Transition Planning for Young Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Transition Coordinator’s Perspective

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Transition Planning for Young Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Transition Coordinator’s Perspective

Abstract
The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the perception of transition coordinators as they help students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) transition from high school to college or post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment. This research study considered practices of transition coordinators and determined if they were aligned with current best practices, while highlighting challenges and barriers to good transition planning. Semi-structured interviews were used which revealed four major themes: (a) transition process differences, (b) financial issues, (c) parental/family involvement, and (d) transition planning practices. Findings revealed that poor transition outcomes are influenced by lack of standardized practices, financial issues, family expectations, and post-graduation evaluations. The study points to a number of recommendations to address the perennial challenges of low employment and stagnant postsecondary school activities. The study offers some insights to school administrators, transition coordinators, families, and the people with ASD on how to navigate this important period in the lives of young adults with ASD. Policy implications and recommendations for future research are provided.

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Transition Planning for Young Adults with
Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Transition Coordinator’s Perspective

By

Stephanie L. Quarles

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by
Gilbert Louis, Ed.D.

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Elizabeth Corrigan, Ph.D.

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

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Dedication

Thank You God! I’m grateful for your daily presence in my life, and for blessing my dream of 25 years to come to pass.

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and friends, beginning with my son, Marcus A. Quarles, and daughter-in-love, Tiomee F. Quarles. Thank you for all of your support and encouragement from day one. You will forever be my heartbeats! Love you both. There is nothing like family – to my mom and dad, Phyllis and Walter Johnson, my sister, Denise, Alicia, Phillip, Demitra, Cypress, and Solana! I appreciate your prayers and support.

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To my committee chair, Dr. Gilbert Louis, and member, Dr. Elizabeth Corrigan, thank you for your guidance, patience, and lifetime commitment to serving those with intellectual disabilities. Your support and experience helped me become a better person and writer, and achieve my dream of obtaining my doctorate. I will forever be grateful.
Biographical Sketch

Stephanie L. Quarles is currently a consultant and serves as the Executive Pastor at ‘New’ Union Church of New Rochelle. Ms. Quarles attended Concordia College from 1996 to 1998 and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1998. She attended the University of Bridgeport from 1999 to 2000 and graduated with a Master of Business Administration in 2000. She came to St. John Fisher College in the summer 2019 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Ms. Quarles pursued her research in Transition Planning for Young Adults with an Autism Spectrum Disorder: Transition Coordinator’s Perspective, under the direction of Dr. Gilbert Louis and Dr. Elizabeth Corrigan and received the Ed.D. degree in 2021.
Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the perception of transition coordinators as they help students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) transition from high school to college or post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment. This research study considered practices of transition coordinators and determined if they were aligned with current best practices, while highlighting challenges and barriers to good transition planning. Semi-structured interviews were used which revealed four major themes: (a) transition process differences, (b) financial issues, (c) parental/family involvement, and (d) transition planning practices. Findings revealed that poor transition outcomes are influenced by lack of standardized practices, financial issues, family expectations, and post-graduation evaluations. The study points to a number of recommendations to address the perennial challenges of low employment and stagnant postsecondary school activities. The study offers some insights to school administrators, transition coordinators, families, and the people with ASD on how to navigate this important period in the lives of young adults with ASD. Policy implications and recommendations for future research are provided.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

General Perspective

The prevalence of autism among children in the United States increased by over 175% from 2000-2016 (Maenner et al., 2020). The Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) network states that in 2000 one in 150 children (6.7 per 1,000 8-year-olds) had been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). As of 2016, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimated that one in 54 children (or 18.5 per 1,000 8-year-olds) in the United States had been diagnosed with an ASD (Maenner et al., 2020). Further supporting this finding, a study conducted by the 41st Annual Office of Special Education Programs Report to Congress indicated that between 2008 and 2017, the percentage of students with autism spectrum disorder in special education aged 18-21 increased by 163% (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2019).

Autism spectrum disorder is a diagnosis of impairments in social communication, social interaction, and repetitive behaviors that impact people of different backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic status (Health & Services, 2017). ASD first came to public awareness in the 1940s with Kanner’s (1943) clinical case descriptions of 11 children with autism (Al Ghazi, 2018). No two youth with ASD are alike. In 2019–20, the number of students ages 3–21 who received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was 7.3 million. Students with autism accounted for 11% served under IDEA (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES],
Falling off the cliff is often used to describe the transition from high school to adulthood for students with autism (Roux, 2015). IDEA 2004 requires schools to offer transition plans to help vulnerable youth navigate through challenging barriers to adulthood. Following the last day of high school, the legal mandate ends. There is no federal requirement for providing supportive services or care management in adulthood. When families are unable to access help after high school, too many students with autism can fail to launch successfully into adulthood. ASD manifests itself differently from person to person: identifying an individual’s unique characteristics relative to social interaction, communication, and executive functioning is critical to long-term transitions. Individuals with ASD have issues with social interaction, resulting in lack of verbal communication and social reciprocity; often limiting their ability to engage appropriately.

It is a reasonable expectation of parents that public schools are of sufficient quality to meet the transition needs of students with ASD. The issue of program quality for high school students with ASD is especially important because students with ASD have the poorest exit work placement outcomes of any disability group when they leave public school (Kraemer et al., 2020).

Young adults with ASD are likely to live at home after high school and less likely to live independently (K. A. Anderson et al., 2014). Roux et al. (2013) reported from their analysis of the National Core Indicators Adult Survey, with 3,520 respondents with ASD, that 50% of the adult respondents live at home with a family member, 54% reported some form of mental health condition, and 14% held a paying job in the community. The creation of effective transition planning and programming to meet the
needs of 50,000 individuals with autism who leave high school each year is an urgent task facing our society (Wei et al., 2015). According to White et al. (2016) students with autism have lower graduation rates and lower rates of post-graduation employment as compared to non-disabled students with other disabilities. Approximately 59% of non-disabled students enrolled in 4-year colleges ultimately graduate with a bachelor’s degree (NCES, 2014), whereas only 41% of individuals with a disability, including ASD, graduate (Newman et al., 2011) from a bachelor’s granting institution. There is a need to identify, develop, and implement new strategies to increase post-high school success for this student population. Nationally, the combined 2- and 4-year college enrollment for students with ASDs was 37% in 2015-2016 (Wei et al., 2016). The low rate of college enrollment has economic ramifications for students with ASDs, their families, and society. Gaining and maintaining employment can be difficult for adolescents with ASD (Chan et al., 2018). Adolescents with ASD may face unemployment because of the unique challenges that the symptoms of ASD present when preparing for life in the workforce.

Starting in 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act required schools to plan for the transition from age 16-21 of adolescents with disabilities before leaving the k-12 school system. The growing emphasis on employment for transition-age students resulted from evidence that postsecondary employment is far less likely for students with disabilities if they did not hold a job in high school (Rabren et al., 2014). Without school supports students with ASD experienced reduced employment possibilities. There is evidence suggesting that academic achievement in high school is an essential factor that corresponds to later positive outcomes for the student population in general (Hein et al.,
2013). While many young adults with an ASD are intellectually capable of university-level education (White et al., 2016), they require a range of academic and supportive accommodations. Accommodations such as mentors, access to counseling, and disability support groups (Cai & Richdale, 2016) can help students with ASD succeed both educationally and transition to employment (White et al., 2016).

Marrero et al. (2014) believe it is vital to reach marginalized groups to develop transition planning and share best practices with teachers. Those practices can include technology as a tool for creating flexibility in instructional format and expanding access to resources that benefit many learners (Trust, 2018). Curriculum and instruction need some level of modern technology to support accessibility for all learners (Edyburn, 2010). Students with ASD have strengths that assist them in post-secondary education. Many have strong memory, high-level technical skills, and intense interest in subjects they are studying (A. H. Anderson et al., 2019). Postsecondary institutions recognize the needs of students with ASD, and most offer a range of academic and non-academic supports such as exam accommodations, tutors, mentors, and counseling (Sarrett, 2018).

Individuals with ASD experience challenges due to co-occurring conditions (Rosen et al., 2018) that include intellectual disability (CDC, 2019), language disorder (Bartlett et al., 2014) and learning and attention disorders (S. Anderson, 2018). There is not a single cause of ASD, but a myriad of genetic and environmental factors (Masi et al., 2017). The literature on autism has primarily focused on childhood (Levy & Perry, 2011; M. J. Taylor, 2005). Research on adolescents and adults with ASD only recently gained traction in the past 20 years (Levy & Perry, 2011). Understanding adult outcomes (resistance to change, aggression, compulsions) common for individuals with ASD helps
inform interventions, planning, and support (Burke et al., 2019). Employment outcomes are a focus area for students with ASD to prepare good citizens who are capable of contributing to society through work (Wilczynski et al., 2013). The results vary and studies (Holwerda et al., 2012; Shattuck, Narendorf et al., 2012) used various data collection techniques. Many studies (Carter et al., 2012; Shattuck et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2018) point to poor participation in employment for young adults with ASD (Chiang et al., 2013; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Roux et al., 2013). The meaningfulness of employment for individuals with ASD is questionable and tends to be in low paying jobs with limited working hours (Holwerda et al., 2012).

In a longer-term follow-up study, Howlin et al. (2013) suggested that struggles for adults with ASD may persist long-term. Research aimed at developing knowledge about the life span of people with ASD is needed to create supports to improve well-being (Werner & Shulman, 2013).

In New York, students are eligible to receive special education services until they reach age 21. After a student reaches age 21, funding for the school’s services comes to an end (Gauthier-Boudreault et al., 2018). Previous research has indicated that the transition period into adulthood is crucial for individuals with ASD (Gauthier-Boudreault et al., 2018). In an effort to prepare students with ASD for post-school success, effective transition planning is needed (Francis et al., 2018). However, successful post-school outcomes are often flawed due to inadequate transition plans and lack of services (Francis et al., 2018).

Current literature indicates a need to explore the practice in transition planning as there is a lack of research regarding best-practices for transition planning (Miller-Warren,
The results of this study will shed light on the complexities of transition planning issues and serve as a guide to navigate the paths of post-school activities for educators, families, and students with ASD. This study will examine the perception of transition coordinators as they help students with ASD transition from high school to college or post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment.

**Problem Statement**

Over the next decade, an estimated 707,000 to 1,116,000 individuals who are 18 years and older (70,700 to 111,600 each year) on the autism spectrum will enter adulthood (Autism Statistics and Facts, n.d.). Unfortunately, there is a lack of guidance on how to support these youth in achieving successful post-high school outcomes (White et al., 2016). Recent statistics for adults with ASD show that 85% are unemployed, and 69% want to work (Griffiths et al., 2016). Shattuck, Narendorf et al. (2012) found the employment rate of adults with ASD to be significantly lower (55%) than adults with learning disabilities (93.8%), and speech impairments (86%). The projected annual cost of autism in the United States will reach $461 billion by 2025 (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2020). The costs associated with caring for an individual with ASD includes education, medical, support services, housing, and transportation and may exceed $2 million over their lifetime (Buescher et al., 2014). As students with ASD graduate, metrics suggest that many leave school without the skills, experiences, and linkages that will prepare them well for postsecondary education and employment (Snell-Rood et al., 2020). The belief is that poor transition planning (lacking participation of key school personnel, involvement of students in planning, and communicating with families) is responsible for why students with ASD do not seamlessly transfer from high school to post-school...
activities, including postsecondary education and employment (Friedman et al., 2013; Shattuck, Narendorf et al., 2012). According to Roux et al. (2015), only 58% of youth with autism have a transition plan, and 37% disconnect and do not participate in postsecondary education or get a job after high school, in comparison to 8% for those who are learning disabled and speech/language impaired.

High school students with ASD have lower rates of participation in vocational education, employment, and fewer positive social experiences in 2- or 4-year programs than people with speech and language impairments, learning disabilities, or intellectual disabilities for up to 7 years after high school (Shattuck et al., 2012). This study will explore the practices of transition coordinators to effectively guide students with ASD through the transition process. There is evidence that current transition planning efforts are uneven and do not succeed in preparing young adults with ASD to join the adult worlds of either postsecondary education or employment (Friedman et al., 2013; Van Hees et al., 2015).

**Theoretical Rationale**

Schlossberg’s transition theory (M. Anderson et al., 2011) falls under the broader academic umbrella of adult development theory (Evans et al., 2009; Levinson, 1978). Adult development does not end with adolescence; as people move through life, they continually experience change and transition, often resulting in new relationships, behaviors, and self-perceptions. As high school students with ASD transition to adulthood, their experiences and perspectives are valuable to stakeholders in understanding how to support their development into their new surroundings and
persistence in higher education, enabling them to be contributors to society (Sosnowy et al., 2017).

First developed in 1981, Schlossberg’s transition theory studied how humans adapt to transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg’s (1981) theory represented a conceptual integration and expansion of existing theory and research on transition, drawing heavily on the work of other theorists, including Levinson (1978) and Neugarten (1979). The approach has continued to evolve as Schlossberg integrated ideas of other theorists. Based on feedback from critics, Schlossberg updated her theory in 1984 to focus on how individuals respond to transition (Evans et al., 2009). In 1989, Schlossberg, Lynch et al. updated the approach to include the 4 S System and the concepts of moving in, moving through, and moving out to describe the phases of transition (Evans et al., 2009).

Students’ learning disabilities, the law, and institutional resources influence the transition from high school to college. This study uses Schlossberg’s transition theory to frame students’ transition experiences. Initially, the theory applied to adult transitions. However, student development theorists have adopted the theory to understand college students’ transition challenges. Human life is subject to changes to which one must adapt (Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg’s transition theory was created to facilitate a common understanding of how people continually undergo transition. Her theory includes a characterization of transition, different forms of transitions, the transition process, and factors that influence transition. Schlossberg, Waters et al. (1995) defined transition as “any event or non-event that results in altered relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 27).
In 1995, Schlossberg teamed with Elinor B. Waters and Jane Goodman for the second edition of her book, *Counseling Adults in Transition*. In 2006, she collaborated with Goodman and Anderson to update her theory and release the third edition of the book. The authors indicated the importance of the global community, the impact of technologies, and the value of understanding cultural diversity and spirituality in helping adults’ transition (Goodman et al., 2006). In 2011, the authors updated the theory, linking it to a more diverse student population (M. Anderson et al., 2011). A weakness in the theory is that it does not specify whether the theory includes individuals on the spectrum or everyone in general (Jacobs, 2017).

Students with learning disabilities anticipate the academic transition from high school to college. However, they remain unprepared for the social and emotional situations they encounter in the transition to adulthood after high school. Students must cope with leaving behind family, friends, and other valued support groups. They must also adjust to new social settings and environmental challenges. To help students successfully transition to higher education, professionals working with this population must understand the unique challenges and incorporate appropriate student programming resources to help students overcome them (M. Anderson et al., 2011).

As higher education institutions become accessible to students with autism spectrum disorder, their academic, social experiences, and perceptions regarding the transition into postsecondary education could inform retention efforts and benefit stakeholders in supporting the retention (Barnhill, 2016). Stakeholder perspectives on the challenges faced by students with ASD will facilitate the transition in a comprehensive manner (Elias et al., 2019).
Transition theory concerns learners of all ages, genders, ethnicities, and socioeconomic levels (Schlossberg et al., 1989). According to M. Anderson et al. (2011), there are three significant aspects in the transition process: (a) approaching transition, or transition identification process; (b) taking stock of coping resource or the 4 S System; and (c) taking charge, or strengthening resources. The impact a transition has on an individual’s life is vital concerning their “relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Goodman et al., 2006. p. 40). For students with ASD, this may include being further away from home and learning new school systems and processes (M. Anderson et al., 2011).

According to Schlossberg, (2011), four variables impact an individual’s ability to cope during a transition. As each individual is unique, how they deal with transition depends on these four variables. These variables are referred to as the 4 S System and are as follows:

1. Situation: What is happening?
2. Self: To whom is it happening?
3. Support: What help is available?
4. Strategies: How does the person cope?

Each variable can be further broken down into several components and are interrelated. First, the situation focuses on event or non-event characteristics, timing, duration, and previous experiences (M. Anderson et al., 2011). For students with ASD, this may include leaving home for the first time and adapting to a new school system. Second, the self includes both personal characteristics and psychological resources. It may consist of how an individual feels about having ASD. Third, support can be the type
of assistance that an individual received. Students with ASD may rely on support from home, friends, or religious groups. Finally, strategies entail coping with the transition through information seeking, helping students with ASD learn how to advocate for themselves.

Studies using Schlossberg’s transition theory have implemented varying approaches. Webster (2004) and DaDeppo (2009) researched students with disabilities and their transition into, and persistence in postsecondary institutions. First, Webster used interactive journaling and e-mail interviewing with 22 university students with disabilities to explore their perceptions and experiences in transitioning to college. Next, DaDeppo explored integration factors related to academic success and intent to persist among 97 freshman and sophomore college students with learning disabilities.

Schlossberg’s transition theory was used to explore the academic and social experiences that lead students with ASD to transition into and persist in a postsecondary career and college pathway. The limited studies examining the perspective of college students with ASD have reported isolation and challenges related to social and communication barriers (Madriaga & Goodley, 2010; Müller et al., 2008). However, there appears to be a gap in the literature surrounding transition issues high school students with ASD face. The researcher’s goal was to understand transition coordinators’ perspectives regarding the transition success factors, experiences, and overall preparedness of ASD high school students. Doing so may allow stakeholders to provide supports and programs that can better meet the growing needs of students with ASD in higher education (Shattuck, Narendorf et al., 2012; Shogren & Plotner, 2012)
Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the perception of transition coordinators as they help students with ASD transition from high school to college or post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment. The purpose of transition planning is to inform individualized programming (Landmark & Zhang, 2013). A critique of transition planning is that students fit into existing programs rather than building transition plans around individual students’ needs (Test et al., 2014). Despite the explicit IDEA transition mandates, empirical guidance and data regarding what planning teams might encounter when implementing transition assessment processes is sparse. This research sought to identify exiting strategies that high school transition coordinators use to support transition planning for students with ASD. Research findings lead to the identification, development, and refinement of a unique model, proper tools, and environments that enhance young adult learners’ academic experiences with ASD for a unique transition experience. The study’s findings reveal effective strategies that help high school students transition post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment.

Research Questions

Three research questions guided this study:

1. What are transition coordinators’ perceptions of the transition planning process?

2. What are the main barriers to achieve good Individualized Education Program transition planning?
3. How do transition coordinators know if transition planning has been successful, and what outcomes should be expected?

**Significance of the Study**

This study serves transition coordinators, educators, families, and students with ASD in several ways. It identifies current practices through lived experiences of transition coordinators, and it identifies gaps in practices which have resulted in long-standing poor outcomes.

**Definitions of Terms**

*Autism spectrum disorder* – ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by deficits in social communication and the presence of restricted interests and repetitive behaviors. In 2013, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*—5th edition (*DSM-5*) was published, the concept of a spectrum ASD diagnosis was created, combining the DSM-IV’s separate pervasive developmental disorder (PDD) diagnoses into one (Hodges et al., 2020).

*Employment* – Integrating into a social network, contributing to society, making choices and decisions, being seen as part of a community, and being less reliant upon publicly funded programs (Wehman et al., 2015).

*Family/parent* – The individual who takes care of the transitioning young adult in the home and is an active participant in the individual’s life (Rehm et al., 2012).

