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Transition Services in the Public School System for Adolescents with Autism Spectrum
Disorder

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An Ed.S. thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

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Abstract

Due to early intervention efforts and improved diagnoses, more individuals with high functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are able to attend postsecondary education than ever before (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). However, due to the inherent nature of autism, the transition to postsecondary education can be of great difficulty and cause a great deal of anxiety for these individuals. The purpose of the current research was to explore what is being done to aid in the transition to postsecondary education for this specific population and what is helpful. All participants were male and either had or currently are receiving special education services. Participants consisted of 3 high school students, 1 Blue Ridge Community College student, and 3 James Madison University students. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire and participated in an individual interview with the researcher. Overall, it was found that the majority of participants were not involved in the construction of their transition services plans and none of the participants knew the role of a school psychologist. All of the university participants named one person who took charge of their transition to college and are experiencing academic success as a result. Further results are discussed as well as implications for future research.

Transition Services in the Public School System for Adolescents with Autism

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a pervasive developmental and neurological disorder that greatly impacts a child's communication and social interaction skills (Block, Block, & Halliday, 2006; Kogan et. al, 2008). Children with ASD may display odd, stereotyped behaviors such as rocking back and forth, flapping their hands, or engaging in fixated behaviors (Block et. al, 2006). In addition, children with ASD have a higher rate of comorbidity with epilepsy, gastrointestinal problems, anxiety and depression than typically developing children (Kogan et al, 2008). It is estimated that about 50 percent of children with autism are also intellectually disabled (Amiet et. al, 2008). However, on the other end of the spectrum, individuals with high functioning autism will probably still have difficulty with social skills, odd speech, and restricted or repetitive behaviors, but generally will also have average to above average cognition (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Thus, as the name implies, autism is a spectrum disorder that affects each individual differently, with symptoms ranging from very mild to severe (Adreon & Durocher, 2007).

The pervasiveness and prevalence of ASD is now more recognized than in years past (White, 2011). The Center for Disease Control (CDC) (2014) reports that one out of every sixty-eight children in the U.S. meets the diagnostic criteria for Autism Spectrum disorder, and rates of autism still seem to be increasing (Fletcher et. al, 2012; Newschaffer, Falb & Gurney, 2005). As such, the numbers of children receiving special education services due to ASD have increased steadily in the United States since the 1990's (Maenner & Durkin, 2010).

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004, all students in special education must have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) (Gartin & Murdick, 2005). The IEP includes several components, such as the student's present level of performance, academic and functional goals for the child, related services to be offered (e.g., occupational therapy), and at the age of 16, a Transition Services Plan is to be added to the IEP (Gartin & Murdick, 2005).

The Transition Services Plan should include postsecondary goals that are appropriate and measurable based upon age, training, education, employment and independent skills. It should also include a description of the courses of study the student needed in order to obtain the postsecondary goals (Gartin & Murdick, 2005). Thus, a transition services plan should either give the student the required skills to enter the work force or go on to higher education. IDEA 2004 does state that an IEP team, or those in charge of building an appropriate IEP for the student, consists of the student's parents/legal guardians, a regular education teacher, a special education teacher, a representative of the school (e.g., the principal), related services personnel when appropriate, and the student when appropriate (Gartin & Murdick, 2005). However, IDEA 2004 fails to delegate the actual task of designing a personal transition service plan to every child in special education to a specific school employee. Thus, these plans are often very generalized rather than individualized. This presents a problem to adolescents with autism spectrum disorder as their needs are often very specific and individual.

In the current paper, I review the literature concerning the development of transition services plans in public schools, effective transition services plans for individuals in special education, transition services specific to adolescents with autism,

and specific skills individuals with autism spectrum disorder must develop in order to succeed in higher education settings. I propose that the development of transition services plans for individuals with autism has become more generalized rather than individualized and that individuals who participate more with the development of his/her own transition services plan feel more prepared to transition to college. Further I propose that those individuals with high functioning ASD who are trained in self-advocacy skills, those who take more credit hours in advanced placement courses, and those who have received training or instruction regarding special education laws and anti-discriminatory laws (e.g., IDEA and ADA) feel more prepared for and are more successful in higher educational settings.

