

Student-Led Individual Transition Plans and the Effects on Self-Determination

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Abstract

Purpose of the Study: The Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 1997 requires that students in Special Education have an Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) included in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) by the time they reach the age of 16 years old. This legislation included the ITP in the IEP to ensure that students with disabilities were active participants in the planning of their future lives beyond the educational system. Previous research conducted concludes that self-led IEPs can crucially factor in increasing students' self-determination, increasing their postsecondary school success. The purpose of this study is to describe the effects of including youth with disabilities in the IEP through student-led ITP's and how this process increases self-determination.

Procedure: To determine the relationship between involving the student in the ITP Planning Process through a student-led ITP and the impact on self-determination, the study used a qualitative case study approach. The study was conducted over a period of six months during the participant's spring semester of his sophomore year of high school. The study took place in 8 sessions.

Findings: The participant's self-determination and confidence increased as a result of participating in the structured activities and lessons leading up to the student-led ITP. The results show that the participant's ability to conceptualize his knowledge, ability, and perception increased with the opportunities presented both at home and in the school setting. The results indicate that the student's ability to think critically about his future by conceptualizing a goal, and determining the appropriate steps to reach this goal, is evident through the data results.

Conclusions: The results of this study show that including students throughout the transition process increases motivation, self-determination, builds autonomy, independence, and leadership skills as they develop the skills necessary to be autonomous individuals in life after high school.

Acknowledgement

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the participant of this study, Ira. Ira, thank you for being vulnerable and honest throughout the journey and for spending your time on extra “homework” with me. Your participation in this study has greatly influenced my own teaching practices, and will impact practices of other special education teachers to ensure that all student with disabilities have meaningful experiences transitioning to life beyond high school. I am excited to continue watching you grow throughout the remainder of your 2 years in high school!

I would like to thank my husband and my family for their ongoing love and support throughout the completion of my Master’s program. It is the strength of my family that kept me going, even when it felt impossible. Their words of encouragement, and words of advice, are what pushed me to keep moving forward. There were many days and evenings that I missed spending time with each one of them, and I am excited to start my new adventure with our growing family.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Developing, acquiring, and learning self-determination and self-advocacy skills are some of the most crucial elements of postsecondary school success for students with disabilities. Self-determination can be described as “the ability to identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself” (Field & Hoffman, 1994, p. 164). According to research, one strategy that can potentially increase self-determination and self-advocacy skills is to involve the student in the development, planning, and implementation of the Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) process in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

The Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 1997 requires that students in Special Education have an ITP included in their IEP by the time they reach the age of 16 years old. IDEA defines transition services as a:

coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that is designed to be within a result-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of a child with disabilities to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities. (IDEA, 20 U.S.C § 1401 (34))

The transition requirements were included to protect students with disabilities, and to close existing gaps by improving students with disabilities success in postsecondary education.

Legislation included the ITP in the IEP to ensure the students' involvement in the decision making process, so that they may assume responsibility for their own lives and successfully transition from a structured educational system to the freedoms of participating as an active member in the larger community (Test et al., 2004). Meaningful involvement throughout the process provides opportunities for students to participate in

goal setting, strengths, areas of weakness, legal rights, present levels, and communicate their interests and preferences (Test, et al., 2004). Increasing student participation in the IEP process in this way can increase students self-confidence and self-esteem as they integrate into the larger community setting.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

As a Resource Specialist in a comprehensive high school for students with a range of disabilities, it is my role and responsibility to advocate for my students, make sure they are accessing the curriculum, and ensure that they learn skills necessary to be successful in their future lives beyond high school. Preparing students for life after high school is one of the foundational pieces of instruction in a resource specialist high school program. According to research, self-determination is a key factor in building independence and increasing success of post-high school goals (Arndt, Konrad, & Test, 2006).

It has been my practice to interview all students prior to their IEP meeting in order to better understand the students' strengths, preferences, interests, and post-high school plans. I then use this information to write their ITP and present this information at the student's IEP meeting. According to the research, when students participate in choosing their IEP and transition goals, which are based on the students' interests, and preferences, they feel more invested in the process (Arndt, Konrad, & Test, 2006; Washington, Hughes & Cosgriff, 2012). Research also suggests that student-led IEPs can lead to higher post secondary school outcomes, because students feel more invested in the process and their future goals (Arndt, Konrad & Test, 2006; Test et al., 2004; Mason et al., 2006; Nolan-Spohn, 2016).

While students with disabilities have attended their IEP meetings, their preferences, opinions, and ideas have rarely been included in the discussion. This leads to limited participation in the decision-making progress of very important aspects of their future lives (Arndt, Konrad, & Test, 2006). Within my school context, there is evidence that students are often not active participants in the IEP process, and therefore lack self-determination and related skills that enable them to be active citizens in their lives beyond high school. In addition, this lack of participation in the IEP process contributes to decreased self-advocacy and related skills within the school setting. Increased involvement in the IEP process may be one factor that can increase self-determination within students with disabilities. The purpose of this study is to describe the effects of including students in the planning process through student-led ITPs and how this affects their self-determination.

The common practice of students' participation in their IEP meetings at my school site involves their attendance at their annual and triennial meetings. While this is the common practice, it is not the rule, meaning there are times where students are not present at their IEP meeting due to various reasons; for example, parents may not want them present at the meeting, parents may not want students to miss class, and occasionally students refuse to attend because they feel uncomfortable. Most often, the special education teacher leads the IEP meeting. While students are present at their meetings, they often do not participate in the decision-making process and do not participate in the planning of their IEP. Research shows that student involvement in their IEP planning and process can have lasting benefits. In addition, active student

involvement in the IEP planning process and student led IEP increases self-determination (Arndt, et al. 2006).

Within the school setting, it is essential that students learn and develop these skills in order to become active citizens in society and life beyond high school. The common practice at my school site combined with research on this topic led me to closely explore the changes in the student's self-determination by participating in the transition process and how the inclusion of the student in the transition process affects their involvement, participation, and engagement during the IEP meeting.

Significance of the Study

Educational expectations for students with disabilities is an ever-changing practice. Transition and related services were included in the IEP to better prepare students with disabilities in college and career readiness skills. This study is designed to support the argument that people with disabilities have the ability to actively participate in the IEP and ITP Planning process, which increases self-determination. Furthermore, this study adds to the scholarly research and literature in the field by expanding on the role of instructional related activities that support the transition planning process. Lastly, the completed study will improve practices and policies by adding knowledge to the field, suggesting a structured process for including the student in the planning process, and how this can lead to stronger self-determination for the student.

Definitions of Terms

Self-Determination: What does it mean to be self-determined and what characteristics define a self-determined individual? Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and

Wehmeyer (1998a) summarized various definitions of self-determination by concluding that self-determined individuals are able to:

apply a combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs which enable individuals to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one's strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential in self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults in our society. (p. 10)

Self-determination empowers young adults to have a voice over their future by enabling them to use learned skills and tools to be successful in life beyond high school. Lastly, it provides adolescents with the foundational pieces to live an autonomous life; these skills enable children with disabilities to live independent lives capable to navigate and make choices within society.

According to Wehmeyer, Field, Doren, Jones and Mason (2004):

Field et al. further delineated the common components of self-determined behavior identified across multiple models of self-determination. These include (a) awareness of personal preferences, interests, strengths, and limitations; (b) ability to (i) differentiate between wants and needs, (ii) make choices based on preferences, interests, wants, and needs, (iii) consider multiple options and anticipate consequences for decisions, (iv) initiate and take action when needed, (v) evaluate decisions based on the outcomes of the previous decision and revise future decisions accordingly, (vi) set and work toward goals, (viii) regulate behavior, (viii) use communication skills such as negotiation, compromise, and persuasion to reach goal, and (ix) assume responsibility for actions and decisions; (c) skills for problem-solving; (d) a striving for independence while recognizing interdependence with others; (e) self-advocacy and self-evaluation skills; (f) independent performance and adjustment skills; (g) persistence; (h) self-confidence, (i) pride; and (j) creativity. (pp. 414-415)

Self-determination characteristics are the foundational pieces that build an individual to be capable and successful as they cross the proverbial bridge from

adolescence to adulthood. These characteristics and attributes are necessary for individuals to be active members of society.

Transition: The definition of transition can be found in federal regulatory laws such as the Individuals with Education Act (IDEA) which describes and outlines mandates of policies related to transition planning and related services. Secondary Transition Services are described as:

services defined by IDEA to mean a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-oriented process, that promotes movement from school to post school activities including postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independently living, or community participation. The coordinated set of activities must be based on individual needs; preferences; interests; areas of instruction; community experiences; the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives; and if appropriate, the acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. (34 CFR 300.18)

The legislation includes transition to ensure that students with disabilities are protected beyond the education system. In addition, legislation includes transition-related services and planning to close the existing gap that exists between future outcome of children with disabilities and their typically developing peers.

