2002, Grbich, 2007).

Americans with disabilities have realized gains in the areas of education, independent living, and social participation (Johnson, 1999). Research supports choice as a guiding force in the outcome-oriented disability legislation, essential to the freedom and success of individuals with disabilities. Literature pertaining to students with disabilities and their transition to adulthood concludes that the empowerment of the individual is necessary and should be the basis for transition planning (deFur & Patton, 1999). As Stanton (2000) states, “Diversity and choice are essential elements if we are to meet the needs of all pupils – including the needs of children with autism” (p.115). This historical framework, supporting freedom, choice, and self-advocacy, also promotes positive life-long outcomes for those with disabilities and sustains the notion that it is imperative for students to become stakeholders in the transition planning process. Through the use of a pragmatic and phenomenological lens

supporting a socio-political research model, this research can provide students with a sense of ownership in relation to the disability policies that are the cornerstone of their secondary education.

ORGANIZATION OF STUDY

In the following chapters I will support the study through the review of the literature and the organization of the methodology that will be utilized to collect and examine data. In Chapter Two I will review the literature related to the topics of special education history, Asperger Syndrome, current public policy, transition planning, and freedom of choice in education. Through a review of the literature, I will explore the current research, identifying the strengths of the documents as well as the gaps in the literature pertaining to this study. Support for future research will be referenced, as will the investigation of additional questions concerning this study's topic. In Chapter Three I will present a methodological framework for the study emphasizing data collection, evaluation, and presentation. In Chapter Four I will explore the findings from the study and discuss the major themes that emerge through the synthesis of data gathered from participant interviews, participant digital journaling as well as supplemental archival documents relating to the participant's Individualized Transition Plans. Finally, in Chapter Five I will discuss the findings of this study by providing a synopsis of the interpretation of the data collected.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

The individual perceptions of those with Asperger Syndrome in reference to their IDEA mandated transition plans are lacking in current special education research literature. It is important that researchers gauge these perceptions in order to explore and improve the secondary outcomes of those with autism. By understanding the role of the participants, we gain a new and important perspective in relation to the IEP and the transition process that can serve as the basis for future policy implementation as well as for better understanding and improvement of current policy.

The literature review will focus on the areas of research having the greatest impact on this study. These topics include literature pertaining to the history of special education in the United States, the IDEA, current trends in transition planning, Asperger Syndrome, student choice, self-advocacy and self-determination in relation to transition planning, and the current policy and legislative implications of transition planning.

SPECIAL EDUCATION HISTORY IN THE UNITED STATES

Special education in the United States was born from both the efforts of individuals and advocacy groups (Yell, Shriner & Katsiyannis, 2006). Compulsory attendance laws of the early 20th Century sparked the development of a number of parent advocacy groups

including The Council for Exceptional Children (1922) and the National Association for Retarded Citizens or ARC (1950), which began to organize coalitions aimed at providing educational opportunities to those with disabilities. These advocacy groups began to change the manner in which individuals with disabilities were educated, but it was the Brown v. Board of Education civil rights case (347 U.S. 483) of 1954 that promoted legal protection for all students in reference to public education (Pfiefer, 1993) are sparked a civil rights movement that would change the way children with disabilities would be educated. Early federal involvement included the formation of The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, The Handicapped Act of 1970, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, providing further support for student access to public education. Following primary right to education cases such as Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Pennsylvania (1972), and Mills v. District of Columbia Board of Education (1972) The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142) was implemented (Yell, Rogers, & Rodgers, 1998). This law was reauthorized and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 and was the initial legislation on which current special education law is based.

As educational access issues were addressed, the equality focus of special education law shifted to that of educational quality (Yell, Shriner & Katsiyannis, 2006). The 1982 case of the Board of Education v. Rowley (458, U.S. 176) focused attention beyond educational access for students with disabilities to the individual right to an appropriate and high quality education (Wright & Wright, 2007). Cases such as this reinforced the reauthorization of the

IDEA again in 1997, with a focal point of evident improvements in the educational achievement of students with disabilities (Yell, Shriner & Katsiyannis, 2006). Shortly after the 1997 IDEA reauthorization, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was implemented, sparking yet another reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004. This current reauthorization seeks to align special education policy with the quality and accountability standards of mainstream education policy.

INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION IMPROVEMENT ACT 2004

A number of researchers have produced recent inquiries into the document we know currently as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Most authors begin the examination of the IDEA by asking, “What is it?” Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley (2001) refer to the IDEA as landmark legislation “that not only provides supportive funding to the states but also governs how students with disabilities must be provided with a free and appropriate public education” (p.327). This notion is also supported by Wright & Wright (2007) as they explore the reauthorization of the IDEA for 2004.

Historically, children with disabilities have received unequal treatment in the educational arena, often being excluded from public institutions (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001; Yell, Rogers, & Rodgers, 1998). The literature notes the great importance of historical legislation directly and indirectly related to individuals with disabilities as the groundwork for current special education policy. Researchers explore the connection of the development of special education policy to the civil rights movement of the 1950’s and

1960's. The landmark Supreme Court decision in the Brown v. Board of Education case, in which the court ordered the end of racial segregation in public schools while further implying that no child can be denied an education, sparked a revolution in civil rights law, Brown v. Board of Education also heavily influenced future special education policy and also seen as the cornerstone to historical inquiries (Lagemann & Müller, 1996). Yell, Rogers, & Rodgers (1998) examine the development of the 10th Amendment to the United States Constitution which implies that education is the responsibility of state government rather than that of the federal government. This amendment allows states to impose compulsory attendance statutes that would greatly impact youth with disabilities. In addition, the 14th amendment , supporting equal protection for all persons under the law, is also considered as the basis for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), one of the most encompassing pieces of legislation supporting people with disabilities of all ages (Burris & Moss, 2000) as has section 504 of the Rehabilitation act of 1973 (deBattencourt, 2002) .

The reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004 marks a number of changes in the legislation that better align it with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Turnbull, 2005). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2001) was enacted by President George H. W. Bush in 2001 to improve U.S. students' academic achievement of through rigorous accountability systems and the use of evidence-based practices (Yell, Shriner & Katsiyannis, 2006). IDEA 2004 calls for increased accountability of school and state educational systems centering on increased academic achievement and increased accountability (Yell, Shriner & Katsiyannis, 2006). Wright and Wright (2006) explore the changes in the IDEA 2004 transition

component, highlighting the greater importance placed on appropriate and measurable goals that are based on a child's needs and preferences.

The transition component of the IDEA 2004 reauthorization contains changes to include an improved, results-oriented process focusing on improving the academic and functional achievement of children with disabilities (Edgov, 2007). A greater emphasis is also placed on the inclusion of students in IEP meetings that pertain to their secondary goals and transition services (Wright & Wright, 2006), supporting the need for the study of the individual perceptions of those with disabilities in reference to their IDEA-mandated transition plans. It is important that researchers gauge these perceptions in order to explore the postsecondary outcomes of those with disabilities including autism and Asperger Syndrome. By understanding the role of the participants, we gain a new and important perspective in relation to the IEP, and the transition process can serve as the basis for future policy implementation as well as the understanding and improvement of current policy.

All of the articles and publications reviewed promoted the need for future research in reference to the IDEA. In addition, researchers support increased focus on educational excellence and continued educational opportunity for youths identified with disabilities. As supported by the latest reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004, quality and assessment should be maintained and explored through future research (Wright & Wright, 2007).

TRANSITION PLANNING AS PART OF THE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT ACT

One of the greatest concerns in education today is ensuring effective preparation of youth to become successful, employable citizens who can live independently. In the case of students with disabilities, this concern is even more pressing. The current IDEA reauthorization strengthens the transition component of the legislation (Snyder, 2005). The current revisions to the IDEA 2004, that redefine the role of the Individualized Transition Plan, have brought transition planning under greater scrutiny in current literature. Research studies reviewing the transition planning process seek to emphasize the need for the development guided outcome-oriented strategies while supporting individuals with disabilities, including those with Asperger Syndrome.

Guided by the increased emphasis current legislation places on student outcomes, the Individual Transition Plan has become a focal point in a great deal of special education literature that investigates student interests and aspirations (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009). It is necessary for the transition plan to be inclusive and supportive of coursework that interests the students and will serve to support their post-school goals (Gartin & Murdick, 2005). Policy states that all students with disabilities must have an inclusive transition plan intended to address their potential for postsecondary prospects such as education, vocational training, and independent living (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). A number of studies qualitatively focus on the Individualized Transition Plan and the documents related to instituting the planning process (Lawson & Everson, 1993; Grigal, Test, Beatti & Wood, 1997), yet they do not seek

the views of students. A further review of the literature found few studies which address the postsecondary aspirations of youth with AS or ASD, although a number of other disabilities were represented (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009).

Research literature also currently examines the new IDEA 2004 position which states that planning needs to take place at 16 years of age rather than 14 years of age, a change from the IDEA 1997 (IDEA, 1997; IDEA, 2004) . Some researchers voice concern over this change explaining that 14 may be too late for transition planning (Hitchings, Retish & Horvath, 2005).

The transition plan is looked upon as a long-term process that takes much coordination (Goupil, Tassé, Garcin, & Doré, 2002) and consistently requires evaluation. A theme that runs through a great deal of literature is the consideration that the transition process should be student focused (Kohler, 1996), with Kohler specifying Student-Focused Planning as the first of five categories in his “Taxonomy of Transition Programming.” A student-centered approach in which the student is present at all levels of the planning process (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1995) is evident in a number of studies concerning best practices in transition planning. Halpern (1994) concludes that the “locus of interpretation” should be geared towards the individual being assessed rather than the assessors. Student involvement and self-advocacy are undercurrents of much of the literature concerning transition strategies, yet much of the literature concerning perception of the process or concerns related to the future of the student is in reference to the parent or teacher (Goupil, et. al., 2002). The IDEA supports students’ involvement in the formation of their transition plans that should be

designed to make best use of potential for postsecondary prospects inclusive of independent living, vocational training, and further education (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). Even though many studies support student involvement in the planning of their academic and postsecondary plans, little attention in research studies has been paid to the views and perceptions of the children themselves (Carrington & Graham, 2001).

The IDEA 2004 emphasizes postsecondary goals that are measurable and that should include the interests of the student (Powers, Gil-Kashiwasbara, Geenan, Powers, Balandran & Palmer, 2005). As illustrated by Kohler & Field (2003), the perspective concerning the transition process has changed from a services-centered perspective to an outcome-based process, guiding the way toward student success and independence. This innovative concept is also supported by a number of studies that link changing social and economic conditions to a more standards-based transition process (deFur & Korinek, 2008). Successful transition of students with disabilities to postsecondary education is also identified as a major indicator of the effectiveness of an educational system (Bassett & Kochbar-Bryant, 2006).

The fact that autism and ASD were not identified as a special education category until 1994 (CDC, 2007) is most likely responsible for the small number of research studies available concerning student with Asperger Syndrome and their involvement in the transition planning process. Asperger Syndrome has recently become more commonly recognized, and a number of researchers have begun to focus on the need to connect those with the disorder to resources concerning transition to life activities and the support of education and work in the post-secondary world (Grandin & Scariano, 1996). Hurlbutt & Chalmers (2002) express

that more information concerning disabilities at the upper end of the ASD spectrum has become more readily available and of greater interest to researchers. Wing (2005) supports this notion in her research as well, referring to the confidence that individuals with Asperger Syndrome gain as they become involved in their life planning. A number of publications focus on the disabled population in general, yet do not specify by disability (Halpern, 1994). This is a limitation in the literature, so further research should be conducted to facilitate more disability-specific publications.

ASPERGER SYNDROME

The term Asperger Syndrome is used to describe one of the Pervasive Developmental Disorders, (PDD) also referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), as defined in DSM-IV by the American Psychiatry Academy (DSM-IV, 2000). These are a sequence of five diagnoses, of which autism is the most frequently discussed. These five disorders are Autistic Disorder, Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified, Rett's Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and Asperger Syndrome (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). ASD is a developmental disability that affects a child's ability to respond properly to social cues, along with both verbal and nonverbal communication difficulties commonly evident before age 3 (Müller, 2004). In addition, ASD is characterized by resistance to change and often repetitive activities (Darden, 2007). Individuals identified with Asperger Syndrome meet all criteria for ASD but lack the delay in verbal communication that is characteristic of classic autism. Individuals with Asperger Syndrome

also generally have average or high IQs, social impairments, narrow focus, and non-verbal communication problems (Fitzgerald & Corvin, 2001).

Temple Grandin (1995), herself an individual with Asperger Syndrome (AS), exemplifies in her work a new genre of literature written by those who are the most insightful concerning Asperger Syndrome. Grandin's many books and publications provide a view into autism that offers greater understanding to the neurotypical individuals off the spectrum. Her frank explanation of the inner struggle as well as her illustrations of the many methods by which those with Asperger Syndrome cope with daily life (Grandin & Scariano, 1996) are paired with technically sound research based on biological and psychological premises (Grandin, 1992). This insight provides a rich narrative that can help researchers better understand individuals with Asperger Syndrome and ASD, helping researchers to utilize student perspectives to improve outcomes for high functioning persons with disabilities.

In addition to their research-based knowledge concerning AS, the writings of individuals such as Grandin, Donna Williams (1992) and Birger Sellin (1995) provide a great deal of personal insight from their differing vantage points. A number of publications that focus primarily on those who have experienced the trials of seeking out their place in secondary education also add insight into the lives of those with Asperger Syndrome who excel educationally. *Aquamarine Blue* (Prince-Hughes, 2002), a compilation of personal vignettes, exposes the inner fears and triumphs of individuals who have ventured into the world of higher education. Individual accounts that exemplify self-advocacy and educational support serve to educate readers as they navigate the educational maze that incorporates

disability policy and support services offered to those with AS. Ann Palmer's book that accounts her son's educational experiences from elementary school through university-level education supports the idea that all students with disabilities can reach their personal educational goals as long as they have a solid support network and search out the services and the educational programs suited to them personally (Palmer, 1996). This literature illustrates the efforts of individuals attempting to assimilate socially and educationally into the mainstream, higher-education system, by showing their motivations and the support networks both key to their successes and at the roots of their failures. In addition to opening the world of autism up to the neurotypical world, these memoirs support the need for scholarly research to make use of these voices to better understand public policy relating to the future outcomes of youth with ASD and other disabilities.

The personal accounts written by those with Asperger Syndrome differ greatly from the more scientific literature based in the psychological sciences such as publications by Uta Frith (1991) who translated Dr. Hans Asperger's (1944) original paper concerning the disorder and who later continued her work explaining characteristics of AS and its differences from traditional accounts of autism (Frith, 1989). Longitudinal studies support the learning and social outcomes possible for individuals with autism (Szatmari, 1991), yet are often not inclusive of Asperger Syndrome as a distinct disorder. The characteristics of individuals with AS, including social impairments and intense interest paired with average or above average cognitive function and age-appropriate language skills (Campbell, 2005), are highlighted in many articles and books alike, providing an insight into characteristics that

have a bearing on educational and life decisions. A great number of books created to guide the parent and practitioner or to arm the caregiver and teacher with tools to enrich the social and academic lives of individuals with AS (Stanton, 2000, Mesibov, Shea, & Adams, 2001) abound as well.

Lorna Wing writes from yet a different perspective. As both a scientist and a parent of an autistic child, she emphasizes the need for proper diagnosis and conducts epidemiological studies highlighting the “autistic continuum” as the manner by which many autistic individuals can share mixtures of autistic features (Wing & Gould, 1979). Wing also concludes, as does much of the literature, that all individuals diagnosed with autism will require some type of assistance throughout their lives (Wing, 2005; Bashe & Kirby, 2001; Stanton, 2000).

A great number of quantitative and qualitative studies concerning Asperger Syndrome (AS) has progressed since the disorder became diagnosable in 1994 through the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th edition (DSM-IV), used by the American Psychiatric association (Griffin, Griffin, Fitch, Albera, & Gingras, 2006). Dr. Lorna Wing characterizes Asperger Syndrome as “a triad of impairments affecting: social interaction, communication, and imagination, accompanied by a narrow, rigid, repetitive pattern of activities” (Wing, 1998, p.477).

Increased awareness has spawned research ranging from case studies of individuals with AS and reports concerning educational interventions, to genetic studies and food allergies. There has been recent literary interest in AS paralleling the increasing number of

individuals identified with the disorder. This increased interest seems to be due to a greater general awareness of the disorder, the intensified media coverage of AS and the representation of individuals with AS in movies and on television (Grandin, 1995).

The increased awareness of the disorder and the broadening of the determination criteria for Asperger Syndrome have increased the number of individuals requiring educational services (Wing, 2005). Because of their higher ability level, many children with AS are placed in mainstreamed classrooms (Baron-Cohen, 2003), leaving school systems scrambling to serve this growing population. While state and federal agencies currently support research centering on the transition of those with general disabilities, there has been very little concentration specifically on those with autism (Müller, 2004). Researchers such as Safran (2001) and Baron-Cohen (2003) have brought to light an increased focus on meeting the educational needs of higher-functioning individuals with ASD. It is evident that a gap exists in the literature supporting the emerging secondary population of students with Asperger Syndrome.

CHOICE, SELF-ADVOCACY AND SELF DETERMINATION

It is through the identification of students' choices, expectations and preferences that we will increase successful transition outcomes for those with disabilities, as shown in the literature (Wehmeyer, Agran & Hughes, 1998). Research supports the need for choice making, as it is a basic civil right (Repetto & Webb, 2002). Making choices for the future and being comfortable and independent in doing so is the basis for effective transitioning. "Choice making and decision making are imperative to achieving independence"

(Wehmeyer, Agran & Hughes, 1998, p.67). Many authors, including Johnson (1999) and Wehmeyer (1992), convey criticism of the limited choices offered to individuals with disabilities in life planning and suggest that researchers provide stronger models to incorporate choice into the transition planning process. This lack of choice can lead to lack of control over life decisions and the perception that one's life is not his own. Transition outcomes have been found to be greatly improved for students who are active and engaged in their individual transition planning (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Thoma, 2005).

Self-determination can be incorporated into the development of the Individual Educational Plans and Individualized Transition Plan, strengthening the individual's sense of purpose and control. Self -determination is, according to Field, Martin, Miller, Ward & Wehmeyer (1998), "a combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior" (p.2). Self-advocacy skills, which are a sub-set of self-determination, are also a central factor in the success of an individual's post-secondary outcomes. Literature maintains the importance of self-advocacy skills as a key element in the successful transition to adult life (Wehmeyer, 1992).

In addition to being an important part of the transition process, self-determination and choice are fundamental rights of children as well as human beings in general. According to current educational policy as well as the United Nations Declaration of Rights (2011), everyone has the right to education, choice in the type of work they pursue, and an educational path "directed to the full development of the human personality" (p.1).

Along with the increased importance placed on student involvement in their transition planning come the equally important task of understanding the perspectives of individuals with ASD and other disabilities in the formation of educational policy. The perspectives of various stakeholders can only increase the richness of research pertaining to the educational needs of students with disabilities.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

Individuals with Asperger Syndrome and ASD face the daunting task of managing a lifelong disability as they work toward personal independence. It is of utmost importance that the preferences and aspirations of the very individuals with the most at stake be considered in the formation of plans and policies supportive of this goal.