Development of Transition Services Plans

Similar to their peers without disabilities, individuals with disabilities are increasingly wanting to go to college because of the benefits a degree offers to them (Webb, Patterson, Syverud, & Seabrooks-Blackmore, 2008). The National Longitudinal Transition Study – 2 reports postsecondary school being the primary goal for more than four out of five students with disabilities. In fact, individuals with disabilities are increasingly taking college prep classes, including foreign language and science (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004). Unfortunately, of those who enroll in college, many students with disabilities experience limited success despite increased access to higher-education and greater numbers of disability service programs at colleges and universities. This may be due to a lack of preparation at the high school level.

Mull, Sitlington, and Alper (2001) reviewed the literature concerning postsecondary education for students with learning disabilities and found that students were unprepared for postsecondary academic requirements, learning strategies, study skills, time-management, test-taking skills, memory, and note-taking strategies. Further identified weaknesses included poor organization, communication, and social skills. In addition, there was a theme of needing to better train self-advocacy skills among students with disabilities who attend postsecondary education.

Generally, even if teachers are knowledgeable about evidence-based transition practices, they may resist infusing these elements into the curriculum due to high-stake material (e.g., SOL material) that must be covered. High school teachers may be unaware of how to facilitate transition practices into the classroom or may assume that students with disabilities who are able to competently perform in general education classrooms will also be able to competently perform in postsecondary education (Webb et. al, 2008).

Currently, as reported in the National Longitudinal Transition Survey – 2, transition services plans often address the student’s goals and supports for transition; including vocational training, mental health resources, supported living arrangements, transportation services, behavioral interventions, accommodations specified for postsecondary education etc. (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004). Only 58% of students with disabilities actively provide input for their transition services plan, and only 12% take a leadership role in the process (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004). However, almost two-thirds of students with disabilities reported to have received specialized instruction intended to assess options and develop strategies to transition from secondary school to adult life (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004). Further, 38% of seventeen to

eighteen year old students with disabilities had colleges contacted on their behalf as a part of their transition services. However, as reported previously, four out of five students with disabilities have postsecondary school as their primary goal; thus, it would be optimal to have an increased amount of communication with colleges regarding student's specific needs and accommodations.

Effective Transition Services Plans

There have been several evidence based practices identified that promote transition to postsecondary education for students with disabilities. For example, Webb, Patterson, Syverud and Seabrooks-Blackmore (2008), through a content analysis, identified five areas of transition practices that college students with disabilities identified as being most helpful: self-determination, social skills, academic preparation, accommodations, and assistive technology.

The critical components of self-determination include problem solving skills, understanding one's disability, goal setting, and self-management. Clearly, these developing these skills will lead to more successful outcomes for students (Webb et. al., 2008). Social skills development may be important as students with disabilities may display inappropriate behavior that may influence their relationships with peers and adults. Academic preparation may be a barrier to students with disabilities as special education curriculum is often modified. Per the Least Restrictive Environment guideline outlined in IDEA, children with disabilities are often mainstreamed into general education; however, the curriculum is often modified and these students are not likely to be encouraged to take more advanced courses. If students have experiences with rigorous

coursework during high school years, they may be more likely to generalize their work habits to postsecondary education settings (Webb et al., 2008).

Students with disabilities may or may not realize that if they choose to go on to postsecondary education, they can still have access to accommodations to help them succeed academically. Some of the most common accommodations include extra time on exams/ assignments, a quiet/ isolated environment to take exams, priority registration for classes, and recording of lectures. Finally, assistive technology is a major need expressed by college students with disabilities (Webb et al., 2008). Technology has the ability to maximize access to education for students with disabilities. Thus, in order to maximize students' success at the postsecondary level, instruction concerning these needed skills and resources should be done at the high school level. Logically, it would be beneficial if these areas were addressed on an individual basis through a student's Transition Services Plan.

Eckes and Ochoa (2005) also address the need for students with disabilities to develop self-advocacy skills before transitioning to postsecondary education, the primary reason being that once reaching postsecondary education, the university, by law, is *not* required to find and assist these student succeed as is required by IDEA for K – 12. In fact, there are no specific education laws for individuals with disabilities for higher education, only anti-discriminatory laws such as Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). Thus, individuals with disabilities will need to develop their self-advocacy skills as they will not only need to disclose their disability to the university, but will need to be able to discuss specific accommodations they will need in their courses.

Transition Services Specific to Adolescents with Autism

As there is now better identification of children with autism at an earlier age, there has been an increase in early intervention services; thus, more adolescents with autism have the ability to go to college than ever before (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Due to the inherent difficulties of ASD (e.g., difficulty with change, difficulty with communication/ social interaction, restricted interests, etc.) the transition to college may be exceptionally difficult for this particular population.