IDEA requires individual states to include an Individual Transition Plan (ITP) in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to be in effect before the child turns 16. If the team feels that an ITP is necessary before the child turns 16, this can take place. The ITP is updated annually by the IEP team and includes age-appropriate, measurable postsecondary goals based upon age-appropriate assessments that relate to independent living skills, career employment, education and education-related trainings. The transition services are included in their student's IEP to: increase graduation rates of

those with disabilities, decrease the dropout rate of those with disabilities, and improve the post-school outcomes of students with disabilities (Sawyer, 2015).

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): According to Blackwell and Rossetti (2014), the federal definition of The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is “a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised” on an annual basis (p. 2). For children with disabilities, the IEP is a legal and federal mandated document that outlines the student’s present levels, goals, services, and accommodation in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and is free and appropriate (FAPE).

The IEP must include information on the student’s current levels of academic and functional performance, annual goals that serve to focus special education interventions, a plan for monitoring progress toward these goals, detailed information on the services and supports provided to the student, and a description of the extent to which the student will participate in general education classes. The IEP is developed or revised annually by a group of key stakeholders called the IEP team. (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014. p.2)

The IEP team includes the student’s parents, a general education teacher, an administrator, the student, a special education teacher, and any service providers. Each individual member of the team brings forth a unique perspective collaboration in making the best-informed decisions to best meet the student’s individuals needs.

Individualized Transition Plan (ITP): In 2004, IDEA was reauthorized to include transition services for children with disabilities. The ITP is a document included in the IEP. Once a child with a disability reaches the age of 16 a transition plan needs to be in place. Included in the ITP are legally mandated: transition assessments, transition services, and the inclusion of measurable postsecondary goals that are based on age-appropriate transition assessments. The revision of IDEA to include the transition

provisions were designed to better assist children with disabilities to succeed in life beyond the educational system (Schmitz, 2008).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Transition is an important issue for people with disabilities across their lifespan. Young children with disabilities, and their families, experience many transitions as they navigate through childhood into adolescence. Transitions are more difficult for youth with disabilities compared to their same age peers without disabilities; adjusting to new situations can bring forth many feelings of uncertainty as a child with a disability needs to readjust and become familiar with new settings and people. This time in any adolescent's life can feel exciting as they experience a greater sense of autonomy and independence; this feeling can be more intense for students with disabilities (Margaraf & Pinquart, 2015). The transition to adulthood is an important developmental milestone as adolescents assume more responsibility and autonomy that involves decision-making, future-planning, and maintaining close social relationships with family and peers.

The transition requirements were included in IDEA in order to plan with the student, family, school, and agencies; assist students to see the path to the future; and increase their success postsecondary school (Flannery, Lombardi, & Kato 2013; Cobb et al., 2013). The reauthorization of IDEA included the transition requirements in the hopes of increasing participation to postsecondary education for students with disabilities. The transition process includes the student, the family, transition service providers/agencies, school counselors, school psychologists, special education teacher, local education agency (LEA) and general education teachers.

Successful facilitation of the transition process begins with understanding the history of legislative acts which guarantee transition services for children with

disabilities, the role of the family throughout the process, and effective collaboration with and between school professionals.

Legislation Special Education & Transition

With the reauthorization of IDEA in 1990, and in 2004, the US Department of Education included transition requirements to protect students with disabilities, and close these existing gaps by improving students with disabilities success in postsecondary education. These transition requirements were included in IDEA in order to plan with the student, family, school, and agencies; assist students to see the path to the future; and increase their success postsecondary school (Flannery, Lombardi, & Kato 2013; Cobb et al., 2013). The reauthorization of IDEA included the transition requirements in the hopes of increasing participation in postsecondary education for students with disabilities. The transition process includes the student, the family, transition service providers/agencies, school counselors, school psychologists, special education teacher, LEA and general education teachers.

Historically, postsecondary school outcomes of attending community college, a four-year university, or vocational school, are significantly lower for youth with disabilities than for youth without disabilities (Kellems, Springer, Wilkins, & Anderson, 2016; Naugle, Campbell, & Gray, 2010; Margaraf & Pinqart, 2015; Cobb, Lipscomb, Wolgemuth, & Schulte, 2013; Trainor, Morningstar, & Murray, 2015). Although transition planning has been legally mandated for over two decades, young adults with high-incidence disabilities, including learning disabilities (LD), emotional disturbance

(ED), and attention-deficit/hyperactivity (ADHD), are continuing to experience lower postsecondary school outcomes than their peers without disabilities (Trainor et al., 2015).

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) is a resource that provides the most up to date information about the transition of students with disabilities. The NLTS2 study concluded that students with disabilities who received special education services are less likely than their peers without disabilities to: enroll in postsecondary programs (60% vs. 67%), earn an income comparable to the general education population (an average of \$10.40 per hour vs. \$11.40 per hour), live independently (45% vs. 59%), and have a checking account (59% vs. 74%) (Kellems et al., 2016; Margaraf & Pinquart, 2015). The results support that the transition to postsecondary education is much more challenging for a student with a disability than their peers in the general population. Thus, there needs to be a greater support for preparing children for postsecondary school transition.

The transition requirement supports students with disabilities in planning for the future. The IDEA legislation requires the transition process to include: on going assessment and instruction that supports the child's postsecondary interests, preferences, and strengths (Trainor et al., 2015; Flannery et al., 2013). The transition team should begin discussing appropriate postsecondary goals related to education and employment by the time the student is 16 years old. Flannery, Lombardi, and Kato (2013) suggest that the IEP team is required to plan the student's post-school goals based on the student's interests, and preferences. In addition, the team is required to identify services and course of study (COS) to achieve these post school goals. This process requires the team to

consider the skill development along with identifying necessary supports in order for that individual to their post-school goals.

Postsecondary transition performance goals are measured and evaluated by the Annual Performance Report (APR) based on IDEA's 21 indicators. Indicators are designed to monitor student progress on goals. There are four indicators that specifically report and relate to the transition process. They are: Indicator 1—percent of youth who graduate high school, indicator 2—percent who dropout of school, Indicator 13—percent of youth with required transition components in the IEP, and Indicator 14—percent of youth who achieve post-school outcomes outlined in IDEA (Wehmeyer, 2007, p. 45). Indicators 13 and 14 are especially significant to the transition process because they focus on the educational outcomes and results of the measurable IEP transition goals. Success throughout the transition process begins with collaboration amongst involved participants with the family unit at the center of the team. Because the transition process can feel overwhelming for students with disabilities, a strong, supportive unit increases the path for a successful transition to adulthood.

Family Role in the Transition Process

The child's family is the constant in the child's life and therefore is the primary unit for the family-centered service delivery (Shelton, Jeppson, & Johnson, 1987).

According to Bruder (2010):

every child is a member of a family (however it defines itself) and has a right to a home and a secure relationship with adults. These adults create a family unit and have ultimate responsibility for caregiving, supporting the child's development, and enhancing the quality of the child's life. (p. 341)

The family-centered approach maintains the belief that because the family is the primary unit for the service delivery, family members involved must be active participants throughout the process, and therefore with respect and dignity. In addition, parents and the family unit should be provided with necessary supports and resources necessary in order to ensure the child's success in their post school endeavors.

The transition from childhood to adolescence can greatly affect the entire family as this time of change can bring forth feelings of ambivalence and concern for any parent, and this is only magnified for parents of children with disabilities. In order to alleviate some of this stress, it is crucial that from the beginning, when the child turns 16, our schools and teachers include parents and families throughout the entire transition process.

Previous research in this area concludes that when families and schools actively work together as a team, the student is more likely to be successful in their adult life (Maryland State Dept. of Education, B. I., 1999). Also, students report that it is important to them to have their families actively participate in the transition process (Miller-Warren, 2007). Including parents and families in the transition process is imperative to student success. One of the most positive identified factors in students with disabilities reaching their post school goals is parent involvement. Further, children of parents who have high expectations for their children tend to have more positive outcomes in their future (Hirano, Garbacz, Shanley, & Rowe, 2016). While families and parents of the student may not have a deep understanding of the transition process, they play a crucial role in the facilitation of the transition process. Parents often know their

child better than anyone, and can therefore provide great insight into their child's strengths, interests, and preferences.