Significant yet limited research exists utilizing the perceptions of the main consumers of special education policy, the very students served by public policy. Few researchers utilize student perceptions as the cornerstone for their research concerning transition and postsecondary outcomes. In light of research employing student perception, participants' insight is extremely noteworthy, as they are the greatest stakeholders in the transition planning process. According to Martin, et.al. (2006), further research supporting student involvement in the IEP transition process may increase student participation rates in middle and high school. Researchers such as Hasp, Griller-Clark and Rutherford (2001) as well as Trainor (2005) have explored the perceptions of students with disabilities in relation to transition plans and the roles of stakeholders in the transition process. The perceptions of

youth with specific disabilities such as AS have also been employed by researchers to better understand the views of students, as seen in Carrington and Graham's (2001) study of the perceptions of two teenage boys with Asperger Syndrome and Camarena and Sarigiani's (2009) exploration of the post-secondary aspirations of high-functioning adolescents with autism. Many more studies rely on the perceptions of parents, teachers, administrators, and special education case-workers concerning transition plans and the IEP process (Fish, 2006; Spann & Soenksen, 2003). Lewis (2002) supports the need to explore the views of children with disabilities in reference to their learning supports along with the analysis of pupils' views toward their mainstreaming experiences (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

According to research literature, it is through the examination of the written and spoken words of those with higher functioning autism, including AS, and exploration of their perceptions that researchers can learn more about the lives of those with disabilities (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2002). Increased attention is being paid to the quality of the transition process, but little examination of the views of the student has been pursued (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Turnbull & Rutherford-Turnbull, 1997). Greater emphasis needs to be placed on understanding the place that students have in their own transition process. The adult perspective is only one part of increasing the effectiveness of public policy, but a truly effective policy cannot be presented without the views of the main stakeholders. Researchers have begun to understand the relationship between a student's perception of his personal experiences and the successful outcomes (Dunn, Chambers & Rabren, 2004). It is this gap in literature that needs further exploration.

This study will shed light on the role that students with Asperger Syndrome play in the formulation of their transition plans and the feelings of control that may be connected to this involvement.

STUDENT VOICE

Student voice is a term that describes a movement in educational research that explores the various avenues that provide youth the opportunity to take part in educational planning that will shape their academic and social lives (Mitra, 2006). This movement stems from the realization of researchers in the 1990's that a number of educators and social critics noted the exclusion of student voices in current research studies concerning educational policy (Cook-Sather, 2006). Through the evaluation of contemporary studies focused on special education themes and educational policy, it becomes clear that the perspectives of students are rarely considered. As Cook-Sather (2006) states,

“Student voices—students’ own words, presence, and power—are missing. This elision is consistent with the tendency for educational research to be conducted *on* not *with* students (p. 372).

This premise presents an opportunity to develop more studies that incorporate the voices of students as stakeholders in existing and emerging policy studies. As expressed by Mitra (2008), “To improve student achievement, it makes sense to go straight to the source – students.” (p.20).

Researchers have discovered that young students have a distinct and unique perspective concerning both their learning and the educational environment they utilize

(DeFur, S., & Korinek, 2008, Mitra, 2004). These student perspectives are valuable to all stakeholders in the policy creation and evaluation processes. Including student voice in research includes the following considerations by Cook-Sather (2006):

Young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling, their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults, and they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education (p. 363).

Student voice engages students as envoys for change and influence in supporting learning inclusive of programs, policies, and the principals they are based upon (Harper, 2002).

Incorporating student voice not only serves to improve policies, but the inclusion of student perspectives also directly affects the very students the policies and programs will serve. Student voice is seen as both individual expression and as participation in the policy process (Lensmire, 1998). This allows the student population to share their views while at the same time becoming contributors to policy creation. The term “voice” suggests that students have a genuine viewpoint and opinion and that they should compose a dynamic element “in decisions about and implementation of educational policies and practice” (Holdsworth, 2000, p. 355).

Researchers have also identified an additional benefit of engaging students in dialogues pertaining to educational policy: the increase in their sense of self-worth and self-efficacy (Mitra, 2004). Just as adults strive to be heard, students, too, simply wish their voices to be heard. It has been seen that when students experience the justification of having

their ideas and views considered, they tend to be more proactive about their learning (Cook-Sather, 2009). This realization is making a greater impact on including student voice in educational research as part of a three-fold benefit of inclusion.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The framework for disability policy is built on legislation, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education of 1990, 1997 and 2004, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education and Applied Technologies Act of 1990, and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 (Kohler, 1998). Public policy and legislative changes have brought about interest relating to the implications of students with mild disabilities, including youth with Asperger Syndrome, and the planning for their transition into the adult world. Societal perceptions of disability and related scholarly research help to shape public policy (Shogren, Bradley, Gomez, Yeager, Schalock, Borthwick-Duff, Buntinx, Coulter, Craig, Lachapelle, Luckasson, Reeve, Snell, Spreat, Tassé, Thompson, Verdugo, Wehmeyer, 2009), and it has only been recently that public policy has recognized the social and communication differences of those with autism (Steuernagel, 2005). Current policy changes, as well as federal and state legislation, lend importance to the investigation of the future policy transformations that will come about from purposeful research. These changes have the potential to positively impact individuals with disabilities (Johnson, 1999).

Although policy supporting the transition of those with disabilities has been strengthened, Asperger Syndrome and autism remain challenges to policy makers (Cohen,

1998; Steuernagel, 2005). Current literature is still limited and points to the necessity for research studies that will impact policy and provide a voice to those with disabilities who are essential stakeholders in policy change and development. Again, little has been done to identify the perceptions of the individuals with disabilities in reference to public policy and its impact on their success in adult life.

Together these areas of the literature pertaining to my study will bind together the common goals of this research and will help to support the necessity to dig deeper to assess the perceptions of students with AS in relation to their transition planning process.

The next chapter will explore the methodological framework for the study, including data collection, analysis, evaluation, and proposed presentation of results.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

The following chapter presents a description of the research methodology and design used to explore the main research questions outlined in this study. This section begins by exploring the research goals and rationale for qualitative inquiry as well as case study design. It then describes in detail the methodology and data collection techniques utilized by the researcher to gather data. Finally, validity and generalizability of the study are explored as are possible limitations to the study.

This study serves to explore the perceptions of high school students with Asperger Syndrome (AS) in reference to their Individual Transition Plans as part of the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) process. My research interests included the involvement of students in the planning process and the development of their goals, dreams, and ambitions through the formation of a guiding plan for their futures beyond high school and I also examined how they see the IDEA mandated Individualized Transition Plan and process in relation to their movement towards adulthood and independence. Rather than attempting to prove the efficacy of the IDEA policy through this study, I hoped to aid in the understanding of the manner in which those individuals with Asperger Syndrome used the policy as part of their educational planning. This supports the notion that further research is necessary in order to

explore the perceptions of students in relation to the transition planning process (Carrington & Graham, 2001, Weidenthal & Kochhar-Bryant, 2007).

WHY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

The research method most appropriate for this study is qualitative. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) qualitative research is:

“a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3).

The nature of qualitative research lends itself to the holistic presentation of phenomena in the natural world (Stake, 1995) and the constant search for emerging data. This holistic approach empowers the researcher with, in the words of Hancock and Algozzine (2006), “rich details of the true nature of the phenomenon” (p.3). Qualitative research allows researchers and readers to transcend the facts and figures through the emergent design

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and the flexibility it affords researchers as they pursue the many paths to multiple realities discovered within the experiences of the individual.

While examining my research questions and interests, I concluded that qualitative methods would support the “participant centered perceptions” (Hatch, 2002, p.7) of students with Asperger Syndrome in relation to the transition planning process in high school.

Qualitative research offered me, the tools and format within which I could concern myself with the participant’s perspective of the issue at hand (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Qualitative research has recently become more routine in the study of individuals with disabilities (Pugach, 2001). Numerical data cannot always fully express the stories those with disabilities wish to share, yet the qualitative researcher is empowered with the ability that transcends simple statistics and can purposefully convey the voices of those under-represented in the mainstream (Pugach, 2001). As Clandinin and Connelly, (2000) explain, individuals with autism “lead storied lives on storied landscapes” (p.8). These individuals not only have stories to tell, but they are also more than capable of conveying these narratives as communicative individuals. Researchers such as Minkes, Robinson and Weston (1994) have documented the value of empowering individuals with disabilities by unfolding their stories and seeking their views. Qualitative research can give voice to those who have struggled to have their stories told. Due to the differing abilities of the participants with AS, qualitative methods allowed me, the researcher, to interact with the participant in a familiar, natural setting (Bogden and Biklen, 2003) while ensuring flexibility within the study parameters (Punch, 2000). Individuals with Asperger Syndrome rely heavily on the

consistency of their schedules and often their comfort with physical surroundings will impact their behavior (Wing, 2005). Boundaries and defined actions help the individuals with AS cope with and adapt to uncomfortable social situations for which they often lack defined coping skills. Furthermore, qualitative inquiry affords flexibility in research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), allowing themes, discoveries, and further questions to emerge as research is conducted while at the same time enabling the researcher to be mindful of the needs of the participants.

In addition to appropriately addressing my research questions, qualitative inquiry is a very good fit for the exploration of disability policy and the experiences of individuals connected to these policies. There has been a considerable increase in the use of qualitative inquiry methods for issues pertaining to practical social policy research (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). Walker (1985) contends, “What qualitative research can offer the policy maker is a theory of social action grounded on the experience – the world view – of those likely to be affected by a policy decision” (p.19). It was not my intention to embark on a policy analysis in this study; it was my hope to allow the stories of students, those most affected by the policy, to speak to the public. The fact that I am interested in exploring IDEA policy supports the use of qualitative inquiry as it is currently employed as an important tool in the exploration and comprehension of diverse, contemporary policy issues (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). Research methods most often employed by the qualitative researchers, including case study, observation and interviewing, are essential to the examination of policy (Haas & Springer, 1998), and they also encourage the researcher to consider the implication of the

personal viewpoints of participants whose voices are traditionally underrepresented in research.

Finally, qualitative inquiry enhanced and suited my personal beliefs and skills as a researcher. In my view, it is essential that the researcher is the primary instrument in the inquiry process (Cresswell, 1994 , Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, Punch, 2000). I looked upon this study as a holistic endeavor where the process was set to uncover themes and understanding and where a hypothesis was neither tested nor a product sought (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Through my investigation I assumed that my “eyes and ears will become the filter” (Lichtman, 2006, p.23) for the data collected, and I eventually became the weaver of the final tapestry which exemplified and uncovered the multiple stories of the participants.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Through the review of the literature and the identification of current policy implications concerning transition planning and the rights of those with disabilities, I identified the following overarching research question:

How do high school students identified with Asperger Syndrome perceive the usefulness of their IDEA mandated Individualized Transition Plan and Process in reference to their post-secondary education and life goal planning? Data was also collected to answer the study’s three sub-questions:

Sub-questions

1. What goals do students with Asperger Syndrome have for their post-secondary futures?
2. How do high school students identified with Asperger Syndrome utilize their Individualized Transition Plans in preparing for post-secondary education, training and independent life experience?
3. How do these students perceive their role in the transition planning process?

These questions were a guiding framework for inquiry. As data was collected and multiple themes emerged, new questions surfaced in reference to student voice and empowerment that required additional examination of the literature, data, and participant input. As Lichtman (2006) expresses:

“Qualitative questions address sociological, psychological, or political aspects. Qualitative questions are those that focus on human beings and how they interact in social settings or how they see themselves or aspects of their environment” (p. 29). Topics relating to student voice and participant satisfaction arose as data was collected.

RESEARCH PARADIGM

My intention for this study was to gather data that would exhibit the perceptions of individual stakeholders involved in the transition planning process, particularly those with the most at stake, the students. As a researcher, I aimed to explore the multiple realities that

exist in relation to the participants of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), therefore supporting the discovery of multiple perceptions of transition planning. Participants became collaborators and storytellers in the study, and were afforded the chance to modify information providing their own rich narrative to the data. The participants provided a powerful and novel voice, enriching the collection of data and allowing the reader to more readily understand their points of view (Hatch, 2002). I used an inductive approach to data collection and analysis by employing participant narratives and multiple data sources to build themes and further questioning, thereby forming meaning, rather than aiming to discount a hypothesis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). This method of data collection aided in not only providing multiple points of corroboration, but also allowed for the fact that some sources of data would be stronger than others. It was through discovery and discourse that ideas and arguments arose, consequently led to data connections, along with the exploration of multiple data sources that I studied. This led to a more holistic perception of the realities and perceptions of my participants and their place in the understanding of transition policy. The voyage into case study and narrative exploration facilitated the support of students with disabilities on their journey to have their voices heard (Pugach, 2001). According to Yanow (2000), “narrative analysis has been underplayed” (p.58) in exploring policy, although narrative analysis can help to provide depth and character to policy examination. Case study enabled me, the researcher, to move beyond collecting simple responses; instead, it opened up the entire sensory package of seeing the non-verbal elements of student responses. Also, the fact that the case study focused on students personally along with their perceptions and

their views seemed to increase the comfort level of the participants, thus enabling them to share their ideas openly.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study consisted of three case studies with a cross-case analysis. According to Merriam (1988), “A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon” (p. xiii). In addition, a case study is a comprehensive assessment of a single setting, subject or a distinct event (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). Case studies are also “bounded by time and place” (Cresswell, 1998, p.249) supporting the bounded system of this study are students with Asperger Syndrome attending public high schools in Wake County, a large urban/suburban school district in the state of North Carolina.

There were challenges as well as advantages to conducting these case studies. The dilemma of deciding how many cases to study was one of the challenges this researcher faced in conducting case studies (Cresswell, 1998). I chose to conduct multiple case studies in hopes of gaining diverse perceptive views from multiple participants. Multiple case studies allowed for more informative data and the comprehensive exploration of the cases through in-depth study by providing the researcher with the ability to explore the research questions with less “dilution” of the overall analysis (Cresswell, 1998, p.63). These case studies were instrumental, in that the cases themselves were not paramount to the study but the issues imbedded inside relating to the involvement of secondary students with Asperger Syndrome

in their transition planning process provided the rich data sought by the researcher (Stake, 1995). It was the intention of this study to observe the essence of student perspectives concerning IDEA transition policy while examining the views and insights developed from the examination of the case studies that were instrumental in the research of this policy (Merriam, 2002).

Three students were purposefully selected for participation, conforming to the following criteria: a) Student must have a legitimate diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome according to North Carolina state policy as guided by the DSM-IV criteria; b) Student must be in grades 9-11; c) Student must be between the ages of 15 and 18 at the onset of the study; d) Student must have an active Individualized Transition Plan or will be in the process of creating one within the school year. During the participant selection process it was necessary to expand the age range from the original 16 -18 of age to 15- 18 of age in order to create a greater pool of ninth grade potential participants. The changes were approved via an IRB update approval process. These considerations were originally made due to the fact that according to federal IDEA policy, students must complete a transition plan by the age of 16 with the plan to remain in effect until graduation or their exit from special education. The change in age range was appropriate since North Carolina guidelines ensure that students create their Individualized Transition Plans at age 14 and update it annually thereafter.

The selection was purposeful in nature and made with a great deal of thought and intention. Purposeful selection differs from random sampling in that it provides powerful cases relating directly to the research at hand (Patton, 2002). Unlike random sampling,

purposeful sampling can lessen the probability of gathering a biased sample (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Purposeful sampling also promoted the study of information-rich cases (Patton, 1990) that were required for this study and my hope of understanding participant perceptions.

Students were chosen from public high schools in Wake County which is located in the state of North Carolina centered near the capital city of Raleigh. Due to a number of factors, the connections I had secured with a collection of individuals that were interested in being involved in this study had to be supplemented with alternative means of participant recruitment. I connected with participants who were open to inquiry as this was important in studies such as this one where time and resources were limited (Stake, 2005). Stake also suggests that, “Balance and variety are important – opportunity to learn is of primary importance” (p.6) lending support to my participant’s enrollment in different high schools. It was also my intention to seek out participants from diverse high schools as well as from different grade levels.

My original connections with potential participants did not produce as many leads as I had hoped due to a number of unforeseen circumstances. Three potential participants began homeschooling and withdrew from the public school system and the Individualized Transition Planning process. I then made my search public by placing web notices on well known autism support sites as well as contacting a number of individuals close to the Asperger community.

Participants were ultimately recruited for this study in a number of manners. A post inviting students to participate in this study was available on the current website of the local Autism Society. In addition to the web posting, an invitation to participate was provided on local Asperger blogs and was provided to local parent groups supporting students with autism.

This greatly added to the time I had planned for participant recruitment but did garner some response. These circumstances ultimately led to a small number of participants in the final study, posing difficulty for generalizability which may lessen the perceived rigor of the study (Becker, 1990, Stake, 1995).

A number of rising ninth graders did come forward as potential participants who met the revised age ranges, thus opening up a greater pool of possible participants. I was able to find three high school students from three different grades who had diverse personalities and very different interests. This created a rich and interesting group of voices to be explored.

This study incorporated multiple-case study or collective case studies which promoted the connection and collective nature of this evaluation (Merriam, 2002; Stake, 2005). By initiating a number of cases, one can compare and contrast the data collected and the themes that emerge (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Yin, 2003). These multiple cases, chosen from diverse public institutions in Wake County, illustrated a number of perspectives concerning the topic of transition planning and provided a broader data set to be explored.

SITE SELECTION

I selected a large, urban/suburban school system located in the area of Raleigh, NC as the site for my study for a number of reasons. This school system contains a variety of public and public charter high schools of varying sizes and locations. The schools chosen were diverse in size and scope, yet all were guided by common county, state, and federal legislation pertaining to students with disabilities. All participants chosen were mainstreamed throughout their school day and were supported by general and special programs staff common throughout North Carolina state school systems. Contact with all participating high schools was made via email to their special programs directors. I encouraged them to participate in the study as it would not be conducted to “evaluate” school programs but to gauge the perceptions of the students involved in their own transition planning, thereby helping rather than improving understanding of the individual experience of students with disabilities. I also explained that schools participating in the study would be able to share the resulting data produced through the study to positively enhance the transition process for their students. None of the schools that I contacted wished to participate. I did understand that these department heads were under numerous constraints and may not have had the time to participate. A number of the directors and teachers contacted supported my endeavors but did not wish to participate further at the time of this study.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected primarily through multiple individual student interviews, document and artifact collection, and the exploration of student journals. These multiple methods aided in the formation of a holistic description of individual experiences (Walford, 2001; Pugach, 2001). In addition, providing a number of data collection methods added to the identification of themes and patterns apparent in the research. These multiple methods also provided a holistic inspection of personal perceptions as well as policy issues (Haas & Springer, 1998). It was through these artifacts and interviews that participants found the ability to communicate their personal stories (Yanow, 2000) in relation to current policy which enabled me, the researcher, to form a tapestry of understanding.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were employed in this study, allowing for some flexibility as topics arose, while still providing the organization desired by participants with Asperger Syndrome. Interviews are a common method of data collection in case study research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Erickson, 1986; Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2003), but participant interviews in this study required special care and diligence in order to address the specific social and interactive differences of the students as individuals with Asperger Syndrome. It was imperative for the researcher to know and appreciate the uniqueness of the individual (Stake, 1994), especially persons identified with AS who are literal in thinking and perception (Wing, 2005). I spoke with all participants either face to face or via telephone prior to our meeting in order to gauge their comfort and confidence levels. Interview

questions were written clearly and contained language that was descriptive and succinct. Secure, quiet, and comfortable interview sites in familiar locations away from extreme noise and distractions facilitated acceptance by the participants (Baron-Cohen, 2006). An adjustment period of 10 -15 minutes further ensured the participant's comfort and was provided by the researcher prior to the interviews. I was able to meet one of the participants at his school and conduct the initial interview in a quiet and comfortable office in the student services area. A follow-up interview took place with the same participant in a teacher's unoccupied at the school. One of the participants came to my home office for his interview. His parents expressed that it made him feel important, and I noticed that it provided him with confidence since he was the center of the inquiry. I had a follow-up interview at the student's home at the time when I collected the ITP documents from his parents. My final participant met me at a public library that he often visited. I secured a quiet, private room which was an effective and comforting interview area for this participant.

