ABSTRACT

Jones Richard, Ayanna Quiane. A Qualitative Study on the Perspectives of Secondary Special Education Teachers in a North Carolina School System on Creating, Implementing, and Evaluating the Effectiveness of Transition Plans for Students with Disabilities (Under the direction of Dr. Jennifer Ayscue)

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the perspectives of secondary special education teachers in a North Carolina school district as it related to transition plans through the lens of two diploma options (Future-Ready Core and Occupational Course of Study) and Indicator 13 (required transition plan components) and Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcome one year after high school). Successful transition after high school for students with disabilities is imperative and there is a specific need to address transition professionals' perspectives about how transition plans are written as well as how they are implemented. Federal guidelines outlined in IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004) continue to require transition planning as students matriculate through high school to postsecondary outcomes.

This research was conducted in a purposefully selected public-school district, where the participants were secondary special education teachers who taught two diploma options within comprehensive high schools in the district. It addressed three research questions with the third research question having two subsequent follow-up questions. Findings from the study provided insight into the effectiveness of transition plans for students with disabilities from the perspective of special education teachers.

Participants emphasized the importance of collaboration with colleagues and IEP team member input, highlighting the central role the student plays in crafting the transition plan through their input. Understanding there was a distinct difference in the transition planning of students on the different diploma options was captured in the findings, maintaining all transition plans were created to prepare students for postsecondary success, albeit goals in some instances

were not realistic. As it relates to data collection and Indicator 13 (required transition plan components), transition plans consistently contained the necessary components for compliance guidelines, with perceptions of the requirements being met but overall not effective as a result of lack of evaluation. Lack of familiarity with the terminology and formal data collection for Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcomes on year after high school) yielded ineffective transition plans as secondary special education teachers in this research did not collect formal data, although many were able to maintain contact with students and determine favorable post-school outcomes through the relationships they had established. Based on the findings, implications for special education policy and special education practice were offered. Suggestions for future research were detailed and generally related to transition plans, postsecondary outcomes, plan effectiveness, and federally mandated data collection.

A Qualitative Study on the Perspectives of Secondary Special Education Teachers in a North Carolina School System on Creating, Implementing, and Evaluating the Effectiveness of Transition Plans for Students with Disabilities

by
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DEDICATION

This body of work is dedicated to my daughter Annaya Christiana Rose Richard for creating a drive in me to be a better version of myself and demonstrating that with the proper plan and focus, you can accomplish anything you set your mind to. Also, to my mother, Doris Veronica Heath Jones, for always instilling in her children the importance of education and the sentiment that education is the one acquisition in life that once you have it, no one can ever take it away from you. She is the epitome of motherhood, always encouraging her daughters that anything with God is possible and taking every opportunity to do whatever was needed to support our dreams and aspirations. There would be no me without you. Thank you for being a model mother to Tasha and me, a phenomenal MiMi to my daughter, an extraordinary educator, a faithful friend, and a marvelous mentor!

BIOGRAPHY

Professionally, I am a certified special education teacher and administrator. During my educational career, I have taught every disability exceptionality and core subject in the classroom at all grade levels. Then, I was privileged to serve as a county special education compliance specialist working with several schools within the district, building-level administration as an assistant principal and principal. I went on to district special education administration, providing support as a senior administrator for high school programming and district director. Special education is a passion of mine, as are all the students and families we serve. It is important for me to advocate for teachers, families, and students by providing whatever support I can to assist each student in reaching their full potential. Currently, at 23 years of educational service, I serve as the executive leader for the Exceptional Children's Department in one of the state's largest public-school systems. It's encouraging to bring fresh ideas, a spirit of collaboration, and a diverse educational background to help facilitate progress toward the next level of teaching and learning for all students. I embrace the opportunity to serve the students, families, and teachers in this capacity, always focusing on knowing and understanding that "all students have the capacity to learn; we simply have to find what capacity to teach them!"

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

For students, transitioning into adulthood from high school is usually defined as successful when one can demonstrate achievement of specific developmental tasks (Henniger & Taylor, 2014) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14). Transition planning in high school involves preparing youth to leave school and begin their young adult lives as participants in postsecondary education, employment, and community life (Munsell & Schwartz, 2022). In a culture such as North America, where productive citizenship is valued, students' preparation to contribute positively to society is considered a crucial milestone of adulthood (Gerhardt & Bahry, 2022). Postsecondary preparation can and does occur through transition planning for students at the secondary level. A transition plan outlines a roadmap of the high school classes students will take and the specialized transitional services they will receive in high school to result in their postsecondary goals being met. Planning is especially important for individuals identified as having disabilities; under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), transition services should be results-oriented and focus on improving the academic and functional achievement of students with disabilities to facilitate their movement from secondary to postsecondary activities (IDEA, 2004). Academic achievement refers to a student's ability to access the general curriculum in the least restrictive environment alongside their non-disabled peers and demonstrate success on thorough state assessments (Thornton et al., 2004). Functional achievement speaks to a student's ability to access and complete daily tasks and activities that are not considered or related to academic achievement (Bouck, 2012). Research on transition planning and the role of transitional professionals highlights that student plans are consistently inadequate in planning and executing favorable post-school outcomes for students (Fabian et al., 1998). Until transition plans are approached more competently and helpfully by teachers, parents, students, administrators, and outside agency representatives, students with disabilities will continue to be disadvantaged after graduation (Miller-Warren, 2015).

According to Haber et al. (2015), students identified with disabilities experience poorer postsecondary outcomes in comparison to their peers who are not identified as having a disability. The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS-2), which includes data from a national sample with over 8,000 students, indicates that only 27% of students with disabilities were enrolled in postsecondary education compared to 68% of students without disabilities (NLTS-2, 2009). In addition, over 30% of students with disabilities drop out of high school or never enter high school (Fabian et al., 1998). Post-school education data indicated that only 7.7% of sampled students with disabilities attended a four-year college or university, and 12.8% attended a two-year community college (Test et al., 2009). A different study examined over 2,000 participants identified as students with disabilities participating in a school-to-work intervention program between 1990 and 1995 (Fabian et al., 1998). This study focused on transition plan interventions for student participation in an academy where transition professionals provided specific transition instruction and services. Researchers followed up with students six months after program completion to determine whether they were employed or enrolled in school. The results indicated that 84% of participants worked or were enrolled in postsecondary education. These statistics are unique because students who received specific transition support were largely successful. However, more study is needed for students with disabilities who would not ordinarily have access to this specific type of specialized transition programming. Historically, postsecondary outcomes achieved by students with disabilities have been poor (Fabian et al., 1998), with a lack of access to targeted transition curriculum. Although some improvements have been made, and post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities have increased slightly over the years, there is still a need for greater improvement in the areas of employment, education, and independent living (Test et al., 2009).

Before the current iteration of the IDEA 2004 legislation, a persistent concern that educators and parents had with IDEA 1997 was how to address postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities (Prince et al., 2013). Although the framework for effective transition services and supports has developed in the last two decades, an effort to prepare students with disabilities to obtain relevant employment after secondary school or college has remained an important outcome of education in the United States (Carter et al., 2012). When the 1997 legislation of IDEA was passed, it was critically important to identify the longstanding need for improved postsecondary transition outcomes among youth with disabilities (Connor et al., 2021). The primary way the legislation accounted for this concern was to incorporate language in the law that created specific mandates on individualized education plans (IEPs) requiring a transition component for a student when they reach the age of 16; this transition component must address the student's plans for after high school. The legislative updates to IDEA that were incorporated in 1997 mandated transition planning to start for all students by the age of postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14), with a component for transition concerning the student's high school options and a statement of required transition services with collaboration with community agencies (Prince et al., 2013). Transition planning must focus on improving the academic achievement of the student with a disability to facilitate their transition from high school to post-school activities; this provides each student with opportunities for successful transition outcomes (Li et al., 2009). Although this is necessary for successful postsecondary outcomes, many students do not have effective transition plans that map out planned high school transition activities and eventually align with their postsecondary goals.

This qualitative study will examine the perspectives of transition professionals in a North Carolina school district and their interactions with students' transition plans. Transition professionals include transition specialists, exceptional children instructional specialists, and special education teachers working in future-ready and occupational course of study courses. These professionals shared their experiences of their involvement with students' transition plans, students' engagement in prescribed high school transition activities, students' specific course of study, and what students with disabilities engage in as it relates to postsecondary outcomes after completion of secondary school. The curriculum and courses that a student takes in high school are expected to improve their knowledge base, as well as their skills, in an effort to prepare them for their postsecondary outcomes (Long et al., 2012). Previous quantitative research has focused on systematically evaluating secondary school experiences of students with disabilities and postsecondary experiences in work, postsecondary schooling, training, and adult living (Mazzotti et al., 2016). This research aims to use a qualitative approach to examine the perspectives of transition professionals in a North Carolina school district and what they believe about the role transition plans play in the outcomes of students with disabilities once they have graduated high school. This research is unique in that it explores the perspective of those professionals and how effective transition plans are, as well as how it relates to federal expectations of those plans and data collection through required transition plan components (Indicator 13) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14). These indicators are the federal mandates for evaluating the appropriateness of the transition plans and their components and optimizing students' postsecondary outcomes one year after completing high school. Specifically, required transition plan components (Indicator 13) is the percentage of youth aged 16 and above with an IEP that includes coordinated, measurable, annual IEP goals and transition services that will reasonably enable the student to meet the postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14) is the percent of youth who had IEPs, are no longer in secondary school, and who have been competitively employed, enrolled in some type of postsecondary school, or both, within one year of leaving high school.

Although numerous studies have been conducted over the years about student transition and their postsecondary outcomes, there remains a need for more research that focuses on transition professionals' views of transition plans and how data is collected and reported. Research is needed to identify in-school secondary transition predictors such as plan effectiveness, course-taking patterns, and prescribed transition activities related to postsecondary school success (Mazzotti et al., 2016). Primarily, past studies have focused on using the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS-2), which gathered quantitative data from students identified as having disabilities from 2001 until 2009. These studies, such as Fabian et al.'s (1998) study and Test et al.'s (2009) study mentioned earlier, conducted secondary quantitative analyses of the data provided by this uniquely important database to conduct correlational studies of youth with disabilities' in-school experiences and post-school outcomes (Mazzotti et al., 2016). While valuable, collecting data from students neither gives any insight into the professionals who write transition plans nor their thoughts on the transition plan process, the agencies that participate, and ultimately, the plan's effectiveness as it relates to required transition plan components (indicator 13) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14).

It is important to look at the high school experiences and the inclusion of transition components, such as on-the-job training, vocational courses, opportunities for certifications during high school, general curriculum, and how these components relate to students enrolling in college, two-year certification programs, vocational training, and possibly joining the workforce. This qualitative study will focus on gathering information from various transition professionals as it relates to components of transition plans: the courses of study a student participates in during high school, transition activities, agency participation in the transition process, and how these components are related to a student's post-school outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

Since successful transition into society is necessary for all students and transition planning for students with a disability is a federal mandate, there is a specific need to address transition professionals' perspectives about how transition plans are written as well as how they are implemented for students in a North Carolina school district with a focus on students with disabilities who are on two different high school diploma options. One of the most challenging transitions for individuals is to become adults, with all the rights, privileges, and obligations that adulthood implies (Eaves et al., 2012). Educators are responsible for providing good, solid transition instruction in high school, well-written, realistic transition plans, and proper processes to evaluate student outcomes (Carter et al., 2012).

Federal guidelines from the IDEA, reauthorized in 2004, included a mandate with specific transition language that all students identified with a disability must have a plan that followed specified guidelines. Including their transition plans in their IEP needs to occur before the student turns 16 (Park & Bouck, 2018), as IDEA requires the transition planning process for a student's movement from high school to post-school environments. The three components of the transition plan include (a) academic and functional achievement, (b) individual student needs, and (c) course of study, postsecondary outcomes, and postsecondary support. The course of study speaks to the academic path toward graduation through the required courses. The district and state requirements for a high school diploma outline a student's course of study. This includes a certain number of English, math, science, and history courses and elective courses categorized by areas, such as music and fine arts, career and technical education, remedial classes, and vocational courses. For students with disabilities, the transition plan includes goals and services that dictate some of these course offerings in those students' selected course of study. The postsecondary outcomes address education/training, employment, and independent living (where appropriate). Special education teachers are mainly responsible for IEP meetings and direct service delivery; as such, they should integrate responsibilities for planning and delivering transition services and activities (Li et al., 2009). They are the individuals and identified transition specialists who write the transition plans and most often provide the instructional support for coursework and services as outlined in the plans.

Consistent with the law, special educators should acknowledge the importance of developing a course of study based on transition needs and not be forced to choose between transition services and the general education curriculum (Li et al., 2009). Regardless of one's philosophical orientation to curriculum, researchers, educators, and policymakers ultimately want what is best for students with disabilities in school and for post-school success (Bouck, 2012). IDEA makes clear that students with disabilities with postsecondary outcomes after graduation should have post-school success by meeting their transition goals. To determine success, it is necessary to identify what students are doing by evaluating their enrollments and certificate program completion, whether a traditional college degree or vocational training program—determining if the course programming in high school is related to meeting identified goals, including entering the employment field.

In North Carolina, students in high school have three different options of study, two of which produce a high school diploma and are this study's focus. All North Carolina students who enroll in secondary school, regardless of disability status, follow the Future-Ready Course of Study (FRC). This course of study includes general education courses in mathematics, English, sciences, history, and electives. Students identified as having a disability can follow the FRC of Study, or an IEP team may determine, based on the disability, that another diploma option is most appropriate, which would consist of the Occupational Course of Study (OCS). This course of study includes general education electives, although all core courses in mathematics, English, history, and science are self-contained courses where all students are identified with disabilities, and the teacher of record is a special education teacher. This course of study also includes a substantial vocational component by way of Occupational Studies I-IV or Employment Preparation I-IV, which focuses on employment or specific vocations in preparation for postsecondary outcomes, with a significant work hour completion component.

In addition to North Carolina, several states have identified multiple student diploma options, including two neighboring states (Georgia and Virginia; Education Commission of the States, 2024). Currently, not much research highlights transition professionals' views of those diploma options and how they relate to transition planning (Morgan, 2015). Transition plans outline a trajectory for students to pursue specific interests and goals once they leave the public-school environment. However, this information is not consistently gathered from the school to the federal level. The data is often incomplete, as there is no mandate for students to participate, nor are there protocols in place during a student's tenure to plan for consistent, uniform data collection over North Carolina or the United States once they have exited high school. The impact of gathering more complete data and preparing for data collection through the IEP process would support more information that can be used to formulate better transition plans that align students' courses of study and their intended postsecondary outcomes. More complete transition data could increase the success of students with disabilities and how they effectively transition into adulthood. For example, it would be useful to explore student postsecondary outcomes through the lens of a transition professional as it relates to the mandates and data concerning required transition plan components (Indicator 13) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14). High school course credits, high school academic achievement, graduation, and postsecondary entry have all been examined through myriad studies utilizing national samples of high school students to determine their effect on student transition (Long et al., 2012). Most studies have found little correlation between high school coursework and postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities; however, these studies do not account for the transition professionals' views when writing and implementing those plans.

Ultimately, educators want to improve student post-school outcomes via transition plans, create greater alignment with the IEP, and increase the number of students completing and graduating from postsecondary programs. Standard best practices for success include (a) transition planning and self-determination at an early age, (b) engagement of family members when planning the transition, (c) individualized transition plans, (d) career and technical education experiences, (e) utilization of a functional curriculum for independent living, (f) inclusive educational practices, and (g) interagency embedded in the process of collaboration (Park & Bouck, 2018). Bouck (2012) studied post-school outcomes (i.e., employment, independent living, and post-secondary education) about the functional and academic curricula taught during high school. Park and Bouck (2018) reported that students with disabilities have low rates for positive post-school outcomes, and there is no relationship between academic or functional curriculum with any postsecondary outcome but suggested an in-depth analysis of services in high school such as curriculum and transition resources, would lead to positive postsecondary outcomes (Park & Bouck, 2018). Previous research examining the NLTS-2 reflected that almost all students (98.6%) had a transition plan; however, the study did not look specifically at what was included in the transition plan (Park & Bouck, 2018).

Miller-Warren (2015) examined the transition plans from a sample of graduates with disabilities from the class of 2011 in a small rural school district, and those plans did not meet the proposed criteria for a sound plan. Criteria set by IDEA were used to evaluate the quality of the transition plans, and many of them proved inadequate. The research-based criteria were taken from a combination of sources, which included IDEA 2004 regulations and required transition plan components (Indicator 13) components, such as what postsecondary outcomes (i.e., work, vocational training, and two- or four-year college) a student was engaged in one year post high school graduation (Miller-Warren, 2015). Transition plans were poorly done, and there was little documentation of transition activities coupled with a lack of follow-up on students' postsecondary outcomes. Trainor (2005) completed research on self-determination to examine transition strategies and the overall involvement of students of different racial groups in the process. Although all participants in the study expressed a desire to pursue postsecondary education, in comparison to white students, African American and Hispanic participants were more frequently enrolled in career and technical education programs. Although it was a very interesting finding, no information was included about the courses or transition activities those students took and experienced in high school.

There are also specific cases of litigation over the years that demonstrate what actually occurs when there are perceived deficits with some transition planning for postsecondary outcomes. In the *Q.C-C. v. District of Columbia* (2016) case filed by a family on behalf of their daughter against the District of Columbia school system, the family claimed their daughter was denied a free and appropriate public education. Their petition accused the school district of failing to develop an age-appropriate transition plan, as the plan neither included courses addressing academic deficiencies nor addressed college preparation. The school district was found to be at fault in the court decision because the transition plan was not reasonable, realistic, or attainable (Prince et al., 2013).

Another case that demonstrates how the transition plan failed to address the particulars needed for a student's postsecondary outcome based on the plan was *C.D. v. Natick Public School District* (2019). In this case, a family filed suit claiming their son was interested in sports and broadcasting. The student was placed in a district program for postsecondary transition but was never given a vocational assessment. The court ruled the school district was at fault because this student's postsecondary goals included in his transition plan did not involve career and technical education, but his transition interest was in an academic course of study (Prince et al., 2013), which would have included general academic courses.

Transition plans continue to be a topic of interest for students, especially those identified with disabilities. Students who received a rigorous academic curriculum during high school reported more positive post-school outcomes than those who did not. They were represented by slightly higher frequencies of enrollment in two-year and four-year postsecondary education (Bouck, 2012). For an increase in efficacy, schools will need to incorporate a transition curriculum, professionals responsible for writing transition plans will need professional development in effective transition plan writing, and how we gather data will need to integrate different methods that encourage student participation. The inclusion of a transition curriculum means that special education teachers, behavior analysts, family members, and members of IEP teams need to take a much longer view of how the transition to adulthood works and when it should start if significant adult skills are to be developed (Gerhardt & Bahry, 2022).

Transition planning for students with disabilities is the cornerstone of placing them on a path to achieve their goals and become productive citizens of society. Although this is necessary for successful postsecondary outcomes, many students still need effective transition plans aligning with their goals. Researchers, educators, and policymakers ultimately want what is best for students with disabilities in school and for post-school success (Bouck, 2012). These plans should be updated annually and revised to align with the student's desires for post-school outcomes, consistently considering courses of study and transition activities. These revisions of the transition plan should occur until the student completes school with a diploma, a certificate of completion, or ages out.

Transition plans for students with disabilities are created to identify a path for students to plan out their post-high school goals while moving into adulthood. This planning is an important aspect, and the plan details the coursework the student will take during high school that will support those goals. Since successful transition into society is necessary for all students and transition planning for students with a disability is a federal mandate, there is a specific need to investigate how we address students' high school transition plans related to transition services and post-school outcomes, along with documenting the results. Educators are responsible for providing solid transition instruction, mapping out the most appropriate high school coursework, writing realistic transition plans, and implementing proper processes to evaluate student outcomes. All of these should work together to result in favorable postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the views and perspectives of secondary special education teachers in a North Carolina school district and their experiences developing and implementing transition plans for students in high school who have disabilities. In particular, this study examined teachers' perspectives about the similarities and/or differences in transition plans written and implemented for students on the Future Ready high school diploma versus the Occupation Course of Study diploma option. Also, this study explored if secondary special education teachers see these transition plans as effective when considering postsecondary outcomes and how those views relate to required transition plan components (Indicator 13) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14). At the conclusion of this research study, I was able to identify themes concerning the transition planning process, how plans are implemented, their perceived effectiveness, alignment with federal transition component mandates (Indicator 13), and finally, those professionals' experiences of postsecondary outcomes of students one year following graduation from high school (Indicator 14).

A qualitative method is appropriate for this study because it allows the examination of the perspectives of several secondary high school special education teachers and the students they directly support in transition. Purposeful selection of relevant individuals is necessary. Several roles within the school district support students with disabilities and transition planning, which include specialists, teachers, and district personnel. This study focused on secondary special education teachers who were included in this study. The findings from this study examined their views and gathered information that provides insight into the research questions posed in this study. Examining the entire content of transition plans was beyond the scope of this research; therefore, for this study, the focus was on the special education teachers and how they relate to various aspects of the transition process and plans.

Research Questions

The following research questions are intended to increase the understanding of the perspectives of transition professionals' relationships and experiences with the transition process for students, along with their views on the postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities. These questions were designed to gain further insight into the similarities and differences in plans for students on different diploma options and the perceived effectiveness and how data about those plans are collected. The effectiveness of transition plans is operationalized as students achieve their identified postsecondary goals and services, as evidenced by data from postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14).

RQ 1: How do secondary special education teachers create and implement transition plans for students with disabilities on two diploma options, Future-Ready-Course of Study and Occupational Course of Study, in North Carolina?

RQ 2: What do secondary special education teachers perceive are the similarities and differences in the nature of transition plans for students on the Future-Ready-Course of Study diploma option and the Occupational Studies diploma option?

RQ 3: How do secondary special education teachers perceive the effectiveness of transition plans for students who complete high school on the Future-Ready-Course of Study diploma option and the Occupational Studies diploma option?

RQ 3a: How do secondary special education teachers perceive the effectiveness of transition plans related to required transition plan components (Indicator 13), the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) appropriateness, and student attainability of transition goals?

RQ 3b: How do secondary special education teachers perceive the effectiveness of transition plans as related to Indicator 14, the postsecondary outcomes of students one year after high school?

Definition of Terms

The following definitions clarify pertinent concepts in the current research study.

Academic Achievement—a student's ability to demonstrate proficiency on academic standards and rigorous state tests (Thornton et al., 2004).

Favorable Postsecondary Outcomes—consist of employment, independent living, attendance to postsecondary training programs, and enrollment in post-school education (IDEA, 2004).

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)—

> special education and related services that-- (a) Are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge; (b) Meet the standards of the SEA, including the requirements of IDEA; (c) Include an appropriate preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education; and (d) Are provided in conformity with an individualized education program (IEP) that meets the requirements of NC 1503-4 and NC 1503-5.1. (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2022b)

General Education Curriculum—the curricular content adopted by a public agency, or schools within a public agency, for students from preschool through secondary education (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022a).

High School Graduate—a student who successfully completes North Carolina curriculum requirements for a high school diploma, which consists of earning at least 22 course credits in the Future Ready Course of Study (FRC) or the Occupational Course of Study (OCS) available for those students with disabilities who are specifically identified for the program and has adapted course requirements and the same credit requirements as FRC (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2022).

