EXPERIENCING POSTSECONDARY TRANSITION PLANNING:
THE PERSPECTIVE OF STUDENTS WITH MODERATE SPECIAL NEEDS

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Abstract

Special educators must engage students with special needs in transition planning to help students set and achieve goals with regard to postsecondary education, vocation, community engagement, and independent living. Researchers have examined many aspects of transition planning, but few have examined how students with special needs experience the transition process and the outcome of transition. It is important to examine the student perspective to fill a gap in the literature, to enable schools to develop more effective transition planning services, and to provide these students with a voice. This study used a phenomenological approach to fulfill these goals by examining how students with moderate special needs disabilities describe their experience of planning for and pursuing transition goals, what influenced and affected them in the process, and what the initial outcome of their transition has been. The researcher purposefully sampled six former high school students with moderate special needs disabilities. The data for analysis emerged from in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews. Using a strategy of open coding, the researcher analyzed and reduced the data to textural and structural descriptions, revealing the essence of transition for students with moderate special needs disabilities. The findings suggest that the nature of participant interaction with special education teachers within a specific high school setting affects the participants’ experience of transition planning and the initial outcome of their transition. Improving transition planning requires understanding how student interaction at the individual, classroom, and school levels affects whether students acquire the skills and attributes needed to make a successful postsecondary transition.

Keywords: Special needs, moderate special needs disabilities, postsecondary transition, transition planning, phenomenology
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Using a theoretical framework comprised of bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and empowerment theory (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010), I examined the lived experience of young high school graduates with moderate special needs disabilities as they recalled their postsecondary transition planning efforts and as they described the outcomes of their initial transition to adult life. Postsecondary transition planning refers to the process of preparing students with special needs to lead productive lives after high school by helping them identify their postsecondary goals and then designing and implementing services to help them acquire the skills needed to achieve those goals (Mittnacht, 2012). In this study, I used the terms postsecondary transition planning and transition planning interchangeably. For clarification, moderate special needs disabilities encompass specific learning disabilities, mild developmental disabilities, and emotional and behavioral disorders.

Statement of Problem

Special educators are responsible for ensuring that students with special needs receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. To accomplish that task, special educators provide students with services to enable them to make effective progress in school. However, when students with special needs reach high school, special education teachers must also provide transition planning services to help students further prepare for postsecondary life. Federal and state laws dictate the elements of the transition process, which include identifying a student’s goals, interests, and needs related to postsecondary education, vocation, community engagement, and independent living and then implementing results-oriented activities to achieve them (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement [IDEA] Act, 2004; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE], 2008).
Researchers have confirmed the value of the provisions stipulated in IDEA (2004) and have identified strategies and best practices that facilitate transition (Powers, Gil-Kashiwabara, et al., 2005). However, researchers have not focused sufficiently on the perceptions that students with disabilities have of the transition process and its outcomes (Gil-Kashiwabara, Hogansen, Geenen, Powers, & Powers, 2007; Powers, Geenen, & Powers, 2009). The latter represents an important educational problem to explore because adults know the importance of transition services and assume students with disabilities share an understanding of the purpose, process, and necessity of transition. However, peer-reviewed research on students’ perceptions of transition has revealed that they do not understand the process or purpose of transition planning (Kortering & Braziel, 2008; Trainor, 2005; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). Students express a desire or interest in only 19% of their stated transition goals although their individual education and transition plans often indicate that they are the primary person responsible for implementing the action steps to achieve the goals (Powers, Gil-Kashiwabara, et al., 2005, p. 56). Powers, Garner, et al. (2007) have suggested that this disconnect with students emerges from their separation from the research process.

Most conclusions regarding the efficacy of transition practices have emerged from research conducted by professionals who have deemed them effective without directly consulting the students with disabilities who engage in them (Powers, Garner, et al., 2007). My experience working with students on transition activities suggests that they do not share the same perspective as adults regarding transition. Students display different degrees of engagement at various points in the process while in high school and often pursue different transition goals once they graduate from high school. It is a challenge to engage them effectively when their investment in the process varies over time. Therefore, it is important to discover, from the
students’ perspective, the experiences that compel them to engage or disengage in transition activities and to alter or abandon their transition goals. By identifying the transition experiences that foster commitment and agency and those that induce students to eschew transition activities and goals, special educators can improve transition services and outcomes for students.

**Significance of Problem**

In 1984, Madeline Will, Assistant Secretary for Special Education, introduced the necessity of transition planning for students with disabilities. Since that time, the federal government has focused on improving transition services nationally by supporting state and local education agencies via research studies, model demonstrations, and policy, interagency, and systems change efforts (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition [NCSET], 2004). This has included incorporating specific language delineating transition requirements for state and local education agencies in IDEA (1990) and then revising it in IDEA (1997) and again in IDEA (2004; NCSET, 2004). IDEA (2004) currently requires special educators to outline a coordinated set of results-oriented activities, based on a student’s goals, interests and needs in the domains of postsecondary education, vocation, community engagement, and independent living, to facilitate a student’s transition to post-school activities (IDEA, 2004). Massachusetts law mirrors those requirements but lowers the age at which transition begins from 16 to 14 years old (DESE, 2008).

The changes to IDEA represent the federal government’s effort to ameliorate what have been historically poor outcomes for students with disabilities (deFur & Korinek, 2008). Congress has assessed the postsecondary success of students with special needs since the mid-1980s through two National Longitudinal Transitional Studies. Early data revealed that students with special needs were significantly more likely to live in poverty than their counterparts without
disabilities (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996). More current data indicate that, while outcomes have improved, students with special needs continue to struggle to complete postsecondary education programs, to obtain and maintain employment, and to engage productively in their communities as compared to their non-disabled counterparts (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2004). Special education mandates at the state level reflect the federal government’s concentration on improving transition efforts and results.