A discrete schedule outlining the interview session was provided to the participant both verbally and in writing and was loosely adhered to by the researcher in response to the wishes of the participant being interviewed. Prior to the interviews I emailed all participants the interview outline, including all questions to be asked during the interview. Individuals with Asperger Syndrome may have strong reactions to visual stimulation and noise (Bashe & Kirby, 2001); in addition, new and unusual situations and locations may cause anxiety for the participant. It helped that all areas were quiet, unobtrusive, and comfortable. I did make the mistake of having a very movable office chair during one interview that did need adjustment

prior to one of the interviews. Individuals with AS thrive on organization and structure; therefore, I provided explanations of the physical environment as well an interview agenda which allowed the subject to focus better on the interview questions. An interview outline, including interview questions, was again provided to the participants at the beginning of the interview. In a further attempt to ensure the comfort of the participants and to attend to their convenience as well as that of their families, the interview length and participant number was limited (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992).

I, the researcher, conducted an explanation of the tools and technology present in the room including recording devices, writing devices, and all other items provided by the researcher. I employed a small analog tape machine to record the interviews. The participants were asked a few preliminary questions unrelated to the topic serving as priming, a strategy allowing individuals to become familiar with tasks and setting through discovery (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). I taped these questions and responses and played them back so that the participants and the researcher were assured that the hardware was functional. This all added to the reassurance of the participant that the interview would be calm, safe, and predictable since understanding that many with AS can be rigid in reference to change and routine (Griffin, Griffin, Fitch, Albera, & Gingras, 2006). It was important to be clear, honest, and expressive with my participants as they all appreciated and required organization and stability in order to gain their undivided attention (Baron-Cohen, 2000).

A semi-structured, guided interview facilitated by the researcher was effective with the intended research (Lichtman, 2006). Interview questions were open-ended and

descriptive. Supportive phrases and visual queues were utilized to keep the participant focused on the interview questions (Baron-Cohen, 2006). Rephrasing of interview questions was necessary at times in order to increase understanding. Visual prompts such as printed interview guides and written response cards provided alignment with interview questions that allowed for the interviews to be in-depth, creating a conversation between researcher and participant (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995). At times it was necessary to use visual documents as references.

Researcher goals for the interview included providing open-ended questions, using clear and concise language free of slang and euphemisms, and respecting respondent's social and interactive differences. It was necessary to approach and prepare for the interview with the understanding that individuals identified with Asperger Syndrome may respond differently socially than the interviewees without AS; therefore, strategies to control the tone and movement of the interview were employed in order to help the participants have a successful interview experience. All participants seemed to be at ease during the interviews and required no further accommodations. All participants reacted maturely to questions, occasionally asking me to repeat questions or further explain them in order to enhance the participants' understanding.

Each participant had an initial interview consisting of basic open-ended questions concerning what they, as students, believe an Individualized Transition Plan was, their involvement in the transition planning process, their post-secondary goals, and their current use of their ITP. The interviews were to last approximately thirty minutes in duration but all

eventually lasted a bit longer due to the wishes of the participants and the extent of their responses. Two of the three participants were involved in brief follow-up interviews. The follow-up interviews included questioning based on the responses of each participant in their initial interview and their subsequent journaling. The initial interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by the researcher as were the follow-up interviews. This enabled the researcher to hear the responses again and recall the nuances of the interviews during transcription. In order to insure confidentiality, all audiotapes were secured in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office and remain so until the study is completed. All tapes will then be destroyed at a later date.

The interview questions (See Appendix A-1) sought to identify the post-secondary goals of the students in addition to their perceptions concerning their Individualized Transition Plans. As Creswell (1998) states, "the qualitative researcher works inductively, such as when he or she develops categories from informants rather than specifying them in advance of the research" (p.77). These questions simply guided the interview while leaving room for emerging data (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and further inquiry. Many times during the interviews the researcher added questions that branched from participant responses or that aided in returning the conversation to the current topic being explored.

Artifact and Document Collection

Qualitative studies often utilize multiple forms of data (Eisner, 1991) thus aiding in the enhancement of understanding. Documents such as student Individualized Transition Plans, transition planning process guides, Individual Educational Program notes, special

education plans, four year high school plans, school schedules, and academic assessments were “unobtrusive” (Hatch, 2002, p.24), and were used as supporting data. These documents were collected from parent copies of the information. The researcher was able to gather student schedules and special education forms from school-based data sources. This written data was utilized in conjunction with other data to construct a clearer picture of the perceptions of students identified with Asperger Syndrome in reference to their Individualized Transition Plans. Collecting additional data in the form of artifacts provided added detail and supplementary sources for corroboration or contradiction (Merriam, 1998) to student responses. These data did not influence the overall setting being observed and were dynamic, making for a good companion data source (Hatch, 2002). Methodological triangulation was employed to provide a holistic account of the study. This type of triangulation made use of multiple methodologies in the study of this phenomenon (Yin, 2009, Flick, 2008).

The Individualized Transition Plans and supporting documents were compared to the responses of the participant interviews. This comparison enabled the researcher to determine if the perceptions of the participants aligned with the documentation referencing the transition plans. Guides related to the transition planning process for each institution provided information concerning the methods each school enlists in order to incorporate students in transition planning. Wake County’s Individualized Transition Plan checklist was examined for reference purposes since all of the institutions involved were encouraged to follow these guidelines. By examining the four-year high school plans as well as the

student's school schedules, the researcher could make connections between the goals of the student, the transition plan, and the actualities of the course of study leading to post-secondary activities.

Participant Journaling

At the initial interview all students were provided with digital journals containing prompts concerning their goals and aspirations, their main post-school concerns, and their perceptions of the benefits of having an Individualized Transition Plan. Students with Asperger Syndrome are generally adept at communicating through writing rather than direct questioning due to their social differences (Attwood, 2006, Oznoff, Dawson, & McPartland, 2002). This notion prompted the collection of the additional data through a written source. In addition, individuals with AS often have dysgraphia (the inability to write legibly) or other writing related differences which make the typed journal an efficient method of communication. The participants were instructed to free-write in any legible manner they wished and were given one week to complete each of seven entries. The researcher attempted to collect each entry as they were completed but resorted to collecting the completed journals at the end of the study, as the students did not complete entries within the allotted time frame. The following journal topics were presented to the participants:

Journal Topics:

1. State your educational, career, and life goals for the next 10 years. Explain how you plan to reach these goals.

2. In your opinion, what are the factors that will be most difficult for you to overcome in reaching your educational goals?
3. Explain in your own words what an Individualized Transition Plan is and how it is used?
4. What does your Individualized Transition Plan mean to you?
5. Does your Individualized Transition Plan truly contain your goals, dreams and ambitions? Explain how it does or does not.
6. Explain the ways your Individualized Transition Plan benefits you now. How will it benefit you in the future?
7. Explain the role you have taken in the transition planning process. How would you change your role if you could?

The researcher entered this study presuming that reactions and perceptions concerning the Individualized Transition Plans would flow more easily in a written format for those with Asperger Syndrome since these individuals often misinterpret or fail to understand non-verbal actions of others (Griffin et. al., 2006) and these misunderstandings can disturb their fluid expression of thought in the interview process. Also the concrete nature of the written word can be more reasonable to those with AS while the extended time is more conducive to thoughtful responses. As Hatch (2002) expresses, “Journaling can guide the directions of other data collection” (p.141). Writing in a journal may have revealed the participants deeper thoughts of the participant as it eliminated the discrete social aspect of

other types of data collection. Journal writing was supported by researchers as a means through which understanding is developed while participants “dig deeper” to draw out beliefs that provide a “way to triangulate data” (Janesick, 1999).

Data gathered through the participant journaling process mirrored much of the content of the interview responses. Through the examination of the journal responses, the researcher became aware of the fact that the students considered the journaling as an “assignment” much like those they were given at school. Their brief answers epitomized the behavior of typical high school-level teenagers in that they expressed that they did not have the time or that they were not very interested in writing if it was not for a grade. As this occurred throughout the study, I, the researcher, realized that my participants were not simply teenagers identified with Asperger Syndrome, but they were also typical teenagers. This fact accounted for the brief answers provided in the journals in addition to the many reminders necessary to ensure the completion of the journaling.

Weblog

Current technologies including email and digital journaling were utilized in this study. My work as a technology teacher led me to an interest in new technologies that could be used in research, as they have been recognized as effective communication modes in other areas of data gathering. I employed a secure blog as an additional means of collecting data. “Blog” is short for weblog and may be used interchangeably in reference to this digital medium. A weblog is a frequently updated journal consisting of brief posts that are archived

in reverse-chronological order. Weblogs also allow for readers to leave comments in an interactive format (Glossary, 2006). While using an anonymous identifier participants may add their postings and responses as they wish. Although this innovative communication medium has not been regularly employed in educational research, it supports the growing use of digital scholarship as an integral part of scholarly research (Ashling, 2007). New technologies provide creative and unique opportunities for qualitative researchers (Turney & Pocknee, 2005) and will become commonplace as the research community becomes more comfortable with digital data.

Blogging can be seen as a keen lens into the past and present experiences of participants through the exploration of their digital communication (Gurak, 2008). A number of researchers believe that blogs can have a significant impact on traditional academia by providing an immediate forum for peer review of research (Batts, Anthis, & Smith, 2008). In addition, online research provides the means for researchers to remove the geographical boundaries that are often a barrier to the diverse experiences of individuals living in diverse areas of the country or the world. Today's blogs can be compared to the journals of the past and can cultivate distinctive voices associated with the individual (Oravec, 2002).

I created and supported a secure blog for use by both myself and my participants. By creating a blogging site with the aid of Blogspot, a pay service providing secure blogging options, I ensured that this initial blog was private and only accessible to my participants. Security was heightened by ensuring authenticity of participants, online pseudonym use, and password protection practices (Oringderff, 2004). I provided prompts for the blog and posted

my questions while leaving ample time for participants to respond to me as well as each other.

In light of the social differences that my interviewees possessed, I felt that a secure blog would allow the participants to more effectively and openly communicate their feelings, ideas, and perspectives. I provided each student with a guide sheet that explained pictorially and with written support how to log in to the blog and how to navigate the student screen. In addition, the paper contained the individual's username and password which was tested prior to distribution in order to lessen any confusion for the participants. The participants were encouraged to access the blog and to contact the researcher with any questions. According to Hawkridge and Vincent (1992), through the use of technology and computers, those with disabilities can move beyond dependency and become more capable by using a communication medium that is self-paced and less threatening. The use of technologically-aided communication has become commonplace within the secondary school culture and can add an additional level of comfort to those in an age group accustomed to communicating digitally. It was my thought that by freeing my participants of the social constraints of face-to-face interviews, they would focus on the content of their responses rather than battle their anxieties connected to direct socialization. The use of technology can also allow students to write and respond at their own pace without feelings of embarrassment or fear (Standen, Brown, & Cromby, 2001).

As many social researchers have begun to discern, the Internet provides countless opportunities to recruit participants for research projects (Turney & Pocknee, 2005). It is my

intent to employ local professional agencies and societies related to ASD and autism to inform members of the opportunity to participate anonymously in this research related blog. As supported through conversations with a number of key individuals in both local and national autism awareness groups, I became aware that individuals with Asperger Syndrome are eager to have a setting in which they can have their voices heard.

As with all forms of data collection, blogging carries both positive and negative attributes. Security of information and the anonymity of the participants can be seen as the greatest concern. These issues can be easily negated through the use of secure and legitimate blogging sites as well as the careful request for participants through well known autism society websites and newsletters. Positively, blogs provide a distinctive written record, accurately represented and automatically recorded, making oral recording and transcription unneeded by the researcher. (Turney & Pocknee, 2005).

Unfortunately I did not account for a number of considerations that came to light after the creation of the actual blog and the distribution of support materials to the participants. It was uncovered that all three participants logged into the blog but became uncomfortable with a technology medium they were unfamiliar with. They expressed individually that they found discomfort in the unknown audience. In addition, they were less Internet savvy than I believed that they would be. Two of the participants were issued email accounts specifically for the purpose of the study and only used the Internet to access school-related resources or factual information supportive of school work. I found that none of the participants utilized social networking sites or other social media found on the Internet.

Even though this blog was not a successful tool in collecting data relating to the participant's Individual Transition Plans that can transcend face to face encounters it was a valuable tool to the researcher in helping to shed light on the social differences among individuals with Asperger Syndrome. This fact can serve to encourage more inquiry into the comfort level and prior knowledge of participants before data collection begins. It is my hope that this medium of communication will be implemented in further studies and hopefully will serve as a meaningful data collection tool.

DATA ANALYSIS

While analyzing the interview data, I personally audio-taped and transcribed the three initial interviews verbatim (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, Cresswell, 1998). I also transcribed the two follow-up interviews personally and verbatim in order to further grasp verbal cues and tonal differences of the participants. During the process I memoed and coded the transcriptions immediately (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After collecting and reviewing the interview data, I selected two participants for follow-up interviews. Participant journal entries were collected via flash-drive and email at the conclusion of the data collection, then coded and compared. I employed constant comparison as I review all interviews and supporting data (Glaser, 1965). As I processed the, I maintained a log of my reactions, thoughts, and the commonalities apparent in the data. I also afforded the participants the chance to review their transcripts and documents, thus enlisting participant review as a credibility measure. Only one participant took advantage of this process. Open coding was

utilized as the means to identify and create categories in which observed phenomena were grouped (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

As a qualitative researcher, one is seen as the primary source of data in the course of a study (Woods, 1994). I applied an emergent design throughout the data collection which allowed themes to surface and “patterns” to appear (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992). Merriam (1998) suggests that it is appropriate and advantageous to analyze data “simultaneously” (p.162) as information is collected. Distinct themes began to emerge as I examined these data. In addition to traditional data analysis, I utilized both the Atlas.ti software for analysis purposes and Dragon Naturally Speaking voice recognition software for dictation. Organizational software, including Quality Tools and mind mapping, was employed to organize and store data. Microsoft word was employed to help color code data, thereby allowing the researcher to visually see connections and sort information into themes.

Validity

Validity indicates the trustworthiness of a study and supports the reliability and credibility of the data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1995). A paramount threat to this study was the small sample size since I employed only three participants. In this study, searching for validity rather than seeking credibility was supported by the richness of data and the research abilities of the investigator, rather than sample size. The greatest threat to the validity of this study was researcher bias. As a teacher in a large, Southeastern school system whose student population exceeds 140,000 students, I often work with disadvantaged

populations or populations identified as “disabled”. As a career educator, I strongly believe in the worth of all individuals as a part of working society and do not take inequality lightly. I am often an advocate for students with differing abilities as they forge their way through an educational system that can be complicated and inaccessible to them. It is through my experiences that I feel I may become an “advocate” for the participants, seeking to improve their situation; However, in this case, my main goal was simply to observe and gain insight into the issue of individuals identified with Asperger Syndrome and their role in the transition planning process, regardless of my views on the nature and quality of such plans.

Through self-examination, journaling, and the freeing of my expectation or advocacy, I feel that I was able to place myself in the role of observer and researcher, attending to actual data presented. I also enlisted a number of outside sources to serve as sounding boards so that I could periodically check my level of bias, especially in areas in which I felt that I may have had a great deal of experiential knowledge. As Woods (1994) expresses, “The researcher’s subjectivity is seen as an inevitable feature of the research act” (p.313). I believe that I was able to uphold this subjectivity throughout my research and through understanding of my role as observer.

In light of the qualitative nature of the study, I did not have preconceived notions or theories of the outcome of the study, and this detail helped to guide me through the process of discovery, in turn creating a richer data analysis and conclusion for this study. Qualitative data analysis is a process that continues throughout the course of a study, allowing for new issues to emerge for review (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, Stake, 1995). Through the consistent

evaluation of the information I collected while examining data and examining my personal “take” on the patterns, I witnessed stories emerging. In order to facilitate the interconnecting analysis of the information gleaned from multiple data sources, I incorporated constant comparison methods to compare, contrast, and meld the emergent patterns (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In addition to bias, data analysis was also a concern in relation to the validity of this study. The data in this study was holistically analyzed, allowing the data to support itself and to help the visualization of themes and participant perspectives (Yin, 2009). Data triangulation was utilized both through the use of multiple data sources as well as the implementation of method triangulation to corroborate information by detecting themes and perceptions (Creswell, 1998). Cross-case analysis, in addition to within-case analysis, aided in the comparison of the cases and helped to identify both similarities as well as differences. This comparison helped to “deepen understanding and explanation” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 173) of the participants’ perceptions. These rich, thick descriptions were then incorporated to support transferability (Merriam, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I consulted with colleagues and experts was sought to assess the accuracy of the data collection and analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Due to the collaborative nature of qualitative research, I also employed member checking by asking participants to review initial segments of reporting of which they are a part. Not only was there cooperation between the researcher and participants, but also, as supported by Glaser & Strauss (1967), the researcher and the readers will “share a joint responsibility” for the formation of understanding. I truly viewed

this research opportunity as a dynamic, ever-changing undertaking that allowed for the creation of understanding which was permitted to grow and flow in an open system among researcher, participant, and reader.

Generalizability/Transferability

The qualitative design of this study brought about a number of challenges in relation to rigor and generalizability, especially in the realm of policy research (Haas & Springer, 1998). Throughout the study, it was my aim to maintain rigor through dynamic and consistent interpretation of data (Stake, 1995). The keen and diligent interpretation and comparison of rich data collected from multiple sources in addition to holistic evaluation further bolstered the rigor of this study. Although generalizability was not my motivation, the “thick” and complete description of phenomena improved the “transferability” the findings (Walford, 2001, p.15). A number of practices including member checking, prolonged engagement and triangulation, that helped to improve rigor and bolster transferability were incorporated into this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

ETHICAL CONCERNS

Qualitative methods rely on intensive social connections between participant and researcher. Due to the nature of Asperger Syndrome, participants in this study were subject to instances that may be perceived as difficult or uncomfortable. In order to lessen the anxiety on the part of both participant and researcher, informed consent of the participant and

the underage participants' guardians was secured. In order to uphold the highest ethical standards, IRB approval of the research study was also secured. All changes in the study format were approved by the IRB. Contact was made directly with participants prior to the interview process and data collection. Discussions concerning the study that included the researcher and individual participants ensured that they would be comfortable. Participants, in addition to signing a release form, were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality rules were adhered to at all times, and both participant and parents were informed prior to the study of all researcher and participant interactions. Underage participants were permitted to have guardians oversee all activities, with only one participant's parent taking advantage of this condition.