Indicator 13—"Percent of youth aged 16 and above with an IEP that includes coordinated, measurable, annual IEP goals and transition services that will reasonably enable the student to meet the post-secondary goals" (U.S. Department of Education, 2020, p. 104).

Indicator 14—"Percent of youth who had IEPs, are no longer in secondary school and who have been competitively employed, enrolled in some type of postsecondary school, or both, within one year of leaving high school" (U.S. Department of Education, 2020, p. 111).

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)—a plan or program developed to ensure that a student who has a disability identified under the law and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives specialized instruction and related services (IDEA, 2004).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)—a law that makes available free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities nationwide and ensures special education and related services to those children (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Self-Determination—"people or peoples having control over their lives and who determine his or her own fate or course of action without compulsion" (Wehmeyer, 1998, pp. 5, 8).

Student with a Disability—

> means a child evaluated in accordance with NC 1503-2.5 through NC 1503-3.5 as having autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, developmental delay (applicable only to children ages three through seven), hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, serious emotional disability, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, or visual impairment (including blindness), and who, by reason of the disability, needs special education and related services. (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2022b, p. 5)

Transition—"process of changing from one state, activity or place to another" (Riches, 1996, p. 71).

Transition Services Plan—IDEA defines special education transition services as:

> [...] a coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability that:
>
> (A) is designed to be within a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, career and technical education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation
>
> (B) is based on the individual child's needs, considering the child's strengths, preferences, and interests; and

(C) includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, when appropriate, the acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. (IDEA, 2004, Section 300.43)

Vocational Training Curriculum—an education program that is formalized variedly, and the aim of the content, ways, and methods of conveyance, which are to grant the set competencies (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022a).

Significance of Study

Youth with disabilities often experience poor post-school outcomes (Prince et al., 2013). The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) reports that a mere 9% of students with disabilities attend universities during their post-school experiences compared to students without disabilities at 70% (NLTS-2, 2009). This study is significant because the postsecondary outcomes for students are imperative to their transition into adulthood. It is critical to conduct this research as it will provide insight into the transition professionals' involvement with transition plans that ultimately result in students' postsecondary engagement after graduation. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), individuals with disabilities are less likely to enroll in postsecondary programs than their counterparts without disabilities. Many speculative reasons have been explored in previous research, such as self-determination, quality of transition plans, parental involvement in the transition process, and transition resource barriers. Very little research examines the transition professionals and how their roles may directly impact what postsecondary education activities students they serve engage in, and their perceived effectiveness.

Completing research in this area, specifically, this topic of transition professionals' perceptions of the transition process as it relates to writing plans for students on different courses of study, may create opportunities for school systems to evaluate and adjust the transition professionals' plan construction and training to support a student with disabilities' postsecondary goals. This may provide additional insight into components that could be included in students' transition plans and, finally, course pathways that would specifically support a career and technical educational outcome provided that was a student's postsecondary goal. It has been nearly 20 years since IDEA 2004 was reauthorized and the additional clarifying language added to the legislation referencing transition. The impact of this research could eventually influence policy and legislation on the state and national level about how transition professionals plan transition for students with disabilities and the plan's role in informing curriculum pathways for high school courses. Educators, parents, and students alike could benefit from this research to assist in steering students toward high school experiences that will align with their postsecondary goals and the course of study outlined in the transition plan. Parents would benefit by providing insight into how transition services relate to postsecondary outcomes and their role in advocating for their students with educators. Finally, educators can benefit from this research by learning about the importance of making the appropriate transition experiences available to students with disabilities that align with their postsecondary goals while providing the academic support needed for students to succeed.

Organization of Study

The current study consists of five chapters. Chapter I provided the introduction, statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, research questions, definition of terms, the organization of the study, and summary. Chapter II includes a literature review of past and current research on transition planning, implementation of transition plans, current governmental mandates, transition litigation, and postsecondary outcomes, with specific research from the perspectives of transition professionals. Chapter III presents a description of the study's research design and will include the following components: research design, research participants, interview protocols, data collection procedures, and data analysis. Chapter IV contains the research findings. Finally, Chapter V includes a discussion of the implications of the findings for policy and practice, limitations, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

Summary

Transition planning and postsecondary school outcomes are still areas of interest that warrant further investigation. Postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities have been a persistent concern for educators and parents alike (Prince et al., 2013). Transition professionals carry an amazing weight in creating these plans and being the primary entity in implementing the plans for the postsecondary planning of students (Plotner et al., 2012). In the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, this was a primary concern that was addressed to ensure that students with disabilities were prepared for transitioning into society and contributing positively. Favorable post-school outcomes often include gainful employment, independent living, attending postsecondary training programs, and enrollment in post-school education. To ensure that all students with a disability are given an opportunity for a free and appropriate education, transition plan effectiveness is paramount (Prince et al., 2013). Informing the design and delivery of transition education and employment preparation for youth with disabilities involves examining factors associated with improved early post-school outcomes (Carter et al., 2012), such as the necessary components for graduation in North Carolina to obtain a diploma from the FRC and

OCS options. School districts must intensify the implementation of evidence-based practices to enhance the effectiveness of transition services and, ultimately, the lives of those with disabilities (Prince et al., 2013). When these strategies are implemented, students will likely have transition plans that outline attainable postsecondary goals. When transition data through required transition plan components (Indicator 13) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14) is sought out after students leave high school, hopefully, the data will support transition professionals' integral roles in creating those plans containing all the necessary components as well as students being engaged in favorable postsecondary outcomes.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Which postsecondary outcomes students with disabilities engage in after high school are of great interest to educators, parents, and students. These post-school engagement activities highlight the effectiveness of transition plans and allow educators to collect data on postsecondary outcomes. Researchers often focus on student or parent feedback about their transition experiences, involvement in the transition process, and post-school outcomes (Banks, 2014). This qualitative case study focuses on the perspectives and experiences of transition professionals in a North Carolina school district regarding transition plan writing for students on different high school diploma options, the similarities and differences of those plans, plan effectiveness, perceptions of postsecondary outcome successes, and mandated data collection.

This literature review provides an in-depth exploration of the theoretical framework for transition, considering Schlossberg's (2011) transition framework with Wehmeyer's (1998) strengths-based transition planning analysis and Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecology systems theory. It will be imperative to outline the policy and legislative background surrounding transition services and their role in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This portion of the review will include reasons for portions of IDEA being amended to focus on positive postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities, in addition to a legislative timeline dated back to the 1970s with the Disabilities Act to the most recent iteration of IDEA 2004. From there, this literature review delves into the components of a transition plan according to the federal legal mandates and how transition plans are evaluated using required transition plan components (Indicator 13) at the district and state level to be reported to the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). It then describes how the federal government gathers data at the state and local levels concerning postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14). Transition for students with disabilities has become integral to their transition plans, most often directly affecting postsecondary outcomes (Riches, 1996). Since there is a growing concern for students and their favorable outcomes, examining some of the litigation in past years concerning student transition is important when the school districts have been found at fault. Schools have to take accountability through the judicial system to ensure they provide all students with free, appropriate public education (FAPE), including the transition portion of the IEP (Prince et al., 2020). The literature will reveal what research says about the role of transition professionals in transition planning, how plans differ depending on the course of study, their perceptions of student postsecondary outcomes as it relates to their role in the transition planning process and outcome data collection.

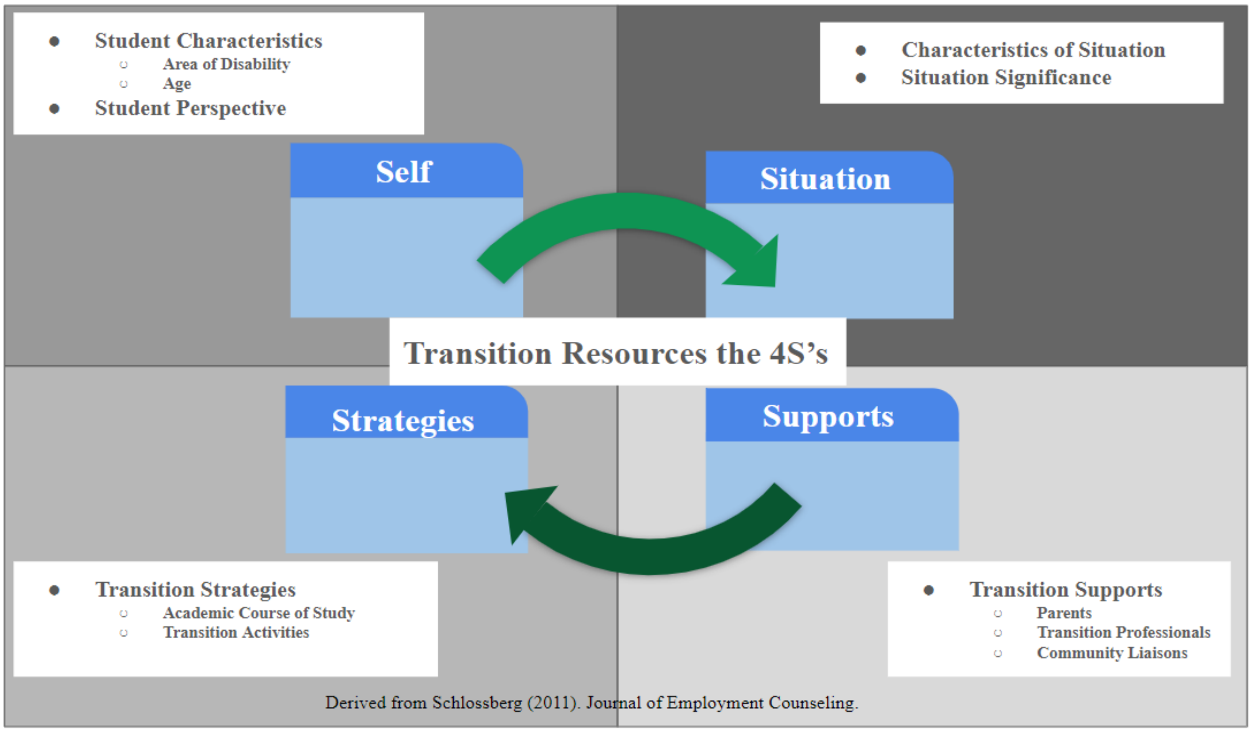
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation that frames this research study is that of Schlossberg's (2011) theory of transition, with underlying support from Wehmeyer's (1998) theory on self-determination for students with disabilities and Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecology systems theory, later updated to Bronfenbrenner and Morris's bioecological theory (2006). Although initially intended to reference adults experiencing life transitions, Schlossberg's transition model is appropriate to support understanding transitioning from secondary to postsecondary for students with disabilities. In conjunction with Schlossberg's transition model, Wehmeyer's theory on self-determination assists in shaping an understanding of transition processes such as goal setting, problem-solving, and decision-making, along with the role of transition professionals guiding students through the transition process and writing transition plans for students with disabilities. Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) bioecological systems theory supports understanding how interpersonal relationships exist with transition professionals, students, and parents working together in the larger social structure of communities, specifically schools and community-based agencies.

Schlossberg's (2011) theory of transition was initially created in response to her desire to analyze adults in transition as it pertained to work-life transitions. Her work supported understanding different types of transitions and dealing with change to explain how individuals relate to change due to life transitions such as going to college or obtaining new employment (Carlo & Dwyer, 2018). Within this theory, Schlossberg identified three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and "non-event." Anticipated transitions consist of an event that someone expects to take place. This research will explore professionals' perspectives on the anticipated event of transitioning from secondary school to postsecondary school for students with disabilities (Bonanni, 2015). Unanticipated transitions consist of events in life that are unexpected and may be turbulent. Finally, "nonevent" transitions are anticipated events that, for some reason, fail to take place at the appointed time (Schlossberg, 2011). How one handles transitions and the common features of all transitions, be they anticipated, unanticipated, or a "nonevent," can be separated into four categories, which Schlossberg identified as the 4S system. Those categories include situations, self, support, and strategies (Schlossberg, 2011). As depicted in Figure 2.1, the first "S," situation, refers to an individual's situational status at the time of a transition and is important for identifying the circumstances surrounding this life change. The second "S," self, references the individual experiencing the transition and their method of coping with the life event. The next "S," supports, are what type of resources are available to the individuals at the time of the transition and examines how the individual leverages help and enlists those resources to assist in the transition. The final "S" represents strategies, which speak to the methods individuals employ to handle the transition (Goodman et al., 2006). Ultimately, how will the individual use those learned strategies over their specific lifetime until that point to assist in the life transition?

Figure 2.1

Adaptation of Schlossberg 4S Transition Resources



Note. This figure depicts Schlossberg's (2011) transition 4S theory, which illustrates the four categories and elements of the transition process and transition plans relevant to each identified area.

For this research, Schlossberg's transition theory relates to students with disabilities transitioning from secondary to postsecondary schooling. The initial "S" of the situation is already identified by the circumstances of a student reaching the age of transition and planning for the anticipated transition of graduating from high school. The second "S" of self is clearly the student who is transitioning. The two "S's" within the framework that warrant focus are supports and strategies, which are facilitated through the transitional professional and their construction of the student IEP. Moving into the final two “S” categories of supports and strategies, transition professionals, including teachers, are integral to these components, as they represent the available resources, professional associations, and teaching strategies that are a source of aid for the student (Schlossberg, 2011).

Professional teaching tools for effectively coping with transition could include strategies for skill building, goal setting, and active decision-making, also known as self-determination (Wehmeyer et al., 2001). Bonanni (2015) conducted a phenomenological study to frame college freshman students’ transition experiences as they moved from high school to college through the lens of Schlossberg’s transition model. The findings of this study concluded that elements of the 4S model impacted students’ transition experiences with common themes around transition assessment, community involvement, and school support. This transition model supports the research by helping to supply a framework and exploring student experiences by identifying the type of transition, the extent to how much the student’s life will be altered, where they are in the transition process, and what resources are available to aid in postsecondary success (Schlossberg, 2011). According to this model, it is imperative to consider if a student’s overall resources are adequate to facilitate the successful transition from secondary to postsecondary school after graduation (Goodman et al., 2006).

As was mentioned, self-determination ties into Schlossberg’s transition theory and is an integral part of the transition, as illustrated by Wehmeyer’s (1998) theory on self-determination. Wehmeyer (2019) suggests that promoting the self-determination of students with disabilities has become “best practice in special education, particularly in promoting more positive transitions from school to post-school life” (p. 1). Self-determination is defined as “people or peoples having control over their lives and who determine his or her own fate or course of action without compulsion" (Wehmeyer, 1998, pp. 5, 8). Considered an effective practice for students with disabilities for nearly 35 years, transition professionals can address this concept with students by encouraging them to actively articulate and identify their choices (Wehmeyer, 2019). Self-determination encompasses students taking responsibility for their postsecondary choices through strategies such as addressing transition information, sharing their perspectives, and specific tasks since the reiteration of IDEA requires students' increased involvement in the transition planning process. North Carolina mandates that

> (1) In accordance with paragraph (a)(7) of this section, the LEA must invite a child with a disability to attend the IEP Team meeting if the purpose of the meeting will be the consideration of the postsecondary goals for the child and the transition services needed to assist the child in reaching those goals under NC 1503-4.1(b).
>
> (2) If the child does not attend the IEP Team meeting, the LEA must take other steps to ensure that the child's preferences and interests are considered. (NC 1503-4.1 7b)

This mandate refers to the required invitation of the student to attend IEP meetings and for the IEP team to consider the student's specific preferences as it relates to transition. This includes transition professionals encouraging consideration of a student's preferences regarding transition goal setting, academic goals, the preferred course of study, transition activities, community agency involvement, and post-school outcomes (Wehmeyer, 2019). As such, "educators can focus on promoting self-determination as an outcome of the educational process" (Wehmeyer, 1998, p. 8) for students moving through the anticipated transition of graduating from high school.

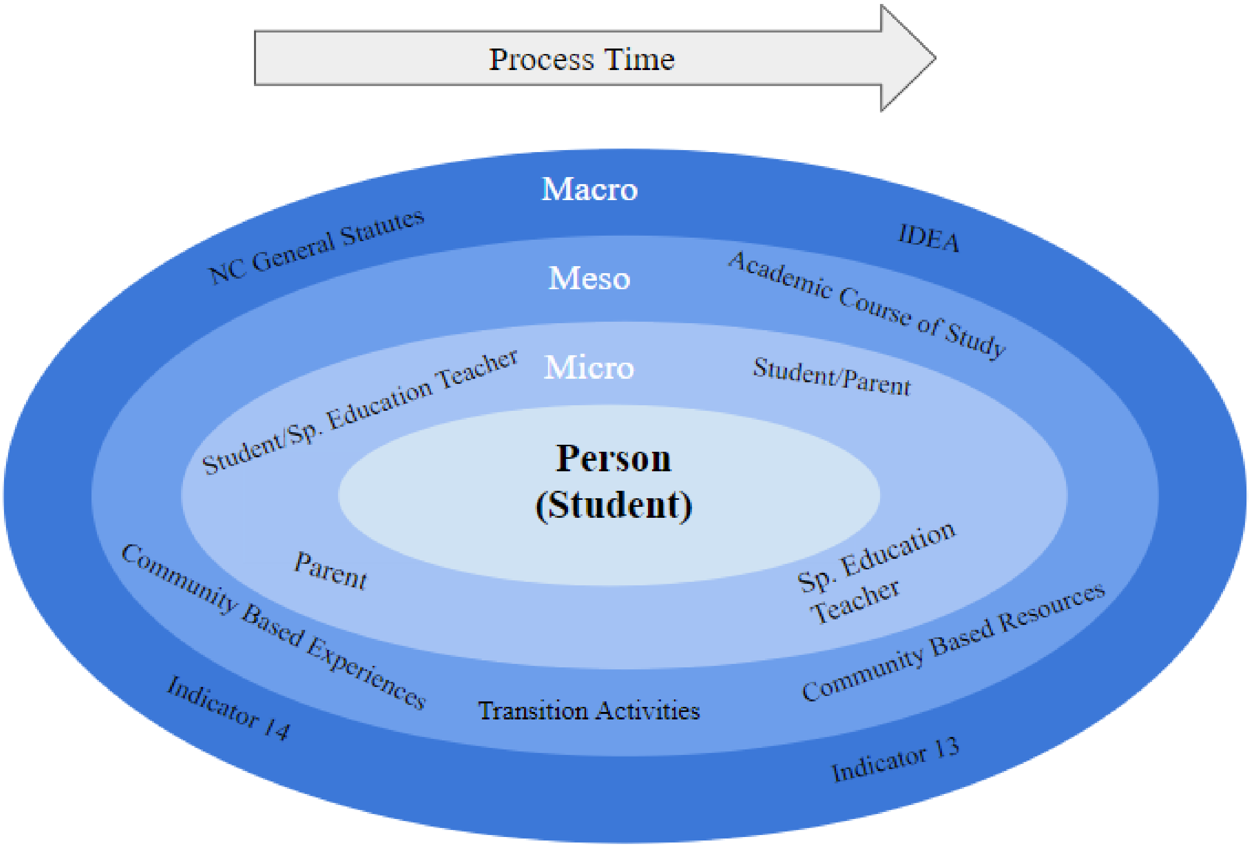
When working within the educational environment, it is clear that an interconnectedness exists between transition professionals, students, parents, and community agencies. To better understand that interconnectedness, we rely on Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) bioecology of human development to provide insight. This model delves into the characteristics of humans as it relates to the continuity of change in biopsychology (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) model proposed four defining properties: process, person, context, and time. These properties focus on the development of an individual through a series of processes, with a specific context, as these processes take place over some time. It involves a hierarchy of concentric circles surrounding the developing person (Figure 2.2), each representing social systems of successively greater complexity. It outlines a timeline that as the person grows, they will systematically encounter those more complex social systems. Bronfenbrenner and Morris's model explains that interpersonal relationships do not exist without interaction of larger social structures such as communities and schools (Hertler et al., 2018) with four levels that progressively become more comprehensive with the interactions among a student and their environment (Luft, 2015).

> The specific profile of the bioecological model of human development is its interdisciplinary and integrative focus on the age periods of childhood and adolescence and its explicit interest in applications to policies and programs pertinent to enhancing youth and family development. (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 794)

This is an appropriate framework for highlighting transitions of students with disabilities during secondary school through to postsecondary outcomes (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014). This framework mimics the complexities of relationships and how those relationships are interconnected. Those relational interactions directly affect student transition as they move through this process, starting with self and progressively engaging elements from home, school, community, and overall society.

Figure 2.2

Adaptation of Bronfenbrenner and Morris's Bioecology Theory



Derived from Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006). Urie Bronfenbrenner: Toward an Evolutionary Bioecological Systems Theory.

Note. This figure depicts Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) perspective on Bronfenbrenner's revised theory of bioecology, which illustrates the transition process's four defining properties and elements. It illustrates how each transition element interacts with other elements and their interaction relationship over time.

The levels of the model include the person at the core, then the microsystem level, a mesosystem level, and a macrosystem level. The mesosystem references the various interactions between those entities at the microsystem level, such as relationships between special education teachers and parents, teachers and community resource representatives, and transition professionals with students. Interactions that exist between the microsystem and the larger social system would include academic courses of study, transition activities, and community-based resources and experiences. Lastly, the macrosystem is the outermost layer in a student's environment (Hertler et al., 2018) that has a direct effect, namely laws (IDEA, NC General Statutes) and annual performance data of required transition plan components (Indicator 13) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14). This model considers all the relationships of a student and the interactions among the identified components and the process of time that examines how these interactions evolve. As students matriculate through school, additional environments are included and ultimately interact with the current systems (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014). Luft (2015) asserts that the use of a "multilevel, ecological framework and person-centered planning offers systematic strategies for increasing access to transition resources and supports to address these unique needs and lead to successful adulthood" (p. 395). She completed a study on transition services for adolescents and young adults with disabilities to highlight an array of transition services available to these students with disabilities, specifically students identified as deaf and hard of hearing (DHH). In this study, Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) bioecology framework was used to explain how the model can optimize student transition outcomes by creating tools that the transition IEP team can leverage for effective collaboration (Luft, 2015). According to Luft, transition for students with disabilities can often present challenges, although some strategies and interventions have been researched. These researched interventions have not been fully validated but offer valuable learning opportunities for students with disabilities (Luft, 2015). This research demonstrates the need for transition professionals to implement modest changes with transition strategies to see student postsecondary success. The breadth of the identified transition strategies is difficult to obtain in most school districts due to limitations presented by the transition professional's knowledge base and resource availability. How these varied systems interact was the primary focus of this work.

"The bioecological framework provides a comprehensive and systematic approach for identifying individuals and settings, as well as facilitative factors to leverage" (Luft, 2015, p. 407). Bronfenbrenner and Morris's bioecological framework allows a clearer portrayal of what barriers exist with transition and how interaction among the various systems can work in tandem to alleviate some of those barriers over time.

Figure 2.3

Theoretical Frameworks Relational Significance

Schlossberg's 4S Theory	Bronfenbrenner & Morris' Theory of Bioecology	Wehmeyer Self Determination
Self • Characteristics • Perspective	Person • Student	Goal Setting • Actively identifying choice • Articulating one's choice
Situation • Characteristics • Significance	Micro • Relationships • Student/ Special Ed Teacher • Community Agency Support	
Strategies • Academic Course of Study • Transition Activities	Meso • Course of Study • Transition Activities • Community Based Experiences	• Skill Building • Executive Functioning
Supports • Parents • Transition Professionals • Community Liaisons	Macro • Indicator 13 & 14 • NC General Statutes • IDEA	Active Decision Making

Process Time

Note. This figure is an illustration of how the three identified theoretical frameworks of Schlossberg (2011), Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), and Wehmeyer (1998) are interrelated and align with each other as they relate to the various components of transition.

