

IMPROVING TRANSITION SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL
DISABILITY AT GILES COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL

by

Catherine Claire Paul

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

2021

APPROVED BY:

Dr. Kelly Alves, EdD, Faculty Mentor

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my students, past, present, and future, for inspiring me to walk this journey.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my family for their undying support of my education.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	2
Dedication.....	3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	7
1.0 INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT AND RELATED LITERATURE	8
Overview	8
The Educational Setting and Background	8
Introduction to the Problem.....	9
Significance of the Problem	10
Purpose Statement	11
Related Literature	11
Narrative Review	12
Theoretical Review.....	30
Summary.....	33
2.0 PROCEDURES	34
Overview	34
Permissions.....	34
The Investigator’s Role	34
Ethical Considerations.....	35
Questions	35
Data Collection and Analysis	36
Interviews	36
Survey.....	40

Document Analysis44

Summary.....44

3.0 FINDINGS45

Overview45

Description of Participants45

Results47

 Sub-question 147

 Sub-question 252

 Sub-question 355

Discussion of Results58

Summary.....65

4.0 SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM67

Overview67

Restatement of the Problem.....67

Proposed Solution to the Central Question67

Resources and Funds Needed.....76

Roles and Responsibilities of Stakeholders.....77

Timeline.....79

Solution Implications.....80

Evaluation Plan.....81

Summary.....82

REFERENCES85

APPENDIX or APPENDICES93

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this project was to improve transition services available to high school students with intellectual disabilities in Giles County, Tennessee. The problem was there is a lack of consistent transition planning in Giles County, Tennessee. The central research question was, “How can transition services for students with intellectual disabilities be improved at Giles County High School in Giles County, Tennessee?”

This project was conducted through interviews with administrators and educators, surveys of parents, and a document analysis of available information in Giles County for transition services. The information was then coded and analyzed for a mixed-methods research design.

The results found that though Giles County High School was utilizing appropriate transition practices, specifically through transition planning meetings, little transition training and community resources were available. Administrators and educators both indicated a lack of development opportunities in transition, while administrators, educators, and parents all agreed on the insufficient community resources. The document analysis supported their concerns, showing that no transition service agencies or resources are housed in Giles County, with the closest resources requiring a commute of 30-plus miles.

The research lended itself to several recommendations, including additional training and an exploration of increased transition planning technology. In addition, community conversations were recommended to help aid in developing resources within Giles County which would help eliminate the insufficiency as a barrier to transition planning. Overall, the study found that the suggested recommendations could be implanted with just over \$4,000 with an immediate opportunity for impact and connections with the immediate community members.

1.0 INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT AND RELATED LITERATURE

Overview

The purpose of this project was to improve transition services available to high school students with intellectual disabilities in Giles County, Tennessee. The problem was there is a lack of consistent transition planning in Giles County, Tennessee. Transition services offered by schools are mandated at every transition level, though many transition services are focused on students moving from younger grades to older grades. Research into best practices in transition from high school to postschool is being conducted with the development of the Higher Education Opportunity Act which allows for federal funding for students with disabilities at the postsecondary level (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008). Students with intellectual disabilities, however, are often left out of many considerations, as their needs differ from students of other disabilities who may have the cognitive ability to attend typical schools with accommodations. Opportunities are improving for students with intellectual disabilities, but the gap arises in how to transition those students from the high school level to a higher level of independence.

Section 1.0 will introduce the problem at Giles County High School and provide a review of the literature in relation to transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities. The literature review will focus on common problems in transition planning, as well as current best practices.

The Educational Setting and Background

Giles County High School is located in Pulaski, Tennessee, at 200 Sheila Frost Drive. Giles County High School is comprised of 754 students, with students with disabilities making up 9.7% of the student body (Tennessee Department of Education, 2019). With 56 total

classroom teachers, the school is served by three administrators (Tennessee Department of Education, 2019). In a relatively small high school, students may face difficulty finding access to transition services, as there are fewer educators and administrators that can dedicate their full attention to transition planning (Tennessee Department of Education, 2019). The graduation ready rate in the state of Tennessee refers to students who are prepared for postsecondary success, an overall 7.8% rate for students with disabilities (Tennessee Department of Education, 2019). According to the Tennessee DOE (2019), students in Giles County with disabilities have a 3.2% graduation ready rate. Therefore, students with disabilities at Giles County High School are considered less successful than their statewide counterparts.

Introduction to the Problem

The purpose of this project was to improve transition services available to high school students with intellectual disabilities in Giles County, Tennessee. The central research question was, “How can transition services for students with intellectual disabilities be improved at Giles County High School in Giles County, Tennessee?” Historically, students with intellectual disabilities have had little participation in their transition-based Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. Cameto et al. (2004) found that 86% of students with intellectual disabilities have very little participation in their transition IEP meetings, while Johnson et al. (2020) furthered this research, and found that there are still over 60% of students with intellectual disabilities who have little or no participation in their IEP meetings 17 years later. Additionally, Lombardi et al. (2018) found that many transition planning programs are out of date, and do not represent current transition practices. Based on the Tennessee IDEA Part B APR Indicator 14: Post-School Outcomes report, 30% of students with disabilities exiting high school were not engaged in postschool employment or educational opportunities (State of Tennessee, 2017).

Additionally, the state report noted that 20% of students with disabilities at Giles County High School were chronically absent, more than 10% of the school year, a 4% increase from the year prior, and higher than the state average of 17.3 % (Tennessee Department of Education, 2019). As compared to 35.9% in the state of Tennessee, just 25% of students with disabilities are noted as enrolling in some type of postsecondary education program after graduation from Giles County High School (Tennessee Department of Education, 2019). Both figures show a gap in the success of students with disabilities at Giles County High School and upon their exit from school. This gap could potentially be caused by greater needs in relation to transition services. The TennesseeWorks 2013 Transition Educator Survey revealed a significant lack of information for educators to promote community transition services to students with disabilities (Tennessee Department of Education, 2013). Over half of educators reported that they did not have adequate information to any community transition service providers, with at least 80% of educators reporting lack of information for at least seven providers (Tennessee Department of Education, 2013). The problem is there is a lack of consistent transition planning in Giles County, Tennessee.

Significance of the Problem

Lombardi et al. (2018) found that very few transition programs differentiate their transition planning for students with different disabilities. Additionally, the authors found that many transition programs set goals for their students that are significantly below an attainable measure, planning for low-wage employment and minimal educational opportunities (Lombardi et al., 2018). This project is designed to determine ways to improve transition services. Success after high school most often occurred when students attended high school programs that had focuses on vocation skills, as well as independent living education opportunities (Haber et al.,

2016). The setting for this project was located in a rural area that does not have the direct access to services and therefore, needs assistance in determining what services can be useful to students and where community services may be located. This could drastically improve the post school lives of students with disabilities in Giles County, specifically students with intellectual disabilities.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this project was to improve transition services available to high school students with intellectual disabilities in Giles County, Tennessee. It was important to solve this problem because there are many post-school options for students with intellectual disabilities, and students at Giles County High School deserve the opportunity to be as successful as possible after they exit high school. The first approach regarding data collection was semi-structured interviews with educators and administrators at Giles County High School. The second approach regarding data collection was a survey with parents of students with disabilities at Giles County High School. The third approach regarding data collection was a document analysis of available data on the community transition services available in Giles County.

Related Literature

An intense review of research was conducted to explore current transition practices that are successful for students with intellectual disabilities transitioning from high school to post school endeavors. This section will provide an overview on the existing literature pertaining to the study of opportunities for transition practices during the high school to post school transition. The first section will discuss the theories selected to frame the study, and the second section will synthesize the recent literature pertaining to transition practices for students with intellectual disabilities.

Narrative Review

Transition practices for students with intellectual disabilities differ from students who may have disabilities but can participate in typical education settings with minimal help. The design of transition practices for students with intellectual disabilities is an area in which much research has emerged. A review of the literature will provide a more focused area of need for this study.

Career and Educational Opportunities for Students with Intellectual Disability

Within special education, the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is the driving document for student needs, and that continues into transition planning. As noted by Lombardi et al. (2018), postsecondary goals identified during transition planning must be measurable, occur after high school, be age appropriate, and be based on student interest and preference, while focused on employment and postsecondary education or training. Carter et al. (2020) found overall that 95% of students with disabilities in high school expected to have paid employment by the age of 30. Postsecondary options have expanded with the development of the Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) funding opportunity for colleges and universities to add programs for students with disabilities (Lombardi et al., 2018). Additionally, more and more options have become available for students to be better prepared for postsecondary employment due to more education and training.

Specifically, based on overlapping elements of several policy initiatives, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, the Carl D. Perkins Act (Perkins) of 1984, and the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014, it is becoming increasingly urgent to better understand how educators prepare students with disabilities for college and careers. (Lombardi et al., 2018, p.83)

Predictors for Post School Engagement and Success

Kaya (2018) found that individuals with intellectual disabilities are among those with the poorest transition outcomes, as they have the lowest participation rate in postsecondary education and employment. In fact, students with intellectual disabilities are nearly 30% less likely to gain employment post school (Kaya, 2018). Many researchers have historically found that demographic variables can affect post school success, while finding that indicators also include academic achievement and work experience during high school (Prince et al., 2019).

More recent research into transition for students with intellectual disabilities found that gender and exit reason had the highest influence on an individual's post school outcomes, noting that males were found to be more likely to gain competitive employment, while females were more likely to gain some sort of postsecondary education (Prince et al., 2019). Those with intellectual disability who graduated with a high school diploma were more likely to attend postsecondary education or training, while the high school diploma did not have much influence on competitive employment (Prince et al., 2019).

School districts also had an effect on students with intellectual disability, as higher attendance rate positively influenced post school outcomes, while rate of special education services negatively affected post school outcomes (Prince et al., 2019). This indicates that students with intellectual disability need accountability and increased services in order to be successful, supporting the need for transition services prior to their move to a post school setting.

Wehmeyer (2014) noted that recent research has shown that students with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, have a higher incidence of positive postschool outcomes when participating in self-determination interventions during their time of transition age. Howard et al. (2020) noted that student participation in IEP meetings having in an

increasing amount of influence on post school success, specifically for students with intellectual disability. Through their participation in IEP meetings, students are able to develop self-advocacy and self-determination skills further than what they learn in the classroom (Howard et al., 2020).

According to the research submitted by Blustein et al. (2016), only 36.2% of students with intellectual disability had middle or high school experiences with paid or unpaid employment opportunities. Haber et al. (2016) found that transition programs with vocational education and independent living education yielded the most success. Strnadova and Cumming (2014) supported this idea with evidence that students with intellectual disabilities have greater success when they have access to career fairs and vocational experience during their high school years. More so, students with education experiences that include work for credit or opportunities to obtain certifications proved even more successful (Kaya, 2018).

Research-Based Transition Practices for Students with Intellectual Disability

Francis et al. (2018) found that according to parents, there are seven strategies that have been effective in transition planning for individuals with intellectual disability, including starting earlier, creating and maintaining high expectations, permitting choice and risk, recognizing family interdependence and involvement, helping parents with skill development and support, increasing technology, and promoting inclusion.

Though federal legislation determined that transition services must begin at age 16, many researchers have found that 16 is too late to begin transition planning (Rodriguez et al., 2017). Beginning the transition planning earlier, such as age 14, allows time for the development of an Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) within the IEP (Davis & Garfield, 2021). An ITP can create a roadmap with specific goals related to transition, as well as anticipated services needed to

successfully transition (Davis & Garfield, 2021). This in turn allows for time to apply to needed services and create action items to attain goals. Shriner et al. (2010) discussed the importance of continuous assessment, goals that are appropriate for the student, and goals that are measurable. In addition, McKenzie et al. (2016) specifically discussed transition planning for students with intellectual disability and the need for a more in-depth planning process for those students based on their capabilities. This supports the idea that an ITP within an IEP, as suggested by Davis and Garfield (2021), could create a personal plan that is based on not only the strengths and interests of the student, but also on their levels of performance, service needs, and assessments as reflected within the IEP. This would help determine skills needed to attain transition goals and help with planning for independence.

Many researchers focus on self-determination and self-advocacy as an important piece of transition, as well as developing tools to help foster these concepts versus just having students attend meetings and observing. Martin et al. (2004) commented that “it is naïve to presume that youth attending their IEP/transition planning meeting will learn how to actively participate and lead the process through serendipity—yet this is precisely what current practice tends to expect” (p. 4).

Self-determination is defined as “a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior,” (Mueller et al., 2012, p. 39). Wehmeyer (2015) extended that definition to a self-determined person being one that can be a causal agent to freely make decisions. Such behavior can help dictate the success of students not only in post school employment and education, but also within social, familial, and professional relationships. Supported decision-making and person-centered planning have been found to be successful in helping to promote self-determination (Taylor et al., 2019).

Additionally, researchers have found that students are more motivated and have more success when having the opportunity to have a role in their transition planning (Johnson et al., 2020). Furthermore, Wehmeyer (2015) discussed that self-determination, once practiced in person-centered planning and supported decision making, can be used more freely to make overall decisions that can help in postschool settings.

Role of Educators in Transition

Carter et al. (2020) indicated that secondary educators are one of the most essential roles in transition for individuals with disabilities outside of families due to the amount of daily involvement in the students' lives. Researchers also discovered that interagency collaboration can vary unevenly and can also be limited depending on the community type (urban vs. rural) in the state of Tennessee in which the study was conducted (Carter et al., 2020). In reference to rural communities, Carter et al. (2020) noted, "they may have a narrower range of employment opportunities, provide fewer disability-related services, report more limited transportation options, and hold different expectations for life after high school" (p. 2). However, the researchers also found that students in rural communities had closer relationships with their educators (Carter et al., 2020).

Additionally, researchers found that teachers receive limited instruction on how to actually implement practices, such as promoting self-determination, outside of attending conferences which leads to a diminished role in instruction in the classroom (Wehmeyer, 2015). Rowe et al. (2020) found that using access to online training and professional development can help fill the gap between information and implementation for some educators dealing with transition. For example, the state of Tennessee has developed Transition Tennessee, an online resource that can provide training for students, families, and educators (Rowe et al., 2020). This

resource includes not only supports for students and families, but free courses for educators (Tennessee Department of Education et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic increased the amount of virtual training for this particular resource, and while it may not serve as hands-on instructor for educators, it can help keep them up to date with best practices (Rowe et al., 2020).