Many individual with AS are open with their differences, but confidentiality took precedence in this case since the participants were adolescents who were not always comfortable with revealing their differences. The fact that I was not associated with the school sites where the participants were students lessened the intrusion into the daily lives of participants. I funded the project personally and used my own time to conduct research and gather data. I was sure to adhere to schedules that best suited the participants and which lessened their discomfort and anxiety.

This study was not developed from the "action research" (Hatch, 2002, p.31) branch of qualitative methodology, as a change or improvement of the issues being studied was not sought. It is the goal of this research to gain a greater understanding of the transition process,

the role that the perceptions of individuals with Asperger Syndrome play in planning for their future lives, and their views of the IDEA mandated Individualized Transition Plan.

LIMITATIONS

A number of limitations were presented in this study. Sampling presented a challenge as the population of students identified with Asperger Syndrome is small compared to that of students identified with other disabilities. It was difficult to locate participants who fit the criteria presented and were willing to take the time to be involved in a study. Many potential participants were not comfortable or open with their status as an individual identified with Asperger Syndrome and were reluctant to participate due to fear that their peers or the public would become aware of their designation.

Prior to the study, I had a number of individuals who were supportive of the study's premise and who were willing to be participants. Through an unknown circumstance, a number of them withdrew from the public school system and were no longer part of the Individualized Transition Process.

Access to IEP documentation was also a limitation to this study. Due to current scrutiny of programs and in light of legislation, many schools did not wish to have their special education programs studied for fear that they would be penalized if their program was not compliant with federal mandates. This concern did not limit the diversity of schools and participants involved and provided no barriers to data collection and triangulation due to the

fact that I directly collected all documents from parents. This process, however, brought about a new limitation, as it was often time-consuming to collect materials from parents, and the quality of the copies was often poor.

Transferability and generalizability are often areas of unease in the methodology of the case study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Yin (2003), a common concern in reference to qualitative case studies is the difficulty in generalization from one case to another. In order to lessen this concern, multiple cases were explored, increasing the perceived validity of this study; transferability rather than generalizability was highlighted.

In addition to the general limitations of case studies in general, this particular exploration of individuals with autism presented unique difficulties in data gathering and communications. Those with Asperger Syndrome and other forms of ASD have difficulties in forming relationships and often have personal limitations in respect to sustained, real-life communication (Prince-Hughes, 2002). As a researcher I had to be thoughtful and creative in order to lessen the communication barriers that existed between me and my participants, especially in the arena of this qualitative study. This barrier became less of a concern as I became more familiar with the study participants and gained a better understanding of their particular personalities.

SUMMARY

This chapter, through data collection, analyzing, and verification, outlines the methodology that will convey the perceptions of students with Asperger Syndrome in

reference to their Individualized Transition Plans. The next chapter will present the findings from this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS OF STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to investigate and illustrate the perceptions that high school students with Asperger Syndrome have in reference to their Individualized Transition Plan and Process. The Individualized Transition Plan and Process is a component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act-mandated, special education Individualized Education Program. Chapter Four explores the findings from the study of the perceptions of high school students with Asperger Syndrome in reference to their Individualized Transition Plan and Process. The study sought to answer the overarching research question of:

How do high school students identified with Asperger Syndrome perceive the usefulness of their IDEA-mandated Individualized Transition Plan and Process in reference to their post-secondary education and life goal planning?

Data were also collected to answer the study's three sub-questions:

1. What goals do students with Asperger Syndrome have for their post-secondary futures?

2. How do high school students identified with Asperger Syndrome utilize their Individualized Transition Plans in preparing for post-secondary education, training, and independent life experience?

3. How do these students perceive their role in the transition planning process?

This chapter discusses the major themes that emerged through the synthesis of data gathered from participant interviews, participant digital journaling, and supplemental archival documents relating to the participant's Individualized Transition Plans.

These themes emerged from a careful analysis of data collected from in-depth interviews, follow-up interviews, and participant digital journaling performed with three high school students identified with Asperger Syndrome. Data will also be presented relating to Individualized Transition Plan documents collected by the researcher. Descriptive meaning of the perceptions of the three participants will be offered in addition to the examination of themes uncovered through the analysis of the data.

A number of key findings emerged from a constant comparative analysis of data collection and analysis, including student knowledge of the transition process, students' views of their involvement in the transition process, student perceptions of their current and future utilization of the transition plan as well as their vision of the incorporation of their goals, dreams and interests in the plan. In addition, the perception of the student's overall satisfaction with the plan became a central data focus.

PARTICIPANTS

The three participants identified with Asperger Syndrome took part in interviews and digital journaling. One participant took part in a follow up interview.

Table 1. Participant Background Information

Name	Gender	Age	Grade Level	Race	Course of Study
Drew	M	15	9	Caucasian	Future Ready Core
Matt	M	16	10	Caucasian	Future Ready Core
Graham	M	17	12	African-American	College/University Prep

As illustrated in Table 1, the participants in this study varied in school of attendance, grade level, age, and race. All students involved in this study were enrolled in high school degree programs consisting of college preparatory coursework. NCDPI approved a Future Ready Core Course of Study that replaced the multiple diploma options available to students prior to the 2009 – 2010 school year. Thus the Future Ready Core Course of Study was comparable to the College/University Prep course of study at the time of this investigation. A limitation of the sample for this study was the lack of female participants. This lack of gender diversity may be due to the fact that the number of male children identified with Asperger Syndrome, as well as Autism Spectrum Disorders in general, greatly outnumbers females identified with the same diagnosis. Current research indicates that the ratio of males to females diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome nationwide is approximately 12:1. In lieu of

gender representation, the diversity of the participants in other areas lends a broader view of student perspectives consisting of experiences from different special education departments that impart comparable federal policy on the local level.

A number of key themes emerged throughout the data collection process, including student knowledge of the transition process, students' views of their involvement in the transition process, students' perceptions of their current and future utilization of the transition plan as well as their vision of the incorporation of their goals, dreams and interests in the plan. In addition, the perception of the student's overall satisfaction with the plan became a recurrent premise as data was evaluated.

The following is a detailed exploration of the study participants and their perceptions concerning their future goals and their attitudes toward their Individualized Transition Plan and process.

Matt

My first meeting with Matt took place in my office. He was a 16 year old High School sophomore who was a member of the marching band and who played various instruments. Matt was dropped off by his parents with his paperwork in tow. He was very casually dressed with sweatpants and slip-on shoes. Matt had a distinctive gait and moved a great deal as he walked, appearing to have a great deal of energy. He looked much younger than his age of 16 years, almost like a very tall, much younger child. His glasses framed his round face and fell a bit lopsided on the bridge of his nose. As he entered my office, he shook my hand heartily and abruptly sat in a comfortable rolling chair I had motioned to. His

eyes darted around the room furiously as I began my introduction and asked him if he was comfortable and if there was anything I could do to increase his comfort. Matt was very comfortable in acknowledging to me, his teachers, and other students that he lives as a young person with Asperger Syndrome. He did allude to the fact that not all young people at school understood his differences, and their misunderstandings often cause friction for him at school.

I asked him how he was doing, and he replied, "Very good. How are you?" This began a short period of introduction where I explained the technology and reviewed the interview protocol. Matt gave me little eye contact but did not hesitate to begin talking about his recent marching band practice and his new school year. I asked if he had reviewed the interview questions that I had emailed him a week prior to the interview, and he affirmed that he did but that he may have some questions concerning them. It became apparent that Matt had not reviewed the questions which led to our spending a few minutes reviewing them together. We began the interview with a click of the tape recorder, and Matt began moving a bit in his chair, giving very little direct eye contact to me, something I would expect from an individual diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome. In addition, Matt spoke with an almost robotic, pedantic-type speech pattern. His tone was consistent, loud, and easy to hear. Matt easily veered off topic throughout the interview but returned to topic when prompted. He was obviously very intelligent and used an advanced vocabulary in his speech, mirroring a much more mature manner of speaking in comparison to typical teens of his age. He labeled

himself as a “computerholic” and explained in detail the parallel between an alcoholic and a computerholic. Matt explained:

“ Just as an alcoholic drinks all of the time, I am on the computer all of the time. It is hard for me to stop!”

In light of this admission, I found it interesting that Matt did not have an active email account that he could use for communication. He and his parents agreed that he would use an email account created for the study weblog for communication purposes. After some slight email difficulties, I ended up routing most information through both Matt’s email address as well as his mother’s email. I asked why he did not have an email; he responded simply, “ I mostly talk to my family and they are at my home, so I don’t find it necessary.” In addition, I would contact him via cell phone. His mother had provided me with his cell number, mentioning that he doesn’t receive many calls, so he would be very excited to receive my calls. When I contacted Matt via cell phone, I would most often leave a message, and his notification was very telling.

Matt’s inbox message stated:

“This is Matt, I am not available right now please leave a message. If this is family I will get back with you immediately. If this is a friend I will try to get back with you. If this is someone I do not know I will probably not be calling you back.”

In addition to this first meeting, I also conducted an informal follow-up interview with Matt. This time we met at his home with his parents and siblings present in the home. He was again dressed casually in his marching band workout clothes from his band practice.

He said that he was waiting for the water to warm back up before taking a shower before dinner. He offered me a “beverage” and asked me to have a seat at the kitchen table. At this time I also collected his IEP documents which he collected from his mom. Matt was very relaxed and much less active than during our previous interview in my office. It was very simple to observe that his comfortable home surroundings had a great deal of impact on his level of comfort. I asked Matt to provide some additional information concerning both his initial interview responses as well as his written reactions to the digital journal prompts. This informal interview was not tape recorded. I instead used a paper and pen to take notes and then immediately transcribed the information upon arriving home after the interview. We spoke briefly and then ended the interview. Matt thanked me and expressed that he hoped that this information could help enrich autism research.

My first interest in the interview process was assessing the types of goals and aspirations that the student participants held in reference to their futures. Matt had clearly defined short term goals. When asked what his goals were through high school he responded:

“To graduate high school, get into a good college and get the classes and requirements needed to get the job I want and the career I want to do.” “Pass and graduate, because that is practically everyone’s goal except for some who just want to drop out or just get out of there. But that’s my main goal, yeah.” (Matt, Initial Interview)

“Going to college to learn if I want to be a chef or video game designer. If I could, I would do both.” (Matt, Digital Journal)

When asked how he would reach these goals, including getting accepted to college, he was succinct:

“Special curricular activities, high SAT scores.” (Matt, Initial Interview)

“ I will take classes that will help me in college and will help me decide what I want to do.” (Matt, Digital Journal)

“I want to get into a club where I have friends that I know and it’s an experience that I want to take. That’s one of the reasons I took marching band. Right nowand that’s probably going to be the only thing I’m going to do. It’s more fun than the others.” (Matt, Initial Interview)

When asked about his future life goals, Matt focused on his job choices and the quality of his life:

“Well, I see my career actually nine to five because those are the hours I work best at. Definitely not a 12 hour shift because I need time.” (Matt, Initial Interview)

He also wanted to:

“Get a car, because I am going to have to be driving to my job. Which would, I haven’t decided, but I have a choice between becoming a chef and a video game designer. But my instrument is my very best.” (Matt, Initial Interview)

Matt’s focus on family was striking for a young man his age and seemed an important facet of his future planning, as was his eventual independence from them. When asked where he would be living in the future and who he would share his life with, he explained:

“I will live by family. Definitely [live] not far away. Until I get the money to have an apartment. Because I want to tell my parents that when I get the money I’ll be gone, but for now I need a little help.” (Matt, Initial Interview)

“I will definitely have a family. A roommate? Not too sure about that one. I will have to think about that one, but I know that I am going to get a family.” (Matt, Initial Interview)

“I like living with my brothers and sisters. It is nice having company in the house.” (Matt, Follow-up Interview)

After identifying some of Matt’s goals for the future, it was important to gauge his knowledge of his Individualized Transition Plan. I asked him generally if he knew anything about his ITP:

“Um, I think so. Are you talking about the meeting my freshman year?” (Matt, Initial Interview)

I affirmed and explained that the plan was initiated when he was in middle school and took place during his scheduled IEP meetings. He added:

“Oh that. Well, I don’t remember talking about that in the meeting, but I do know that they drilled it into all our heads on the first day, on some of the first days we got there, like what classes to take, how many math classes we needed, or how many English we need, etc. So basically how has that effected me?” (Matt)

Matt later explained what his ITP was created for this way in his journal:

“It is a plan that is used for kids who have...differences like me. It’s used to help kids get through school.” (Matt, Digital Journal)

Matt expressed some personal thoughts about his interactions in the ITP process especially focusing on the reactions of the adult participants in the meetings:

“Well I know one thing, the assistant principal Mr. ***** , when I said I wanted to be a video game designer, he said, ‘that’s practical, everyone wants to do that.’ The next time I have an IEP meeting I’ll be telling them about that.” (Matt, Initial Interview)

In addition he only briefly alluded to any activities that gauged his interest:

“We went to the computer lab, did this dot com, did this test, saw which ones would do it then did a more exact test to see which ones would be more appropriate for us. Then we wrote down which jobs we thought would be best for us.” (Matt, Initial Interview)

When asked how he perceived his role in the ITP process, Matt responded:

“My role is the same thing I am doing now. Tell my opinions since there is no right or wrong answers, and if there was they’re judging me.” (Matt, Initial Interview)

When asked if he felt that the IEP team listened to his ideas and input them into his plan, Matt was positive, citing the importance of his participation. His response was not part of his transition plan but was a part of his overall IEP. He explained:

“Yeah, they are. Like for one reason I don’t like to eat in the cafeteria, because it is too noisy and I like peace and quiet. Something I get rarely lately. In school I mean, not in my personal life. So, yeah they do.” (Matt, Initial Interview)

In addition to his overall feeling of inclusion in the ITP process, I also inquired about his reaction to disagreements with the other ITP members. Matt responded maturely:

“I’d ask them to give reasons why that was a bad choice, and if they turn out to be valid I would change my opinion.” (Matt, Initial Interview)

I asked Matt if he often referred to his actual ITP documents. He admitted readily that he rarely looked at the document yet felt empowered by the fact that his teachers were knowledgeable of his needs. His responses showed a greater reliance on the overall IEP document than to the specific Individualized Transition Plan:

“In my opinion, I just let it run smoothly and just wait what happens. So basically I don’t look at my IEP...I don’t think I look at my IEP at all, except the once a year that I have my IEP meeting.” (Matt, Initial Interview)

“I don’t look at it. My teachers know my modifications, and I know what is in my plan” (Matt, Digital Journal

I wanted to know more about how Matt envisioned his ITP aiding him in the future. He conveyed his belief that he, like other students, would mature and change requiring the ITP to do the same. In addition, Matt saw a future where he may not need an IEP anymore and worried that he could become reliant on the modifications supported by the plan. Again, Matt’s responses were much more geared toward the overarching IEP rather than the Individualized Transition Plan. He communicated the following:

“Well, let’s put it this way. As everyone ages, we become more mature than last year. It’s the start of the New Year. Not like in December 31st and everyone throws balloons

at each other and fireworks and stuff like that. It's kind of like turning over a new leaf. As the years went by I. Here, let me put it into perspective. Alright, suppose I had five things I wanted to do. Like, for instance, one of them is sitting at the front. Shows with sticky notes. Sitting in the cafeteria, getting a different kind of test, doing stuff that will give me better grades because of my IEP. These things will keep on getting off." (Matt, Initial Interview)

He added:

"Well, I , well there is only one comment I need to make. When I, I'm just hoping when I am through, unless it is something that has to happen. I won't need an IEP. I'm worried that as the years go on I might use my IEP as a crutch to help me get ahead; it's like an excuse or something. It's like, I'm not saying they pretend to break their leg, but if someone does, they need a crutch to help them up. So, my IEP, in my opinion, is something like a crutch. Right now I need it, but in four years or so, I would probably break that crutch." (Matt, Initial Interview)

"I think it's a little too early. Definitely my junior year I'll be talking about that and definitely be looking at colleges." (Matt, Digital Journal)

As I wrapped up the interview I asked Matt if he was satisfied with the overall Individualized Transition Plan and process and his response sounded genuine:

"Um, yes. I think that it helps us kids and will help us in the long run"

I found that Matt had a great deal of insight into his own educational planning and understood that he had a support system in place to help in his education. It was my feeling that he really did not see the Individualized Transition Plan as a separate document and

process from the general IEP. I do believe that he feels positively about the program as a whole, inclusive of the ITP.

Matt provided a frank insight into his experience with the ITP process. As a student in his second year of high, his responses show some growth and an increasing social awareness. In the subsequent section I examine the data collected from Graham, the eldest participant in this study.

Graham

At the time of the interview Graham was a 17 year old high school senior. Graham's interview took place in a private room located in a local public library. I had met Graham previously as a middle school student but hadn't seen him for a number of years. When we met at the library he was dressed in slightly baggy jeans, sneakers and a printed shirt typical of current teenage style. He was extremely tall and had long, neat braids. His glasses were of a modern style that gave him a very fashionable appearance. He looked like the 17 year old suburban high school student that he was.

When I approached Graham, he shook my hand and welcomed me with a soft, confident voice. His mother was with him and said that she wished to sit in on the interview. Since Graham was not 18, I complied with this request. Graham seemed very comfortable with the setting for the interview and spoke directly and with conviction. His speech was not pedantic but was smooth and easy to understand. Not unlike many individuals identified with autism spectrum disorders, he gave little eye contact but still appeared to be confident

and social. He sat with his hands crossed on the table and looked comfortable in his seat, slouching slightly and looking very much like a typical teenager.

During the interview Graham spoke freely about his dreams and goals for the future. He expressed his tendency to change his mind concerning his future career aspirations but was consistent in his hope to attend college in order to increase his options for employment as an adult. Graham spoke the most about social connections and his discomfort joining clubs and being involved with groups of other students. In addition, he articulated that he did share his dreams with his family, brother, and a close group of friends who shared his interests. Graham at times expressed that he did not feel teachers listened to him in general, yet believed that his IEP and Individualized Transition Plan provided him with an avenue to be heard.

Throughout the interview Graham conveyed his interest in animals and in architecture. He was then enrolled in drafting courses in high school and hoped to find a summer job working with animals, possibly at a veterinarian's office. He supported his desire to find a college or university that would offer architecture in addition to studies in the animal sciences while acknowledging the chance that he might change his mind and major in something totally unrelated to these interests. By the end of the interview, Graham's mother had tears in her eyes and explained that she had never heard Graham speak in such a self-assured manner and in such a clear, adult tone. It was evident that she was impressed with Graham's maturity and his genuine excitement for the future.