Marcia Mittnacht, Massachusetts State Director of Special Education, recently reminded special education teachers and administrators, “The ultimate goal of all professional endeavors in special education is to prepare students with disabilities for adult life” (Mittnacht, 2012, p. 1). In addition, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education outlined that one of its key priorities is to prepare all Massachusetts public school students for post-high school success in terms of careers, college, and citizenship (DESE, 2012b). The Department’s Task Force on Integrating College and Career Readiness reinforced this by stating, “Every child deserves an education that nurtures their dreams and lays out a navigable pathway to accomplish them” (DESE, 2012a, p. 25). On the local level, school districts face financial pressure to provide effective transition services because districts that fail to prepare students with disabilities to be reasonably self-sufficient in postsecondary life may have to pay for them to receive compensatory services (In re Dracut Public Schools, 2009).

Since students with special needs continue to struggle to overcome obstacles to their postsecondary success and as pressure mounts on the federal, state, and local levels for special educators and administrators to provide effective transition services, it is critical to understand how students with moderate special needs disabilities experience transition in order to improve transition interventions (Powers, Garner, et al. 2007).
Research Questions

Rather than develop transition services based on assumptions of why students behave the way they do during the transition planning process or what their postsecondary experiences are, a need exists to understand transition from their point of view. The research questions outlined in this study addressed this need. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe what recent high school graduates who have moderate special needs experienced during their transition from high school to adult life. The phenomenon of postsecondary transition entailed participating in transition planning activities, pursuing transition goals, and experiencing the initial transition from high school to postsecondary life. The primary research question was: How do students with moderate special needs disabilities describe the experience of planning for and pursuing their postsecondary transition? There were two sub-questions: How do students with moderate special needs disabilities describe what influenced or affected them in planning for and making their postsecondary transition? How do students with moderate special needs disabilities describe the outcome of their initial transition from high school to postsecondary life? The theoretical framework I used as a lens through which to examine these research questions consisted of bioecological (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and empowerment theories (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). In the balance of this chapter, I present a discussion of the theoretical framework, a summary of the chapter, and an overview of the organization of the remainder of the document.

Theoretical Framework

Bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and empowerment theory (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010) formed this study’s theoretical framework. They enabled me to explore how participants with moderate special needs disabilities experienced their postsecondary transition.
These theories offered complementary perspectives because both focus on people in context. Urie Bronfenbrenner (2005) developed the bioecological model, which suggests that people are evolving organisms existing in changing environments such that interactions between the person and the environment shape each other and influence development. Empowerment theory complements bioecological theory because it also considers human agency as embedded in social interaction and context although it focuses primarily on how people derive meaning from taking action in context and how they use that information to moderate subsequent action (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). Using these two theories as a framework, I examined participation in transition as a contextual, on-going, iterative process in which the participants actively constructed meaning from their experiences. It provided insight into how they experienced transition and how that subsequently affected their engagement in the transition process. My analysis of the data generated in the study contributed to my developing recommendations designed to help students overcome obstacles and capitalize on resources in order to foster their competence and power and elicit their continued engagement.

**Bioecological theory.** Bioecological theory evolved from Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of development, which emerged from his reaction against the previously de-contextualized nature of research on human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Bronfenbrenner envisioned ecological theory as enabling researchers to address a gap in research by examining human development as it occurs in context. He argued that it would facilitate improvement in programs and policies designed to strengthen youth and family development, which would then improve research opportunities (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).
Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979, 2005) stated two important propositions in his ecological model. The first proposition is that human development occurs through processes characterized by progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active person and his or her environment. He labeled these processes, which must be regular and occur over an extended time period, proximal processes. The second proposition states that the form, power, content, and direction of proximal processes vary systematically depending on the characteristics of the person and the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Ecological theory re-conceptualizes the environment where these interactions occur from the perspective of the developing person. It proffers that people interact within nested contextual levels: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979, 2005) defined microsystems as reflecting complex interpersonal relationships between a person and the environment in a setting that contains the person. A setting is a place where a person participates in specific activities in specific roles for particular periods of time. For a student, a microsystem includes experiences at home, at school, and with peers. Mesosystems reflect interrelationships among the major settings that include the person at specific times in life. A mesosystem for students involves interactions between school and family, family and peers, and peers and school. Exosystems extend beyond mesosystems to include major social structures that do not typically contain but affect the immediate settings in which the person interacts, thereby circumscribing what occurs there. Examples of exosystems include the community, the work world, and government agencies. Macrosystems differ from the previous levels in that they reflect general cultural or sub-cultural systems that affect society concretely and influence how people interact. For example, macrosystems include social, legal,
and educational systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 2005). The core of the ecological orientation and what distinguishes it from other approaches is its focus on the nature of interaction and accommodation between a developing person and that person’s immediate environment, including how broader environmental forces may mediate the relationship (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner’s work profoundly influenced human development research and theory, developmental psychology, and social policy development (Weisner, 2008). It helped drive research out of the laboratory and into naturalistic observations of children within the sociocultural contexts of their everyday lives (Weisner, 2008). However, during his career, Bronfenbrenner (2005) recognized that ecological theory emphasized context to the exclusion of a discussion of the process of development, which ultimately led him to articulate an expanded bioecological theory.