According to the National Longitudinal Transition Survey – 2, postsecondary education was much less likely to be a goal for adolescents with autism when compared to other disability categories (excluding multiple disabilities and intellectual disability). This may be due to the fact that transitions, although difficult for most individuals, are inherently demanding and scary for individuals with autism due to the nature of their disorder (e.g., resist change and enjoy their routines). In fact, the National Longitudinal Transition Survey – 2 also found that less than 3 in 10 parents of students with autism felt that the transition planning process was useful. This may be due to the fact that students' with autism needs are much more specific, even when compared to their peers with other disabilities. Further, 45% of student with autism provide little input in their transition services plan (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004). They are also less likely to have general education teachers participate in their transition services (only 39%) and are less likely to take the general education courses (40 to 62% as compared to more than 90% of students with learning disabilities, speech, or other health impairments) that would better prepare them for postsecondary school.

This is truly regrettable considering 43.9% of individuals served under IDEA as identified as having autism spectrum disorder went on to some form of postsecondary school. Specifically, 32.2% went on to a 2-year or community college, and 17.4% went on to a 4 year college (National Longitudinal Transition Study – 2, 2009). About 86% of these individuals enrolled in postsecondary school were enrolled steadily throughout the year, as opposed to “off and on,” and about 73% of these individuals with autism were enrolled full time (taking 12 or more credit hours) during their first year of postsecondary school. It is clear that individuals with autism are aware that their disability impacts their academic functioning as 63% enrolled in postsecondary education, disclosed their disability to their institution in an effort to receive services and accommodations; however, about 13% of individuals with autism enrolled in postsecondary education who considered themselves to have a disability, and, therefore, to need accommodations, had not informed the school of their disability. This may be due to a lack of advocacy skills.

Unfortunately, according to the National Longitudinal Transition Study – 2, it does not appear that those with autism who do enter 2-year or 4-year postsecondary education are overly successful. The average number of credits earned by individuals with autism, who had been out of high school for up to eight years, for a 2 year or community college was about 38 and was about 77 credit hours for a 4 year college or university (the average bachelor’s degree is about 120 credit hours). Again, having a stronger preparation for such a huge transition may be beneficial, especially to those with autism spectrum disorder.

There is a dearth of literature in regards to specific needs of adolescents with autism who are transitioning to college. However, VanBergeijk, Klin, and Volkmar

(2008) discuss the needs of high functioning adolescents with autism who are making the transition to a university and make recommendations in order to students with autism to be successful both academically and socially at a university level. First and foremost, these authors acknowledge that individuals with autism have tremendous difficulty with transitions, and without preparation, they are much more likely to ultimately fail at the university level than their neurotypical peers.

The authors go on to say that they recommend introducing college curriculum to higher functioning individuals on the spectrum while they are still in high school. Ideally, these courses should be of the student's choosing that are in his areas of strength (VanBergeijk, Klin, & Volkmar, 2008). It is even recommended to have students spend half of the school day at a local community college and half of the school day at the high school in order to make the transition into a full college course load easier. This may also make the transition between community college and a university easier, if the student decides to go take courses at a community college before entering a four year university (Adreon & Durocher, 2007).

Further, when looking into colleges, students should be made aware that while smaller colleges may feel more appropriate due to smaller class sizes and may be less over stimulating, smaller schools may not be as familiar with the unique educational needs of students with ASD (VanBergeijk, Klin, & Volkmar, 2008). Further, Adreon and Durocher (2007) point out that while smaller colleges or community colleges may offer more individualized attention from professors and less overwhelming campuses, it may also increase the visibility of being different. Larger schools may offer more diversity,

and, therefore, more opportunities to meet others with similar interests. Thus, communication to colleges prior to enrolling is strongly encouraged.

Adreon and Durocher (2007) address that many independent living skills may need to be trained before the transition to college. For example, due to sensory issues and/or anxiety it may be difficult for a student with ASD to share a dorm room or a communal bathroom. Other areas of difficulty that could be at least discussed with the student are how a meal plan works, using a campus ID, the issue of transportation (e.g., teaching the student to use a bus schedule), etc. If it is likely that student is going to struggle with any of these aspects, then it should be addressed in the student's transition services plan.