After our interview I spoke with Graham concerning Temple Grandin, an adult with Asperger's who has made a career out of blending her creativity in design and architecture with her love for animals. Graham was unaware of Temple Grandin's books and was very interested in learning more about an individual with his same interests. Since we were in a library, I specifically guided him to *Thinking in Pictures*, Temple Grandin's first account of her life as an individual living with Asperger Syndrome. He enthusiastically went in search of the book as I exited the library.

I first asked Graham what his main goal in high school was, and he responded frankly:

“To feel more comfortable. To feel that nobody is better than me, exactly.” (Graham, interview)

I knew that Graham was in his senior year of high school, and I was interested in knowing what his general goals were, both educationally and personally. He explained his goals:

“Pretty much to find a job or volunteering that would help me reach, or help get experience in my career. I want to be a vet or an architect. I could get a job at an animal shelter or vet could hire a s a volunteer and just get experience.” (Graham, Interview)

“I took biology and it was kind of interesting. You dissect a frog and see how it is different from everything else. I wondered how could they breathe underwater? Do what they do. How is their skin different? Just how they work. So many questions that I want to find out. Also, I, like, went to a college and helped dissect a pig heart and found it was so much like a human’s heart. Why is it like that? How is it important?” (Graham, Interview)

“To get experience somehow with animals so I know that is what I want to do. I am not sure how I am going to do this, but I have some ideas.” (Graham, Digital Journal)

I asked if he was involved in any clubs related to his interests and he responded:
“Well, I’m not too big on the clubs and stuff. I expect on joining one or find the interest to join a club.” (Graham, Interview)

“It is hard to say because I change a lot. I want to be an architect, and then I say that and then I, When asked about his goals after high school, he explained that he definitely wanted to go straight to a four year college after high school and had visited one earlier that day prior to the interview. In addition, Graham had personal goals similar to many young people. He explained:

“ I want to be a vet. I know when I get some experience. I might want to change my career or what I want to do. So I’ll just say at 26 I might still want to be in that architecture thing. Hopefully have a job and feel comfortable.” (Graham, Interview)

“I want to live on my own. Like, somewhere comfortable. Somewhere it is warm and sunny. I don’t really plan on having a family. I might get married but not have a family. Not that I can see right now.” (Graham, Interview)

“I could probably picture myself designing a building or institution that will help animals. I can also picture myself working on animals and getting the experience in designing for the animals. I noticed animals liked me when I was little. They didn’t like my brothers so much; they would growl or attack them or something. I don’t really fear that

many animals. I kind of like them. I experience something different. Look at them and study them.” (Graham, Interview)

The Individualized Transition Plan and process is designed not only to help students plan their academic futures, but it also aides in their progression into adulthood in regards to their social interactions and family life. Graham had specific ideas concerning his personal goals as illustrated by these responses:

“I want to get a job I feel comfortable with, I enjoy doing. Get the items I want, a house a car and not to be stressed every day. Just enjoy my life. Not regretting anything.”
(Graham, Interview)

“Probably, I want to live on my own. Like, somewhere comfortable. Somewhere it is warm and sunny. I don’t really plan on having a family. I might get married but not have a family, not that I can see right now.” (Graham, Digital Journal)

It was also important to gauge the participant’s familiarity with the Individualized Transition Plan and Process before inquiring about it, so I asked Graham if he was familiar with his own ITP. The following responses confirmed his general knowledge of the plan and process:

“I remember the meeting. We talked about, like, what I want to do when I grow up and stuff like that.” (Graham, Interview)

“Did it talk about, like, the accommodations or something like that?” (Graham, Interview)

“I know some details. Like I’m on the college/university thing, plan. I know that they try to get the classes that I need to get into the college that I want to get into. I don’t know the small details, the exact details of it. Usually, that is not what I look at. I’m big about the big stuff..... they talk about the small details that I don’t understand, so I don’t pay much attention to it.” (Graham, Interview)

In addition to his general knowledge of the plan, I also asked Graham what he believed the plan was used for. He responded:

“I think it’s to help me excel, find a better place that can help me with what I want to do in the future. In my personal life, it’s to help me find something I’ll be comfortable with more than a career, than a job. So I can enjoy my life and reach my other goals other than education.” (Graham, Interview)

Similar to the other participants, Graham could give little information in regard to the actual methods by which information concerning his interests was gained. His response revealed the inner perception that he was not well supported in this area of the ITP process. Graham explained that little information was provided to him concerning his desire to pursue a post-secondary degree in animal science or architecture. It was his opinion that most information concerning further education was gained through personal research and his conversations with friends and family members. He remembered the following:

“They just told us websites to go to or you can go to this community college first and then you can go here. They have lots of help programs to get you where you need to go. But nobody really personally told me advice because not a lot of people really want to know what

I want to do. So I haven't heard much personal advice or anything like that." (Graham, Interview)

Graham was the oldest participant in the study and was in his final year of high school. He had the most experience with the ITP and had been involved in updating it annually since he was in middle school. I was very interested to understand what role he believed he took in the process. His responses were very complete and enlightening:

"They tell me that I'm the most important part of the meeting. They can plan all they want, but they don't know what I'm thinking. Nobody knows what I want better than me. And so I see myself as the main gear that would make the meeting work because without me there would be no point in the meeting. The meeting is about me and for me; so I might as well be there and give my opinions about the meeting." (Graham, Interview)

"Usually, we talk about the accommodations. How often I use them and how I use them in class. Sort of a small portion is what I am going to do in my future, but everything they talk about during class work eventually goes into transfer; it's a small but still important part of the meeting." (Graham, Interview)

"I am the main reason for the meetings." (Graham, Digital Journal)

Graham's previous responses had expressed his feelings that he was not listened to during the interest identification portion of the ITP process, so I asked him if he perceived that he was listened to during the general ITP planning meetings. He explained that he was, but that his comfort level in the meetings may be holding him back from contributing more to the meetings. He explains:

“I feel that they are listening, but I don’t usually have much to say when I go there. Most of the time it’s already covered, and I don’t usually change a lot. I would say I do feel important, but I don’t feel that I have to insert myself that much into the meeting because most of it is already covered with my mom, or I haven’t changed. Everything is the same.

“(Graham, Interview)

I asked Graham how he handled criticism during the ITP process and wanted to know how he handled committee members who wanted him to make changes to his plan or who did not agree with his decisions. He explained:

“I would compromise. I would listen and maybe change if I thought they had a good point. Otherwise I just would let things stay the same. The way I wanted them in the first place. This doesn’t happen often. Most of the plan is set by the time we go over it.”(Graham, Interview)

Since there is an actual ITP document available for reference and all students and their parents are provided with a copy of the plan, I asked Graham if he often referred to the document. His response was similar the other participants:

“I usually don’t ask to look at it a lot. I’m in CA, so we go over our modifications and they show us our IEP and stuff. Sometimes we talk about it and sometimes in class I ask for accommodations that teacher in class wouldn’t remember to give me, like separate setting. I know they have to use those accommodations a lot to get during the test and stuff.”
(Graham, Interview)

When asked what impact the ITP had on his immediate needs in regards to his school life Graham presented his current use of the plan:

“I asked for seating a lot. Usually the first day of class I ask for a window.” (Graham, Digital Journal)

“One counselor told me, ‘Now you have start deciding what you are going to do. Start planning ahead.’ That got me thinking more about what I wanted to do. Picking classes more wisely.” (Graham, Interview)

“I think it is there to remind me what I need to do and show in more detail not what I expect but what they expect of me. It shows what help I need to get and where can I get it. Other small details other than just my broad picture of I want to be an architect and this is the class I need to do. The other small things in there that I need to do; what they expect of me.” (Graham, Interview)

As students progress to higher grade levels, the Individualized Transition Plans will hold varying levels of importance to them. I asked Graham if he saw the plan as a dynamic document, and if he foresaw changes in the plan as he moved toward graduation.

“I’m not a big planner, so whatever is on it I usually go with except if I see something that is really wrong. I could see it changing where I go for college, the classes, or how long it will take me to reach the goal.” (Graham, Interview)

“On my IEP they know what I want to be, but I don’t remind them of it every day. My IEP, I usually talk about it and look over it during CA or during the meeting, but that is about the only time it is usually in my mind, only if I need an accommodation. But for like

transfer (transition), I hear that all the time, more now since I am going to the twelfth grade.”

(Graham, Interview)

When asked if overall he was satisfied with his Individualized Transition Plan and Process Graham declared:

“I’m satisfied.” (Graham, Digital Journal)

My interview with Graham was very eye opening and enjoyable. His ability to communicate his goals and desires was very enriching to this study. In the next section I examine data collected from Drew, the youngest participant.

Drew

Drew was a 15 year old high school freshman at the time of our first interview. Soon after our interview, he moved out of state and was enrolled in a new high school however, he provided me with a current email address for ease of contact.

Drew and I met for our first interview in the student services office of his school. He stayed after school on this day for the scheduled interview but had forgotten to call his mother to remind her that he was not coming home on the bus. Prior to sitting down for the interview, we spent a few minutes calling his parents. As he tried to get in touch with his parents, Drew began slowly pacing around the office, most likely as a response to the stress of it taking a few minutes to get in touch with his parents. Drew often uses pacing as a coping mechanism when he finds himself in uncertain situations. After we were able to speak with his mother, he stopped pacing and was ready to enter the office.

As we moved down the hall to the interview location, Drew walked quickly and with deliberate and quick movements toward an office that he recognized as the one listed numerically on the interview invitation. Drew was smiling and seemed very comfortable with the location for the interview and appeared genuinely excited to be involved in this study. He was neatly dressed in hiking pants, a plaid shirt and shoes. His hair was long and shaggy, and he wore glasses. His height, clothing, and demeanor made him appear older than his age of 15. As he entered the room, prior to taking a seat, he waited for instructions as to his seating choices. After I motioned toward a table and chairs, he chose to have a seat in a straight-backed chair. I then explained to him the recording device that I would be using, and we reviewed the interview guidelines. He explained to me that he had reviewed the interview questions and found them satisfactory.

Before we began the interview, I asked Drew if he had any questions or concerns. He asked if the recorder was on yet and how many minutes of the interview it could tape. His voice struck me as slightly pedantic and stereotypically teacher-like. I explained that each tape could record 20 minutes on each side. Knowing that we had set the interview for 30 minutes, Drew was satisfied that the tapes would be sufficient. The interview process began smoothly, and his responses were fluid and honest. He remained on topic for the bulk of the interview and actually spoke longer than the allotted time.

A week after the initial interview, I had a brief conversation with Drew in reference to his upcoming move out of state. We again met at his school but spoke in one of his classrooms. He again spoke freely and gave additional information concerning his transfer to

a new high school. He was very eager to be moving closer to his extended family and was leaving a few weeks earlier than his parents and sister. This seemed to be an exciting and independent venture for Drew. Throughout all of our interactions, Drew was very easy to speak with and seemed to take great pride in his participation in this study.

To begin the interview, I asked Drew about his goals for the future. I asked about both his educational and his personal goals. He had very specific ideas for his future and did not hesitate to share them:

“Well, the first is to graduate high school. The next is to get into college. Hopefully get my bachelor’s degree, at least. Then go on to be a teacher and try to get a higher degree somewhere later on in life.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

“I would like to be a teacher.” (Drew, Digital Journal)

Drew explained that he knew it would take a great deal of work to achieve his goals:

“Well, first I’ll study for an incredible amount of time and just turn up for class, so I could graduate high school first.” (Drew, Digital Journal)

When asked about his life goals, Drew focused on his career and included comments about his hope for a family of his own:

“I will hopefully teaching seventh grade. I figure that’s the middle ground between too young and too old. I’m more, I actually need to talk about... I’m interested in the history aspect of school rather than the all around so I figure middle school would be a good place to start. The fact that it is the beginning of the multi-teacher classes.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

His personal goals included:

“I’d have to be in reasonable visiting range of them [family]. Four to two hours and to get there in case something bad happens. Not like seven hours, like I am now.” (Drew, initial Interview)

“My only personal goals are to get married and, well, build a stable family.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

“I’m good with kids and I think I could probably handle them. My sister’s still a child.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

When asked where he would like to live, Drew added:

“Most likely [live] in Pennsylvania. Either an apartment or a small house I can own myself. Preferably urban. Not too great about the city maybe rural.” (Drew. Initial Interview)

“I might maybe like to visit a few places in Europe. Rome, Paris , London.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

“Well that would let me get a deeper view of those cultures and help me understand the history on a more cultural level.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

The following quote explains Drew’s desire to lead a typical, successful life in the future:

“I foresee myself continuing to be a middle class civilian.” (Drew, Digital Journal)

When asked what he knew about his Individualized Transition Plan and Process, Drew at first could not remember developing such a plan. I prodded further by asking if he remembered an IEP meeting where they began addressing his future needs, especially his academic course of study. This questioning brought about recognition of the process:

“Ahh, yes. I remember now. I know it has my core classes and my study needs.”

(Drew, Initial Interview)

“I think that I told the group my interests, and they asked me what I wanted to do and where I wanted to live. A little like what you just asked me.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

“The transition meetings were used to identify my needs for the future through high school and after my graduation.” (Drew, Digital Journal)

After identifying Drew’s knowledge of the Individualized Transition Plan and Process I delved further to understand how he perceived the ITP by asking how the plan is used. He responded:

“Well, that transition plan is to help me select the courses to take during high school. I plan on actually becoming a teacher, so I would focus more towards language arts and social studies than math or science.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

Similar to the other participants, Drew’s recollection of the means by which his interests were evaluated was limited:

“We just took a computer simulation based on our likes and our capabilities. We researched our interest. It was handouts that we had to write down that teachers then collected.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

To fully understand the participants’ view of the ITP, it is necessary to appreciate how they see themselves as a part of the transition process. I asked Drew how he perceived his role as a part of the Individualized Transition Plan and Process and he responded as follows:.

“My role was to let them know what my problems were and my personal opinions on how to help me with those problems. My role was to let them know which classes I wanted to take and see if they would be good for my current career path and their opinions on those classes.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

“My role is to give them my opinion for classes that will help me to reach my goals for the future in my education and in my life” (Drew, Digital Journal)

“I’d most likely give my suggestions for classes that I would like to try or point out what I am having difficulty in. The plan would be a support in case I need help” (Drew, Initial Interview)

In addition, I asked Drew if he felt that he was listened to in the ITP Process. He explained that he was passive yet expressed the desire to compromise:

“I’m not completely sure. I’m usually quite passive when it comes to those things.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

“Most likely I’ll be working according to my capability levels from that point on. Such as I’ll be moved to a less difficult class if that class proves too difficult for me. I’d ask for suggestions for a more appropriate difficulty level class. I never was one for easy grades.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

“I saw myself making compromises. Not everyone, everyone has their own opinion and I might make some bad choices in life; we all do in life. I just have to change my things as needed.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

When asked if he actually referred to the written Individualized Transition Plan during the school year when not connected to his IEP meetings, he responded:

“Rarely ever. I don’t really require it. I’m usually on a day to day basis good. I’ll most likely pull it out whenever I need it. Reviewing it every day or every so often is not really how I do it. I have looked at it, well, parts of it at least. But, no. I have never really felt the need to do all that. I tend to have good confidence in it.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

“Most likely the teachers and my parents with help guide my future plans. The papers can only do so much for you when you need them.” (Drew, Digital Journal)

I asked Drew if the plan itself played a role in his education even though he did not regularly refer to the written ITP. He expressed the feeling that it did:

“First, it helped me realize what career path I should take, which allowed me to select the right classes.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

“I really think that it helps teachers understand what I am working for; I mean without it, it would be hard for them to know. I’d have a hard time letting them know myself.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

I asked Drew if his ITP became more important as he progressed to higher grade levels. As Drew was the youngest participant in the study (he had just entered high school) he did not have much experience to report but still had an insightful response:

“It will probably start appearing a bit more. But I’m not really too sure. The future is unpredictable.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

In conclusion, I wanted to know if Drew was personally satisfied with the Individualized Transition Plan and Process. His reactions were positive:

“It certainly helps us all. You know, if we had gone through the generic version of it, we might not be as successful if we had not done this. I believe it is a great help to all people, like I, with special needs.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

“I think the system is working quite well so far. I think you did a good job guys, good job.” (Drew, Initial Interview)

Study data was examined upon collection and notations were made to aid in the identification of emerging themes. Initial and follow-up interviews were transcribed by me, the researcher, allowing for further analysis of data with references to tonal and contextual clues.

Digital Journals

The prior responses were drawn primarily from participant interviews. A few responses from the digital journals were interwoven, but most digital journal responses from the participants were simple repetitions of the interview responses. These responses echoed the interviews and further reinforced the emergent themes seen in the interview data. The richness of the interview responses made them a much better representation than the written reactions of the participants. To no avail, I attempted to gather enhanced written responses from the participants. Not unlike many students this age, the participants in this study did not elaborate in the case of their written responses. When asked, they similarly explained that

they did not have much time at home and that other academic assignments were more important.

There were three digital journal questions that garnered limited, yet rich responses from the participants:

In your opinion, what are the factors that will be most difficult for you to overcome in reaching your educational goals?

The opinions of the participants in reference to the factors that would be most difficult for them to overcome in reaching their educational goals were diverse yet poignant. These responses exemplified the students' individual personalities while confirming the fact that they are all still young men in the process of maturing and growing as individuals.

"I hope that I can do a good job in all of my classes. If I don't I might not reach my goals." (Matt, Digital Journal)

"Sometimes I change my mind too much. I should focus on one area so that I will be able to get a job or volunteer in the right area. I'm afraid that I won't be able to follow one path." (Graham, Digital Journal)

"I don't really worry much about not reaching my goals. It is just one step at a time for me. I am sure I will have setbacks here and there but I am sure that I will get through them." (Drew, Digital Journal)

Explain the role you have taken in the transition planning process. How would you change your role if you could?

The participants in this study all expressed that they would not change their current role in the transition planning process. Their responses reiterated their satisfaction in the transition planning process.

“I wouldn’t change anything. All of my ideas are listened to and the teachers know what I need. I can ask for what I need at any time.” (Matt, Digital Journal)

“I guess I could say a little more of what I want during meetings but I think that my role is pretty good right now. I get to say what I want and the people listen and do their best to make sure it happens and I get what I need to make me a successful student.” (Graham, Digital Journal)

“My role is just right. I don’t think it will change much as I get older. It seems to work as it is right now.” (Drew, Digital Journal)

What does your Individualized Transition Plan mean to you?

When asked what their Individualized Transition plan meant to them, the participants in this study revealed that the plans were an important part of their educational success. They did not relate the plan to any personal or social goals but they did express that the plans were necessary to their success in high school and post-secondary education.

“My plan means a lot to me. It will help make sure that I take the classes that I need to get through school and it will help me to know what to do so that I can get the job I want in the future. It will also help me know what I need to get into a college that will also help me with my career someday.” (Matt, Digital Journal)

“It means that I will always have a say in my class planning and I will be able to focus on my interests. That is the most important thing is that I will be able to take classes to help me get into the college that I want to go to.” (Graham, Digital Journal)

“I guess it means that I always have someone looking out for me, at least through high school. It means a lot that I will have a plan to follow. Plans make it easier to reach your goals.” (Drew, Digital Journal).