In the bioecological model, Bronfenbrenner (2005) focused more on process by defining human development as “a phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings,” which continues over “the life course, across successive generations, and through historical time, both past and future” (p. 3). Bronfenbrenner (2005) proposed two fundamentally related defining properties of the bioecological model. One pertains to defining the phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of the people whom researchers study using the Process-Person-Context-Time model. The other relates to developing the scientific tools for developing research designs to assess continuity and change. Bronfenbrenner intended for researchers to use the model to develop alternative hypotheses and research designs while providing a scientific basis for developing more effective social policies and programs (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).
Bronfenbrenner (2005) described the four principal components of the bioecological Process-Person-Context-Time model by emphasizing the role a person has as an active participant in context where the person’s characteristics indirectly produce and are the product of development. The core of the model is Process, which includes the proximal processes occurring across the systems as described in the ecological model. However, in the bioecological model, these processes vary as a function of the developing Person, the immediate and distal Context, and the Time periods during which they occur (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) elaborated by explaining that three Person characteristics are most influential in affecting the course of development based on their capacity to influence the direction and power of proximal processes. These are dispositions, resources, and demand characteristics. Dispositions are those personal characteristics that set proximal processes in motion and maintain their operation. Certain resources, such as ability, experience, knowledge, and skill, are necessary for proximal processes to function effectively at a given period of development. Demand characteristics are those that encourage or discourage reactions from the social environment by promoting or inhibiting the operation of proximal processes. Differentiation among these three characteristics produces patterns of Person structures that further account for differences in the direction and power of proximal processes and concomitant development. Bronfenbrenner and Morris incorporated the Person characteristics into a revised definition of microsystems, which suggests they are also characteristics of parents, peers, teachers, and others involved in the life of the developing person over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Bioecological theory suggests that the person is a critical player in interactions leading to developmental outcomes, which may be either positive or negative.
Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) suggested that Context in the bioecological model includes an expanded conceptualization of microsystems to include proximal processes involving a person’s interactions not only with people but also with objects and symbols. The model also allows for the differentiation between environmental features that promote as compared to those that hinder proximal processes and development. Time is the final defining property of the bioecological model. It occurs at three levels: microtime, mesotime, and macrotime. Microtime pertains to continuity versus discontinuity in ongoing periods of proximal processes. Mesotime refers to the recurrence of these episodes across broader time intervals, such as days and weeks. Macrot ime refers to the changing expectations and events in the broader society that influence and are influenced by human development processes and outcomes over a lifetime (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Bioecological theory relates to how students experience transition for several reasons. Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested that the phenomenon of a person moving through the various systems represents an ecological transition occurring as a result of an alteration of the person’s role, setting, or both. These ecological transitions occur across the life span and include phenomenon like attending school then graduating from school and getting a job (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). When special educators engage students with special needs in transition activities, they guide them to fulfill not only a government mandate but also a developmentally appropriate life change that is an ecological transition (Trainor, 2010). During transition activities, students with special needs interact across their microsystem and mesosystem as they collaborate with individuals and community groups to address their postsecondary transition goals. In addition, they interact with exosystems and macrosystems as they negotiate a change from high school, framed by IDEA (2004), to the adult world, framed by the Americans with

As Trainor (2010) articulated, a plethora of examples exist of how students function across these systems. An example of a transition-related activity within a student’s microsystem includes completing an informal assessment of one’s independent living skills with a teacher. A transition activity pertaining to a mesosystem involves attending a transition fair at a local high school with one’s parents. A transition-related example of an exosystem interaction includes the state department of education offering grants to schools to provide teachers with professional development in transition. Even broader, an example of a macrosystem interaction includes federal laws, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), that create strict academic progress requirements that prompt schools to reduce vocational electives (Trainor, 2010). Each type of interaction represents a proximal process that has the potential to affect a student’s development.

Bioecological theory offers a useful way to frame a thoughtful investigation and analysis of students’ perceptions of their interactions with people, objects, and symbols at the microsystem and mesosystem levels. It is most appropriate to examine participants’ interactions at the microsystem and mesosystem levels because a school system could alter interactions at those levels through programmatic change. This requires examining students’ responses to identify the Person factors affecting their experiences in transition planning. It involves analyzing student reactions to proximal processes related to transition in terms of how those reflect a student’s specific dispositions, resources, and demand characteristics. Specifically, it entails looking for patterns in those characteristics in relation to specific activities and whether those lead students to positive or negative perceptions of the transition process. Bioecological theory also aids in examining students’ responses to identify Context factors over microtime and
mesotime, which affect their experiences in transition planning, their pursuit of specific transition goals, and their interest in engaging in subsequent transition experiences. This investigation provides insight from the student’s perspective regarding the Person and Context factors that affect interactions and drive students to embrace or resist certain transition activities and goals.

**Empowerment theory.** Examining the student perspective on the type and quality of their interactions provides critical information regarding relationships and processes that support or impede students in this developmental process. However, bioecological theory lacks a critical piece to understanding the student perspective. It does not provide a lens for understanding how students derive meaning from these interactions. In this way, empowerment theory (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010) complements bioecological theory because empowerment theory seeks to explain how people comprehend their experiences.

Hur (2006) located the emergence of the concept of empowerment in Paulo Freire’s plan to liberate the oppressed through education. Diverse disciplines across the social sciences have since adopted the empowerment concept due to its central focus on improving lives (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Hur, 2006). However, during the course of its acceptance as a construct, many have struggled to define and operationalize it, suggesting one single definition or universal formula for facilitating empowerment is inappropriate for a process so individually and contextually driven (Boehm & Staples, 2002; Zimmerman, 1990, 1995). Despite this caution, Zimmerman (1990, 1995) attempted a description of the concept as a way to distinguish individual empowerment from organizational empowerment.

According to Zimmerman (1990), individual empowerment, also termed psychological empowerment, depends on a person’s participatory behavior, motivation to exert control, and
feelings of efficacy and control. Empowerment entails interactions between individuals and the environment, defined by culture and context and reflecting different intensities that change over time. Zimmerman (1990) suggested that contextual factors and intrapsychic factors have equal weight since the goal of empowerment is to understand what occurs metacognitively when a person interacts with the environment in an attempt to control factors affecting his or her life.