It is important that researchers continue to examine best practices for transition services for individuals with high functioning autism as this group of individuals is likely to have a disadvantage with the nature of the transition due to the inherent nature of their disorder, but is also likely to have the cognitive skills to succeed academically in postsecondary education settings. The purpose of the proposed study is to examine transition services for individuals with high functioning ASD who wish to pursue higher education. As the examiner is employing the use of the grounded theory, I do not have any specific hypotheses; rather, the study is exploratory in nature. Thus, results were what emerged from the data.

Study Design

For the purposes of this study, I used individual interviews and data was collected qualitatively. Thus, participants first completed a demographic questionnaire, and then

participants responded to interview questions regarding their personal experiences with transition services plans and their transition to a community college or university.

Method

Participants

Participants included seven individuals with high functioning Autism who received special education services in high school. Specifically, 3 participants were high school students, 1 participant was a Blue Ridge Community College student, and 3 participants were James Madison University (JMU) students. One of the JMU students had previously attended a community college prior to enrolling in JMU. Of the participants, five were Caucasian, one was African American, and one was Asian American. High school participants were recruited via the Special Education Department. College participants were recruited via their respective Office of Disability Services at Blue Ridge Community College and James Madison University. Participants did not gain class credit or other compensation.

Materials/ Apparatus

Demographic Questionnaire. Participants responded to demographic questions, including age, race, class standing/ grade, and GPA. See Appendix A for specific questions.

Interview Question Form(s). Each interview had similar questions, but varied based on the level of transition of the students (e.g., high school versus university). Each form consisted of 10 to 12 open-ended questions, where the participants will be able to freely discuss their experiences with transition services (e.g., “*How involved were you*

with the planning/ construction of your transition services plan in high school?”).

Questions were altered in order to investigate any surprising results yielded from the discussion. See Appendix B.

Tape Recorder. The interviews were recorded in order to aid in the analysis of the data. Participants did not identify themselves by name.

Procedure

After gaining informed consent, or assent, from participants and/ or their parents, the researcher asked questions relevant to transition services and college preparation with the participants. Following data collection, the interviews were transcribed.

Procedure

Participants’ identities were kept confidential during data collection. There were 7 interviews total, each lasting 30 minutes to an hour. After gaining informed consent/ assent from participants and notifying them of the tape recorder, I asked each participant to complete the demographic questionnaire. I then proceeded to asking the interview questions. Participants responded verbally, and no questions asked by participants were answered until the debriefing session in order to not skew results.

Qualitative data has been described as being particularly useful at an early stage of research as a means to elicit information that participants think is relevant, which can then be used to inform larger studies at a later date (Smithson, 2000). Thus, an individual interview methodology was selected due to this study being one of the first to examine transition services specifically for adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder, the exploratory nature of the study, and the desire to identify common themes and opinions

among the participants. Further, due to the nature of ASD, it was thought that meeting with participants one-on-one may elicit more meaningful information than in a group setting.

The Cut and Sort methodology was employed to analyze data. Cutting and sorting involves identifying quotes or expressions that appear to be important, and then grouping similar quotes/ expressions together (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Thus, results were gathered by coding each question into frequently expressed ideas using theme words or answers that appeared during interviews. After which, similar ideas or answers were clustered together. These clusters or groupings then became the overarching themes identified. Specific comments that were relevant from participants that supported the overarching themes were reported as well.

Results

For the purposes of not biasing results, all answers provided came directly from participants. Any misperceptions or incorrect knowledge was addressed during debriefing sessions.

Overall

Overall, only one participant was aware of having a transition services plan. Participants were asked if they had a transition services plan, and 86% of participants were not aware of having a transition services plan. The student who was aware that he had a transition services plan did not feel that he was involved in the making of the plan. When asked “How were you involved in the planning of your plan?” he responded “I think there was just a meeting about the plan.” Three out of seven (42%) participants mentioned attending their IEP meetings. Thus, although some participants recalled attending the meetings where transition should be discussed, most participants were not aware of their transition services plan. See Chart 1.

In an effort to explore how ASD affects individuals academically, all participants were asked, “Describe any difficulties experienced in the classroom.” The most consistent theme present had to do with social difficulties in the classroom. For example, participants mentioned feeling self-conscious asking questions in front of classmates, feeling bothered by noisy classmates, and feeling anxious in class. Two students also mentioned academic difficulties. One student mentioned that he has difficulty with only oral information, and benefits from visual aids, and the other student simply indicated that he had difficulty with the amount of work required. See Chart 2.