*Technologically mediated* – Activities or communications that require a means of technology or a technological interface to achieve the fruition of a particular action, communication, or social event (García-Jiménez, 2012).
**Transition** – The process of moving from high school to postsecondary education and other post-high school environments (Schall et al., 2014). Post-school activities including postsecondary education and employment.

**Transition coordinator** – any professional who serves as a liaison between the school and post graduate programs and assists students with disabilities and their families in obtaining services necessary to transition from high school to a postsecondary setting, whether for postsecondary education, employment, or long-term support (de Lught, 2020).

**Transition plans** – Include Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals linked to postsecondary outcomes that are based on personalized interests and strengths of the students (Snell-Rood et al., 2020).

**Transition year** – by the student’s 16th birthday, encouraging a seamless transition by including IEP goals linked to postsecondary outcomes and allowing students to stay in school until they earn a regular diploma or until their 22nd birthday (Snell-Rood et al., 2020).

**Young adult** – An individual transitioning out of high school between 18-22 years of age who has completed high school and received a high school diploma (Cobb et al., 2013).

**Chapter Summary**

The increased number (Shattuck, Narendorf et al., 2012) of high school students with ASD will need to transition to postsecondary education or the job market with required skills and capacity. There is a corresponding need for increased study of appropriate curricula, curricula implementation, and instruction to facilitate successful transition (Rutherford et al., 2016). This qualitative study examined the transition
planning practices of transition coordinators as they helped young adults with autism transition from high school to college. This research examined transition coordinators’ perceptions of transition planning of young adults with ASD in the transition to post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment.

Chapter 2 provides a topical review of the literature relevant to the research study and includes an overview of the transition process, a history of autism spectrum disorder, and Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory related to students with learning disabilities.

Chapter 3 provides the methodology for this research study, a restatement of the problem, research questions, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 presents the finding of the study, and Chapter 5 discusses the interpretation of the results.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Postsecondary education is vital for all students, including students with disabilities, as it improves personal, academic, and employment skills, and self-advocacy and self-confidence (de Lugt, 2020). Postsecondary education experiences have been related to increased wages and job opportunities (Southward & Kyzar, 2017). It is not surprising that some parents have expressed a desire for postsecondary education to be listed as a goal on their student’s transition plan (Chiang et al., 2012). This literature review provides a background of empirical studies that have explored postsecondary transition opportunities for young adults with ASD. The review also covers emerging and successful transition plans, as well as student and family perspectives.

The transition process for young adults with ASD has been challenging (Cheak-Zamora & Teti, 2015). Students with learning disabilities face specific challenges with academic content, organization, time management, and study skills (Novotney, 2014). These difficulties are exacerbated by several issues with students with ASD, including the following: proper identification of students in need of services, the hidden nature of the disability, students’ reluctance to disclose their disability, and larger class sizes and more limited teacher-student contact in college settings (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). When personalized transition plans get designed and implemented, they must consider these difficulties.
The review of the literature that follows includes research on autism spectrum disorder, high school student transition preparation, and experiences leading to postsecondary education and employment opportunities. The topics of interests for this review of the literature consist of (a) an in-depth definition of ASD, (b) the use of technology to assist in successful student transitions, (c) the process of transition as defined by IDEA, (d) the perceptions of families and young adults regarding access to postsecondary programs, and (e) outcomes of educational development for families who are navigating the transition process.

**Historical Perspective of Autism**

The term autism was used first by Eugen Bleuler, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychologist, around 1912. Autism and autistic come from the Greek word *autos*, meaning self (Holaday, 2012). The term initially referred to a fundamental disturbance in schizophrenia, referring to an extreme withdrawal of oneself from social life (Frith, 2003). In the first half of the 20th century, psychologists, psychiatrists, and physicians, such as Leo Kanner, began studying and trying to define subgroups of children diagnosed with childhood psychoses (Holaday, 2012).

Kanner (1943) described cases of children he believed to be afflicted with a syndrome not previously characterized. He noted these children “have come into the world with innate inability to form the usually biologically provided affected contact with people” (Kanner, 1943, p. 217). Kanner noted language delays, inability to use language for communication, a desire for aloneness, and an ability to relate to objects in their environment only when they wanted to, and it did not interfere with self-imposed isolation (Kanner, 1943). He also noted that the parents of these children showed social
difficulty themselves (Kanner, 1943). Kanner’s ideas about the parents of autistic children are accepted by psychiatrists and psychologists (Holaday, 2012). The results were that many parents were overwhelmed by guilt causing family members to attempt to blame one of the parents and spend large sums of money on psychoanalytic treatment for their children (Holaday, 2012).

During this time, Hans Asperger, a Viennese psychiatrist, documented similar behaviors in children in Austria (Wing, 1981). He described cases of autistic psychopathy of childhood and called it Asperger’s syndrome (Wing, 1981). Asperger noted that some children had extraordinary gifts in mathematics and sciences (Frith, 2003). He also considered the possibility of a genetic link to autism (Frith, 2003). Asperger’s overall tone was more positive than Kanner’s. Asperger’s approach to the syndrome was to offer treatment and education (Frith, 2003).

It was years before autism was included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 3rd edition (DSM-III) from the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 (MacFarlane & Kanaya, 2009). Since then, the breadth of research and awareness surrounding the clinical diagnosis of autism has proliferated (MacFarlane & Kanaya, 2009). The DSM-IV-TR, produced in 2000, made a clear distinction between autism and autism spectrum disorders (ASD), including Asperger’s disorder and pervasive developmental disorders, which have separate diagnostic criteria (MacFarlane & Kanaya, 2009).

According to Holaday (2012), autism is the most prolifically researched of all childhood psychiatric disorders. The brief history of autism demonstrates the disorder’s concept and definition have changed over the years, as has the beliefs about treatments
and services provided to those with autism (Holaday, 2012). Autism spectrum disorders take diverse forms, ranging from profound communication and behavioral problems to social difficulties with a universal language and, in some cases, unique talents in the areas of math and natural sciences (Holaday, 2012). ASDs are usually apparent before 3 years of age and diagnosed as young as 18 months (Holaday, 2012).

**Autism Spectrum Disorder Background**

ASD encompasses a spectrum of complex developmental disorders that affect a person’s interactions, behaviors, learning styles, and communication (U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services, 2017). ASD is a developmental disability that appears early in childhood, has several long-lasting effects for affected individuals and their families (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013), and reportedly affects boys about five times more than girls (Baio et al., 2018). There is a wide span of abilities, interests, and strengths in individuals with ASD, and characteristics of the disorder are expressed differently in each individual (Ravindran & Myers, 2012). Individuals with ASD may present mild symptoms of autism, while others display characteristics in extreme manners (APA, 2013). There are many circumstances when the symptoms are not recognized until the individual gets placed in school. Research has shown that the social and developmental gap between typically developing children and those who potentially meet the criteria for autism grows during the school years (Jordan, 2013).

**Legal Framework**

IDEA was published in August, 2004. IDEA is a federal law that ensures students with a disability are provided a free appropriate public education (FAPE) tailored to the individual’s needs and goals. IDEA enables students to prepare for future employment
and independent living. The goal of IDEA is to provide an equitable education for students with disabilities, ages birth to 22 years of age, the same as those students who do not have a disability. Under the IDEA, the school district must start transition planning no later than when a student turns 16 years of age.

The Americans with Disabilities Act was reauthorized as the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA) of 2008 (Ciccantelli, 2011). Section 504 of the act, directly speaks to postsecondary education and requires institutions to provide students with disabilities reasonable accommodations. Once students leave secondary school, they must self-advocate for services with ADA (Longtin, 2014). Despite the federal mandates, students with ASD leaving secondary settings are often unprepared for postsecondary institutions and lack the necessary skills to be successful in the college setting (Kucharczyk et al., 2015).

**ASD Transition Success Factors**

The transition to adulthood is known to be a challenging time for individuals with ASD (Levy & Perry, 2011). Many families report feeling unprepared for the transition to adulthood and feel uncertain in how to support their child to ensure postsecondary success (Kirby, 2015).

**Postsecondary Education Transition and Support**

Camarena and Sarigiani (2009) conducted a mixed-method study to assess the postsecondary educational aspirations and thoughts concerning obstacles and resources that shaped the high school ASD population’s educational experience. Participants were recruited by special education administrators and community support groups in Michigan via e-mail, letters, and flyers. The study sample included 21 adolescents, 20 mothers, and
13 fathers. The data collection consisted of parallel sets of semi-structured interviews for the students and parents based on previously published works on the postsecondary aspirations of a different unique population.

The interviews were conducted at each family’s preferred location; all but two took place in their homes. The study was primarily descriptive, with responses to quantitative questions presented in terms of means and standard deviations as indicators of basic patterns. The study’s target population included only adolescents who had a formal diagnosis on the autism spectrum, as reported by their parents. The majority of students interviewed (68%) were either unaware of their diagnosis or chose not to disclose as part of the interview. The students’ level of awareness corresponded to the extent to which their parents had educated them on the ASD diagnosis. Overall, Camarena and Sarigiani (2009) reported that students with ASD and their parents could have a significant role in determining appropriate services required in postsecondary education (PSE) to address their unique needs.

In a quantitative study conducted by Wei et al. (2016), the researchers evaluated data from Waves 1 through 5 of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2). The study used propensity score techniques to assess the relationship between transition planning participation, goal-setting, and college enrollment among youth with ASDs. The purpose of the study was to explore the connection between transition planning, goal-setting, and college enrollment. The specific research questions examined whether the college enrollment rates for students with ASDs were associated with (a) their participation in transition planning, and (b) having a primary transition goal of college enrollment.
Data were gathered from approximately 920 youth with ASD whose parents responded to a phone or mail survey. Data were also gathered from students’ high school transcripts and school staff responses who were familiar with high school programs for students with ASD. After the study, Wei et al. (2016) found that 2- or 4-year college enrollment rates were significantly higher among youth with ASDs who participated in transition planning and those who had a transition goal of college enrollment.

Although the Wei et al. (2016) study made a valuable contribution to the transition planning literature, the study was limited by collecting college enrollment data that were collected via surveys rather than registration records, thus resulting in possible reporting biases. Second, future studies should validate the mechanism underlying the positive association between transition planning, goal-setting, and college enrollment, as there may be other factors involved as well. Despite these limitations, this study broke new ground in developing an understanding of best practices in transition planning for youth with ASDs.

Elias and White (2017) conducted a nationwide qualitative study to review the transition-related needs of emerging adults with ASD from a parent stakeholder perspective. Parents were chosen as the primary participants, as they were pivotal in assisting their children with identity development, emotional, and educational/vocational transitions associated with developmental matriculation. The purpose of the study was to (a) determine the challenges and needs to be encountered by students with ASD related to PSE, and (b) identify the challenges and support needs of students with ASD who attended a postsecondary institution or were soon to visit.

Elias and White (2017) used an anonymous online survey created in
SurveyGizmo to ascertain a diverse sample, distributed nationwide. They used flyers, email distribution, and online resources to recruit participants locally and nationally. The study was sent to parents of individuals with ASD related to the transition out of high school and into higher education. Participation was limited to individuals in the United States, with a total of 143 respondents.

Elias and White (2017) found that students with ASD primarily struggled with social tasks and daily living skills when transitioning into PSE. Specifically, in the social domain, parents reported difficulties with social interactions, and making and maintaining social support such as friendships.

There were several limitations to note in this study. First, the total sample was relatively small, with only 143 participants. Additionally, the diagnosis was not confirmed in this study. The monetary incentive may have prompted some participants to complete the survey even if their child did not meet the diagnostic inclusion criteria. Another potential limitation related to the study’s design in that all data came from a single source – parent report and an online survey.

As the population of ASD increases, the necessity of providing student-specific services continues to grow. There is no evidence-based research discovered to address the need for effective interventions for individuals with ASD during the transition from high school to PSE. The three studies addressed the views and opinions of parents and students with ASD. Results indicate that postsecondary disability services may lack specificity to the students because there is no clear way to collect data and information regarding the support students require during the transition. It is essential to understand the characteristics of individuals diagnosed with ASD and how they may impact a
Historically, individuals with disabilities have faced legal and social challenges to fully access public education (Aron & Loprest, 2012). One primary federal law for special populations is IDEA which guarantees a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment for all students (Madaus & Shaw, 2006). In support of IDEA, mobile learning has facilitated teaching and learning by increasing the use of mobile technologies to support the success of all students (Xie et al., 2018).

In a quantitative study examining the effect of video programming and task completion for students with autism, Mechling et al. (2006) found that completion time substantially decreased in students with ASD following the presentation of choice via a computer-based video program. Baseline and intervention sessions were conducted in a self-contained classroom with low- to high-functioning students with ASD. Task completion time monitored using computer-based technology, and two participants with ASD in self-contained classrooms were randomly selected. The research question guiding the study was as follows: “would the presentation of high-preference stimuli via computer-based, video technology, function as a reinforcer to improve the duration of task performance for students with a diagnosis of ASD” (Mechling et al., 2006, p. 8). Although task completion time decreased significantly and study results supported the use of this approach for providing reinforcement, no conclusions concerning the specific components that impact the use of computer-based video programs were made.

A notable limitation of the study was that the video reinforcement condition in selection B included choice. Reinforcement A did not provide a choice. Video choice
alone with or without the video component would provide similar results. Future study warrants an isolated examination of the reinforcing value of video preference.

Richter and Test (2011) conducted a qualitative study on the effects of multimedia social stories (MMSS) on knowledge of adult outcomes and opportunities among transition-aged youth with significant cognitive disabilities, including autism. Included in the social story intervention were three students aged 17 to 21 with significant cognitive disabilities who (a) planned to work in a supported employment setting, and (b) lived in their families’ homes. All training and assessment sessions took place in a public-school conference room in the southeastern United States. The data were collected throughout the study by videotaping 20.8% of the intervention sessions. Observers used a detailed checklist to measure the integrity of the intervention implementation. Richer and Test assessed each participant’s ability to exhibit knowledge of adult outcomes and opportunities in a novel setting, an information transition planning meeting. All participant’s scores increased from pre-intervention of 8 to post-intervention of 12.

Findings indicated a functional relationship between MMSS and students’ knowledge of outcomes and opportunities. All students demonstrated an immediate increase in knowledge level. Special education teachers confirmed that participants who received MMSS were better able to indicate and support a learning plan, working, living, and having fun in postsecondary life compared to students who did not receive MMSS (Richter & Test, 2011).

There were a few limitations to this study. The small number of participants reduced the generalizability of findings, as only three people attended the information transition planning meetings. Moreover, these meetings may not have accurately
represented a student’s ability to express knowledge of outcomes and opportunities at a typical transition planning meeting. However, the students’ positive reports of the MMSS and their active participation in the information transition planning meeting aligned with National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) reports that student with disabilities value involvement in the IEP decision, suggesting that student with cognitive disabilities value opportunities to plan for adult life with their teachers and families (Richter & Test, 2011).

In a study conducted by Middleton and Murray (1999), the researchers assessed the relationship between levels of technology implementation (LoTi) in the classroom and standardized test scores in reading and mathematics. The study aimed to investigate how the levels of technology implementation affected student achievement in reading and mathematics. A sample of teachers surveyed used the LoTi instrument to determine the classroom’s personal level of technology implementation.

Based on the findings of the study, Middleton and Murray (1999) revealed that student academic achievement was affected by the classroom teacher’s level of technology usage and that successful implementation of each type of technology largely depended on the teacher. Technologies must be a total part of education, and teachers should see technology as a part of learning.

Richter and Test (2011) suggested that technology has an impact on learning in students with ASD in video technology and MMSS, and (Middleton & Murray, 1999) suggests a teacher must be trained in the proper implementation of technology. Teachers are often not educated about the classroom technology themselves, so it is not used to its fullest potential. While many districts can afford new technology, teacher training and
usage of it is not supported. If teachers do not understand or are trained on how to use technology, they will misuse it.

**Assistive Technology**

One method for supporting postsecondary education and career pathways is through the use of assistive technology. The term assistive technology refers to “any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially, modified, or customized used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals disabilities” (Bausch et al., 2005, p. 60). Assistive technology (AT) supports are crucial for students with disabilities because they encounter different challenges in reaching PSE goals (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2012). Standard tools such as smartphones, tablets, and MP3 players are considered as assistive technology, and most postsecondary students have at least one of these tools (Kellems et al., 2015). Students with ASD can take advantage of these tools in self-determination, daily living, academics, and employment opportunities. The benefits of these tools can include the following: (a) providing virtual practices for desired postsecondary skills, and (b) supporting student's vocational performance (Kellems et al., 2015).

Cullen, Alber-Morgan et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study about technology-mediated self-prompting interventions of daily living skills for individuals with disabilities in diverse settings, including the community, school, and home. The study was conducted in employment settings at a university and in the local community. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the effects of video self-prompting using iPads on the percentage of vocational task steps completed accurately by young adults with autism
2. What are the effects of video self-prompting using iPads on the generalization of vocational tasks?

3. What are participants’ and job coaches’ opinions about using self-directed video prompting of vocational tasks in integrated employment settings?

(Cullen, Alber-Morgan et al., 2017, p. 362-363)

Observation and data collection ranged from 15 minutes to 3 hours. Participants were recruited from a postsecondary program for individuals with IDD who worked in unpaid job internships or paid integrated employment settings. Three adult males from the ages of 20 to 26 years comprised the participants in this study.

Each participant successfully acquired three vocational tasks in integrated employment settings using the intervention. Additionally, participants successfully generalized two of the three tasks to new materials, people, or environments. The results from the Cullen, Alber-Morgan et al. (2017) study were consistent with previous research using self-directed video prompting (Bereznak et al., 2012; Cihak et al., 2008). However, there were key differences and limitations in these studies. In the Cihak et al. (2008) study, prompts were limited to audio plus picture, and the focus of the research was on the transition between known tasks with no new vocational tasks acquired during the intervention.

Furthermore, in the Bereznak et al. (2012) study, vocational and daily living tasks were taught in mock vocational settings using video prompting on an iPhone. This study represents an advance and further contribution to the literature because of its completion
in integrated employment settings. The students maintained the behavior after the removal of the iPad. A limitation of this study was that the low number of participants made it challenging to generalize the results to a larger population. More research on the use of self-directed video prompting should be implemented in integrated employment settings to further validate the findings of this study and previous studies utilizing video prompting in integrated settings.

Cannella-Malone et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study comparing self-directed video prompting to least-to-most prompting in postsecondary students with moderate intellectual disabilities. The study’s purpose was to examine the effects of least-to-most prompting of self-directed video prompting with error correction. The research questions addressed in this study were: (a) “is one method of instruction more efficient for teaching vocational skills?” and (b) “will skills acquired using both methods maintain over time” (Canella-Malone et al., 2017, p. 212). Two males enrolled in a PSE program at a large urban university with a moderate intellectual disability participated.

The results of the Cannella-Malone et al. (2017) study showed that both instruction methods quickly led to skill acquisition for both students. When they chose to use the iPod Touch, both students used it with fidelity. These findings are important for many reasons. First, this study adds to the body of literature that demonstrates with effective teaching, vocational skills taught to people with moderate intellectual disabilities (Bereznak et al., 2012). Second, the findings of this study provide another demonstration that people with IDD can learn new skills using self-directed video prompting with little instructor-driven intervention (Cannella-Malone et al., 2017). Once they have access to technology, there is the potential to use self-directed video prompting
Cullen, Simmons-Reed, et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study using 21st-century video prompting technology to facilitate the independence of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The study was aimed to determine the effects of self-directed video prompting on the acquisition and generalization of cleaning tasks to increase the independence of young adults with IDD. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the effects of using self-directed video prompting to prompt acquisition and completion of cleaning cooking tasks by young adults with IDD who are striving to live independently?