Documents

Parent copies of the ITP documents were collected from the three participants in the study via personal deliver, mail and fax. This study did not set out to audit the documents for quality or completion according to federal or local laws or guidelines. The examinations of these documents was important, though, to better understand and corroborate the involvement of the students, parents, and other committee members in the formation of the Individualized Transition Plans.

To begin, all of the Individualized Transition Plan documents were prepared according to the guidelines set by the local school system. The fact that the three students were in different grade levels led to a disparity in the number of documents available in the plans and their overall completion. All plans seemed to be in accordance with a general checklist (Appendix F) available to the committee and individual special education case managers.

Just as the students expressed in their interviews, very little individualized information concerning their interests, goals, and dreams was detected in the Individualized Transition Plan. Most of the documents were general multiple choice or fill in the blank assessments completed by the students with assistance from parents and special education staff. Brief statements by the students could be seen and very little to no documentation of individualized research relating to future goals, future education, or interests both inside and out of school was available. I was not presented with any personalized portfolios or supporting documents concerning student interests or goals.

As stated above, it is evident that all Individualized Transition Plans made available to me during the data collection of this study were produced in good faith by committee members, parents, and students while following the basic guidelines of the law. The area where there is a perceptible gap in understanding is the “individualized” part of the plan. While it is true that all students individually completed the same forms, there was very little evidence in these three plans that differentiation went beyond that. This exploration substantiated the information provided by the student participants in this study.

ITP DOCUMENTS

After the thorough inspection of student class schedules and IEP documents, it was found that all were in compliance with the IDEA-mandated IEP process and were in alignment with the goals and needs listed in the Individualized Transition Plan attached to the most recent IEP documents. The Secondary Transition DEC 4a pages 1 and 2 were available

and completed in all cases (see Appendix G). Sections A and B were mandated for students ages 14 and older, while Sections C and D were mandated for students 16 and older (see Appendix G). In all cases the appropriate sections were completed. Additional IEP notes and attached documentation of interest inventories, career searches and educational searches were available; yet each differed among the IEP plans for the individual students. These differences may have been due to the fact that all students attended different high schools and were in different grades.

These documents revealed an overall adherence to the law and the appropriate participation of all individuals involved according to the guidelines set by the LEA. Where the documentation shows a deficit is in reference to the true individualization for the students and the small number of times the document is updated during a student's high school career. All of the documents were pre-printed forms that consisted of checklist items and fill in the blank sections. Many of the written responses were brief and did not fully represent the students' passion for their future endeavors represented in the interview data collected in this study.

Themes

The data observed confirms the participants in this study have very different yet equally important goals for their futures. As different as they all appear to be, they collectively agree on a number of themes that developed through their interviews and journal responses.

1. High school students identified with Asperger Syndrome have educational and personal goals for the future similar to all students.
2. High school students identified with Asperger Syndrome vary in their perceived knowledge of the ITP process and the documents that support the plan.
3. Students view themselves as a large and important part of the transition planning process.
4. High school students with Asperger Syndrome do feel that they utilize their Individualized Transition Plan in preparing for post-secondary education and life.
5. High school students identified with Asperger Syndrome are satisfied with their experiences with their Individualized Transition Plan and process.

Themes

Table 2: Participant Responses

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Matt</i>	<i>Drew</i>	<i>Graham</i>
Similar to all high school students, high school students identified with Asperger Syndrome have educational and personal goals for the future.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Had clearly defined goals for both high school and the future • Was very aware of his comfort level with educational options and possible future careers • His main concern was to graduate from high school • He wished to attend a 4 year college or university • His future goals included a career as a chef or video game designer • He really wanted to get a car sometime in the future after high school • Goals were very succinct and realistic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very specific goals for high school and beyond • Had appropriate goals for future as a teacher • Knew exactly what type of teacher and what level of education he would be comfortable teaching • Well researched and defended ideas for his future • Also had precise goals to have his only family in the future and to care for them • He also had defined ideas of geographical living arrangements for himself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He had specific social goals pertaining to fitting in better with peers • His focus was on finding current opportunities such as volunteering or interning to help with his future goals working with animals and architecture • Connected his course choices in high school with both his interests and his future educational needs • He explained that his goals and dreams changed a great deal as he progressed through high school

Table 2. Continued

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • His goals were all very realistic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • His focus for the future greatly encompassed his comfort as to his living arrangements, future schooling and career • Had a clearer sense envisioning himself in a career and was attuned to what it would take to reach that goal • Even though he said his goals changed often they were very realistic and reachable
<i>Theme</i>	<i>Matt</i>	<i>Drew</i>	<i>Graham</i>
Students view themselves as a large and important part of the transition planning process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Felt his role was to tell his opinion • Felt that his participation was important • Often mixed the ITP up with the more general IEP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viewed his role as important • He saw himself as the one that informed the ITP/IEP committee of his problems and interests • He saw his personal opinions as important in relations to choosing courses and electives in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saw himself as the main “gear” that made the ITP process work • Voiced that he was the main reason for the plan and the meetings • Felt that only he could provide the team with pertinent information relating to his needs

Table 2. Continued

		<p>high school</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saw the plan as a support system for himself if he needed assistance • Saw himself as more passive than he should be • Felt that he was listened to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saw the attention to his interests as a small part of the process • He felt that even though he knew he was important he had little to say at the meetings
High school students with Asperger Syndrome do feel that they utilize their Individualized Transition Plan in preparing for post-secondary education and life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explained that he rarely saw the actual ITP document and did not refer to it regularly • Expresses that teachers knew the ITP existed and could refer to it as they did the general IEP • Felt the plan would change with him as he aged • Saw the plan as helpful in the present • Saw it as a mode for teachers to understand his needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He did not refer to the actual document regularly but knew the content • Felt that he access the document at any time if needed • Explained that the teachers were aware of the document and what it contained • Saw the plan as a guide for him to follow his interests • Sees it changing as he grows as a person 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressed that he rarely saw the actual ITP documents and did not refer to them often • He explained that in his curriculum assistance classes that he could see them if he needed to • He saw the ITP as a document that guided teachers and counselors to ensure that he looked toward the future • He saw the document as fluid, one that would change with his needs as

Table 2. Continued

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Believe the plan to be a support system for his future Interestingly saw a time when he may not need the plan anymore 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helps to open the door to his needs by providing him a voice when he feels he does not speak out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> he aged He began to see the limitations of his plan
<i>Theme</i>	<i>Matt</i>	<i>Drew</i>	<i>Graham</i>
High school students identified with Asperger Syndrome are satisfied with their experiences with their Individualized Transition Plan and process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Had positive feelings about the plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Had positive view of the ITP plan and process Felt that it was personalized Saw it as an aid to all with learning differences like his 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He was satisfied overall.

- Similar to other high school students, High school students identified with Asperger Syndrome in this study have educational and personal goals for the future.
- High school students identified with Asperger Syndrome in this study vary in their perceived knowledge of the ITP process and the documents that support the plan.
- Students in this study view themselves as a large and important part of the transition planning process.

Table 2. Continued

4. High school students with Asperger Syndrome in this study do feel that they utilize their Individualized Transition Plan in preparing for post-secondary education and life.
5. High school students identified with Asperger Syndrome in this study are satisfied with their experiences with their Individualized Transition Plan and Process.

1. Similar to other high school students, High school students identified with Asperger

Syndrome in this study have educational and personal goals for the future.

Students with disabilities are often looked upon as incapable of having cogent goals and dreams for their futures that would also parallel those of students without disabilities. Through the resounding voices of the participants in this study, one can see that high school students identified with Asperger Syndrome have a wide range of innovative and realistic goals for their future education and lives outside of school. Understanding the aspirations and dreams of the study participants added a cornerstone to developing a clear picture of the involvement that these students had in the development of their transition plans and the place the plan had in their future educational and life planning.

Student Educational and Career Goals

All student participants cited graduation from high school as one of their main educational goals, regardless of the fact that they all were successfully working toward a college preparatory diploma, and graduation seemed a given. They also appeared to take a step-by-step approach as they navigated their road to a future education, career, and lifestyle. In addition, the participants were very realistic in their goal-setting and the need to plan and work hard toward their goals. As the students spoke of their goals, their body language was often inviting and their tone of voice very animated.

When asked how they would reach these goals, students had varying answers that ranged from the specific to the general. It was obvious that they had all previously thought about their future endeavors and were working toward succeeding in achieving their goals. All participants

had their current goals for the future recorded in their Individualized Transition Plan as part of their overall IEP documentation. The documentation for students in 10th and 12th grade contained a student portfolio, future outcomes/goals assessment documents, and the planning area inventory that was available in the 9th grader's ITP. These documents contained brief assessments of student preferences for post-secondary employment, education, independent living, and community participation. Available IEP notes also alluded to the interests of the individual students.

Future Life Goals

The respondents had a variety of plans for the future in reference to their personal life goals. Many included their current family unit as well as the creation of a family of their own in the future. Transportation and living arrangements also were important aspects of the participants' future planning.

Personal Goals

When asked about their personal lives the participants were very introspective and took their time answering.

2. High school students identified with Asperger Syndrome in this study are knowledgeable of the Individualized Transition Plan and process to varying degrees.

From the beginning of the data collection process it became apparent that the participants were not immediately familiar with the Individualized Transition Plan or the planning process

itself. After being asked the initial interview question, “what can you tell me about your Individualized Transition plan?”, all participants initially responded with confusion and needed prompting to locate the transition plan in their memory. After preliminary prompting, the students became more comfortable with the notion of the ITP component and the place it holds in the IEP process. The familiarity with the Individualized Transition Plan was comparable among the participants but their views of the meaning of the ITP varied between them.

One student was initially vague but slowly began to remember the IEP meetings and the discussion of their future plans within the ITP planning meeting.

When asked if they could tell me about their Individualized Transition Plan and the process that was taken to create the document, participants at first sounded confused. Only one participant did not recognize the ITP planning process immediately. Two of the other participants immediately remembered a connection to the ITP meeting but recalled little about the meeting’s content. When further prompted, they did recall the development of their ITP. They often did not remember the specifics of conversations during the ITP planning meetings but understood the overall process.

When asked what the ITP was used for the students similarly referred to themselves as the plan’s main beneficiary. They all expressed that the plan was a useful connection between them and their teachers as most of the participant expressed that communicating their needs was difficult for them. In addition, when asked about the process for identifying interests the students could identify only a small number of activities.

3. Student participants in this study view themselves as a large and important part of the transition planning process.

All students served by the IDEA are invited to their IEP meetings when they reach the age of 14 or before if their maturity dictates inclusion. Students take varied roles in these meetings and are included of active members of the IEP team. Self-advocacy and the confidence needed to be active and integral voices in the creation of their own Individualized Transition Plan has been shown to be important to a student's future success. The participants in this study perceived their involvement in their ITP and transition process to be central to the development of the transition component.

Student Perception of Their Roles

As the data was collected it became apparent that as the students moved further through high school an expanding self-awareness emerged and they increasingly explored their own feelings and goals. Students seem to have a good connection with their opinions, skills, abilities and personality types. They also were able to express the manner by which they interact socially within their educational and personal environments. When students were asked how they perceived their part in the transition planning process they put in plain words their importance as the focal point of the ITP.

When asked if they felt that their ideas were listened to and input into their plans students were very positive citing the importance of their participation.

The ITP process includes a number of contributors in addition to students including parents, administrators, special programs teachers as well as other support professionals. As students create their ITP documents and provide their inputs and insights these members have their own opinions concerning what should be included in the ITP. The study participants were mature in their responses when asked how they act in response to criticisms or divergent thoughts of the ITP team members. When asked how they would react they often voiced their ability to compromise. Compromising on the part of these students is representative of the self-advocating skills many students with special needs hone as they move through the special education system. All three participants in this study also had a maturity beyond their years and they may have seen compromising as the adult approach to empowering themselves as they navigated their path to post-secondary lives. In addition, the participants all illustrated a basic trust that the adults involved in the transition process had their best interests in mind and may at times know better than they what they need.

4. High school students with Asperger Syndrome in this study feel that they utilize their Individualized Transition Plan as a part of a greater process in preparing for post-secondary education and work.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires public schools to develop transition service plans for older students who need to prepare for community living after leaving high school. Transition services are a set of coordinated activities that assist

students with disabilities as they move from school into self-determined post-graduation activities including higher education and work. Students in North Carolina create their primary transition documents at age 14 and review and add to it annually.

When asked how often they actually refer to the ITP document most participants revealed that they rarely accessed the actual written or digital document yet used the guidelines set forth in the document to guide discussions with their teachers, parents and guidance counselors.

Participants in this study expressed that they employed the principles and ideas recorded in the Individualized Transition Plan as they consulted with the adults in their lives that helped to guide them as they navigate their future lives. The student's responses hinted to the fact that the ITP works as an informative bridge allowing them to cooperatively plan for their social and educational needs with those who have the knowledge to help them including parents, teachers and guidance counselors. Students seemed to feel empowered by the document making it easier for them to connect with their teachers in response to their immediate and future educational needs. As the students progress to higher grade levels the Individualized Transition Plans appear to become more important to them. They also see the plans as dynamic documents and foresee changes as they move toward graduation.

5. High school students identified with Asperger Syndrome in this study are satisfied with their experiences with the transition process.

Throughout the interviewing process most of the participant responses were positive in regards to their Individualized Transition Plan and process. Most of the respondents in this study

regarded the plan as a stepping stone for the identification of their scholastic needs and as an outline for them to follow as they navigated their high school education.

SUMMARY

Chapter Four explored the findings from the study of the perceptions of high school students with Asperger Syndrome in reference to their Individualized Transition Plan and Process. This chapter discussed the major themes that emerged through the synthesis of data gathered from participant interviews, participant digital journaling as well as supplemental archival documents relating to the participant's Individualized Transition Plans.

In this chapter, it was apparent that the data gathered and synthesized through the process of this study created an interesting portrait of the participant group. These young high school students identified with Asperger Syndrome were more than capable of sharing their life experiences while creating a voice for themselves in reference to current educational policy. The insight into their personal experiences with their Individualized Transition Plans and Processes in addition to their perceptions as the point source of educational policy is encouraging. Researchers can see that the voices of the most important link in the policy chain is valuable and may offer a better understanding of the influence of educational policy.

Chapter Five presents conclusions derived from the previous chapter. An overarching theme garnered from the perceptions of the student participants as well as the researcher will be reviewed.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will discuss the findings of this study by providing a synopsis of the interpretation of the data collected. The research questions will be examined in reference to the responses of the study participants and existing research. In addition, implications on policy and future research will also be considered.

Indirectly, the Individualized Transition Plan and the ensuing planning process empower students with identified with Asperger Syndrome in this study. Through the development of the plan, students perceive that their goals, dreams and interests are considered as their plan is developed. They also seem to feel that their voice is an integral part of the planning process that is created to guide their future educational and personal lives. These students in this study all viewed the ITP plan as a plan that was created for them and that they should have ultimate say in the outcome of the plan.

LESSONS LEARNED

A number of potential participants previously identified by the researcher left the local public school system in order to be homeschooled. This added to the difficulty in finding participants. Some of the respondents to the study did not meet the age or grade requirements and were found to be ineligible for the study. In order to increase the number of eligible students

a change in the age range of students was made. Time was also a factor in participant recruitment as it took time to disseminate the information to interested parties in the area.

Another issue that became apparent as the research proceeded was motivating teenagers to submit written documents such as the digital journal and the ITP paperwork. The students were very excited to be interviewed and were very forthcoming with their verbal responses. Students were much brief in their responses to journal questions. These findings were surprising to the researchers as common literature expounds the notion that students with Asperger Syndrome are limited socially and would be hesitant to talk one-on-one with an individual (Myles & Simpson, 2002).

Blogging

The blog was not a successful data gathering tool, as the researcher had surmised it would be. Only two of the respondents attempted to log onto the blog and one logged onto another blog unrelated to this study. Upon follow up interviews with the respondents, it became apparent that the participants did not participate fully in the blogging for two main reasons, lack of time and they viewed of blogs as too social for their comfort levels.

“Well, it is hard to get the time to get on the computer sometimes. I had a lot going on with practice and homework” (Drew, follow-up interview)

“I am a procrastinator, so I don’t often get to things. I did not get to it” (Matt, follow-up conversation)

Many individuals with Asperger Syndrome use internet blogs to share their personal stories (Clarke, Juanne & Van Amerom, Gudrun, 2008) as these participants did in the interview

and digital journaling process of this study. Therefore I assumed that my participants would be comfortable with this mode of communication and was surprised to find that they were not.

Implications for Methodology

It became apparent early on in this study that any generalized, preconceived notions concerning the communication abilities and preferences of students identified with Asperger Syndrome were not necessarily on target for all participants. Through the process of collecting data from multiple sources, I was consistently surprised by the communication abilities of the study participants in addition to their typical teenage behaviors. Although one could observe social differences during the interview process with slight need for modifications and straight forward conversation, the participants' blossomed in their ability to tell their own life stories. My experience as a teacher and parent of teenagers led me to discern similarities in behaviors when it came to writing journal responses, adhering to timelines for submissions and the admissions of their own laziness and procrastination. The journal entries were characteristic of teenagers and were very brief, offering a mirror of their interview responses. Above all, the participants' desire to have their voices heard was the most impressive observation made highlighting the need to cultivate more comfortable communication avenues for high functioning students identified with Asperger Syndrome and ASD. This couldn't be better illustrated than through the description of Graham's initial interview process.

When Graham was interviewed, his mom wished to be in the room. This situation was not planned but was acceptable and did not change the format of the interview. It did however

add an uncommon lens into the communication process of a young man who wished to be heard. Graham's interview was extraordinarily rich and thorough, surprising not only me but obviously his mother. At the conclusion of the interview, Graham's mother had tears in her eyes and explained that she did not realize that her son was so mature and could represent himself in such a mature and dignified manner. Graham then simply explained that he finally felt comfortable and not judged in this casual interview situation. I too realized that maybe I received much more frank and detailed information in the capacity of researcher rather than practitioner.

The data collected in this study indicates that students, such as the participants in this study, that have the ability to communicate can be advocates for both themselves as well as neurotypical peers as well as those peers also identified with special needs. Their stories confirm the empowerment and usefulness that current special education policy provides for some students while also emphasizing the need to further examine improvements in differentiating the Individualized Transition Planning process.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A great deal of special education policy research aims to highlight a population's differences and idiosyncrasies, focusing mainly on their differences. Contrary to this characterization, students with Asperger Syndrome in this study seem to be very similar to their neurotypical peers in relation to their future goals, dreams and aspirations concerning both their educational ambitions and their personal lives. Students identified with disabilities, including those with Asperger Syndrome, hold the same academic and life goals as students without

disabilities (Henderson, 2001). This does not negate the fact that current literature confirms that even though students with disabilities have similar goals and aspiration, their college attendance and graduation rates are significantly lower than those not identified with disabilities (USDE, 2000). Despite this fact, currently a greater number of students with ASD's including Asperger syndrome expect to attend college. (Graetz & Spampinato, 2008). This leads to the importance of future study inclusive of the voices of those with disabilities as they seek the same diverse and fulfilling future opportunities as the typical high school student.