Zimmerman (1995) updated the construct of psychological empowerment to suggest that empowering processes are those in which people create or encounter opportunities to control their destiny and influence decisions affecting their lives. Empowering processes might include chances to develop and practice skills, to identify and manage resources, to collaborate with others on common goals, to enlarge one’s support network, and to cultivate leadership skills. These reflect one’s active engagement in the community coupled with an emerging understanding of the sociopolitical environment. Zimmerman (1995) suggested that psychological empowerment includes not only beliefs about goals one might achieve but also an awareness of the resources and factors that impede or improve one’s efforts and abilities to achieve the goals.

Zimmerman (1995) conceived of psychological empowerment as a nomological network of intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral components. The intrapersonal aspect pertains to beliefs guiding how people think with regard to their ability to produce a certain outcome. The interactional domain entails one’s understanding of one’s environment with respect to the resources available for aiding one’s goal attainment. The final component refers to actions one takes in an environment to achieve one’s goals (Zimmerman, 1995).

Most recently, Cattaneo and Chapman (2010) have developed a model for understanding empowerment for use in research and practice. Drawing from the various definitions of
empowerment, including Zimmerman’s (1995), they defined empowerment as an iterative process in which people set meaningful goals to increase their power, take action to achieve their goals, and observe and reflect on the impact of their actions while applying an evolving sense of self-efficacy, knowledge, and competence. The model focuses on how social contexts influence people at six stages in this process (setting goals, self-efficacy, knowledge, competence, action, and impact) and affect not only a person’s beliefs about his or her ability to accomplish goals but also the subsequent action he or she takes. Cattaneo and Chapman proposed that social context influences each of the stages and the links among them.

Cattaneo and Chapman (2010) suggested the first stage, setting personally meaningful, power-oriented goals, is important because people are motivated to work to achieve goals that are personally relevant. The second stage, self-efficacy, involves understanding a person’s beliefs regarding his or her ability to achieve those goals. Assessing the self-efficacy a person brings to the process can help to highlight the dynamics involved when that person encounters obstacles and opportunities in the environment. Cattaneo and Chapman describe knowledge, the third stage, as involving a person’s understanding of their social context, as it reflects power dynamics, the paths to achieving one’s goals, and the resources needed to do so. The fourth stage occurs after a person has set goals, believes he or she can achieve them, and knows what to do. It involves a person’s competence, the actual skill a person possesses relevant to the task. Cattaneo and Chapman emphasized that the competence stage reveals that knowing what to do is different than knowing how to do it. If one does not know how to achieve one’s goals, it presents an obstacle that may have a reciprocal reaction with other aspects of the process. The fifth stage involves taking action, which the previous stages may have influenced also. The action a person takes reflects the knowledge he or she has about the context and the power dynamics existing
within it, suggesting ways he or she either can or cannot change the dynamic. The final stage is impact, which involves assessing what occurs after a person takes action by examining an individual’s perceptions regarding his or her personal impact and goal attainment. It is in this domain that obstacles, a lack of resources, or other contextual factors become most explicit (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010).

Empowerment theory complements bioecological theory because it enables one to examine how participants construct meaning from their experience of setting and pursuing transition goals. It enables one to analyze participants’ contextual interactions by breaking them down into the six empowerment stages. It facilitates the examination of the Person characteristics as they operate in this stage process to determine what about a participant’s dispositions, resources, and demand characteristics creates empowerment or disempowerment at specific points in this process. It exposes how Context characteristics such as opportunities, obstacles, and resources in the environment factor into this process to impede or foster a participant’s sense of empowerment and subsequent approach to transition. As Ryan and Deci (2000) noted, most people demonstrate effort, agency, and commitment to their lives although sometimes individuals reject growth and responsibility when they feel their spirit diminished.

Bioecological theory and empowerment theory both lend themselves to naturalistic inquiries using qualitative approaches (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004). Although Bronfenbrenner preferred using his theory to frame experimental designs in naturalistic settings, he appreciated the value of phenomenological approaches and advocated that researchers could use bioecological theory to examine how a particular feature, such as being a student with special needs engaged in transition planning, might play out within and across each level of the ecological system in a natural context (Weisner, 2008). Bronfenbrenner (1979) also
proposed that researchers could ascertain the knowledge and initiative of a person in study in a
natural context by interviewing a person retrospectively. Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006) also
suggested that the features of development relevant for scientific study include not only the
objective properties of experience but also those subjectively experienced by the person.
Similarly, Cleary and Zimmerman (2004) and Zimmerman (1990) have suggested that
qualitative research methods represent dynamic constructs most appropriate for capturing the
context-related factors influencing people’s decision-making in the empowerment process.
Zimmerman and Warschausky (1998) also suggested that empowerment was an appropriate
concept for professionals to use when helping people with disabilities increase their
independence, develop skills to overcome barriers, and collaborate with others to overcome
obstacles that may limit full community integration. A theoretical framework comprised of
bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and empowerment theory (Cattaneo & Chapman,
2010) corresponded well to a phenomenological study of the experience of former high school
students with moderate special needs disabilities in setting and pursuing transition goals.

Summary

Special educators in Massachusetts must provide transition planning services to students
with special needs once those students turn 14, which means guiding them to identify their goals,
interests, and needs with regard to postsecondary education, vocation, community engagement,
and independent living. These services must be results-oriented (DESE, 2008; IDEA, 2004). The
literature offers special educators a host of best practices in transition although those have
emerged from research that has excluded the perspective of the students engaged in those
practices (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Powers, Garner, et al., 2007). Often, a transition activity
merits the label best practice by virtue of the number of studies that reference it rather than by
students confirming that the activity led to a positive result for them after high school (Landmark, Ju, & Zhang, 2010).