These frameworks work together to illustrate how transition relates to students with disabilities and the integral individuals or entities they interact with to reach their postsecondary goals as it relates to the process of time. Schlossberg's 4S system outlines self, situation, strategies, and support, which aligns with Bronfenbrenner and Morris's bioecological theory at each defining property, which aligns further with Wehmeyer's theory on self-determination. As illustrated in Figure 2.3, each of these theories aligns with the various components of transition for students with disabilities and special education teachers' roles. The self-component in Schlossberg's theory relates directly to Bronfenbrenner's (1976) microsystem and Wehmeyer's self-determination component of goal setting. All of these stem from the individual making the transition, highlighting their disability characteristics and perspectives of actively identifying and articulating the student's choice. Furthermore, the strategies in the 4S model coincide with the mesosystem of Bronfenbrenner and Morris's bioecology theory and Wehmeyer's skill building. Each of these ideals relates to students acquiring knowledge and experiences that aid in their preparation for transition into postsecondary outcomes. The supports needed for students to be successful include individuals such as teachers and community agency resource professionals, who can be capitalized upon to encourage active decision making for post-school goals. Lastly, situation and macrosystem from Schlossberg's and Bronfenbrenner's theories identify the significance of expectations set by the importance of adhering to parameters outlined in IDEA, the North Carolina General Statutes, and graduation requirements set by the state.

Special Education Background and Transition Policy History

The genesis of supporting students with disabilities in the public-school system emerged decades ago when President Gerald Ford signed into law the PL 94-2 Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. This law's purpose was to support states and local education agencies in protecting the rights of meeting the needs of students with disabilities to improve educational outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). This legislation ensured FAPE for all students identified with disabilities in the United States. There was a reauthorization of this law in 1986 to address providing services to young children before age three, then another reauthorization in 1990 that ultimately changed the name to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act while adding two additional areas of disabilities that brought the overall total number of disabling conditions to 13. This specific reauthorization is where we first encountered the language of transition and the need to address postsecondary outcomes by including a transition plan in a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). The final amendment was in 1997, where emphasis was placed on least restrictive environments for students with disabilities and access to the general curriculum.

On December 3, 2004, President George W. Bush signed H.R. 1350, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004), into law (Johnson, 2005). IDEA 2004 stipulates that transition planning must occur for all students with a disability no later than age 16 (Li et al., 2009). There were significant adjustments between the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1990 (amended in 1997) and IDEA 2004 about transition services (Johnson, 2005). There is an overall inclusive format in the reauthorization of IDEA for the functional needs of students in preparation for meeting postsecondary goals. IDEA 2004 states that a central purpose of special education is to "prepare [students with disabilities] for further education, employment, and independent living" as part of a national policy aimed at "ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities" (IDEA, 2004). These plans are designed to map how students with disabilities will be instructed by teachers and transition professionals on transition components in high school, collaboration with community agencies, high school course of study, and postsecondary goals. "Transition planning for students with disabilities ages 16 and above has been universally mandated in the United States since the 1990 reauthorization of the IDEA, with modifications of requirements occurring in 1997 and 2004" (Kraemer et al., 2022, p. 200).

The age for mandatory addition of transition services was changed from one iteration of the law to the next. The amendments to IDEA refined the definition of transition, included more specificity in how transition services would be delivered (Luft, 2015), and required transition planning by way of transition assessment to begin at age 14 with a transition statement regarding the student's course of study and a statement of needed transition services with connections to outside agencies (Prince et al., 2013). Federal guidelines from IDEA reauthorized in 2004 mandate that all students who have been identified with a disability must have a transition plan as a part of their individual education plan by the age of 16 years (Park & Bouck, 2018), and the reauthorization further refined the transition requirement (Prince et al., 2013). IDEA requires the transition planning process for a student's movement from school to post-school environments to be included in a student's IEP, with much of the planning based on age-appropriate transition assessment. The inclusion of their transition plans in the IEP needs to occur before the student turns the age of 16. However, North Carolina state statutes hold North Carolinians to a higher standard. The transition component for the IEP must be included by students aged 14 years, in addition to documentation that the student was invited to the IEP meeting to provide input (NC 1503-4.1 7b). Recently, federal guidelines have added student enrollment in postsecondary education and training programs and independent living as valuable components for transition outcomes (Eaves et al., 2012). Preparation for employment for individuals with disabilities was also a provision that was included in this version of IDEA (Carlo & Dwyer, 2018). Other key elements of transition involve the participation of a team to develop the student transition plan, which involves the student, parents, teachers, transition professionals, community agencies responsible for providing services, and any advocates (Riches, 2009).

Components of Transition Plans

According to IDEA, every transition plan has required components that must be addressed within the IEP. Transition planning for students is the cornerstone of placing them on a plan to achieve that goal and become productive citizens of society. IDEA requires the transition planning process for a student's movement from school to post-school environments to be included in a student's IEP. Some states mandate a higher standard, and the transition component for the IEP must be included by students at an earlier age.

The major components of the transition plan include postsecondary and IEP goals, transition services, documented transition assessments, and course of study (Test et al., 2009). Postsecondary goals reference post-school outcomes for students, such as employment, education/training, and independent living (if necessary), while IEP goals address student transition service needs directly related to the service delivery documented in the IEP (Carlo & Dwyer, 2018). Post-school experiences represent independent living (i.e., living independently or dependently), employment (i.e., employed defined as having a paid job, full-time/part-time employment, wage), and post-secondary education (i.e., attending and earning a diploma from four-year college or university, community college, and/or vocational/technical school) (Bouck & Park, 2018). Postsecondary support is provided through transition services, transition activities, and the persons/agencies identified as responsible for making up the services component of the transition plan. The next component of the student's transition plan consists of transition assessments, which are "age-appropriate evaluations that assess the career aptitude and interest" (Luft, 2015, p. 396) of students with disabilities. The final component is the student's course of study, which outlines the academic path a student will take toward graduation during their high school tenure.

The transition plan services that students receive include the involvement of community agencies that provide postsecondary education and support services, with federal funding through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which is an amendment to the Rehabilitation Act. WIOA is legislation created to support the workforce within our society to assist the nation's people including transitioning youth with disabilities into secure employment into quality jobs and to keep qualified workers in those jobs. Pre-employment transition services support students with disabilities while they are enrolled in secondary school and support accessing these resources in post-school opportunities. North Carolina has several agencies that provide transition services through this funding source, with one in particular that works to partner with school districts to provide student support. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is the agency that houses the pre-employment federal funding and is able to contract with service providers to go into schools to provide direct services to students as well as provide employment/job training opportunities for students. VR can be accessed through involvement with agencies such as Alliance Behavioral Health in NC. This agency works with providing access to intellectual developmental disabilities services for citizens who live in southeastern counties of North Carolina. The difficulty of students being able to capitalize on this opportunity and teachers being able to include this in transition plans is due to the bureaucratic method needed to access this funded service. Access to these funds can present challenges for students with how various agencies, such as VR or Alliance Behavioral Health, are linked together, often requiring involvement with an initial agency before there is access to other agencies. There are also often extensive waitlists to process and accept citizens through the application process, with required parent consent for students under age 18.

Federal Mandated Transition Tracking

As a result of the federal guidelines and mandates, students with disabilities are entitled to a comprehensive transition plan that encompasses all the required components as have been outlined. The specific mandates are described as federal indicators, with 17 in all. The indicators range from gathering data on graduation rates, high school dropouts, least restrictive environment student placement, and referral timelines. These indicators are categorized into three different monitoring areas, which include monitoring priority of FAPE and the least restrictive environment (LRE), monitoring priority of disproportionality, and lastly, monitoring priority of effective general supervision of which required transition plan components (Indicator 13) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14) falls under. These two indicators will be the focus of this work. These data collection points deal directly with transition planning and student post-school outcomes, which no other indicators reference. Specifically, required transition plan components (Indicator 13) is the “percent of youth aged 16 and above with an IEP that includes coordinated, measurable, annual IEP goals and transition services that will reasonably enable the student to meet the post-secondary goals” (U.S. Department of Education, 2020, p. 104). Postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14) is the “percent of youth who had IEPs, are no longer in secondary school and who have been competitively employed, enrolled in some type of postsecondary school, or both, within one year of leaving high school” (U.S. Department of Education, 2020, p. 111). IDEA 2004 requires states to collect postsecondary outcome data for youth no longer in secondary school and with IEPs in effect at the time they left school (Prince et al., 2013). This requirement hails directly from the government’s emphasis on state accountability of the Annual Performance Reports and the State Performance Plans (Rabren & Johnson, 2010). The mandate does not specify how this data should be collected, and the data collection method is left up to the individual states to determine. Rabren and Johnson (2010) performed a study on how two states (Alabama and Washington) gathered information on postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14), and post-school outcomes. The study examined four districts consisting of urban and rural areas within these states to determine their method of collecting post-school data and the instruments used. The researchers explain that these states were chosen due to the federal grant funds that both received to develop each state's data-collection system and how that specific funding played a major role in their process. At the time of this research, Alabama districts had recently discontinued the use of an in-school survey for 11th graders but continued to collect data points from students in school and retained that information in their student management system. Upon students exiting high school, teachers conducted exit interviews. Once students graduated or left high school, an electronic post-school survey was conducted where student demographic information was recorded. This survey consisted of a Likert Scale, multiple choice questions, and yes/no questions, which mostly focused on post-school program enrollment or working status.

Rabren and Johnson (2010) also reported on Washington State's process for collecting information for postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14). The districts examined in Washington reported a two-part process for collecting data from students transitioning. The initial portion was completed before a student completed their high school program, which ensured that teachers had the most accurate contact information for each student and their demographic information. The second portion of Washington state's process was phone interviews with students the following January after graduation. Teachers completed this portion of the data collection by asking students yes/no questions and multiple-choice questions. There were some differences and similarities when comparing the two states and their data collection methods. The similarities were that both states had in-school components to their data collection, while one of the major differences was that one state conducted phone interviews while the other conducted electronic surveys.

In evaluating the process of gathering information for the required transition plan components (Indicator 13) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14) transition data, some immediate outcomes consist of assessing whether plans contain all the mandated components, have evidence of student progress after students graduate or exit high school, as well as building a strong foundational transition program to support student goals. The outcomes should encompass an overall increase in student participation in the process of collecting postsecondary data through transition surveys and increased numbers of enrolled students in post-school training, certification programs, and postsecondary schooling. Researchers have lamented that required transition plan components (Indicator 13) are not a precursor to postsecondary outcomes one year after high school postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14) (Gaumer-Erickson et al., 2014). It has been presumed that the required transition plan components' (Indicator 13) assessment of the appropriate components for transition plans actually translates into postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14) students' post-school outcomes. Quantitative research was conducted through a bivariate regression to evaluate the relationship between the two indicators. Ultimately, Gaumer-Erickson and colleagues analyzed whether increasing the number of compliant transition plans would result in improved postsecondary outcomes, where transition professionals supported the notion that it does. The results indicated that there is not a statistically significant relationship between both indicators where the percentage of students that went on to enroll in postsecondary college or training programs had compliant transition plans.

Role of the Secondary Special Education Teacher in Transition Planning

Regarding transition planning, special educators and transition professionals are primarily responsible for creating and implementing student plans. When special educators manage a student case, they also write the IEP that identifies goals, academic services, transition services, and course of study. Transition plans consist of components, which include postsecondary goals, transition activities, and course of study where special education teachers are mainly responsible for IEP meetings and direct service delivery; as such, special education teachers should integrate responsibilities for planning and delivering transition services and activities (Li et al., 2009). There are multiple transition needs in and around postsecondary transition for youth with disabilities, including equity of resources, accommodations, and services, life skills training/interventions, individual and family counseling/guidance, and interagency collaboration (Connor et al., 2021). Special education teachers and/or appointed transition specialists are usually the individuals who write transition plans and most often provide the instructional components of those services as outlined in the plans. These school professionals advocate for students with disabilities in the IEP meetings, conduct instructional assessments to determine accommodations and modifications needed, and facilitate students in achieving the IEP objectives and goals (Li et al., 2009). They also usually lead the planning teams, support students’ individual needs for academics, and act as liaisons with community agencies to enlist postsecondary support (Riches, 1996). All the required IEP team members work together to finalize the transition plan with valuable input from the parent and student. Included in the plan is an area to define the responsible party for carrying out the activities listed, which often consists of parents, students, and school staff, but rarely community agencies, which could be a great asset to the plan. Students should have access to a transition professional who acts as the connection between the community and post-school options while still enrolled in high school (Riches, 1996). Students with access to transition professionals who can support community-based instruction through that liaison role are provided with a valuable instructional experience within the community (Gerhardt & Bahry, 2022). With professionals who can leverage community opportunities, students can receive opportunities to access entry-level jobs (Carlson et al., 2019). For transition professionals, taking the time to plan for transition meetings and making connections with all stakeholders is an integral part of the planning process (Riches, 1996).

A review of transition services from the perspective of the transition professional was completed in Australia following a nationwide restructuring of the transition process. Riches (1996) reviewed the process and reported on how it has changed and what specific needs were documented by the professionals completing the plans. The Australian model was created to include various aspects of transition including employment, postsecondary education, vocational training, independent living, recreation, and financial literacy. Many of the same elements included in the transition process here in the United States were mentioned in this review. This process was reviewed in its sixth year of implementation, directly affecting how the transition is done. Significant features that were identified by transition professionals that contributed to the effective transitioning of students highlighted were continued connection with students after leaving high school, appropriate curriculum with instruction, fiscal support from the policy level, involving relevant stakeholders, interagency collaboration, and ongoing professional development provided from district, state, and policy levels (Riches, 1996).

Ultimately, transition professionals identified some aspects of planning that were perceived as being needed to facilitate a successful transition for students from secondary school into postsecondary. One theme that consistently emerged was the importance of collaboration with a team of professionals that would support students with disabilities and specific professional development with guides to transition planning. These planning teams were school-based with a heavy community involvement component and focused on curriculum, instruction, and transition experiences (Riches, 1996). School-based transition professionals identified a major concern with the lack of community resources and their willingness to participate in these planning teams. They often cited the lack of adequate community opportunities for students and adult services to support the transition from high school. Another substantial concern was the availability of professional development opportunities that dealt directly with transition, skills for professionals to assess students about transition, instruction on how to write effective transition goals, and access to written support documents that housed effective transition strategies and sample plans. According to Riches (1996), a draft manual was provided to schools in 1990. However, there failed to be consistent updates, which created significant delays to revised documents that would continue to support the work of transition in Australia. Emerging from this review are seemingly apparent nuances similar to professional experiences with transition planning in the United States and, more specifically, North Carolina.

Effect of Course of Study on Postsecondary Outcomes

In North Carolina, there are three options for courses of study in high school for students with disabilities. Students can obtain a standard course of study diploma, an Occupational Course of Study diploma, or an extensions standard certificate of completion. Students with disabilities most often receive their education in the least restrictive environment with students without disabilities and have the same requirements for graduation (Munsell & Schwartz, 2022). The latter option, an extensions standard certificate of completion, is reserved for students with the most severe cognitive disabilities, and an IEP team is required to make that determination. Also, this option does not produce a diploma for the student, but a certificate of completion provided the student successfully attained their IEP goals. This particular option also includes alternate assessments identified in the student's IEP. Students who pursue the extension's standard completion certificate most often remain in school until they age out at 21, turning 22. An IEP team must also determine if a student will pursue an Occupational Course of Study diploma. North Carolina is one of several states offering students multiple diploma options. The Education Commission of the States (2024) reports that 21 of the 50 states offer multiple diploma options for students. These diploma options identify the course requirements for earning a high school diploma. In North Carolina, those courses of study diploma options consist of two options: Future Ready Course of Study and Occupational Course of Study (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1

Graduation Requirements for 2021-2022 Freshmen Entering High School

	Future Ready Course	Occupational Course
English	English I, II, III, IV	English I, II, III, IV
Math	NC Math 1, 2, 3 Fourth mathematics course to be aligned with the student's post-high school plans	Introduction to Mathematics, NC Math I, Financial Management, Employment Preparation IV: Math (to include 150 work hours)
Science	A Physical science course, Biology, an earth/environmental science course	Applied Science, Biology, Employment Preparation I: Science (to include 150 work hours)
Social Studies	Founding Principles of the United States of America and North Carolina: Civic Literacy, Economics and Personal Finance, American History, World History	Founding Principles of the United States of America and North Carolina: Civic Literacy, Economics, and Personal Finance, Employment Preparation II: Citizenship 1A (to include 75 work hours), Employment Preparation II: Citizenship IB (to include 75 work hours)
Health & Physical Education	Students are required to successfully complete CPR instruction to meet Healthful Living Essential Standards as a requirement for high school graduation. Accommodations/alternative assessments for students identified by ADA or IDEA will be provided.	Students are required to successfully complete CPR instruction to meet Healthful Living Essential Standards as a requirement for high school graduation. Accommodations/alternative assessments for students identified by ADA or IDEA will be provided.

Table 2.1 (continued).

	Future Ready Course	Occupational Course
Electives	Two Elective credits of any combination from either: **Career and Technical Education (CTE), Arts Education, or World Language**	
Elective Concentration	Four Elective credits from the following (four-course concentration recommended): Career and Technical Education (CTE) ROTC Arts Education (e.g., dance, music, theater arts, visual arts) Any other subject area or cross-disciplinary courses (e.g., mathematics, science, social studies, English and dual enrollment courses)	Four Elective credits from the following (four-course concentration recommended): Career and Technical Education (CTE) ROTC Arts Education (e.g., dance, music, theater arts, visual arts) Any other subject area or cross-disciplinary courses (e.g., mathematics, science, social studies, English and dual enrollment courses)
Additional Requirements		Employment Preparation III: Citizenship II A (to include 75 work hours) Employment Preparation III: Citizenship II B (to include 75 work hours) The work hours included in Employment Preparation I, II, III, and IV shall be as follows: 150 hours of school-based training work with activities and experiences that align with students' school goals and 225 hours of community-based training, and 225 hours of paid employment or 225 hours of unpaid vocational training, unpaid internship, paid employment at community rehabilitation facilities, and volunteer and/or community

Table 2.1 (continued).

	Future Ready Course	Occupational Course
		service hours. Total work hours: 600 A career portfolio **Completion of the student's IEP objectives**
Total Credits	**22 Credits**	**22 Credits**

Note. This table depicts the graduation requirements for North Carolina as of 2021-2022 for students entering high school. It illustrates the course differences in the two diploma options for students following each course of study. Information reproduced from the North Carolina Department of Instruction graduation requirements 2022.

Bouck (2012) conducted a secondary analysis of the NLTS-2, the largest national study of students with disabilities that examined student post-school outcomes. This study was conducted to investigate the curriculum in high school educational programming and the relationship between curriculum and postsecondary outcomes. He looked specifically at students with intellectual disabilities to determine if the course of study, functional or academic, had any impact on postsecondary outcomes. His research determined that the curriculum was unrelated to post-school outcomes, such as employment or independent living (Bouck, 2012). Students who are identified with a disability can be exposed to the curriculum in several ways, be it in the general education environment without accommodations or in that same environment with access to accommodations (Wehmeyer et al., 2001), as well as a special education environment with accommodations and instruction from a special education teacher. These environments are consistently referred to as an inclusive environment or a resource environment. In North Carolina, all the academic courses taken on the FRC of study are in a general education environment, with certain courses offered in a collaborative setting with a special education teacher and a general education teacher. Students who follow the OCS in North Carolina receive all the academic courses in a resource setting with a special education teacher. Test et al. (2009) conducted a methodical review of transition literature to determine predictors for postsecondary outcomes where students who participated in general education classes engaged in post-school education and employment. Overall, this review yielded no significant results for the type of high school curriculum, although participation in general education did predict more successful post-school outcomes (Test et al., 2009).

Career and Technical Educational as it Relates to Postsecondary Outcomes

Research supports a definite relationship between postsecondary outcomes and career and technical education (CTE). Informational data gathered from the Center for Public Education ascertains that students with disabilities experience successful postsecondary outcomes when allowed to access CTE during secondary education (National School Boards Association, 2020). A study conducted by Bragg and Ruud (2007) in Illinois through a collaborative partnership between a university and community agencies examined the effect of CTE on students transitioning from high school into postsecondary training at the community college level. This study found that CTE course enrollment in high school positively impacted students who completed these courses and provided positive outcomes for students to develop employability skills and their academics (Bragg & Ruud, 2007). Participants in this particular study were not identified as students with disabilities, although the outcomes were favorable with the support of CTE courses.

The Center for Public Education (CPE) published a fact sheet on the relationship between students with disabilities and CTE by focusing on five indicators. Those indicators consisted of the number of students who participated in CTE courses in high school, students' completion rate who accessed CTE courses, graduation rate, academic performance, and college/career readiness related to students with disabilities. North Carolina's high school graduation requirements consist of four elective credits with a strong suggestion of a four-course concentration recommended in CTE and a few other options. This CPE factsheet highlights an increase in the number of students with disabilities who enrolled in CTE courses during the 2017–2018 school year, their completion of high school with an earned CTE credential, increased high school graduation rates with diplomas, significant progression in academic proficiency, and an increased expectation of passing various skills assessments that align with industry technical standards (National School Boards Association, 2020). Recommendations were made to school professionals through this document that outlined a series of practices that provide varied benefits for students with disabilities. These ideals reflect creating criteria for transition plan writing for students with disabilities that support collaboration with families and school officials, enlisting the support/partnerships of community and businesses, and then finally encouraging CTE participation that can increase secondary placement opportunities (National School Boards Association, 2020).

Overall Transition Plan Effectiveness on Postsecondary Outcomes

As students complete high school and transition into postsecondary school outcomes, they can be involved in activities that can include enrollment in a training program, employment, enrollment in college or technical school, or not actively engaged in any activity at all. In many school districts, one of the components of their strategic plan is to graduate successful students ready for a career, college, and life. Transition planning for students is the cornerstone of placing them on a plan to achieve that goal and become productive citizens of society. Although this is a necessary component of successful post-secondary outcomes, many students do not have effective transition plans that align with their post-secondary goals. Common best practices for success include (a) transition planning and self-determination at an early age, (b) engagement of family members when planning the transition, (c) individualized transition plans, (d) career and technical education experiences, (e) utilization of a functional curriculum for independent living, (f) inclusive educational practices, and (g) interagency embedded in the process of collaboration (Park & Bouck, 2018). Another identified integral component for post-school success is that students have access to adult services with specific employment training and job opportunities when leaving high school (Riches, 1996).

The most common postsecondary activity that students with disabilities participate in is employment. This employment can include part-time work, sheltered employment, and full-time work. The post-school employment of young adults with disabilities is likely shaped by multiple factors that coalesce in complex ways (Carter et al., 2012). In a transition study by Bouck (2012), students who received an academic curriculum in high school reported more positive post-school outcomes, as represented by slightly higher frequencies of students engaging in employment or postsecondary education. Also, when examining student post-secondary goals, it was found that parent expectations significantly predicted student outcomes (Doren et al., 2012). The population of students with disabilities reported low rates of independent living, employment, and post-secondary attendance (Bouck, 2012). If one does not attend a post-secondary institution, one typically enters the job market (Bouck & Park, 2018). Entering the job market would be considered a positive post-school outcome, as well as attending a post-secondary institution.