2. What are the effects of training a three-element cleaning task that differ by three components?

3. What do participants say about the procedures, goals, and results of using self-directed video prompting to learn cleaning tasks? (Cullen, Simmons-Reed, et al., 2017, p. 968)

Three adult males from the ages of 20 to 24 with intellectual or developmental disabilities participated in this study. The participants were selected for the study because they were in a postsecondary program for individuals with IDD, living in supported living or an apartment, away from parents/guardians, and lacked basic cleaning skills.

The results showed that video prompting helped all three participants improve the accurate completion of cleaning tasks. Data collected showed improvements for the original task and the tasks that were between one and three components different. The study’s results support previous research that found self-directed video prompting to be
an effective method for improving the acquisition of daily living skills (Bereznak et al., 2012). This study extends previous research because it is programmed for near-, immediate-, and far generalization tasks and promotes self-determination.

This study had limitations in terms of the number of participants. Although it demonstrated effectiveness among those participants, the replication of single-subject studies is essential to demonstrate the effectiveness of interventions. This study focused on daily living skills, but vocational and academic tasks also have components that could be varied to see if self-directed video prompting will promote near-, immediate-, and far generalization tasks. Future research could examine the effects of self-directed video prompting on vocational and academic tasks.

In a study conducted by Purrazzella and Mechling (2013), video modeling was used to teach navigation skills. The researchers sought to determine whether people with intellectual disabilities could call for assistance and use video features of a smartphone to provide information on their location when lost in the community. The study intended to address the following: whether persons with a moderate intellectual disability could learn to use the features of a smartphone to take and send video captions of their surroundings. Additionally, could persons with a moderate intellectual disability generalize the use of the smartphone features to take video capture of their surroundings to other persons so when lost in the community, they could be located. Three adults aged 24 to 29 with moderate intellectual disabilities participated in the study. Each participant attended a community college program that provided post-school services for persons with a developmental disability—the study used iPhone 4s with FaceTime for capturing and sending videos.
The study results showed all three participants learned the steps for operating the iPhone 4 to take and send video captions. This study was among the first to evaluate one of the many features available to smartphone technology users, thus creating several directions for future research with persons with disabilities. Smartphone features may also be valuable in providing video and audio feedback and interaction between persons with disabilities who live alone, mainly when their supervisors or caregivers are in a different location (Purrazzella & Mechling, 2013).

These studies (Bereznak et al., 2012; Cannella-Malone et al., 2017; Cullen, Alber-Morgan et al., 2017; Cullen, Simmons-Reed et al., 2017) suggest that there are various interventions in which the utilization of multiple types of AT devices are practical teaching tools for individuals with ASD and ID who participated in the studies. The acquisition of independent living skills is essential in supporting students with ASD and IDD to have a quality of life. The AT devices used in these studies taught various skills. Overall, individuals with ASD and IDD who learn to complete a daily task with AT devices, such as an iPhone or iPad, may experience an enhanced quality of life and independence.

**ASD Transition Success Experiences**

Transition beyond high school is challenging. Family support and intervention supports from schools and teachers are imperative. Families and individuals with ASD face challenges and barriers in their quest for successful transition to higher education.

**Family Support**

Family members, especially parents, play a significant role advocating for individuals with ASD, especially during their primary and secondary educational years.
Toor et al. (2016) explored the needs and facilitators (referred to as bridges) for individuals with ASD who attended higher education and highlighted the importance of family support in the pursuit of higher education (Zeedyk et al., 2016). However, research investigating parents or other family members’ experiences during the transition to PSE for students with ASD is lacking (C. Anderson & Butt, 2017; Dymond et al., 2017). As a result of an increased number of students with ASD likely to enroll in higher education and the growing research in this area, it is critical to understand the experiences of these students to implement best-practice transition support strategies (Sarrett, 2018).

Through a qualitative, cross-case design, Alverson et al. (2019) explored the high school to college transition experiences of young adults with ASD. The purpose of the study was to identify the unique personal and contextual barriers young adults with ASD face in PSE. Alverson et al. (2019) also studied the services needed by these youth to prepare for transition beyond high school. The research questions were as follows: (a) “What high school transition services do young adults with ASD need to be successful in college?” and (b) “What unique personal and contextual barriers do these individuals face when enrolling and remaining in college” (Alverson et al., 2019, p. 53). The researchers followed a phenomenological approach using individual interviews over 6 to 12 months. Participants were five young men aged 19 to 22 who lived in urban and suburban areas of a northwestern state. Based on findings from interviews with participants, parents, and service providers, Alverson et al. (2019) identified multiple challenges, especially in areas of social skills, communication, and executive functioning skills. These challenges were evident in high school and persisted in college settings.
Two limitations should be noted when reviewing the findings of this study. First, the sample, although purposive based on strict criteria reflected only one portion of the population of those with ASD – those diagnosed with autism syndrome (AS) before 2013, when the criteria for ASD diagnosis changed. Second, the majority of the participants were Caucasian males who lived in the same geographic area. Further research is needed to identify transition services unique to individuals with ASD, including longitudinal and experimental studies, and to inform the understanding of effective high school transition services. Young adults need services designed to support their internal motivation, family support, and clear post-school goals to become college- and career-ready.

C. Anderson and Butt (2017) conducted a qualitative study using grounded theory with young adults on the autism spectrum at college, investigating their successes and stumbling blocks. The researchers focused on individuals with ASD who were no longer on campus as well as their parents. To participate in the study, a family had to have a young adult with ASD who had left high school within the past 15 years. Recruitment of families was conducted via social media and e-mail from the mid-Atlantic region. Interviews were unstructured and featured open-ended questions. Two questions asked were: (a) “What was it like for you as you came to the end of high school?” and (b) “what happened after that” (C. Anderson & Butt, 2017, pp. 3030-3031). Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. To analyze the data, C. Anderson and Butt utilized a constant comparative method associated with the grounded theory approach. Results of the study showed nine young adults were attending a 2- or 4-year college (50%), four (22%) completed a bachelor’s degree, three (17%) were forced to return
home after suffering a crisis while living at college, and two (11%) had dropped out and were working part-time jobs.

The study had several limitations. One was the utilization of a small convenience sample of 18 families from the mid-Atlantic region. These families were mostly Caucasian and occupied high-income brackets. Therefore, the results were not generalizable. Future research should utilize larger and more diverse samples to investigate which high school and college practices and programs are associated with postsecondary students’ success on the autism spectrum.

Dymond et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study on PSE and students with ASD and the experiences of parents and university personnel at one public research university in the United States. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of parents and university personnel who supported students with ASD to pursue a university degree. Participants of this study were selected from two stakeholder groups, (a) university personnel, and (b) parents of students with ASD. A staff member from the disability services office mailed a letter to the parents of each student with ASD registered with the disability’s services office. Ten parents agreed to participate in the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 parents and six university personnel. Data were analyzed using a constant comparative method. Based on the findings, Dymond et al. (2017) suggested services offered by universities may need expansion to meet the unique needs of students with ASD. Five common themes emerged across university personnel and parents related to their experiences supporting students with ASD to pursue a university degree.
As students with ASD increasingly pursue PSE, it is incumbent upon colleges and universities to identify and provide appropriate support that meets the unique needs of this population. Findings from the Dymond et al. (2017) study suggested that traditional university services may not be sufficient and that more individualized supports may be needed that extend beyond those typically offered. Moreover, a transition plan during high school must include goals that teach students to understand and communicate their individual support needs.

Peña and Kocur (2013) conducted a qualitative study using naturalistic inquiry to investigate parents’ experiences in the transition of students with ASD to community colleges. The study’s goal was to add to the emerging body of literature to inform community colleges of the services families believe would help support these students. Participants included a total of 18 parents who took part in semi-structured interviews lasting 1 hour. Participants were given $30 upon completion of the study. Audio files were transcribed and uploaded to Saturate App, a qualitative analysis software program. The results underscored the role parents play in enabling their children with ASD to gain access and transition to community college. Most of the students in the study could not have gained access or transitioned successfully without parental involvement.

There were notable limitations to the Peña and Kocur (2013) study. The study’s sample included predominately highly educated, middle-class families in one county in southern California, and therefore results from these parents’ experiences may not generalize to other geographic locations. Second, the study did not include the students’ voices regarding their experiences at a community college. Previous literature has indicated that parents play a significant role in their child’s academic experience with
special needs. However, future research must focus on including the voices of the students to understand the transition process from their point of view.

All studies were published between 2013 and 2019 and conducted in the United States. The designs of the studies included grounded theory (C. Anderson & Butt, 2017), phenomenology (Alverson et al., 2019), and naturalistic inquiry (Peña & Kocur, 2013). One study did not specifically state a study design (Dymond et al., 2017). Individuals who identified as having ASD, but had no formal diagnosis, were not represented in these studies. Only one study included perspectives of the individual and family members concurrently (Alverson et al., 2019). Findings from these studies suggest that core and associated characteristics of ASD may create additional challenges for students with ASD when transitioning to higher education. In particular, difficulties associated with social-communication skills, executive functioning skills, and independent living skills may result in further student supports and accommodations beyond those provided within higher education.

The differences in the manifestation of these characteristics of each individual will necessitate an individualized approach to needed supports. Regardless of diagnosis, no two individuals will have the same difficulties, experiences, or needs. These studies provide insight into a rapidly expanding and significant area of research investigating the experiences of students with ASD who are transitioning to higher education. Furthermore, the varied experiences of transition support programs described by participants within these studies highlight the need for effective programs to facilitate children’s transition.
Transition Planning Challenges and Barriers

The prevalence of young adults with ASD has created urgency to improve transition programs and supports. Researchers have established an evidence base documenting poor outcomes and identified a range of contributing factors and barriers including limited parental involvement, lack of financial resources, and poor interagency collaboration between high schools and adult service providers (K. A. Anderson et al., 2014).

Giarelli et al. (2014) conducted a thematic content analysis to examine the expectations and perceived facilitators of, and barriers to transition to community. Participants were young adults, ages 18-23 from the east coast of the United States. Seventy percent of young adults hoped for employment, and 30% wished to find a partner and raise a family. Perceived barriers were as follows: self-assessed behavioral problems, and personal and institutional factors. Bridges to facilitate transition were community accommodations, cognitive abilities, personal strengths and qualities, as well as mentor’s qualities.

Gobbo and Schmulsky (2014) conducted a qualitative inquiry involving two focus groups made up of experienced faculty who met to discuss the academic concerns of college students with autism spectrum disorders. The purpose of the study was to examine how students with ASD performed academically from the perspective of faculty at a New England liberal arts college. The study focused on faculty viewpoints on the strengths and weaknesses of students with ASD and effective teaching strategies for these students. Results were grouped into three categories: academic challenges for students with ASD (social skill deficits, critical-thinking challenges, and anxiety); academic
strengths (passionate interests, desire to be right, and adherence to rules); and promising instruction approaches (provide structure and attend to the emotional climate).

Hedges et al. (2014) utilized focus group methodology as the qualitative approach to access the experiences of high school students with ASD, their families, and the professionals who served them. The purpose of the study was to analyze multiple stakeholder perspectives on challenges impacting the success of students with ASD in high school. The study examined the following question: “what is challenging about high school for students with ASD and their service providers” (Hedges et al., 2014, p. 67). The findings resulted in three themes demonstrating the misalignment that exists between the nature of high school and the needs of students with ASD as they prepared for success in postsecondary environments: (a) inconsistencies, many of which are intrinsic to the postsecondary environments, (b) difficulties with interpersonal connections, and (c) knowledge and/or process breakdowns. The study emphasized the crack that exists between the nature of high schools, and the characteristics and needs of students with ASD. They recommended future research investigate interventions and supports to address inconsistencies in processes, and the impact they cause to students with ASD, their families, and their service providers (Hedges et al., 2014).

The studies all outlined challenges (institutional, personal, academic, social skill deficits, and anxiety) and some barriers to transition planning from families, students with ASD, faculty, and professional support. (Hedges et al., 2014) recognized the inconsistencies in practices that exist which led to the crack that exists between high schools and the students they serve. The cracks must be addressed to ensure successful transition planning and outcomes.
**Intervention Support**

Individuals with ASD often experience difficulties with communication and socialization throughout their lifespan (Graetz, 2010). These difficulties can create significant barriers to successful outcomes in the transition phase to adulthood (Howlin et al., 2013). Social deficits in young adults with ASD can impact participation and success in higher education, and are linked to the quality of life, future employment, self-confidence, and personal skill-building (Vanbergeijk et al., 2008). Current services do not typically address the range of supports needed to assist college students on the spectrum with their unique and often complex needs (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). Moreover, many comprehensive services received in elementary, middle, and high school through the IEP process are no longer available during college years (Graetz & Spampinato, 2008).

Ashbaugh et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study of increased social integration for college students with ASD. The purpose of the study was to assess a multiple-baseline across participant design; within a context design of whether a structured social planning intervention would increase social integration for college students with ASD. The researchers explored the following questions:

1. Will the social planning intervention produce improvement in the participants’ involvement in campus and community-based social activities?

2. Will the intervention produce an increase in the number of extracurricular activities for participants?

3. Will the intervention be associated with collateral improvements? (Ashbaugh et al., 2017, p. 3)
The intervention consisted of weekly meetings to plan social activities around the students’ interest, improve organizational skills, and target specific social skills. Each participant had peer mentor support during the social activities. In total, three college students with ASD participated in this study. Each student had a diagnosis of an ASD by an outside agency, was a current student in a higher education setting, was between 18 and 25 years of age, was able to speak using full sentences, and had no history of violence or aggression. During an intervention, the pairing of participants and mentors occurred. All sessions were conducted once per week for approximately 1 hour at the University of California’s Santa Barbara campus.

Results showed after the intervention that all participants increased their number of community-based social events, extracurricular activities, and peer interactions (Ashbaugh et al., 2017). Additionally, participants improved in their academic performance and experienced higher levels of satisfaction with their college experience. These results build upon previous research, suggesting that a structured social planning intervention can increase social integration for college students with ASD (Koegel et al., 2013). Simultaneously, a limitation of the study was the population size. Including a larger sample size to help strengthen the validity of the research and assess whether the findings apply to a broader range of students is warranted. Also, the racial/ethnic diversity of the current sample was limited, and it would be valuable to investigate cultural differences in a sample of more demographically diverse students. This study marked a step in furthering the area of developing and examining treatment techniques for college students with ASD (Ashbaugh et al., 2017). Providing services to help
postsecondary students with ASD will likely increase their ability to obtain a higher education degree successfully and may improve their long-term outcomes in life.

Siew et al. (2017) conducted a study on a specialist peer mentoring program for university students on the autism spectrum in Australia. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the pilot year of the Curtin Specialist Mentoring Program (CSMP), a specialized peer mentoring program for university students with ASD, aimed at improving self-reported well-being, academic success, and retention in university studies. A single group pretest-posttest design was used; quantitative and qualitative evaluations were undertaken with 10 young adults with ASD to explore the effectiveness and acceptability of the CSMP program. Of the 12 mentees enrolled in the CSMP, 10 (seven males and three females) consented to participate in the research study. Participants ranged from 17 to 20 years old. All questionnaire data, including sociodemographic data, were de-identified, exported, and analyzed using SPSS. Data from semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim and collated with participants’ typed responses.

The Siew et al. (2017) study provided evidence that a specialized peer mentoring program can improve the well-being of students with ASD, highlighting the importance of interventions that are individualized, flexible, based on a social model, and target environmental factors such as social support. Future studies should aim to promote generalization of skills beyond the university setting. Young adults with ASD have significant disadvantages in adult life, including employment, mental health, social relationships, and quality of life. Future studies could also benefit from a greater focus on the transition to life beyond university by linking participants with organizations related
to their field of study, thus providing relevant experience and a potential gateway to employment.

Ames et al. (2016) conducted a quantitative study to evaluate the ASD Mentorship Program (AMP) for university students. The study aimed to better understand the characteristics of the sample of students utilizing AMP by examining information obtained during initial interviews. This study sheds light on the service gaps inherent within institutions and promotes the development of similar programs nationally. Students participating in the program are typically referred to AMP through the counseling service at York University in Canada. To participate in the program, students must have a self-reported diagnosis of an ASD. Little knowledge exists on how best to facilitate the transition and academic success in this population. It would be valuable for future research to examine factors essential for success, both in the university setting and post-graduation.

Pearlman-Avnion and Aloni (2016) conducted a quantitative study on the impact of a PSE program on the self-efficacy and future orientation of people with high-functioning autism (HFA). The study’s purpose was to examine the effect of such intervention programs on self-efficacy and the future orientation of people with HFA. Nineteen students (15 females and four males) from the ages of 23 to 28 diagnosed with HFA participated in the student service center program. The program aimed to accommodate each student according to his or her individual needs, assigning a personal mentor who provided a continuous channel of communication and emotional support. The participants completed the self-efficacy assessment questionnaire and the future-orientation questionnaire before and after the intervention. Results indicated a definite
improvement in measures of both self-efficacy and future orientation (Pearlman-Avnion & Aloni, 2016). A limitation of the study was that it was conducted in one specific university, making it difficult to generalize the results. Further studies on intervention programs and their implementation could enable the inclusion of a large number of students or universities to produce a more accurate reflection of the strengths of people with HFA.

All studies revealed successful interventions of peer mentoring as a means of enhancing social support. Although research identifies academic supports as a preferred service of students with ASD, lack of research on academic support exists. Additional research is needed to quantify the contribution of academic challenges toward low completion rates of postsecondary students with ASD and to clarify the importance of academic success.

**ASD Transition Success Preparedness**

Studies have reported a higher likelihood that students with ASD face social exclusion, become victims of bullying, and have lower academic achievement than their classmates without ASD at the mainstream secondary level (Mandy et al., 2016). The rising prevalence rates, and the increased number of students with ASD attending mainstream schooling, depict a new phenomenon in society and education. This research underlines the need for and importance of understanding which factors contribute to or prevent a successful transition to secondary schools for children with ASD. This research can be accomplished by analyzing the existing literature and identifying related factors.

Makin et al. (2017) conducted a multi-informant mixed-methods study on the primary-to-secondary school transition for children on the autism spectrum. The
researchers examined the factors influencing a successful school transition for autistic children in one local education authority in London, England. Fifteen children were seen twice within 4 months, once during the final term of their mainstream primary school and again during secondary school. The process entailed semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with children, parents, and teachers at both the pre- and post-transition phases. Results showed that participants reported negative experiences of their transition to secondary school. Transition success appeared to be related to several school- and system-level factors, including tension over school choice, delay in placement decisions, and lack of initial preparation and communication between schools (Makin et al., 2017).

Findings of the Makin et al. (2017) study were consistent with existing studies showing that individuals with ASD experience difficulties adjusting to and coping in their new secondary placements. A limitation of this study was that a measurement of child-level characteristics at both pre- and post-transition did not occur, meaning it was not possible to determine whether the sensory responsiveness and anxiety increased after the transition to secondary school. Future research should allow for additional longer-term follow-up periods to address this issue.