Engaging students with disabilities in transition services that enable them to lead reasonably self-sufficient and productive lives after high school is a mandate at the federal, state, and local levels. However, in my experience as a special education teacher and administrator, students with special needs often do not appear to share the urgency adults have with regard to transition planning. Sometimes they engage and disengage in transition activities over their high school career, and often they pursue different goals once they have exited high school. As a result, it is difficult for special educators to know which of the best practices they implemented served students well in transition.

Rather than continue to implement transition services that create this vacillating engagement and that leave teachers wondering what has actually worked, I wanted to know what students with special needs experienced while planning for and pursuing their postsecondary transition. Therefore, I sought to reveal that experience using a phenomenological approach framed by a theoretical framework consisting of bioecological (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and empowerment (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010) theories. Bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) enabled me to examine and analyze how students in transition perceived their interactions with people, objects, and symbols at the microsystem and mesosystem levels. Empowerment theory (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010) complemented bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) because it allowed me to explore how students derived meaning from their experience of planning for their transition and pursuing their goals. Using this theoretical framework, I examined how participants’ characteristics interacted with context across these stages to create experiences that cultivated or diminished their engagement in transition.
Document Organization

In Chapter One, I introduced the importance of improving transition planning services for students with moderate special needs disabilities and the relevance of understanding transition planning from their perspective. I outlined the research questions and provided a rationale for using bioecological (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and empowerment (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010) theories as a theoretical framework in conjunction with phenomenology as the research methodology to answer those questions. In Chapter Two, I review the literature, which includes three pertinent bodies of research: self-determination, risk and resilience, and student perception of transition planning. Self-determination is a body of literature that provides information on current practices for involving students with moderate special needs disabilities in setting and achieving transition goals. The second body of literature pertains to risk and resilience factors that affect students with moderate special needs. Student perception of transition is the third body of literature, which reveals what researchers know about the student experience. In Chapter Three, I outline the study’s phenomenological research design. Chapter Three contains a detailed discussion of the research question, the methodology, site and participants, data collection procedures, and analysis; also, it provides an explanation of the procedure for the protection of human subjects. In Chapter Four, I present the participant data, providing a thick, rich description of the phenomenon of transition planning and postsecondary transition as experienced by the participants. I discuss the research findings in reference to the theoretical framework and literature in Chapter Five. In my conclusion to Chapter Five, I discuss implications and recommendations for practice and present the limitations of the study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Research Questions for the Literature

Bioecological and empowerment theories guided me to explore three questions of the literature. What does the scholarly literature tell about current practices for involving students with moderate special needs disabilities in setting and achieving transition goals? (2) What does the scholarly literature say about the factors that affect students with moderate special needs disabilities in the transition process? (3) What does the scholarly literature tell about the perceptions students with moderate special needs disabilities have of transition? Bioecological and empowerment theory informed the first question because it explored practices researchers recommend and special education teachers use to teach students about setting transition goals. They informed the second question because it examined the internal and external factors that may influence students with moderate special needs disabilities in transition. The final question also drew from both theories in identifying what researchers know about the student experience. I thoroughly explored these bodies of literature to create a foundation for this study, which revealed elements of empowerment theory (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010) and bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Self-Determination

When students with special needs reach high school, special educators must provide them with transition planning services. One of the best practices in transition planning dictates that special educators use person-centered planning techniques by involving students directly in the transition planning process (NCSET, 2004). This means engaging students in developing an annual transition plan by asking students about their strengths, preferences, and interests and cooperating to develop appropriate, measurable postsecondary goals. Educators then devise and
engage students in results-oriented activities to improve their academic and functional achievement and to facilitate their acquisition of the identified goals (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, n.d.). Self-determination is a vital skill for students to possess when participating in person-centered transition planning (Trainor, 2002).

The essence of self-determination is that it is an expression of personal agency in which one understands one’s needs, preferences, strengths, and weaknesses sufficiently in order to analyze options and goals and establish a clear vision for one’s future (Cobb, Lehman, Newman-Gonchar, & Alwell, 2009). It emerged from the work of Deci and Ryan (2000) and Ryan and Deci (2000), who theorized that people have an innate tendency toward psychological growth provided they satisfy the three fundamental psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which will typically happen in a supportive social context. People exhibit constructive psychological and social development and personal well-being when they fulfill these needs. People experience negative mental health consequences and an inhibition of persistence and performance when they do not fulfill these needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students with special needs who develop self-determination skills assess their abilities, establish goals, and make choices, which are skills fundamental to participating in person-centered transition planning (Cobb et al., 2009; Trainor, 2002).

The concept of self-determination expanded rapidly in the literature throughout the 1990s due to the government’s support of research on the concept, its inclusion in disability law, and the special education field’s progression through the normalization and deinstitutionalization movements (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001; Field & Hoffman, 1994; Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003). The emphasis on helping students develop self-determination skills emerged as a focal point of the Office of Special Education Programs’ (OSEP) efforts to
improve students’ postsecondary outcomes in the wake of early data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (1985-1993) (Alwell & Cobb, 2006; Cobb & Alwell, 2009). OSEP funded over 100 projects to improve postsecondary outcomes for students with special needs beginning in the early 1990s (Alwell & Cobb, 2006; Cobb & Alwell, 2009). This included over 25 projects to introduce, define, and operationalize the construct of self-determination, which emphasized the philosophy emanating from the normalization and deinstitutionalization movements that students with disabilities have the right to direct their lives (Cobb et al., 2009; Stancliffe, 2001; Wehmeyer, 1999). These projects enabled researchers to develop several models for framing the skills, abilities, attitudes, and beliefs that create self-determined students and to identify instructional activities that promote self-determination. Several of the models reflect aspects of bioecological (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and empowerment theories (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010).