Parents and families are most often the ones responsible for the student after completion of high school; therefore, they often need guidance and assistance with postsecondary education planning (Miller-Warren, 2007). Consequently, schools need to not only recognize the role the family plays in the success of the transition process, they need to provide parents and families with the resources that they need to best support their child with a disability reach their post school outcomes and goals. For example: including families in researching appropriate colleges and postsecondary educational programs assisting with the application process, exploring available scholarships and financial support options, and disability support programs offered by prospective schools. Students will be faced with new experiences and challenges, so involving parents in all the aspects previously mentioned can help create a smooth and seamless transition. Ensuring that families have the support they deserve in preparing their children for postsecondary education requires effective collaboration between all IEP team members.

Role of Collaboration in the Transition Process

Collaboration is a working puzzle in which many different pieces are constantly moving. Collaboration between IEP transition team members should be ongoing and involve: the family, school psychologist, special education teacher, transition program coordinators, counselor and general education teacher. Each individual brings forth a unique wealth of knowledge, and perspective, valuable in supporting the child through the transition process to to postsecondary education. Collaboration between all members

is instrumental in creating a successful transition, and it should be viewed as a constant rather than a variable. The result of such constant collaboration would be a comprehensive, data-based individualized plan, detailing transition from one school setting to a progressively more independent setting (Kellems et al., 2016).

According to Morgan and Riesen (2016), “a transition team must articulate common goals; share common values; agree on operating structures; share roles, responsibilities, and resources; and understand their shared accountability for success and failure” (p. 235). It is essential that all members are actively involved in the process and share the responsibility of accountability. In addition, it is important that all members share a common perspective in making decisions based on what is best for the student. An effective transition team begins with involved members who understand his or her role in the process.

The special education teacher plays a significant role in the transition process because they often interact frequently with the student, and therefore has a unique connection and relationship with the individual. Another responsibility of the special education teacher is to design, implement, and assess instruction. The special education teacher is responsible for addressing the functional performance needs of their students as it relates to the transition to postsecondary education (Kellems et al., 2016). In addition, The special education teacher is the glue between all IEP team members and ensures all participating members are accountable and responsible for their roles in the process. Lastly, the special education teacher is responsible for ensuring that all transition activities are goal focused and support the student for reaching their long term goals.

The school psychologist administers assessments and interprets assessment results used to create and inform decisions relating to postsecondary transition. The role the school psychologist plays in regards to transition to postsecondary education relates to eligibility after exiting the school system (Kellems et al., 2016). School psychologists can also support the transition process by ensuring that transition assessments are relevant and current. Many postsecondary schools require current assessment and documentation in order to be considered for disability services. The services available to a child with a disability vary from university to university; high school counselors must be educated in available resources and services available to students with disabilities at their college or university.

School counselors are an invaluable resource in the collaborative piece of the transition process as they bring a wealth of expertise to the team regarding postsecondary education (Naugle et al., 2010). School counselors should have knowledge not only of college disability services, but should also have knowledge of local programs that can provide transition services to post-secondary education (Naugle et al., 2010; Tait, 2013). According to Naugle et al. (2010), some of these services can include programs preparing students for college and career placement programs. Transition programs can further increase success for students with disabilities by offering a range of supportive mentoring groups.

The school counselors collaborate with college and university representatives and can provide useful information to students about disability services available. They can also support students through the process of providing resources about a variety of

schools, researching colleges, selecting courses, and picking a major the student is interested in. Further, school counselors can support the family unit by providing the family with resources regarding disability services offered at universities and colleges (Tait, 2013).

Previous research results have identified collaboration as one variable predicting successful post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities. However, one study found that despite collaboration practices importance, consistent collaboration is not being implemented (Taylor et al., 2015). Rehabilitation counselors and special educators surveyed in the study selected two top practices that would improve collaboration. The first practice is to offer joint trainings, attended by transition teachers and vocational rehabilitation counselors, the second is to provide training for transition teachers on the transition process (Taylor et al., 2015). Further, participants were asked open-ended questions to identify steps to improve collaboration. The four categories identified are: more time to develop relationships with transition team members, administrative support, funding, and training for all team members (Taylor et al., 2015). Collaboration is a valued component of the IEP planning process, and by implementing these practices, team members can improve transition practices and outcomes.

IEP Transition Planning and Related Services

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 further strengthened the transition requirements for children with disabilities. IDEIA requires special education and related services outlined in a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) be found on scientifically based research and peer reviewed reports

(Test et al., 2009). Congress requires schools and educators to use instructional practices that are grounded in scientifically-based research. Transition planning services are designed to enhance the involvement of individuals with disabilities in transitioning to postsecondary education (Naugle et al., 2010). Transition planning and coordinated programming includes components of: curriculum and instruction, postsecondary education awareness and training, independent living skills instruction, career awareness and work experience (Collet-Klingenberg, 2011). Unfortunately, one of the biggest identified barriers of effective transition planning and programming centers around the lack of resources provided to teachers.

Transition planning should begin as early as possible; IDEA requires particular elements of the transition process be complete by the time the child turns 16 (Mazzotti et al., 2009). Others argue that transition planning should begin as early as sixth grade to ensure successful postsecondary transition outcomes. According to Riesen and Morgan (2016), “when planning transition for youth with disabilities, start with the end in mind” (p. 107). Transition planning should begin with considering the end goals and work backwards. While some students may not know what career field they are interested in during their sixth grade year, career assessments and learning assessments are ways to begin identifying student interests and preferences, which can create opportunities to begin discussing future plans and goals.

Transition assessment is the continuous and ongoing collection of data on the student’s interests and needs that relate to the student’s current and future career environment, post-secondary and education path, and personal and social environments

(Kellems et al., 2016; Mazzotti, et al., 2009). Assessment data serve as the common thread in the transition process and form the basis for defining goals and services to be included in the Individualized Education Program (Kellems et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2009). In other words, assessment is crucial in selecting age appropriate goals and services included in the IEP. IDEA 2004 requires that the transition process include annual age-appropriate transition assessments related to the child's postsecondary education goals.

The team should consider including both formal and informal transition assessment; this will provide a whole picture of the child's strengths and areas of weakness. For example, interviewing the student can be used as an informal assessment and provide insight into understanding the child's educational goals and path after high school. A formal assessment may include a psychoeducational report by the psychologist, which provides information about the child's disability and include a description of evidence-based practice recommendations. This information provides postsecondary institutions (colleges, universities) with necessary background information to better understand the child. IEP team members can use the assessment results to plan and make informed decisions about the best support options available.

Transition planning is complex and requires specific step-by-step action in order to be effective. The research implies that transition planning in high school significantly increases the odds of students with disabilities success in their future. According to Newman, Madaus, and Javitz (2016), careful and detailed transition planning in high school combined with specified and needed postsecondary accommodations and

available supports increase the odds that students with disabilities will be successful in postsecondary education. Transition planning experiences are extremely important for children with disabilities and results demonstrate the important linkages between transition planning and receipt of postsecondary education and available supports at postsecondary schools (Newman et al., 2016). Riesen and Morgan (2016) consider five important planning steps in the transition process. The steps in the transition planning process are: first, interpret transition assessment results (academic and functional); second, develop present levels of performance; third, develop measurable postsecondary goals; fourth, write annual transition goals; and fifth, describe transition services (Riesen & Morgan, 2016). Furthermore, including the child in the transition planning process can have lasting positive benefits.

Self-Determination

According to Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998b), self-determination can be defined as “people controlling their own lives and their own destinies” (p.76). Research suggests that students with disabilities often are not the ones to make decisions about their life; rather, professionals and teachers are the one to make decisions for them. Even though educators of students with disabilities value self-determination skills, it is often a practice that is not translated into the classroom. Agran, Snow, and Swaner (1999) found that even though educators found self-determination skills to be an important element of curriculum, it was often left out of a student’s individualized education program. This may be one of the reasons why many students with disabilities lack self-determination skills.

Moreover, Test et al. (2004) found that students with a range of disabilities can be taught self-determination and self-advocacy skills such as: choice-making, problem-solving, self-regulation, participation in the IEP process, taking risks, assuming responsibility for one's actions, and self-awareness. Furthermore, research supports that teaching self-determination skills to children with disabilities can be vital to transition outcomes (Arndt, Konrad, & Test, 2006). Students with disabilities who are more autonomous and independent have higher levels of self-determination skills and therefore have a better quality of life.

It is important that students with disabilities are held to the same standards as their same-age peers; many studies demonstrate that teacher expectations strongly correspond with high student performance and subsequent student outcomes (Palmer et al., 2004). Most studies that been conducted focus on only the benefit of these learned skills in the school environment. There is little research that has documented the longitudinal impact or long-term efficacy of instruction in beyond high school (Test et al., 2004; Agran, Snow, & Swaner, 1999). The key is that these learned skills can be generalized for use for the rest of the students' lives.