Mandy et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study on the transition from primary to secondary school in mainstream education for children with ASD. The study’s purpose was to offer the first empirical account of the transition from primary to secondary mainstream education of children with ASD in England. Twenty-eight participants recruited from the Greater London area or a part of South East London. The researcher measured different types of psychopathologies to capture diverse outcomes relevant to
the success of a school transition. The study included adaptive function and levels of peer victimization before and after the move to secondary education.

Although no observation of any widespread increase in problems occurred, findings raised several concerns for children with ASD making the transition between primary and secondary school (Mandy et al., 2016). In particular, there were high levels of psychopathology and adaptive function difficulty in the sample, and participants had substantial support needs, which were under-recognized and often went unmet. Moreover, participants were labeled high functioning even though 85% scored in the low range for adaptive function.

Consideration of the following limitations, first, the generalizability of the findings was questionable based on the sampling strategy used and the fact that the study was concerned with an ecological shift. Second, as the transition occurred in the UK state school system, it was likely that characteristics and outcomes would be different if compared to a private school, or a school in another country (Mandy et al., 2016).

Peters and Brooks (2016) conducted a qualitative study on parental perspectives on the transition to secondary schools for students with ASD and HFA. The study’s purpose was to explore experiences of the transition to secondary school for students with ASD/HFA from the parental perspective. Seventeen parents of children with ASD/HFA from the north of England completed an online questionnaire about their child’s school transition experience. The questionnaire captured self-reported observations of support provided during their child’s transition to secondary school. Responses indicated that many factors influenced the experiences of students with ASD/HFA at school and the preceding transition, including anxiety, bullying, friendship, and supports. Moreover, the
transition to secondary school seemed to encompass some difficulties for students with ASD/HFA.

The findings suggest that pre-transition support is not a stand-alone factor influencing the ease of the transition. Stressors relating to the physical and social environment, combined with receiving minimal support, resulted in transitions that rated as extremely difficult. Pre-transition visits are beneficial, but support needs to be ongoing to enhance the quality of their school experience. The demographics of the sample proved to be a limitation of the study. The skewed representation of females in the sample study reflected the male dominance of the condition. This study demonstrated that females with ASD/HFA have a unique experience, and further research is necessary to capture females’ experiences with the condition (Peters & Brooks, 2016).

Furthermore, the ethnicity of the participants was homogenous and, therefore, not representative of the population. Ethnic minority populations and those of lower socioeconomic status are not widely accessing support services. The findings from the Peters and Brooks (2016) study suggest that the transition success is multifactorial and that consideration must be given to the specific individual’s environment and personal needs to promote inclusion in school and subsequent well-being.

Tso and Strnadová (2017) conducted a qualitative study on parental perspectives on the transition process focusing on home collaboration. The study aimed to create greater awareness of how to best support students with ASD and their families in the transition process. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 15 parents of children with ASD who attended mainstream government high schools in metropolitan Sydney, Australia. Parents were found to have varying levels of transition support.
Findings suggest that more significant implementation of practices, including mandated transition planning and home-school collaboration in schools, would contribute to more authentic inclusion of students with ASD.

There were limitations to the study; first, the small sample size of 15 parents with children attending mainstream high schools in metropolitan Sydney. The sample size does not allow for these experiences to be representative across the population of parents of children with ASD in transition. Furthermore, parents whose children with ASD attending schools in rural areas may also have different experiences. Recommendations include conducting future research in the transition area for students with diverse stakeholders such as school principals, teachers, and students with ASD (Tso & Strnadová, 2017).

International research has shown that school transition is often linked not only to the excitement but also to stress and anxiety for both students and their parents. The literature has identified students with ASD as a vulnerable group regarding the transition. The rising number of children with special needs in many countries lead to new phenomena and situations. The assessment of the transition from primary to secondary school for children with ASD is a new phenomenon in England and other countries, which until now had remained unknown and, to some extent, neglected. The literature has shown a need for understanding and efficiently handling this phase of the school career. This research could result in implications for educational policies or changes in the educational system to better support students with ASD during their transition to secondary school.
Studies show parents’ well-being suffers and is challenged during their child’s transition from primary to secondary school. There are high levels of stress and anxiety, which are not healthy for the child or the parents themselves. As previous research has shown, stress levels can be reduced by starting the transition process on time and involving the parents as equal partners. Overall, the reviewed studies show that the parents well-being suffers during their child’s transition from primary to secondary.

**Characteristics and Effects of Transition Planning**

The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA defined transition services as a group of set activities for a child with a disability that “is designed within a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate child’s movement from school to post-school activities” (IDEA, 2004, 1401 section). Best practices in transition planning emphasize student and family involvement, including developing an individualized transition plan focused on developing student skills linked with desired life outcomes.

Wei et al. (2016) conducted a quasi-experimental study on the effect of transition planning participation and goal-setting on college enrollment among youth with ASDs. The research questions examined whether the college enrollment rates for students with ASDs were associated with (a) their participation in transition planning and (b) having a primary transition goal of a college enrollment specific in their transition plans. The researchers used data on a sample of approximately 920 youth with ASDs whose parents responded to a phone or mail survey at Wave 1. The results provide a national picture of the effect of high school transition planning participation and goal-setting in college enrollment rates between students with ASDs (Wei et al., 2016).
About 40% of youth with ASDs actively participated in their transition planning meetings, while roughly 24% had a primary transition goal of college enrollment in their transition plan. The study suggests that transition planning participation is a valuable opportunity to improve PDS outcomes for secondary school students with ASDs. There is a marked contrast between the large percentage of youth with ASDs who expect to attend a PSE institution (84.4%) and the low percentage of PSE goals included in the transition plan (24.2%). A limitation of this study was unobserved confounding is a concern in propensity score modeling. There is a possibility that an unmeasured factor might correlate with both the likelihood of transition planning participation and goal-setting and the likelihood of college enrollment. This study’s findings lay the groundwork for achieving a better understanding of the association between transition planning practice and goal-setting and college enrollment among youth with ASDs (Wei et al., 2016).

Shogren and Plotner (2012) conducted a study on transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities, autism, or other disabilities. The purpose of the study, utilizing data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), was to compare transition planning characteristics for students with intellectual disability, autism, or other disabilities. The NLTS2 sampling process allows the results to be generalizable to the full population of students receiving special education services in the United States. This study used data from Wave 1 of NLTS2, which provided an initial picture of transition planning experiences of students aged 14 (the age at which IDEA requires transition planning to begin under IDEA 1997) and older. Data on transition support and services collected through parent telephone interviews and school program surveys were analyzed. The interviews lasted approximately 1-hour using Computer
Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) software. The parent telephone interview included a section on family interaction/involvement with the students, parents’ perceptions of student and family involvement in the IEP, and the usefulness of planning for life after high school. The school program survey included a section on the transition to adult life. The results showed that the average age when transition planning began was similar for all three groups at 14.4 years of age. The data suggest that schools comply with the transition mandates of IDEA (Shogren & Plotner, 2012).

When studying events occurred in greater depth, it revealed that only 66% of students with autism had an IEP, specifically linking their course of study to transition goals (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). While these numbers reflect population estimates, they suggest that many students are underprepared to effectively participate in the IEP meetings. It is critical to effective transition planning that students and their families can access a diverse team to identify future supports and services and develop a postschool vision. The data confirm that there remains a breakdown in communication and collaboration within transition planning teams. Central tenets in IDEA (e.g., family involvement and transition planning based on students’ dreams, interests, and strengths) do not appear to be occurring for one-third to one-half of students and their families. There are limitations to the data in that direct comparisons cannot be made between teacher and parent perceptions. The NLTS2 is a wide-ranging study; thus, the included questions are broad rather than going in-depth into one area. The absence of linkages between transition goals and students’ course of the study suggests that schools offer data models (i.e., one-size-fits-all) that do not promote individual instruction. These models do not allow them to make progress toward their dreams for their future.
Using NLTS2 data, Wei et al. (2016) conducted a study on the transition to adulthood, focusing on employment, education, and disengagement in individuals with ASD. Their research addressed the following questions: (a) “What are the major transition sequences to adulthood of PSE and employment in the 6 years after exiting from high school?” and (b) “Are youth demographic and functional characteristics associated with different transition sequences” (Wei et al., 2016, p. 38). The study focused on a subset of youth who were out of high school at or before the third wave of out-of-high-school data, each 2 years apart. Youth with ASDs who enrolled in a PSE institution identified by answering six survey items asked parents if their child was currently attending or had attended a 2-year community college. As it relates to employment, both responded to questions related to a paid job now or in the preceding 2 years. The results showed the most common activity up to 2 years after high school exit was “unemployed and not enrolled in PSE;” 34.7% of youth with ASDs fit this category (Wei et al., 2016 p. 39). Youth with this activity dropped to 21.3% from 2 up to 4 years after high school exit, but then increased to 30.6% from 4 years up to 6 years after high school exit.

These detailed depictions of the youth transition pattern with ASDs fill a gap in the literature by augmenting employment and PSE rates reported in other studies. They also portray a troubling picture of the post-high school outcomes of these youth. The high rate of youth with ASDs who were continuously or increasingly disengaged from either work or PSE and the very low full-time employment rates are worrisome. The transition activities undertaken on behalf of these youth at the hand off from high school to the adult world were insufficient to connect them effectively with either PSE or employment.
Future research is needed to identify the supports, accommodations, and services that can effectively enhance the performance of individuals with ASDs in PSE and future employment.

All studies used the NLTS2 data to identify the characteristics and effects of transition planning (Shogren & Plotner, 2012; Wei et al., 2015). The transition to adulthood can be challenging for all adolescents as they move from the education system to various post-school environments. These studies established a foundation for developing a better understanding of the association between transition planning practices, goal-setting, and college enrollment among youth with ASDs.

**Job Coaching**

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014) is intended to increase access to high-quality employment services to support the attainment of competitive, integrated employment as an outcome (Schroeder, 2014; Smith et al., 2017). WIOA requires state and local vocational rehabilitation agencies to collaborate with school districts to coordinate transition activities emphasizing competitive, integrated employment. Transition-age youth with IDD (ages 14 to 21 years old) must be equipped with the skills to both attain and retain jobs.

Mandated pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) include focal areas of employment readiness, social skills, and training within the workplace. There are five areas funded within Pre-ETS: (a) job exploration and counseling, (b) workplace readiness and training, (c) counseling on postsecondary enrollment, (d) instruction on self-advocacy, and (e) work-based learning experiences (WIOA, 2014). Facilitating delivery of these services to students is often the responsibility of special education teachers in
transition settings, whose responsibilities related to employment skills instruction often mirror job coaching methods (Gilson & Carter, 2016). Transition educators may serve in these roles in classroom settings or via community-based instructional settings, in which students receive employment training at a community jobsite with the direct support of an educator who provides job coaching.

Typical job coaching involves the use of strategies such as task analysis, prompting hierarchies, fading techniques (i.e., gradually decreasing levels of support), verbal instruction, physical demonstration, and performance feedback to help students learn job responsibilities (Monahan et al., 2021; Riesen & Jameson, 2018). When delivered well and withdrawn strategically, job coaching can have a positive impact on students’ independent work performance and catalyze long-term success (Gilson & Carter, 2018).

**Transition and Employment**

Individuals with ASD face significant challenges entering the workforce, yet research in this area is limited, and the issues are poorly understood. Current employment outcomes for people with ASD are very concerning, given the multifaceted effects of employment or lack of employment on both the individual and society. Employment serves as one means of offsetting the economic costs of ASD (Cowen, 2011).

J. L. Taylor and Seltzer (2011) conducted a qualitative study to evaluate the activities of young adults with ASD who had recently exited the secondary school system. The focus on a narrow age range allowed the researchers to better understand whether the employment difficulty reported in the literature was evident in the years immediately following high school or after some time post-high school graduation. The
The study’s purpose was to see if having an intellectual disability was related to the type of employment or day activity. The analysis focused on 66 youth with ASD who had exited the school system and had information about post-high school activities. The study contributes to the knowledge about the transition to adulthood for individuals with ASD by focusing on employment and day activities immediately after high school graduation. The same low rate of employment, as reported in previous studies, was found. J. L. Taylor and Seltzer (2011) found that those who were competitively employed tended to have menial jobs, and no one in the sample worked full-time. The pattern of underemployment persists for young adults with ASD. The pattern is more pronounced for the present example.

The present study is limited by its small sample size, which may have led to difficulties finding group differences. The sample members were Caucasian and skewed toward those with a higher income. These factors placed limits on the generalizability of the results to non-White and lower-income populations, and studies are needed that examine the implications of race/ethnicity and income for post-high school youth with ASD. The results suggest an important avenue for future research. More research with larger samples is needed to describe the transition process for youth with ASD as they exit the secondary school system and enter the adult world.

Shattuck, Narendorf et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative study postsecondary education and employment among youth with an autism spectrum disorder. Using national data, the study’s authors found that youth with autism were at high risk for no postsecondary education or employment, especially in the first 2 years after high school. Findings highlight the need for improved transition planning. An emerging pattern of
results across a range of outcome measures suggests poorer youth with an ASD have very
different life chances after leaving high school than more affluent peers.

The Shattuck, Narendorf et al. (2012) study had some limitations. The sampling,
based on enrollment in the special education category of autism, is only moderately
sensitive relative to the total population of youth with an ASD. It is impossible to
quantify how well the finding generalizes to all youth with an ASD and just to those who
also enrolled in the autism special education category. The data was collected using
surveys that relied on respondent information. The sample size and diversity served as a
strength as it allowed researchers to examine disparities in outcomes, a previously
neglected direction of inquiry in research on ASDs.

Wehman, Schall et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative case study on the effects of
supported employment on vocational rehabilitation outcomes of transition-age youth with
intellectual and developmental disabilities. The study aimed to examine the impact of
supported employment intervention on the employment outcomes of transition-age youth
with intellectual and developmentally disabled using a case-control study design. The
sample included 23,298 youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities aged
between 16 and 25 years old. Results yielded six homogeneous subgroups, and receipt of
supported employment was found to increase the employment rates across all the groups.

The effect of supported employment was especially strong for youth who were
Social Security beneficiaries, special education students, and individuals with intellectual
disabilities or autism who were high school graduates. These findings suggest that
supported employment is an effective service for enhancing young adults’ vocational
rehabilitation outcomes and provides valuable information for policymakers, health care
providers, rehabilitation counselors, and educators. Limitations to the study are that the fidelity of the special education provided by agencies and vendors within and across states is unknown. This study represents one of the most comprehensive studies demonstrating the effect of supported employment. The results support the investment in supportive employment at the national level and align with national- and state-level initiatives and legal mandates to increase the integration and economic independence of transition youth (Wehman, Schall et al., 2013).

Chiang et al. (2013) conducted a study to identify the factors associated with employment participation for high school leavers with autism. Secondary data analysis of the NLTS2 data was performed. The study found several factors associated with employment participation, annual household income, parent education, gender, and social skills. Other factors included whether the child received career counseling during high school, and whether the child’s school contacted postsecondary vocational training programs, or potential employers were significant factors associated with participation in employment.

**Best Practices in Transition Planning**

Szidon et al. (2015) stated that planning to incorporate successful transition support for high school students with ASD requires IEP teams to consider the unique needs of students. The authors outlined five steps to identify appropriate postsecondary goals: (a) identify transition goals, (b) link postsecondary goals to IEP goals, (c) troubleshoot and adjust transition and IEP goals, (d) provide the opportunity to teach skills, and (e) evaluate progress. These steps confirm that with a solid plan in place, the
team can develop instructional opportunities to foster skill development and effectively evaluate progress for students with an autism spectrum disorder.

Chiang et al. (2013) stated that student participation in transition planning as part of self-determination has been associated with improved outcomes in postsecondary education and employment participation after high school. There is limited information on evidence-based information practices specific to improving employment outcomes specific for transition of young adults with ASD. Wehman et al. (2013) used two case studies to provide a description of a modified Project SEARCH model for young adults with ASD. The research implemented the key elements of the Project SEARCH model (intensive business-based internships, collaboration, and complete embedment in the final year of high school); (Daston et al., 2012) with ASD-specific interventions. The ASD-specific elements included (a) regular consultation with a behavioral analyst, (b) consistent structure to unstructured internship rotations, (c) use of visual supports, and (d) intensive instruction and monitoring of student success. The results from the program were promising, with reported 88% employment rate for those who completed the program.

Students who participated in their transition plans were more likely to participate in postsecondary education as long as their transition goal was participation in PSE (Chiang et al., 2013). Students with ASD and their families will require information, transitional support, and preparation for the demands of PSE environments to be successful. Hewitt (2011) identified a number of promising practices for supporting students with ASD in transitioning to PSE, including: (a) using person-centered planning models in transition planning, (b) providing peer mentoring for students with ASD, (c)
providing educational coaching, and (d) enhancing self-determination and self-advocacy skills.

**Person-Centered Planning**

The Taxonomy for Transition Programming developed in 1996 by Kohler and Field, and updated in 2016, consist of five areas that were developed from 133 effective transition practices in transition proven to increase post-school success. The five areas include student-focused planning, student development, family involvement, interagency collaboration, and program structure. Student-focused planning focuses on identifying the strengths and preferences of students, interest and needs by involving students in the transition planning process, and allowing students to have a voice. Support systems are then put in place to support students in achieving their goals to help them experience positive post-school outcomes. The rationale for encouraging students to participate in transition planning IEP meetings stems from research finding that students who acquire self-determination skills experience improved employment outcomes, higher earning potential, and a noticeably higher quality of life (Shogren et al., 2015).

Hagner et al. (2014) conducted a study to determine strategies and supports to help young adults with ASD participate in person-centered transition planning meetings. Seong et al. (2015) conducted a randomized trial control to determine whether students who received the self-directed IEP instruction could increase their level of self-determination and transition knowledge and skills. Finally, Van Laarhoven-Myers (2016) conducted a mixed-method study to evaluate students’ and parents’ perspectives on a project designed to support students with developmental disabilities to have a voice in IEP meetings. The findings of these studies revealed a lack of active student involvement
in the IEP transition planning process. However, with appropriate interventions and strategies, students can be educated and upskilled to increase their overall participation in the IEP transition planning process.

**Chapter Summary**

The researcher reviewed the history and background of autism spectrum disorder, and focused on the transition success factors, experiences, and preparedness of young adults in transition after high school. The researcher examined the complexities confronting students with ASD as they make the leap transition from high school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment. This study’s motivating force is the gap in the literature and the problem with inadequate transition plans. Improving transition plans is imperative for students with ASD, which will subsequently increase diversity by including this subpopulation within colleges, universities, and the workforce.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

The study examined the perception and approaches used by transition coordinators as they help students with ASD transition from high school to college or post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment. Furthermore, this study considered the differences in transition coordinators’ reasons why they believe a given transition plan resulted in failure or success after a student with ASD received a high school education.

The results of this study shed light on the complexities of transition planning issues and serve to navigate the paths of post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment for educators, families, and students with ASD. There is evidence that current transition planning efforts are uneven and do not prepare young adults with ASD to join the adult worlds of postsecondary education or employment (Friedman et al., 2013).

The phenomenon is that the current process to help students transition successfully is not succeeding at helping high school graduates on the spectrum enter college or have the skills for employment. This research used in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method to understand the lived experiences of transition coordinators who work with and serve students with ASD in high school during their transition year.

Three research questions guided this study:
1. What are the transition coordinators’ perceptions of the transition planning process for high school students with ASD?