Review of Research Questions

How do high school students identified with Asperger Syndrome in this study perceive the usefulness of their IDEA mandated Individualized Transition Plan and process in reference to their post-secondary education and life goal planning?

The participants in this study provided a rich narrative of their experiences with the Individualized Transition Plan and the process involved in creating the transition documents. In general, the student participants provided viable goals for the future in both their educational and personal lives. Special education research supports the importance of understanding the hopes and aspirations of students with AS in order to appreciate their postsecondary needs (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). The participants in this study supported this notion by expressing their future goals and aspirations with conviction and excitement. Through their clear and honest explanations of their interactions in the planning process, the students also illustrated a keen

connection with their opinions, skills, abilities and personality types. When students incorporate their voice into the planning process, it represents both participation and engagement (Holdsworth, 2000).

Students in this study commonly implied that their interests, goals and strengths were addressed through the Individualized Transition Planning process and in the ITP documents themselves. Regardless of the manner in which the transition documents were utilized by the student they all perceived that they were empowered by the ITP process and subsequently carried a greater confidence in their own educational and life planning. In the case of these high school students identified with Asperger Syndrome, the formal Individualized Transition Planning process appears to support less formal interactions in the lives of students that maintain and support student transition plans. Students identified with higher functioning autism, such as Asperger syndrome, will often have very individual needs and follow a less stringent outline of needs than those with more severe impairments making them very similar to students not identified with disabilities have aspirations for their futures (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009). Participants in this study expressed that they were prompted to speak with parents, teachers and counselors concerning their transition needs with the support of the transition documents and the knowledge that there is a process in place. In addition, the fact that there was an Individualized Transition Plan in place and the knowledge that they were a part of a greater process appeared to encourage the students in this study to consider themselves accountable as participants in the planning of their future educational and life endeavors.

Throughout this study, participants expressed that they considered the ITP to be a document that was produced for the singular purpose of serving their needs. They stated that they were the main reason for the ITP process and that they were the sole beneficiaries of the practice of developing written transition plans. While this notion seemed to empower my participants, it also helped to remind me that they were still teenagers unaware of the multiple constituents in the educational policy process. They seemed unaware that laws and directives dictated that their school-based practitioners carry out specific transition activities and document them in order to remain compliant. The participants in this study simply recognized one of the very few activities in a teenager's educational existence geared exclusively to their needs.

What goals do students with Asperger Syndrome have for their post-secondary futures?

The high school years are when many adolescents begin to create a life plan and begin exploring the many avenues available to them as they initiate their preparation for their post-secondary lives. As noted by researchers, there is very little literature that addresses the postsecondary ambitions of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009). It was necessary to begin this study by understanding the insights that the individual participant had in relation to their future educational and personal goals. Today's educators and practitioners support student-focused planning where student's goals, interests and visions are the basis for educational decisions in as an important part of the educational planning process (Kohler & Field, 2003).

All participants in this study afforded the researcher an opportunity to understand their inner feelings concerning their ambitions and hopes for their adult lives. Educators and researchers alike have begun to recognize the significance of listening to students (Cushman 2006, Mitra 2008). This notion guided the exploration of the goals, dreams and aspirations that students identified with Asperger Syndrome hold as they look toward the educational and social opportunities that will shape their futures. Participants in this study were forthcoming with details concerning their personal views and at times explained that these views were contrary to expectations of parents, teachers and counselors. Studies support student's ability to clearly and securely articulate their goals and life choices, even when parents and other essential members of their transition team do not agree (Steere & Cavaiuolo, 2002). In light of the social differences inherent to those identified with ASD and Asperger Syndrome the student's responses transcended the expectations of the researcher. Young people with Asperger syndrome often would like to socialize with others, but are often frustrated and overwhelmed by the interaction (Graetz & Spampinato, 2008). They expressed that they had goals and dreams similar to their peers yet often had difficulty sharing these personal ideas with others. It became apparent that given the chance, that students with social differences are very capable of exploring their individual opinions and beliefs in relation to their respective future goals. One of the most encouraging approaches to student's future success involves using a student's interests and knowledge to help themselves create and reach their potential goals (Levin, 1994). These students in this study seemed to embrace this concept by not only voicing their goals and

ambitions but through the recognition that they were the main architects of their individual futures.

The students in this study all freely expressed educational expectations that would lead to lives that they personally would find fulfilling. In addition, these students had clear desires and plans for external social environments that would satisfy their needs as an individual. The most surprising aspect of the investigation into the participant's goals was their common concern that they would graduate from high school. All of the participants in this study held goals that included graduation from a four year secondary institution. Unlike their very lucid plans and preparations for their educational, work and social futures, this notion seemed out of place and an unlikely concern. Current data clearly suggests that an increasing number of students identified with disabilities are interested in continuing their education beyond secondary school and are graduating from high school with a regular diploma (Shaw, 2009). Contrary to this impression, all participant's life plans emerged as well thought out and cohesive maps for future success.

As data was gathered, it became clear that the students identified with Asperger Syndrome in this study voiced goals and aspirations that were very succinct and realistic. This understanding set the stage for the further evaluation of their perceptions of the IDEA mandated tools created to aid them in reaching these goals.

How do high school students identified with Asperger Syndrome in this study utilize their Individualized Transition Plans in preparing for post-secondary education, training and independent life experience?

When policy makers create policy in support of a group of individuals it is a given expectation that the policy will be employed and will be a benefit to a number of stakeholders, particularly the target population. Research can be done to evaluate the documents and pertinent archives that help to assess the effectiveness of these policies. Additional data that could include bench marks of success for a target population can also be utilized to extrapolate the quantifiable statistics that would signal a policy's success. However, these investigations do not take into account the peripheral influences of policies that influence the main stakeholders of policies such as the IDEA mandated Individualized Transition Plan. Through the investigation and collection of the perceptions of the one student population targeted by this legislation, one gains an insight only available through the voices of the stakeholders most affected by the policy, the students. Research illustrates that policy makers and special education advocates are aware of the connection between transition services and the attainment of post-school success for youth. (Bassett & Kochhar-Bryant, 2006). Further research is indicated to more fully comprehend the meaning that this policy holds for highly capable students identified with disabilities such as students with Asperger Syndrome.

Although the student participants in this study agreed that they rarely accessed the actual ITP documents their interview and journal responses reveal that the ITP process carries a much more subtle influence in their lives. As the individual participant perceptions of the policy

utilization began to be uncovered it became apparent that simply being aware that there was a plan in place to guide them through high school was comforting and empowering to them. Researchers have recently begun to understand that, “student outcomes will improve and school reform will be more successful if students actively participate in shaping it.” (Mitra, 2004, p.652.) The students in this study often presented the impression that they could access the documents at any time in support of their day to day activities as well as their more long range goal planning. Through their words the participants exuded a confidence in the fact that they were partners in a process that was acknowledged and supported by those who would aid them in reaching their goals.

In light of the fact that the actual ITP documents were infrequently accessed, the component of the ITP process requiring that students meet with the IEP team for an annual reevaluation of the plan encouraged students in this study to be proactive in the development of additions and updates to their plan in support of their changing needs. These study participants articulated the dynamic nature of their ITP and their understanding that their requirements as students would be fluid and would change often as they advanced through high school. As these students progressed through high school new opportunities to support their self-determination in planning develops encouraging students to have a greater focus on their ITP (Pierson, Carter, Lane & Glaeser, 2008). Again, students in this study appeared to gain reassurance and confidence through the ITP processes focus on their individual wishes and changing needs.

How do these students perceive their role in the Individualized Transition Planning process?

Students appeared surprisingly confident concerning their position as members of an effective planning team in the Individualized Transition Planning process. Although they remained respectful of their adult counterparts they often expressed the need to be heard and to support their dreams for the future. Student voice has an important place in transition planning as it allows students the opportunity to take part in their own life planning by having their ideas considered (Holdsworth, 2000). ITP documents supported this impression by showing the inclusion of the students as equal members of the ITP team. This involvement is upheld by number of research studies supporting the involvement of students in the planning of their ITP (McGahee, Mason, Wallace & Jones, 2001; Wood, Korvonen, Test , Browder & Algozzine, 2004). The students did express the fact that they could involve themselves more in the ITP process and would like to do so in the future.

It was apparent that the students in this study perceived themselves as the main source of information used to input goals and aspirations into their Individualized Transition Plan. Research has shown that students identified with disabilities will be more motivated to achieve their goals when they choose their own activities (Field & Hoffman, 2007) and establish their own goals. As the students moved further through high school they exhibited an expanding self-awareness and increasingly expressed their stature as the main focus of the ITP process. The students did clarify that other members of the team incorporated their views into the ITP process but only with their final approval. In addition, the participants in this study gave the impression

that they had a good connection with their opinions, skills, abilities and personality types. This fact allowed the students to express the manner by which they interact socially within their educational and personal environments and incorporate that into the ITP process.

The study participants demonstrated a maturity in their ability to compromise with adults who had greater life experience than they did. Their awareness of the need to gather information from all parties was a common theme as they explained their position in the Individualized Transition Planning process. The students simply wished to be listened to as the central benefactors of the process. This new, open type of listening must be enlisted to benefit students (Cruddas & Haddock, 2003; Cook-Sather, 2006) and should be supported by practitioners, parents and students alike.

ITP/SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Individual Transition Plans and additional IEP documents were found to be supportive of the IDEA mandated IEP process and were in alignment with the guidelines set by Wake County. The Secondary Transition DEC 4a pages 1 and 2 were available and completed in all cases. Sections A and B mandated for students ages 14 and older were completed in all cases while Sections C and D mandated for students 16 and older were completed in the case of the older students. In all cases the appropriate sections were completed. Additional IEP notes and attached documentation of interest inventories, career searches, student interview sheets and student portfolio sheets were available yet differed in richness among the IEP plans for the individual

students. These differences may have been due to the fact that all students attended diverse high schools and were in different grades.

Most of the documents contained in the ITP were worksheets that contained short responses, one word replies or yes/no answers. Little companion information in support of the ITP was present in any of the documents investigated. Student schedules and plan of coursework were consistent with the college preparatory and future ready courses of study. This aligned with the desires of all participants to attend four year colleges or universities upon completion of high school.

REVIEW OF POLICY

The IDEA mandated Individualized Transition Plan is a set of guidelines supported by a paper component embedded in a student's IEP. In North Carolina, the secondary component is developed by the time a student turns 14. Further planning relating to future services and post-graduate supports systems must be completed by the time a student reaches age 16 and is annually updated until high school graduation.

This policy remains the cornerstone of the transition plans for students with disabilities in North Carolina and throughout the United States. Even though all students with disabilities participant in this process and develop an Individualized Transition Plan very little research has focused on the perceptions of the students, the greatest stakeholders of this policy. Of greater importance, high functioning students with disabilities such as those with Autism Spectrum

Disorders, particularly Asperger Syndrome, who can provide a great insight with their perceptions of special education policy, have been greatly ignored in current research.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and describe the perspectives of high school students with Asperger Syndrome in reference to the Individualized Transition Plan. The aim of this examination was to understand their perspectives of students as they generate and employ their transition plans focusing on the student perception of their involvement in the development of the plan and its value to them. This study attempted to examine how students view the ITP as a part of their current and future educational and personal planning. The results of the findings seek to better understand the manner by which students with Asperger Syndrome see, use and perceive their Individualized Transition Plan.

Through the exploration of the rich voices of the study participants a number of themes emerged relating to the student perceptions of the ITP. Triangulation using data from student journaling and ITP documents lent credence to the notion that the participants found overall value in the Individualized Transition Plan and transition process. The overarching theme that arose from the data collected in this study expressed that the transition process, including the development of the actual transition documents, produced a feeling of importance and empowerment in the student participants. Having a planning process based solely on their dreams, interests and future goals created an interest in them to look forward and begin to voice their needs to reach their goals.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Even though there are currently few studies that focus on the perception of students with disabilities, a number of researchers currently support the inclusion of student perspectives in educational policy inquiry (Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996). This study explored student perceptions of special education transition policy by examining the viewpoints of three, diverse high school participants identified with Asperger Syndrome. Their candid responses provided a novel glimpse into the perception of students who are the main stakeholders of transition policy.

This study strongly suggests that high school students identified with Asperger Syndrome hold dreams and aspirations very similar to the typical high school student. It can be seen in this study that students with AS can communicate their goals, ambitions and aspirations for their futures and feel empowered by their participation in their Individualized Transition Plan and Process. Unlike the past notion that students with disabilities do not have the capability to have a voice in establishing their postsecondary choices, there is an increasing awareness in the educational community of the significance of providing opportunities to make choices, similar to opportunities provided to students without disabilities (Van-Belle, Marks, Martin, & Chun, 2006). Even though the participants in this study point to the fact that they had limited direct involvement in the ITP Process and could work harder to overcome their social difficulties to become more involved, they all believed that they were empowered by the simple fact that the Individualized Transition Plan existed. The participants' empowerment seemed to stem from the fact that the ITP was created for them as individuals and its primary focus is to improve their future educational and personal lives.

After examining the responses of this small yet diverse group of high school students identified with Asperger Syndrome, one can appreciate the need to recognize and encourage the goals and dreams of all students. Parents, teachers and practitioners often overlook the independent aspirations of students identified with disabilities dismissing them as dreams that could easily turn into disappointment. The important people in students' lives should encourage dreams and aspirations offering the exploration of these ideas while encouraging students to follow realistic routes to achieve success in all postsecondary areas.

Most importantly, this study expressed the need to include the voices of students in the exploration of educational policy. There has been a trend in special education research to be "conducted on not with students" (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 372). By reversing this trend, researchers will be able to gain valuable insight into the true effects of transition policy on the most important participants in the process, the students themselves. Pekrul and Levin (2005) express the notion that listening to the voices of students may transform high school transition practices. By providing voice to students and encouraging their participation in research professionals and practitioners alike will gain an extensive understanding of the usefulness of current policies as well as the need for development of new policies. Practitioners may also benefit by understanding that there are many students identified with disabilities that have goals for higher education and beyond that they can achieve with the proper support.

What the ITP could be

As promoted by many researchers, the Individualized Transition Plan and process is believed to be of utmost importance to the successful transition from secondary school to lifetime activities including education, work and social activities. The structure for success has been presented as has the knowledge of the importance of planning for transition, but I believe there is a gap in reference to the true individualization in transition planning.

It is beyond the scope of this study to analyze the quality of the ITP documents reviewed in the process of data collection, but the lack of detail in the plans in addition to my experience as an educator and participant in the ITP process leads me to see the missed potential of this obviously beneficial practice. The data in this study shows an overall student satisfaction with the ITP process in addition to the perception that the ITP provides students with a voice and the power to achieve their future goals. Through the inspection of the ITP plans and discussion with the participants this notion seems to be limited only by the scope of the plans. The students in this study feel empowered by their plans as they already appear, imagine the impact on future success if the plans were richer, containing more personalized information obtained to support the specific interests and goals of the students themselves. The framework is already in use, practices for implementation are easily accessible and support for the process has been established through policy. All that is needed is the increased focus on students like the participants in this study who have the ability to share their reachable goals and dreams and who share the positive perception of the current ITP process.

In addition, the methods of data collection and incorporation of students identified with Asperger Syndrome should be further explored. Simple modifications to lessen a student's stress could encourage greater participation in the formation of their Individualized Transition Plans. One-on-one meetings including students and an advocate could precede the often large ITP/IEP meetings that the participants in this study voiced as a major impediment to their participation in the formation of their ITPs. In addition, more emphasis could be placed on the ITP as a guiding document that could be more dynamic throughout a student's high school career. Rather than being updated annually along with the IEP, quarterly evaluation gauging the changing aspirations and needs of the high functioning student could benefit the individual and keep them aware of the benefits of the plan.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this study were typical to qualitative research. These included small sample size, validity and reliability. The small number of participants available and willing to be involved in a study of this type limited the scope of perceptions concerning the Individualized Transition Plan and process. Additionally, having all males in the sample left out the important perspective of females identified with Asperger Syndrome. The small sample size impacts the overall validity and generalizability of the study data. Even though the participants provided relevant and rich narratives individually they lacked the corroboration of a large number of respondents in order to enable the generalizability of themes that emerged.

Limitations were also apparent in the use of the secure weblog. Secure weblogs can be a valuable tool in social research and are increasingly gaining the attention of researchers. Although this data collection medium can be a valuable instrument to researchers it was apparent that the age of the student participants in addition to the social differences experienced by those identified with Asperger Syndrome hindered the success of the weblog. None of the students had prior experience with weblogs and were not comfortable with the social format of the weblog. Piloting technologies new to qualitative research with individuals with similar needs to study participants in order to gauge effectiveness would be advantageous to researchers prior to study implementation.

Another limitation associated with this study pertains to the small number of participants. The difficulty in securing participants for this study was due to the fact that relatively few students in the current secondary school cohort are identified with Asperger Syndrome. This fact stems from the fairly recent addition of the designation into the DSM-IV in 1994 and the interchangeable use of the quasi-diagnosis of High Functioning Autism by many practitioners. Similarly, many parents do not wish to have their child's diagnosis publically available for fear of embarrassment or judgment.

In addition to these limitations, the ITP documentation used as a peripheral comparison was difficult and time consuming to secure. It is important to note that even with these limitations, this study is one of the few to date to examine the perceptions of students with disabilities in reference to their Individualized Transition Plans and therefore contributes to the overall understanding of the how students view current disability policy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study supports further examination concerning student perspectives in special education policy exploration. Relating to the obvious lack of literature focusing on student perspectives, there remains a persistent need for the inclusion of the perspectives of individuals with disabilities and the empowerment of an inclusive policy process.

Future studies aiming to understand the secondary effects of educational policy and processes would enhance the current body of knowledge concerning special education policy. By closely listening to the voices of students, researchers can identify subtle, underlying themes that may point to issues not easily quantified by statistics or paperwork. These themes can be as influential as the recorded outcomes for policies and can enrich an overall service model for high functioning students with disabilities.

A longitudinal study following a group of students with ASD or Asperger Syndrome beyond secondary school would be advantageous to the study of transition policy. The identification of educational and life outcomes concerning this population of students could provide important insights into the strengths and weaknesses of current transition policies. In addition, the acknowledgement of external forces and social factors that have a bearing on the success of the policy could also offer vital information as changes or improvements are sought.

Broader research considering multiple life factors including parental involvement as well as parental attitude towards their child's disability would also be informative to researchers, practitioners and parents.

Further studies from the student perspective can expand current research concerning student voice. It is often the case that there are additional implications to the policies set forth that are not apparent through the gathering of quantitative data alone thereby supporting continued qualitative research studies. Student perspectives can add underlying motivations that a policy may promote that cannot be measured by investigating graduation rates or post-secondary educational success alone.