Farmer, Allsopp, and Ferron (2015) investigated the impact of learning skills and strategies to improve self-determination through The Personal Strengths Programs (PSP) for children with disabilities. Such characteristics as: self-knowledge, self-awareness, self-advocacy, self-regulation, and goal setting are all foundational pieces of self-determination which can impact postsecondary outcomes for youth with disabilities (Farmer, Allsopp, & Ferron, 2015; Agran, Snow, & Swaner, 1999). Students with

disabilities experience decreased postsecondary outcomes when compared to their peers without disabilities. Self-determination is a foundational characteristic which can significantly improve the postsecondary success of a child with a disability. Teaching children such characteristics throughout the education can have lasting positive effects as they become autonomous individuals in life.

While self-determination is a critical building block in increasing the self-confidence and self-esteem of a student with a disability, the current research suggests that there is a need for a “pulse check” on the future of instructional practices related to self-determination (Test et al., 2004, p.4). Special education teachers are professionals in a field that is ever evolving as instructional practices change to improve best practices in regards to teaching self-determination and related skills. While self-determination instruction is recognized as an essential key factor to success, the demands of standards-based reforms, access to the general education curriculum, and evidence-based practices are barriers of effectively finding time to instruct students in this skill area (Test et al., 2004). Incorporating instruction of self-determination and related skills into the general education setting is the ultimate goal.

Student Involvement in the Transition Process

For students with disabilities, postsecondary school life can feel discouraging, overwhelming and daunting; therefore, involving students as much as possible in discussions related to their postsecondary school path prepares, builds, and deepens their self-determination, awareness, and advocacy. Understanding the role of the transition process builds awareness and independence as the child can be involved in decisions that

affect the rest of their life. Further, advocacy for children with disabilities includes learning about their rights that extend into the real world (Gartner, 1987).

Students with disabilities should be involved in the transition process from the very beginning. Their interests, preferences, and dreams should be the driving force behind the transition team's decisions regarding the best plan and path for the student's postsecondary education. The ultimate goal of the transition team is to help students with disabilities acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to live happy and productive fulfilling lives, and this begins with keeping the student's interests at the center of all discussions (Kellems, Springer, Wilkins, & Anderson, 2016).

Students should be actively involved throughout the entire process because it sets the foundation of life after school and builds independence within the student. As students grow and mature throughout their high school years, their interests and future life plans may also change and evolve. The transition team needs to respect and consider the choices and decisions the student makes as they ultimately are the one who will live with the decision (Wehmeyer, 2007, p 136). Wehmeyer (2007) suggests planning and preparing for the transition process to adulthood starts long before the child exits school; in most cases, it is the early intervention and services the child received in their younger years that set the foundation for the student to be successful in their post-school life.

One way to increase student involvement in the IEP process is through student-led IEPs. Research suggests that student-led IEPs can lead to higher post secondary school outcomes, because students feel more invested in the process and their future goals (Arndt, Konrad & Test, 2006; Test et al., 2004; Mason et al., 2006; Nolan-Spohn, 2016).

A review of 16 studies about self-determination reveals that students with disabilities need systematic instruction to increase self-determination skills that will positively impact their abilities to participate more fully in their IEP meetings (Test et al., 2004). Skills such as choice-making, risk-taking, taking responsibility for one's actions, and generalizing learned skills into other settings, are all skills that help increase self-determination skills when students are given explicit systematic instruction (Sheppard & Unsworth, 2011). These skills encourage the student's self-determination skills, which supports their participation and involvement in the IEP process.

Meaningful involvement in the IEP process and goal setting can have positive benefits that follow the student into life after high school. The annual IEP meeting provides students with an opportunity to focus on skills that can increase one's self-determination. Including the students in the process increases students awareness of his or her disability, strengths, needs, legal rights, present levels of performance, goal setting, communication preferences and interests, participation in discussions about postsecondary school plans, and determining appropriate and useful accommodations (Test et al., 2004). Involving the students yearly in their IEP can be beneficial in assuming responsibility for their future and postsecondary school dreams.

Valuing student participation in the IEP process supports students' self-determination and related skills and characteristics. Self-led IEPs and active involvement in the process supports building skills to instruction to apply those skills in a structured setting. This process can build knowledge, skills, and beliefs, to empower individuals to take ownership and responsibility over various aspects of his or her life.

Providing these safe places for students with disabilities to discover these skills builds confidence as they discover and find the voice over their future lives (Wehmeyer, et al., 2004).

Chapter 3: Methods

The study was completed during the 2017-2018 school year in a classroom located at a comprehensive 9th-12th grade high school in Northern California. The study was conducted in a Resource Specialist Program classroom, called Study Skills, which served sophomore age children with a range of mild to moderate disabilities. The school was on a block schedule and the class met every other day for 90 minutes.

Study Skills was designed to support students in their general education courses such as: English, Science, History, and Math. The Study Skills classroom served approximately 10 to 15 students and was staffed with one instructional assistant and one credentialed special educator (the study author). The purpose of the class was to empower students to take responsibility for their learning within a supportive environment. Study Skills classes focused on helping each individual student discover their learning style, strengths and needs, work on developing self-advocacy skills, and organization and transition to postsecondary school education and careers.

Participants

The study took place over a period of six months during the Spring semester of the participant's sophomore year of high school. The focus participant in this study was one male sophomore in high school: pseudonym "Ira." Ira was chosen because he had an IEP meeting prior to the initial start of the study and was willing to participate in the study. Ira had parental consent and gave his consent to participate in the study.

Ira was a 16 year old African American male student with a mild to moderate disability, qualifying under the category of Specific Learning Disability. Ira lived with his

mother, grandmother, and younger brother in a rural part of Northern California. Ira had been receiving special education related services for two and a half years; he initially qualified for services in 2016. His many hobbies and strengths include: skateboarding, playing sports (basketball), and playing the the guitar (music). He enjoyed doing physical labor work. Well-liked by his peers and a leader in his peer group, he enjoyed science and history-related courses. At the time of the study, Ira worked part-time at a local skate and music shop for at-risk teens. This was Ira's first time leading a portion of his IEP. He had attended one of his previous IEPs prior to the study, but did not contribute to the meeting.

In addition, participants included Ira's IEP team members. The IEP team members included: Ira's 5 general education teachers, his mother, his school counselor, and his special education teacher (the researcher of this study). The IEP team members participated in the planning by providing feedback prior to the meeting and then by attending the scheduled IEP meeting.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative design and a case study approach. A case study approach was used because the research focused on a single individual student, addressed a particular phenomenon of activities that occurred in its natural context, and was richly descriptive because of the many sources of data collected (Honcock & Algozzine, 2006). The case study design was the best method to answer the research questions because it focused on a single individual's set of activities that occurred in the natural setting of the classroom.

Data Collection

Data were collected through various techniques and sources such as: rating scales, inventive sources (quick writes), a series of interviews, and a student led transition IEP. Descriptions of each of these data collection methods and how they were implemented throughout the study are described in the following sections.

Rating scales: ARC's & AIR self-determination scales. Two different Self-Determination Scales were used as a data collection tool to measure the Ira's self-determination. The American Institute for Research (AIR) Self-Determination Assessment was used both prior to the study being completed and after the study was completed. Formerly known as the Association for Retarded Citizens of the United States (ARC), the ARC Scale was used after the study was conducted to compare the participant's self-determination to the norm.

Developed by Wehmeyer and colleagues (1994), the AIR's Self-Determination Scale is used as a collaborative measurement between students with disabilities, parents, and educators to determine the individual's levels of self-determination, to inform IEP goals, and to identify areas of strength and weakness. The AIR Self-Determination Scale is used for students from kindergarten through grade 12 and measures two different components of self-determination — capacity and opportunity. The Capacity subscale refers to three different sections of the assessment — the student's knowledge, abilities, and perceptions that enable them to be self-determined. The second subscale, Opportunity, has two sections — measuring the student's opportunity at school and opportunity at home, and refers to the student's chances to use their knowledge, abilities,

and perceptions within different contexts (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Williams-Diehm, Davies, & Stock, 2011). The AIR Self-Determination Scale was developed and normed with 450 students with and without disabilities (Wehmeyer et al., 2013). The AIR Self-Determination Scale raw scores convert to percentages that can be compared from one point in time to another (Sheppard & Unsworth, 2011).

The ARC's Self-Determination Scale, also developed by Wehmeyer (1995), is an assessment used for adolescent students with mild to moderate disabilities to evaluate and measure their beliefs about themselves and their self-determination. The ARC's Self-Determination Scale was used once at the end of the study to collect data about the participant's perception of his self-determination after completing the 8 sessions and how this compared to the Total, domain and subdomain scores with Scale norms. The normed data compared to the students' data provides honest feedback, which can be used for future interventions beyond the realms of the study completed (Wehmeyer, 2011). The Arc's Self-Determination Scale supports the planning of appropriate goals and objectives that support postsecondary school transition planning.