2. What are the main barriers to achieve good Individualized Education Program transition planning?

3. How do transition coordinators know if transition planning has been successful, and what outcomes should be expected?

**Research Design**

The qualitative study design was appropriate for this study because it prioritizes research participants’ perspectives, interpretations of events, issues, and problems (Creswell, 2012). The phenomenological approach revealed transition coordinators’ lived experiences as they supported students with ASD. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) defined this approach as follows:

Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos. Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

Furthermore, Vogt and Johnson (2011) noted that a phenomenological approach focuses on documenting how subjects experience a particular phenomenon such as the death of a loved one, being a gifted child, or any other “experience” described from the subject’s inner perspective (p. 289).

**Positionality**
Smith et al. (2021) state a researcher’s positionality shapes their interpretations, understandings, and beliefs about their research as well as other’s research. The researcher’s experience with her differently-abled son and instructing high school students with ASD post-high school provided a perspective and intimate familiarity on students with ASD and parental influence and support. This intimate familiarity to conduct the interviews helped, but also presented an opportunity to skew the findings if left unattended without accountability to the process. Throughout the interviewing process, the researcher bracketed her biases related to transition planning practices to ensure the findings reflected the research participants’ view (Secules et al., 2021).

**Research Context**

The setting for this research was comprised of four suburban public high schools located in the northeast United States, each of which houses an office dedicated to disability services and accessibility. All 40 public high schools located in this northeast region must develop transition plans for students with ASD. The four high schools selected enroll more than 8,000 students (Public School Review, 2020). Figure 3.1 illustrates the enrollment by ethnicity of the four high schools selected. Figure 3.2 displays the median family income in the four research sites. Figure 3.3 demonstrates the race at the four research sites.
Figure 3.1

*School Enrollment by Ethnicity of Four Schools*

![Bar chart showing school enrollment by ethnicity for four schools.](chart1)

Figure 3.2

*Median Family Income at the Four Research Sites*

![Bar chart showing median family income for four research sites.](chart2)

Figure 3.3

*Race at the Four Research Sites*

![Bar chart showing race distribution across four research sites.](chart3)
These high schools were selected as they met the four inclusion criteria for this study. For this study, High School 1 corresponds with Participant 1 (P1) and Research Site 1, High School 2 corresponds with Participant 2 (P2) and Research Site 2, and High School 3 corresponds with Participant 3 and Research Site 3. High School 4 corresponds with Participant 4 (P4) and Research Site 4. The criteria for school inclusion were as follows:

1. A transition coordinator onsite who’s responsible for overseeing the execution of the transition plan process;
2. An established disability services/accessibility office with professional staff who provide transition services to ASD students under Section 504 of both the Rehabilitation Act and the American with Disabilities Act;
3. The inclusion of students with ASD in the general academic setting;
4. An offering of academic programs and a counseling support center.

**Research Participants**

This study utilized purposeful sampling of high-value subjects consisting of transition coordinators located in four public high schools in the northeast. The study was conducted by contacting disability services/accessibility offices at four public high schools. E-mail messages were sent to the directors or managers of these disability services/accessibility offices for recruitment purposes requesting their participation in the interview process (see Appendix A). Moreover, contact information for each office is publicly available on school district websites. Interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom, given the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviews were conducted after hours or on
the weekends. This study aimed to be population-specific by speaking to transition coordinators working on transition plans directly with ASD students.

While conducting this study, careful ethical considerations were made to ensure the research participants’ confidentiality. Research participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time (see Appendix B). Additionally, consent was received from each research participant for recording and transcription of the interviews. Before each interview, research participants signed a consent form as required and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. John Fisher College.

Sampling is a method of deducing information about a whole population from a limited number of units. Only appropriate and proper development of the sampling technique led to the authenticity of the results. Miles and Huberman (1994) highlighted the importance of sampling in any research since one “cannot study everyone everywhere doing everything” (p. 27) and that “decisions are required not only about which people to interview or which events to observe but also about settings and processes” (p. 30). For the present study, the researcher adopted purposeful sampling. It is a viable technique to deeply investigate, discover, and understand the phenomenon under study through a sample that gives detailed information (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Ideally, the sample represents the entire population on interest characteristics (Burns & Grove, 2009).

Table 3.1 displays the demographic information for the study research participants. A total of three males and one female participated in the semi-structured interviews and are identified as “P” followed by an assigned number.
Table 3.1

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Number</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Years as Acting Transition Coordinator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1*</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2*</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>School Psychologist</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3*</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Transition Coordinator</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Serves as transition coordinator in addition to their regular job.

The research participants’ descriptions, less any identifying details, are listed below.

1. Research Participant 1 was a special education teacher with a Master’s in Special Education working as a transition coordinator in secondary education. His school had a unique cohort model where students stayed together in the same group from sixth to 12th grade. There were currently eight students in his cohort. The school’s guidance counselors did not have a great deal of experience with the transition process, and at his school, a transition consultant was hired for complex cases.

2. Research Participant 2 was a school psychologist with experience working as a transition coordinator. This position was developed as a result of a need for the service. He served as chairperson on the committee on special education and provided transition support to approximately 10 students.

3. Research Participant 3 was a special education teacher with experience supporting students with special needs. She has also served as a guidance counselor, job coach, and job developer. She supported 100 students in
connecting with Access VR and OPWDD, as well as college planning. She holds a master’s degree in guidance and counseling.

4. Research Participant 4 worked primarily with low-functioning students in their junior and senior high school years. He supported approximately 50 students.

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

The researcher used semi-structured interviews (see Appendix C) to gather information for the research questions to gain insight into the lived experiences of transition coordinators working with students with ASD during their transition year. The qualitative research interview helps researchers “understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world before scientific explanations” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 3). The primary instrument for data collection consisted of interview questions designed by the researcher.

Zussman (2004) stated, “Interviews are certainly one important way to understand people, particularly the meanings they bring to bear on the places where they live and work.” (p. 359). Because the researcher is the instrument in semi-structured qualitative interviews, unique researcher characteristics can influence the collection of empirical materials (Pezalla et al., 2012).

**Procedures Used for Data Collection**

The researcher personally conducted all semi-structured interviews. Utilizing this interview process offered a better chance to obtain interviewees’ opinions, views, perceptions, and experiences in detail. According to Kvale (2007), a semi-structured life world interview “is defined as an interview to obtain descriptions of the life world of the
interviewee concerning interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" (p. 8). The utilization of semi-structured questions helped the researcher identify and evaluate relationships throughout the data. Rev.com, a professional transcription service, was hired to transcribe each interview. The digitally recorded interviews (with permission from the participants) preserved each session’s accurate account. The researcher assured confidentiality during recording and reminded research participants of their right to withdraw from the study or terminate the interview any time before the session’s conclusion.

In addition, the researcher took notes during the interview and highlighted important parts upon reading each interview transcript, making notes in the margins of each page when analyzing the data. Sandelowski (1995) suggested that analyzing text starts with basic proofreading and highlighting key phrases. As outlined in the informed consent form (Appendix B), the researcher mailed transcripts to research participants providing an opportunity for member-checking. Member checking is basically what the term implies – an opportunity for research participants to check (approve) particular aspects of the interview transcripts and is often a single event (Doyle, 2007).

**Procedures Used for Data Analysis**

The analysis began with the researcher reading each interview several times and noting key themes and patterns within each transcript. The researcher used inductive thematic analysis as the qualitative method, as it is data-driven. The researcher used thematic analysis to analyze data generated from the interviews and researcher notes. According to Saldaña, 2016, thematic analysis is appropriate because the raw data will unfold and provide patterns identified through codes, categories, and themes which will
assign meaning to the research participants’ experiences. The researcher used inductive thematic analysis as the qualitative method, as it is data-driven. The purpose of inductive thematic analysis is to enable the researcher to identify commonly recognized patterns and relationships to answer the study's research questions meaningfully. According to (Clarke & Braun, 2014), this method involves seven steps: transcription, reading and familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finalizing the analysis.

Phenomenological studies capture the meaning of the experience for the research participants that allows for an "analytic description of the phenomena not affected by prior assumptions" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 98). Patton (2015) states, "Because each qualitative study is unique, the analytical approach used is unique” (p. 522). Beyond a discussion with the researcher’s mentor, no other consultation occurred for data analysis.

The researcher read the interview transcriptions, then coded and developed categories, looking for themes and categories to answer the three research questions and evaluate the data. The coding occurred in three phases. The first phase involved the utilization of open coding and in vivo coding techniques. This is described in Saldaña (2016), and outlined below:

Open Coding. The first step in the analysis process is to break down textual data into discrete parts and create codes to label them (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher at this step is not concerned about the broad picture of the data but reviewing the data in fine detail and creating an identifying code. The purpose of breaking up the data and labeling them with codes enables the researcher to continuously compare and
contrast similar events. This is done by collating all pieces of data identified with a particular code. This process eliminates bias. Open coding may be recorded in various ways, for example, through marginal notes, processing programs, or specialized software where code labels are attached to data segments for easy retrieval. The researcher reviewed all transcripts and recorded codes as margin notes. (Boeije, 2009) suggests the researcher think beyond just gathering words with codes. The researcher must begin to ask questions concerning the data and conceptualize what kind of picture is being painted by the data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) state that open coding precedes axial coding, developing specific categories.

**In Vivo Coding.** The root meaning of an in vivo is “in that which is alive,” and as a code refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data, utilizing terms used by the research participants (Strauss, 198). The research found examples such as cohort model, hybrid transition, and financial barriers, which represented words used by the research participants, and are included as codes in the study.

**Axial Coding.** In the second phase, the researcher applied axial coding. In contrast to open coding, where the data are grouped into discrete parts, connections are drawn between codes with axial coding. The codes developed in the initial coding are read over to combine into categories. Boeije (2010) explains that axial coding’s purpose is “to determine which codes in the research are dominant, and which are the less important ones, and reorganize the data set removing redundant codes, and selecting the best representative codes” (p. 109). The linkage of categories guardianship, advocacy,
and family barriers to the theme of parental/family involvement is an example of the axial coding process.

**Selective Coding.** Selective coding is the last phase in connecting all categories and defining a unified theory around the research. Selective coding combines categories developed during the axial coding phase. In grounded theory, the core category ultimately represents the central concept of the research, becoming the foundation of the study. This study, not being a grounded theory, served a different purpose. Boeije (2010) pointed out that the core concept does not “magically emerge from the data” (p. 116). Key themes were developed during the final phase, ultimately answering the research questions. The results section is organized by themes and subthemes, as is traditional with qualitative research. The coding process used for this study is summarized below:

1. First phase coding: The researcher used open and in vivo coding.
2. Second phase coding: The codes were grouped into categories with the application of the axial coding process.
3. Third phase coding: The research combined categories and analyzed them to uncover themes.

Phenomenological research utilizes statements of significance, the creation of meaning units, and a description of the *essence* to elaborate on the sense of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Instead, the emphasis is on providing an analytic description of the phenomenon not influenced by prior assumptions.

Understanding this description dictated the decision to use semi-structured interviews to collect the transition coordinators’ lived experiences of the transition planning process. Once the data was collected and transcribed, the researcher began the
three coding phases to draw themes from the participants’ responses. Creswell (2012) addressed these three steps as follows: (a) review and highlight significant statements connected to the lived experiences of the participants and combine them into themes; (b) develop a textural description of the themes and statements to describe how the participants experienced the phenomena; and (c) in combination with the textural description, create a structural description to explore the context of the experience. Lastly, at the study’s conclusion, research participants were offered member checks, where they were invited to review notes and clarify any errors.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Recent statistics for adults with autism spectrum disorder show that 85% are unemployed, yet 69% want to work (National Autistic Society, 2016). Shattuck, Narendorf et al. (2012) found the employment rate of adults with ASD to be significantly lower than adults with learning disabilities and speech impairments. The projected annual cost of autism in the United States will reach $461 billion by 2025 (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2020). The price associated with caring for an individual with ASD includes education, medical, support services, housing, and transportation and may exceed $2 million over their lifetime (Buescher et al., 2014). In context, assuring that students are equipped with the vocational and professional prerequisite skills for adult life is important. As students with ASD graduate from high school, metrics suggest that many leave without the skills, experiences, and linkages that will prepare them well for postsecondary education and employment (Snell-Rood et al., 2020).

The belief is that poor transition planning (lacking participation of key school personnel, involvement of students in planning, and communicating with families) is responsible for students with ASD not seamlessly transferring from high school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment (Friedman et al., 2013; Shattuck, Narendorf et al., 2012). In this chapter, the researcher presents the results of four semi-structured interviews with transition coordinators within four public high schools in the northeast. The data collected points to several reasons: lack of
preparation and standard practices, poor transition planning, and failure to address deficits in major skill areas. This chapter also introduces the four main themes and 13 subthemes that emerged from the data analysis: (a) transition process differences, (b) financial issues, (c) parental/family involvement, and (d) transition plan practices.

The focus of this study was the perceptions and effectiveness of transition planning by coordinators as they helped high school students with ASD progress from high school to college and/or post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment. Francis et al. (2018) and Scheef and Mahfouz (2020) identified practices such as Individualized Education Plans utilized by transition coordinators in supporting students with ASD. Student-focused planning, student participation in the IEP process, employment skills, assessments, interagency collaboration, and family inclusion are vital practices for students, faculty members, institutional policymakers, and other administrators to support this underserved population. During the interviews, research participants discussed the need for student-focused planning, assessments, and family inclusion in the planning process and the necessity for interagency collaboration to ensure a smooth transition process for students.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is the federal law dealing with education for children with disabilities. Congress first passed IDEA in 1975, recognizing the need to help ensure that local schools would serve the educational needs of students with disabilities. In updating IDEA in 2004, Congress found that the education of students with disabilities was impeded by “low expectations and insufficient focus on applying replicable research on proven methods of teaching and learning” (1400 Section). Significant changes to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were
designed to provide students with disabilities access to high expectations and the general education curriculum in the regular classroom to “meet developmental goals and, to the extent possible, the challenging expectations that have been established for all children” (1400 Section). IDEA requires all states that accept IDEA funds to provide a free appropriate public education to all children with disabilities in the state. In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act IDEA 2004 requires that post-school planning begins before a student turns 16.

Transition planning is an essential practice (Test et al., 2009), and it includes assessment, planning, and instruction related to student’s needs (Morningstar et al., 2015). Despite mandates in IDEA to facilitate successful transitions for individuals with disabilities from school to adult life, transition planning and implementation are falling short for many students with ASD (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Kucharczyk et al., 2015), suggesting a gap between policy and practice. Post-school outcomes are the poorest for individuals with ASD, who have the lowest employment rate and the highest rate of no activities after school of any IDEA disability classification (Shogren et al., 2018). Only 58% of those on the autism spectrum worked during their early 20s, as compared to over 90% of young adults with emotional disturbance, speech impairment, or learning disability (Roux et al., 2015).

This chapter outlines the findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with the research participants who provide transition planning services for high school students with ASD. The chapter is organized by research questions and themes that emerged from the research participants’ responses to interview questions. The themes reflect the research participants’ own words and experiences.
Research Questions

The following three research questions guided this qualitative, phenomenological study:

1. What are transition coordinators’ perceptions of the transition planning process for high school students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?
2. What main barriers make it difficult to achieve good Individualized Education Program transition planning?
3. How do transition coordinators know if transition planning has been successful, and what outcomes should be expected?

Data Analysis and Findings

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to collect the needed data to answer the research questions. The interviews occurred between January and April 2021. A purposeful sample of transition coordinators with responsibilities from four different high schools in the northeast were selected. The semi-structured interview protocol allowed the interviewer to ask predetermined questions (Appendix C). Research participants answered questions about their background, experiences, barriers with transition planning, and vocational assessments. The interview questions were constructed to align with the research questions. Table 4.1 presents the interview questions in alignment with the research questions.
Table 4.1

*Interview Questions in Alignment to Research Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Relationship to Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How long have you been a transition coordinator?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How many Young Adults with ASD do you support in a typical year?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Describe the transition process as you understand it from the guidelines of the secondary transition plan in the IDEA Act?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. When do you start creating the transition plan?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What are the critical elements of good IEP transition planning?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What are the key services that should be described in the transition plan?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Define the differences in your experiences when you did a vocational transition and a time you did a higher education transition.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Describe a successful student transition that you facilitated.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Describe what skills you need to possess as a transition coordinator to complete a successful student transition.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. What are the key services that should be described in the transition plan?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Are you familiar with Access VR/VESID?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Does every student have a job coach?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. What are the policy barriers, funding, workforce, or interagency barriers?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Are there any challenges particular to ASD, or are these barriers common for other adults with intellectual disabilities?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. What are the alternatives or implications for high school students with ASD’s who do not have a transition plan?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. What are the potential solutions to these challenges?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. How do you measure transition outcomes?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. How do you use the outcomes for changing, planning, or adapting your programs?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. How do you determine when outcomes have been achieved?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. What are some of the supports you need from your district in order to effectively transition services?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The interview questions were open-ended. Open-ended questions do not provide research participants with a predetermined set of answers; instead, they allow them to respond in their own words. All research participants provide transition services and have experience working with students with ASD. The researcher detailed the transition coordinators' lived experiences through the analysis and aligned each theme with their corresponding subthemes in the following sections. Table 4.2 highlights key themes identified through the interviews.

**Table 4.2**

*Number of Times Research Participants Reported High-Level Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Number of Times Referenced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transition Process Differences</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Plan Practices</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Issues</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental/Family Involvement</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Four themes emerged from the interviews: (a) transition process differences, (b) financial issues, (c) parental/family involvement, and (d) transition plan practices. Table 4.3 displays the themes that were derived from the participants’ responses to the research questions.

**Table 4.3**

*Major Themes – Research Question 1: Research Participants Perception*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>P1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>P4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transition Process Differences</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Issues</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental/Family/Involvement</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Plan Practices</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tables 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6 display the codes, categories, and themes uncovered from the research participants by research question. Several of the research participants’ comments and responses are included in this chapter. Table 4.7 illustrates 13 categories that emerged from interviews with all the research participants in response to the research questions guiding the study.