All participants were then asked, “Do you think these difficulties are related to having ASD?” Five out of seven (71%) participants indicated that it was likely that difficulties in the classroom were directly related to having autism; however, it is difficult to know as autism is a part inextricably a part of these individuals. The other two participants did not feel that difficulties in the classroom were related to having autism and were both high school participants. This may indicate a lack of insight or a lack of acceptance.

Next, participants were asked, “Have you ever discussed these difficulties with a teacher? Describe these interactions.” Six out of seven (86%) participants indicated they had discussed difficulties with a teacher. One participant was specific, stating that while he had discussed difficulty in class with professors, he had not discussed any difficulties specifically related to having autism. Two participants indicated that they had disclosed their disability to professors, and some professors were more understanding than others.

All participants were also asked, “Describe your understanding of how special education laws/ disability laws change between high school and college.” Only one participant had an idea of how law changes as he stated that once in college, it is ultimately up to the individual to disclose having a disability and get the help needed, whereas prior to coming to college, it is up to the school to make sure individuals get the assistance needed. Thus, six out of seven (85%) participants did not know how the law changes regarding disabilities.

Finally, all participants were asked to describe the role of the school psychologist. Unfortunately, none of the participants knew who or what the role of the school

psychologist is. This is discouraging considering that all participants were involved in the special education program within their school systems. Thus, it is logical to deduce that at some point, each participant was evaluated by or came into contact with (e.g., at a meeting) his/ her school psychologist.

High School

Following analyzing the data collectively, I analyzed each level of transition individually. High school participants were asked “Describe how you think classes will be different in college,” and each student had a different answer. One student believed the content would be more focused on one particular area of focus; another felt the scheduling would be different as the classes may start later in the day and last longer, and the last student felt the location of the college may impact how classes are different. Students were then asked, “How do you think studying will differ between high school and college?” Two participants indicated that college courses would require more studying and the content would be more difficult. The other high school student did not feel that studying would differ between high school and college.

High school participants were then asked “Why do you want to go to college? What are you looking for in your college experience?” Two of the three high school participants stated that they wanted to go to college because they want certain careers. The other was interested in experiencing a new area. One of the participants mentioned wanting to go to a specific university because of liking the mascot. None of the participants indicated that they had given any thought to specifically what they wanted from their college experience except a career path. Further, although the participants were

aware that the careers they wished to obtain required a college education, it did not appear they had made the connection that there must be a program of study specific to their field of interest. For example, the student who wished to go to a specific university because of the pervasive interest in the mascot hoped to someday become a meteorologist. When asked if this specific university had a meteorology program, he stated he was unsure.

High school participants were asked, “How do you intend to pick your own classes once in college?” All three participants indicated they had not thought about that. One participant mentioned that he thought someone would choose his classes for him, much like high school. The other two participants stated that someone at the college, such as an advisor or professor, would help them.

Participants were also asked “How do you think your social life will be different in college?” All three high school students indicated that they would meet new people, but did not elaborate on how different their social life might be. Only one student mentioned that meeting new people may be difficult for him.

Finally, high school students were asked “What do you know about the Office of Disability Services at colleges?” Two of the three students did not know what an Office of Disability Services does. The third participant knew that he could receive accommodations from the Office of Disability services, but he could not name any specific accommodations and was unsure how to go about receiving accommodations.

Community College

The community college participant was asked “Describe things your high school did to better prepare you to transition to community college. What were you told that really helped?”. He responded that his high school was not helpful, and he held a great deal of resentment towards his high school as a result.

The community college participant was asked why he chose to attend a community college rather than a university, and he replied that he did not feel he could handle the social stress that would occur if he attended a large university

The community college student was asked “Describe how classes have been different in community college as compared to high school.” He shared that community college classes were much more stressful than high school due to the class size. He indicated that his anxiety became so severe that he is now only taking online classes. In fact, this participant stated that he has become more withdrawn since beginning college.

The participant attending community college was then asked “How did you go about registering with ODS and what are your current accommodations?”. The participant indicated a doctor told him about the Office of Disability Services; however, he also indicated that he was initially reluctant to register because he felt he was “running away from a problem.”

This student was adamant throughout the interview that he did not feel he was being successful in college, and he largely blamed his high school for a lack of preparation.