It is important to look at what students are doing post-secondarily immediately following their exit from high school within a year, to what post-school activities students are engaged in several years after high school. Results from Park and Bouck’s (2018) study indicate that 24.7% of students with disabilities report living independently within four years of exiting high school, as compared to 35.7% of students with disabilities within 6 years and 44.7% within 8 years. Consistently, researchers have concluded that the more time a student is out of secondary school, the more favorable their transition to postsecondary outcomes (Bouck & Park, 2018). This could be attributed to gaining more experience through working or acquiring more knowledge through formal training, along with the ability to live independently. In other words, it is logical to assume that one would make more money [when engaged in working post-school] the longer one is out of high school (Bouck, 2012). Moreover, many work experiences—when they do occur—involve low wages, provide few hours, and take place within segregated settings (Carter et al., 2012). One presumes that most individuals expect their lives will improve the longer they are out of high school (Bouck & Park, 2018). While the potential of the IDEA transition requirements remains significant, poor or incomplete implementation has seemingly resulted in newly graduated autistic adults with few of the skills needed to live preferred lives characterized by competence, dignity, happiness, and quality (Gerhardt & Bahry, 2022).

The adult service system, as it currently stands, is unprepared to meet the needs of this diverse and complex population (e.g., Goehner, 2011). Individualized services and personal accommodations designed to close the gap between environmental demands and individual skill deficits must be available during the transition and on the terminal side of the transition process (Goehner, 2011).

Transition Litigation

Considering all the components of transition plans required at the federal and state levels, in conjunction with the mandated data collection, it seems that transition plans would produce the desired results for students with disabilities. State and federal government agencies have created myriad checks and balances for transition professionals to ensure that students are provided appropriate access to complete transition plans and successful postsecondary outcomes. Albeit, after a landmark case that looked at FAPE and provided some context about what providing a free appropriate public education to students really meant, special education litigation has become more frequent, including cases dealing specifically with transition. These cases have steadily experienced an increase since the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 (Prince et al., 2020).

The initial case that established the legal definition of FAPE was determined in 1982. *Rowley v. The Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson School District* (1982) dealt with the family of a student with a hearing impairment who sued the school district because they refused to provide the student with a sign language interpreter, citing a violation of FAPE. This case made it to the U.S. Supreme Court, where it was ultimately decided that the requirements of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EACHA) special education services should be viable enough for a student to demonstrate some educational benefit, although services are not required to provide the greatest benefit (McKay, 2021). The case was found in favor of the school district, as it was determined that FAPE had been provided to the student. The courts offered a two-pronged approach to determining FAPE since the legislation did not clearly define it. Those two prongs advise the courts to inquire "(1) whether the state complied with the procedures set forth in the IDEA and (2) whether the student's IEP was reasonably calculated to enable the child to receive educational benefits" (McKay, 2021, p. 1). This landmark case was decided in reference to the EACHA, the pre-legislation of IDEA, where school systems had to simply supply students with the most basic services rather than the additional services that would promote greater performance (McKay, 2021). There has been debate about this decision with claims of ambiguity and "judicial usurpation of legislative function" (Tucker, 1989, p. 235). As a result of this case, special education litigation was refined and, according to some, created an extremely low threshold for services, causing difficulties in proving school districts' provision of FAPE or lack thereof (McKay, 2021).

The ruling from *Rowley v. The Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson School District* (1982) case opened up legal ramifications of inadequate transition plans and the quality of services students were receiving that supported their postsecondary goals identified in the transition plan. Services specifically outline a student's course of study, access to appropriate transition plans, and specially designed instruction dealing specifically with postsecondary goals. For this research, examining a few cases with legal outcomes in favor of families is relevant to determining the most appropriate components of transition plans, which align with the required transition plan components (Indicator 13). Transition planning has become prevalent in the special education legal realm, with decisions that are holding schools accountable for providing sound plans (Katsiyannis et al., 2012).

The first case to explore is *Q.C.C. v. District of Columbia* (2016), a case filed by a family on behalf of their daughter against the District of Columbia school system; the family claimed their daughter was denied a free and appropriate public education. Their petition accused the school district of failing to develop an age-appropriate transition plan as her plan neither included courses addressing academic deficiencies nor did the plan address college preparation. The school district was found to be at fault in the court decision because the transition plan was not reasonable, realistic, or attainable (Prince et al., 2013). In a similar case, *C. D. v. Natick Public School System* (2019), a family filed suit claiming their 20-year-old son was interested in sports and broadcasting. The student was placed in a new district program for postsecondary transition designed to assist in accessing post-school outcomes, but he was never given a transition assessment. The court ruled the school district was at fault because this student's postsecondary goals included in his transition plan did not involve career and technical education, but his transition interest was in an academic course of study (Prince et al., 2013), which would have included general academic courses. Litigation dealing with special education continues to be a legal area that garners a great deal of attention to its explosive nature with "significant practice implications" (Katsiyannis et al., 2012, p. 23). In the *Klein Independent School District and Texas Education Agency v. Per Hovem* (2010) case, a family sued the school district due to an identified deficiency in spelling and writing discovered during their child's senior year that would impede his ability to go to college. This student had received special education services since he was in middle school, but the family removed the student from the school district and placed him in a residential school that could focus on his specific needs. The parents sued the school district and requested compensation for the private school tuition for their son. The courts ruled in favor of the family and agreed that the school system had failed to meet his transitional needs due to his transition plan not being individualized or appropriate to meet the student's academic needs. Therefore, the family prevailed and received reimbursement for their son's tuition. In this case, it was decided that the proper components of the transition plan were not met according to the requirements of required transition plan components (Indicator 13), which lacked postsecondary goals and an assessment to determine vocational skills. Transition professionals have a great legal responsibility when crafting transition plans, with an expectation that those plans will contain all the proper components that will afford a student access to address "appropriate, measurable postsecondary goals based upon age-appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills; and the transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the child in reaching those goals" (Katsiyannis et al., 2012, p. 37).

Gaps in Research

Currently, there are limited resources available to examine postsecondary outcomes for youth with disabilities. It has been challenging to identify literature that qualitatively examines the perceptions of transition professionals, but several studies that have quantitative methods have analyzed data from students, parents, and school professionals about post-school outcomes. Little evidence is relevant to transition plan effectiveness and how curriculum impacts post-school outcomes (Bouck, 2012), especially not from the perspective of transition professionals. One source of information is the NLTS-2, which was designed to provide nationally representative information about students receiving special education services as they transition from secondary school to adulthood (Carter et al., 2012). NLTS-2 was funded in 2000 by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (Mazzotti et al., 2016), which, unlike other longitudinal studies, focused solely on students with disabilities. Since the conclusion of the NTLS-2, a plethora of researchers have analyzed the NLTS-2 data set to examine outcomes of students with disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2016). Another more recent source of national transition outcomes for students post-high school is the High School Longitudinal Study 2009 (HSLS-2009). This dataset has more current information and is inclusive of all students with and without disabilities; far less research has been conducted using this dataset. The HSLS-2009 study encompasses several states in its data. There remains a deficit of research identifying in-school predictors that provided evidence of favorable postsecondary outcomes across correlation studies such as systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Mazzotti et al., 2016). Most of the research that has been conducted on transition planning has used a quantitative approach. To provide additional insight into quantitative research, it will be beneficial to have some qualitative research that highlights the perspectives of transition professionals by describing their point of view when creating transition plans and what transition professionals perceive their effects are.

For students identified with disabilities, IDEA 2004 requires State Education Agencies (SEAs) to collect postschool engagement outcome data (employment and postsecondary education/training) one year after youth exit high school through postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14) (Prince et al., 2014). However, very little exists examining postsecondary outcomes in relation to the transition professionals who create the plans. These sources of transition information detail two- and four-year college education enrollment, competitive employment, and enrollment in vocational training programs. One review of transition in Australia was conducted that examined the perspectives of transition professionals (Riches, 1996). This information was powerful, although it does not specifically speak to transition professionals in the United States or North Carolina. IDEIA 2004 outlines specific needs that would not be relevant or considered in another country. Therefore, a study of transition professionals' perspectives in the United States is needed. This study will address this gap by studying one school district in North Carolina.

There is a gap in research that addresses the effectiveness of student transition plans and their goals for postsecondary outcomes. The field lacks evidence that particular in-school variables result in specific post-school effects (Eaves et al., 2012). Research also lacks a framework that conceptually captures the work of transition and the various approaches (Gerhardt & Bahry, 2022).

As a result of the limited information on the options that students have once they leave high school, there are gaps in the research. Many of the most current sources of analysis were conducted by analyzing the NLTS-2, but there are many limitations, although this is the most comprehensive option for transition that exists. Since the completion of the systematic review and meta-analysis, the NLTS-2 data set has been released to the field, and researchers have been conducting secondary analyses of these data (Mazzotti et al., 2016). The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) collects data from the states each year in reference to student transition and postsecondary outcomes. There are also research gaps related to examining postsecondary outcomes, the information the OSEP collects. This information is taken at the state level, but there are no federal mandates regarding how this transition information should be collected and/or organized. Data collection on postsecondary outcomes across states generally includes common outcome measures such as post-school survey questions (Prince et al., 2014). Since there is no uniformity across states, there are some common factors of the information collected and the method by which the information is collected varies greatly. Some states use surveys completed at the district level, while others use statistical data companies to collect this information. The lack of consistency in this data collection limits comparison across states. It also makes it difficult to look at specific groups of students with certain disabilities to determine favorable outcomes for those 14 disabling conditions. These data inconsistencies also contribute to a lack of information regarding specific disabilities, and the results cannot be interpreted concerning different disability categories (Bouck & Park, 2018). Given the often complex and multifaceted service and support needs of transition-age youth with disabilities, additional research is needed that identifies factors that may individually or collectively impact the postsecondary outcomes of these youth (Carter et al., 2012). It is critically important to identify the longstanding need for improved postsecondary transition outcomes among youth with disabilities (Connor et al., 2021). Little research systematically explores the relationship between time after exiting high school and post-school outcomes, especially for students with disabilities (Bouck & Park, 2018). More recent data suggest that attention is still needed to be brought to the post-school experiences of students with disabilities (Bouck & Park, 2018). Unless federal and state authorities have prior knowledge of the desired target outcomes that we as a nation are preparing our students to meet, there is little hope of evaluating our efforts (Eaves et al., 2012).

It was important to use an integrative review to delve into this specific topic by examining critiques and synthesizing the information found on transition planning, albeit limited. Each topic is integral to the transition process and why this research is important. By looking at the specific components of transition planning from transition specialists and a student's postsecondary outcomes from those professionals' perspectives, this research will shed some light on where we are as researchers and what areas to focus on for future research.

Summary

This literature review highlighted research focused on transition planning and the professionals who play an integral role in that process. Each component of Schlossberg's (2011) 4S theory of transition, Wehmeyer's (1998) self-determination theory, and Bronfenbrenner's (2006) bioecological model work together to provide a theoretical framework of transition. Each theory centers on an individual utilizing various resources from family, the community, and transition professionals to navigate the transition process, actively working toward postsecondary outcomes. The special education background and transition policy were reviewed to identify the inception of special education processes and how our society has arrived at the legal requirements through legislation where every student identified with a disability is entitled to a transition plan. Legislation has mapped out which components each transition plan requires, such as identified course of study and transition activities to prepare students for post-school engagements. Federally mandated transition options encompass each state, including North Carolina, and require the maintenance of data through the use of required transition plan components (Indicator 13) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14). Both indicators provide insight into transition plans containing all required components and documenting what students are doing one year removed from high school.

The role of the transition professional is an integral part of the transition process, most often taking on the sole responsibility of writing the plans and coordinating the teams that collaborate to implement the IEP as written. These plans outline the course of study students will engage in during high school, and this review demonstrated some of the effects of the course of study on postsecondary outcomes. When students can access resources to transition experiences in high school to coincide with their postsecondary goals, it can support the overall transition plan effectiveness. Transition litigation often happens as a result of transition plans not lining up with students' IEP goals as well as students' access to FAPE. This is demonstrated in cases such as *Rowley v. The Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson School District* (1982), the landmark case that cemented the definition of FAPE, as well as transition-specific cases such as *C. D. v. Natick Public School System* (2019) and *Klein Independent School District and Texas Education Agency v. Per Hovem* (2010), where school systems were found at fault for not providing appropriate transition plans and services. Research gaps still exist as there is little information available on transition plans, postsecondary outcomes, and plan effectiveness as related to high school course of study and federal data collection that are inclusive of the perspectives of transition professionals with a qualitative lens.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

The purpose of this general qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of transition professionals about the effectiveness of transition plans on student postsecondary outcomes as they relate to North Carolina data collection requirements post-high school for students with disabilities. In particular, this study compared perceptions about transition planning for two different diploma options. This chapter provides a description of the research design, the study's research questions, the positionality statement, site and participant selection, the instrument used, the data collection, data analysis, credibility, and limitations and delimitations of this research.

Positionality Statement

As an educator who has spent the last 20 years working in special education, there are biases I hold that exist from being intimately involved in the transition process each day. As a teacher, I was responsible for writing and implementing transition plans. As a school administrator, I was responsible for providing input for transition plans and evaluating their correctness. In becoming a district administrator, part of my responsibility is to oversee the transition program and ensure that district support is providing the appropriate training to staff to ensure that transition plans are completed and carried out with fidelity. I also need to make transition services, such as community resources, job shadowing/coaching, post-secondary training options, and work experiences, available to students with disabilities who follow the Occupational Course of Study. Additionally, as a district administrator, I am responsible for reporting transition outcomes by submitting reports to the state in compliance with the identified transition indicators. Each one of these roles continues to influence me and my perceptions of what is a favorable outcome, a well written transition plan, and whether or not the transition plan has been followed with fidelity.

From my perspective as a special educator focusing on student transition, providing as many postsecondary options to students when constructing their transition plans is imperative. I believe that a well-written plan contains attainable goals that are supported through various transition services, such as community resources and work experiences while identifying the responsible party. Those goals are identified through conducting appropriate transition assessments that create a foundation of interest upon which to build the goals and identify the most appropriate course of study. Components that address education training through instruction and related services, employment through transition activities for adult living, and community experiences are all pertinent to having a well-written plan. A transition plan is also most effective when a collaborative IEP team can contribute to the plan, including the student, parents, special education teacher, general education teacher, school counselor, administration, and community support personnel (i.e., Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor). As the transition professional, I needed to collaborate with all team members to implement the plan effectively, and I had to be persistent in following up on the student's progress toward goals. These components work together to provide the direction needed for the student to transition from high school into postsecondary outcomes and experiences. Favorable outcomes would most often include enrollment in college or completion of vocational programs. Students who secured employment after high school were also considered participants in favorable post-school outcomes.

In my experience, all of these components create a landscape for postsecondary success and effective plans; this experience has shaped my view of transition plans. Many of the resources and strategies I had an opportunity to implement were sought out independently or self-taught as a result of my overall passion for transition and desire for students with disabilities to become productive members of society. During my tenure as a special education teacher who did the work of transition planning, very little professional development was provided to give guidance on a well-written plan and how to leverage community resources and transition experiences. Therefore, as a current district special education director, every opportunity to provide robust training and mentoring of special education teachers into transition leadership is taken very seriously. I place a high premium on preparing teachers through professional development and training and creating collaborative relationships with community agencies, partners, and businesses to offer students as many transition services opportunities as possible. In light of this experience with writing transition plans and overseeing the professionals who write them, I have developed a sensitivity to the challenges often presented in constructing a transition plan. This sensitivity may have impacted the way my research was conducted by allowing first-hand experience and knowledge to create a tendency to gloss over specifics under the assumption that I understand and therefore, there is not a need to examine closer. It may also create situations where I over-identify with participants by empathizing with their work, obstructing an objective view. On the contrary, my first-hand experience and knowledge also may lend themselves to a more critical eye when analyzing data since I have a full understanding of well-written appropriate transition plans, substantial knowledge of all aspects of required transition plan components (Indicator 13), and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14), and North Carolina’s high school graduation requirements via course of study. Given this sensitivity and empathy, I consistently reflected on my positionality when collecting and analyzing data so that I could remain aware of my own biases and try to instead rely on my participants' perspectives.

Research Design

A basic qualitative study method allowed me to gain an understanding of how secondary special education teachers interpret their experiences and provided an in-depth description of their perspectives about transition plan effectiveness and its relatedness to required transition plan components (Indicator 13) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This qualitative research study provides insight into how people make sense of their worlds, mainly for the purpose of this work, the world of transition, in an effort to reveal and synthesize their meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with special education teaching professionals, and various documents were evaluated from their professional learning communities required for transition planning postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14), data collection documents, and exit IEP processes. This research was designed to examine the perspectives of different secondary high school special education teachers who work for a public-school district in North Carolina. It included three general education special education teachers and four Occupational Course of Study special education teachers. The focus was on the real-life experiences of participants who described their experiences and then the researcher analyzed their experiences and insights (Creswell, 2005). Qualitative research was most appropriate as it provided the opportunity to examine the participants' specific views and how they contributed to answering the research questions. As a result of the limited existing research available concerning the specific topic of transition planning, an exploratory design was used, which allowed for some flexibility and open-endedness.

Research Questions

Data were gathered from special education teachers to determine how they create and implement transition plans, focusing on any similarities and differences between plans for students pursuing a Future Ready or Occupational Course of Study diploma. I also explored these teachers' perceptions about postsecondary outcomes for students. In particular, this study addressed the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do secondary special education teachers create and implement transition plans for students with disabilities on two different diploma options, Future-Ready-Course of Study and Occupational Course of Study, in North Carolina?

RQ 2: What do secondary special education teachers perceive are the similarities and differences in the nature of transition plans for students on the Future-Ready-Course of Study diploma option and the Occupational Studies diploma option?

RQ 3: How do secondary special education teachers perceive the effectiveness of transition plans for students who complete high school on the Future-Ready-Course of Study diploma option and the Occupational Studies diploma option?

RQ 3a: How do secondary special education teachers perceive the effectiveness of transition plans related to required transition plan components (Indicator 13), the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) appropriateness, and student attainability of transition goals?

RQ 3b: How do secondary special education teachers perceive the effectiveness of transition plans as related to Indicator 14, the postsecondary outcomes of students one year after high school?

Site and Participant Selection

One purposefully selected public-school system in North Carolina was the focus of this study, and secondary high school special education teachers who work within the district were the study participants. The school district has over 80 schools that serve approximately 50,000 students. They employ over 7,000 full-time employees and are the second largest employer in the area. The percentage of students who receive special education services is about 14% of the student population, with over 7,000 students identified for special education. In the school system, there are district-level personnel who support schools, and each school has certified special education teachers who provide direct services to identified students. A school district of this size provides a level of variability with the transition professionals and school-level educators. Purposeful sampling was used to determine target individuals that fit the needs of the study. It was imperative that participants were employed in the designated school district and worked in the capacity of a secondary special education teacher. According to Creswell (2005), purposeful sampling is the decision as to whom to select as participants (or sites) for the study, the specific sampling strategy, and the sample size to be studied. Therefore, the sample of special education teachers provides the specific details and information needed to answer the research questions due to the experiences and connections that they have with the transition process (Miller, 2013), as well as their current functioning roles in creating transition plans that determine student course of study, implementing those plans, and the data collection of postsecondary outcomes as it relates to the transition indicators. The North Carolina school district that is the subject of this research is a large school district in the state with close to 20 high schools, all of which have special educators assigned to support students with disabilities. Of those approximately 20 high schools, 11 are comprehensive high schools, offering the Future

Ready and Occupational Course of Study options. Each special education teacher is a transition professional at the high school level, as they are responsible for constructing transition plans for every student assigned to their caseloads. On average, secondary special education teachers carry a caseload of 15–35 students depending on the diploma option, all of which they write transition plans for. District secondary special education teachers were the study participants for this research. In this district there are teachers titled Occupational Course of Study Curriculum teachers and Future Ready Course of Study Curriculum teachers. Each secondary Future-Ready Course of Study and Occupational Course of Study special education teacher is the direct case manager of students with various disabilities, constructs each transition plan, and assesses each student for whom they are responsible. For consistent perspectives, this purposeful sample included only school-level professionals. Of the seven teacher participants, four teachers had six or fewer years of experience, and three career teachers had seven or more years of experience.

This district was ideal to study as it was one of the larger districts but located in a unique area of the state that lent itself to a diverse group of individuals. The area is somewhat of a melting pot, as it is military-rich, which allows for a diverse teaching force. The district is also quite transient, which may be helpful for two unique circumstances. One, it allows for more frequent formal assessments of older students as a result of the legal requirement to determine the state's eligibility for students who are out-of-state transfers or previously students of the Department of Defense Education Association (DoDEA), and two, it creates an environment with increased teacher turnover which enlist more frequent professional development for teachers, specifically on transition. This district also has a significant special education population, with almost 15% of its students being identified with a disability. This fact signifies more prevalence with transition planning and an increased number of special education teachers to service those students, allowing for a larger pool of diverse participants. There are also long-standing relationships with district educators in this district, which made for a situation of more accessibility to conduct research.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using virtual interviews and document review. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that the interview protocol questions were used as a guide, while additional probing and follow-up questions were necessary to gain additional insight for addressing the research questions. Level 1 and Level 2 questioning based on the interview protocol was intended to offer insight into the interviewee's perspective. Level 1 questions were the actual questions that were asked during the interview process, while Level 2 questions were a mental line of questioning to achieve the purest form of response from each participant (Yin, 2018).

The researcher created the interview protocol to address the study's research questions. This interview protocol allowed for each research question to be addressed with two to four related questions. The inquiries that were included in the protocol were born out of interest in the topic of transition and are based on the literature that was reviewed as well as the theoretical frameworks of Wehmeyer (1998), Schlossberg (2011), and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006). Included in the interview protocol were 21 open-ended questions, which gradually became more specific to each participant's direct experience with transition planning and data collection (Appendix A). The interview questions addressed the topic of writing transition plans, how those plans relate to courses of study, professional development on transition, data collection, and community/professional collaboration. Before implementing the interview protocol, it was reviewed by a panel of experts who have specific knowledge of qualitative research methods and transition planning. This review enhanced the research trustworthiness of the interview protocol as did piloting the protocol with someone who was in a position similar to the participants, which allowed the opportunity to ensure that the questions and the line of questioning made logical sense and elicited the types of responses that were intended (Yin, 2018).

In this district, teachers meet with students, parents, and district support for student exit interviews to transition out of high school. The documents used to conduct those interviews and assessment documents from district-sponsored transition programming (i.e., Next Up, Brigance) were reviewed. These exit interviews usually occur starting in April and last approximately a month. Documents were reviewed using a protocol that identifies the group of teachers, transition plan components, data collection, and exit procedures for the conclusion of the school year (Appendix B). Also, at the end of the school year, teachers are required to complete exit protocols for students who are graduating and conduct the data collection for required transition plan components (Indicator 13) for transition-aged students and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14) for students that have been post-school for a year. Each of these documents concerning the processes when the teachers complete these end-of-year tasks was reviewed.