**Table 4.4**

*Transition Planning Data: Codes, Categories, and Themes – Research Question 1*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cohort model, mainstream kids, lack of district oversight, indicator 13 self-assessment, deep dive into transition planning in the IEP, State Audit, knowledge of OPWDD, focus on individual strengths, no cookie-cutter</td>
<td>Lack of Standardized Practices</td>
<td>Transition Process Differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap in skills identified, received support through OPWDD, supportive work environment program, executive function skills, life and independent skills, realistic plan non-verbal, need more support intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>Individualized Instruction Diversification (IID)</td>
<td>Transition Process Differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not adequate, limited interaction with guidance counselors, chair the CSEs, headteacher of classroom, master’s in special education</td>
<td>Lack of Standardization of Personnel</td>
<td>Transition Process Differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You need to be organized, patience, motivated to keep helping these kids, many setbacks, you really need to care, empathetic, show compassion, concerned about what happens after they leave the classroom</td>
<td>Skills Requirement</td>
<td>Transition Process Differences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4.5

*Transition Planning Data: Codes, Categories, and Themes - Research Question 2*

What are the main barriers to achieve good Individualized Education Program transition planning?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Barriers, kids could benefit from postsecondary programs, Medicaid waivers, however, the cost still high, Bronxville wealthy, cost to send a child to Mitchell college</td>
<td>Availability of Resources</td>
<td>Financial Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding stream cut, no longer providing training, funding barriers</td>
<td>Financial Resource Allocation</td>
<td>Financial Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs unavailable, COVID stopped services, ACCESS VR completely flooded, current climate, people worry about coronavirus, the last thing on people’s mind is where people with disabilities are going to when they leave school.</td>
<td>COVID-19</td>
<td>Financial Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family establish guardianship, who’s talking to the family about guardianship, legal ramifications of guardianship</td>
<td>Guardianship</td>
<td>Parental/Family Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental resistance, parents take an active role, being your child’s advocate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Parental/Family Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma minded parents, teach to the test, spend time educating parents, every parent wants what’s best for their child</td>
<td>Family Barriers</td>
<td>Parental/Family Involvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.6

*Transition Planning Data: Codes, Categories and Themes - Research Question 3*

How do you know if transition planning has been successful, and what outcomes should be expected?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other measures for planning, celebrate making the outcome, make new outcomes,</td>
<td>Outcome evaluations</td>
<td>Transition Plan Practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational Assessments, some kids go to BOCES, vocational evaluations, college tech schools</td>
<td>Post-high school assessments</td>
<td>Transition Plan Practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in postsecondary programs, earlier planning, enrollment in ACCESS VR and OPWDD, transition website, graduation pathways, colleges now offer transition type services, supported work environment, talk about high interest</td>
<td>Postsecondary employment preparation</td>
<td>Transition Plan Practices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.7

*Sub-Themes Categories and Frequency of Participant Responses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
<th>P1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of standardized practices</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualized Instructional diversification (IID)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of standardization of personnel</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill requirement</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of resources</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial resource allocation</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
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<td>✓</td>
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The researcher identified themes revealing similarities and differences in the research participants’ transition experiences. All research participants agreed on the importance of individualized transition plans inclusive of the student’s unique abilities, needs, and talents. They stated that the focus should be on assisting the students in identifying their particular skills and supporting the development of strengths within the transition planning process. Participant 1 commented:

There is a need for linkage between annual and postsecondary goals. I think those postsecondary goals are fundamental. I believe those yearly goals related to those postsecondary goals are important because they should drive instruction. Moreover, that is how you are working and trying to get that student towards zero. For example, this is what Karen is working for, and you should justify to the parents how your annual goals are there to help Karen get to those postsecondary goals. And then obviously, the coordinated set of transition activities at the end of the IEP are also essential. However, if I had to say the most important, it would be keeping your annual goals coordinated with your postsecondary plans.

Participant 2 explained:

Realistic and tangible goals. Susie would like to be a veterinarian, you know, I mean maybe at 14, 15 years old, that is how it will sound. She wants to be a veterinarian. You have a kid who is currently struggling to grasp the concept of a U.S. history class. Johnny wants to be an attorney. Let's, talk about what is realistic here. I think recommendations for appropriately placed supports are necessary. We had kids who, you know, severe ASD needs, like significantly limited language functioning, some perceptual issues, some major social issues,
and the parents saying, well, I want to, I want to apply to a trade school. I am like, well, hold on for a second. Now, you know, many of the things that we are seeing in your child could pose a safety concern in a trade school. I think the better route is applying for OPWDD [Office for People with Developmental Disabilities] and getting that parent to kind of go, the supported work environment as to full-on trade school, you know. Judgment aside, you know, speaking to the data we have on the kid, your child might get hurt in a trade school environment. I think the goals, you know, are both tangible and realistic, and they support the kid with that severe need. I do not believe ACCES VR [Adult Career and Continuing Education Services-Vocational Rehabilitation] is going to be able to do much for him. I think they are probably better on the side of OPWDD or some of the other services out there.

Participant 3 stated:

We give everybody an equal opportunity to the best of their ability, concentrating on their strengths and knowing what the weaknesses are, of course. But, focusing on the individual; no cookie-cutter, you know. I am not a cookie-cutter person. That is how we treat everybody here as an individual and look at everybody separately, especially in my capacity.

Participant 4 commented:

The student wants their voices heard; enabling you to recommend the right programs and the related services based on the individual.

Both P3 and P4 introduced the need for person-centered approaches to transition planning aligning with documented best practices within transition planning (Hagner et
Their responses differed from the other transition coordinators, as they spoke to hearing from the student directly and creating a unique plan; they focused on the person, and the other two coordinators’ responses centered more on the process of transition planning. P3’s and P4’s statements were consistent with the spirit of IDEA, as it emphasizes the person-centered approach, including the voices of students with disabilities in this transition planning process (Hagner et al., 2014).

The person-centered transition planning meeting includes the components of exploring one’s strengths, weaknesses, interests, and supports, developing goals and plans, and sharing a vision for the future (Hagner et al., 2014). Despite mandated policies and guidelines, the implementation of person-centered transition practices is not uniform in the IEP transition planning for youth with ASD (Shogren & Plotner, 2012; Snell-Rood et al., 2020). During the interviews, the research participants exemplified this as they referred to the process as *cookie-cutter* or on cruise mode. The wide range in the numbers that the research participants support provided a possible cause for this concern. The number of students supported ranged among the research participants from 10 to 100 students. This may speak to the inability to provide customized transition plans. Each theme is discussed later in this chapter, with examples based on specific interview responses given by the research participants in this study.

**Detailed Analysis**

Four high-level themes emerged: (a) transition process differences, (b) financial issues, (c) parental/family involvement, and (d) transition plan practices. Through the use of inductive thematic saturation, the researcher focused on identifying new codes or themes. Inductive thematic saturation focuses on identifying new codes and themes rather
than the complexity of existing theoretical categories to reach saturation. Saturation is “when no new information seems to emerge during coding, that is when no new properties, dimensions, conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences appear in the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 143). The researcher reached saturation after codes consistently and frequently appeared in all transcripts.

Table 4.8 provides an overview of the four high-level themes and corresponding subthemes. This is followed by discussing the themes and supporting data from each participant to substantiate the findings.

**Table 4.8**

*Themes and Subthemes Emerging from the Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Transition Process Differences</strong></td>
<td>Lack of standardized practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individualized instructional diversification (IID)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of standardization of personnel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Skill requirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial Issues</strong></td>
<td>Availability of resources</td>
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<td>Financial Resource Allocation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Post-high school assessments</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Postsecondary employment preparation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The interviews revealed four major themes that resulted from an initial coding cycle of 89 codes; from these themes, 13 subthemes emerged. The findings of this research are represented according to these four themes and describe how they relate to the theoretical framework of Schlossberg's transition theory, discussed in Chapter 2.
Schlossberg stated that self plays an integral role in an individual's ability to move in, move through, and move out to describe transition phases (Evans et al., 2009). The self principle considers personal and demographic characteristics such as age, socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity. Transition coordinators need to understand the student’s individuality to implement self with young adults with ASD and develop transition plans reflective of their strengths, goals, and abilities. The results indicated the timing of the initial transition planning is key to effective transition plans. Martin and Williams-Diehm (2013) suggest that at a minimum, the next IDEA reauthorization needs to ensure transition education and planning start by the age of 14. Two of the research participants P1 and P2, referenced having conversations on transition the year the student turns 15, providing time to prepare students and reinforce skills required for a successful transition to post-high school activities, including postsecondary education and employment.

Best practice suggests transition planning occurs before a student turns 16 years of age, reflecting Schlossberg's situation in the transition theory. Situation refers to an event that is expected or unexpected and involves how an individual reacts to change. Inclusion of pre-transition activities such as community work and employment training as part of the transition planning goals would help ASD students transition to post-school activities. The third S in Schlossberg's theory represents support. The results suggest that family support during transition is crucial for the student with ASD. Families need to advocate for their children and attend the reflection of their children's needs transition planning meetings to ensure their child's needs in the individualized education plan.

Strategies, the final S, describes the coping responses used during a transition. For effective transition to occur, transition coordinators must be equipped and
professionally trained in transition planning best practices to best assist students with ASD during the transition. To help students successfully transfer to higher education, transition coordinators working with students with ASD should understand the unique challenges and incorporate student programming resources to help students overcome them (de Lugt, 2020).

**Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 asked: What are transition coordinators’ perceptions of the transition planning process for high school students with ASD? The transition coordinator's perception of the transition planning process is that it is poorly resourced, requires individualized instruction, is flexible, must include parents, requires patience, is iterative, and lacks involvement of key personnel. Based on the interviews, the identified themes further highlight the transition coordinators’ perceptions of the transition process. The transition coordinators’ responses to interview questions informed the answer to Research Question 1. Interview questions consisted of the following:

1. What are the critical elements of good IEP transition planning?

   P2 stated, “I would say tangible and realistic goals. A kid struggling to grasp a U.S. history class and his parents saying he wants to be an attorney is unrealistic. I think recommendations for supports that are appropriately placed are what’s required.”

   P3 commented,

   Well, of course, there is a VOC [vocational] assessment. Any VOC assessment documenting their experience that's part of assessing their strengths and weaknesses. Documentation that we have psychological, spiritual, what's realistic, what isn't realistic. So, I think the key component of a transitional plan is
to be realistic, and develop it with the assistance of the family, the people who know the child.

2. Does every student have a job coach?

P2 explained, “it's built into the programs, so, as a job coach, the special education teacher functions as the liaison between, you know, whatever the work environment is.”

P4 commented, “yes, all students have a job coach.”

3. Describe what skills you need to possess as a transition coordinator to complete a successful student transition?

P1 commented,

I think you need to be organized; you need to be motivated to keep helping these kids. There's going to be tons of setbacks in this, in that position, especially in my job where I have the kids for so long, you'll see setbacks left and right. But you need to keep pushing forward. And you need to care.

The identified themes will further highlight the transition coordinator’s perception of that process.

P4 stated, “You need to be patient, empathetic, show compassion for people, and most importantly have the ability to persevere, as there are times that are often difficult to navigate throughout the transition process.”

**Theme 1: Transition Process Differences**
The first major theme, transition process differences, captured the broad spectrum of inconsistent practice identified across the transition coordinators interviewed. The team developing and implementing the IEP process encourages a seamless transition by including goals linked to postsecondary activities and permits students with ASD to stay in school until they earn a diploma or
until their 22nd birthday. The results from the data analysis revealed that all research participants identified a number of issues associated with inconsistent practices. As illustrated in Table 4.9, the results from the interviews revealed four areas that influenced transition process difference: lack of standardized practices, individualized instruction diversification, lack of standardized personnel, and skill acquisition.

Table 4.9

| Transition Process Differences – Perception and Identified Research Participants |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
|                                 | P1 | P2 | P3 | P4 | Total |
| Lack of standardized practices  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | 4    |
| Individualized Instructional    | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | 4    |
| diversification                 |    |    |    |    |      |
| Lack of standardization of personnel | ✓  | ✓  |    |    | 2    |
| Skill requirement               | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | 3    |

_Transition Process Differences Subtheme 1: Lack of Standardized Practices._

The lack of standardized practices within a school district results in a fragmented system suggesting a gap in the process. The complex multilevel factors of intraschool/interagency linkages, assessments, career counseling, education, community training, family support, and program evaluation across organizations and settings often negatively impact the transition process of high school students with ASD. Although the research participants acknowledged many successful transitions, they commented on the complexities of the transition planning process. Participant 3 stated the need for students to complete the transition plans early to prepare students for their high school experience.

The completion of transition plans occurs when students with special needs enter high school. Resources and translation services are available for parents, which is a great resource. Some students come in with eligibility, and parents have
knowledge of OPWDD; some parents knew but did not complete the necessary paperwork. (Participant 3)

Participant 4 commented:

In the supported work environment, transition coordinators function as job coaches. They work as the liaison between the work environment and the student. We do a lot of talking about interests to get their juices flowing about post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment.

Participant 2 explained:

The process must focus on students as individuals with unique abilities, not in "general" terms.” It was scary. We started to back it down to start the conversations earlier, so the parents knew the amount of work required. It is sad because there is a lot to do with your college-aged kid, but you have more to do with a special needs child who needs transition support for adult life in general.

The transition coordinators interviewed identified various core components that were successfully adhered to, executed, and considered in creating a transition plan for high school students with ASD. The research participants identified core components as individualized instructional diversification (IID), skill acquisition, and goal enrichment.

**Transition Process Differences Subtheme 2: Individual Instructional Diversification**

*Individual Instructional Diversification.* Individual instructional diversification is a customized plan that targets and addresses student’s needs after goals have been identified. Once the plan is in place, all teaching, curriculum, and plans are developed based on the goals and aspirations of
the student. The plan includes documenting the gaps in knowledge and skills that students may need to accomplish their post-high school goals. Individualized instruction diversification surrounds the research participants’ experiences related to vocational versus postsecondary education transition.

Participant 2 stated:

We had a set of twins whose family relocated from another country; they were not aware of all the available services. They had done nothing in terms of transitioning. With the teacher's help, they received support through OPWDD and a supportive work environment program. They did many interviews, intakes, and many vocational practice assessments focused on what the kids can do and their needs. They were hardworking kids, young men at that time, with tremendous language needs. The supportive work program trained them, and now they are both gainfully employed at a supermarket and a hotel.

Participant 1 stated:

I have a student who is graduating this year who will become a full-time student. Postsecondary planning for him is two-fold; he still needs a lot of those job skills. Still, there are also some executive functioning skills that you want to work on with those students who are moving. He is going to Mitchell University, which also has support services, but he still needs to care for himself. He is still going to need those life and independent living skills while he is there. You also want to keep working on those academic skills to succeed in the classroom while he is there.

Participant 3 commented:
The key component of a transitional plan is to be realistic and develop it with the student's family. Not everybody is assigned a job coach, as some are not ready. We do give all students vocational experience. For some students, it is pre-vocational, like in our ABA class with kids that are non-verbal and need more support. We do pre-vocational skills, folding, matching socks, putting the pencils in a pencil case, things like that. We also have a class where we work on basic skills, cooking and kitchen hygiene, and skills.

The research participants focused on supporting students in developing realistic goals and providing opportunities to engage in vocational experiences and skill preparation for postsecondary real-life experiences. The research participants’ practices were consistent with the literature on the appropriate components of an effective transition plan. However, the research participants did not discuss evaluation practices used to evaluate the progress of the students they supported during the transition.

As young adults with ASD prepare for post-high school activities, including postsecondary education and employment, transition planning is needed to dictate goals, services, and supports. Transition planning provides the opportunity for students to learn about themselves and plan for their future. Therefore, young adults with ASD must have goals explicitly developed with their participation, and focus on skills needed in current and future environments (Iovannone et al., 2003).

**Transition Process Differences Subtheme 3: Lack of Standardization of Personnel.** The lack of standardization of personnel was a subtheme identified by the researcher and validated by the diverse backgrounds of the research participants. The majority of the research participants noted their experience filling a gap in their district to
support students in transition planning, despite being hired to perform different roles. When discussing the various roles and responsibilities of the transition coordinators, it became clear that there was a lack of job analysis and job matching documented criteria of skills and a formal application process for transition coordinators. Without systematic job analysis, training, professional development, and implementation of transition coordinators or the plan's creators, planning results will be inadequate at best.

Participant 2 remarked, his district hired him as a school psychologist; however, the need for a transition coordinator arose, and he was given the additional responsibility to lead coordinated transition activities. He stated,

Since I entered the field as a school psychologist, it developed as a need. When I first got into the field, it was like a cruise control method. I found that they were moving year to year, and then the kid turns 20, and everybody goes, “What are we going to do?” Being part of our district as the school psychologist year to year, in most cases, probably 90%, I also chair the CSEs. (Participant 2)

In a similar experience, Participant 1 acquired the role after obtaining his master’s degree and developing an interest in transition planning.

Interesting, this is my sixth year as the headteacher of this classroom, and before that, I was getting my master’s in special ed, and I wrote my thesis paper on transition and transition process. I also wrote a grant for transition practice. I started to get into it when I was taking my transition courses for my Master’s program, and in the transition process for about the last 6 years. (Participant 1)

The diversity of professional experiences and academic backgrounds speak to the limited standardization of transition coordinators’ qualifications, roles, and
responsibilities. The researchers’ findings are consistent with the transition planning literature in the field of transitions, which has emphasized the necessity and importance of professional development for school staff in supporting students during transitions (Motoca et al., 2014).

**Transition Process Differences Subtheme 4: Skill Requirement.** When asked what skills transition coordinators needed to possess to complete a successful transition plan, the skills identified by research participants comprised soft skills. Pachauri and Yadav (2014) defined skills as personality traits, social gracefulness, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism to varying degrees. Students with ASD need to understand boundaries, but more importantly, they need to interact with their caregivers, job coaches, and job developers appropriately. They should also expect that the support given is evidence-based (Steinbrenner et al., 2020). The delivery of high-quality transition planning in secondary schools depends on the personnel who implement them (Snell-Rood et al., 2020).

Participant 4 stressed the need for transition coordinators to have patience. He stated, “You need to be patient, empathetic, show compassion for people, and most importantly can persevere, as there are times that are often difficult to navigate throughout the transition process.”

Similarly, Participant 2 validated the need to understand the full range of the student with respect to navigating plans for the future. Participant 4 continued,

You need to have a broad range of programs available, as well as knowing the kid top to bottom. I call it the soup to nuts, and I think you must be willing to
listen to the family and being able to shape the conversation.

Participant 3 differed in her approach and placed an increased focus on her ability to be resourceful. She stated, “I develop jobs and internships for students that have work experience on their IEP. I work with students on either employment, competitive employment, or volunteer work.” Furthermore, Participant 1 identified organization and determination as necessary for transition coordinators’ success: “The skills required included being very organized, as there is a lot of paperwork involved in kids transitioning out of school.” He also stated the need to have “stick-to-itiveness” as well as the motivation and resolve to keep these students going.

Transition coordinators need to possess transition skills that directly impact a student’s ability to transition successfully to post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment. Students with disabilities may fail to receive services due to the absence of a sufficient number of qualified special educators (Mason-Williams et al., 2017). After the interviews, the researcher was surprised by the lack of professional development and participants’ transition skills. Their experiences were more around the soft skills in providing emotional support for their students.

**Summary of Theme 1.** The researcher identified the first theme after interviewing transition coordinators and reflecting on the process differences in implementing transition plans across various school districts. The core components of transition planning were often neglected, therefore ultimately negatively impacting student success. There are several causes for such process differences, the lack of standardization of practices, individualized instructional diversification, lack of standardization of key personnel, and skill requirement. The special education literature
(Mazzotti et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2015) has identified some necessary practices for successfully transitioning students with disabilities from high school to post-school settings. These include the following: (a) active student involvement in the transition planning process; (b) active family participation in transition planning; (c) vocational training; (d) career awareness activities; (e) paid employment or work experiences while still in high school; (f) interagency collaboration; (g) identification of and instruction in skills (e.g., vocational, academic, and social) that the student will need; (h) inclusion in regular classrooms; and (j) assistive technology assessment and implementation.

One of the practices suggested is assistive technology assessments as a necessary component. Yet, none of the transition coordinators mentioned assistive technology related to transition planning in our interviews. In addition, the transition coordinators addressed some of the practices. Still, there was not one research participant interviewed who utilized all of the practices confirming the initial theme of transition process differences.

**Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 asked: what are the main barriers that make it difficult to achieve good Individualized Education Program transition planning? The main barriers to the achievement of good IEP planning were financial limitations of families, schools, and outside organizations, restricted programming due to COVID-19, and resource availability. Additionally, research participants identified barriers related to parents and families, support, engagement, and advocacy. The interview questions answered that informed this answer were as follows:

1. What are the policy barriers, funding, workforce, or interagency barriers?
P4 stated, “There’s a ton of financial barriers; family income, poverty vs. wealth, and district resources. I have a classroom of resources iPads, computers, and laptops, but it’s tough when it comes to who is going to pay for what afterward.” P3 commented, “one of the barriers could be funding because we would like more kids to have more experiences. We don’t have as much staff to send throughout the building.”

2. What are the alternatives or implications for high school students with ASDs who do not have a transition plan?

P1 stated, 

I have to assume that they did have an IEP, and then somebody didn't do their job at some point. They didn't set them up with the acces VR or set them up for OPWDD or any job training. And that's either on, the school, the transition coordinator or it's, or because once they leave, once they leave the, once they leave the building with their high school diploma, New York state says that the school is not responsible for that child anymore.

P3 stated, 

They’re going to stay home. And how often do you see that? Not very often. Especially recently, for example, we have a student who has significant disabilities. Still, every year at his annual review meeting, we speak to the mother or the aunt because he lives with both of them. They still do this day have not completed the applications.

**Theme 2: Financial Issues.** The researcher classified the barriers the transition coordinators expressed as most important to the achievement of good IEP transition
planning as financial issues, which included the availability of resources, financial resource allocation, and the impact of COVID-19. Table 4.10 highlights financial issues.

Table 4.10

Financial Issues – Barriers and Identified Research Participants

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<th>P2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>P4</th>
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Financial Issues Subtheme 1: Availability of Resources. The availability of resources to achieve post-high school goals was a clear theme. Many schools provide access to information, and although difficult to navigate, they provide resources for students and their families. Students are provided information for programs, but they cannot fully succeed until they have the financial resources to gain admission into the program. When exploring resource availability, two factors arise (a) access, and (b) acquisition of resources. Participant 1 illustrated the point as follows:

I think many kids in my class could benefit from postsecondary education programs, but the cost of sending students on the spectrum is immense. A parent with a kid going to Mitchell College will pay $100,000 a year to send them there. He is from a family that can do that. Bronxville is wealthy, but I teach kids from all over the Bronx, Yonkers, etc.

According to the literature, transition planning needs to accommodate the logistical hurdles and obstacles parents face in supporting their children after high school due to social and economic conditions (Snell-Rood et al., 2020). Based on the location of a school and the demographic composition of its student body, in-house resources may be
available to support students. However, technology accessibility required at home is often limited depending on a family’s socioeconomic status.

**Financial Issues Subtheme 2: Financial Resource Allocation.** Financial resource allocation across school districts and outside organizations was another subtheme that evolved during the interviews. These financial constraints impact families, school districts, and the organizations that support students with ASD. Participant 2 addressed the budgetary restrictions which impact internal and external programs. He stated,

> There could always be more funding; I have yet to hit a situation with a particular family where I say, I am sorry, I cannot help you; the funding will not be there. That is not what I am saying. I think more of just different options. ACCES-VR would volunteer to do a parent training night. Within their organization, they cut the funding stream, and they no longer provide training. I almost wish parents were banging down the doors for these services.

Participant 1’s statements surrounded students who would benefit from postsecondary education, but could not because of funding barriers.

> There are financial barriers like you would not believe. Telling Mom he should go to California for a college internship program for $110,000, and she is like I cannot spend that is not an option, and it is challenging. There’s a ton of financial barriers. (Participant 1)

Students with ASD need support, and not all school districts have funds to provide adequate support for students on the autism spectrum. Therefore, when budget
cuts are required, there are two areas to make cuts: people and programs. Participant 3 stated,

One of the barriers could be funding because we would like more kids to have more experiences. We do not have as much staff to send through the building, especially for students with special needs; you need to have the proper ratio.

Hendricks and Wehman (2009), Kucharczyk et al. (2015), and Snell-Rood et al. (2020), stated that for successful transitions to occur, preparation and implementation are required. Furthermore, it requires resources, funding, and personnel within the school and adult service agencies to provide needed support. Continual involvement and careful coordination between the school and key community agencies, vocational rehabilitation (VR), and OPWDD services are essential to improving outcomes through the transition process (Christensen et al., 2017).

Financial Issues Subtheme 3: COVID-19 and IEP Development. One of the most critical aspects of the transition to post-high school activities, including postsecondary education and employment, is the student's fit to postsecondary institutions or employment activity. The student needs an individualized education program developed with a transition coordinator during high school to make this decision. A completed IEP will serve as a blueprint for the services required to support post-high school aspirations. The IEP should identify the student's strengths and weaknesses and outline academic modifications, independent living skills, socialization skills, and vocational goals to support post-school outcomes. Transition coordinators interviewed stressed the pandemic's financial impact and availability of programs for students with ASD related to post-high school plans. Participant 4 commented:
Programs run by the state require a lot of paperwork from the school and the parents, i.e., ACCES-VR; COVID-19 further impacted this. A significant barrier right now is the coronavirus. The last thing the government is thinking about is where students with disabilities will work when they leave school.

Participant 1 explained:

I have a student graduating this year, and he signed up for ACCES-VR last year and got in. They had him in for his first interview, and mom was very excited cause he has incredible typing skills and worked in the school store. Then Corona came in. It was quiet, and they will talk to them on Zoom and stuff like that, but you are not getting those training skills they claim to give kids.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic caused an abrupt change in routine and services, and change is challenging for students with ASD (Bellomo et al., 2020). It also impacted the fit assessment for postsecondary education activities. Students went from a routine of receiving in-person educational instruction to a less than an efficient and familiar online delivery model. This change was difficult for all students, but particularly students with ASD. Students with ASD had to make adjustments and adapt and engage in ways in which they were unprepared.

**Summary of Theme 2.** In summary, the second theme demonstrated the wide variety of resource challenges transition coordinators face, including providing programs for students whose parents are not financially able to execute suggested programming and the financial resource limitations of schools or supporting organizations. Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic strained the operational and financial capacity of schools, families, school personnel, and state organizations.
**Theme 3: Parental/Family Involvement.** The lack of available services for young adults with ASD is concerning; once they reach 22 years of age, the protections of IDEA end. The transition process may be challenging as students may lose the services provided by the school district as they enroll in postsecondary education programs or enter the workforce. Many students need support to continue to reach their educational, career, and life goals. In some cases, these supports will be needed for an extended period of time. As such, transition coordinators noted that the need for support and services was a consistent theme identified by parents. Parents/families play an essential role during the transition process as they are pivotal in assisting their children with emotional, educational, and vocational transitions associated with post-school activity determination.

Transition planning meetings can be overwhelming for parents and families. Often, parents are expected to make quick decisions regarding their child’s future and may feel inadequate or not prepared for the task. Therefore, meetings should state the goals and associated steps for completion and who is responsible for implementation. Without the determination of the person accountable for completing the plans, execution may not occur. Parents and families need to understand the result and the consequences of failure in implementing the necessary process to achieve the agreed-upon goals. Additionally, there are social and economic conditions that families must face after their children complete high school. Direct and frequent communication amongst school staff, parents, families, and the students could improve the complex transition planning process and lead to a better overall experience. Table 4.11 highlights parental issues.
Table 4.11

*Parental/Family Involvement – Identified Research Participants*

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*Parental/Family Involvement Subtheme 1: Guardianship.* When a child turns 18, they have the right to make their own decisions related to special education support services. Those rights include deciding to discontinue their services (Frederick et al., 2020). Participant 1 discussed how the issue of guardianship comes up typically in the CSE meetings and the need to address it with families:

“As soon as I started sharing in meetings, they asked who's talking to this family about guardianship. We had the tough questions, and it would hit the CSE table to have the family establish guardianship.” The importance of guardianship arose during the interviews, with some transition coordinators noting that this issue can be problematic to families. However, Participant 3 differed somewhat in her assessment, focusing on the legal ramifications associated with establishing guardianship after high school:

“We also give information on guardianship, which is very important. We recommend families to different agencies to complete the process, without the cost of an attorney.”

Families of students with ASD must address guardianship during the transition process. These discussions often introduce complexity, and although necessary and well-meaning, they can further complicate the transition process.
**Parental/Family Involvement Subtheme 2: Advocacy.** Parents and families are those closest to students with ASD and must become informed and strong advocates for their children. Participant 2 illustrated this point as follows:

We start to drop kind of pellets to grow in a parent's mind the year the child turns 15. Sometimes, I have a hard time with my parents. When you describe it to them, they are like, "I'll think about it." I'm like, no, you must do this for the success of your child's future. You have to be your child's advocate.

However, it is also clear that parents and families must advocate on numerous levels, including services identified as necessary for future success.

As illustrated by Participant 4, the lack of advocacy for a student can be highly adverse:

You sometimes face parental resistance. Some parents do not understand or do not want to let go of their children. Parents want their children to stay with them their whole life, and they don’t want them to go into a residence and live independently. A lot of times, it’s educating the parents.

Furthermore, Participant 3 stated:

I have a student with significant disabilities, but every year at his annual review meeting, we speak to the mother or the aunt because he lives with both of them. They know what we have to offer, and we talk about it all the time. They still, to this day, have not completed the application so their son can receive post-high school services. They said that he has a trust fund, and he’s going to be okay, but in 10 years, what’s going to happen. I inform them that he is entitled as a disabled American to get these services immediately.

Lastly, Participant 1 stressed the importance of parents advocating for their loved ones.
I have to assume that they did have an IEP and that someone didn’t do their job, and that’s either on the transition coordinator or on the fact that New York State says, once you leave the building with a high school diploma, the school is not responsible for that child anymore. The parent needs to stay on top of that kid, especially if they do not have intrinsic motivation. I don’t want to blame the parents, but I think that’s when you see the 50% that fail to move on post-school. As part of the needed advocacy of parents, they need to play an active role.

**Parental/Family Involvement Subtheme 3: Parental Barriers.** As supportive and nurturing as parents can be, there is an underlying sense on the part of many that they may also, at times, become overbearing and rigid in their approach. Parents can become a significant barrier to their child’s success, and at the same time, be very focused on the goals they have for their children. Participant 1 provided an example of this related to a students’ mother who strongly imposed her ideas for her son:

I have diploma-minded parents; they are like, we need a graduate and a Regent's diploma. I have one student in particular where mom was adamant that he gets a Regents diploma. I'm proud that I was able to balance it. I had to teach to the test. I know they tell you not to do that, but I had to do so he could pass.

Participant 3 commented:

Some parents don’t understand or want to let go of their children. When you talk with them about OPWDD and everything it has to offer, they avoid the conversation. They state things like she’s going to stay with me my whole life, and she will not be in residence. I don’t want her out every day. I spend a lot of time educating the parents so they aren’t resistant to the process.
Transition coordinators have the responsibility to instruct parents in a collaborative rather than judgemental or combative way. Parents need to feel like part of the process without hindering it by being underinformed.

**Summary of Theme 3.** Parental barriers (logistical and economic) can be significant impediments for students with ASD. Transition coordinators must hear the parents before they can effectively assist the child; this can sometimes prove challenging. Transition coordinators must be multifaceted in their approach and communicative in their relationships with parents to ensure a smooth transition for students with ASD. A highly structured plan agreed upon by the child and their parents is essential for success.

**Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 asked: how do transition coordinators know if transition planning has been successful, and what intervention outcomes should be expected? The research participants shared that successful transition planning occurs when outcomes are observable and measurable, when the transition process includes vocational assessments, and when students are enrolled in ACCES VR and OPWDD. The interview questions answered that informed this answer were:

1. How do you measure transition outcomes?

P1 explained,

So that's funny in my thesis that I wrote; I have a whole plan about a 2-year and a 4-year survey about how we did transition planning. I haven't had a student before 4 years out. I have had a student for 2 years, and I have spoken to the mom about the transition planning. Tough though, because some of the time, you'd get the answers you don't want. I did not do a good enough job. That's not the feedback
that you want, but it's the feedback that you need. And that's, that's how I like to
measure it.

Also, in the monthly and monthly lunches that I have, you get a lot of
informal feedback about how kids are doing. It just makes you think about when
they're gone. Like, I'm not saying that two kids could be the same, but another kid
could benefit from something you realized that you should have done with one
student. It's sad to admit that maybe you didn't think of it at the time, and perhaps
the student didn't get to benefit, but from another student, but other students may
be able to benefit from it. So, you know, talking to the student, in particular, is
good. And then that feedback with the parents.

P2 stated,

Outcomes must be observable and measurable; Johnny wants to work in the field
of education is not a goal. Johnny will work as one-to-one support within the
school setting is okay. We need to be more specific. We had a whole in-house
training about addressing how to write those goals. I don’t know if that’s
something our director, special education, does as part of their data collection.
The desired outcomes for students with ASD will vary based on individuality.

Theme 4: Transition Plan Practices. A successful plan requires thorough
preparation and execution. Communication between the school, the family, and the
student is essential to improving transition process outcomes. Placing the student at the
center of the transition process is a key planning component, yet it is often overlooked.
Gieseke-Smith (2015) noted that the lack of student participation in transition planning
has a potential negative impact on post-high school planning. There remains a need to
involve students with ASD in the transition planning process and empower them to become active participants in the trajectory of their future aspirations. In addition, there is a need to understand the barriers to transition planning, which start from high school to postsecondary school, community, and employment settings. Barriers to planning include the need to accommodate parent’s logistical hurdles in participating in the transition process and the obstacles they face due to economic conditions (Snell-Rood et al., 2020). Table 4.12 highlights transition plan practices.

**Table 4.12**

*Transition Plan Practices – Outcomes and Identified Research Participants*

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*Transition Plan Practices Subtheme 1: Outcome Evaluations.* Failure to include appropriate goal-setting, effective communication, good interagency collaboration, and community relationships further limit improved transition outcomes for high-school students with ASD (Snell-Rood et al., 2020). The majority of the transition coordinators suggested that vocational interest, inventory tools, and exposing students to community options could assist in planning and developing more realistic transition goals unique to the student. Transition planning needs to be highly individualized to account for the range of skills and needs of young adults with an autism spectrum disorder. Participant 1 stated:

*Celebrate that you have met that outcome, but then what is the next outcome? You do not stop there; you need to keep going for new outcomes. I want to create a lifelong learner, a continuous learner. I am constantly challenging them for a*
new outcome.

Participant 4 explained:

We take data and give it to our guidance department about where everybody goes, whether to college, vocational, or what agency they connect. When I certify everybody in June, we have all of that information. I keep the records of all the graduates, as it is good information to have. We use it to change, modify, and evolve the program continuously. It helps me to put new things into my repertoire. I am always learning like we all are in life.

Successful outcomes may not be limited to enrollment into postsecondary education or employment and may extend to personal skill-building. However, it is vital that students' needs are captured and plans established to help students evolve. Kucharcyzk et al. (2015) highlighted the lack of intervention practices (evidence-based intervention components, social competence, academics, transition, and families) at the high school level and the need to address students' diverse and individualized needs across the entire spectrum. There needs to be access to high-quality assessments and effective planning processes to align interventions with the requirements of individual students.

*Transition Plan Practices Subtheme 2: Post-High School Assessments.* Post-high school assessments are integral to the improvement of the IEP transition process development. Post-high school assessments provide evidence of success or challenges in creating well-designed plans at the time of transition. Furthermore, this will help advocates replicate best practices (strength-based student planning and informed
individualized planning) and offer success stories. Therefore, families need to understand how post-high school assessments lead to successful adult outcomes.

Participant 1 had an experience with a student who reached out to him because she struggled to navigate the systems and maintaining employment during the transition process.

I was working with a student who I met while I was her counselor. She changed districts but reached out, and she was having a difficult time in the job environment because of her needs. She was being bounced back and forth between OPWDD and ACCES-VR. I felt bad because now she is 23 or 24; catching kids like that, I think it’s a barrier.

Furthermore, Participant 2 supported this observation, noting that he had a student recently reach out to him for a copy of his last completed IEP:

The student was going to start a program at PACE. His needs were different. Reaching out to students who have transitioned and they're like, say, 24 or 25 years old may be helpful to see if they've met their goal outlined on the IEP.

Once a student leaves high school, the school is no longer responsible for the student. This is the cause of numerous issues related to transition planning. Students leave high school and may engage in post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment, and may be successful or unsuccessful for a variety of reasons. Currently, there is no process to assess the progress of students with ASD post-high school (Ruble et al., 2019).

**Transition Plan Practices Subtheme 3: Postsecondary/Employment**

**Preparation.** Transition is inclusive of education, employment, community integration,
and independent living skills development. These areas are pivotal for success in adulthood for all students, but particularly students with ASD. Based on a student with an ASD profile, paths at transition vary and are often difficult to assess. Some students choose post-school activities, including postsecondary and employment. Effective transition planning provides the opportunity for adolescents to learn about themselves and plan for their futures. It is clear that success is possible, but substantial work must be done to ensure that transition plans are well-structured, align with the student's needs, and document realistic success measures for the individual student.

Participant 3 outlined an employment success story for a student based on proactively working with a job coach to facilitate the transition process:

This student goes to Project SEARCH, and before he even graduated, the job coach was able to find a placement for him at a school. It’s a part-time job. He works 3 days a week scanning, and he also goes to an adult program 2 days a week. He is a success story. We do have other ones, but he's one that really, you know, really stands out. We're very proud of him.

Participant 1 also experienced success when a student demonstrated intrinsic motivation and took personal responsibility for his learning, resulting in postsecondary acceptance:

I wouldn’t measure success as a student going to an Ivy League college, and he will be the next president, but I do have a nonverbal student who had a lot of behavioral issues. We found out he was talented in math, placed him in a mainstream math class, and he excelled, really flourished. He really found intrinsic motivation, which is a huge bonus as a teacher. It’s great when a student
takes their learning into their own hands. When he got into college, he came in, and he was so excited.

This final subtheme demonstrates that there is no greater feeling than that of success. Successful postsecondary or employment transitions serve as a significant accomplishment for transition coordinators.

**Summary of Theme 4.** Overall, the mixed outcomes for young adults with ASD transitioning from high school to adulthood show that some students successfully transition, but many face significant obstacles in multiple areas (interpersonal skills, flexibility, and focus) as they attempt to navigate postsecondary education and employment.

To maximize the probability of success for every student, it is imperative that transition plans outline their unique needs, stipulate individualized goals, and include measures of success to document relevant outcomes. Unfortunately, without proper planning, documentation, and standards of success, the student's potential will likely be limited. In addition, there must be a feedback mechanism that includes follow-up with students and others to identify which programs and processes are effective.

**Summary of Results**

Chapter 4 presented findings from four transition coordinators and their lived experiences supporting high-school students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) transitioning to post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment. Through semi-structured interviews, the perceptions and experiences of these transition coordinators were captured. Four major themes emerged from this study:
(a) transition process differences, (b) financial issues, (c) parental/family involvement, and (d) transition plan practices.

The overarching goal for education is similar for all children. However, for the individual with ASD, it should support the ability to live independently, be a productive member of society, and have meaningful relationships. The transition planning process is the bridge between high school and postsecondary and employment. The identification of individual supports to help facilitate goal attainment for students with ASD is essential. It is crucial to tailor all plans based on each student’s strengths, preferences, interests, needs, deficits, and weaknesses. Chapter 5 provides the implications of the findings of this study. Additionally, limitations and recommendations for future research are discussed.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Leaving school and transitioning to adulthood presents challenges for all young adults. However, this can be particularly stressful for families living with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Thompson et al., 2018). Although young adults with ASD are ambitious, they often experience poor transition outcomes, including unemployment and low rates of postsecondary education. Poor vocational and educational outcomes are consistent for those with ASD with average intellectual capacities (J. L. Taylor & Mailick, 2014). Parents continue to be a major source of support and advocacy for young adults with ASD as they move into adulthood (Van Bourgondien et al., 2014).