Implementing Interagency Collaboration

According to Povenmire-Kirk et al. (2015), interagency collaboration is defined as a “process through which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts; agency representatives come together to achieve, collectively, more than they could each achieve working independently” (p.54). Davis and Garfield (2021) indicate that purposeful collaboration is not just the representation of the agencies and providers, but also the involvement of those agencies and providers in transition planning. These collaborative efforts among all stakeholders allow for the identification of needs from agencies after transition, as well as the implementation of a plan for the future.

Communication and collaboration are mentioned in high incidence by teachers who work directly with students in transition to post school, as many teachers note that there is often a gap between school, home, and the community (Rodriguez et al., 2017). This could be due much in part to the agencies functioning as independent entities versus using collaboration to their advantage. Additionally, Carter et al. (2020) found specifically in Tennessee that limited time and access to resources often played a part in the lack of collaboration and was not attributed to lack of willingness or low priority. Rowe et al. (2020) also discussed that rural communities often struggle with limited public transportation and long travel times to access such resources.

Many researchers support the need for more collaboration specifically with the community in order to provide additional support (Haber et al., 2016). Research into current

practices indicated a need for an increase in collaboration between school and community, as well as home (Rodriguez et al., 2017). McBurney et al. (2017) echo the need for more collaboration and the need for access to community supports for students who may not attend a postsecondary education program that helps them discover more supports. Therefore, students who may go straight into the workforce or a different postsecondary program would need to already have made those community connections during their transition planning in order to avoid a gap in that access.

Carter et al. (2020) found that with nearly one-fourth of students with disabilities living in rural communities, those students face unique struggles in transition planning. Carter et al. (2020) described that rural communities have more difficulty finding postschool employment or education options, struggles with transportation, less school staff, and fewer adult service providers than their urban counterparts. This poses problems when it comes to interagency collaboration because there may be different outcome expectations than the community resources are able to provide. However, when taking rural communities into consideration, community closeness can be seen as a strong point because there is typically an increase in positive relationships between educators, students, and the community (Rowe et al., 2020). This may provide an increased opportunity for student support that larger communities are unable to provide. The key, according to Rowe et al. (2020), is to utilize those close-knit ties to create partnerships that favor the student.

Carter et al. (2020) described the need for more joint professional development to help educators and other agencies understand how to collaborate more effectively with potential for using a well-established model such as CIRCLES that helps create teams across all levels. Perez and Crowe (2021) added that involving community partners in transition programming helps the

students as much as it does the partners. The researchers noted that when community resources are more involved in transition planning and services, the community partners often learn more about the needs of students with intellectual disability and can better serve that population.

Specifically, Kaya (2018) described the importance and prevalence of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), as it is available in all 50 states to provide career counseling, on the job training, and supported employment. It was found that students with intellectual disabilities who utilized VR services were twice as likely to gain employment versus those who did not use VR. The researcher found that 46.7% of individuals with intellectual disability gained competitive employment through VR services that included counseling, assessment, and job coaching (Kaya, 2018). Researchers additionally found that the use of such interagency collaboration actually increases student involvement, as they feel empowered by their team (Flowers et al., 2018; Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2015).

Through research in Haines County, Tennessee, Schutz et al. (2021) discovered that the use of “community conversations” in rural counties could help individuals with disabilities, their families, and educators bridge the gap when it comes to transition resources. The researchers used a model that would allow for stakeholders of all kinds to participate in a conversation that addressed the specific needs of students with disabilities in their local communities in order to help get the right connections involved (Schutz et al., 2021). This type of situation allowed for members of the community not directly involved with the education system or students with disabilities to express knowledge about the community and what it had to offer versus just relying on the school system (Schutz et al., 2021). Researchers found that community conversations can aid in situations where rural counties desired to help students with disabilities,

but often struggle to connect between the school districts and the community partners (Carter et al., 2020).

Technology in Transition

The use of technology can improve the success of students transitioning to post school in various ways, as overall computer use for instruction has tripled since 1995 (Williams-Diehm et al., 2018). Despite this overwhelming increase in technology for instructional use, such use is relatively young in special education. Additionally, technology can arise as an issue for rural communities, including less access to internet, cellular service, and overall technology support (Rowe et al., 2020). Lombardi et al. (2018) discussed the importance of using technology with students with disabilities in order to enhance academic learning and career preparation. Williams-Diehm et al. (2018) suggested that the use of technology helps students with disabilities increase academic skills closer to that of their peers in many subjects, such as mathematics and literacy. In addition, technology can be used to increase employability skills, such as using office software (Williams-Diehm et al., 2018). Researchers found that students with disabilities benefit from the use of technology during transition, specifically using technological portfolios that can help them keep track of their needs, indicating that these portfolios could essentially replace IEPs when students leave secondary education (McBurney et al., 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic helped shed light on some other ways that technology can be incorporated into transition planning while educators were forced to rely so heavily on such technology. Rowe et al. (2020) described the use of videos to explain assessments, data, and other piece of the IEP to both students and families. This could be beneficial in rural areas, where there is less access to needed resources. Even in a face-to-face IEP setting, others could

provide documentation or explanations through videos to allow more communication, and also to allow the student or parent to rewatch those videos for further understanding (Rowe et al., 2020). Additionally, immersive videos could be used to assess students who may be participating in on-site training during their transition planning, so that educators, specifically in rural areas, would spend less time traveling to sites and more time assessing (Rowe et al., 2020). This could even extend to home settings where students are practicing what they have learned at school, such as laundry, cooking, chores, etc. There are a host of other technology-based assets to transition planning, such as virtual job shadowing, mock job interviews, virtual career fairs, etc., that can be extremely helpful to rural communities of transition planning (Rowe et al., 2020).

Organization in Transition

As indicated by Olivier-Pijpers et al. (2019) different systems and interactions can create challenging behavior in students with intellectual disability, therefore organized systems could be used to help manage those behaviors. One residential post school setting described the reduction of employee hours in order to provide an organized stability that mirrored an education setting for students to have staff that was constant (Olivier-Pijpers et al., 2019). Flowers et al. (2018) identified the idea that a coordinated set of services through transition that addresses both academics and functionality can help students better participate in their IEP and transition planning meetings. Therefore, such organization can add to the effectiveness of the overall transition team.

Current Practices

Rodriguez et al. (2017) identified ten instrumental practices that are necessary in order for a student to be successful in transition to a post school setting. Included practices were listed as active students and family involvement in transition planning, vocational training, career

awareness practices, vocational experience during high school, interagency collaboration, instruction in academic and life skills, instruction in self-determination and self-advocacy, inclusion with regular peers, and assistive technology (Rodriguez et al., 2017). Ju Zeng and Landmark (2017) found that low self-advocacy led to difficulties for students with disabilities, and that they were able to report the lack of preparation by transition services. The authors stated, “There is a need for collaboration between secondary educators and postsecondary disability service providers to develop a systematic way of teaching self-determination skills and fostering generalization of the skills in postsecondary settings.” (Ju Zeng & Landmark, 2017, p.187)

Additionally, there is a need for an increase in instructing students on skills that foster independence, such as functional living and life skills (Rodriguez et al., 2017). Scaffolding within these skills has been found instrumental for students with intellectual disabilities, according to Taylor et al. (2020). Rowe et al. (2020) described using hands-on learning versus didactic experiences, such as practicing kitchen and cooking skills versus watching videos about them. Combining both an instructional and video experience with a hands-on approach would allow for Universal Design of Learning aspects to reach as many students as possible with possible. For example, a student who is learning to cook may benefit from watching a video about cooking spaghetti, and then only at first be able to brown the meat. Using scaffolding to continually add new steps, such as boiling noodles for the appropriate amount of time, and then using a can opener to open sauce, can result in the student combining all three skills to make spaghetti. This in turn translates to using these skills for other dishes. Additionally, following a recipe can be a practice life skill for students to work on their step-by-step procedures that could result in following a to-do list in an employment situation. Researchers found that community-

based instruction (CBI) allows for preparation for independence skills, such as managing money, hygiene skills, domestic skills, and understanding their community (Rodriguez et al., 2017).

Practices can also extend to teaching students how to participate in their own decision making, including transition goals. Johnson et al. (2020) found that just 3.4% of students with intellectual disabilities initiated their transition goals. Blustein et al. (2016) found that there is a gap between aspirations or goals and the outcomes of those goals, supporting more student-involvement in their goal setting. Wehmeyer (2014) used a study of the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) that found students with intellectual disability can learn to self-regulate problem solving. The study involved setting an educational goal, developing the plan, and monitoring the progress, and found significant improvements in students after a year of intervention (Wehmeyer, 2014). This shows support for having students participate in their own decision making and also shows the need for appropriate training within the practice. Such practices can align with the extension of transition services well into adulthood, as many services are extended through the age of 25 due to a significant delay in maturation (Salt et al., 2019).

Consistency in Practices

Shriner et al. (2010) discussed the need for consistency in transition, which included multiple transition assessments, keeping track of goal changes when student interest changes, and aligning transition goals with the academic ability of the student to promote success during the transition time. Morningstar et al. (1996) discovered inconsistencies in the involvement of students in transition planning, as many students did not know what an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting was, nor were they invited. In situations where students were invited, it was discovered that the role of the student is often very small, with one research study reporting that students spoke around 3% of the time (Johnson et al., 2020). Howard et al. (2020) indicated that

preparing students to participate in IEP meetings should begin early to achieve consistency. The researchers suggest beginning as early as elementary school by presenting the information about IEP meetings, including how they work, what will happen, and how the students can participate (Howard et al., 2020). By identifying roles and responsibilities of those involved in the IEP meeting, even young students can become aware of how they can be involved, and providing this early creates consistency, as students are able to participate in their transition planning (Howard et al., 2020).

It is important to note that there are instances where students may not have the communication skills to speak or accurately express themselves through speech, so the research conducted by Johnson et al. (2020) was done with this in mind. However, the researchers did find that 39.8% of students had little to no role in their transition planning meetings (Johnson et al., 2020). Researchers have found that for these particular students, using multiple means of representation and engagement that align with Universal Design for Learning (UDL), can help improve communication in IEP meetings (Howard et al., 2020). Such strategies can include videos to help explain steps in IEP meetings, visual aids to help identify team members, guiding question sheets with answer options to help students choose, choice cards, yes-no paddles, visual agendas, and response-prompting procedures (Howard et al., 2020). Additionally, using interest inventories can help with IEP pre-planning to obtain input that the student may not be able to announce during the actual meeting (Howard et al., 2020).

Rodriguez et al. (2017) found that while planning is considered one of the most important aspects of transition, less than 20% of schools they surveyed in North Carolina, California, and Texas had appropriate planning practices in place, indicating that the lack of transition planning is still a problem over 20 years after the previous research. Additionally, Lombardi et al. (2018)

found that many transition programs do not alter their preparation for different disabilities, and when they do plan for ID, they plan for low-wage or minimal opportunities. (Strnadova & Cumming, 2014)

Needs of Families and Students

Gauthier-Boudreault et al. (2017) found that parents were facing major obstacles during transition time, which included non-systematic planning for transition, limited services specific to students with intellectual disability, and a lack of access to information. McKenzie et al. (2017) discussed the need for formal support rather than what parents indicate as simply helpfulness, meaning that families need more than just someone to help them understand transition. Families are in need of supports within education, as well as access to community supports in order to create less of a seam during transition to post school. Strnadova and Cumming (2014) described home-school collaboration as a way to empower parents, as well as help them feel informed and involved. Gauthier-Boudreault et al. (2017) noted that concrete materials, such as a document containing a timetable for parents, can be instrumental in helping parents and students keep track of transition. This eliminates the parents from having to rely on the school staff for next steps and planning timelines, which can in turn help families feel more prepared. Blustein et al. (2016) noted that parents often report a gap in what they feel is an important postschool outcome and the likelihood of that outcome occurring. By this, the researcher meant that parents often want their children to find postschool employment, paid or unpaid, but they have lack confidence in the path to that success. Blustein et al. (2016) suggested that perhaps this gap exists in their unfamiliarity of services and vocational options after high school, supporting the need for more concrete resources.

Rodriguez et al. (2017) discovered that high school teachers indicated the need for students to have support in attending to personal issues. While many students overall feel the stress and anxiety of additional responsibilities as they move into adulthood, Salt et al. (2019) found that students with intellectual disability also feel this type of weight. Some of the aversion to their “growing up” came in different forms, such as having more fear about parental deaths, but essentially many of the concerns of students mirrored those of typical students (Salt et al., 2019). Taylor et al. (2019) noted that students with intellectual disabilities often find more stress during the transition to adulthood than their typical peers, as they have a significant struggle understanding their adult roles. While many students desire to take on adult roles, as far as familial roles, financial responsibility, and societal norms, their capabilities may not serve them as well as they would like, leading to higher stress (Taylor et al., 2019). Additionally, the researchers found that there is a student need for having access to their post school settings prior to the actual transition in order to decrease student stress overall (Rodriguez et al., 2017). This supports the best practice of hands-on learning that creates authenticity for the student as they prepare for transition (Rowe et al., 2020).

Students with intellectual disability who may be more prepared to take on their adult roles still may lack the skills needed to fulfill those roles. Rowe et al. (2020) suggested that a quality transition program includes instruction on how to access services needed after transition, including health care, benefits such as food stamps, social security and more. While not all students with intellectual disability will be able to make their own decisions in regard to such services, learning to navigate some of these services may help with self-determination skills and decision-making.

Salt et al. (2019) discussed the tendency of those providing services, including educators, to lean towards protecting the student versus allowing for healthy experimentation and positive risk-taking. This stems from the need to control for the safety of the student; however, there is also a need to help students with intellectual disability make situational decisions. Mueller et al. (2012) discuss the need for self-determination skills, in which the cornerstone is self-advocacy. Taylor et al. (2019) found that using short-term goal setting to meet long-term goals, along with scaffolding independent living skills that resulted in more choice making for positive results was beneficial to students who needed to improve self-advocacy. Taylor et al. (2019) suggested that in order to develop self-determination and feelings of effectiveness, students should often be offered chances to make decisions, including both every day and life choices.

Students who are less stressed and have more help with personal issues can then increase their self-advocacy skills in which they can ask for help or accommodations as they need them when they progress into post school roles outside of their families (Mueller et al., 2012).

Importance of Family Involvement

Rodriguez et al. (2017) indicated that post school success is associated with active family involvement in transition planning. Carter et al. (2012) found that students with disabilities were three times more likely to find postschool employment when they had parents who expected them to do so. Students indicated a need for their families to be involved with helping them make post school and career decisions, as well as set goals (Morningstar et al., 1996). Salt et al. (2019) found that students with intellectual disability are significantly fearful of how they will function after their parents die, so a need for heavy family involvement with early adult decision-making presented itself immensely. Students were concerned with appeasing their parents as a measure of self-worth, and this called for heavy familial participation (Salt et al., 2019). Additionally,

Morningstar et al. (1996) discussed the high number of students who indicated they would want to either live at home or live close to their families even after their secondary education was complete so that they had help with functional and life skills.