Wehmeyer (1999) offered a model suggesting that students with special needs who are self-determined act with behavioral autonomy, exhibit self-regulated behavior, are self-realizing, and show psychological empowerment. When these students demonstrate self-determination based on these characteristics, they become causal agents who make or cause things to happen in their lives because they have the intention of shaping their future. However, Wehmeyer recognized that all people frequently face choices that may be constrained or forced due to the interdependent nature of life. As a result, he defined causal agency within this context as people making choices and decisions without excessive interference or influence from others. Many of the methods and materials emerging from this work focus on teaching students to set goals, choose and make decisions, problem-solve, self-advocate, and take greater control of their learning (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000). While this model acknowledged
the influence of environmental factors and political self-determination, Stancliffe (2001) characterized it as a psycho-educational perspective.

This particular model reflects aspects of bioecological and empowerment theories. Wehmeyer (1999), who cited the early work of Zimmerman, described psychological empowerment as a characteristic people develop as a result of learning and using problem-solving skills to achieve either perceived or actual control in their lives. Wehmeyer also raised the issue of environmental influences in acknowledging that students may have limited choices from which to choose, which may impact their decision-making process. However, Wehmeyer (1999) remained focused on the personal characteristics leading to self-determination rather than the interaction of environmental and personal factors or their influence on students in drawing conclusions about their capacity for self-determination.

Field and Hoffman (1994) devised a self-determination model. They suggested self-determination is the ability to define and achieve goals as influenced by one’s self-knowledge and self-esteem. Their model contains five components: know yourself, value yourself, plan, act, experience outcomes, and learn. The know yourself stage occurs when one assesses the range of options available to oneself along with one’s strengths, weaknesses, needs, and preferences in order to identify an important goal. The value yourself stage entails believing in oneself and understanding that one has the right to pursue a goal. If a student possesses either the self-knowledge but not the self-worth or the self-worth but not the self-knowledge, the student will not achieve self-determination. The third and fourth stages of the model involve planning to achieve then acting to achieve specific goals. The fifth stage includes learning from the experience of working to achieve goals. Field and Hoffman assumed that this learning takes the form of the person recognizing the changes he or she must make to become self-determined.
In discussing their model, Field and Hoffman (1994) implied but did not clearly articulate elements of Cattaneo and Chapman’s (2010) empowerment model and elements of Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) bioecological model. Field and Hoffman’s model reflects Cattaneo and Chapman’s empowerment model because it is a stage model intending to explain how one sets and achieves goals and learns from the process. However, Cattaneo and Chapman’s model contains more detail in describing additional steps that reveal the complexity of the process. While Field and Hoffman suggested that students must have self-knowledge and self-worth to become self-determined, Cattaneo and Chapman suggested there are more layers to this process. One has to have an integration of self-efficacy, knowledge, and competence before one can take action and learn from that action. A breakdown in any of these areas can lead a person to feel disempowered. In addition, Field and Hoffman assumed that the learning in the final step will lead to further development of self-determination. In contrast, Cattaneo and Chapman suggested that the final impact stage involves a person understanding either the obstacles they have overcome to achieve their goal or those that have prevented them from accomplishing the goal. However, they do not assume that people automatically learn something from the experience leading to positive development (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). Field and Hoffman also suggested that environmental factors impact one in becoming self-determined although they did not describe those factors. Instead, they proposed that a person could attain and maintain self-determination in environments presenting varying degrees of support (Field & Hoffman, 1994).

Both models contrast with another self-determination model that proposed an ecological perspective acknowledging personal competencies but focusing on environmental factors impeding self-determination (Stancliffe, 2001). Stancliffe, Aberly, and Smith (2000) suggested that much work has been done to identify the skills, attitudes, and knowledge one needs to
become self-determined but that these have never been evaluated in terms of environmental factors that might affect self-determination. They suggested that having the personal capacity for self-determination is not sufficient; one must also have regular environmental opportunities to exercise those competencies (Stancliffe et al., 2000). Like the two previous models, this reflects Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model in suggesting that interactions at environmental levels affect a student’s development, but it seems to eschew an exploration of personal factors in this process. These models established the foundation for how the field understands self-determination, which continues to evolve supported by the most recent government funding.

A consortium of universities received a grant from the federal government to develop a social-ecological approach to self-determination for use with people with intellectual disabilities (Walker et al., 2011). Based in part on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory, it conceptualizes the existence of reciprocal environmental and personal variables (characterized as moderating and mediating variables) that impact the development and application of self-determination skills (Walker et al., 2011).

These models suggest an idea that Cobb et al. (2009) proposed in summarizing a meta-synthesis of self-determination literature, which is that self-determination is complex and involves an extraordinary number of dimensions. Algozzine et al.’s (2001) review of the self-determination literature found that, while a great deal of research exists on self-determination, the majority of self-determination interventions involve teaching choice-making skills to students with intellectual disabilities and self-advocacy skills to students with learning disabilities. Of the models described above, Wehmeyer’s (1999) model, Stancliffe et al.’s (2000) model, and the model under development by the consortium (Walker et al., 2011) are specifically for use with students with intellectual disabilities. Few studies have demonstrated how to teach students a
broad range of self-determination skills, and few have contained social validity data indicating whether participants have found the goals, procedures, and outcomes of self-determination interventions acceptable (Algozzine et al., 2001).

Ankeny and Lehman’s (2011) narrative study involving four students from a Midwestern community college was one of the few studies to examine students’ understanding of what it means to be self-determined and what influences their performance of those skills. They concluded that self-determination evolves over a lifetime with personal, environmental, and experiential factors influencing its development. They also suggested that part of the transition process should include an opportunity for school personnel to “incorporate an attentive, reflective, and celebratory dimension to their interactions with students” (Ankeny & Lehman, 2011, p. 287). Their conclusions reflect Algozzine et al.’s (2001) argument that research should assess how specific interventions influence the quality of students’ lives and reinforce the importance of understanding how students with special needs perceive transition practices. The most current research on self-determination has attempted to fill these gaps.