Data Collection

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from North Carolina State University's Internal Review Board (IRB) before collecting data. The research methodology was followed, and a specific protocol considering acquiring information from human subjects through conducting research was maintained with fidelity. Permission to conduct research from the school district was also obtained through their formal process. An application was submitted to the data and accountability office through a submission of the research request. The district has a committee that meets monthly to review the applications for research and provides a favorable response to the request after all documentation for a research study, along with the IRB approval, has been submitted.

After obtaining permission from IRB and the school district, all the secondary special education teachers on the Future Ready and Occupational Course of Study options were solicited to participate in this research, where approximately 150 invitations went out to those individuals via blind copy email. Twelve individuals responded, and a follow-up email was sent to the participant directly with additional information related to this research, along with a consent form and Doodle link to select a pre-scheduled interview with the researcher. Eight participants replied by actually scheduling an interview. Seven of the participants provided a signed consent, either an electronic signature or a pdf-signed version of the consent (see Table 3.1). When consent was granted, a set of proposed times was shared with each participant with pre-determined dates and time slots via an electronic scheduling Doodle. Each participant could select from the proposed dates and times that fit best with their schedule to complete the virtual interview. One of the eight participants scheduled an interview but failed to submit consent. Then, before the scheduled interview, they sent a message that they could not attend. One-hour blocks were reserved for each interview, understanding that interviews may be longer if needed. This consideration was taken into account with the proposed dates and times from the researcher, with refraining from scheduling interviews immediately following one another. Virtual interviews were conducted with participants using a uniform meeting platform. Voice recordings were also implemented as a backup to capture the most accurate interview version (Yin, 2018). To maintain the confidentiality of study participants, pseudonyms were given to each professional for reference during the findings. To align with the theme of the research and examining postsecondary transition, pseudonyms are in line with various professions (i.e., server, artist, webmaster). A quick Google search was conducted to identify the most popular professions for individuals with disabilities, and the names of those professions were utilized. Participants were randomly assigned a pseudonym of a particular profession to protect their anonymity.

Table 3.1

Data Collection Plan

Targeted Participants	Total	Course of Study FRC	Course of Study OCS	Invitation Email Contact	Consenting Participants
District Special Education Teachers	535	-	-	-	
District High School Special Education Teachers	141	56	24	80	
Beginning Teachers	-	32	8	40	1
Career Teachers	-	11	6	17	2
Veteran Teachers	-	13	10	23	4

Note. This table depicts targeted participants and the selection process. Highlighted areas represent the target population of high school special education teachers.

Finally, as the school year concluded and district transition personnel along with special education teachers completed student transition activities, documents were reviewed of the teachers completing those tasks. Activities such as student exit IEP completion, data collection through phone interviews for postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14), and transition plan audits for required transition plan components (Indicator 13) documents. Throughout each of these reviews of document opportunities, I maintained accurate notes and examined transition documents with the use of the document protocol (Appendix B).

Data Analysis

While collecting data, it was important to memo by documenting continually and consistently. Once interviews of the participants and observations were complete, collected data was organized and prepared for analysis. Since each interview was recorded, the dialogue from each participant interview session was transcribed into transcripts and cleaned. The transcripts of all interviews were read in their entirety to memo about emerging ideas and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) related to transition. Then, inductive and deductive coding was utilized to conduct the first round of coding (Saldaña, 2016). Deductive codes that are directly related to the theoretical frameworks of Schlossberg (2011), Bronfenbrenner (2006), and Wehmeyer (2019) consisted of self, supports, situations, strategies, skill building, goal setting, active decision making, course of study, data collection, transition/community-based activities, postsecondary outcomes and self-determination. A similar process was used to code the field notes from the document review. In addition to deductive coding, to capture the essence of the interviews while giving importance to what participants share directly, in vivo coding was also used (Saldaña, 2016). Delving into Braun and Clarke's (2006) method, which utilizes six steps for data analysis, allows the participants' own language to emerge in the codes. The second cycle of coding allowed for the categorization of initial codes and the opportunity to combine related areas. Also, this second cycle of coding allowed for the identification of emerging patterns. Once those patterns were identified, questions such as what lessons have been learned potentially were answered by identifying themes.

Table 3.2

Data Sources and Approach to Analysis for Each Research Question

Research Questions	Data Sources	Data Analysis
RQ1: How do transition professionals, including transition specialists, Occupational Course of Study specialists, and secondary special education teachers, create and implement transition plans for students with disabilities on two different diploma options, Future-Ready-Course of Study and Occupational Course of Study in North Carolina?	• Interview question 7- postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14) • Document review of transition planning tools	• Deductive coding • Descriptive and In Vivo coding
RQ2: What are the similarities and differences in the nature of transition plans for students on the Future-Ready-Course of Study diploma options and the Occupational Studies diploma options?	• Interview questions 14-15 • Document review of transition plans	• Deductive coding • Descriptive and In Vivo coding
RQ3: How do transition professionals perceive the effectiveness of transition plans for students who complete high school on the Future-Ready-Course of Study diploma options and the Occupational Studies diploma options?	• Interview questions 18-19 • Document review of transition assessment data collection	• Deductive coding • Descriptive and In Vivo coding
RQ3a: How do transition professionals perceive the effectiveness of transition plans as related to required transition plan components (Indicator 13), the Individualized Education Plan	• Interview questions 18-19 • Document review of Transition IEP Exit Interview Agenda	• Deductive coding • Descriptive and In Vivo coding

Research Questions	Data Sources	Data Analysis
(IEP) appropriateness, and student attainability of transition goals?		
RQ3b: How do transition professionals perceive the effectiveness of transition plans as related to postsecondary outcomes one year after high school postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14), the postsecondary outcomes of students one year after high school?	• Interview questions 18-19 • Document review of the Transition Indicator Data collection tool	• Deductive coding • Descriptive and In Vivo coding

Note. This table depicts the various methods used to collect and analyze data in the study to answer identified research questions.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Since this subject matter is a topic that I am most passionate about, it was easy to empathize with the participants. Each of the participants' roles are job responsibilities that I have once functioned in during my career. I can completely identify with transition plan writing, providing service delivery, and being a district support professional supporting teachers. During this process, I caused myself to be reflective of my own experiences while being open to each participant's individual experiences and perspectives. This openness worked to maintain some neutrality for my bias and not allow my experiences to overshadow the participants' perspectives. During interviews, it was important to document my own feelings while gathering information, which supported reflection on my own positionality. Once the information was finalized and initial themes emerged, these findings were shared with the participants to ensure that their perspectives had been accurately captured and were representative of their views through member checking. Data were triangulated through various data sources such as interviews, document examination of data collection for indicators 13 and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14), and documents for exit IEP data collection. The use of multiple sources provided insight into each of the research questions. To increase trustworthiness, a briefing with a peer knowledgeable about transition planning, indicator data collection, and high school diploma options was conducted to gain other perspectives or angles that may be relevant to the findings. This peer debriefing also helped to ensure that my ideas about the subject matter were reasonable and not farfetched.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations for this study include readily having access to professionals willing to participate in the study that fit the previously mentioned criteria. Another limitation was that exit interviews and data collection did not happen within the allotted timeframe of the study, and access to pertinent documents was limited. This lent itself to being unable to collect substantial additional data through document review, as the documents availability failed to be completed within the study's allotted time. Finally, this study's timeline was very specific to consider school not being in session and the possibility of not having access to teachers during the summer months. Therefore, a limitation was being able to conduct interviews with participants while school is still in session.

Delimitations consist of gathering a singular view of one school district based on access. Only researching one district puts boundaries on the information that can be gathered and the individuals who can participate. This delimitation may also provide a unique view of the transition process based on school district culture and training. To hone in on specific transition nuances, this narrowed view should be a beneficial constraint while looking at more than one school district would provide a great deal of variation. I also intentionally limited the number of participants within the study, which allowed for an in-depth, concentrated view. Finally, it was intentional to set this timeline to complete the data collection during this school year, to not run the risk of the state-mandated process of data collection for required transition components (Indicator 13) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14) changing during data collection.

Summary

The research of transition planning and the perspectives of special education teachers as it relates to data collection of required transition components (Indicator 13) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14) in addition to high school courses of study is important work. If students with disabilities have an opportunity to develop into productive citizens, transition professionals will continue to be instrumental in this process. Their level of expertise and competence in setting students on the appropriate path through high school and creating plans that foster community experiences, then being able to document that effectively, is the hallmark of this study. This process of study and research unveiled some of the nuances of secondary special education teachers' perspectives and how effective they are through various opportunities for data collection. Utilizing this research to address these questions has provided insight into an area of transition professional perspectives as it relates to the course of study, plan writing, and data collection for required transition plan components (Indicator 13) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14) that is not widely researched. This research has added to this limited area of study. The topic of transition is a definite passion and shapes my interest in this research along with my positionality. To conduct this study, it was imperative to utilize the outlined plan detailed above that gathered pertinent information from secondary high school special education teachers in a North Carolina school district. The research provided insight into special education teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of transition plans on student postsecondary outcomes, by answering the research questions outlined above. Through data collection, interviews, and document review, while ensuring credibility and trustworthiness, answers were sought for the identified research questions. The previously mentioned limitations did not significantly impact the study, while the delimitations provided a concentrated view of the study.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Introduction

This research sought to answer the following questions and provide insight into the transition of students with disabilities on different high school diploma options from the perspective of the secondary special education teacher:

RQ 1: How do secondary special education teachers create and implement transition plans for students with disabilities on two different diploma options, Future-Ready-Course of Study and Occupational Course of Study, in North Carolina?

RQ 2: What do secondary special education teachers perceive are the similarities and differences in the nature of transition plans for students on the Future-Ready-Course of Study diploma option and the Occupational Studies diploma option?

RQ 3: How do secondary special education teachers perceive the effectiveness of transition plans for students who complete high school on the Future-Ready-Course of Study diploma option and the Occupational Studies diploma option?

RQ 3a: How do secondary special education teachers perceive the effectiveness of transition plans related to Indicator 13, the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) appropriateness and student attainability of transition goals?

RQ 3b: How do secondary special education teachers perceive the effectiveness of transition plans as related to Indicator 14, the postsecondary outcomes of students one year after high school?

Chapter 4 contains the research findings that explore themes and subthemes constructed from qualitative interviews. The interviews addressed secondary transition and were conducted with high school special education teachers actively working with students on two diploma options in one school district. These themes include the importance of student input toward their transition plan, with the importance of teachers having access to the students, building relationships, having access to transition resources, and realistic goals that align with the diploma options. Important themes also included IEP team member involvement with the support of family as well as the participation of community and school representatives. When writing transition plans, teachers indicated that collaboration with colleagues, participation in professional development, and access to instructional resources were paramount.

Teachers perceived that life after high school was reflected in all transition plans, although depending on the diploma option, there was varied support from the special education teacher and a varied focus on academics versus job readiness. Finally, the details of Indicator 13 (required components of transition plans) and Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcomes for students one year after high school) were widely understood, although neither consistently recognizable nor referred to using formal terminology.

Summary of Methods

Data was collected through virtual semi-structured interviews with seven secondary special education teachers in one school district and documents that were collected from the district. The participants comprised three Future Ready Core teachers and four Occupational Course of Study teachers. The interview data were analyzed using deductive and inductive coding, and a second round of coding was conducted to identify categories and, ultimately, themes for each research question.

The data were analyzed to identify themes in the dataset using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis allowed the researcher to answer each research question by converting textual data into codes, categories, and themes (Roberts et al., 2019). An inductive approach was used to analyze data by generating codes using the data instead of determining them from existing literature (Ravindran, 2019). NVivo 12 was used for analysis, and data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) method, which utilized six steps. In Step 1, interview transcripts were reviewed to get familiarized with the data. In Step 2, the codes were generated by reading the transcripts inductively and applying deductive codes based on the theoretical frameworks. In Step 3, similar codes were combined to form categories and similar categories were grouped to form the themes. In Step 4, themes were reviewed and refined to represent the data accurately. In Step 5, themes were defined and named according to research questions. In the last Step 6, the report was generated using the analyzed data.

Participant Profiles

The study involved seven participants who were purposefully selected via identified school district and diploma options at the secondary level. Each participant was actively teaching in the school district in a classroom capacity with caseload management responsibilities that included writing, implementing, and collecting data on transition plans. Participants of the 11 comprehensive high schools in the district came from five high schools, representing 45% of the district's schools. One high school produced three total participants; it was the only school with more than one participant. Teachers from both diploma options were represented, with three teachers participating from the Future Ready Core option and four teachers participating from the Occupational Course of Study option.

Each secondary special education teacher brought varied teaching experiences, backgrounds, and different pathways to the teaching profession. Some took the traditional route and were formally trained as teachers through a university teaching preparatory program, while others came into the profession via residency following another career. A couple of the participants had the experience of working in both areas of diploma teaching Future Ready Core and Occupational Course of Study options. Teachers in this research also had varied experiences with teaching outside the United States in other countries by way of military connectedness. To maintain the confidentiality of study participants, pseudonyms were given to each participant. To align with the theme of this research involving postsecondary transition, pseudonyms are in line with various professions (i.e., server, artist, webmaster) that were gleaned from a Google search that was completed identifying the most popular professions for individuals with disabilities. The names of those professions were used for each participant and randomly assigned as a pseudonym.

"Accountant"

Accountant is new to the teaching profession and had just completed the first year teaching the Occupational Course of Study to ninth and 10th graders. Currently, this teacher is an international teacher, originally from the Philippines. Accountant is part of a teaching exchange program in which the district participates to recruit highly qualified teachers. Accountant is working under a Visa and has never taught before but was formally trained in a teacher preparation program in their home country.

"Server"

Server is a veteran teacher who has been teaching for over 17 years. During those years of teaching, due to a military connection, this secondary special education teacher also taught special education in Germany. Their current district tenure was broken when they deployed out of the country. Before leaving, they taught middle school special education and upon return have been a teacher at their current high school since 2007 for a total of 17 years in their teacher role with the same school. Server currently works in the occupational courses specific to transition preparatory classes with mostly 11th graders.

“Webmaster”

Webmaster is retired military, whose first career was that of a mechanic. This second teaching career arose due to the desire to give back to today’s youth through educational service. This teacher did not take the traditional route to becoming a teacher but matriculated through the residency program to earn a teaching license through a series of classes and required tests. Webmaster’s current teaching role is to work with students on the Future Ready Core option in a collaborative math setting, which has been their assignment for the past six years. Most of Webmaster’s students are ninth and 10th graders. All of Webmaster’s special education teaching experience has been in this school in this capacity.

“Paralegal”

Paralegal is a residency teacher who comes to special education by way of general education and pre-K. As a result of past teaching experience, this teacher is dual certified in general education and special education and comes to special education because of experience working in a collaborative environment with another special education teacher at the middle school level. Paralegal is currently enrolled in a master’s program working towards licensure in special education through residency. The 2023–2024 school year was their second year teaching special education, although Paralegal has more than five years overall teaching experience.

“Entrepreneur”

Entrepreneur is new to the teaching profession and had just completed their second year teaching the Occupational Course of Study, primarily to ninth and 10th graders. Before becoming an Occupational Course of Study teacher, this teacher spent eight years teaching Pre-K in a metropolitan area in North Carolina. Entrepreneur is new to the community and reintegrated into the workforce after spending 10 years as a stay-at-home parent.

"Artist"

Artist is a veteran teacher and has been teaching the Occupational Course of Study since 2010 in math and financial management. This teacher entered the teaching profession traditionally by completing a university teaching preparation program. Artist has had teaching experiences in other states, such as Georgia and Florida, along with out-of-country experience in curriculum specialty overseas through a military connection. All of Artist's teaching experience has been in the Occupational Course of Study option while teaching in North Carolina, but Artist was in secondary special education in other states and countries.

"Athlete"

Athlete is a veteran teacher with over ten years of experience in special education; Athlete is also dual-certified and spent several years teaching science in a metropolitan area in North Carolina. This teacher went the traditional route to becoming a teacher and was a homegrown teacher who has returned to their hometown community. A unique quality of this teacher is the desire to teach special education as the result of parenting a child with special needs. Athlete had an interest in educating himself for the benefit of his child, which translated into a desire to support other children with disabilities. Currently, Athlete supports the Future Ready Core through collaborative classes in English, math, and curriculum support courses for students in all grades. Before this teaching assignment, this teacher also worked in the Occupational Course of Study option teaching math and science.

Table 4.1

Summary of Participant Characteristics

	Diploma Option	Years Overall Experience	Years of Special Education Experience	Race	Gender
Accountant	OCS	Up to 3	Up to 3	Asian	F
Server	OCS	7 or more	7 or more	Black	F
Entrepreneur	OCS	7 or more	Up to 3	White	F
Artist	OCS	7 or more	7 or more	White	F
Webmaster	FRC	4-6	4-6	Black	M
Paralegal	FRC	4-6	Up to 3	Black	F
Athlete	FRC	7 or more	7 or more	White	F

Note. This table depicts the specific characteristics of the research participants, including diploma option currently teaching, years of experience teaching overall, years of experience teaching special education, race, and gender. OCS = Occupation Course of Study, FRC = Future Ready Course of Study, F = Female, M = Male.

Findings

This chapter includes the findings of the thematic analysis for the seven interviews conducted for this research, as well as the collected documents. The analysis focused on three research questions, with the third having two sub-questions. This chapter addresses each research question's findings by analyzing the emergent themes and their subthemes. In addition, relevant direct quotes from participants will be highlighted in the chapter, as well as the results of the document review.

Research Question 1

This research sought to initially answer the first question: "How do secondary special education teachers create and implement transition plans for students with disabilities on two different diploma options, Future Ready Course of Study and Occupational Course of Study, in North Carolina?" It was the hope to gain insight into the particulars of how secondary teachers were creating and implementing transition plans. Participants were eager to share their experiences and how integral the role of students' input was in the creation of transition plans, then elaborated on the importance of the members of the IEP team and their contributions to the plan. According to participant perspectives, implementation of transition plans was heavily dependent on collaboration with families, school personnel, and community agencies. In response to this research question, I constructed three main themes, each having subthemes.

The first main theme explored input from students in creating transition plans. Within this theme, I identified four subthemes: access to students to gain input to transition plans varied by diploma option, relationship building, students having realistic goals, and access to student transition resources. The second main theme for this research question examined IEP team member involvement in creating and implementing transition plans. The three sub-themes for this theme were family support, community agency involvement, and school personnel involvement. The third main theme described professional development and plan writing training with subthemes that consisted of access to collaboration with colleagues and attendance at professional development conferences.

Input from Students for Their Transition Plans. Participants highlighted the central role of students in the transition planning process and the various activities involved in writing effective transition plans. They stressed that students should be central to the transition plan, with their active participation essential for its success. However, many students were reluctant to engage in their IEP meetings, which posed challenges. Participants often rectified this by holding preliminary meetings and interviewing students to note their preferences, career jobs interests, and goals. This initial work also ensured that student contributions were still received even if absent and passed to the parents.

Participants shared their views on students' role in transition plan writing. Server shared, "Sometimes they are involved. It can be taxing sometimes because you are pulling, trying to get information, and trying to make them feel what you feel about how important it is to have some form of transition." Artist shared that when they wrote the IEP plan, "The student is a part of me writing it because obviously, you have to meet with the student and get student feedback before you are writing the IEP, as you have to get their goals, their vision." Artist was thankful that students "advocate, they speak up, they talk for themselves and give their input, which is good."

All the participants emphasized the need to initiate transition at an early stage from middle school to prepare students for their future. Server explained that they "Try to do assessments to try to find out what the student would like to do or what are their interests." Server said doing so was important because "I do not want it to be something I imposed upon them. I want it to be something that they are interested in." The fact that planning started early enabled teachers to notice changes in students' needs and dreams as they grow.

Two documents were reviewed to examine this research question that were born from the participants' responses. The assessment tool of Brigance and Transition Plans CTE component. Brigance is a transition skills inventory that is web based but also can be purchased in a hard copy format. It consists of several interest skill inventories and this district has given access to its teachers. The researcher accessed a specific assessment from the large hardbound notebook, a supplemental skills list. This document outlined various hobbies, social activities, and vacation planning to be completed by checking off those items that have been mastered, which would be extremely helpful in transition plan writing for daily living and leisure activities in the transition plan. As identified by the participants, teachers can provide some guidance with course selection and CTE interest can be included in the transition plan. Examining the Transition Plan CTE document revealed an area of the selected course of study and identified high school courses. Utilizing these documents allows students to consistently provide input for their transition plans and have a voice, even if they are not always present at the actual IEP meeting. Despite these efforts, some students expressed reluctance to participate in their IEP meetings, which could affect the effectiveness of the transition planning. Participants acknowledged the need to overcome this challenge to ensure the transition plan aligned with the student's aspirations and readiness for post-school life.

Access to Students to Gain Input on Transition Plans Varied Based on Diploma Option. Participants highlighted the significance of student participation in IEP meetings. They encouraged students to engage in these meetings and often conducted preliminary interviews to understand students' goals and career interests, which participants shared with parents to address communication gaps between students and their families. Despite these efforts, some students were hesitant or unwilling to attend the meetings, creating challenges in ensuring their involvement. Participants recognized the need to adapt their strategies to maintain student engagement and emphasized the importance of students understanding and advocating for themselves, especially since all students are identified with disabilities. The goal was to prepare students for a successful transition to postsecondary life, where they must independently manage their plans with self-determination and self-advocacy. The data revealed the categories of the students' role in meetings and the actual written transition plan. Participants shared their views on students' transition meeting roles and engagement levels. They also indicated that preparations for transition should be done beforehand to ensure that the students were ready for challenges in the future.

Participants shared that depending on the diploma option, access to students to complete transition assessment opportunities varied greatly. Students who followed the Occupational Course of Study had many more opportunities to work directly with special education teachers to complete interviews, transition assessments, and interest inventories as those opportunities were often built into the curriculum and course offerings. However, students following the Future Ready Course diploma option had very few opportunities to work directly with the special education teachers to complete interviews, transition assessments, and interest inventories. As Paralegal shared,

> Prior to that IEP meeting, I tend to interview the kid first about their thoughts or what are the goals that you wanted to do, what are the career paths that you are interested in, and when I meet with my students it is necessary to take them out of class to conduct the interview.

This is a challenging situation for the special education teacher as this time is not allotted; therefore, it causes the student to miss instructional time to complete this task for transition input. Thus, there is a difference in teachers' access to students to gather their input for transition plans depending on their diploma option.

***Relationship Building Opportunities*.** Due to the unique bond with the secondary special education teachers, developing rapport with the students was primarily considered challenging, particularly in the higher grade classes (i.e., junior and senior). Participants shared how teachers need to get acquainted with each student and understand their passions, weaknesses, and strengths to form a foundation for developing a good transition plan. Accountant specifically stated that the following was important for creating a transition plan: "Knowing the student well, knowing their strengths well, creating the present level of performance well. What are their strengths? What are their weaknesses? What hobbies do they like? What interests them?" It was essential to hold individual meetings with students to help them decide what they wanted to become. Accountant shared a struggle in getting to know the grade 11 and 12 students because "I am new to them. And they told me they do not want to share it with me because I think they know that, 'Oh, you are just new here, you just got here. Why should I share it with you?'" It was considered significant to have a partnership, and participants discussed the value of teaching, engagement, and developing strong bonds with students in this process to support student success. Artist had a problematic student, and "Most people that have had encounters with him in any kind of way at the school would say it would be problematic." Artist continued, "We were able to work together. I was not, I was not his case teacher. He was not on my caseload, but I was able to work with him, do assignments with him, and he graduated this year."