The ARC Self-Determination Scale consists of 72 questions that assess the self-determination strengths and weaknesses of students with disabilities through student involvement in educational planning. The scale was normed and developed with 500 students with cognitive disabilities and adequate reliability and validity in the measurement of self-determination for students with cognitive disabilities (Wehmeyer et al., 2013, & Wehmeyer et al., 2011). There are a total of 148 points possible on the scale, and higher scores indicate higher levels of self determination (Wehmeyer et al., 2013).

The ARC's Self-Determination Scale yields a total self-determination under four subdomain categories: autonomy, self-regulation, psychological empowerment and self-realization. The scales concurrent criterion-related validity results in a score of total self-determination (Wehmeyer et al., 2011).

Inventive sources (quick writes). Quick writes are a practical and useful assessment tool used by educators to gather student responses. Quick writes are a brief response to a question or stated prompt. In the classroom setting, and in the upper grade levels, teachers use a range of writing tools to measure students' comprehension of a particular topic or subject. Quick writes are often teacher-led and provide a meaningful and engaging platform for educators to gather student responses to a given topic (Knipper & Duggan, 2011). One way quick writes can be used is to gather baseline information about what the participants know about a particular phenomenon or topic. In addition, they can be used after instruction and provide more flexibility in response opportunities for students to write and construct their own representations of newly learned material (Green & Smith, 2007).

A series of three quick writes were used in this study as part of data collection. The quick write prior to the study provided information about the participant's previous knowledge of the topic. The quick write after the first session was used as an assessment tool to gather information about what the participant learned from the instruction presented within the first session. The last quick write was used after the student led IEP to provide further insight into students understanding and representation of the topic.

Interviews. The three interview series method of interviewing was used in this study (Seidman, 2006). This method of in-depth interviewing involves conducting three separate interviews with the participant over a period of time. The three series interviews build upon one another to explore the participant's lived experiences. Through asking open-ended questions the participant is able to reconstruct their past experiences within the topic that is being studied (Seidman, 2006). The participant's reconstruction of their experiences is placed in a specific context, which provides meaning to their lived experiences.

The first interview was focused on the participant's life history. This interview was designed to understand the participant's experience as it related to the topic of the study. The participant was asked open questions about his previous educational experiences. The participant reconstructed these experiences in a broad, general, sense. The student was asked questions related to his relationships in the educational experiences that have been of support, questions related to his understanding of his disability, his strengths in school and his struggles in school. The interview recreated his experiences in school that have shaped him as the student he is today.

The second interview was a more in-depth look at the concrete details of the participant's lived experience as it relates to the topic. The student was asked more specific and detailed open-ended questions related to his thoughts about postsecondary school. In addition, the participant was asked questions about his motivation. Furthermore, the student was asked about goals related to after high school.

The third and final interview asked the student questions that were reflective about the meaning of his experiences related to his participation in the IEP transition process. The participant was asked open ended questions that sought to discover his emotional connection to his goals and postsecondary school pathways and his motivation to reach his goals.

Student-led transition IEP meeting. The student-led transition IEP meeting was audio recorded and provided an in-depth understanding of Ira's present levels, goals, accommodations, courses for the next two years in high school, and most importantly, the status of his credits as it relates to graduation. A student-led IEP is one way to increase involvement in the development and implementation of the IEP. In addition, this supports students' monitoring of their goal achievement (Test, et al., 2004). The IEP meeting was a collaborative effort that included Ira's mother, special education teacher, counselor, administrator designee, and Biology teacher (general education teacher). Ira participated by sharing his transition plan, which included his transition goals. He also added to the discussion by sharing his thoughts as it related to his transition goals, and course schedule for the remainder of his time in high school.

Data Analysis Design

Comparative analysis. Comparative analysis, "used to identify complex patterns ...by conducting formalized comparison(s)" was used to compare the results of the AIR Self-Determination Scale Results (Cronqvist, 2011, p.2). Trends in the data were compared across domains. In addition, the relationships between the themes were explored across domains.

Likewise, comparative analysis was used to compare the baseline data results of the quick writes from the first session and the last session. Lastly, comparative analysis was used with the ARC's Self-Determination Scale. Ira's self-report of measurement of self-determination was compared to the norm of the comparison of data. Trends in the data were analyzed and coded into themes. The relationships between these trends and themes were analyzed.

Thematic coding. Thematic coding was used to determine the overall relationships and themes of the data collection (Vaughn & Turner, 2015). Open coding was used to determine overarching themes and ideas of all the data collected. Trends in the data support the themes. Data triangulation was used to determine validity across the domains of data collection.

Procedure

The study was conducted over a period of six months during Ira's spring semester of his sophomore year of high school. The study took place in 8 sessions.

Session 1: The first session was designed to take baseline data to collect information about the student's thoughts surrounding the topic and definition of self-determination. In addition, Ira took The American Institutes for Research (AIR) Self-Determination Assessment.

Session 2: The second session included the first interview (see Appendix A). This provided a baseline of data related to previous knowledge of the IEP, participation in an IEP meeting, discussion of thoughts about leading an IEP meeting and feelings about Ira's postsecondary school career and education paths. In addition, Ira received an

instructional session of historical background information related to special education (IDEA) to give a brief idea of the legal history and educational rights for students with disabilities; this included rights to an age-appropriate transition plan and related services. This session also introduced the ITP.

Session 3: The third session included the second interview, which collected a more in-depth focus of Ira's present lived experience related to the topic area of transition and postsecondary school interests (see Appendix B). In addition, Ira completed a quick write, which collected information about the previous session's historical background information.

Session 4: The fourth session included an informal interview about Ira's postsecondary school paths related to career and education paths. The interview was designed to support the writing of the ITP within Ira's IEP. Questions were designed to answer questions related to interests, preferences, and choices related to current high school courses and postsecondary school courses.

Session 5: During the fifth session the special education teacher and Ira wrote the ITP form together. The responses from the informal interview in the previous session guided the written responses on the ITP.

Session 6: Ira and the special education teacher practiced and modeled the student-led transition plan and discussion of goals. This was a recorded session in which the special education teacher and Ira rehearsed and practiced the IEP meeting.

Session 7: Student-led transition portion of the IEP meeting, which included all IEP team members as described with participants. Ira shared his transition plan and

related goals to the team. In addition, Ira, shared his thoughts as it related to his future high school schedule and preferred classes.

Session 8: The eighth session included a reflection on the meaning of self-determination and of participating in the experience. The third interview was significant in that it asked Ira to deeply consider his thoughts and feelings about the experience and of the meaning of this experience as it related to his present and future plans (see Appendix C). In addition, the student took the AIR's Self-Determination Scale and the ARC Self-Determination Scale again for comparison.

Chapter 4: Results

Ira, a sophomore at a comprehensive high school, participated in structured instructional activities to support a student-led Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The effects of Ira's participation were examined to determine the relationship between a student-led IEP and self-determination. Results of this study indicate that active and ongoing participation in the IEP planning process, combined with a student-led IEP, increase one's self-determination.

Existing Archival Sources Within a School (Cumulative File)

Existing archival records from Ira's middle and high schools were examined. Records indicate that a Student Study Team (SST) began in September of Ira's 8th grade school year. The SST team identified concerns regarding Ira's performance such as: low skills and previous grades, short attention span, impulse control, challenges with following multiple steps, tendency to forget information, and lack of organization skills. The team brainstormed creative strategies to address the concerns for a period of 6 weeks. While the records indicated a period of 6 weeks in the action time, there were no follow up records or notes. However, there was a follow up SST meeting in February which stated that there had been no change during that period of time. An Assessment Plan was suggested and agreed to for Special Education testing to see if Ira qualified for Special Education Services.

Ira's initial IEP (Individualized Education Plan) was held in March 2016 when he was 13 years old and in the 8th grade. He qualified for services under the disability category of Specific Learning Disability (SLD). Ira displayed deficits in the area of

attention processing. This impacted his ability to follow multi-step directions, organization, and executive functioning. His disability impacted all areas of his academic performance and ability to meet grade-level expectations.

During the Spring semester of Ira's 8th grade year, he signed a "Remediation and Retention Review Contract" because he was identified as at risk of 8th grade retention for failing one or more courses. It was recommended at this time that he find motivation and purpose to do well in school, and take school seriously. Ira participated in a Bridge Academy Program (an intervention) to support the transition from middle to high school. The parent, the student, the counselor, and the administrator signed the contract.