Recent research studies exploring self-determination highlight areas ripe for investigation and provide support for qualitative studies using the aforementioned theoretical framework. Many studies described in the following paragraphs conclude that internal and external factors affect student participation in the transition planning process and merit future study.

For example, Carter, Trainor, Owens, Sweden, and Ye (2010) completed a causal-comparative survey study using a sample of 196 high school students from a Midwestern state in the United States (p. 69). These students received special education services under a primary or secondary category of learning disability, emotional and behavioral disorder, or mild/moderate cognitive disability. Carter, Trainor, Owens, et al. explored perceptions of students’ self-
determination capacities and opportunities by distributing the AIR Self-Determination Scale to students, their parents, and their teachers. They found that teachers assess students’ self-determination differently based on disability category, which suggests that disability type influences transition. They proposed that future research should identify the nature and source of those deficits and should surface the issues of context, teacher perspective, and disability. Carter, Trainor, Owens, et al. argued that studies should incorporate additional student, family, school, and community variables into analyses that further examine the multiple factors impacting the experiences of students with disabilities in transition. The authors recommended investigating contextual factors that may emerge when assessing self-determination, supporting the idea that interactions between components of ecosystems may influence the transition process. However, the authors acknowledged that the AIR Self-Determination Scale was global in nature and may have missed subtleties in assessment (Carter, Trainor, Owens, et al., 2010). One disadvantage to quantitative studies using these types of surveys is that they provide a forced choice selection rather than allowing participants to express their ideas in an open-ended format.

Youngsun et al. (2010) also completed a quantitative study. They employed an experimental design to examine the intraindividual, dispositional, knowledge, and experiential-instructional factors that best predicted post-intervention self-determination and goal setting. Their sample included 168 junior high and middle school students receiving special education services in 12 Midwestern schools (Youngsun et al., 2010, p. 3). They trained teachers to use the *Whose Future Is It Anyway?* curriculum and then divided students into a group receiving instruction in the curriculum using a digital e-reader and a group receiving instruction using a hard copy. They used the Air Self-Determination Scale and the Arc’s Self-Determination Scale to assess students’ self-determination levels. Youngsun et al. developed and gave a self-efficacy
measure to ascertain students’ beliefs about their ability to participate in transition planning. The researchers determined that instructional, knowledge, and dispositional or belief factors predict students’ self-determination more than personal variables, such as age, gender, and IQ level, and that self-determination and involvement in transition planning promote each other (Youngsun et al., 2010). They concluded that research should probe relationships between specific student characteristics and dispositions, context, and intervention factors because these are factors educators could affect by changing their transition protocol (Youngsun et al., 2010). While this study has value in identifying these aspects for future research, it does not explain the factors most influential for students, which is information a qualitative study could potentially reveal.

Some studies found that internal factors warranted further study. For example, as part of a larger, multi-state, randomized trial intervention, Williams-Diehm, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup and Garner (2008) completed a multivariate analysis to examine differences in self-determination between groups of students who differed in involvement in their individual education plans. The sample included 236 students with disabilities from 62 high schools in 33 school districts in five states (Williams-Diehm et al., 2008, p. 20). They recruited teachers to administer the Arc’s Self-Determination Scale and the AIR Self-Determination Scale and developed a questionnaire to assess students’ involvement in transition planning. The researchers concluded that students who are more actively involved in developing their IEP are also more self-determined, which suggests that researchers should examine the interaction of disability level and student involvement in transition planning (Williams-Diehm et al., 2008). While this conclusion is valuable, one of its limitations is that it included little discussion of validity and reliability aside from the process of norming the self-determination measures and training the teachers to administer them (Williams-Diehm et al., 2008).
Others have suggested that external factors deserve more investigation. For example, Carter, Trainor, Cakiroglu, Sweden, and Owens (2010) surveyed school administrators, including principals and assistant principals, student service directors, school counselors, and other school staff, to determine the career development and vocational activities that transition-age students and students with emotional-behavioral disorders could access. They selected administrators from 34 high schools in 26 school districts who had participated in a larger study of factors affecting youth employment and community participation (Carter, Trainor, Cakiroglu, et al., 2010, p. 15). The researchers purposively selected these schools to achieve geographical, economic, and cultural diversity and achieved a 100% return rate on the questionnaires distributed (Carter, Trainor, Cakiroglu, et al., 2010, p. 16). The results indicated that high schools offer an array of programs, but students have limited and uneven access to them. Carter, Trainor, Cakiroglu, et al. (2010) argued that researchers know little about the factors that students perceive as influencing their participation in such programs and recommended asking students to identify the barriers they encountered affecting their involvement in such activities. A well-designed qualitative study could target student perception, which could lead to information critical in redesigning a school’s transition planning services.

A survey study by Powers, Hogansen, Geenen, Powers, and Gil-Kashiwabara (2008) examined the differences among males and females with disabilities in their goals, expectations, and experiences and whether this varied by culture. Powers, Hogansen, et al. distributed a total of 2,400 surveys to male and female students with disabilities and to parents of male and female students with disabilities in two large, urban school districts in two Western states (p. 352). The results indicated that gender-related factors impact transition but that all students report restricted opportunities to engage in transition activities, which suggests that environmental factors may
influence a student’s participation in the transition programs available in a school district (Powers, Hogansen, et al., 2008). However, Powers, Hogansen, et al. only garnered a response rate of 21% and made no effort to address the non-responders (p. 352). Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012) acknowledge that failure to address non-responders presents a problem because non-responders may have different views than responders. Conclusions drawn primarily from responders may not truly represent the beliefs of the population sampled. Non-response on survey studies is a disadvantage of quantitative studies that qualitative studies avoid (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

As the models and research described above suggest, an interaction exists between personal and environmental factors as students engage in goal setting and then attempt to achieve their goals. Students learn something from those interactions that affects their willingness to pursue further transition goals. The idea that both internal and external factors affect students confirms that a theoretical framework comprised of bioecological and empowerment theories is appropriate for framing a study of students’ perceptions of the transition process. It also suggests the importance of understanding the risk and resilience factors known to affect students with special needs in high school and in terms of their experiences with transition.