In addition, families can be instrumental in fostering self-determination and self-advocacy skills. Researchers indicate that families and caregivers are on the front lines of self-determination, modeling for their students with intellectual disability at an early age, whether it be positively or negatively (Taylor et al., 2019). While some families have good intentions to protect their students, they also have to tread lightly as students progress or age, so as not to misspeak for students with the idea that they “know best” (Taylor et al., 2019). Wehmeyer (2014) advocated for a better framework with family roles that helps parents and families become collaborators with the student and the professionals when possible, rather than being the voice for their student. Wehmeyer’s (2014) research helped develop guidelines for parents and caregivers that can help establish self-determination and avoid overprotection, including allowing risk-taking, promoting decision-making even in small situations, and recognizing the process versus focusing on the outcome. Wehmeyer (2014) found that there are fewer opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities to make decisions, and this eliminates the teaching component to self-determination. Sibling roles, though rarely discussed, were found to be helpful as students with intellectual disabilities put more weight on their siblings’ opinions because they saw them more as peers (Taylor et al., 2019). This combines with the idea of allowing for teaching moments, and perhaps allowing siblings to model decision-making and how to handle successes and failures.

Factors Causing Familial Distress

Gauthier-Boudreault et al. (2017) discussed the idea that even though students with intellectual disabilities are at the center of transition, sometimes their mental capacity doesn't allow them to totally grasp the importance of transition, leaving the parents and family to feel the pressure of the transition plan. "Previous studies on caregivers have noted that parents with a child with a disability had had to make significant employment decisions because of their child, such as turning down a promotion, reducing the number of hours the work, changing jobs, or rejecting a new job offer," (McKenzie et al., 2017, p.778).

Parents indicated that the stressful aspects of transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities are more intricate than other students with disabilities (McKenzie et al., 2017). In fact, some parents expressed that transition planning can be described as a "second shock", similar to finding out the diagnosis of their student with an intellectual disability (Codd and Hewitt, 2020). Specifically, parents noted that finding residential options, employment opportunities, finding social outlets, and creating community connections are among the most intensive aspects of transition planning (McKenzie et al., 2017). Such parents have been found to be at an increased risk for anxiety and depression (McKenzie et al., 2017).

Families may also feel that they cannot create positive risk-taking situations as they might with students of typical ability, which causes a source of stress in walking the line to help students with self-determination without putting them in danger (Salt et al., 2019). In addition to the stress of trying to help their student with intellectual disability, researchers indicate that parents and family often times become the student's primary social network after transition adding even more pressure to their responsibilities (Small et al, 2013).

Social Participation

Researchers indicated that students with intellectual disability participating in postsecondary programs had greater success due to meaningful relationships with peers (Prince et al., 2019). Salt et al. (2019) discussed that the term “intellectual disability” can sometimes have a negative connotation that impacts student social relationships. Small et al., (2013) noted that adults with intellectual disabilities often have less friends in their adult lives than they did as teenagers due to their transition into different settings. This aligns with the importance of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model, as it places importance on social networks among the systems. Researchers described individuals with intellectual disabilities as relying on peers and friendships to help them find their personal identities into adulthood, (Hurd et al., 2018).

In contrast to their typical peers that continue social networks through college, social groups, and a number of other ways, students with intellectual disabilities suffer a disruption in social networks during transition. “Friendships discussed do not necessarily demand an equal or identical contribution from each friend,” described Hurd et al. (2018, p.1193). Perez and Crowe (2021) discovered that leisure education and social skills programs can help aid transition-aged youth with intellectual disabilities feel more connected to their communities and peers. Zhao et al. (2020) identified sports as a way for individuals with intellectual disabilities to connect with their peers socially. While helping connect the student with the community for a better sense of self, sport can also help meet the physical demands needed to improve or maintain the student’s health. Additionally, participating in sports can help establish relationships that students could continue to foster after transition through the common factor of sport participation.

Theoretical Review

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory helps us make sense of human development through the person-process-context-time (PPCT) model, which includes proximal

processes, person characteristics, context, and time, noting that all of these interact and are essential to how an individual develops (Tudge et al., 2016). Bronfenbrenner goes on to define each of these constructs, including proximal processes, which is the interaction between a child and their immediate environments (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1993). This coupled along with the child's person characteristics, demand, resource, and force, create the first two aspects of PPCT (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Context is described by Bronfenbrenner in a way that frames the environments and settings of individuals into five levels that depend on their level of impact on the child. The time aspect is then in reference to how the effects of those levels change at different points of development, as represented by the fifth level to his model of context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner's levels of context include the microsystem of an individual, meaning their immediate environment that has a direct impact on their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For a special education student in transition, the microsystem could be described by the child's parents or guardians, teachers, therapists, job coaches, Vocational Rehabilitation counselors, etc. The second level is the mesosystem, which includes the interactions of those with a direct effect on a child's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, this could include the Individualized Education Plan team and how they interact, the interactions of parent and teacher, the interactions of teacher and job coach, etc. The exosystem describes settings that may not have a direct role in the child's life, but may still affect the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This could include a parent's employment status, or perhaps in this case, the availability of resources for a special needs student. The macrosystem includes culture and environment, such as political or economic influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This could be impactful for a special education student in the form of special education laws, or the authorization of Federal Pell Grant for students in

postsecondary education with disabilities. The chronosystem combines all this with time and could represent how special education changes over time.

The consideration of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory would provide the opportunity to approach all aspect of an individual's life when it comes to creating a transition plan. Strnadova and Cumming (2014) advocate for the use of a holistic, individual approach when it comes to transition in order encompass each relationship and environment in which the student is involved. This includes increased communication between the student, school, family, and community to collaborate in the most effective way for the student (Strnadova & Cumming, 2014). Perez and Crowe (2021) discussed the critical need for collaboration so that students can find success in transition and post-school endeavors, including community and social life. In order to successfully approach all of one's systems, transition services need to be available to aid the student in their success in order to create comfort for students. For example, a student may suffer from a more anxious time in their life when it is time to transition and providing services for this type of emotional response will help the student be successful in creating a transition plan as the focus is eased off of the stress.

According to McKenzie et al (2017) stress is at its height among families and students during and after transition as they suffer the loss of educational support and social connects. Codd and Hewitt (2020) recognized many parents feeling lost when transition to adulthood begins, after losing the predictability of supports during childhood. Small, Raghavan, and Pawson (2013) discuss,

Engaging with transition planning then involves a counter-intuitive emphasis – it might appear that the need is to shift the young person into the meso and the exo system;

but to do this, the exo and the meso need to feel more like the micro – there has to be a ‘moving in’ to facilitate a successful ‘moving out’ (p. 297).

This coincides with the need to create new systems for the student in a way that they can feel concrete and supported during their transition.

Summary

The purpose of this applied study was to improve transition services available to students with intellectual disability in Giles County, Tennessee. Transition services offered by schools are mandated at every transition level, though many transition services are focused on students moving from younger grades to older grades. Research into best practices in transition from high school to post school is being conducted with the development of the Higher Education Opportunity Act which allows for federal funding for students with disabilities at the postsecondary level. Students with intellectual disabilities, however, are often left out of many considerations, as their needs differ from students of other disabilities who may have the cognitive ability to attend typical schools with accommodations. Opportunities are arising for students with intellectual disabilities, but the gap arises in how to transition those students from the high school level to a higher level of independence.

Additionally, it is evident that there is a significant gap between current practices in transition, and the outcomes of students with disabilities at Giles County High School. The literature supports the need for a meticulous transition planning program, as well as different practices for different types of disabilities. This supports the need for research into the disabilities served at Giles County High School, and the availability of appropriate transition planning and resources.

2.0 PROCEDURES

Overview

The purpose of this applied study was to improve transition services available to students with intellectual disability in Giles County, Tennessee. The problem was there is a lack of consistent transition planning in Giles County, Tennessee. The problem for Giles County High School concerning transition services often stem from the lack of access to resources for transition planning. The purpose of this section is to describe the project permissions, role of the investigator, ethical considerations, project questions, procedures, data collection, and analysis for the evidence-based project.

Permissions

Much of the data for this project came from public data made available through state and county resources. In order to completely understand the scope of the problem, more detailed data was collected through access to the school's administration, teachers, special education support staff, and parents. Written permission to conduct the capstone project was obtained from the superintendent of Giles County schools (see Appendix A for the approved permission request).

The Investigator's Role

The investigator was a former public school special educator that specialized in transition, though this occurred outside of Giles County and the state of Tennessee, so there were not any personal relationships between the investigator and the chosen school. However, bias had the potential to occur when there were discrepancies in how the school operates their special education program as compared to best practices the investigator is familiar with from prior experience and research. The investigator had recently developed the curriculum for a special education (K-8) undergraduate program at the current institution of instruction and is currently

developing the curriculum for a 6-12 licensure program in special education, as well. Helping to mold future teachers going into this particular school district is a goal of the program and understanding how to prepare future educators is important to the investigator.

Ethical Considerations

The purpose of this applied study was to improve transition services available to students with intellectual disability in Giles County, Tennessee, therefore, this information will not be shared outside of this project. Data collected from state and regional resources were collected from public entities and has already been coded to conceal any student identity. No names were included in any data, and any identifiable information were concealed so that all information shared will remain confidential. All surveys and interviews were conducted virtually and stored on the investigator's password-protected, personal computer.

Questions

Central Question: How can transition services for students with intellectual disabilities be improved at Giles County High School in Giles County, Tennessee?

Sub-question 1: How would administrators and educators in an interview improve transition services for students with intellectual disabilities at Giles County High School in Giles County, Tennessee?

Sub-question 2: How would survey data from parents of students with intellectual disabilities enrolled at Giles County High School improve transition services at Giles County High School in Giles County, Tennessee?

Sub-question 3: How would data from a document analysis improve transition services for students with intellectual disabilities in Giles County, Tennessee?

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through interviews with administrators and educators, surveys from parents, and a document analysis.

Interviews

The first sub-question for this project asked how administrators and educators in an interview would suggest improving transition services for students with intellectual disabilities at Giles County High School in Giles County, Tennessee? The interviews consisted of a superintendent, a director of special education, an assistant director of special education and four current special educators and were conducted virtually due to the current COVID-19 situation. The following research-based questions were used during the interviews.

1. Describe the process for beginning transition planning for students with intellectual disabilities.

By asking this question, the researcher was seeking to determine if the transition planning is started at an appropriate age to allow enough time to properly plan.

Rodriguez et al. (2017) suggest that though 16 is the federally mandated age, it is often too late to effectively plan.

2. Discuss the makeup of the transition planning team for students with intellectual disability.

McKenzie et al suggests there is a large need for school, community, and home collaboration, while Rodriguez et al. (2017) suggest that students with intellectual disability have an even greater need for all stakeholders to be involved. This helped the researcher determine if there are any stakeholders left out of the process.

3. To what extent are students involved in their IEP and transition planning meetings, and goal setting?

Morningstar et al. (1996) found that many students are not included in IEP planning, and often did not know what an IEP much less transition planning was or entailed.

Cameto et al. (2004) the found that 86% of students with an intellectual disability were not involved in planning. The researcher intended to understand the involvement level of students with intellectual disability in relation to transition planning.

4. What is the focus of goals for students with intellectual disability during their early transition planning?

Mueller et al. (2012) focus heavily on the need for self-determination and self-advocacy goals specifically for students with intellectual disability. This question was designed to help the researcher determine goals used at the beginning of the transition process.

5. What is the focus of postschool goals for students with intellectual disability?

Research suggests that many schools do not delegate different goals based on disability, though findings show that students with intellectual disability are often given goals that have lower expectations (Strnadova & Cumming, 2014). This question was designed to access how goals progress through transition planning, and how the school is able to help the student make appropriate goals that aren't too high or low based on their abilities and progress through transition ages.

6. Describe how electronic records are kept for IEPs, transition plans, and student portfolios.

McBurney et al. (2017) place heavy impact on the use of electronic records to be easily accessed post school. The researcher intended to use this question in order to determine what electronic resources are available to educators in the transition planning process, and to determine if more technology needs to exist.

7. What community programs and resources are available for students with intellectual disabilities during or transition in Giles County?

Ju et al. (2017) advocate for strong collaboration between educators and community resources for post school transitions, noting that these relationships can create stability for parents and students. The knowledge of what is available was necessary to establish these collaborations.

8. Describe the information educators receive with accurate and up-to-date resource lists for services within the community.

Gauthier-Boudreault et al. (2017) voice the need for concrete documents and resources that can be provided to both educators and parents to determine the appropriate post school pathways and resources for those pathways. By asking this specifically to this group, the researcher worked to determine where there may be resource gaps. Educators in the state of Tennessee have voiced that they have very little access and training in regard to community resources, according to the Tennessee Department of Education (2019). This question was designed to determine if educators in Giles County feel the same.

9. Describe the TPSID programs that are available in the state of Tennessee.

Lombardi et al. (2018) discuss the increase in TPSID programs at colleges and universities that can provide postschool opportunities for students. There are five

available TPSID sites in Tennessee, and though they are all an hour or more from Giles County High School, some students may qualify and be able to move to these programs. It was hard to gauge who knew about those programs prior to this applied research.

10. What resources does Giles County provide to parents and guardians of students with intellectual disabilities during transition?

In the discussion of concrete resources, Gauthier-Boudreault et al. (2017) suggest that documents such as timelines for transition, as well as resources available can be extremely helpful to parents. Using this question, the researcher determined what services are being communicated to parents and guardians.

11. What types of programs are available to students with intellectual disabilities at Giles County High School?

Flowers et al (2018) found that by including both academic and functional skill training, students are better prepared for their transitions versus focusing on just one of the other. For example, practicing reading doubles as an employability skill for students who may need a task list to successfully complete their work. Additionally, developing functional life skills are noted by researchers to be instrumental in fostering independence and self-advocacy skills as a part of transition for students with intellectual disabilities (Rodriguez et al., 2017). Heavy focus on community-based instruction can lead to further honing these skills as students have the opportunity to practice, according to Rodriguez et al. (2017). Kaya (2018) found that student success can also be found when individuals have the opportunity to work or complete on-the-job training for school credit. Williams-Diehm et al. (2018)

explains that students with intellectual disability can greatly improve their employability skills through learning technology, while also preparing for postschool options that could include training programs where they would have an advantage through understanding technology. Understanding how this works in Giles County helped the researcher understand the overall transition process.