Ira's discipline records from middle school indicated that he had 16 documented discipline incidents. The records also indicated behaviors such as: continuous disruptions during instructional class time, disrespect towards adults and peers, defiance, continuous off-task behaviors in the classroom setting, and physical fights with peers. His transcripts showed that in the fall semester of his 8th grade year he passed Math and Choir; he failed English, PE, Physical Science, and U.S. History. During his 8th grade spring semester he passed Study Skills (RSP) and English (RSP); he failed Math, PE, Physical Science, and U.S. History.

As a freshman in high school, Ira was suspended for possession of drugs while at school. In addition to the suspension, Ira had 14 other discipline incidents that occurred during his freshman and sophomore years. The incidences include: defiance, disruptive behaviors, nuisance, harassment, dangerous behaviors, leaving campus, use of electronic devices, and tardiness.

During his 9th grade Fall Semester, Ira passed Study Skills (RSP) and English; he failed Algebra Academy (RSP Math), Physical Science, PE, and Human Interaction (HI). In his 9th grade Spring Semester, Ira passed Algebra Academy (RSP Math), English (RSP), Study Skills (RSP), and PE; he failed Physical Science and Introduction to Business. Entering into his sophomore year of high school Ira earned 30 of the 60 credits towards graduation.

During his Fall Semester of his 10th grade year, Ira passed PE, Study Skills (RSP), and Biology; he failed English (College Prep), Math I, and World History. The study conducted began during Ira's Sophomore Spring semester. Ira's grades at the end of the Spring semester were: a D in English (College Prep), a B- in PE, a C- in World History, a B in Study Skills (RSP) and a C- in Biology. He failed Math I.

Rating Scales: AIR Self-Determination Scales

Developed by Wehmeyer and colleagues (1994), the AIR Self-Determination Assessment is used as a collaborative assessment tool to determine an individual's level of self-determination and is completed by educators, parents, and the student. The assessment is used to inform IEP goals and identify areas of strength and weakness.

The results of the AIR Self-Determination Scales were used to compare the student's measure of self-determination before the study and after the study. In addition, the Scales were also completed, in reference to Ira's experience, by his five general education teachers. The general education teachers' scores were averaged for each domain section and will be reported as an average of overall percentage of self-determination.

Ira's self-determination profile before the start of the study showed that his level of self-determination was 64%. The "Things I do" section, which is part of the "capacity" scored in an ability score, reflected that he had difficulty with identifying areas of interest, goal setting, and planning. Ira rated on the scale that he "almost never or sometimes" met his goals, was able to plan his work and adjust the plan as necessary, and identify areas of interests and strengths.

Ira's perception before the start of the study on the "How I feel" section of the assessment reflected similar thoughts to the previous section. Ira rated his feelings and thoughts about his interests, beliefs about goal setting, work initiation, willingness to complete tasks, and reflect on his goal setting as activities he sometimes engaged in.

The last portion of the assessment measured the student's opportunities both in the home setting and in the school setting. Ira rated the opportunities available to him at home and at school the same. Ira felt as though there are "almost always" people at school and people at home that encourage him, understand when he has to change his plan to meet his goals, and offer advice and encourage him to reach his goals.

Ira's self-determination profile after the study showed that his level of self-determination was 82%. The "Things I do" section reflected that after the study he "always or almost always" was able to identify areas of interest, goal setting, and planning. Ira rated on the scale that he "almost always or always" met his goals, was able to plan his work, adjust the plan as necessary, and identify areas of interests and strengths. After the completion of the study, Ira's perception of himself, and his thoughts

and feelings related to his interests, beliefs, goal setting, work initiation, willingness to complete tasks, and reflect on his goal setting increased to “almost always or always.”

Lastly, his self-reflection of his opportunity at home and school increased slightly from before the start of the study. Ira had strong beliefs about opportunities available to him both at home and school prior to the start of the study, and his thoughts about his opportunities in both of these settings increased slightly.

Ira’s five general education teachers completed the AIR Self-Determination Educator Forms prior to the start of the study. Ira’s general education teachers saw him every other day for 90 minutes. At the time of completing the AIR Scale, Ira’s teachers had known the student for seven months. As an average, Ira’s general education teachers believed that his level of self-determination was 55%.

Ira’s mother also completed the AIR Self-Determination Parent Form prior to the start of the study. For three years prior to the study being completed, Ira’s grandmother was raising him. His mother moved back into the home a few months prior to the study being completed and she held educational rights. Ira’s mother rated his self-determination as 75%.

Rating Scales: ARC’s Self-Determination Scales

The ARC’s Self-Determination Scale was completed once by Ira at the end of the study to determine perception of his self-determination and how this compared to the Total, domain and subdomain scores with Scale norms. The ARC Scale yields a total self-determination under four subdomain categories: autonomy, self-regulation,

psychological empowerment and self-realization. This score results in the total self-determination.

The Autonomy section has 96 possible points. Ira scored 73 points which is 76%. He has average autonomy self-determination skills.

The self-regulation section is divided into two parts. There are 12 possible points in the first section. Ira scored a 58% on the first section. Higher scores represent more effective interpersonal cognitive problem-solving skills. The second section of the self-regulation domain measures students' abilities to identify goals and the number of steps needed to meet the goals. Higher scores represent more effective goal setting and task attainment skills. There are 9 possible points on this section. Ira scored 77%.

The Psychological Empowerment section of the assessment asked the student to reflect on an answer that describes them best. The answers in this section reflect that the student demonstrates control over psychological abilities and perceptions of control. Ira scored 100%: demonstrating very strong psychological empowerment-related skills.

The last section of the assessment, Self Realization, measured students' beliefs about self-knowledge and self-awareness. The highest score is 15. Ira scored 86%: demonstrating emerging to strong self-realization skills.

Inventive Sources (Quick Writes)

The quick writes asked the student to reflect about the meaning of the term "self-determination." The student wrote about what he believed the definition of self-determination was at the start of the study. His response was, "self-determination to me means with a little bit of hard work and motivation you can make any plan

successful. It is important to me to be self-determined because you can get more done with a successful mindset.” The student reflected again on this term after the completion of the study. His definition showed growth and maturation:

Self-determination to me means working hard to reaching your goals and putting forth the effort needed to reach and accomplish the goal. I think it is important to be self-determined for many reasons. Being motivated to accomplish a goal, staying optimistic through the whole sequence for more opportunities.

Interviews

The three interview series of in-depth interviewing was used in this study (Seidman, 2006). Three separate interviews were conducted over a short period of time with the participant. The three series interviews were designed to be sequential and build upon one another to explore Ira’s lived experience as it related to his education. Ira was asked open-ended questions that provided opportunities for him to reconstruct his past educational experiences (Seidman, 2006).

The first interview was focused on the participant’s interests, past experiences in school, and questions related to his disability. The purpose of the interview was to have Ira recreate some of his experiences in school that have shaped him into the student he is today.

Results of this interview revealed that Ira’s interests included: skateboarding, playing the guitar, and basketball. He thought of himself as a social person, who was well-liked by his peers. The social aspect of school was his favorite part about going to school. His biggest challenge in school was finding motivation to keep his grades up, and complete homework and classwork. Another challenge he identified was that he was

very easily distracted, and lacked focus. He commented that his lack of focus negatively impacted his ability to keep up with his school work.

During the first interview, Ira was asked questions related to motivation and self-determination. At the time of this study, he commented that he was a motivated student, self-determined, and felt as though if he earned good grades in high school, he would be more successful in his future. His biggest accomplishment in school is completing the school work and homework because that had been consistently an area of difficulty.

Ira was asked questions about his understanding of his IEP and his disability. His responses revealed that he did not have an understanding of what an IEP was. Likewise, Ira said that he has never been a part of the IEP before and had never led an IEP. He expressed great interest in wanting to know about his IEP and said he would be interested in leading the transition portion of his IEP.

The second interview was a more in-depth understanding of Ira's ability to identify, set, and plan goals for his future after high school. Furthermore, he was asked questions related to supports he had both at the school setting and home setting. During the second interview, Ira was asked more specific and detailed open-ended questions related to his thoughts about postsecondary school.

Results of the second interview indicate that Ira would like to become a business entrepreneur and open a music shop or skate shop. He acknowledged that in order to become a business entrepreneur he will need to graduate high school in order to attend the local JC to take business-related courses. Ira felt very confident in his ability to reach

his goals. Similarly, he commented that he was most excited about one day being able to make his own decisions so that he could do stuff his own way.

Lastly, the third interview asked the student reflective questions about the meaning of his experience of participating in the IEP transition process. During the third interview, Ira, was asked questions that sought to discover his emotional connection and motivation towards reaching his postsecondary school goals.