Participants often spoke about the lack of student knowledge of their roles and the overall IEP process, which translated into resistance to relationship building. Athlete believed that students "Need to be involved to understand this process" because they do not "have a clue as to what an IEP is or, or even anything about their disabilities when they come over to the high school." Self-determination and advocacy are key; as Athlete expounded in their interview, they educate students about the OCS program. They had "to understand so you can advocate for yourself when you get out of here. Because if you cannot advocate for yourself, you are not gonna move forward." Athlete stated,

> They are actively engaged when I invite them to the meetings. At first, when we talk about our disabilities and stuff like that, of course, they are in denial. You know, they do not want to accept that they have a disability, but I work with them to tell them, "Well,

> once you understand what it is you can work on it, and then you can move forward from there, you know, if you do not understand where the problems lay or what you need to overcome, or what you need to work on, you cannot go forward."

Participants shared their views on conducting assessments to check the effectiveness of alignment of the goals in transition plans to achieve postsecondary outcomes. Accountant believed that many students "Do not have any self-determination or do not have any self-awareness that you need to explain to them that then they will realize, I am good at this." Because of this, "Teachers tend to encourage students with that kind of interest so that they can realize that you are good at this" and also help them identify their strengths "because sometimes they are being encouraged by their peers to do this, even though they do not like it." Building rapport and educating students on the process is paramount and lends itself to getting students to buy into the transition planning process and openly share their thoughts and desires for postsecondary outcomes.

Realistic Goals that Align with Diploma Options and Interest. Participants conveyed that many students made unrealistic goals, and it was the responsibility of the teachers to help them realize the necessity of writing goals to be measurable and not only measurable for that time but for the short and long term, ensuring the goal aligns with something the student would really want to do. This responsibility is related to the strategies and challenges that special education teachers encounter when making effective transition plans for students. One of the main tasks teachers had was helping students develop reasonable expectations about their postsecondary existence, which was complex because some students had vague and shifting goals. Participants stressed that transition plans should be tailored to each student according to their strengths and limitations and the environment they were entering, with a strong focus on individuality. Participants shared their experiences in writing transition plans and the challenges they faced. Participants encouraged realistic, tailored transition plans and emphasized monitoring progress. Even when students were not proactive in planning, such strategies were intended to develop exhaustive and individualized post-school transition plans that encouraged students' successful transitions from school to adulthood. Educators advocated for realistic transition plans tailored to students' experiences and aspirations and emphasized the importance of monitoring progress and ensuring compliance with IEPs.

Access to Student Transition Resources to Create Transition Plans**.** Participants used interest surveys, checklists, inventories, and a district-provided curriculum with assessments as resources to guide transition plans. The participants narrated several success stories from utilizing such resources focusing on improving students' performance in transition activities such as passing the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), a standardized assessment used by the armed forces that measures four specific areas that include math, verbal, science, and special awareness, which identifies career areas that are most suited for specific individuals. This was a significant achievement given some of the student's academic challenges. All these were considered as proofs or triumphs, indicating diligent work by students and teachers in the face of challenges. Athlete shared, "We start off the school year with interest surveys, and I get an idea of what the kids are interested in based on their interest surveys, and then I usually talk to them one on one." Athlete discussed their goals with them and asked them, "What do they really want to do when they are done with school? Where do they see themselves after graduation?" After that, "I look at their interest surveys and I kind of compare, well, this is what you said in your interest survey. This is what you want to do. So we need to come up with a plan." Paralegal shared that they had a checklist for students with questions related to their interests, such as, “What do you see yourself doing? Is there, do you, do you feel like you want to go to? We have the whole little checklist, you are interested in college, vocational school, going straight to work.” Webmaster stated, “The county has just purchased that with something called a curriculum called the Next Up transition curriculum, which has a lot of assessments with it.”

Document review revealed a transition assessment interest inventory used within the district. It was a hard copy document for students to complete a single-sided three-page packet with a Likert scale to describe a series of activities. The directions stated to indicate your interest level for each activity below and rate from “strongly dislike” to “strongly like,” with “unsure” being a neutral option. There were 10 items on each page. Some examples of activities consisted of “build kitchen cabinets,” “write plays or books,” “drive trucks,” “start your own business,” and “assemble electronic parts.” Once completed, there was an accompanying scoring rubric in which the teacher could enter the information on a website to produce career categories that coincide with the areas of interest identified within the interest inventory document. Participants had access to this option for students and could use it as a resource when creating transition plans for their students.

When writing a transition plan, teachers employed alternatives to hard copy surveys and protocols, such as Google Forms or electronic surveys, to gather information from students, parents, and teachers. Thus, each plan is created individually for each student, considering their goals and objectives. Various transition curricula, including the Next Step Transition curriculum, enable the development of such plans as they contain assessment structures. Artist believed that they had enough support and stated, “They gave me resources,” and the “materials and the things that the district would send out to our case teachers, … and she would send it out to us to just be able to look at those resources, all of that helped." Access to these various transition resources works to create a foundation of information to utilize in creating transition plans for the benefit of teachers who write the plans for the students they serve.

IEP Team Member Involvement. Participants emphasized the crucial role of including other key figures in the IEP process, such as guidance counselors and external specialists, highlighting several key roles those stakeholders held in creating effective student transition plans. Transition planning often involves incorporating feedback from various sources to tailor the plan to the student's needs. Participants reported that successful transition planning requires engagement from multiple parties. This included meeting to discuss goals with parents and incorporating input from vocational rehabilitation specialists, school personnel, and other external partners if permitted. IEP team member involvement was expressed by participants' experiences and challenges in creating and implementing transition plans in special education. It included the importance of collaboration and the support from friends, mentors, and instructional coaches when teaching special education. Participants highlighted the importance of conducting IEP meetings and implementing special education instruction. In addition to these stakeholders, educators highlighted the importance of including career and technical education (CTE) teachers and other school staff in the planning process. CTE teachers could provide valuable insights into the student's vocational interests and how those could be incorporated into their transition plans. Additionally, the involvement of specialists, such as job coaches and IT professionals, was considered beneficial for students with specific career goals or special needs. Some schools began incorporating vocational rehabilitation into their IEP meetings, commonly done in exit presentations.

Family Support. Participants stressed that parents should be involved in the transition planning process and, more broadly, students should become the co-authors of the chosen and realistic, tangible goals. The participants also recognized the significance of parents' vital roles in enhancing students' transition to new institutions. Participants acknowledged that parents and their involvement were essential in enhancing education and accomplishing students' objectives. Accountant shared that the information needed to do transition planning required parent involvement and stated, "So how does the child do it in their house also, not only in school? How we should assess their abilities to live on their own without their parents or to be independent without their parents?" Participants were engaged in designing the necessary strategies to support the results of transition planning with parents. Also, parental involvement was identified as a significant variable and instrumental in enhancing the transition process. Webmaster believed that a positive transition experience depends on family support.

Participants highlighted challenges, including parental opposition, practical issues, and resource constraints. Some parents could not fully participate, which sometimes caused growth to slow down and made support challenging. Nevertheless, transition implies the practical cooperation of educators, families, and community resources as the key to responding to the multifaceted issues of students with special needs and their effective transition into new educational or professional roles. Server had a student with autism who had parents' support despite struggling: "He [the student] works on the military base doing the landscaping. So for me, that was a plus, but it was a whole lot of what the parents would do to help these children move forward." Participants explained the necessity of these partnerships with parents to gain their cooperation. Participants ensured the parents were well informed of the process and had input regarding the student's home life and possible additional assistance.

Community Agency Involvement. The level of community support and the ongoing evaluation of students' readiness were salient indicators to make effective transitions. Furthermore, participants attempted to seek any possible assistance of social and academic services available to students. Participants had mixed opinions regarding inviting external agencies, such as Vocational Rehabilitation, Alliance Health, and the Department of Health and Human Services, to their IEP meetings. Some participants believed that external agencies had no role in IEP meetings, and others believed in their support. Also, parents' resistance was one of the factors in not inviting external agencies. Accountant shared that before inviting external partners, they "need to ask permission first for the parents. So, if the parent does not want anyone in there, because I think 90% of my IEP meetings are through phone calls and the parents working, they do not want to bother inviting external partners." Participants mentioned the benefits of connecting students to other resources and community support to offset gaps and get more academic support in addition to what they receive in classrooms. Entrepreneur had a similar experience and explained,

> I recently had a student that got hired after graduation to work from the Service Source Agency that helped them in the service hours. Then that student because he had autism and we were aware that there would not be a normal transition for him because he did have autism. The parents of this student played a huge part in his situation! Also, because the mother got him enrolled into college at Fanferry Teaching Common College and he was able to do a couple of semesters at Fanferry Teaching Common College, so that was a good story for him because he needed assistance while in college and he was able to get that. He was provided with all the resources that we had available like full vocational rehabilitation, some low services and some of the other stuff that we had to help him get a

job. They also integrated occupational activities and community agencies to design an effective plan.

However, some participants experienced challenges integrating external partners into IEP meetings because of parents' resistance due to work commitments and privacy concerns, despite the benefits of vocational rehabilitation services. Participants had to explain the importance of external partnerships to parents in gaining cooperation. They stressed the importance of connecting students with vocational rehabilitation services by age 14, particularly for those planning to attend college, which requires different preparations than high school.

School Personnel Involvement. Participants also discussed the importance of involving multiple stakeholders from the school in the transition planning process. This included guidance counselors, job coaches, translators, and coaches, who provided additional perspectives and resources. To facilitate effective communication, translators could be needed for non-English speaking students. Teachers and job coaches played a significant role in the transition plan by contributing insights into the student's academic and vocational progress. The participants described special needs students transitioning from high school to postsecondary education or employment as requiring a diverse support network. These elements fashioned a supportive and understanding environment to meet students' needs. Therefore, a successful transition was possible by seeking advice from senior colleagues, having good and trusting relationships with students, and receiving support from instructional assistants and job coaches. Some participants used tools like Google Forms to collect detailed feedback from school personnel and teachers, ensuring that the transition plan addresses all perspectives and needs.

Participants shared their views on the involvement of school personnel in developing the transition plan. Artist shared that in planning activities, "There is me, the case teacher, there is the student, the parents, all four I get feedback from ‘cause, you know, we are, we are on the block, so I always created a Google form, and I tailor it to each one of my students.” Artist also stated that they took feedback and “the questions on it speak specifically to that student. So, I include all four teachers, my immediate parents, and school administrators; they are all a part of that.” Webmaster stated the importance of including “the student, the parents. our job coach is kind of a key piece in that.” Paralegal shared, “The student and the parent should definitely be involved,” and also “counselors, other teachers too.” Paralegal would “talk with that teacher if there is something that they need to work on specifically or it could be even their social, the social-emotional support teacher, the SED (Emotional Disability) resource teacher,” because transition does not always occur because of a vocational need.

Overall, effective transition planning involves a collaborative approach, incorporating diverse perspectives to create a comprehensive plan that supports students in achieving their postsecondary goals. In a robust and collaborative school environment, students have access to many different resources in school personnel and each of these entities can offer invaluable insight into the transition process. Students, teachers, and school personnel interact daily with students in various capacities that touch students in different ways. Counselors often work with students on college planning, while CTE teachers work closely with students to complete career development planning. Webmaster discussed the importance of CTE teachers being able to offer a great deal of insight into transition plans for students and being included in the plan writing. As described above, both of these and others would lend pertinent information to the transition plan.

Professional Development and Plan Writing Training. Participants shared that part of their responsibilities included creating and completing transition plans for all students on their caseload. Although this is a requirement, it is a task that is not inherent and must be learned.

Concerning professional development opportunities and transition plan writing, participants discussed the following subthemes: access to options for collaboration, conference attendance, and instructional resources. Overwhelmingly, participants divulged that access to resources and opportunities to collaborate with colleagues provided the necessary components and foundational elements to create meaningful student transition plans.

***Access to Collaboration with Colleagues*.** Participants shared that they had support from colleagues and were also provided professional training to write effective IEP plans for students. However, they also believed that training was insufficient and needed more training specific to transition planning. They believed having a support group in the school was necessary to make teachers feel secure and confident in their jobs. However, participants had mixed opinions about the transition support they received. While some reported adequate social support from their colleagues and instructional coaches, others were dissatisfied with the level of available professional development. They consider training too broad and not detailed enough to address the needs of the students with disabilities they encounter in special education. When they felt like they had not received proper training, participants were confident in their abilities to write the transition plan for students with the help of support and experience. Webmaster stated, “We have monthly PLCs and lots of, lots of support, if it is needed. I feel like I have plenty of people that I can reach out to if I have questions and I feel like the support is there.” Conversely, Server believed, “I feel that a lot of times there is always need for improvement and more training to help us be better teachers to do these things like collaborate to help prepare us because every student is different.”

***Professional Development Conferences*.** Participants recognized the need for continued training to remain most relevant in practices associated with special needs education related to transition. They examined the advantages of attending conferences or professional development training sessions where one gets to listen and meet other professionals in the special education field. A few participants had experiences attending conferences that benefited their teaching and transition plan creation. Accountant shared,

> I was one of the participants in the NCDCDT [North Carolina Division of Career Development and Transition] conference organized by, yeah, the NCDCDT. I met a lot of my co-teachers there and shared our thoughts a lot. [I] met agencies, business. Students that shared their struggles and how they made success with this kind of pathway.

Each of these experiences was advantageous for those teachers, allowing them to improve, which benefited their students' outcomes. The professional development opportunities were limited and not widely available to every teacher. Teachers need help with constant professional development and procedural support to help them address students' learning needs and prepare them for the future.

Research Question 2

This study also sought to answer the question: "What do secondary special education teachers perceive are the similarities and differences in the nature of transition plans for students on the Future-Ready-Course of Study diploma option and the Occupational Studies diploma option?" Participants highlighted that both programs aimed to prepare students for postsecondary outcomes, focusing on transition planning and goal setting to assist students in achieving their desired goals after high school. However, they differed in their approaches and emphases. The OCS program provided practical, hands-on experiences to prepare students for immediate employment, offering personalized guidance and support for developing daily living and adult skills. It involved activities like job site visits and underscored independence. The Future Ready core focused on college preparation and a more academic approach with courses that prepared students for higher education. One theme was constructed with three subthemes in response to this research question. Preparation for life after high school in transition plans was the overarching theme, which was supported by the sub-themes of diploma options designed to prepare students for postsecondary outcomes with graduation requirements, varied guided levels of support from special education teachers, and varied focus on academic or job readiness of the transition plans.

Preparation for Life after High School Reflected in All Transition Plans. The participants' view of the similarities and differences between Occupational Course and Future-Ready programs was that they were designed to prepare students for life after high school, but each with distinct foci and methodologies. The programs shared the goal of facilitating students' transition from high school to postsecondary outcomes, whether in the workforce or higher education. They emphasized setting transition goals and creating plans specific to each student's aspirations and abilities. Participants discussed various strategies to support students' career and personal development, focusing on overcoming students' lack of self-awareness and self-determination. Teachers played a crucial role in helping students recognize and build on their strengths, encouraging them to make informed career choices rather than succumbing to peer pressure. This required a deep understanding of each student's abilities and interests to provide personalized advice. They observed that students often lacked self-awareness and self-determination and needed the teacher's assistance to develop these perspectives. Participants frequently encouraged students to recognize and build upon their strengths, to translate into transition planning for life after high school, opposing peer influences while choosing less suitable career paths. This process involved deeply understanding each student's abilities and interests to offer tailored advice.

Both Options are Designed to Prepare Students for Postsecondary Outcomes with Graduation Requirements. Participants shared that both options had clear requirements for diplomas, although the OCS option had more checkpoints for teachers to maintain. Future Ready requirements consisted of a series of classes determined by cohort in high school. Despite the opportunities available, there was a notable gap in participants' perceptions of postsecondary transition services, with limited state support after high school. According to participants, students who completed high school with a Future Ready diploma did not have access to equitable opportunities with transition services via community resources and agencies. The amount of programming options was limited for students with postsecondary goals to attend college compared to students with goals to go directly into the workforce. For example, if an OCS student had a postsecondary goal to attend a training program to become a certified forklift driver, there were more available programming opportunities than the student planning to attend a university. Participants stressed the importance of connecting students with vocational rehabilitation services by age 14 to aid in their transition planning, especially for those pursuing post-school training, which demands different skills and preparations compared to high school. Parents were encouraged to discuss financial support and explore options for students' postsecondary goals, including college pathways that required maintaining certain GPAs. The participants also pointed out that postsecondary education often lacked the individualized support provided by IEPs, making it crucial for students and parents to communicate effectively and plan accordingly.

Server communicated, “You can also track it better when they are on the OCS because we have a check-off list to see if they have masked these things or whether they are ready to move on.” The participants emphasized an ongoing effort to improve employment preparation using resources like Canvas, an online instructional platform for student use, and the Next Up Transition Program. They emphasized practical skills within the OCS curriculum such as resume writing, job applications, and financial literacy through hands-on activities, such as managing a school enterprise, all of which are instructional standards associated with the graduation requirement high school OCS course, Employment Preparation III. Students completed practical work-related tasks as part of course assignments, performing tasks such as grocery shopping for the school-based enterprise to grasp concepts of pricing, product management, and other enterprise skills, which are course requirements for the high school OCS courses, Economics, and Personal Finance in conjunction with Employment Preparation II to include the work hours. These activities aimed to increase students’ awareness and participation in their educational and career paths. In contrast, future-ready pathways focused on academic preparation for higher education, with a greater emphasis on interview skills, resume building, and securing scholarships, which align with many of the academic standards in English I-IV and/or CTE courses.

***Varied Levels of Guided Support from Special Education Teachers*.** Participants shared their views on the differences in the transition component between OCS and the Future Ready programs. Server shared that “Occupational course of study path, it gives a whole lot of one-on-one to whereas it is like you walking them through the process … If they are on the regular curriculum, you do not get a whole lot of one-on-one.” While OCS students received individualized support to acquire practical skills, future-ready students were geared towards academic success and professional readiness. Thus, the two programs catered to students' diverse needs and aspirations, with OCS focusing on workforce readiness and future-ready pathways emphasizing academic and career development but generally offering different levels of support to students. Entrepreneur also had a similar perception, stating, "Future Ready courses, I think it is not as guided."

***Varied Focus on Academic or Job Readiness of Transition Plans Depending on Diploma Option*.** The Occupational Course of Study program was known to be more of an employment-based program that preferred more experience-based activities and skills. Students in this program went on occupational site visits and undertook practical activities. The students aim to be offered employment immediately after program completion. Besides, the curriculum was aimed at practicing adulthood living and vocational skills to support the student's independence. This could involve self-care activities like washing, cooking, getting a job, and handling personal tasks like dosage of medicine and dressing, among others. The program focused on preparing the students for careers that did not require additional education after high school.

Future-Ready options were more curricular-based, directing the learners who intended to advance to university and pursue a college degree. These pathways were aimed at guaranteeing students had a solid instructional foundation for their learning needs, helping them access scholarships, and acceptances to colleges, and/or universities. Teachers focused on competencies such as essay writing for college entrance as those developments helped the students to succeed in their future careers. Future-oriented programs were aimed at students who often had the definite idea of further education through academic scholarships.

Both programs were alike because they helped the students through their individual transition plans and ensured that each student was provided with all the tools and guidance necessary for their respective fields. They correspondingly involved students in planning and goal setting, though of a different nature. They separated future-ready pathways, which were more academic in orientation. They prepared students for their next step in learning from the OCS program, which focused more on vocational skills and employment focused on job readiness. Altogether, these programs met numerous needs of the students and aimed at the high school graduates' successful transition, which could be single-staged or multi-staged and could include further education, military service, or employment. Paralegal believed, "Because of the transition plans for an OCS student, they are going to focus more on those adult living skills and daily living skills, and they seem to be more self-help." Participants shared their experience facilitating students in various occupational transitional activities such as resume writing, mock interviews, building portfolios, money management, and helping with job applications.

Research Question 3

This study also researched a third question: How do secondary special education teachers perceive the effectiveness of transition plans for students who complete high school on the Future-Ready-Course of Study diploma option and the Occupational Studies diploma option? Participants shared their perception of the lack of effectiveness of the transition plan in attaining students' goals, along with the challenges of integrating those goals into actual outcomes for students. One overarching theme that emerged from this research question was that the transition document is a requirement for all students who have IEPs although underutilized, therefore overall ineffective.

Required Document that is Underutilized, Therefore Overall Ineffective but Necessary. Participants had clear and consistent views about the required components of transition plans and how the plan is intended to support postsecondary outcomes for students transitioning out of high school. “When you write up a transition plan, it is not anything set in stone. It is just you trying to guide a student on a pathway after high school so they will be able to have a career,” Entrepreneur stated. Overall, they underscored the need for a consistent and intentional approach to transition planning, ensuring alignment and compliance while equipping students with the skills and support needed for success beyond high school. With that being understood, the participants consistently shared that the transition plans were not often utilized as a true planning tool, but as a requirement to be checked off a list of items to complete for compliance.

Research Question 3a

Participants revealed the perception of transition plan effectiveness in attaining students’ goals related to Indicator 13 (required transition plan components). Overall, the participants underscored the need for a more consistent and intentional approach to transition planning, ensuring that all components were aligned and compliant while providing students with the skills and support they need to succeed beyond high school. One theme emerged regarding this research question. Required components of the transition plan do not consistently translate into viable real-life postsecondary outcomes and, therefore, are not considered effective, and specific elements of the required components of transition plans are understood by special education teachers but may not be referred to formally as Indicator 13.

Required Components of the Transition Plan Do Not Consistently Translate into Viable Real-life Postsecondary Outcomes and Therefore Are Not Considered Effective. Participants shared their opinions on their role in collecting information on Indicator 13 documents. These documents can often not be finalized and completed without all the required components being accounted for. The state-wide electronic student system consistently checks for required compliance components, although the quality of those components is not considered. Accountant shared that Indicator 13 was "included in their IEP for transition services. So for transition services, we tend to come up with goals that they will reach during high school when they are still in school." When examining transition documents and the indicator data collection tool included in student IEPs, the accountability system used in North Carolina provides a template for the necessary components needed in transition plans as a built-in fail-safe.

Special education teachers understood specific elements of the required components although they may not refer to them formally as Indicator 13. Server believed that collecting Indicator 13 information "starts with the development of that IEP." Each required area of Indicator 13, which includes education/training, instruction, employment, community experiences, employment development, and independent living, is included in the transition plan within the state-wide electronic student system. Artist spoke extensively about completing these portions of the IEP transition process,

> We are ready for that annual review, and I go down through those same questions and the general transition section on the IEP. I generally try to hit every area in that transition section with the vision and concerns with and where, where are we going and how are we gonna get there between now and then but then it is not just transition that does not happen just at the IEP meeting.

These are the processes teachers go through with students, although it does not always translate into viable outcomes for those students due to the transition plan or the process.

Research Question 3b

In the last area, the research solicited answers for the final part of question 3 about Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcomes one year after high school) and the effectiveness of transition plans as perceived by secondary special education teachers. One theme with one sub-theme emerged about this research question. Participants' responses gleaned that required data collection is not widely recognized as Indicator 14 and is therefore ineffective by default because of lack of knowledge. Each participant was a passionate educator who sought to follow up on their students. However, they may not formally gather information for Indicator 14 on what students did after leaving high school.