12. How would you improve the transition services for students with intellectual disabilities at Giles County High School in Giles County, Tennessee?

Interviews were recorded and were transcribed and coded to categorize information into themes, using an inductive approach that allowed the investigator to look for research-based themes in transition planning. Through identifying themes, the investigator was able to determine what improvements could be made to the current transition planning for students with intellectual disability at Giles County High School in order to be more effective.

Survey

The second sub-question for this project asked how quantitative survey data collected from at least 15 parents or guardians of students with intellectual disabilities currently enrolled at Giles County High School would improve transitions services for these students. The surveys consisted of 15 questions and were conducted virtually through Survey Monkey due to the current COVID-19 situation. The following research-based questions were used during the surveys.

1. What age is your student?
2. What age did transition planning begin for your student?
3. What is your student's gender?
4. What disabilities are associated with your student?

5. What are your student's postschool plans?

6. I am included in all meetings of the IEP and transition planning team.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

McKenzie et al. (2017) suggest there is a large need for school, community, and home collaboration, while Rodriguez et al. (2017) suggest that students with intellectual disability have an even greater need for all stakeholders to be involved. This was a repeat question from the interviews with administrators and teachers to determine if the actual happenings in school from the parent perspective align with the direction of the administration and educators.

7. I am included in the development of all postschool goals.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

Rodriguez et al. (2017) note that parents and families need to be involved in all decision and goal setting, not just simply be present in the meetings.

8. My student is involved in all meetings of the IEP and transition planning team.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

Mueller et al. (2012) show that self-advocacy and self-determination are indicative of positive results postschool, which includes the ability to speak up for one's needs. This can be demonstrated and taught during transition IEP and planning meetings, so this question was used to determine the extent of student learning in transition meetings.

9. My student is included in the development of all postschool goals.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

Mueller et al. (2012) show that self-advocacy and self-determination are indicative of positive results postschool, which includes the ability to speak up for one's needs. This can be demonstrated and taught during transition IEP and planning meetings, so this question was used to determine the extent of student learning in transition meetings.

10. My student has the opportunity to voice opinions related to transition planning.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

Mueller et al. (2012) show that self-advocacy and self-determination are indicative of positive results postschool, which includes the ability to speak up for one's needs. This can be demonstrated and taught during transition IEP and planning meetings, so this question was used to determine the extent of student learning in transition meetings.

11. My student participates in curriculum that is specific to transition and postschool experience, including vocational training.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

Flowers et al. (2018) found that students who have a combined curriculum in both academics and functionality have more success postschool than students who complete curriculum that are geared one way or the other.

12. I am provided with community resources available to my student for the transition process.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

McKenzie et al. (2017) discovered that sometimes this can be the bridge to the gap between school and postschool, as parents can develop relationships with community resources prior to the transition.

13. My student's social needs are met appropriately at school.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

Prince et al. (2019) found that students with social relationships often have better post school success. While it is not the school's responsibility to provide social relationships for the students, it is important that they are provided with the opportunity to create those relationships.

14. The information provided to me to aide with transition planning is helpful.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

McKenzie et al (2017) found that much of the stress felt by parents and caregivers of students with intellectual disability during transition stems from feeling immense pressure to make all the decisions. By asking this question, the investigator determined if parents and guardians in Giles County feel their needs are met.

15. My student is supported at school to effectively transition.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

Rodriguez et al. (2017) discovered from high school teachers that students with intellectual disabilities need more support in regard to handling personal issues, hygiene, and social situations. It was important to understand the view of parents in regard to student needs to help develop transition services that can be more effective.

The data provided by Survey Monkey were analyzed through descriptive statistics of frequency distribution. Survey data was also assessed in order to code and categorize information into themes, using an inductive approach that allowed the investigator to look for research-based themes in transition planning. Through identifying themes, the investigator was able to determine what improvements could be made to the current transition planning for students with intellectual disability at Giles County High School in order to be more effective.

Document Analysis

Documents in either hard copy or electronic format regarding transition services available to students with intellectual disabilities were gathered and analyzed by the researcher. Documents were examined using a frequency chart to provide insight on what types of resources are available to students with intellectual disability during transition in Giles County.

Summary

The purpose of this project was to improve transition services available to high school students with intellectual disabilities in Giles County, Tennessee. The problem was there is a lack of consistent transition planning in Giles County, Tennessee. Overall, the investigator collected data from stakeholders, including administrators, educators, and parents or guardians of current students in order to create a holistic picture of how transition planning is being handled at Giles County High School. The investigator focused on the process of transition planning at Giles County High School, including when it begins, who is included, and what is provided to parents. Specifically, the investigator identified what types of resources are available, and what resources are actually provided during transition planning. This provided the investigator with information on what needs are not being met by current transition services, and what can be improved to help students have better success during transition to post school opportunities.

3.0 FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this project was to improve transition services available to high school students with intellectual disabilities in Giles County, Tennessee. The problem was that there is a lack of consistent transition planning in Giles County, Tennessee. The findings in this section were obtained through interviews with district level administrators and special education classroom teachers at Giles County High School, surveys of parents or guardians of transition-aged students with intellectual disabilities in Giles County, and a document analysis of current transition resources in Giles County, Tennessee. Interviews were conducted first, followed by surveys, and then the document analysis to complete data collection. Data from interviews, surveys, and document analysis were then analyzed to determine themes among the reported information.

Description of Participants

This capstone project used administrators, educators, and parents as participants in order to collect qualitative and quantitative data in the form of interviews and surveys.

Interview Participants

The interviews were conducted with three Giles County school district level employees, along with four special educators at Giles County High School. Participants included Administrator One, Administrator Two, Administrator Three, Teacher One, Teacher Two, Teacher Three, and Teacher Four.

Administrator One has been an educator for over 20 years, serving as a classroom educator for 18 years before serving as an elementary school principal for seven years. She was selected as the district superintendent two years ago and has been instrumental in working to

overhaul special education. Administrator Two is a former special educator that oversees special education in Giles County, and is responsible for providing training for special educators.

Administrator Three is a newly appointed assistant director of special education in Giles County after spending 10 years in the special education classroom. She is responsible for maintaining parental involvement in special education.

Teacher One is a former mental health counselor with specialization in behavioral/emotional disorders and entered special education in Giles County two years ago after teaching five years in a different district. She teaches 9th – 12th grade students with intellectual disabilities, and regularly participates in transition-based instruction. Teacher Two instructs 9th – 12th graders in a transition-based setting and has been in his current position for two years. Prior to his current position, he was a special education instructional assistant for transition-aged students for three years and spent six years as an educator in a private school setting with transition-aged special education students.

Teacher Three is a special education teacher in her fifth year at Giles County High School, specializing in transition for students with intellectual disabilities. Additionally, she has previous work in inclusion settings. Teacher Four has over 20 years of experience in special education, including time in different states, and is a current special educator in 9th – 12th grade comprehensive development classes. She is also the career and technical education coordinator for special education at Giles County High School.

Survey Participants

For this project, 16 parents of students with intellectual disabilities at Giles County High School were surveyed. Ages of the students according to the parent surveyed ranged from 14-19, including six females, eight males, and two non-binary. Of the students with intellectual

disabilities, six parents indicated their student was also diagnosed with autism, while five were also diagnosed with ADHD. Five parents indicated that their student struggled with reading or math, and three noted an additional emotional/behavioral disorder.

Results

Interviews were conducted with district-level administrators and teachers from Giles County High School in order to find themes related to the problem of transition services for students with intellectual disabilities in Giles County. Several themes emerged from the qualitative analysis. Second, a quantitative survey was administered to help assess the problem of transition services for students with intellectual disabilities in Giles County. Finally, a document analysis was conducted to help assess the problem of transition services for students with intellectual disabilities in Giles County.

Sub-question 1

Sub-question one for this project was, “How would administrators and educators in an interview improve transition services for students with intellectual disabilities at Giles County High School in Giles County, Tennessee?” Interviews were conducted with district-level administrators from Giles County, and special education teachers at Giles County High School in order to find themes related to transition services for students with intellectual disabilities in Giles County. The themes uncovered in the qualitative analysis were transition planning, educator training, community resources, interagency collaboration, and postsecondary opportunities (see Table 1).

Table 1

Frequency of Codes

Codes	Frequency
Transition planning	17
Educator training/resources	13
Community resources	12
Agency support	11
Family involvement	9
Community-based learning	8
Postsecondary endeavors	6
IEP resources	3
Administration support	2
Assistive technology	1

Transition Planning. Both administrators and educators discussed transition planning and its beginnings upon the entrance of the high school, including vocational assessments and postsecondary goal setting. “We try to start early with postsecondary goals in the middle school, but we really dive into in the high school when they get to us,” said Teacher Three. All interviewees noted the team-based approach to transition planning with student and parent involvement, but also noted the lack of outside agency involvement. Teacher Three noted, “We have not been successful in having any agencies accepting an invitation to help us with transition

planning. Many of them tell us they just don't have the time."

Teacher Two noted that the use of an electronic IEP system has helped in creating an electronic portfolio that tracks past interactions and grade-levels in order to maintain consistency with students. Additionally, Teacher Two also discussed that only special educators and district-level employees have access to the electronic portfolio and IEP, which was viewed in a negative light because it eliminates parental access. Administrator Three discussed, however, that within the new district-level special education website, there are password-protected parental resources for specific information.

Teachers One, Two, and Three all indicated that there are opportunities for work-based learning and community-based instruction within the school district, but that community partners are hard to find. Teacher One and Teacher Four both participate in school-based enterprises to help with vocational skills training, though Teacher One indicated that they did not always have administrative support to conduct more vocational skills training or to have their students shadow different classrooms and jobs. "I just don't get a lot of support having my students participate in school events or activities that could benefit them," said Teacher One. However, Teacher One indicated that they did have administrative support for life skills training through transitioning the classroom to include a sink, kitchen, and laundry resources.

Educator Resources. Both administrators and educators indicated a lack of educator resources available to them in regard to transition planning, writing IEPs, and available community resources. The four teachers interviewed all indicated that Giles County school district provides some professional development opportunities, but they are limited. Teacher Three added that in four years of service, they have been provided one opportunity to participate in a district-level training. Additionally, the same four teachers indicate they have never been

invited to participate in training opportunities from the state of Tennessee. Specifically, Teacher Four noted that they have had to train themselves on new IEP technology, stating,

I had to self-teach myself. They held a training, and I can sit and listen all the time, but when I'm up here on Sunday afternoon for four hours trying to write an IEP. As a school district, I wish we could come together.

The four teachers at Giles County High School remarked that they are not provided with a specific set of resources for transition planning. The administrators pointed out that the school district has revitalized their special education resources website for both parents and teachers, though they also noted that it is still in the process of being updated to have current resources. Administrator Two specified, "We need to do a better job of training our teachers, making sure they are aware and have access to what they need."

Community Resources. When asked about community programs and resources for students with intellectual disabilities, Teacher Four stated,

I'm sure there are people in this county who would be willing to help. But right now, our students just go home. The Impact Center used to help some, but after COVID-19, they are closed. There is not a whole lot here.

Each interviewee credited living in a rural area to creating a large gap in school and community resources. Specifically, Teacher Four discussed a previous employment in an urban setting in which postschool and community services were readily available as compared to their current setting in which services do not exist.

Each interviewee discussed a large need for an increase in community resources. With the exception of two interviewees, the other five indicated they were not aware of any community resources. Additionally, Administrator One noted that their number one priority to

improve transition services in Giles County would be to advocate for more community resources and opportunities for community-based learning. Administrator Two said, “Even though we don’t have much control over what the community does, more accessibility to levels of support for students with intellectual disabilities would help our students greatly in transition. COVID-19 hit us really hard. The limited access we had is nearly gone.”

Interagency Collaboration. With the exception of the administrators, interviewees indicated that they were not aware of any agencies helping with transition planning. “We have a local representative with the Arc that we are working with in hopes to utilize their help and knowledge for transition-age kids in the future,” said Administrator Three, acknowledging a recent start in communication with the Arc of Tennessee.

Educators said they had never been successful implementing outside agencies. The educators noted that there are not currently any agencies with offices or branches in Giles County. Teacher Two spoke about knowing specific agencies from prior employment, but never experiencing their help in their two years at Giles County High School. Teacher Three noted, “We have not been successful in having any agencies accepting an invitation to help us with transition planning. Many of them tell us they just don’t have the time.”

Family Involvement and Support. All interviewees made mention that sometimes families in Giles County can lack in providing support for their students with intellectual disabilities. Teacher two specifically addressed that many parents and families are vocal about what they need when it comes to transition support, but struggle to follow through with participating. Special Education Administrator Two noted,

We are trying to work with the family engagement with the Arc. We recently conducted a parent information night, we didn’t have any parent involvement, but we are going to

continue to work to improve on the family engagement area of transition.

Interviewees added that families in Giles County struggle with predicaments that families in more populated areas might not face, including lack of transportation, internet, and support. Each interviewee discussed the hardships that families the area face in getting to resources that may be available in surrounding areas. The result of that, is what appears to be a lack of family support but is more a lack of having necessities met to access those resources. Additionally, Teacher Two mentioned that some families struggle with a technology gap because guardians are often grandparents or older family members that do not have the technological knowledge to search for resources or participate in online communities on top of the lack of internet.

Sub-question 2

Sub-question two for this project was, “How would survey data from parents of students with intellectual disabilities enrolled at Giles County High School improve transition services at Giles County High School in Giles County, Tennessee?” Surveys were conducted using a Likert scale with participation from 16 total parents or guardians of students with intellectual disabilities at Giles County High School. Three themes were identified, including transition planning, student involvement, and transition resources.

Transition Planning. Overall, survey participants indicated that 40% feel that their student is always supported in transition planning, and 50% felt that their student is always involved in curriculum that is specific to transition and postschool experience, which includes vocational training. However, 37.5% of participants felt that their student was only sometimes, rarely, or even never participating in appropriate transition curriculum. The most positive trends were within the involvement of parents and guardians in transition planning, as 87.5% of

respondents answered that they were always included in IEP and transition planning team meetings, and 68.75% indicated they were always included in development of postschool goals.