CONCLUSION

Public policy and special education have become intertwined in the American educational fabric, at times causing us to lose sight of the individuality of the very students served by these vital programs. This study helped me to reconnect the many disjointed facets of the Individualized Transition Plan and process that is the cornerstone of special education services today. As a qualitative researcher, I attempted to enter this study open minded and without preconception. Through my experiences as an educator and my intensive research concerning students with Asperger Syndrome, I believed that I understood the social and communication abilities of those on the Autism spectrum. Even in light of my preparation and experience, I was truly astounded by what the data revealed and how the participants interacted in the study process. The participants in this study were typical teenagers bravely and successfully navigating their way through secondary school as individuals with social and communication differences not always understood but always present. Their insight into the Individualized Transition Plan and process not only demonstrated their personal abilities but also

revealed the value of public policy while helping to impress the need for improvement and further research. There appears to be a gap when it comes to transition planning for students such as those with Asperger Syndrome who have goals and aspirations similar to typical students in addition to the abilities to achieve them.

Throughout this study much insight was gained and many lessons learned in regards to methodology. A number of weak links were discovered along the way as data collection methods proved less valuable or more valuable in uncovering information essential to the study premise. The research methods that were successful provided a framework that allowed for a number of valuable themes to emerge providing connections that could be created among the participants that produced an overall understanding of this small but important group of students identified with Asperger Syndrome. The student participants seemed to benefit from their participation as they were afforded the chance to have their voices heard and to provide the impetus for further research that could assist them and the many students who will follow them into the American public education system.

In addition to providing me with experience in social research, this study was rewarding to me both as an educator and simply as a person. Rather than simply seeing students identified with disabilities as part of a formula used to calculate their needs as learners through research based methodology, I began to view them as individuals. The opportunity to perceive my participants as active and ever changing members of our schools and our communities was truly amazing. Their stories were rich with insight and showed the many similarities and differences as individuals of different ages who possessed diverse goals and aspirations. The frank and often

surprising dialogue and comments will forever impact my view of students identified with disabilities as well as the student population as a whole.

Overall, this limited study provided a glimpse into the Individualized Transition Planning process through the lens of the primary policy constituent, the student. By exploring the experiences of students identified with Asperger Syndrome, the study data not only represented the students as capable and communicative but also showed that the ITP policy was empowering to the group of students in this study both directly and indirectly. It also emphasized the need for further research and the examination of improvement to the Individualized Transition Process as a whole in support of students with social differences.

SUMMARY

Chapter Five reviewed the initial policy and research questions that were the basis for the study of the perception of high school students with Asperger Syndrome in reference to their Individualized Transition Plan and Process. This chapter discussed the major findings that emerged in Chapter Four, lessons learned through the study process as well as a review of the implications of the ITP documents collected. Finally, implications for future research were explored.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A-1

Dear Participant,

Your interview has been scheduled for _____ at _____. Please arrive 10 minutes prior to your appointment. You will not need any supplies. If you have any questions prior to your interview please contact Susanne Killian by email: skillian@wcpss.net or phone: 562-9819. I have provided the interview questions below for your review.

Thank you for your participation.

Interview Questions

These are the interview questions I will be asking you. Additional questions may arise as we speak. This interview will be very casual and you will be able to express your ideas and opinions. I will not be judging or grading your answers.

Interview Questions

1. Explain, in your opinion, the role of your IEP transition plan in your life both educationally and personally.
2. Tell me about your educational and life goals through high school.
3. Now tell me about your educational and life goals for ten years beyond high school.
4. Tell me about your future career goals upon the completion of your education.
5. Which of your goals and interests are supported in your Individualized Transition Plan?
6. How do you perceive your role as a student in the formation of your IEP transition plan.

7. Let's discuss how will you use your transition plan to reach your post-secondary goals.
 8. Tell me how often you refer to your IEP during the school year.
 9. Let's talk about your Individualized Transition Plan. What information is contained in your ITP?
10. In what ways does your ITP address how you will reach your educational and life goals for the future?

Appendix A-2

School Name Here

Date Here

Salutation: Mr. *****
Address *** *****
Address*****

Dear Mr./Ms.:

I am writing to secure formal written permission to conduct my research, a case study, at ***** High School. The research is designed to satisfy the requirements for a Ph.D. at North Carolina State University.

As I shared with you through our prior communication on the telephone and via email, I intend to conduct a qualitative case study of three students in local North Carolina high schools. The focus of the study is to gain insight into the perceptions that these students carry in reference to their IDEA mandated Individualized Transition Plans.

The methods I have chosen for data collection include interviews, document collection, participant journaling and secure and public blogging. It is my intent to review written ITP plans, report cards, student schedules, interview selected students and review student journals. The proposed participation includes only one student from your institution concerning their perceptions of the transition process as identified in the IDEA legislation.

I appreciate your support in allowing me access to your school and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Susanne Killian

Appendix B

North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board For The Use of Human Subjects in Research

GUIDELINES FOR PREPARATION OF INFORMED CONSENT FORM

PLEASE READ ALL OF THIS INFORMATION CAREFULLY **PRIOR TO COMPLETING THE CONSENT FORM**

An **Informed Consent Statement** has two purposes: (1) to provide adequate information to potential research subjects to make an informed choice as to their participation in a study, and (2) to document their decision to participate. In order to make an informed choice, potential subjects must understand the study, how they are involved in the study, what sort of risks it poses to them and who they can contact if a problem arises (see informed consent checklist for a full listing of required elements of consent). Please note that **the language used to describe these factors must be understandable to all potential subjects, which typically means an eighth grade reading level.** The informed consent form is to be read and signed by each subject who participates in the study **before** they begin participation in the study. A duplicate copy is to be provided to each subject.

If subjects are **minors (i.e. any subject under the age of 18)** use the following guidelines for obtaining consent:

- 0-5 years old** – requires signature of parent(s)/guardian/legal representative
- 6 – 10 years old** - requires signature of parent(s)/guardian/legal representative and verbal assent from the minor. In this case a minor assent script should be prepared and submitted along with a parental consent form.
- 11 - 17 years old** - requires signature of both minor and parent/guardian/legal representative

If the subject or legal representative is *unable to read and/or understand the written consent form*, it must be verbally presented in an understandable manner and witnessed (with signature of witness). If there is a good chance that your intended subjects will not be able to read and/or understand a written consent form, please contact the IRB office (919-515-7515 or 919-515-4514) for further instructions.

*For your convenience, attached find a sample consent form template that contains necessary information. In generating a form for a specific project, the principal investigator should complete the underlined areas of the form and replicate all of the text that is not underlined,

except for the compensation section where you should select the appropriate text to be used out of several different scenarios.

*This consent form template can also be adapted and used as an information sheet for subjects when signed informed consent is waived by the IRB. An information sheet is usually required even when signed informed consent is waived. The information sheet should typically include all of the elements included below minus the subject signature line; however it may be modified in consultation with the IRB.

**North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH**

Student Perceptions of their IDEA Mandated Transition Plan and Process

Principal Investigator: Susanne Rhodes Killian

Faculty Sponsor : Bonnie Fusarelli

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of the perceptions that secondary students identified with Asperger Syndrome have in reference to the IDEA mandated Individualized Transition Plan. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to better understand how high school students with Asperger Syndrome view their IDEA mandated Individualized Transition Plan.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Take part in up to 2, 30 minute audio taped individual interviews (40 minutes including two 5 minute breaks)
- Allow the researcher access to the parent copy of your Individualized Transition Plan, your IEP, and your school schedules
- Keep a journal in response to 5 journal prompts
- Take part in a secure blog concerning the issue of Asperger Syndrome and Individualized Transition Plans.
- You will be asked follow-up questions relating to your responses.

You will have the choice of locations for the interview sessions including your home, a private room at a local library or a private room at North Carolina State University. The amount of time you will have to donate to this study will vary. In addition to the 80 total minutes of interview time you will be taking time to respond to journal prompts and blog entries. In all 15 – 20 hours of your time may be needed to gather data.

Risks

You may face discomfort with the social nature of the interview process. The interview duration will be kept at a maximum 40 minutes to lessen stress on you, the participant. You will be provided with two 5 minute breaks during the interviewing process and will be given the option to respond in writing or through drawing. You will be utilizing online resources including email, blogs and computer-based journaling which carry confidentiality risks. I will take all measures possible to protect your confidentiality throughout the project.

Benefits

An anticipated benefit of this study is the better understanding of your views and perceptions regarding your Individualized Transition Plan. At the current time the views of students like yourself have not been widely used in policy research and your voice will add to the importance of using student views in policy making. In addition, this study may benefit you directly by involving you to a greater extent in their transition planning.

Confidentiality

The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. Data will be stored securely in a locked and private facility. No reference will be made in any reports which could link you to the study. You will be provided with an identifier made up of letters and numbers to be used in journal responses, emails and blog responses. Your journaling prompts and responses will be kept on an individual flash drive provided for your use only which I encourage you to keep secure and for the use of this study only. When you have completed your journaling I will collect your flash drive and gather information off-line. In addition the blog will be hosted by a fee-based company offering increased security and private blogging. Emails will be encrypted beyond that provided by the email provider. At the conclusion of the study audiotapes and flash drives will be destroyed.

Compensation

Not applicable. For participating in this study you will not receive any monetary compensation.

What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Susanne Rhodes Killian, at 3932 Forgotten Pond Ave., Wake Forest NC 27587, or 919-971-6205.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514).

Consent To Participate

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Participant's signature_____

Date _____

Parent's signature_____

Date _____

Investigator's signature_____

Date _____

Appendix C-1

Interview Protocol Sheet
Participant Identifier: _____

Location: _____

Time Beginning: _____

Breaks: _____

Time Ending: _____

- 1. Meet student and bring them to interview room**
- 2. Introductions**
- 3. Review the physical area in the room as well as the time constraints and questioning format.**
- 4. Demonstrate how the technology devices (the digital tape recorder) works and how it will be used in addition to explaining that the researcher will be using a pad and pen to record extra information.**
- 5. Ask the participant if they are comfortable with the surrounding.**
- 6. Have them seated and open with some general questions such as:**
 - a. Where do you attend school?**
 - b. Explain to me what your school is like.**
 - c. What types of subjects are you interested in?**
- 7. Explain the interview process to the participant and provide them with a means to communicate when a break is needed or if they become uncomfortable with the situation. A yellow note card will be provided for a non-verbal notification method.**
- 8. Begin the interview by following the interview questions outlined below**
- 9. Take breaks at 15 minute intervals allowing the participant to stretch or use the restroom**
- 10. At the end of 60 minutes of interview time (not including breaks) sum up the interview allowing the participant to complete their final thoughts**
- 11. Express your gratitude with your participant**
- 12. Provide your participant with the outline for the digital journaling segment of the research along with researcher contact information.**
- 13. Allow the participant to be dismissed**

Interview Questions

These are the interview questions I will be asking you. Additional questions may arise as we speak. This interview will be very casual and you will be able to express your ideas and opinions. I will not be judging or grading your answers.

Interview Questions

1. Explain, in your opinion, the role of your IEP transition plan in your life both educationally and personally.
2. Tell me about your educational and life goals through high school.
3. Now tell me about your educational and life goals for ten years beyond high school.
4. Tell me about your future career goals upon the completion of your education.
5. Which of your goals and interests are supported in your Individualized Transition Plan?
6. How do you perceive your role as a student in the formation of your IEP transition plan.
7. Let's discuss how will you use your transition plan to reach your post-secondary goals.
8. Tell me how often you refer to your IEP during the school year.
9. Let's talk about your Individualized Transition Plan. What information is contained in your ITP?
10. In what ways does your ITP address how you will reach your educational and life goals for the fu

Appendix C-2

Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. Explain, in your opinion, the role of your IEP transition plan in your life both educationally and personally.
2. Tell me about your educational and life goals through high school.
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4. Tell me about your future career goals upon the completion of your education.
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6. How do you perceive your role as a student in the formation of your IEP transition plan.
7. Let's discuss how will you use your transition plan to reach your post-secondary goals.
8. Tell me how often you refer to your IEP during the school year.
9. Let's talk about your Individualized Transition Plan. What information is contained in your ITP?
10. In what ways does your ITP address how you will reach your educational and life goals for the future?

Appendix D

Document Summary Form

Document Name: _____

Source of the Document: _____

Date Retrieved: _____

Date Reviewed: _____

Purpose(s) of Document:

Document is important to study because:

Summary of Document:

Appendix E

Wake County Public School System: Transition Services Assessment Instruments For Transition Planning Across Grade Levels												
#	Assessment Type	Assessment Instrument	Elem.		Middle			High			LI	
			3rd	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	MS/HS
1	Interest and Skill Inventories	Who Am I?	*	*	*							*
2	Interest and Skill Inventories	Things I Am Good At Doing		*	*	*	*					*
3	Interest and Skill Inventories	Personal Strengths Checklist			*	*	*	*				*
4	Interest and Skill Inventories	Interest Inventory				*	*					*
5	Rating Scales	This Is How I See Myself	*	*	*	*	*					*
6	Rating Scales	Assessing My Multiple Intelligences						*	*	*	*	*
7	Rating Scales	Career Portfolio						*	*	*	*	*
8	Interest and Skill Inventories	Princeton Review Career Quiz						*	*	*	*	*
9	Rating Scales	Job-Related Interest/Preference Inventory						*	*	*	*	*
10	Interest and Skill Inventories	Getting Ready For Your Job: A Job Preparation Awareness Survey						*	*	*	*	*
11	Rating Scales	Work Personality Profile						*	*	*	*	*
12	Rating Scales	Self-Determination/Self Advocacy Checklist			*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
13	Interest and Skill Inventories	Personal And Professional Goal Worksheet		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
14	Rating Scales	School And Community Social Skills Rating Checklist				*	*	*	*	*	*	*
15	Interviews	Student Interview Form							*	*	*	
16	Interest and Skill Inventories	WCPSS Job Readiness Assessment						*	*	*	*	
17	Interest and Skill Inventories	Let's Look At Relationships						*	*	*	*	
18	Interviews or Informal Assessment	Student Dream Sheet			*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
19	Interviews	Post-Secondary Questionnaire										*
20	Rating Scales	WCPSS Transition Planning Guide				*	*	*	*	*	*	*
21	Informal Assessment	Future Outcomes/Goals Assessment: Student					*	*	*	*		
22	Informal Assessment	Future Outcomes/Goals Assessment: Parent					*	*	*	*	*	

Appendix F

SECONDARY TRANSITION COMPONENT

Students with Disabilities, age 14 and older, are required to have a transition component to their IEP.
Sections A and B of the component are required for students who are 14 and 15 years old. All sections of the component are required for students 16 years and older.

Duration of Special Education and Related Services: From: ____ / ____ / ____ To: ____ / ____ / ____

Student: _____
DOB: ____ / ____ / ____
School: _____
Grade: _____

IDEA requires students be informed that rights will transfer to them at age 18. This notice must be given at age 17. Checking "yes" below will meet this requirement. Check N/A if the statement does not apply.

Has the student been informed of his/her rights, if age 17 and older? Yes N/A

The following section provides information and documentation regarding who provided information and how it was collected. IEP teams are instructed to provide details, as requested.

Section A - Student Needs, Strengths, Preferences and Interests (Beginning at age 14 and updated annually)

The following people gave information about the student's needs, strengths, preferences and interests and course of study selection:

- Student
- Parent(s), Guardian(s) and Family Members
- Adult Service Agency Representatives (specify): _____
- School Staff
- Other (Explain): _____

Indicate which age appropriate transition assessments were conducted for the development of measurable postsecondary goals and transition activities and the date they were conducted:

INFORMAL ASSESSMENT(S):

- Interest and Skill Inventories _____
- Observations/Situational Assessments _____
- Rating Scales _____
- Interviews _____
- Other (Explain): _____

FORMAL ASSESSMENT(S):

- _____
- Other (Explain): _____

The following section is required for all students ages 14 and up. Check one of the options below. If possible, the four-year plan for the student who is in high school should be examined and attached.

Section B – Course of Study (Beginning at age 14 and updated annually)

The student is following a course of study that leads to the high school diploma:

- Future Ready Core Course of Study (effective with the 9th grade class of 2009/2010)
- College/University Prep Course of Study*
- College Tech Prep Course of Study*
- Career Preparation Course of Study*

(*Not applicable to students entering 9th grade beginning with the freshman class of 2009-2010.)

- Occupational Course of Study

The student is following extensions of the standard course of study and pursuing the graduation certificate _____.

The student is in middle school and is following the North Carolina Standard Course of Study _____; or the extensions of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study _____.

IDEA requires that students with disabilities have a measurable post-secondary goal in the areas of education/training and employment. The only optional post-secondary goal is independent living. The IEP team will determine if a goal to support independent living is appropriate.

Post-secondary goals must be written for what the student will do after high school and should not reflect his/her current activities.

Annual goals, based on the student's present level of performance should clearly be linked to his/her post-secondary goals. What skills will the student need in order to accomplish his/her post-secondary goals?

Appendix G

SUBJECTIVITY STATEMENT

We all carry biases in our daily lives, but these biases can be detrimental to a researcher if he or she is not aware of them. I carry a number of biases relating to my study topic concerning the perceptions of students in reference to their Individualized Transition Plans.

The greatest biases I face in myself are those connected to being a public school teacher. I have been a certified vocational educator for almost 15 years. Vocational classes were mainstreamed before mainstreaming students with disabilities into the regular education classroom was mandated by federal and state legislation. Through my interaction with students with disabilities in both the classroom and as the regular education member of their IEP teams I often feel as though I am too much of an advocate. I believe in the rights of those with disabilities to be treated with understanding and dignity. Due to my positive interactions with students with disabilities I often feel that they are not educationally and socially supported or they are not afforded the appropriate services. It is imperative that I curb these feelings of advocacy and become open to the realization that I can save the world and that I must allow the research to speak for itself, untainted by my views. I will attempt to do this by discussing issues with my peers and finding a confidant who can help me to remain impartial as I collect data. I will also need to reflect by journaling my frustrations if I see behaviors and actions that I deem inefficient and ultimately unsupportive of students with disabilities.

I am also a very conservative teacher who believes in consistency and justice. I believe in following guidelines supported by research and utilizing proven practices. Teachers and

educational managers who are not knowledgeable concerning their areas of employment are very frustrating to me. In the collection of documents there is a chance that such artifacts as IEP plans and ITP plans will not be completed according to legislative guidelines. It is necessary that I simply collect data and artifacts with the understanding that I am not critiquing them, but using the information gained from them to identify themes and topics.

In addition, I have a giant justice complex. I follow rules and expect the world to do the same. Through my data collection and research for this study I must keep in mind that I am not conducting action research. I do not wish to directly change policy at this time. I am simply trying to identify a group's perceptions in order to open a dialogue concerning an issue. Through the knowledge that there will be ultimate benefit down the road, by adding to the current literature, I feel that I will be able to curb my need for constant equity.

I have been privileged in my life and have always been in a secure financial and social position allowing me to worry about social equality for others. My family's social consciousness and community work instilled me with the need and desire to help others. I must often look through the lenses of others to understand that there are basic needs that come before justice and equity. I gain a great deal of support and insight through discussion with my close friends and spouse who have differing life perspectives due to their diverse backgrounds.