Required Data Collection is Not Widely Recognized as Indicator 14, Therefore Not Effective by Default of Lack of Knowledge. Participants shared their opinions on their experiences with Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcomes one year after high school). Despite being part of collecting information, most participants were unaware of their explicit involvement or details of the indicator. For Indicator 14, Server said, "Students still keep in contact with me, so it is good to know what they are doing." Server also shared their inability to document the information and stated,

> I have not gotten to the part where I am writing down a document to say that a student did this stuff and others, but I know that it is important to see where to go because there are different components to that as well.

Entrepreneur stated that they were not involved in collecting information and would do a performance survey and said,

> No, it is just we will do the summary of the performance survey and I just remember reading to the students that somebody may make contact with them to get more information from them about it, but other than that, I cannot recall.

Athlete stated, “Not a lot. I have not. I mean, I collect the data. We started doing a little bit more of that this year, this last semester actually. Okay. So that is a new thing for me.” Artist was unsure of terms and stated, “No, ma’am, not that I know of. I have not heard of those terms unless they were—unless they were saying a different way. I do not know.” After an explanation from the interviewer, Artist indicated,

> So I had an underclassmen and so as far as with him, like, you know, in his senior exit, like we did kinda do, obviously in the transition plan, like I think all the surveys that and all the things that had to be on it. Someone just kind of got me through it like this is what you need. This is what this is. And this has to be here.

As demonstrated, it is evident that the participant was unaware of the terminology. Then after an explanation, the participant still lacked understanding about the specific Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcomes one year after high school) data collection. The participant shared a definite interest and effort to collect information by completing a senior exit interview with a survey to follow up with a student after graduation. This further supports the finding of a lack of effectiveness for the transition plan related to Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcomes one year after high school) by default of a lack of knowledge.

Passionate Educators Call for Follow-up of Their Students Although it May Not be Formally Completed. Participants also reflected on their passion for being educators and the importance of following up with their students once they leave their care in high school. Despite this level of commitment and passion, participants shared the challenges they experienced in transition. Although a formal collection of data is not consistently maintained, continuing to reside in the same areas as your students affords various opportunities to discover what they are doing post-high school, like knowing where a student is employed and frequenting that business. Artist shared,

> I recognized one of my students works at the Dollar Tree close to the school and make a point to use that store instead of the one by my house. I try to check on her ever so often to see how she's doing since she left high school.

Participants emphasized the importance of maintaining long-term relationships with students, even after graduation. Some reported staying in contact with former students for decades, representing a commitment to their ongoing development. This long-term engagement allowed participants to maintain contact with students and informally follow up well over the one-year post-high school data point dictated by Indicator 14 but many years after. The participants also highlighted the need for systematic tracking and documentation of students' progress. They discussed their method of collecting and using data to monitor students' achievements and career paths. While these tools were useful, they stressed that the primary source of information should come from direct interactions with students and their families. This personalized approach helped set realistic and relevant goals for each student.

Most participants had followed up with their students and believed in keeping in touch to see their progress. Server said they "follow up with my students once they leave high school" informally because they "genuinely care. And I have had students that still stay in contact with me for over 30 years when they were in Germany." They further stated that follow-up was "One part to the Indicator 14 'cause you really want to see what they are doing outside of it education as well." Entrepreneur shared,

> Sometimes I see some of them working, so I see a few working, and then I may see a parent that had a student, and they will give you a report on the student, so that is how I get my information but I usually do not [complete the Indicator 14 data].

Athlete shared that they had taken information from students and “Where to contact them in a year, that was part of their when we did their exits, they had to fill out the parental information and their information on where they can be contacted next year after graduation.” Paralegal shared, “We are finding out what they are doing. I cannot remember that we have ended up going through and gathering a lot of that data for the guidance counselors.” Paralegal stated,

> So especially when they, I know at our school when we have to fill out those, the indicator documents every year what is going on with students, we get asked more probably than probably some of the other schools because we do have sort of more of an ongoing relationship with even former students and know where they are at and what they are doing.

Participants shared that they consistently collected information on students’ outcomes after high school, albeit informally and not labeled as “Indicator 14.” They seemed to exercise genuine concern and care for what became of their students once they left their educational care. It was apparent from each participant that there was passion and genuine interest in their students’ futures, with an overall desire to see them experience positive post-school outcomes, which aligned with Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcomes one year after high school).

Summary

The study explored the experiences and strategies involved in transition planning for students with special needs, from the perspective of the secondary special education teacher. It emphasized the importance of input from students for their transition plans, IEP team member involvement with collaboration from family, community, and external partners, and ongoing career development support from the lens of a secondary special education teacher. This research also highlighted how preparation for life after high school was reflected across transition plans, although underutilized without translating into viable real-life post-school outcomes without data collection by participants that were widely recognized as indicators 13 (required transition plan components) and 14 (postsecondary outcomes one year after high school). Participants identified challenges such as students' reluctance to participate in their IEP meetings, which was crucial for tailoring transition plans to their needs. To address this, participants used pre-meeting interviews and feedback tools to ensure that students' preferences and goals were reflected in the plans, with input from multiple stakeholders, such as guidance counselors, vocational rehabilitation specialists, and external community resource partners. Additionally, integrating external community partners into IEP meetings was challenging due to parental resistance, work commitments, and privacy concerns. These efforts aimed to increase students' awareness of their educational and career paths and address the gap in postsecondary support.

The study highlighted the need to connect students with vocational rehabilitation services early to aid in transition planning, especially for those pursuing college, which requires different skills and preparations compared to high school. Participants emphasized fostering self-awareness and self-determination among students and maintaining long-term relationships to support their ongoing development. Participants systematically tracked students' progress and used various assessment tools to gather information about their goals and interests. However, they stressed that direct interactions with students and families were the most valuable sources of information for setting realistic and relevant goals.

Overall, the findings underscored the critical role of collaboration, personalized guidance, and ongoing support in ensuring successful transitions for students with special needs. By combining these elements, educators help students make informed decisions about their futures and equip them with the necessary skills and support to achieve their goals beyond high school.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study took a qualitative journey into the perspectives of secondary special education teachers on transition plan creation and implementation as well as the effectiveness of evaluation with transition plans as it relates to data collection. In this chapter, a discussion of the findings is provided. Implications of those findings for policymakers and special education practice are included, and connections are made to the theoretical frameworks. Finally, the limitations of the study are addressed and recommendations for future research are made.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to delve into the perspectives of high school special education teachers in a North Carolina school district and their experiences of creating and implementing transition plans for students following two diploma options: the Future Ready Core high school diploma option and the Occupational Course of Study diploma option. Also, this study's purpose was to glean their perspectives about whether those transition plans were effective when considering postsecondary outcomes and how their views related to the required transition plan components (Indicator 13) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14). The participant perspectives illuminated themes concerning the transition planning process, how plans were created, input from team members, their perceived effectiveness, alignment with federal transition component mandates (Indicator 13), and professional experiences of secondary special education teachers as they relate to postsecondary outcomes of students following graduation from high school (Indicator 14).

Transition is a concept that is ongoing throughout the duration of a student's educational career, to the extent of how much the student's life will be altered, where they are in the transition process, and what resources are available to aid in postsecondary success (Schlossberg, 2011). Utilizing this as a motivating factor, the goal of this research was to provide insight for future educators to hear from their colleagues' perspectives about the value of effective transition planning, how to access and utilize resources for transition planning, and the role that transition planning plays in the lives of students.

Summary of Findings

This study sought to answer three research questions, with the third having two sub-questions related to the perspectives of secondary special education teachers as it relates to transition planning and plan effectiveness in connection to data collection and diploma options. Research Question 1: How do secondary special education teachers create and implement transition plans for students with disabilities on two different diploma options, Future-Ready-Course of Study and Occupational Course of Study, in North Carolina? Participants reported challenges in creating and implementing transition plans within special education. Creation and implementation included the importance of input from students when transition planning, IEP team member involvement, as well as the professional development and training provided to teachers when planning. Furthermore, having adequate transition resources and access to students on both diploma options to complete interviews/surveys in order to provide input was instrumental in creating transition plans. According to the participants' perceptions, there was a difference in student access depending on which diploma option students were pursuing, as Future Ready Core option students did not have a "built-in" graduation component that allowed maximum access for student transition input.

Being able to set realistic goals while building meaningful relationships with special education teachers was also important in transition plan creation. Developing rapport with the students was, in some cases, considered a challenge, as this was necessary to get input from the student to effectively create an individualized plan. Collaboration and support from family, community agencies, mentors, and school personnel added to the robust nature of information sources for transition plans. The importance of conducting IEP meetings and implementing special education instruction was highlighted. The participants believed having a support group of fellow teachers in the school was needed to ensure they felt secure and confident in their jobs. They also spoke to the need for continued training to remain most relevant on practices associated with special needs education as related to transition. The advantages of attending conferences or professional development training sessions where one gets to listen and meet other professionals in the special education field were emphasized on more than one occasion by multiple participants. Any additional experiences were advantageous for teachers, allowing them to improve and benefit their students' outcomes. The participants also identified the significance of parents' essential roles in enhancing students' transition to new institutions. They indicated that preparations for transition should be done in a proactive manner to ensure that the students are ready for challenges in the future. Finally, participants also acknowledged that parents and their involvement were paramount in enhancing their students' education and accomplishing students' objectives.

Research Question 2: What do transition professionals perceive are the similarities and differences in the nature of transition plans for students on the Future-Ready-Course of Study diploma track and the Occupational Studies diploma track? Although participants were able to identify the characteristics of each diploma option, having a full breadth of knowledge of each option was limited. Each option is designed to prepare students for life after high school but with distinct foci and academic/functional goals. The programs shared the outcomes of facilitating students' transition from high school to postsecondary outcomes of their lives, whether in the workforce or higher education. They emphasized setting transition goals and creating plans specific to each student's aspirations and abilities. The Occupational Course of Study program was known to be more of an employment-based program that preferred more experience-based activities and skills. Future-Ready options were more academic standards-based, directing the learners who intended to advance to college and pursue a four-year degree.

Research Question 3: How do transition professionals perceive the effectiveness of transition plans for students who complete high school on the Future-Ready-Course of Study diploma option and the Occupational Studies diploma option? Participants stressed that students should be central to the transition plan, with their active participation essential for its success. However, many students were reluctant to engage in their IEP meetings, which posed challenges. Participants often rectified this by holding preliminary meetings and interviewing students to take down their preferences, career interests, and goals in a one-on-one environment. This initial work also ensured that student contributions were still received even if they were absent and passed IEP meeting attendance to the parents. Participants also discussed the importance of involving multiple stakeholders in the transition planning process for students on both diploma options. This included school personnel, guidance counselors, vocational rehabilitation specialists, and external community resource partners, who provided additional perspectives and resources. Overall, there was a perception of a lack of effectiveness for the transition plan, as there was a disconnect between the goals outlined in the plan for students pursuing a Future Ready Diploma or Occupation Course Diploma and the actual outcomes for students. The transition document is a requirement, although underutilized in true planning and in turn ineffective.

As a subset to research question three, Research Question 3a asked: How do transition professionals perceive the effectiveness of transition plans as related to Indicator 13, the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) appropriateness and student attainability of transition goals? As it relates to Indicator 13 (required transition components), participants understood what was necessary to be included in the transition plan. The state-wide electronic student system consistently checks for the required transition plan compliance components; therefore, it maintains an accurate compliance accounting of the expectation for the indicator. The participants' perceptions were that the requirements were simply met, although the quality and viability of the plan components were not evaluated.

Finally, a second subset to research question three, Research Question 3b asked: How do transition professionals perceive the effectiveness of transition plans as related to Indicator 14, the postsecondary outcomes of students one year after high school? In response to this research question, participants were mostly unaware and did not widely recognize the terminology of Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcomes for students one year after high school). Therefore, the lack of knowledge and by default, transition plans as they relate to this indicator were ineffective. Although they did not formally collect data for Indicator 14, as a result of being passionate educators, most participants maintained relationships with many of their students after leaving high school. Participants were able to share postsecondary outcomes for several of their students in an informal anecdotal method.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, I examine how the findings are aligned or are different from the existing literature in the area of postsecondary outcomes and transition for students with disabilities. I also explore a couple of novel findings from this research. As was stated earlier, there is not an expansive body of literature on specific perspectives from transition professionals; therefore, it will be imperative to highlight those particular findings from this study.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 addressed the perspective of secondary special education teachers from two different diploma options and how they create and implement transition plans. Findings illuminated the importance of input from students through relationship building and access to students to gain input through the use of transition resources in order to create realistic plans. Collaboration and IEP team member involvement was another finding that was paramount and consistent across participants. This aligned with Riches (1996), who reviewed the transition process and reported from the perspective of the transition professional in Australia. Many of the same elements that are included in the transition process here in the United States were mentioned in this review. One common theme that emerged from this research's finding that aligned with Riches's (1996) study was the importance of collaboration with a team of professionals who would support students with disabilities with guides to transition planning. Taylor et al. (2016) conducted a survey of transition professionals, including special education teachers, to investigate interagency collaboration between vocational rehabilitation and schools; they concluded there was inconsistent involvement of vocational rehabilitation staff in the transition process. This level of involvement from vocational rehabilitation and community resources when conducting IEP meetings and collaborating with secondary special education teachers can be difficult to navigate. Bureaucracy often presents challenges with professionals and parents alike having difficulty navigating the landscape of resources through understanding the transition process. However, it was believed by the authors of that research that true collaboration exists when there is mutual respect and opportunity to come together initially to share ideas about the students being served and their transition into adulthood (Taylor et al., 2016). Collaborative partnerships continue to yield favorable results when professionals in special education, the school, and the community are given opportunities to work together (Riches, 1996).

Access to students while building meaningful relationships to gain realistic input for viable postsecondary goals was another finding that was accentuated by the research. Students were hesitant to provide insight into their plans with individual teachers they did not have a relationship with, as was also demonstrated in the interpretative case study conducted by Banks (2014). In this case study, three college students' transition experiences were examined to determine barriers and supports to postsecondary transition. Included were their perspectives from high school experiences and relationships with their secondary special education teacher in addition to school personnel. Each of the participants in the study shared the importance of the relationships with their special education teachers and other school personnel, where if there was not a positive or existing relationship the student had no desire to participate in the transition process or attend the IEP meeting. The opposite was true if there was a positive existing relationship; the willingness of the student to attend an IEP meeting and provide input for the transition plan was not difficult to obtain (Banks, 2014). Banks's finding is consistent with the findings of this research study, as it reinforces the perspectives of secondary special education teachers where relationships and the building of rapport are necessary to support student success.

Participants perceived that IEP team member involvement was paramount in this research; they thought IEP team member involvement was critical to the transition planning process. Several studies have been conducted within the past 10 years that examined the roles of different members of IEP teams as they relate to transition, including parents, teachers, community agency transition representatives, and school personnel (Connor et al., 2021; Li et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2016). The purpose of those surveys was to investigate the importance of varying collaborative combinations between diverse transition professionals, students, parents, and schools through the IEP team process, where the importance of initially sharing thoughts and goals for postsecondary student outcomes is essential to effective transition planning. Connor et al. (2021) found a need for increased collaboration among IEP team members, which included community agency representatives, parents, and school personnel, affirming the findings from this research.

There was an overwhelming theme in the findings, bringing attention to the need for continued professional development and opportunities for conference attendance in order to gain additional insights into transition planning. This echoes the existing literature from Riches (1996) who found that a crucial element of transition planning and consistent implementation is ensuring schools are involved in professional development to support key learning areas in transition plan creation and implementation. Two surveys that examined the perspectives of teachers in reference to transition planning found an overall lack of confidence in their skills of transition planning, which ultimately impacts their abilities to create and implement transition plans (Benitez et al., 2009; Deardorff et al., 2014). According to Deardorff et al. (2014), providing professional development to special education teachers on the topic of transition is challenging, where the most effective method has not yet been implemented. The survey of educators, including secondary special education teachers, was intended to determine perceptions of variations in transition planning and educator knowledge based on location; the researchers found that professional development was needed to improve transition outcomes (Deardoff et al., 2014). Similarly, Benitez et al. (2009) ascertained that professional development opportunities for secondary special education teachers who work directly with transition planning do impact their abilities to create and implement effective transition plans with viable post-school outcomes. These surveys proved consistent with the current study's findings as they examined the perspectives of educators in the area of professional development in transition planning and the perceived need for additional training and education on transitional plan writing.

Research Question 2

Research question 2 sought to examine the similarities and differences between the transition plans of students with disabilities following the two diploma options. Findings from this study also yielded similar outcomes as previous literature, detailing that transition plans embodied the components that prepared students for life after high school. Although this was a qualitative study, previous research pertaining specifically to diploma options and graduation requirements was quantitative in nature. Bouck (2012) conducted a quantitative analysis of the NLTS-2, which was the largest national transition study of students with disabilities that examined student post-school outcomes. This study was completed to investigate the curriculum in high school educational programming and the relationship between curriculum and postsecondary outcomes. Overall, Bouck (2012) determined that curriculum was not related to postsecondary outcomes.

Depending on the diploma option a student was seeking determined the focus on job readiness versus academic achievement. Students in pursuit of an FRC diploma transition plan were more academically focused with goals that aligned with post-school options such as college, while students on the OCS diploma option transition plans focused on employment. Participants perceived there was more guidance from the special education teacher for OCS students than for FRC diploma-seeking students. An article that assessed a broad perspective of concerns dealing directly with students with disabilities in secondary schools and how the challenging standard curriculum impacts performance brought credibility to this study's findings (Stodden et al., 2003). As this relates to transition plans, it can be a monumental task to adhere to the academic focus identified by the diploma options in addition to the individualized needs of the student via IEP. Each transition plan is tailored to the specific needs of each student based on their particular disability. Since students with disabilities encompass and wide range of the 14 disabling conditions, when writing transition plans it is imperative to focus the plan on the disability incorporating elements that support success in postsecondary outcomes. According to Stodden et al. (2003), students with disabilities are more likely to be prepared for postsecondary outcomes when opportunities for guided postsecondary support for students can be incorporated into instruction and assessment practices provided to all students within their program needs. Being able to consistently provide the supports that each student needs according to their transition plan and diploma option was noted as differing in levels based on FRC or OCS in the findings, although incorporating those transition supports into the curriculum was noted as more consistently done when students were following the OCS course of study as it was embedded in curriculum standards.

Test et al. (2009) conducted a methodical review of transition literature to ascertain predictors for post-school outcomes where students who participated in general education classes engaged in postsecondary education and employment. This review produced no noteworthy results for the diploma option, although participation in general education did predict more successful post-school outcomes (Test et al., 2009). Test et al.'s finding was in contrast with the findings of the current research, as the participants from this study alluded to students following the OCS diploma having more favorable outcomes through access to greater community resources and agencies to facilitate postsecondary opportunities. One factor that may provide an explanation for the differing findings is that Test et al. (2009) conducted a methodical review of quantitative research and the findings from this study were qualitative. Also, the purposeful sample used for this study was small and limited to one specific area, whereas the previous research from Test et al. (2009) was a review of several national studies.

In the interpretative case study conducted by Banks (2014), one of the three college students who were the focus of the study shared their experience with transition planning prior to what was described as a course setting change (this type of high school course adjustment in North Carolina would have constituted a diploma option change from OCS to FRC), which in turn was a service delivery change on the student’s IEP. The student was being served in a more restrictive environment of self-contained special education with a transition plan that included postsecondary goals of immediate full-time employment directly after graduation. As a result of being in self-contained classes, the secondary special education teacher provided a transition plan that did not include college and failed to include input from the student. However, there was a desire to attend college and that required an update on high school course enrollment and ultimately how that impacted the transition plan (Banks, 2014). There was a significant difference in the transition plan that once included employment post-school plans, which the secondary special education teacher adjusted based on student input, and graduation requirements to include postsecondary goals to attend a 4-year college (Banks, 2014). All of the high school transition experiences align with these research findings as both diploma option transition plans were designed for postsecondary outcomes in line with the graduation requirements and diploma options.

Research Question 3

The effectiveness of transition plans was an important part of this research, and whether secondary special education teachers perceived the plans that were created and implemented were indeed effective. The overwhelming response was that transition plans had a lack of effectiveness as a result of the inability of the goals to translate into actual viable postsecondary outcomes. Carlo and Dwyer (2018) conducted a quantitative study of the NLTS-2 to compare employment status between the transition ages of 19 and 22 and whether completing vocational training as an adult made a significant difference in the impact of employment status. Results from that statistical analysis showed a positive impact on employment status as the transition activity of vocational training was implemented although it was completed once the individual was an adult and not per the transition plan. The results from this quantitative study emphasize how important transition activities are and how effective they can be, but this should be included in the transition plan of high school students and implemented before adulthood. The transition plan was described as a document that was required, and embodied all the necessary information, but was sorely underutilized. Recommendations from Carlo and Dwyer (2018) include exploring transition options such as vocational training, participating in career/job readiness programs, and employment prep all while still in high school. Each of these suggestions is an excellent example of components of the transition plan that are often included but underutilized.

As a result of the processes and procedures that are in place with the school district, compliance is not a concern; therefore, the transition plans are consistently complete with all necessary components. Unlike the IEP which is a guiding document that is used on a regular basis by all stakeholders who are involved in student learning, the transition plan exists as a part of the IEP but is rarely utilized for planning purposes. The perception of study participants is that informed discussions from transition plans rarely take place from the required transition document, which in turn deems it ineffective.

Research Question 3a

Indicator 13 required transition plan components is the "percent of youth aged 16 and above with an IEP that includes coordinated, measurable, annual IEP goals and transition services that will reasonably enable the student to meet the post-secondary goals" (U.S. Department of Education, 2020, p. 104). There has to be an intentional approach to transition planning and not a mere opportunity to fulfill a requirement for a state or federal mandate through a compliance checklist. There are a few key terms in the definition of Indicator 13 such as "reasonably," "enable," and "meet" that require mention in relation to this discussion. These words allude to the opportunity for a transition plan to contain goals that a student can actually achieve, which aligns with the findings of this research. However, the secondary special education teachers in this study deemed the transition plan ineffective.

Collection of this data and recognizing Indicator 13 (required transition plan components) was not an issue, as the information was familiar and there were safeguards in place to ensure the data was collected accurately. There was a finding of certainty of data collection, no oversight of quality with evaluation, and concerns with the viability of the goals written for postsecondary education as being realistically able to be met by students. As reported by Gaumer Erickson et al. (2014), Indicator 13 data revealed that most LEAs in their research were meeting the State Performance Plan compliance requirements for secondary transition. Thus, the process of creating the transition plan was complete, although the implementation and quality of plan components are questionable and may, therefore, be ineffective.

In two separate studies, an examination of secondary transition plans of a small rural district and an investigation of independent educational evaluation transition plans from a variety of school districts, Miller-Warren (2015) and Green (2018) evaluated transition plans based on their quality from a set of research-based criteria. These studies are relevant to compare the findings of compliant transition plans without viable goals students can attain. Miller-Warren's (2015) research found that transition plans were poorly written, while meeting the basic component requirements, ultimately were not effective plans. Green's (2018) research reported similar findings and overall, the section of the IEP lacked insight and adequate detail regarding the students' future goals in the areas of postsecondary education/training, employment, and independent living. Comparable to the perspectives of secondary special education teachers from this research, transition plans meet the requirements of the document but do not align with post-school goals to utilize in transition planning to be deemed effective.