Student Involvement. Survey results showed the 68.75% of parents or guardians felt that their student was included in IEP and transition planning meetings often or always, leaving 31.25% of students sometimes or never included. Additionally, parents and guardians felt that 75% of their students were often or always included in the development of all postschool goals, providing an increase from simply being involved in the meetings. When inquired about student opportunity to voice opinions related to transition planning, the total remained 75% often or always involved, but there was an increase from the development of postschool goals, as parents or guardians responded the 56.25% of students always had opportunity to voice opinions compared to 50% developing postschool goals (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1

Q9 My student is included in the development of all postschool goals.

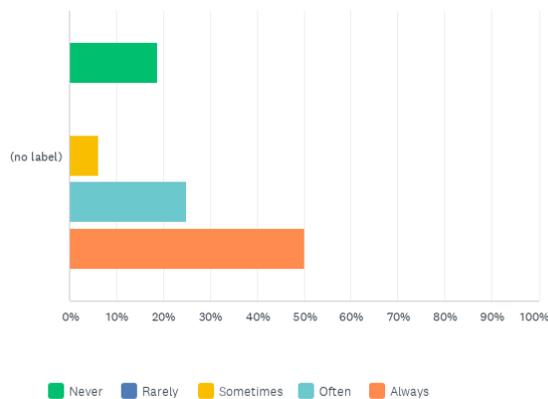
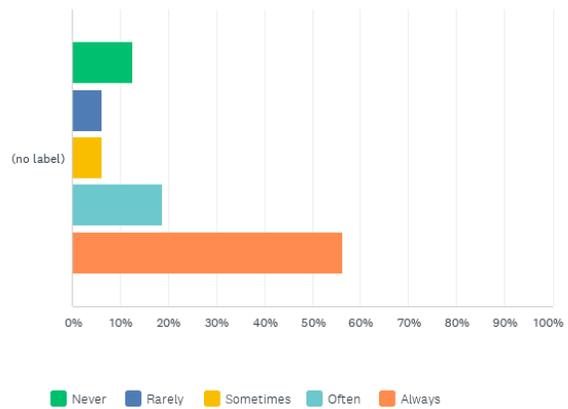


Figure 2

Q10 My student has the opportunity to voice opinions related to transition planning.



Transition Resources. When asked about community resources, 37.5% of participants responded that they had never been provided with community resources during transition planning. Out of the 50% that said they are often or always provided community resources, all respondents also noted that the information was provided was helpful to aide with transition planning (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3

Q12 I am provided with community resources available to my student for the transition process.

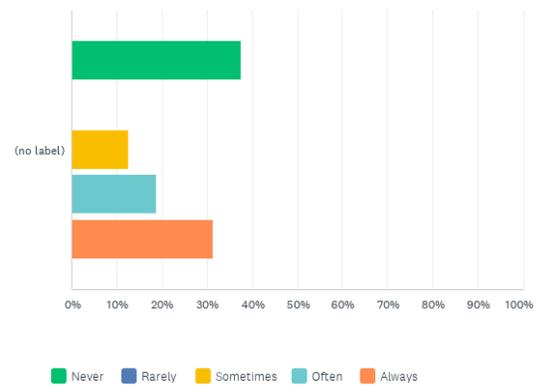
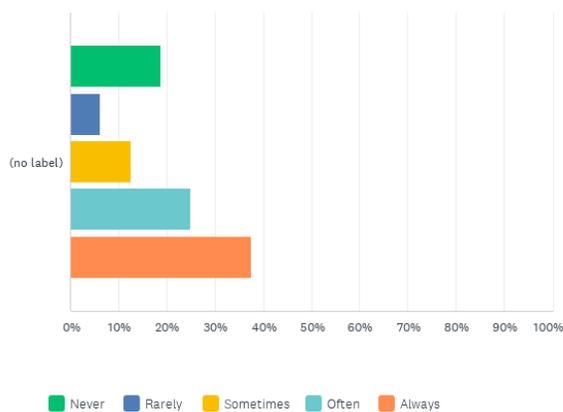


Figure 4

Q14 The information provided to me to aide with transition planning is helpful.



Sub-question 3

Sub-question three for this project was, “How would data from a document analysis improve transition services for students with intellectual disabilities in Giles County, Tennessee?” This sub-question was investigated through a document analysis of available transition resources to students with intellectual disabilities and their families in Giles County, Tennessee. The document analysis was performed through documents or websites that are provided to citizens of Giles County with individuals with intellectual disabilities in transition age. Most resources are provided through Giles County High School or from state-sponsored organizations. Through a frequency chart, three themes emerged from the document analysis, including a lack of community resources, interagency collaboration, and statewide resources (see Table 2).

Table 2

Frequency of Codes

Codes	Frequency
Statewide resources	7
Job readiness	3
Job placement	3
Middle TN resources	3
Located in Giles County	0
School-based resources	1
Job coaching	0
Community-led resources	1

Community Resources. After analyzing available documents, both paper and electronic forms, it was difficult to locate transition resources based in Giles County. A document provided by Vocational Rehabilitation listed 95 resources for the state of Tennessee, including which counties they serve. Of the 95, the five that indicated that they serve Giles County turned out to be five services that are no longer available or that don't truly serve the county. Two of those five are regional services throughout the southeast that do not have any local offices or representatives. Additionally, one resource was formerly in service in the county but was closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and never reopened. The website for that particular service indicated that there would be future offerings but none that currently exist. One service that was

listed does exist in Giles County, but this particular branch offers only mental health services, not the equivalent transition services that other branches provide. The final resource has a representative in a nearby county, which is a 31-mile commute but did not actually have someone serving in Giles County.

Despite the lack in services being offered in the county, there was a community-led resource that developed through local parents of students in transition. The resource is a Facebook-based group maintained by local parents that provides and shares information from statewide trainings, resources, and activities for parents of students in transition.

Interagency Collaboration. Through the document analysis, interagency collaboration emerged as a pathway for many students and families in transition that has not yet extended to Giles County. TransitionTN.org is a newly developed statewide resource that connects Tennessee students with intellectual disabilities with postschool opportunities. Additionally, the website connects those students to resources to help fund those opportunities, along with student and family support. TNPathfinder.org is a second resource that supports interagency collaboration for students with intellectual disabilities, providing a search engine for Tennessee students and families for all types of transition and disability resources. TNPathfinder.org supports using this tool to help individuals connect different agencies that might be of service to them during transition. This search engine does not currently result in any local resources for Giles County citizens.

Statewide Resources. An emerging theme through document analysis was that the state of Tennessee provides many resources for individuals with intellectual disabilities during transition even though the resources do not exist locally in Giles County. The document analysis resulted in at least seven statewide resources provided to students in transition, including three

regionally based resources for Middle Tennessee, in which Giles County falls.

Note: The central question will be answered in Section Five.

Discussion of Results

The findings of this applied research supported much of the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Section 1.0. Though Giles County High School strives to provide effective transition planning with research-based practices, the results indicated that there are very few resources for educators and families alike. Along with a lack of concrete documents and resources for parents and families, educators were found to be lacking in training for transition, and community resources are slim. Despite a desire to provide work-based learning and on-the-job training to increase postschool success, Giles County does not currently have any representatives in the area to help provide these services. The need for these resources is not only supported by the literature, but also by the theoretical review that described the need for a team and resources that go beyond just the educators and their families. The findings discussed in this section created a space for several solutions, and several opportunities to improve the transition experiences for individuals with intellectual disabilities in Giles County.

Narrative Review Discussion

Research-based transition practices include specific strategies that have been instrumental in creating success for individuals with intellectual disabilities in their postschool endeavors. One of those strategies is beginning transition planning earlier than the IDEA-required age of 16, in which research confirms is often too late (Davis & Garfield, 2021). Both parents and guardians, as well as educators and administrators, in Giles County all agree that transition planning appropriately begins for students with intellectual disabilities at age 14. This allows the student, families, and educators to have ample time to assess strengths and weaknesses, assess

vocational goals, survey students about postschool goals, and develop appropriate goals, in which all parties agree that this takes place. This also allows time for the student to adapt to participation in their IEP and transition meetings if they have not been previously involved, as well as develop skills needed to voice their own opinions.

Much of the narrative review focused upon the role of the student within transition planning, especially when discussing and setting student goals. Despite research by Johnson et al. (2020) that suggested that nearly 40% of students have no role in transition planning, the survey data through this applied research found that 68.75% of parents or guardians felt that their student was included in transition or IEP team meeting. This indicates that Giles County is working to achieve more inclusion of their students with intellectual disabilities. The survey data from this applied research also found that 75% of parents or guardians indicate that their student was included in transition goal setting. Howard et al (2020) discussed that this type of participation results in an increase in self-advocacy and self-determination, which is a positive predictor for post-school success. Survey results, along with participant interviews, indicate that these practices are most of the time currently in place in Giles County.

Another practice that aligned with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and independent living skills involved communication skills, specifically within IEP and transition planning. Howard et al (2020) described that using instructional videos, visual aids, and guided question sheets can help with student participation. Though these types of strategies were not discussed by any interviewees or survey participants, interviewees did indicate that use of interest inventories and vocational assessments to help students determine their voice within their transition planning. This practice, supported by Howard et al. (2020), was found common among all teachers interviewed, with evidence that parents were involved in helping to facilitate such

inventories. This helped the students understand appropriate postschool goals, and also helped educators and families have appropriate conversations with students about their goals. In turn, this lays the foundation for self-advocacy and independent choice-making skills, supported by Blustein et al. (2016).

Postschool success, however, can also be determined by vocational opportunities during transition for students with intellectual disabilities. Such opportunities are not available to Giles County students with intellectual disability due to a lack of community resources based upon administrator and teacher interviews. While school-based enterprises are available, there are not any current work for credit or job coaching services provided by the school district to support this type of training.

A need for instruction in skills that support independent living is indicated by previous research, with an emphasis on functional living and life skills (Rodriguez et al., 2017). In order to be the most successful, Rowe et al. (2020) suggested that using scaffolded hands-on learning is best suited for these types of skills, which then translate into practicing such skills within the community. For example, learning to identify coins, then learn their value, and then implementing cost of items in a restaurant or store could then be practiced in a community setting. Administrator One specifically discussed a lack of community-based instruction for this type of learning, noting that this is both a result of the lack of initiation from the school district and a lack of community partners.

The use of technology within transition planning has continued to emerge as a best practice, particularly as a result of COVID-19. Specifically, Rowe et al. (2020) discovered that the use of immersive videos to assess students at home or during on-the-job training, virtual resource opportunities, and instructional technology could all assist in transition planning and

instruction. Though assistive technology was discussed with interviewees, there was little implementation in technology outside of communication devices. With the continued discussion of a struggle in community resources, such technology could be beneficial in accessing resources without having to worry about transportation.

Technology-based practices have also emerged as successful, especially when creating IEPs and transition plans. Research has discovered that electronic IEPs and transition plans can teach students and families how to keep an electronic portfolio after they leave their secondary education (McBurney et al., 2017). Giles County educators discussed that the electronic portfolio is available, but it does not allow for parental access which prevents the parents from learning how to utilize the technology. In conjunction, there is not access to the electronic portfolio and IEP plan for the students, so the responsibility of keeping track of all electronic documents falls to the educators. This creates a situation in which the student isn't learning how to utilize technology, the parent or guardian is also eliminated from the practice, and it adds another responsibility to plate of the teacher.

The role of the educators within transition planning has been determined to be one of the most important pieces of transition planning outside of family members by pre-existing research (Carter et al., 2020). Research also shows that these roles are even more important in rural settings such as Giles County, Tennessee, because of limited transition resources, transportation options, employment opportunities, and disability-related services (Carter et al., 2020). Through interviews, surveys, and document analyses, this has all proved true in Giles County with little to no resources outside of the school system, leaving educators in transition-age classrooms to be the sole source of information for students and families. Without outside agencies within a 50-mile radius, educators find themselves communicating the knowledge they have, which is also

limited in some capacities.

Wehmeyer (2015) discussed the limited amount of training and development available for educators working with individuals with intellectual disabilities in transition, specifically indicating how this leads to struggles in instruction. Specifically, the Tennessee Department of Education (2013) noted that over half of educators in Tennessee reported a lack in information tied to community resources. Educators in these positions in Giles County echoed these statements, indicating that they receive little training on transition from their district. Only one teacher recalled being offered opportunities for transition-based instruction from the Tennessee Department of Education. This supports this slight in developing educators to be prepared to help students transition, and without any outside resources within the county, educators are left with an even heavier role during this transition period.

Despite the struggles in transition-based training for educators in Giles County, the state of Tennessee has developed online resources such as Transition Tennessee and Tennessee Pathfinder to help fill in gaps in professional development. TennesseeWorks provides a place of resources for individuals with intellectual disabilities to obtain employment, while the TN Inclusive Higher Education Alliance offers up information in regard to postsecondary education opportunities. Rowe et al. (2020) discussed the importance of creating access to online training and development when these gaps arise, and how these resources can be used not only for educators, but also for students and families. This also addresses recent issues with in-person opportunities due to COVID-19 but can also help access those in rural communities such as Giles County.

The largest gap in Giles County for individuals with intellectual disabilities, their families, and educators during transition has proved to be a lack of resources that would allow

for interagency collaboration. Both Rowe et al. (2020) and Carter et al. (2020) discussed the specific barriers to successful interagency collaboration in rural communities, including fewer service providers or agencies than in an urban setting. Both studies, however, discussed that rural communities can provide a unique strength in relationship ties that urban communities might not be able to offer. Interviewees expressed the desire for close-knit community ties to offer students with intellectual disabilities more postschool options, but also expressed the struggle in finding those opportunities within the community. The literature suggested that the involvement of other agencies and community partners increase student involvement because it creates a team situation that is empowering (Flowers et al., 2018; Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2015).

Additionally, the interviewees discussed the lack of agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) that can be helpful in connecting individuals with disabilities to postschool opportunities, as well as providing job coaching and vocational training. In fact, research has shown that nearly 50% of individuals with intellectual disabilities are successful in postschool endeavors when partnered with VR. Teacher Three noted that she had several students that had applied for VR services that never received them. Furthermore, she voiced that she had made multiple attempts to contact VR that were unsuccessful. Through document analysis, VR services were discovered in Tennessee, but without a representative located in Giles County or within 50 miles. This was common among many agencies with availability to serve Giles County, and further supported that not only does representation lack, the involvement of those agencies in transition planning does not exist. Davis and Garfield (2021) specifically discussed that agency availability is not enough, elaborating that agencies should be participants in transition planning in order to obtain the correct services and follow through with the transition plan postschool.