Results of the third interview demonstrated a growth in Ira's perception of himself. Ira felt as though participating in the process had "tremendously" increased his confidence because he was more motivated to succeed in his high school classes. He enjoyed participating and leading the transition portion of his IEP. He said, "Honestly, I was really confident about it. It was pretty cool. At first I was a little nervous, but then as soon as we got started, I realized I just had to get through it." When asked about his feelings related to graduation, he said, "I most definitely am keeping my eyes on the prize and I am going to continue to do so." Ira's growth and maturity throughout the process supported his continued efforts in his classes and and hard work throughout the remainder of the semester.

Student-Led Transition IEP Meeting

Present members at the IEP meeting included: Ira, Ira's mother, one of Ira's general education teachers, Ira's special education teacher (this study's author), an administrator, and Ira's counselor. Throughout the year, the special education teacher had been in communication with all members of the team. During the meeting, each member of the team brought forth unique perspectives, but maintained a common goal of

best supporting Ira. Each decision was made with keeping the end goal in mind, which Ira shared during the student-led transition portion of the meeting. Ira shared with the team his transition plan and goals. He stated:

So, the transition plan of coming out of high school is going to a college or specifically like what I want to do after high school, like having my own like guitar shop or skate shop as an example. Or maybe like taking Junior College (JC) classes as an example for business and entrepreneurship.

Ira then went further to add to his annual goal to research classes at the JC related to business and entrepreneurship.

Ira's counselor added:

Ira has a very infectious personality. Unfortunately, last year, you know, he failed some classes... I am so, so impressed with how he is doing right now. I have to say that I have 350 students on my caseload, and I have lots of student every year who are in Ira's same boat and get lots of F's, and unfortunately, they end up having to transition to alternative schools. Right now, if he can maintain this right now, then that should not be the case. So, I just want to say it is really awesome because it is rare to see students make this big of a turn around.

Ira's motivation to maintain his grades was a goal that he set at the beginning of the study. The IEP meeting was held during the middle of the study. By the end of the semester, Ira failed one of his six classes. Prior to the study being completed, Ira failed an average of three classes a semester.

Ira's mother also played a very important role at the meeting. She discussed her own educational challenges and recognized that one of Ira's biggest challenges is that once he falls behind, he has a hard time catching up. She stated:

It motivated him to keep up with the work. You know, he is like, once he sees a grade fall, he gets frustrated and he wants to get it back up bit as long as he can keep it that way instead of letting it fall too much where he becomes behind and then he thinks it is pointless. I know that feeling because I had a hard time in high school too. I was the same age and I know how that is if you get to a point that your too far behind you think to yourself, what is the point? I love to see him

motivated to do [his school work] because once he start going you can see it in his face, he is really excited!

The presence of Ira's mother at the meeting was insightful as she was able to relate to her son and provide support and reassurance of how impressed she was with his improvement in motivation.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The results of this study are evidence that including a student with a disability in his or her transition planning process increases self-determination. Ira engaged in active leadership behaviors throughout the student-led portion of the IEP by expressing his own ideas, thoughts, and opinions, regarding decisions that would not only impact his life in the moment, but also his life in the future.

Ira's self-determination and confidence increased as a result of participating in the structured activities and lessons leading up to his IEP meeting. Furthermore, his ability to conceptualize his knowledge, ability, and perception increased with the opportunities presented both at home and in the school setting. Evidence of this increase resulted in a higher rating of self-determination after the study was completed, and a greater sense of self-confidence, which is clear throughout the third interview session. Lastly, Ira's ability to think critically about his future by conceptualizing a goal, and determining the appropriate steps to reach this goal, is evident through the results of the rating scales, three session interviews, and his student-led IEP.

Themes and Trends

By participating in the study conducted, three themes or trends show Ira's growth and maturation over one semester in high school. The first theme is Ira's growth in his perception of himself. Evidence of the ARC and AIR studies reveal that Ira's perception of his abilities in terms of self-knowledge, self-awareness, and self-realization grew over the semester. At the beginning of the study, Ira's perception of himself revealed that he lacked self-confidence and self-esteem in his beliefs of his capabilities. By the end of the

study, Ira's growth in psychological empowerment is evident throughout his quick write and third interview. Ira stated, "Participating in the ITP helped me become more confident and more motivated to get my school work done so I can get done with the process and get a job after high school." He showed the confidence in himself to gain control of choices within the realms of his power.

Secondly, Ira showed growth in his ability to communicate his goals, identify appropriate steps to complete his goals, and follow through on his goals. At the beginning of the study, Ira struggled to make positive choices and assume responsibility over his grades in high school. Though he expressed an interest in earning "good grades," school records combined with his thoughts in the first interview, self-led ITP, and AIR Scale reveal that he lacked the motivation and ability to follow through on classwork and homework. In the first interview, Ira stated that his biggest challenge was "just not doing the work or kind of not doing homework or anything because I did not care." Through his participation in the study, Ira was able to consider and anticipate consequences for his decisions, and readjust his mindset to set realistic goals with appropriate steps. Ira's willingness, motivation, and desire to assume responsibility over his own choices and life decision dramatically increased.

Lastly, Ira's growth to think more autonomously is evident as he was able to realize the impact that his current choices and behaviors have on the consequences of his future. Over the course of the semester, Ira demonstrated that he learned how to manage and critically analyze his own choices. In the third interview, Ira stated,

Just thinking about the fact that the harder I try, the better of a job I can get after high school... I will most definitely graduate and I am going to keep continuing to keep my eye on the prize.

In Ira's engagement and participation in the student-led ITP, he revealed that he was capable of expressing and communicating his own ideas and thoughts about decisions that would affect his future, both in the short and long term.

Alignment With Current Research

Researchers, legislators, and advocates strongly believe in the importance of students participating in their IEP meetings. The research supports the idea that students with a range of disabilities can be involved throughout the IEP process, and that this is one way to increase self-determination (Test et al., 2004). The research completed in this study supports this theory because Ira's involvement throughout the process leading up to his IEP, and throughout his active participation during the student led ITP, demonstrate the growth in his ability over a short period of time to critically think about decisions and choices that would impact his future.

The research in the field also emphasized the importance of early transition planning and appropriate transition assessments. IDEA requires that elements of the transition process must be completed by the time the young adult reaches the age of 16 (Mazzotti et al., 2009). It can be argued that transition planning and appropriate transition assessments should begin earlier to ensure successful postsecondary transition outcomes. Throughout this study, the activities took place while the child was 16 years old. Data based suppositions reveal that students need infused instruction early in their educational careers to promote self-determined behaviors and skills (Wehmeyer et al., 2004). Appropriate assessments supported Ira in identifying interests and preferences, which created opportunities to begin discussing future plans and goals. The results of the

assessments further supported the goals that were written and included into Ira's IEP (Kellems et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2009).

Lastly, legislation like IDEA includes language regarding the set of activities and instruction used to support transition related skills. The activities must be individualized to support the students, interests, preferences, and strengths (34 CFR 300.18). In this study, Ira participated in a range of teacher-led activities that focused on his individual strengths, interests, and preferences. The series of activities prior to the IEP meeting supported Ira's active participation throughout the IEP meeting. He was able to initiate the transition portion of his IEP with confidence. Ira not only increased his participation in the meeting, but he demonstrated engagement and interest throughout the meeting by contributing to the conversation and discussions that took place about decisions that would impact his high school education, and subsequently, impact his future beyond high school. Ira took on a leadership role by expressing behaviors that indicated control over the decisions he was making (Martin et al., 2006; Arndt, Konrad & Test, 2006; Test et al., 2004).

Limitations

While the research was carefully planned in detail, there were limitations within the study that was completed. The data from this qualitative case study examined one student, which allowed the researcher to closely interpret the meanings of a single individual in the natural setting. This study focused on a single individual because the student, and parents, were willing to participate.

In addition, in order to meet the legal deadlines of the IEP, the student in this study needed to have an IEP that was held in the middle of the semester. The timing of the IEP was a critical factor because the instructional activities needed to be completed before the IEP deadline.

The study was completed during a single semester of the student's sophomore year of high school; data were collected during one semester, rather than over an extended period of time. There are no data to compare Ira's self-determination from the first semester to the second semester. In addition, no comparisons were made between Ira's self-determination from participating in the activities, and from a student who did not participate in the activities and did not lead an IEP.

Despite these limitations, the results show that self-directed IEPs and instruction in teaching IEP meeting skills increases self-determination. Additionally, the instructional strategies that were implemented in this study may be used in any educational setting with young adults with disabilities.

Positionality

As an observer and participant in the study, my presence as Ira's current teacher may have had an impact on the research conducted. My previous relationship with Ira, who was a student in my class for several months prior to the study, provided opportunities within a supportive environment for him to share openly his thoughts and feelings during the structured activities. My established rapport with Ira allowed the researcher to be both an insider and outsider to the study.