University

University students were asked “Describe things your high school did to better prepare you to transition to community college. What were you told that really helped?,” The three college participants all identified one person who really took a major role in helping them prepare for college. Two of the identified individuals were the school counselors, the other was a teacher. All participants also mentioned their parents; however, they seemed to have secondary role in comparison to the school personnel. Further, two college students mentioned taking advanced placement and honors courses, which better prepared them for college level work.

College participants were asked “Describe how classes have been different at the university level as compared to community college (if applicable) and high school.” The participant who attended community college before entering the university reported that at community college more notes were given, and, overall, professors were more helpful at the community college compared to the university level. All of the participants mentioned that class sizes are larger and the content is more challenging. One participant reported feeling that college professors treat students like adults whereas another participant mentioned missing the formal teaching methods used in high school where the teachers had more authority. When asked to describe how studying differed, the participant who had transferred from a community college to the university commented that studying differed greatly between community college and the university because study materials were rarely given at the university level. The other two participants reported needing to pay attention in class and needing to invest a great deal of time studying outside of class. One participant discussed using more active studying techniques (e.g., quizzing) rather than passive (e.g., reading).

College participants were asked “Describe your experiences with creating your own class schedule/ choosing what classes to take.” All participants indicated that choosing classes was overwhelming at first. Three out of four participants indicated consulting with their advisor before scheduling classes (the fourth participant was the community college student).

Finally, college students were asked “How did you go about registering with ODS and what accommodations are you currently receiving?” One student did not remember how he had registered with ODS, and two student indicated their parents helped them to register. Current accommodations for these students included having a private room for tests, extra time on tests, having a service dog accompany one student everywhere, having a single dorm room, the option to record lectures, audiobooks, and being allowed to have a laptop in class at all times due to being able to type more efficiently than write.

Discussion

The results of the interviews indicate that high functioning individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder are not aware of their transition services plans and are not involved in the construction of those plans. Even the students who mentioned participating in their own IEP meetings were not always aware of their own Transition Services Plan. This coincides with the National Longitudinal Transition Study – 2’s findings that about 88% of students with disabilities do not take a leadership role in the construction of their transition services plans (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004). This is troubling as many students who have the potential to succeed in postsecondary education, may not be successful due to a lack of individualized preparation.

Further, it is important to note that the vast majority of participants in this study indicated more social difficulties within the classroom that are inhibiting their learning rather than academic difficulties. Thus, as Webb, Patterson, Syverud and Seabrooks-Blackmore (2008) suggest, training social skills is a vital component of an individualized transition services plan.

I think it is important to highlight that all of the university level students seemed to be having a successful college experience, whereas the community college student was not. The primary difference among these students was that all of the university level students indicated a single individual within the school system who supported and guided them in preparation for postsecondary education, whereas the community college student did not feel prepared and did not feel supported by his high school. This supports the idea highlighted in IDEA 2004 that transition services plans ought to be individualized rather than generalized. The university level participants each had someone to customize their own personal search for the right “fit” for postsecondary education and to better prepare these students for transition. This, in essence, is what transition plans are intended to be.

In addition, all participants were at some point enrolled in special education services; thus, it can be deduced that at some point throughout their academic careers each of these students had come into contact with his school psychologist. None of these students, however, seemed to have ever heard of a school psychologist, and none of the students knew the role of a school psychologist. This is concerning considering the vital role a school psychologist could potentially play in transition. As school psychologists have specialized training in understanding different strengths and weaknesses of an individual’s cognitive abilities, it could be beneficial for school psychologists to explain

strengths and weaknesses to students so that each student can then better advocate for his/her personal learning needs.

Moreover, only one participant had a general idea of how disability law changes from high school to postsecondary education. If the intention of the public school system is to better train self-advocacy skills to students with disabilities, it may be important to tell the students why it is so important that he/she learn to better advocate for him/herself. Thus, the differences between IDEA and ADA may logically be introduced to a student at a transition services meeting. This idea was also cited by Eckes and Ochoa, 2005 as after a student graduates from high school, it is ultimately up to the student to be a self-advocate under ADA, whereas under IDEA, the school system must actively search for and assist students with disabilities. Further, as only one student in high school knew he could receive accommodations from an office of disability services, perhaps how to register for and different accommodations offered by ODS could also be discussed as part of transition services meetings.