Through educators and community resources, McKenzie et al. (2017) also found that students with intellectual disabilities and their families need formal support versus just a helping hand. When interviewed, administrators indicated that they have recently worked to create a more concrete support system for parents in the Giles County during transition. Administrators described a recent family night to introduce Tennessee ARC resources that might be helpful, which resulted in zero attendance. In retrospect, the administrators noted that since this support has not existed previously in the county, they understood that it may take some time to bridge the gap as they continue to work towards a more supportive environment. Specifically, Gauthier-Boudreault et al. (2017) discussed a need for concrete materials, timetables, and documents, in which the Giles County school district has worked to provide in their recent overhaul of their special education website. Despite this, there is still a lack of local resources as described in the document analysis, which continues to leave a gap in support.

It was also found that the focus of postschool options for students with intellectual disabilities was on vocational options versus more education or certificate programs. There was no knowledge of the five TPSID programs that exist in the state of Tennessee for individuals with intellectual disabilities to attend postsecondary education. Such gaps were described by Blustein et al. (2016), who noted some gaps for families are derived from their lack of knowledge of options. Specifically in Giles County, educators themselves don't have the knowledge to pass along to parents and families when it comes to postschool options. This leaves families feeling distress about the future, which in turn can increase anxiety, depression, and the ability to help support their student (McKenzie et al., 2017).

Theoretical Review Discussion

Through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, importance is placed on each environmental level associated with each child or student, including the micro and meso systems that directly affect the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Accompanying the first levels, the exosystem not directly associated with the individual, but affecting their operation, would include the availability of resources. With a limited circle in Giles County, individuals with intellectual disabilities in transition to postschool endeavors could become difficult to navigate. Despite this, the macrosystem, which refers to larger decision-making entities, is intact with the support of TPSID opportunities, Federal Pell Grant available to postsecondary education for individuals with intellectual disabilities, and the Tennessee STEP UP scholarship to provide additional funding for postsecondary work.

Strndova & Cumming (2014) described the need for a holistic approach during this transition time, which would include the student, school, family, and community, supporting Bronfenbrenner's (1979) system. However, Giles County students begin to feel limiting effects of their system beginning at the mesosystem with little access to job coaches, employers, VR counselors, etc., and continue to feel such limitations in their exosystem with a lack of appropriate resources. While the macrosystem level has many opportunities for students, the meso- and exosystem gaps create a situation that eliminate the information to be communicated to Giles County students and families. Left to help the student work towards postschool success are very simply the families and educators who don't have the knowledge they need, opening a large gap for an unsuccessful experience.

Summary

The purpose of this applied study was to improve transition services available to students with intellectual disability in Giles County, Tennessee. Through provided literature and current

research in Giles County, it is evident that there are gaps in transition planning and resources for individuals with intellectual disabilities. It has come to light that the state of Tennessee is working diligently to provide more avenues for individuals with intellectual disabilities to succeed in postschool opportunities. It is also evident that educators in Giles County working with transition-aged students with intellectual disabilities are also working diligently to set their students up for postschool success.

The gap arises in the lack of resources, community partners, and availability of appropriate agencies specifically in Giles County. This creates a disconnect for individuals with intellectual disabilities with postschool success, while also creates a heavy burden for educators to carry as the only service on the frontlines of transition. These findings support the need for an increase in resources and transition-based training in Giles County to create opportunities for success.

4.0 SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

Overview

The purpose of this project was to improve transition services available to high school students with intellectual disabilities in Giles County, Tennessee. The problem was that there is a lack of consistent transition planning in Giles County, Tennessee. Based upon data collected in this applied research, four proposed solutions would be offered to improve transition planning in Giles County. The solutions offered sought to provide opportunities to increase training for administrators and special educators in Giles County, while also providing opportunities to create community connections to develop more resources. The applied research indicated that these were the two weakest areas of transition planning in Giles County, much in part due to the rural area in which Giles County is located. Opportunities sought were able to create solutions that helped eliminate the rural location as a barrier, by seeking online-based training and paths to connect agencies, community partners, educators, and parents and families.

Restatement of the Problem

The problem was that there is a lack of consistent transition planning in Giles County, Tennessee.

Proposed Solution to the Central Question

The central question was, “How can transition services for students with intellectual disabilities be improved at Giles County High School in Giles County, Tennessee?” The proposed solution to the central question involves several steps to further educate teachers on the availability of postschool opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities, as well as involve community partners to help provide additional postschool opportunities in Giles County, Tennessee. In order to accomplish this solution, administrators and special educators that are

involved in transition in Giles County would be required to attend two virtual trainings through Transition Tennessee, attend the Southeast Postsecondary Education Alliance conference in 2022, and host a series of three community conversations with community partners in order to establish a working relationship. In addition, the proposed solution would require administrators to obtain information on using EdPlan Connect to increase parental and student involvement within the Easy IEP system.

During a time in which in-person trainings are limited, Transition Tennessee (transitiontn.org) has created a multitude of opportunities to obtain virtual trainings that are relevant to transition in Tennessee (Tennessee Department of Education et al., 2021). For example, the two most recent trainings provided by Transition Tennessee covered topics on work-based learning and the use of electronic portfolios in transition (Tennessee Department of Education et al., 2021). Both topics were mentioned by interviewees, including remarks by Teacher Two who stated that Easy IEP is the only electronic record-keeping that is done in Giles County. All four teachers indicated that they rarely attended meaningful training, and only one teacher mentioned having been offered training from the state.

By requiring the attendance of two trainings through Transition Tennessee as a piece of the proposed solution, educators could choose from any of the monthly topics offered virtually to increase their knowledge where they feel the weakest. Additionally, all educators would be required to attend a different training, so that more information is obtained and then shared within the department. This would not only create learning opportunities, but it would also spark connections with others in the state of Tennessee in special education or other collaborating agencies that could provide more resources to Giles County.

Creating these connections would increase the likelihood of obtaining more resources.

Carter et al. (2020) described that collaborative professional development helps not only educators, but also other service providers and agencies determine how they can be more effective in collaboration. Should educators in Giles County make connections with outside agencies during such trainings, outside agencies might be more in tune with what is needed to be more successful in Giles County.

Rowe et al. (2020) suggested that specifically for rural communities, online training and resources can help educators fill their knowledge voids. By requiring two trainings, educators would have the option to attend trainings that are convenient for them, without continuing to overload their already full plates. An additional effect of requiring training through Transition Tennessee would be that educators would have access to family resources that they could provide to students and their families. For example, Transition Tennessee houses a Family Tip Sheet that could serve as a concrete transition resource (Tennessee Department of Education et al., 2021). This supports Gauthier-Boudreault et al. (2017) who suggested that concrete documents are imperative to supporting families. Transition Tennessee offers accounts for family members, as well as students themselves, so becoming more versed on the options offered, administrators and educators would be prepared to help students and their families sign up for accounts and navigate the available resources.

While available trainings vary in content, allowing for many options for required trainings, Transition Tennessee also offers virtual transition fairs with various topics, such as inclusive higher education programs, independent living resources, and employment programs and resources. These “fairs” provide up-to-date information on what communities and schools across Tennessee are doing in the realm of transition and could serve as a place to discover ideas for Giles County. They could also provide more access to resources across the state. These fairs

would be considered an option for one of the two required trainings.

Rodriguez et al. (2017) noted that communication and collaboration are among the most common disparities among school, home and the community as reported by teachers themselves. Teachers and administrators in Giles County echoed this with statements that suggested there is a gap with communication information with parents outside of regular IEP and transition meetings. Suggesting that administrators explore the option of EdPlan Connect to combine with their Easy IEP could help eliminate difficulties in communication. EdPlan Connect is operated through the same company that produces Easy IEP and is designed to combine both products to allow for communication with parents, other agencies, and additional stakeholders, including the ability to create documents, upload documents, and obtain permissions or update service information (Public Consulting Group, Inc., 2021). Public Consulting Group (2021) also notes that EdPlan Connect can help with progress monitoring and encouraging family engagement.

Strndova and Cumming (2014) noted that connecting families with more communication empowers them to feel more involved with transition planning. With the knowledge that electronic portfolios are often used postschool to track records and house documents, this would prepare both students and their families for another aspect of transition (McBurney et al., 2017). In addition, this could create a practice that allows educators to communicate with families, service providers, and additional community stakeholders, if necessary, should community conversations result in potential work-for-credit placements or community-based instruction.

If community conversations led to any better connections with agencies such as VR or Tennessee Department of Education resources, these stakeholders would also have the opportunity to weigh in through EdPlan Connect. This could eliminate the barrier to not having agencies located in Giles County. Even though these agencies still might not have the ability to

attend IEP or transition planning meetings in person, EdPlan Connect could allow for their input to be communicated to all team members and information to be discussed during IEP or transition planning.

When asked about TPSID opportunities in Tennessee, there was not an administrator or educator who had heard of this type of postsecondary education opportunity for individuals with intellectual disabilities, despite having five programs in the state of Tennessee. To address this, a solution would be to have special educators at Giles County High School and special education administrators attend the Southeast Postsecondary Education Alliance (SEPSEA) conference to be held at Auburn University during the days of June 23-25, 2022. The conference, which is held each summer at a different southeastern institution of higher education, discusses in detail the innerworkings of TPSID programs in the southeast and could provide a wealth of knowledge for educators in Giles County.

Specifically, the conferences would provide not only knowledge, but connections to TPSID programs and other agencies. In 2021, the conference specifically addressed Assessment of Transition Programs, VR Success, and Cultivating Self-Determination (SEPSEA, 2021). This would not only address TPSID opportunities, but also current best-practices that lead to successful transition. By participating in the entire Southeast Postsecondary Education Alliance, administrators and educators would also have the opportunity to access out-of-state programs, should they have students that are a better fit for these programs. This would further relationships with transition professionals to aid in providing resources for students and families.

For example, Vanderbilt's Next Steps program just added a residential component to their TPSID program, but University of Alabama and Clemson University both have longstanding residential programs for students with intellectual disabilities (Institute for

Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston, 2021). By attending SEPSEA, administrators and educators would have access to the leaders in those programs should they have a student who is able to attend a more advanced program. This increases the opportunities for postschool education outside of just Tennessee for students in Giles County.

Researchers have found that nearly a quarter of students with disabilities live in rural communities which creates additional struggles, especially with community connections (Carter et al., 2020). Haber et al. (2016) suggested that increasing community collaboration could provide the additional support needed for these students. Administrator One specifically named community-based instruction as their number one way to improve transition in Giles County, Tennessee. While other administrators and educators also supported the increase in community collaboration, many questioned whether their community would be willing to be involved. Teacher Three felt that there could be overwhelming community support but was hesitant to know how to create that scenario.

In order to address the lack of community support and resources, hosting three community conversations, as described by Schultz et al. (2021) in other rural Tennessee counties, would be an additional proposed solution. Bumble et al. (2017) described the use of community conversations in order to create pathways for postschool opportunities specific to the communities in which the conversations are held versus creating an overall framework that may not work for individual communities. This could give voice to not only the families and students within Giles County, but also voices to needs of the educators for more training and information and desires among the community. This could also create an opportunity to reach out to the representatives from organizations such as VR to attend and establish a working relationship with Giles County.

Included in community conversations would be the special education administrators and teachers, family members of students with disabilities, and potential local partners, such as potential employers, community leaders, and potential community-based instruction site leaders. This would allow for conversations to exist between those who know what is needed for students with disabilities and those who know the community well and what it could offer. Schutz et al. (2021) described success from 30–60-minute community conversation opportunities that operated in a round table discussion in small groups. The focus of each community conversation would address specific questions and would build into a concrete planning session by the third conversation.

The framework for the community conversations would vary slightly from researched community conversations in that they would be planned to last about 90 minutes. This would give the opportunity for a welcome and a short presentation on what the purpose the community conversation serves. The conversations would include a three-group round table discussion format, allowing 15 minutes for the discussion of each of the three questions and then a culminating discussion. The final discussion would give all attendees the opportunity to highlight the best idea that they heard during the conversation, as well as offer any pertinent information such as additional invitations that need to be extended or ideas for future discussion.

For the first community conversation, the administrators would focus on three of their most pressing questions for community members, dividing the participants into three groups to discuss each question before regrouping for a collective discussion of ideas. Based upon this applied research, the initial three questions should focus on potential opportunities for community-based instruction, potential employment opportunities postschool, and potential partnerships with the two higher-education institutions in the community. The culminating

discussion at the end would also present an opportunity for those in attendance to suggest any other recommended participants for the following conversations.

The second community conversation would be guided by the results of the first conversation but would follow the same type of operation. This would allow for the same participants to attend, but also an opportunity to extend invitations to any others that needed to be involved. The additional invited parties would likely be derived from the first community conversation. The focus for the second conversation would be on three specific questions that arose from the first conversation or that also needed to be addressed. For example, one question could focus on what is needed to be done in schools to better prepare students with intellectual disabilities for employment. This could potentially spur discussion about some of the reservations that community members may have about hiring individuals with intellectual disabilities and what educators could do to better prepare from the employer perspective.

The third community conversation would focus on implementation of discussed ideas from the first two gatherings. This conversation would be indented to discuss framework for community-based instruction, postschool employment, and higher education partnerships that may have evolved from the conversations. This would also allow an opportunity for the participants to discuss if there are specific needs from larger agencies that intend to serve Giles County. For example, if it was identified in community conversations that students and their families needed an overview of the services of VR or needed an opportunity to submit their application for services, a VR representative could be invited to Giles County to do so. This would engage VR with Giles County and also eliminate a transportation barrier for those withing Giles County.

This would also give time to identify needs within the school district from outside

perspectives among the community. For example, if there are community members that are willing to support students for postschool employment, but are worried about vocational training prior to employment, the district would be able to inquire about hiring a dedicated instructor for vocational skills training or an educator that serves as a job coach. If this type of scenario came to light through community conversations, the district could better move forward to improve transition and advocate for new positions or funding with more evidence of a need to be met through such additions.

The third conversation would also serve as an opportunity to create task forces or planning committees that involve community members in relation to transition. Through identified needs, community members could partner with educators to plan for implementation and also discuss opportunities for continued meetings and collaboration.

Specifically, educators addressed that students with intellectual disabilities do not have employment options in Giles County. While this may be currently true, community conversations could help identify community partners in which there may indeed be opportunities. In addition, these conversations could be used to help educate the community on how they can be a part of transition for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

In Giles County alone, two postschool education options exist though neither provide opportunities for students' intellectual disabilities. However, community conversations could include both institutions (the University of Tennessee Southern and Tennessee College of Applied Technology – Pulaski) and involve conversations about how those institutions might aid in training individuals with intellectual disabilities or help provide curriculum that might allow Giles County educators to establish more vocational training.