Research Question 3b

Research question 3b addressed the perceptions of secondary special education teachers of transition plan effectiveness as it pertained to postsecondary outcomes of students one year after high school. Indicator 14 is the "percent of youth who had IEPs, are no longer in secondary school and who have been competitively employed, enrolled in some type of postsecondary school, or both, within one year of leaving high school" (U.S. Department of Education, 2020, p. 111). Systematic research has been completed to evaluate various factors that play a role in the post-school outcomes of students with disabilities (Eisenman, 2003). This research has, in large part, been a follow-up to literature or longitudinal studies that outline the information that has been gathered, albeit limited, as a result of the complexity of determining what students are doing transitionally once leaving high school (Eisenman, 2003).

Findings in the current research study demonstrate that, at large, participants were not familiar with Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcomes one year after high school) and were not fully actively involved with collecting data from students. As a result of the lack of knowledge, transition plans were perceived with no effectiveness. This finding is different from the study completed by Rabren and Johnson (2010), which reported on certain districts in Washington state and their process for collecting information for postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14). Those districts reported a two-part process for collecting data from students transitioning out of high school. The initial portion was completed before a student completed their high school program, which ensured that teachers had the most accurate contact information for each student as well as their demographic information. This would indicate that the special education teacher was directly involved with part one of Washington's process in collecting data from students while still enrolled, unlike in this study where secondary special education teachers reported having little to no role in the collection of data at all. The second portion of Washington state's process was phone interviews with students the following January after graduation. Teachers completed this portion of the data collection by asking students yes/no questions and multiple-choice questions. Again, this would indicate that the special education teacher was actively involved in data collection once students left high school by making formal contacts and administering surveys/questionnaires, unlike in the current study where secondary special education teachers perceived they had no role in the collection of data at all.

The NLTS-2 is still by far the leading data authority on postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities and the literature that exists evaluating that data set (Haber et al., 2015; Henniger & Taylor, 2014; Mazzotti et al., 2016). There is minimal research on Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcomes one-year post-high school) that examines the data of post-school outcomes, especially from the perspective of the secondary special education teacher. When collecting this data, identifying demographic characteristics of students would allow for a nuanced evaluation of demographic characteristics and postsecondary outcomes in relation to Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcomes on-year post high school). One unique finding from this study was the lasting relationships built between teachers and students that allowed for informal follow-up with anecdotal data on post-school outcomes of the students once leaving high school.

Reflections on Theoretical Framework

When examining transition and the role it plays in the lives of students as it relates to teacher perspectives, the four S theory of Schlossberg (2011), the self-determination theory of Wehmeyer (1998), and the bioecology theory of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) paint a picture of individuals matriculating through life with the interaction of various aspects of these theories. Elements from Schlossberg's theory, such as how the student is relative to "self" and transition activities such as strengths finder and career assessment, relate to the theories' "strategies." In addition, elements of Wehmeyer's (1998) self-determination emphasize active decision-making for students and how goal setting is a form of articulation of student choice. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) actualize how elements of the environment around a student (microsystem) act through varying levels, starting small through a relationship with teachers (mesosystem) and gradually expand through examples of exosystems (i.e., high school diploma option) then graduating to the macrosystem where greater elements have influence on the student through sanction such as state and federal requirements.

Schlossberg's (2011) 4S theory outlines how students deal with situations of significance, access supports, and utilize strategies, all while trying to understand themselves. This research highlighted how those "supports" of transition professionals/teachers viewed that process and assisted students in creating and implementing transition plans for students on two different diploma options. Wehmeyer's (1998) self-determination theory focuses on goal setting, understanding choice, and skill building for the student, which the transition professionals also support through the administration of transition assessments, transition goal writing, and determination of student interest through interviews. Finally, Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) bioecology theory examines how students interact with the world around them over time and those defining properties from the micro-, meso-, and macrosystems. Secondary special education teachers are the transition professionals who guide this work with students as they enter high school and matriculate from their freshman through senior years. Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) theory begins with the student as the person at the center of the transition plan with the initial relationship with the parent/family in addition to the secondary special education teacher in the microsystem. Each of the participants in the findings explained their relationships with their students and parents, expressing the importance of their involvement in the transition process, which demonstrated the bioecology theory's inner circle. Ensuring parent involvement in IEP meetings and establishing relationships with students through interviews, in addition to enlisting the input and participation of school personnel/community agency representatives, all connected directly back to the microsystem in Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) theory. Findings from the research also focused on the similarities and differences in transition plans depending on the high school diploma option a student with a disability was following. In line with the mesosystem of Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) theory, both types of transition plans outlined postsecondary outcomes for preparation for life after high school, although the amount of programming options was limited for students with postsecondary goals to attend college compared to students with goals to go directly into the workforce. The macrosystem is the final layer of Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) theory, and its focus is on the regulations that are imposed and require compliance monitoring through data collection. Findings determined that secondary special education teachers were not completely aware of the indicator data, although, in the case of Indicator 13 (required transition components), compliance guidelines were being consistently met as a result of the state electronic system that was in use, although the effectiveness of the transition plan was questionable and deemed ineffective, as teacher perspectives indicated lack of evaluation of transition plans for quality or realistic goals, in additional to lack of application.

As a result of this being an area of study that is not widely researched, it was necessary for these three frameworks to be interlaced to capture the essence of this research. They were then related to the transition professional and how they interact with the student along with the entire transition process, ending with the data collection to evaluate the transition plan's effectiveness. These theories indeed provide valuable insight.

These frameworks work together to illustrate how transition relates to students with disabilities and the integral individuals or entities they interact with to reach their postsecondary goals. Each of these theories aligns with the various components of transition for students with disabilities and special education teachers' roles. Each theory is centered on an individual; for this research, that individual is the students for whom the secondary special education teachers are creating and implementing transition plans. In addition to Bronfenbrenner and Morris's theories, Schlossberg identifies the student as "self" and "person," respectively, while Wehmeyer's theory identifies the individual as the act of goal setting through identifying one's choice as it relates to postsecondary goals. The findings consistently supported the importance of postsecondary goal setting and obtaining specific input from students. The frameworks further work together in reference to relationships and their importance while secondary special education teachers are creating transition plans; the findings emphasize relationship building. This parallels across each of the theories through Schlossberg's "supports," Bronfenbrenner and Morris's microsystem, and Wehmeyer's advocacy; each of these focuses on building meaningful relationships with parents, teachers, community agency professionals, as well as the students themselves. The theories' focus then shifts from relationships with people to relationships with the systems acting upon the students and teachers through policies, requirements, and resources. Schlossberg's "strategies" embody the curriculum, transition resources, and activities, as does Bronfenbrenner and Morris's mesosystem, and Wehmeyer's executive functioning element focuses on skill building through activities such as resume writing and learning to complete job applications. The fourth component of the three theories interlaced foci on outcomes and evidence through data. Schlossberg's "situation," Bronfenbrenner and Morris's macrosystem, and Wehmeyer's life outcomes all encompass the result of the transition plans created by the secondary special education teacher for the students.

The research questions were born out of a curiosity related to various components of transition as captured by specific elements of the selected theories. Elements from Schlossberg's (2011) 4S theory, specifically "strategies" and "supports," framed Research Question 3, while Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) element of the macro system informed the sub-questions for research question three. Several elements, such as the importance of students taking an active role in one's life and actively making decisions regardless of disability, from Wehmeyer's (1998) theory on self-determination influenced interview questions for the participants, especially those dealing specifically with transition assessments, student input, and student engagement. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) also introduced the element of time and how the professionals who are the driving force behind creating and implementing those plans interact with students and the different environments over time. Transition planning is a process that spans the duration of a student's high school career, which spans at least four years. Based on the findings from this research, the interlacing of theories does seem appropriate and works together to give a logical explanation for this work.

The topic of secondary transition for students with disabilities is a complex subject, with many nuances that work together. As a result of this complexity, identifying a singular theoretical framework did not capture the essence of all the transition components that each played an intricate role in this research. As a result, it was important to interlace three different theories to capture the unique essence of transition. There was great consideration of the relational factors and nuances of each of the theories' unique qualities. Elements such as the individual (student), self-determination, and decision-making, were center in all three theories, each addressing a different component of the entire transition process while taking into consideration how time impacts transition for students with disabilities overall.

Limitations

Anticipated limitations that were identified in the research design proved to limit the study. Initially, having access to secondary special education teachers who were willing to participate in the study that fit the criteria was a limiting factor. Ideally, having access to more willing participants would have given a broader perspective with wider, varied transition experiences. The timeline was also a limitation that proved challenging. The accessibility to documents for the document review for exit documentation and indicator data was extremely scarce. Students were released from school prior to Memorial Day; therefore, many of those documents were completed and already submitted to the state and were unable to be examined.

The timeline was also impacted by access to teachers and interview schedules, as it was challenging to schedule them all before release for summer. Two specific participants' willingness allowed the researcher to interview during vacation time while one was traveling and the other was in transit. Ultimately, all interviews were able to be completed, and a fair number of documents were able to be examined to support the findings. Although noteworthy and outside the researcher's control, these limitations were minimized, and the findings were not drastically impacted.

After completing and evaluating outcomes from the interviews and compiling the findings, some of the participant views emerged as having a greater contribution and therefore more representation in the research findings. A unique limitation was noted that it seemed participants with greater years of experience had more to contribute. Participants with fewer years had limited experiences to draw from in responding to the interview questions. Therefore, some participants views emerged more frequently in the findings.

Some limitation beyond what was initially predicted was the apparent siloed nature of secondary special education teachers within high schools providing transition planning and support on the different diploma options as well as the lack of cross-collaboration for teachers and students. There was hardly any crossover between the diploma options, and the teachers possessed only surface knowledge to compare and contrast the two options outside of the high school course requirements, as is evident in the responses to a specific interview question. Three of the participants in the study were from the same high school and this siloed nature even persisted within the same building, where there was little collaboration between teachers from different diploma options. It became apparent that limited collaboration existed between FRC and OCS special education teachers, which in turn resulted in minimal interaction or opportunities to share ideas or resources with special education teachers outside of their particular diploma option. "Athlete" was the only participant who had actually experienced both diploma options through teaching and was able to provide insight into some of the transition similarities and differences between the Future-Ready Course and Occupational Course of Study Options. Teachers seem to be somewhat aware of the general characteristics as evident in the findings from research question 3, but as the researcher, there was limited information to prepare for the realization of the isolated nature of each of the roles. The siloed nature of secondary special education teachers working within the different diploma option was a surprise, as it would seem that teachers consistently collaborated with each other, especially within the same discipline of special education. It was apparent through participant input that there were limited opportunities to collaborate and work together to address the transition components of each of the diploma options through comparison.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Implications for Special Education Policy

Currently, according to Indicator 14, federal policy dictates that school systems gather data on select graduates one year after graduation to determine what postsecondary outcomes they are engaged in. Although this is a federal mandate (IDEA, 2004), there are no guiding parameters to how the data are to be collected or reported. Each state can set its own standard, and at the state level, each district is able to collect data as they determine. In North Carolina, each district has to submit their Indicator 14 data in a state reporting database (North Carolina Department of Instruction, 2022). Addressing policy at a federal and state level, as dictated in IDEA 2004, requires states to collect postsecondary outcome data for youth who are no longer in secondary school and who had IEPs in effect at the time they left school (Prince et al., 2018).

Implementation of a uniform method of collecting and evaluating transition plan data with embedded professional development would be an implication for policy. As demonstrated through our participants' perspectives, they sought to gather informal information about their students long after one year after graduation and maintained some level of contact with many of their students. It may be beneficial if policymakers would implement some clear, consistent parameters around gathering Indicator 14 data, as well as extending the data collection process to a period of time longer than one-year post-graduation. It requires at least 4 additional years for students to matriculate through a college/university, and therefore, maybe creating a policy that would include additional data points at three years and then another at five years would yield some data to determine if transition plans were effective by students being involved in favorable postsecondary outcomes.

Teachers perceived relationships as being imperative to enlisting valuable input from students in crafting their transition plans, which would seem to carry over and translate into gathering input for Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcomes after high school). As Rabren and Johnson (2010) demonstrated in their study in Washington State by enlisting the support of teachers to gather data from students in both phases of their transition data collection, this practice may inform policy to implement locally and gain more insight into transition outcomes for students.

Implications for Special Education Practice

As illustrated in the findings of this research, it is evident that special education teachers are not always aware of the specifics when it comes to the terminology and formal data collection as dictated by the federal and state guidelines as it relates to Indicator 13 (required components of transition plans) and Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcomes one year after high school). School systems should make a concerted effort to educate special education teachers about the meaning behind the processes that they are completing on a daily basis, although systems are able to use electronic checks and balances to ensure compliance expectations are being met. Terminology needs to be utilized on a consistent basis to ensure it is a part of the academic language used and is as prevalent as IEP, which would inform this implication of special education practice. In many instances with the current educational landscape, special education teachers are often coming into the profession as non-traditionally trained, embarking on the teaching profession through lateral entry. These teachers can potentially experience being overwhelmed with learning the job, learning the terminology and nuances of special education, understanding the processes of special education, and grasping special education policy while simultaneously attending college to complete required coursework to earn a valid teaching license.

As educators continue to have a passion for their students, much of what we do as educators is grounded in data. It is imperative that we have formal data to support the work we complete, and although anecdotal success stories may be shared for the students that we serve and their postsecondary outcomes, if that information is not documented through data collection, in many instances, it is as if those successes never happened. There is also no valid measure to evaluate transition plans and their effectiveness, whether students actually achieved the goals that were written. Additionally, a measure of one-year post-high school graduation is a small window of time to determine if a goal has been met when considering transition. Creating a longitudinal measure to assess transition plans incrementally up to five years after graduation would produce a more robust picture of goal attainment for students.

At a local level, it would be important to develop policies and practices based on the findings related to the lack of professional development with transition planning and the barriers that exist preventing parents from being fully involved in the transition process. Local school leaders can explore and invest additional resources in creating opportunities for teachers to have access to professional development to hone their skills with transition writing and create opportunities for greater parent involvement to remove some of the barriers that were described in the findings. Implications for continued professional development specifically for the diploma options could be a district or state level requirement, where teachers participate in targeted learning on transition planning. This professional development requirement would account for the specifics of each diploma option, especially Future Ready since findings identified that students following the general education diploma option had fewer opportunities for postsecondary outcomes. Accountant and Entrepreneur both had been given opportunities through the district to attend conferences and professional development sessions to learn more about transition, which translated into their increased level of knowledge and introductions to resources for their students. Removing barriers for parents to participate more actively could consist of offering varied meeting opportunities, varied times, and parent engagement activities with information provided about community resources.

Findings were consistent with the literature and enlisting opportunities for professionals to collaborate with each other as it pertains to transition planning (Riches, 1996). Specific professional development in fashioning attainable goals that align with the interests and strengths of students is an important skill to hone. Participants shared at length about collaborating with colleagues while having access to in-service opportunities for specific professional learning on transition, which is an implication of practice that is necessary for continued success. This type of high-quality professional development would enhance the transition knowledge of secondary special education teachers and actively support their creation and implementation of transition plans. Leveraging opportunities to work with school personnel on career planning that aligns with student transition plans, as well as scheduling for course alignment with postsecondary goals and activities is another implication for collaboration. Although for most effectiveness in transition planning and implementation, cross collaboration with special education teachers from both diploma options would be of great benefit with the possibility of providing realistic goals on both diploma options that can translate into viable post-school options for students.

Furthermore, transition plans are a component of the student's IEP and are not stand-alone documents. Once the special education teacher has taken the time to gather input from the student to create a plan that outlines their strengths, areas for improvement, interests, aspirations, independent living, and postsecondary goals, that plan should be used to inform high school planning. The transition plan should become an applicable document for informed decision-making for student secondary and postsecondary planning. For example, if a student includes an interest in cyber security in their transition plan, for FRC or OCS diploma options, CTE courses that are directly related to cyber security should be shared with the counselor to ensure access to those courses to promote the transition goal. This implication of practice has the potential to create opportunities for student learning and alignment with postsecondary outcomes that could develop into favorable post-school transitions.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research provides invaluable insight into the perspectives of secondary special education teachers regarding transition plan effectiveness, creation, and implementation. Since this topic is not extensively researched, investigating further into the subject matter would be appropriate. It would be advantageous to delve into more specifics about transition, postsecondary outcomes, and secondary teachers' roles/perspectives in the transition process of students, especially looking further into students' post-school outcomes beyond a year removed from high school in a more formal method. Limited evidence exists regarding the secondary curriculum for students with disabilities in general, particularly for analysis comparing curricular options and research linking curriculum receipt to outcomes (Bouck, 2012). Future research should be conducted to continue to gain further insights into transition professionals' perspectives on transition plans and their effectiveness from that curricular lens. Potentially vetting participants with varied experiences in North Carolina with both diploma options therefore opening the research to more than a singular district would provide a broader view. An additional recommendation for future research would be to create a research timeline that spans multiple school years that may provide a more robust opportunity for document review. Document availability and their review would provide more targeted transition information and types of comparisons.

Finally, this study could be expanded to include the perspectives of other transition professionals, such as transition specialists, special populations coordinators, and community agency professionals. Gaining a varied perspective from professionals who are not necessarily building-level personnel may provide a more expansive view of transition for students with disabilities and the role they actually play in the postsecondary outcomes of those students. Moreover, focusing on transition professionals at the district level who may come into contact with or even be responsible for specific data collection for future research for the indicators would provide a more comprehensive view of transition plan effectiveness.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the perspectives of secondary special education teachers in a North Carolina school district as it related to transition plans through the lens of two diploma options (Future-Ready Core and Occupational Course of Study) and Indicator 13 (required transition plan components) and Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcome one year after high school). Successful transition after high school for students with disabilities is imperative and there is a specific need to address transition professionals' perspectives about how transition plans are written as well as how they are implemented. Federal guidelines outlined in IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004) continue to require transition planning as students matriculate through high school to postsecondary outcomes.

This research was conducted in a purposefully selected public school district, where the participants were secondary special education teachers who taught two diploma options within comprehensive high schools in the district. It addressed three research questions with the third research question having two subsequent follow-up questions. Findings from the study provided insight into the effectiveness of transition plans for students with disabilities from the perspective of special education teachers.

Participants emphasized the importance of collaboration with colleagues and IEP team member input, highlighting the central role the student plays in crafting the transition plan through their input. Understanding there was a distinct difference in the transition planning of students on the different diploma options was captured in the findings, maintaining all transition plans were created to prepare students for postsecondary success, albeit goals in some instances were not realistic. As it relates to data collection and Indicator 13 (required transition plan components), transition plans consistently contained the necessary components for compliance guidelines, with perceptions of the requirements being met but overall not effective as a result of lack of evaluation. Lack of familiarity with the terminology and formal data collection for Indicator 14 (postsecondary outcomes on year after high school) yielded ineffective transition plans as secondary special education teachers in this research did not collect formal data, although many were able to maintain contact with students and determine favorable post-school outcomes through the relationships they had established. Based on the findings, implications for special education policy and special education practice were offered. Suggestions for future research were detailed and generally related to transition plans, postsecondary outcomes, plan effectiveness, and federally mandated data collection.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The purpose of this interview is to get some insight into your role and involvement in the transition process for students with disabilities in your school district through a series of open-ended questions …

1. What is your current educational role in the district and how long have you been in that role?
2. Have you ever worked as a transition professional in another school district? In state? Out of state?
3. Tell me a story about your best transition experience concerning a student.
4. Tell me about your worst transition experience concerning a student.
5. Describe your experience with transition plan writing.
6. Do you feel you have been effectively prepared to write meaningful transition plans that contain all the needed components? Why or why not?
7. Are there any specific professional development sessions that you have participated in that have had a lasting impact on your transition writing involvement experience? If so, please tell me about those.
8. Who do you include in transition planning activities?
    a. How often do you invite students to participate in transition planning activities that they actively engage in?
    b. What role does the student play and what is their level of transition plan input?
9. Which member(s) of the IEP team provides substantial input on the transition plan?
10. In your current school district, who is the responsible professional for writing the transition component of student IEPs?

11. Do you customarily invite community agencies to participate in transition meetings for students?
    a. If so, what is their involvement? Which agencies have you invited?
    b. If not, why not?
12. After conducting student transition assessments, was your drafted transition plan in line with the assessment results, with clear steps to be followed to achieve the students' post-secondary outcomes?
13. Do you facilitate teaching any occupational transition activities to students in high school? For example (i.e., resume writing, interview skills, and college prep). Please tell me a little bit about how you do this.
14. Is there a significant difference in the components of transition plans based on student-designated diploma options? (Future Ready or Occupational Course)
15. If so, what are those specific differences and why are they different?
16. If not, why is there not a significant difference?
17. What has been your involvement in collecting required transition plan components (Indicator 13) and postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14) data?
18. What is your perception of the effectiveness of student transition plans as related to required transition plan components (Indicator 13) and IEP appropriateness?
19. What is your perception of the effectiveness of student transition plans as related to postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14)?

APPENDIX B: DOCUMENT REVIEW PROTOCOL

Transition Document Review Protocol

Date: _______________

Document Reviewed ____

- Event: Transition Plan Exit Interview Data Collection End of Year Processes
- Type of Transition Professional utilizing the Document:

  FRC Special Education Teacher OCS Special Education Teacher

- Transition Topics:
  - ____
  - ____
  - ____
- Transition Task: ____
- Transition Components: ____
- Data Collection:

  required transition plan components (Indicator 13)

  postsecondary outcomes one year after high school (Indicator 14)

- Exit Procedures: ____

Notes:____

____

____

____

____

APPENDIX C: VISUAL DEPICTION OF WORD USAGE AND IMPORTANCE FROM PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

"Accountant" ~ OCS Teacher

"Server" ~ OCS Teacher

"Webmaster" ~ Future Ready Teacher

"Paralegal" ~ Future Ready Teacher

"Entrepreneur" ~ OCS Teacher

"Artist" ~ OCS Teacher

"Athlete" ~ Future Ready Teacher

APPENDIX D: THEMES, SUBTHEMES, AND FREQUENCIES FOR THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Themes and Subthemes	Frequency
Research Question 1	
Input from students for their Transition Plans	
Access to students to complete opportunities to gain input (i.e., survey, interview, transition assessments) varied based on diploma option.	102
Relationship building opportunities	71
Realistic goals that align with diploma options and interests as well as parent input.	56
Access to student transition resources (i.e., transition assessments, interest inventories, ASVAB) to create transition plans	44
IEP team member involvement	
Family Support	32
Community Agency Involvement	62
School Personnel Involvement (i.e., counselor, CTE teacher, coach)	24
Professional Development and Plan Writing Training	
Access to Collaboration with Colleagues	41
Professional Development Conferences	52
Transition Plan Instructional Resources	38
Research Question 2	
Preparation for life after high school is reflected in all transition plans.	
Both options are designed to prepare students for postsecondary outcomes with graduation requirements	49
Varied levels of guided support from special education teachers	28
Varied focus academic or job readiness of transition plans depending on diploma option	37
Research Question 3	
Required documents that are underutilized, therefore overall ineffective but necessary.	
Research Question 3a	
Required components of the transition plan, although they don’t consistently translate into viable real-life postsecondary outcomes therefore not considered effective	
Specific elements are understood of the required components although it may not be referred to formally as Indicator 13 by special education teachers	86
Research Question 3b	
Required data collection that is not widely recognized as Indicator 14, therefore not effective by default of lack of knowledge	
Being passionate educators calls for follow-up of our students although it may not be formally completed	42

Note. Subthemes are italicized.