The researcher used Schlossberg’s transition theory to frame the transition coordinator’s perceptions of the transition planning process. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with transition coordinators in four high schools located in the Northeast. The study contributes to the knowledge base of transition coordinators’ experience developing transition plans for high school students with ASD. In addition, it provides a process to navigate the paths of post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment, to transition coordinators, faculty, parents, and students that can be used when developing a transition plan.

Implications of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of transition planning by transition coordinators to help students with ASD transition from high school to
college or post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment. The transition coordinators indicated that the transition planning process is poorly resourced, lacks involvement of key personnel, and requires individualized instruction. Additionally, the transition coordinators identified barriers that present challenges in the execution of transition plans. The transition coordinators expressed parents’ limited resources and noted the disparity between those with wealth versus those who live in poverty. The options are considerably different, and the options are limited. In addition, family engagement was noted as a barrier expressed by several of the transition coordinators. The research participants shared that successful transition planning occurs when outcomes are observable and measurable when the transition plan includes vocational assessments as part of their process. The results of the study provide answers to the research questions introduced in Chapter 1:

1. What are transition coordinators’ perceptions of the transition planning process for high school students with ASD?
2. What are the main barriers to achieve good Individualized Education Program transition planning?
3. How do transition coordinators know if transition planning has been successful, and what outcomes should be expected?

The four themes that emerged from the study are described in Chapter 4. The main themes are: (a) transition process differences, (b) financial issues, (c) parental/family involvement, and (d) transition plan practices. Understanding these themes provides educators and families the insight to identify a gap in practices required to address the unique needs of students with ASD and provide adequate transition
planning leading to sustainable outcomes. This chapter discusses the findings of the study and presents the limitations of the study as well. Finally, recommendations for future studies are discussed.

**Research Question 1**

Looking at transition coordinators’ perceptions of the planning process, the first theme, transition process differences, reveals the variation and imbalance in the transition planning process, ranging from a lack of role and skill standardization and training of key personnel (guidance counselors). Based on the research participants' responses to interview questions and the researcher's analysis, there are significant implications when individualized instruction diversification, skill acquisition, and elimination of goal enrichment occur within the transition planning process. The individualization and customization of programming based on knowledge of the student's abilities, skills, talents, and goals for post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment, are instrumental to student progress and success during the transition planning process.

The link between effective transition planning and post-school activities, including postsecondary education and employment, is critical to understand the characteristics of transition (student involvement, participation in transition planning, and post-school needs) for students with disabilities, particularly those with autism spectrum disorder who struggle with achieving postsecondary education and employment. When this linkage is missing or not understood, students are adversely impacted.

The disparity in transition coordinators’ inconsistent implementation processes and lack of adequate skills to provide students with ASD effective transition planning
leads to a gap in standardization of best practices. This disparity impacts the recognition and implementation of a standardized transition planning process across all school districts and organizations. All four transition coordinators interviewed possessed different skills, expertise, and backgrounds.

The Federal Partners in Transition (FPT) aims to embed equality, diversity, inclusion, and opportunity into its policy work. Transition provisions recently enacted by Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2014) are consistent with the principles, goals, and policy priorities identified in the 2020 Federal Youth Transition Plan. In order to move toward an inclusive approach to transition outcomes for youth with disabilities, the challenges this population faces and their experiences must be understood within the broader context of youth transition. Youth policy analysts and researchers suggest developing a single federal policy that addresses the challenges faced by youth in transition (Moreno et al., 2013). Therefore, these types of bold changes to policies will enable us to see the standardization the transition coordinators need.

The transition coordinators’ experiences working with high school students with ASD shaped their perspectives on the need to offer targeted instruction based on individual student needs or individualized instruction diversification. Throughout the interviews, the need for individualized instruction diversification manifested in references to hybrid learning, where students are taught both academic and vocational skills.

Eastman et al. (2021) provides an example of a transition services model that encompasses all the components of a hybrid program. A transition team designed the program at Small Town (pseudonym), and the model covers students from Grades 9-12. At Small Town High School, there is a daily focus on academic and pre-employment
skills. The program was designed to align with quality indicators (interagency collaboration, student-centered transition planning, curriculum, and instruction focused on specific post-school outcomes and family involvement).

The transition services model grows with the student and contributes to a digital portfolio that documents the student’s journey after high school. This portfolio is used for students to participate in student-led IEP meetings. The interviews with transition coordinators suggest that IEPs should reflect specific, customized transition plans and goals fundamental to the student’s success. For the transition goals to reflect students’ needs, the ASD student should be included in IEP meetings. As an indicator of quality services and predictor for successful post-school outcomes, the person-centered IEP transition plan has emerged. (Lee & Kim, 2021). This ensures the student’s voice is heard, and the IEP and transition goals adequately reflect their dreams, goals, and aspirations. Current research indicates inconsistencies and areas of improvement surrounding person-centered transition planning for young adults with ASD. A key finding is that person-centered transition practices are not uniformly implemented across the United States (Lee & Kim, 2021). This establishes a foundation for understanding the intersection of transition planning practices, goal-setting, and post-school outcomes for students with ASD.

Research Question 2

The research participants identified several barriers that challenge the execution of the transition planning process. The barriers identified included the difference in wealth availability, financial resource availability of families, schools, and external organizations, the current pandemic resulting in reduced resources, and the need for
family engagement and inclusion. Theme 2 (financial capacity) identifies the challenges transition coordinators experience when developing effective transition plans for students. Theme 3 (parental/family involvement) confirms that transition coordinators need collaboration and support from families of the ASD high school student.

In support of the child, the transition planning process must be collaborative, inclusive of families, and uninhibited by the availability or identification of financial resources. A family or school uninhibited by restricted resources becomes champions of the transition planning process. It is essential that transition coordinators carefully plan for the transition to adulthood to ensure success. High school students with ASD require a wide range of services and supports that are individualized and need-driven. Overall, these findings align with Camarena and Sarigiani (2009). They noted that students with ASD and their parents could significantly determine appropriate services required in postsecondary education to address their unique needs.

High school students with ASD need services designed to support their internal motivation, family support, and clear post-school goals to become ready for postsecondary school and employment readiness. A number of the transition coordinators spoke of the influence, whether positive or negative, a parent has during the transition of a high school student with ASD. For the most part, transition coordinators appreciated the inclusion of parents and family, making it a circle of support.

On the contrary, when families are driven by their children obtaining a New York State Regent’s diploma or attending postsecondary school when it is not the child’s desire, it can prove to be detrimental to the progression and effectiveness of the child transitioning. Parents need to see the process as student-driven and ensure, with the
transition team, that the focus remains on the unique abilities, strengths, and desires of the student.

**Research Question 3**

As it relates to the third research question, the fourth theme (transition plan practices) identifies the need for resources within the school and adult agencies that can support students. Again, continuous involvement, planning, and careful coordination between the school and community are essential to improve the transition process outcomes.

The school and community resources need to coincide, and a post-school feedback mechanism needs development. The service overlap enables students to have post-school support for some time. In addition, outcome measures to move students from the school system's protective umbrella to adult services are required to prevent dependent patterns in students. Wehman and Kregel (2004) stated transition instruction is further complicated by the need for learning opportunities to be provided various settings, including general classrooms, out-of-classroom school environments, and in the community.

Students with ASD are often challenged with behavioral issues that make them appear incapable of employment. Vocational assessments must be included as part of the transition planning process. This ensures that students are assessed and placed appropriately based on their unique strengths, abilities, gifts, weaknesses, and deficits. Research exists that focuses on the strategies designed to increase employee retention by pairing individuals to a complimentary job. Assessments and offering choices have successfully yielded appropriate matches (Nuehring & Sitlington, 2003).
The transition coordinators stated two important factors which contribute to successful employment – effective communication and interpersonal skills. The transition coordinators shared the need for students to have communication and interpersonal skills as they leave high school. One transition coordinator expressed the need for students to have people skills. They were stressing the need for students to be able to “endear” themselves to employers to develop communications skills for future growth. This aligns with the literature that acknowledges the deficits in communication for students with ASD but recognizes the need to develop the skills by training those educators to better assist in language development. Communication challenges are common among children with autism spectrum disorder, as social communication deficits are a primary characteristic of the disorder (D. K. Anderson et al., 2017). Speech-language pathologists and educators must work together to ensure students with ASD have opportunities to communicate with multiple individuals to support social communication development (Douglas et al., 2013). Unfortunately, educators often lack the skills and preparation required to support the communicative needs of students with ASD. They may require targeted training to ensure the appropriate social communication development of students with ASD (Douglas & Gerde, 2019).

The findings suggest the need for vocational assessments and the inclusion of hybrid programs where students are introduced to both options in academia and vocational opportunities. The key finding is that there is no one size fits all solution. Similarly, as every student with ASD is different and complex, the transition plans need to be as unique and layered as the students with ASD themselves. The desired outcomes will be diverse for every student, but their growth can be measured in various aspects,
including personal development, social development, skill acquisition, and self-determination.

A critical part of transition planning is self-determination (Chou et al., 2017). Access to instructional teaching that is focused on goal-setting, decision making, and problem-solving skill has been shown to be a predictor of improved employment post-school outcomes (Shogren & Wittenburg, 2020). The interviews with transition coordinators shared the importance of goal-setting and linking annual goals with postsecondary goals to develop instructional plans. However, decision-making and problem solving were never addressed, causing a misalignment in evidence-based best practices. The goal of every transition is to provide a process where students can grow and develop skills that will assist them in navigating a lifelong process of learning and becoming productive members of society.

Limitations

The study asked transition coordinators to collect their experiences supporting young adults with ASD, which introduces the possibility of biased or inaccurate recollections of the research participants. The research occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic; there was a sense that the transition coordinators were perhaps distracted and not in their school settings, and that may have impacted the clarity of their recollections.

Recommendations

It is recommended that transition coordinators undergo professional training. The research revealed that professional organizations, National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) and The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), provide effective transition support for students with ASD. NTACT provides information, tools,
and support to assist multiple stakeholders in delivering effective services and instruction for secondary and out-of-school youth with disabilities. In addition, they provide hands-on toolkits and transition-focused webinars to support practitioners.

CEC is the largest international professional organization dedicated to improving the success of children and youth with disabilities and/or gifts and talents. CEC advocates for appropriate governmental policies, set professional standards, provides professional development and helps professionals obtain resources necessary for effective professional practice. CEC is known as the source of information, resources, and professional development for special educators.

Additionally, transition coordinators need to participate in continuing education to remain current in evidence-based practices and increased specialization in helping students with ASD prepare for post-school life (Mazzotti et al., 2016). Furthermore, there needs to be a focus on tailored transition plans to address the unique behavioral, emotional, and social needs found in students with ASD. Future transition planning should have flexibility by developing a clear transition plan and having a coordinated approach. The development of a toolkit to assist students with ASD in advocating for themselves is also recommended. In addition, family advocacy training is warranted so that they know the available resources to assist with confronting the challenges that exist in supporting their children. In addition, students with ASD need preparation for specialized transitions and are encouraged to pursue courses and careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). STEM educators have often embraced innovative and engaging classroom instruction that applies to many real-world uses in recent years. The National Science Foundation (2017) highlighted the need for
early participation in STEM for all students due to the practical application of STEM skills to everyday life and work. STEM instruction could benefit students with ASD and ID and be taught in an applied, authentic, and hands-on way (Israel et al., 2013). Finally, an official warm “hand-off” from the high-school transition coordinators should occur to the care manager in the adult world with a period for overlap support.

**Future Studies**

The study’s finding has implications for future research surrounding transition coordinators and their perception of transition planning for young adults with ASD. Suggested topics for future studies are:

1. A future study should interview high school students with ASD and their families to get a balanced and more comprehensive perspective.
2. Principals influence how schools embody special education within a school. A future study on the knowledge and skills of transition planning at the administrative level is suggested.
3. All participants were transition coordinators from schools within a middle-to-upper class community; a similar study in urban areas would show any inequities in the research based on income and ethnicity.

**Conclusion**

As students with ASD move out of school-based services, there are significant differences in the process of receiving services in contrast to when youth was in school: (a) there is no single service point of entry, (b) each program has its own eligibility criteria, (c) the support system is not coordinated, (d) there are overlaps in service provision, and (e) different programs define disability differently. It is essential that
transition coordinators carefully plan for the transition to ensure young adults with ASD are prepared with the appropriate skills and supports needed to be successful. Transition coordinators corroborated that because students with ASD spend much more of their life outside of the educational system, efforts to maximize high school preparation are critical period and pivotal to post-school outcomes, including postsecondary and employment.

This period of transition is so critical that in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo signed legislation authorizing school districts to provide educational services in the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years to students with disabilities who turned 21 during the 2019-2020 or 2020-2021 school years. Under this legislation, school districts may only provide these services to students enrolled in their school district and received services under an IEP during the 2019-2020 or 2020-2021 school years. The statute adds that school districts may provide these services to students until they “complete” the services in their IEP or turn 23, whichever is sooner.

The transition from high school to adulthood is particularly challenging for a student with ASD. Transition coordinators need the skills and (facilitating community experiences, conducting vocational and educational assessments, interagency collaboration, and the coordination of services) to assess and plan appropriate goals to achieve better linkage between schools and outside resources agencies. Unfortunately, lack of resources and internal/external organizational barriers tend to interfere with successful transitions. Although the challenges are complex, so are the solutions that exist across multiple organizations. Transition coordinators need a feedback mechanism that allows them to follow up with students who graduate high school. Therefore, there needs to be a “warm hand off” of responsibility to the adult world to be included in the
transition process. The ultimate goal is to decrease the 53.4% of students who do not qualify or pursue post-school activities after high school.
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Appendix A

Recruitment E-mail

Dear Transition Coordinator,

My name is Stephanie Quarles. I am conducting a research study entitled *Post-High School Transition Planning for Young Adults with an Autism Spectrum Disorder* to fulfil my thesis requirement for my graduate program. The study focuses on the transition planning for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) from high school to college. My primary focus is to explore how transition coordinators perceive their transition planning process with Young Adults with ASD.

I am conducting a personal interview of personnel in the Office of Disability/Accessibility Services who have responsibility for the transition process of Young Adults with ASD. Each interview will take 30-45 minutes.

Confidentiality will be maintained as the only identifying marks are current position and the number of students with ASD your work with during the year. You will be given pseudonyms and all identifying marks will be kept in a secure and locked location that is accessible only by the principal investigator.

The interview will be audio/video recorded but no names provided and the information from the recordings will be transcribed with the audio/video being kept in a locked, secure location. My desire is to ensure all recruited participants are aware they are not at risk and that confidentiality if of the upmost importance.

Participation in this study is voluntary. By your willingness to agree to participate in this study, informed consent has been given.

Thanking you in advance for your participation!

Stephanie L. Quarles  
St. John Fisher College Doctoral Student
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

**Project Title:** Post-High School Transition Planning for Young Adults with an Autism Spectrum Disorder

**Principal Investigator (PI):** Stephanie L. Quarles

**Dissertation Chair:** Sr. Remigia Kushner

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Stephanie L. Quarles. The researcher conducting this study will describe this study to you and answer all your questions. Please read the following information and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether to take part in the study. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to participate without any penalty. And you can decline to answer any questions at any time. Simply tell the researcher that you wish to stop participating. All data collected before you stop will be destroyed and not used in the data analysis or the results of this study. The research will provide you with a copy of this consent form for your records. A summary of the study results will be provided to you upon request.

**If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:**

- Participate in one 30-45-minute interview with the PI via Zoom Video Conferencing or Face-to-Face. The interviews are designed to elicit information regarding both challenges and needs in creating transition plans.

- Review transcripts of your sections of the interview tapes for accuracy. (Transcripts will be mailed to you within 2 weeks following each interview session.)

The total estimated amount of time that you will be involved in this study is 3-4 hours over the course of the spring, 2021 semester, beginning in January and ending in late April.

**Potential risks of being in this study:**
There are no known risks from taking part in this study, but in any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified.

**Potential benefits of being in this study:**

- The possible benefits of your participation in this research are to learn more about the perception of transition coordinators and the transition process. This is an unexplored area which will provide additional benefits to learning more about the transition process and potentially changing the current practices within school districts.

**New Information:**

- If the researchers find new information during the study that would reasonably change your decision about participating, then they will provide this information to you.

**Confidentiality:**

- All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential. The results of this research study may be used in reports, presentation, and publication, but the research will not identify you. In order to maintain confidentiality of your records, Stephanie L. Quarles will keep your information in a locked, secure location, in which no identifies will be provided. As the study involves audio and video recordings, the data from these interviews will be kept for 3 years after the completion of this study and will be deleted and destroyed in totality.

- If we communicate by e-mail during this study, please be aware that e-mail is not a secure form of communication. However, my computer has security software, and I am the only person who has access to my e-mail account. No one else will read our communications.

**Withdrawal Privilege:**

- Participation in this study is completely voluntary. It is ok for you to say no. Even if you say yes now, you are free to say no later, and withdraw from the study at any time.

**Compensation/Costs:**

- The researcher wants your decision about participating in the study to be absolutely voluntary. There is no payment for your participation in this study.

**Subject and Researcher Authorization**
I have read and understand this consent form, and I volunteer to participate in this research study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this form. I voluntarily choose to participate, but I understand that my consent does not take away any legal rights in the case of negligence or other legal fault of anyone who is involved in this study. I further understand that nothing in this consent form is intended to replace any applicable federal, state, or local laws.

Signatures:

Participant Name (printed): _____________________________________________

Participant Signature: ________________________________________________

Date: ______________________________________________________________

Principal Researcher’s Name (printed): __________________________________

Principal Researcher’s Signature: _________________________________________

Date: ______________________________________________________________

Note: You may contact the individuals listed at the top of this form with any questions about this study. You may also contact the IRB Director at St. John Fisher’s College with any questions about your rights as a participant at irb@sjfc.edu.
Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a transition coordinator?

2. How many Young Adults with ASD do you support in a typical year?

3. Describe the transition process as you understand it from the guidelines of the secondary transition plan in the IDEA Act?

4. When do you start creating the transition plan?

5. What are the critical elements of good IEP transition planning?

6. What are the key services that should be described in the transition plan?

7. Define the differences in your experiences when you did a vocational transition and a time you did a higher education transition.

8. Describe a successful student transition that you facilitated.

9. Describe what skills you need to possess as a transition coordinator in order to complete a successful student transition.

10. What are the key services that should be described in the transition plan?

11. Are you familiar with Access VR/VESID?

12. Does every student have a job coach?

13. What are the policy barriers, funding, workforce, or interagency barriers?

14. Are there any challenges particular to ASD, or are these barriers common for other adults with intellectual disabilities?

15. What are the alternatives or implications for high school students with ASD’s who do not have a transition plan?
16. What are the potential solutions to these challenges?

17. How do you measure transition outcomes?

18. How do you use the outcomes for changing, planning, or adapting your programs?

19. How do you determine when outcomes have been achieved?

20. What are some of the supports you need from your district in order to effectively transition services?