Transition Tennessee provides a detailed pathway to hosting community conversations,

including resources on how to plan, how to contact community members, and what topics to discuss (Tennessee Department of Education et al., 2021). This would give guidance to how to host the conversations, as well as how to publicize and communicate with appropriate community stakeholders.

Resources and Funds Needed

In order to successfully complete recommendations for Giles County transition services, much of the resources are already available. Virtual trainings through Transition Tennessee are free of charge to educators once they create a free account, and many of their trainings are recorded if they are offered during school hours. This would mean that attending trainings would not take away from school hours and would not require any substitute teachers or extra time planning for time away from the classroom. In order to help ensure that trainings are completed, a \$50 stipend per training, only for the two required trainings, would be delegated to those who followed through with their participation. If all three administrators and all four educators followed through with their participation, this would total \$700 in stipends. Additionally, the SEPSEA conference is offered during the summer, so it would also not require substitute teachers. The cost for the SEPSEA conference is \$75 per person, totaling \$525 in registration fees if all four Giles County High School special education teachers and all three Giles County special education administrators attended. In addition, the host hotel is \$139 per night for a rough total of \$1200 which would include three hotel rooms for the six females and an extra room for the male teacher, all for two nights. Including travel and food, the SEPSEA conference could potentially cost the district around \$2500.

Because the addition of EdPlan Connect to the current Easy IEP subscription requires financial information and quotes from the company that is not accessible to the researcher, the

cost of this aspect of the solution is unknown. The company does not provide pricing information, so this would be up to the district to explore.

Community conversations would not hold a true cost, except for materials provided at the gatherings such as refreshments. Community conversations would be held after business hours to allow for community partners to attend, along with eliminating the need for substitutes or additional substitute planning materials. The conversations would be developed to send invitations to participants which would be done electronically to help save on costs. Giles County's central office borders the campus of the University of Tennessee Southern, which could potentially allow for a space to hold the community conversations that is central to the county. This could be a potential free resource to hold the conversations, however, they could also be held at Giles County High School so that community members and partners could have a hands-on look at the in-school resources provided to the students for vocational training. Both special education administrators and all four educators would be required to serve on the planning team for community conversations and would be required to attend at least one of the first two conversations and the final conversation. They would be compensated for the two required conversations with a total of \$150 stipend. This would cost a total of \$900.

With the exception of the unknown potential cost of the addition of EdConnect to the Easy IEP software, the total cost for the suggested solutions would total \$4100 for the school district.

Roles and Responsibilities of Stakeholders

In order to implement the solutions described, all three administrators and all four educators would be required to attend the virtual trainings provided by Transition Tennessee. To share information received from different trainings, the administrators would be responsible for

developing a specific meeting time during each semester that would allow for collaboration and future planning if connections had been made to create more resources. The administrators would also be responsible for planning and funding the attendance at the SEPSEA conference in order to increase educator knowledge and training in transition. The primary function of the educators would be to participate in the trainings and share knowledge at each collaboration meeting.

A designated administrator would be assigned to research and negotiate the addition of EdPlan Connect to the already existing contract with Easy IEP to determine its feasibility. Specifically, administrator two would take the lead on inquiring about the use of EdPlan Connect. One of her designated responsibilities was described as increasing and implementing technology use as necessary. Due to this, it would make the most sense to have her continue in that regard by working to inquire about this add-on. EdPlan offers a number of services aside from EasyIEP and Connect, and it would be beneficial for administrators to understand any other possible uses for the platform. After making contact with EdPlan and determining the best usage moving forward, the administrator would need to follow the district protocol for negotiating contracts and making purchases. Essentially, the district process would dictate the timeline of implementation should the software be deemed budget appropriate and useful to increasing technology and parental involvement in IEP and transition planning.

In reference to community conversations, the role of the administrators would be to schedule the community conversations, using educator input on potential community partners to invite, needs from the community, and benefits of becoming a community partner. Both administrators and educators would need to be present at community conversations to facilitate the small-group conversations and take notes at in each group. Administrators and educators

would be required to attend one of the first two community conversations, with all attending the final conversation. The administrator present at each conversation would be responsible for the welcome and opening presentation, as well as serving as the final discussion lead. The group would need to use specific scheduling to make sure at least one administrator and two teachers were present at all conversations.

Transition Tennessee provides a framework for creating successful community conversations, including potential participants (see Appendix B), sample community conversation questions (see Appendix C), and event checklists (see Appendix D). Utilizing resources from previous successes in other counties would help lessen the work of each individual and also provide a pathway to planning the events.

Timeline

Overall, the proposed solutions would begin during the second semester of this school year, January 2022 (See Appendix E for complete timeline). This would allow administrators and educators to begin immediate steps to creating better transition for students with intellectual disabilities in Giles County, and also determine the immediate impact on transition services. Administrators and educators would be required to attend their first training during the semester, giving them from January to May to attend a virtual training, and allowing for a collaboration meeting during the post-planning period of time after school releases for the summer. This would also allow for time to begin training before attending the SEPSEA conference during June, 2022. The second training would be required during the fall semester of the 2022-23 school year.

Research into accessing EdPlan Connect would need to take place beginning immediately so that this service could be provided to students and families beginning in August, 2022 for the new school year if deemed feasible. Additionally, the first community conversation would need

to take place before the release of school for the year so that any potential immediate community partners could be established prior to the 2022-23 school year.

Solution Implications

The implications of the proposed solutions would provide both benefits and detriments to the stakeholders involved. The overall funding of the solutions would be minimal, with the exception of the unknown EdPlan Connect cost. However, given that the research can be conducted now to determine the cost, this would give the district time to prepare for the upcoming school year should it be determined to be feasible. Aside from EdPlan Connect, the SEPSEA conference is the most expensive piece of the solution, totaling roughly \$2500.

The actual trainings, conference, and community conversations would allow administrators and educators to gather resources and knowledge as they prepare to improve transition for students with intellectual disabilities. This creates a positive benefit to not only the administrators and educators in preparedness, but also to serve as better resources to parents and families. The negative implications of the trainings, conference, and community conversations would likely be the time spent to not only plan, but also actually attend the events. Because the trainings are designed to be offered at times when educators aren't teaching, this would take away from their own personal time to train. Additionally, attending the conference would require personal time, along with community conversations that would need to be held after hours so that everyone could attend. This would essentially require quite a bit of the administrators' and educators' own time, despite understanding the positive implications of participating in extra work.

Community conversations could potentially impact Giles County in a massive way, by not only providing vocational and postschool opportunities, but also eradicate some barriers

specific to the rural area. For example, creating such positions or opportunities in Giles County could erase a need to travel out of the county for services, eliminating the barrier of transportation that many students with intellectual disabilities experience. In addition, these community conversations could also lead to direct lines of communication between community services and the education system which could take some of the load off of the need for outside agencies. If community partners and businesses were willing to work with the school districts to provide vocational opportunities and area technical training facilities were willing to help train students with intellectual disabilities, agencies that provide job coaching or training might not be necessary in some cases. This would mean that the lack of those agencies in Giles County would have less of a negative impact on students with intellectual disabilities.

On the contrary, the timeline of the events plans for all proposed solutions to be completed within a calendar year, so the administrators and educators would have complete knowledge of the time they are being required to commit to the solutions. In order to be cognizant of the time required, potential recommendations to administrators would be to provide a stipend for the educators or compensation time to put towards future paid time off. This might impact the financial implications for the solutions; however, it could help offset the weight the educators might carry. An additional possibility would be to determine if extra professional development credit could be given to educators depending on the state requirement or licensure purposes.

Evaluation Plan

To determine the effectiveness of the proposed solutions, formative evaluations would be implemented throughout the calendar year. The district would have access to the survey results from parents and families and would then administer surveys to parents and families at the end of

the 2021-22 school year, the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, and at the one-year mark of beginning the solutions (see Appendix E). Utilizing parent and family surveys would allow the district to understand the implications of their ongoing trainings.

Additionally, the community conversations would serve as evaluations in multiple ways, first by providing clear views of what is available at the first community conversation to how those opportunities have developed by the third community conversation. This would allow the district's administrators to understand and evaluate what resources have been developed and also what resources are still lacking. This would be done by an assigned administrator conducting an additional document analysis and comparing it to the initial document analysis in order to seek out increases in resources.

Community conversations would also provide the opportunity to give surveys to participants to provide an increase in data gathered from the conversations themselves and from parent and family survey data. These surveys would give the administrators and educators an opportunity to understand how stakeholders viewed the actual event and also their views on resources within the community. These would be provided at the end of each community conversation. A sample survey developed by Transition Tennessee is provided in Appendix F (Tennessee Department of Education et al., 2021). This sample could be used to develop a survey specific to Giles County.

Summary

The results of this applied research highlighted many opportunities to improve transition planning in Giles County. This included offering solutions to a need for increased educator knowledge in transition, providing both virtual and in-person training to fit the needs of a rural school district. Seeking an increase in convenient training opportunities addressed many of the

concerns voiced by administrators and educators that described a lack in transition planning information and education. This focus on improving educator transition knowledge would also be two-fold by molding special educators in Giles County into additional resources for parents and families of students with intellectual disabilities during their time of transition, creating a true team approach. An additional facet to proposing development offerings would also allow administrators and educators to construct relationships with Tennessee-based resources in order to alert those entities to the transition needs of Giles County.

Continuing efforts to build transition teams, the proposed solutions offered several chances to engage the community and build bridges to established resources. Through community conversations, Giles County administrators and special educators would have the opportunity to confer with community members to provide more vocational training and postschool pathways. These needs could be addressed directly within Giles County, potentially eliminating as much need for middle agencies, and opening communication with the resources directly available. This could also potentially eliminate barriers that exist in Giles County such as transportation.

Overall, this applied research showed many instances in which transition planning has been established in Giles County, but has the potential to be improved. Based upon this applied research, the themes that emerged primarily in a lack of resources and knowledge pointed to solutions that would eliminate barriers to obtaining such resources and knowledge for both educators and students with intellectual disabilities and their families. Through proposed, research-based solutions, these barriers to adequate transition planning have the potential to be reduced in Giles County. Through a series of additional training and increased technology, as well as involvement of the community through planned conversations, the potential for

increasing effective transition planning and community resources are immense for individuals with intellectual disabilities in Giles County, Tennessee.

REFERENCES

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. (1998). The ecology of developmental processes. In W. Damon & R. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Theoretical models of human development* (Vol. 1, pp. 993–1028). New York: John Wiley.
- Blustein, C. L., Carter, E. W., & McMillan, E. D. (2016). The voices of parents: Post-high school expectations, priorities, and concerns for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *The Journal of Special Education, 50*(3), 164-177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466916641381>.
- Bumble, J. L., Carter, E. W., McMillan, E., & Manikas, A. (2017). Using community conversations to expand employment opportunities for people with disabilities in rural and urban communities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 47*(1), 65-78. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-170883>
- Cameto, R., Levine, P., & Wagner, M. (2004). *Transition planning for students with disabilities. A special topic report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
- Carter, E. W., Austin, D., & Trainor, A. A. (2012). Predictors of postschool employment outcomes for young adults with severe disabilities. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 23*(1), 50-63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1044207311414680>.
- Carter, E. W., Schutz, M. A., Gajjar, S. A., Maves, E. A., Bumble, J. L., & McMillan, E. D. (2020). Using community conversations to inform transition education in rural

communities. *The Journal of Special Education*, 55(3), 131-142.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466920950331>.

Codd, J, Hewitt, O. (2020). Having a son or daughter with an intellectual disability transition to adulthood: A parental perspective. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 49, 39-51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bld.12327>

Davis, M. T., & Garfield, T. A. (2021). Transition to adulthood: Preparing students with specific learning disabilities. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 57(2), 64-69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2021.1890440>.

Flowers, C., Test, D. W., Povenmire-Kirk, T. C., Diegelmann, K. M., Bunch-Crump, K. R., Kemp-Inman, A., & Goodnight, C. I. (2018). A demonstration model of interagency collaboration for students with disabilities: A multilevel approach. *The Journal of Special Education*, 51(4), 211–221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466917720764>

Francis, G. L., Stride, A., & Reed, S. (2018). Transition strategies and recommendations: Perspectives of parents of young adults with disabilities: Transition strategies. *British Journal of Special Education*, 45(3), 277-301. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12232>

Gauthier-Boudreault, C., Couture, M., & Gallagher, F. (2018). How to facilitate transition to adulthood? Innovative solutions from parents of young adults with profound intellectual disability. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 31(S2), 215-223. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12394>

Gauthier-Boudreault, C., Gallagher, F., & Couture, M. (2017). Specific needs of families of young adults with profound intellectual disability during and after transition to adulthood: What are we missing? *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 66, 16-26. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2017.05.001>

- Haber, M. G., Mazzotti, V. L., Mustian, A. L., Rowe, D. A., Bartholomew, A. L., Test, D. W., & Fowler, C. H. (2016). What works, when, for whom, and with whom: A meta-analytic review of predictors of postsecondary success for students with disabilities. *Review of Educational Research, 86*(1), 123–162. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315583135>
- Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, Public Law 110-315 (2008).
- Howard, M., Reed, A. S., & Francis, G. L. (2021). “It’s my meeting!”: Involving high school students with significant disabilities in the individualized education program process. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 53*(4), 290-298. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040059920958739>
- Hurd, C., Evans, C., & Renwick, R. (2018). “Having friends is like having marshmallows”: Perspectives of transition-aged youths with intellectual and developmental disabilities on friendship. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities, 31*(6), 1186-1196. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12493>
- Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston. (2021). <http://www.thinkcollege.net>
- Ju, S., Zeng, W., & Landmark, L. J. (2017). Self-determination and academic success of students with disabilities in postsecondary education: A review. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 28*(3), 180–189. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1044207317739402>
- Kaya, C. (2018). Demographic variables, vocational rehabilitation services, and employment outcomes for transition-age youth with intellectual disabilities: Demographic variables, vocational rehabilitation services, and employment outcomes for youth with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities, 15*(3), 226-236. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jppi.12249>