As far as I am aware, this was the first study to specifically examine transition services for high functioning adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at each level of transition (high school, community college, and university). Thus, this study did not replicate a previous study, but both many similar results from my study have been cited in the literature, primarily in the National Longitudinal Transition Survey – 2, as is discussed previously.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. There was a time constraint due to the deadline of this thesis, so there was only time for a limited number of interviews. Further, as my population I chose to examine was very specific, the number of participants was limited. Additionally, due to the fact that my participants had no outside motivation to participate in my research, they may have been interested in my topic, indicating there may have been volunteer bias.

Suggestions for future research

I suggest a large scale national study specifically examining how transition services are being addressed in high schools and what methods are having the best long-term rates of success for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I think that having a more consistent way of handling transition services may be helpful. Furthermore, I believe surveying school psychologists to ask what, if any role, they currently have in transition for their students, and if they feel that they should be a part of the construction of a transition services plan and training of self-advocacy skills for their students.

It is important that school personnel put more effort into individualizing transition services plans, as they were intended. Having more direct and individualized preparation for postsecondary education is likely to lead to better success rates. For example, as discussed previously, Webb, Patterson, Syverud and Seabrooks-Blackmore (2008) identified five areas of transition practices that college students with disabilities identified as being most helpful: self-determination, social skills, academic preparation, accommodations, and assistive technology. These five areas ought to, of course, be individualized to each student. It can be deduced that not every student will need to be

trained in the same social skills areas, will require the same amount of academic preparation, or will need the same accommodations. Perhaps if these areas are addressed individually with each student, the success rate of students with ASD graduating from postsecondary education will increase significantly.

As school personnel, we need to make an effort to better prepare students with high functioning ASD for postsecondary education. If it is possible to make transition planning more consistent across school systems and to better individualize planning to each student, the success rates of students, and, therefore, life satisfaction, may also increase for these students.

Although these results should be generalized with appropriate caution, the results indicate that in some instances, individuals with ASD are not being adequately prepared for postsecondary education, are not being included in the construction of their transition services plans, and when students are successful, it is directly linked to having a single person within the school system take an individualized interest in the student's preparation for postsecondary education.

Chart 1

Percentage of Participants Participated in IEP Meetings vs. Percentage Aware of Transition Services Plan.

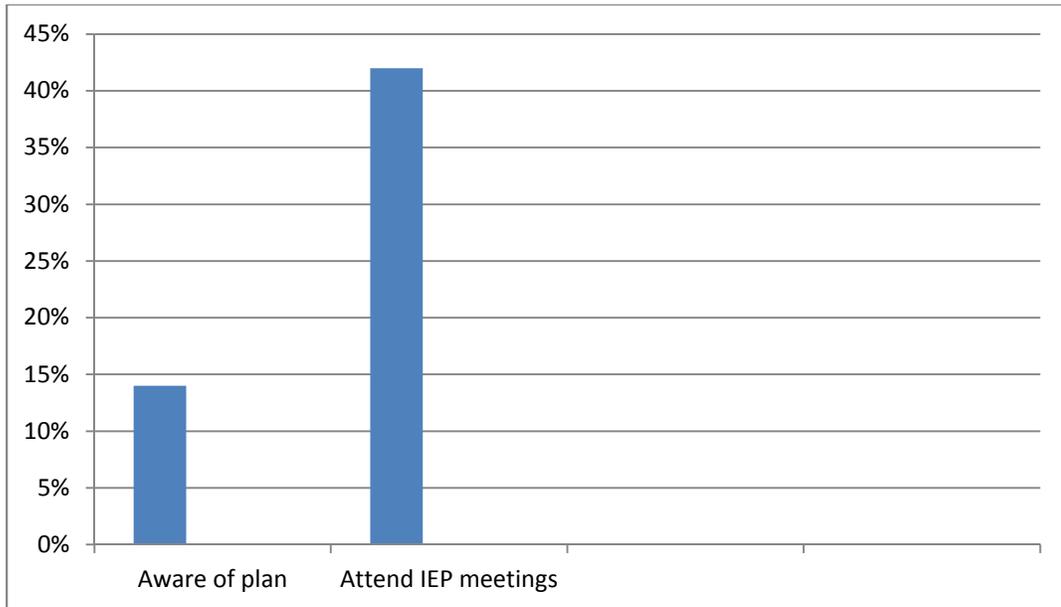
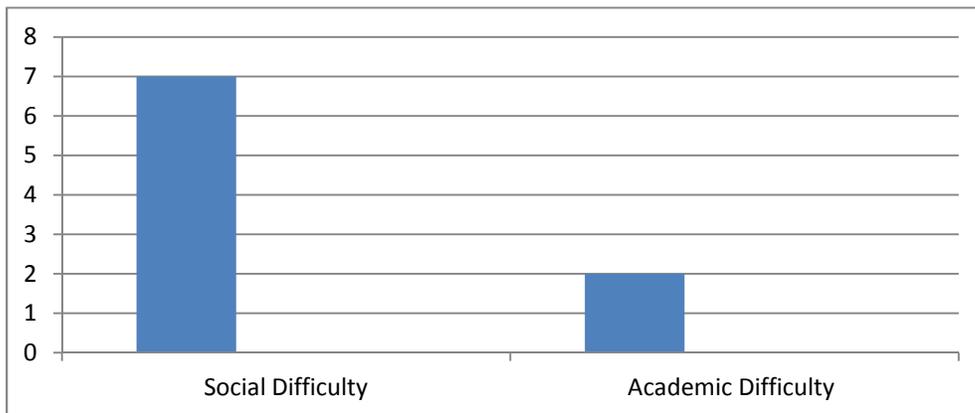