Implications for Practice

Throughout this study, the activities completed took place during Study Skills. In addition, some of the activities took place outside of class due to limited time during Study Skills. As mentioned in the research, limited instructional time does create barriers. For example, the interviews, quick writes, and practice IEP were imperative pieces of completing this study, so finding the time to complete this set of activities with every single student is challenging (Test et al., 2004). Though the role of collaboration was very significant to the study, it was very time consuming for both myself as the special education teacher and the IEP team members to communicate with each other.

The role of collaboration during the entire process was critical to the overall success of the student throughout the semester. As a special education teacher, I was in communication with the participant's counselor, parent, administration, general education teachers, and the student. Each team member brought forth a unique perspective, while all shared the common goal of focusing on Ira's future goals and paths after high school.

As suggested by Riesen and Morgan, the team began planning Ira's ITP with the end goal in mind (p. 107). Ira's end goal of becoming a business entrepreneur and attending the JC was the end goal discussed throughout the three interviews, as well as the IEP meeting. The end goal was important because it was the focus in which other decisions were made. For example, during the IEP meeting, the team discussed Ira's schedule for his junior and senior years. Despite the fact that Ira is credit deficient because he has not passed his college prep classes, he expressed interest in taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses. The team discussed this and validated Ira's opinions,

but ultimately, the team focused on the steps that Ira needed to make in order to reach his goals. Taking AP courses is not a requirement for attending the JC, and because Ira is so credit-deficient, taking an AP course would likely interfere with his step of graduating high school. Graduating high school was one of the major steps Ira needed to complete in order to reach his post-high school goals. By focusing on the end goal, the discussion of this topic demonstrates the positive collaboration of decision making that took place at the IEP meeting to ensure that Ira meets his goals.

Future Research

For the student in this particular study, the instruction resulted in positive self-determination changes. However, there are suggestions to be made in future research to examine the effectiveness of student-led transition meetings.

First, from the results of this study and other literature reviewed by this study, lack of student participation at their IEP meetings is not because the students are incapable of actively being involved. Rather, it is because students are unprepared to participate in their IEP meetings because they lack skills to represent themselves during their meetings (Test et al., 2004). In this study, there was only one practice IEP session included as part of the instructional activities. During the practice session, despite having reviewed the information in previous sessions, Ira, admitted that he was confused and was unsure of what to say when prompted to state his transition plan. “Teachers need to instruct their students on how to participate in their IEP meeting as a way to learn crucial self-determination skills, including self-advocacy, goal setting, self-evaluation, and adjustment” (Martin., et al, 2006, p. 315). While the research supports the inclusion of

students with disabilities leading their IEPs, the evidence from this study validates infusing self-determination instruction into preservice and inservice trainings (Test et al., 2004 ; Martin et al., 2006).

Second, future research should investigate efficient methods for teaching self-determination skills. “It is imperative to identify the most efficacious methods for promoting student IEP involvement given limited instructional time and current demands regarding high-stakes assessment that is characteristic of today’s high schools” (Test et al., 2004, p. 408). Creating meaningful experiences to embed standards and general education curriculum with instruction that includes self-determination related skills is one way to combat limited instructional time and high stakes demands (Arndt, Konrad & Test, 2006 ; Wehmeyer et al., 2004).

In today’s high school classrooms, there are many high-stakes demands such as: standards based reforms, state mandates such as state assessments, access to the general education curriculum, and reauthorizations of laws such as IDEA, that require an abundance of instructional time. In this study, it was discovered in practice that carving out instructional time to complete the activities was a challenge. For example, at times throughout the study, Ira was so overwhelmed with the demands of his general education courses that the instruction took place during non-instructional time such as tutorial, break or lunch. Given the time constraints, Ira at times felt rushed to either complete the work for the study or work for his general education classes. While this study focused on a single individual, future research on effective programs to support self-determinations skills with a large group of students would support the use of this program with a

whole-class approach in mind, and therefore, may alleviate some of the time pressures of individual instruction.

Lastly, the results of this study took place over one semester. Generalization of learned skills such as goal setting, self-advocacy, leadership, and self-determination were measured in one setting during a short period of time. “Future research should extend these findings by collecting long-term generalization data across multiple years of high school IEP planning meetings” (Arndt, Konrad & Test, 2006, p. 206). Long-term effects of learning these skills were not measured as part of this study, but future research of long-term effects over a child’s high school experience would yield more data to support the instruction of student led IEPs. In addition, the long-term effects could be examined across multiple disciplines and settings to evaluate the effectiveness of how these skills are generalized in different settings.

Conclusion

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act included a transition component for students in special education to encourage students’ participation at their IEP meetings and throughout the IEP process (Arndt, Konrad & Test, 2006). Including students throughout the transition process increases motivation, self-determination. Perhaps most significantly, it also builds autonomy, independence, and leadership skills as they develop a deeper sense of their own interests, preferences, and strengths — all of which are needed in order to live successfully after high school.

When students are provided meaningful opportunities to have their preferences and interests be the focus of the discussion, they become more invested in the entire

process. As educators, it is important to acknowledge the importance of teaching students with disabilities self-determination skills to ensure that they are able to be autonomous individuals in life after high school.

Educators of students with disabilities need to actively create opportunities in their curriculum to include elements of self-determination related skills. It is imperative that educators recognize the abilities of their students and empower them with the tools and skills they need to be successful independent adults. Student involvement in the IEP and student led ITPs are ways educators can begin building independence within their students. This kind of involvement in their education builds the foundational skills that will be necessary as they integrate into the larger community beyond high school. The skills and tools that they learn in a nurtured environment will provide individuals with the confidence and courage that they need to make powerful choices and decisions that can impact the future world we live in.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview One

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Can you reconstruct your early experiences in school as it relates to your friends, motivation, interests, challenges, etc?
3. Do you know what your disability is? Even if you don't know what your disability is, how does this impact you in the school setting?
4. Last time we were together we discussed what self determination means to you. How do you feel self determined in the school setting? What motivates you? What accomplishments as it relates to your education are you proud of?
5. Is there a teacher or person in your life who has been supportive of you and helped motivate you to do well in school?
6. If you had a chance for a "do-over" so far in high school, what would you do differently?
7. How was school been difficult for you or easy for you? What has been the most difficult part of school for you? What has been the easiest part of school for you?
8. What are your strengths in school? What are your weaknesses in school?
9. Typically how do you handle your school work? What have you done in the past that has worked? What have you done in the past that has not worked? What are your grades in school? HOW much effort do you put in to your school work?
10. Can you tell me what you know about your IEP?
11. What has your participation been in your IEPs thus far? Have you ever led an IEP or part of an IEP?
12. How would you feel about leading an IEP meeting? Why?

Appendix B: Interview Two

1. Have you thought about your life after high school? What are your plans as it relates to post high school careers and education? How are you planning to reach your post high school goals?
2. How does graduating from high school impact your post-high school goals?
3. When you think about life after high school and the goals you have identified, how confident do you feel in your ability to reach those goals? (not very confident-1, confident-2, very confident-3).
4. What supports do you have in order to reach your goals?
5. When you think about life after school are you excited or does it scare you? What parts are exciting and what parts are scary?
6. How motivated are you and/or what motivates you to reach your post high school goals?
7. How do your strengths and weaknesses contribute to your post high school goals?

Appendix C: Interview Three

1. How has the experience of discussing transition been helpful?
2. How do you feel about the experience of leading your own ITP? What was the experience like for you? Were you nervous? Scared? Did you enjoy it?
3. How has your confidence changed since participating in the transition process?
4. How has your self determination increased or decreased since participating in the transition process?
5. At your iep we talked about AP classes, etc? What are your thoughts right now about that?
6. We also talked about 7 classes, etc. how are you feeling about that next year?
7. And graduation. Keep your eye on the prize.

Appendix D: Institutional Review Board Form Approval

March 14, 2018

Subject: IRB Application #2855, "Student Led Individual Transition Plans ”

Dear Hannah,

I am pleased to inform you that your application to the Sonoma State Institutional Review Board has been reviewed by the Board and approved.

Please contact Gabby Utarid or me immediately should you encounter any unforeseen difficulties or make any significant changes to your planned procedures.

This approval is effective from March 14, 2018 to March 13, 2019. Please notify us when your project has been completed (irb@sonoma.edu). A renewal application is required by February 13, 2019 if your project will continue past the end date listed above.

Thank you for adhering to IRB protocol and I wish you the best in your research project.

Sincerely,

Patrick Jackson
Chair
Institutional Review Board
Sonoma State University
707.664.2126

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