- Lombardi, A. R., Dougherty, S. M., & Monahan, J. (2018). Students with intellectual disabilities and career and technical education opportunities: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 29*(2), 82–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1044207318764863>
- Martin, J. E., Marshall, L. H., & Sale, P. (2004). A 3-year study of middle, junior high, and high school iep meetings. *Exceptional Children, 70*(3), 285–297.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290407000302>
- McBurney, H., Eaton, S.E. & Torunski, E. (2017). A meta-analysis of tools to assist students with disabilities through the transition from high school to post-secondary learning environments (Werklund School of Education Working Papers #2017-002). Calgary, Canada: University of Calgary. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/1880/52065>
- McKenzie, K., Ouellette-Kuntz, H., Blinkhorn, A., & Démoré, A. (2017). Out of school and into distress: Families of young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities in transition. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities, 30*(4), 774-781.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12264>
- Morningstar, M. E., Turnbull, A. P., & Turnbull III, H. R. (1996). What do students with disabilities tell us about the importance of family involvement in the transition from school to adult life? *Exceptional Children, 62*(3), 249–260.
- Mueller, T. G., Bassett, D. S., & Brewer, R. D. (2012). Planning for the future: A model for using the principles of transition to guide the development of behavior intervention plans. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 48*(1), 38–46.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451212443130>
- Olivier-Pijpers, V. C., Cramm, J. M., & Nieboer, A. P. (2019). Influence of the organizational environment on challenging behaviour in people with intellectual disabilities:

- Professionals' views. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 32(3), 610-621. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12555>
- Povenmire-Kirk, T., Diegelmann, K., Crump, K., Schnorr, C., Test, D., Flowers, C., & Aspel, N. (2015). Implementing CIRCLES: A new model for interagency collaboration in transition planning. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation.*, 42(1), 51–65. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-140723>
- Prince, A. M. T., Plotner, A. J., & Bridges, W. C. (2019). Postschool engagement predictors for youth with intellectual disability: Results from South Carolina. *Exceptionality*, 27(4), 247-261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2018.1480946>
- Public Consulting Group. (2021). <https://www.publicconsultinggroup.com/education/education-products/edplan-connect/>.
- Rodriguez, C. D., Cumming, T. M., & Strnadová, I. (2017). Current practices in schooling transitions of students with developmental disabilities. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 83, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2017.02.006>
- Salt, E., Melville, C., & Jahoda, A. (2019). Transitioning to adulthood with a mild intellectual disability—Young people's experiences, expectations and aspirations. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 32(4), 901-912. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12582>
- Santiago Perez, T., & Crowe, B. (2021). Community Participation for Transition- Aged Youth with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: A Systematic Review. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 55(1). <https://doi.org/10.18666/TRJ-2021-V55-I1-10296>.

- Schutz, M. A., Carter, E. W., Gajjar, S. A., & Maves, E. A. (2021). Strengthening transition partnerships through community conversation events. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 53*(5), 359-368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040059920987877>.
- Shriner, J. G., Plotner, A. J., & Rose, C. A. (2010). Development of individual education programs for students with emotional or behavioral disorders: Coordination with transition plans. In D. Cheney (Ed.), *Transition of secondary students with emotional or behavioral disorders: Current approaches for positive outcomes* (2nd ed.). Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.
- Strnadová, I., & Cumming, T. M. (2014). The importance of quality transition processes for students with disabilities across settings: Learning from the current situation in new south wales. *Australian Journal of Education, 58*(3), 318-336.
<http://doi.org/10.1177/0004944114543603>
- Small, N., Raghavan, R., & Pawson, N. (2013). An ecological approach to seeking and utilising the views of young people with intellectual disabilities in transition planning. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities, 17*(4), 283-300. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744629513500779>
- State of Tennessee (2017). *State Performance Plan (SPP)/Annual Performance Report (APR)*
Retrieved from https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/special-education/data/idea-part-b_annual_perf_rpt_2017-18.pdf
- Taylor, W. D., Cobigo, V., & Ouellette-Kuntz, H. (2019). A family systems perspective on supporting self-determination in young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities, 32*(5), 1116-1128.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12601>

- Tennessee Department of Education. *Special Education Training District Transition Planning*. Retrieved from https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/special-education/transition/sped_tr_district_transition_planning.pdf
- Tennessee Department of Education. (2019). *State Report Card*. Retrieved from <https://reportcard.tnk12.gov/>
- Tennessee Department of Education, Tennessee Department of Human Services, Vanderbilt University, Vanderbilt Kennedy UCEDD. (2021). Transition Tennessee. <http://transitiontn.org>.
- Tudge, J. R. H., Payir, A., Merçon-Vargas, E., Cao, H., Liang, Y., Li, J., & O'Brien, L. (2016). Still misused after all these years? A reevaluation of the uses of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 8(4), 427-445. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12165>
- Wehmeyer, M. L. (2015). Framing the future: Self-determination. *Remedial and Special Education*, 36(1), 20-23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932514551281>
- Wehmeyer, M. L. (2014). Self-determination: A family affair: Self-determination. *Family Relations*, 63(1), 178-184. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12052>
- Williams-Diehm, K. L., Miller, C. R., Sinclair, T. E., & Wronowski, M. L. (2018). Technology-based employability curriculum and culturally diverse learners with disabilities. *Journal of Special Education Technology*, 33(3), 159–170. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162643417749933>.
- Zhao, W. M., Thirumal, K., Renwick, R., & DuBois, D. (2021). Belonging through sport participation for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities: A scoping

review. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 34(2), 402-420.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12817>.

APPENDIX A**12/1/2020****Dr. Vickie Beard****Superintendent of Schools – Giles County, Tennessee****270 Richland Drive****Pulaski, TN 38478****RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study**

Dr. Beard,

My name is Claire Paul, and I am a doctoral candidate at Liberty University, as well as a full-time faculty member at Martin Methodist College. I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study in the Giles County school district. I am currently enrolled in the Curriculum and Instruction Special Education programs and am in the process of completing my capstone project with a study of transition services for students with intellectual disability in Giles County.

I hope that you will be willing to allow me to conduct interviews with district administrators about transition services, as well as a focus group with special educators at Giles County High School. I would also like to survey parents of students with intellectual disabilities at Giles County High School.

If approval is granted, interviews and focus groups can take place virtually for COVID-19 precautions, and parent participants could complete the survey at home. The survey results will be compiled for the capstone project and individual results of this study will remain absolutely confidential and anonymous. Should this study be published, only compiled results will be documented.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. You may contact me at any time with questions or concerns at my email address.

If you approve, please sign below and return the signed form in the enclosed self-addressed envelope. You are also welcome to send a signed letter of permission on Giles County letterhead acknowledging your consent and permission for me to conduct this research instead of the signature below.

Sincerely,

Claire Paul, Liberty University

Approved by:

Dr. Vickie Beard 5/25/2021

APPENDIX B

Roles	Individual (name, position)	Contact Info (phone, email)	Person Responsible for Contact	Date of Contact	Notes from Contact
Family Members					
Students (current and grads)					
Special Educators					
Paraprofessionals					
District Specialists (SLP, PT/OT)					
General Educators					
CTE/Vocational Teachers					
School Counselors					
District Administrators					
School Board Members					
Chamber of Commerce Reps					
Vocational Rehabilitation Reps					
Pre-ETS Providers					
Area Disability Agency Reps					
American Job Center Reps					
The Arc Reps					
Disability Advocacy Group					
Community Food Bank/Resources					
Step-TN Reps					
Healthcare- ECF Choices Reps					
Local Recreation Reps					
Local Mentorship Agency					
Local Mental Health Agency					
Faith Communities					
Civic Group Leaders					
Community Leaders					
Government Representatives					
Local Business Employers					
Local Residential Providers					
Inclusive Higher Ed Representatives					
TCAT Representatives					
Community College Representatives					
4 year College Representatives					

APPENDIX C

Sample Community Conversation Questions

General Transition Questions

- What outcomes are important for students with disabilities in our community as they leave high school?
- What are we already doing to prepare students with disabilities well for college, career, and community?
- What could we do better or differently to prepare students and their families for postsecondary life?
- How can we create meaningful opportunities for students with disabilities after high school graduation?
- How can we support students with disabilities for a lasting experience in high school?
- How might we work together in compelling ways to make these ideas happen in our community?
- How might we strengthen partnerships beyond our school to improve outcomes for students with disabilities?
- How could we partner better with community members, employers, and families to support this transition?

Employment-Focused Questions

- What can our community do to expand meaningful employment for students with disabilities?
- What can I personally do to increase employment for students with disabilities?
- What would it take for every student with a disability to have a paid meaningful job experience prior to leaving high school?
- How can we encourage more employers in our community to hire people with disabilities?
- How should we work together to support these employers (and their employees) well?

Postsecondary Education-Focused Questions

- What can our community do to expand access to college for students with disabilities?
- What knowledge, skills, and experiences are important for students to leave high school prepared for college?
- What can we as a community do to better prepare students with disabilities to attend college?
- What can I personally do to increase access to college for students with disabilities?

APPENDIX D

Community Conversations Checklist

Before the Event

Prepare for the event:

- Select a venue, date, and time.
- Develop conversation questions. See *Sample Event Questions* for ideas.
- Develop an event agenda, with timeframes for presentation, rounds, survey, etc.
- Create a means for attendees to RSVP to the event (e.g., Google Forms).
- Determine recruitment strategies (e.g., flyers, phone calls, emails, social media postings). See *Sample Recruitment Flyers* for ideas.
- Assign recruitment tasks to team members, using the *Recruitment Planning Sheet* to record recruitment efforts.
- Arrange for refreshments.
- Identify an event facilitator.
- Develop a facilitator presentation. See *Sample Facilitator Presentation*.
- Identify table hosts (1 per every 6-8 anticipated attendees).
- Provide training to each table host on roles and responsibilities. See *Table Host Training Video*.
- Assign day-of-event tasks to team members to plan for table set-up, refreshments, technology, and greeting attendees.

Make sure to print:

- Table tents containing questions and tips (1 per table; see *Table Tent Template*)
- End of event surveys (1 per anticipated attendees; can also create a QR code for participants to access survey through phones)
- Table host notes for all conversation rounds (1 per table; see *Table Host Notes Template*)
- Table Host Tip Sheet* (1 per table)
- Placemats (1 per anticipated attendees; see *Placemat Template*).
- Nametags (1 per anticipated attendees; may pre-populate with registered attendees and leave spaces for unregistered attendees who attend)
- Registration sheet (pre-populate with registered attendees and leave spaces for unregistered attendees who attend; see *Registration Sheet*)

Make sure to bring:

- Technology needed to display facilitator presentation, play music, etc.
- Microphone and speakers (if necessary)
- Pens and markers for making nametags and documenting ideas
- Decorations
- Access to completed facilitator presentation
- All previously printed paperwork

During the Event

Upon arrival, make sure to:

- Set up registration table with:
 - Registration sheet
 - Nametags
 - Pens and markers
- Set up tables for anticipated attendees, with each including:
 - Table tent
 - Placemats

- Pens
- Candy
- Confirm an appropriate number of table hosts have been selected. Provide each table host with:
 - Table host notes
 - Table host tip sheet

After attendees have arrived:

- Begin the facilitator presentation and address:
 - Purpose of the event
 - Event procedures
 - Conversation etiquette
- Conduct small-group conversation rounds; team members circulate to provide assistance as needed.
- Conduct whole group “harvest” conversation round, displaying ideas for all attendees.
- Disseminate end-of-event survey.
- Facilitator concludes event and allows for networking.

Upon the event’s conclusion, make sure to collect:

- Registration sheet
- Table host notes
- Placemats
- Record of “harvest” round notes
- End-of-event surveys

After the Event

Set goals:

- Review notes (i.e., table host notes, placemats, “harvest” ideas, end-of-event surveys, additional notes) to identify the most promising ideas to begin addressing.
- Schedule a goal setting planning meeting, inviting anyone who expressed interest in getting involved.
- Set 2-3 goals for improvement based on prioritized ideas.
- Complete the *Goal Planning Template* to develop an action plan for addressing goals. See *Sample Goals and Action Plan*.
- Assign team member responsibilities for goal progress.

Disseminate information:

- Develop event summary brief. See *Sample Event Summary Briefs*.
- Use attendee contact information (e.g., emails, mailing address) to disseminate briefs.

Evaluate progress:

- Schedule follow-up meetings to assess goal progress.
- Select a community member to check in regularly regarding progress and attend follow-up meetings.
- At follow-up meetings, assess progress towards goals and make adjustments as necessary. Upon meeting goals, select from other promising ideas to set new goals.

APPENDIX E

Timeline for Proposed Solutions

- **January 2022** – Begin research into adding EDPlan Connect
- **January 2022 – May 2022** – Administrators and educators attend first online training through Transition Tennessee
- **February 2022** – Planning meeting for Community Conversation
- **April 2022** – First Community Conversation
- **June 2022** – Collaboration meeting about online trainings
- **June 2022** – Parent/family survey about transition services
- **June 23-25, 2022** – SEPSEA Conference
- **July 2022** – Implement EdPlan Connect if deemed feasible
- **August 2022 – December 2022** -- Administrators and educators attend second online training through Transition Tennessee
- **August 2022** – Implement EdPlan Connect if deemed feasible
- **August 2022** – Second Community Conversation
- **November 2022** – Third Community Conversation
- **December 2022** – Parent/family survey about transition services
- **January 2023** – Formal evaluation of transition services through document analysis

APPENDIX F

Which role(s) do you represent? *Check all that apply*

- Educator or school staff (special education) Employer or business representative
 Educator or school staff (general education) Representative of a community organization or non-profit
 Educator or school staff (both) Representative of a disability agency or organization
 Parent/family member Member of a community civic group (e.g., Kiwanis, Rotary)
 Middle or high school student City or county leader
 Other: _____

PLEASE SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THIS EVENT AND YOUR COMMUNITY:

This conversation was a good investment of my time.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree
I learned about ideas, resources, or opportunities in this community that I previously did not know about.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree
I identified specific ideas or steps <i>my organization or school</i> could take to improve transition outcomes for youth with disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree
I identified specific ideas or steps that <i>I personally</i> could take to improve transition outcomes for youth with disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree
This conversation improved my views about the capacity of our community to support successful transitions for youth with disabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree
I met people in my community I would not otherwise have known about.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree
This conversation will help encourage important changes in our community.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree
We should have more conversations like this in the future.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree

RATE YOUR LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH EACH OF THE FOLLOWING:

Strong partnerships currently exist between local schools and...

...parents of students without disabilities	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree
...parents of students with disabilities	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree
...local businesses and employers	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree
...community organizations and non-profits	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree
...disability agencies and programs	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree
...city and county leaders	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree
...faith communities	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree
...local colleges and technical programs	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree

What do you consider to be the biggest barrier to successful transitions of youth with disabilities in your community?

What do you consider to be the biggest strength of this community?