Chart 2

Number of Participants with Academic Difficulties vs. Social Difficulties



Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire

Age:

Race:

Gender:

Grade/ Class Standing:

GPA: _____ (on a 4.0 scale)

Graduating high school GPA: _____

Please circle which best describes your high school: Urban Suburban

Rural

Please list all advanced placement courses you took in high school:

Please describe what, if any, special education services you were provided with during your senior year of high school.

Describe the role of your school psychologist in your high school.

Who most helped you prepare for your transition to college?

Appendix B

Focus Group Questionnaire – High School

Do you know if you have a transition services plan?

How involved were you in the planning/ construction of this plan?

Describe how you think classes will be different in college.

How do you intend to pick your own classes once in college?

How do you think studying will differ between high school and college?

Describe any difficulties you have had in the classroom.

Do you think these difficulties are related to having ASD?

Have you ever discussed these difficulties with a teacher? Describe these interactions.

Have you had any difficulty with any particular courses? Do you think these difficulties are related to having ASD?

Describe your understanding of how special education laws/ disability laws change between high school and college.

Why do you want to go to college? What are you looking for in your college experience?

What thoughts have you had about transportation to, from, and around campus?

How do you think your social life will be different in college?

How do you plan to manage your finances in college?

What do you know about living arrangements offered at the college level?

What do you know about the Office of Disability Services at colleges?

Individual Interview Questionnaire – Community College

Do you remember if you had a transition services plan in high school?

How were you involved with the planning of your plan?

Describe things your high school did to better prepare you to transition to community college. What were you told that really helped?

Describe how classes have been different in community college as compared to high school.

Describe your experiences with creating your own class schedule/ choosing what classes to take.

How has studying differed between high school and community college?

Describe any difficulties you have had in the classroom.

Do you think these difficulties are related to having ASD?

Have you ever discussed these difficulties with a professor? Describe these interactions.

Have you had any difficulty with any particular courses? Do you think these difficulties are related to having ASD?

Describe your understanding of how special education laws/ disability laws change between high school and college.

Why did you choose to go to a community college?

How do you commute to classes?

How has your social life/ social behavior changed since coming to college?

How are you managing your finances?

How did you go about registering with ODS and what accommodations are you currently receiving?

Individual Interview Questionnaire – University

Do you remember if you had a transition services plan in high school?

How were you involved with the planning of your plan?

Describe things your high school did to better prepare you to transition to college.
What were you told that really helped?

Describe how classes have been different at the university level as compared to community college (if applicable) and high school.

Describe your experiences with creating your own class schedule/ choosing what classes to take.

How has studying differed between high school and the university level?

Describe any difficulties you have had in the classroom.

Do you think these difficulties are related to having ASD?

Have you ever discussed these difficulties with a teacher? Describe these interactions.

Have you had any difficulty with any particular courses? Do you think these difficulties are related to having ASD?

Describe your understanding of how special education laws/ disability laws change between high school and college.

What factors did you consider before choosing to come to this university?

What kind of transportation do you use? Do you live on or off campus?

How has your social life/ social behavior changed since coming to college?

How are you managing your finances?

How did you go about registering with ODS and what accommodations are you currently receiving?

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