Risk and Resilience

The idea that personal and environmental factors influence whether students experience positive or negative development was one that Garmezy, Masten, and Tellegen (1984) introduced to the field of child development as risk and protective factors. Garmezy et al. (1984) explored risk and protective factors as an avenue to understand stress and competence in children and how such factors contribute to the development of psychopathology in children. They characterized risk factors as anomalous experiences, such as disordered parenting style, disturbed
family and rearing milieus, and disadvantaged environments, that contribute to poor outcomes for children. Garmezy et al. identified protective or resilience factors as dispositional attributes, other environmental conditions, biological predispositions, and positive events that nullify the risk factors operant in a child’s life.

Using this lens, Werner (1993) summarized the results of a longitudinal study of 698 children in Hawaii who had successfully coped with biological and psychological risk factors (p. 503). Werner identified several clear clusters of protective factors in high-risk children. Those protective factors include temperamental dispositions that enable children to elicit positive responses from a variety of caring adults; skills and values that allow children to use efficiently whatever abilities they possess to pursue realistic educational and vocational goals; parents who display competent care-giving styles, which allow children to develop self-esteem; exposure to supportive adults who foster trust and act as gatekeepers to the future; and the existence of opportunities at major life transitions (Werner, 1993). As Werner noted, children who overcome high-risk situations to succeed as adults use their individual dispositions to select or create an environment that reinforces their active, extroverted personalities and rewards their aptitudes. However, Werner recognized that large individual differences exist among high-risk children in how they respond to the positive and negative circumstances in their environments. Werner argued that children’s life trajectories show how a cumulative, interactional continuity exists between risk and protective factors, revealing the need for researchers to understand the critical time periods where intervention may affect a child’s development along a continuum of care. This research prompted an investigation of the risk and resilience factors in the lives of students with high-incidence disabilities, such as learning disabilities (Weiner, 2003; Wong, 2003).
Early research on risk and resilience factors affecting students with disabilities acknowledged that students with disabilities face many types of developmental risks ranging from neurocognitive and academic deficits to psychosocial problems (Greenham, 1999). Students with disabilities often encounter a variety of frustrations not only with academic tasks but also with social experiences and loneliness (Margalit; 2003). Swanson and Malone (1992) completed a meta-analysis of 39 comparative studies and concluded that normally achieving peers like students with learning disabilities less and reject them more. Students with disabilities are likely to have an affective illness co-morbid with their learning disability and recurrent over their lifetime (Morris, Schraufnagel, Chudow, & Weinberg, 2009). According to Bender and Wall (1994), students with learning disabilities face a wide variety of social-emotional problems, including issues with interpersonal skills, ability to adapt, anxiety, loneliness, depression, legal problems, and increased suicidal ideation. The research suggests students with disabilities face many risks in their quest to become functional adults.

Research on the factors related to success and life satisfaction in young adults with learning disabilities has revealed that students continue to struggle as young adults with the effects of their learning disability (Spekman, Goldberg, & Herman, 1992). When high school students with disabilities become young adults, their academic difficulties do not abate. Students with disabilities continue to encounter challenges as their disability manifests in the adult context and as they face the many difficulties presented by life stressors (Gerber, 2012; Morris et al., 2009). However, researchers have found no clear relationship between students’ intelligence levels and their success as adults after school (Morris et al., 2009; Spekman et al., 1992). The presence of a learning disability, while a risk factor for students, does not predict a positive or a negative outcome by itself (Morrison & Cosden, 1997).
This phenomenon of students with learning disabilities achieving varying levels of success with no apparent relationship in their level of success to their level of intelligence reflects the challenges researchers have had in identifying subtypes of learning disabilities. The heterogeneity of disabilities and students with those disabilities coupled with the wide variation in students’ social emotional development has made it nearly impossible to categorize students into subtypes of disabilities with estimations of their potential for success (Donahue & Pearl, 2003). Given that students with learning disabilities vary widely in their cognitive, emotional, and social development, researchers have begun to consider how personal and environmental factors exacerbate or minimize the difficulties students with learning disabilities encounter as students and adults (Donahue & Pearl, 2003; Morrison & Cosden, 1997). Bender and Wall (1994) have argued that researchers should not assess students’ cognitive and achievement abilities using standardized tests and predict a student’s potential for success or difficulty later in life. Instead, researchers must expand the factors they examine to understand a student’s potential for long-term development and life success (Bender & Wall, 1994).

Support for this type of exploration of the risk and resilience factors affecting students with disabilities reflects bioecological (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and empowerment (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010) theories. Weiner (2003) has suggested that researchers seeking to understand how students and adults with learning disabilities function must understand the interactive relationship between an individual’s characteristics and environment. Keogh and Weisner (1993) have suggested that researchers adopt an ecocultural perspective that envisions risk and protective factors as located in the child, family, community, subculture, and social unit levels. They have argued that it is necessary to understand how risk and protective factors interact across these levels in order to facilitate intervention planning and program development.
Others consider these contextual experiences and recognize that it is insufficient to understand simply what factors affect students. They have argued that it is critical to explain why and how such factors put students at risk or protect them from poor life outcomes (Wong, 2003). An examination of why and how risk and resilience factors affect students reflects empowerment theory (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010) because it seeks to understand how students integrate those factors into their experiences and then respond to life events. Zimmerman and Arunkumar (1994) supported the idea that risk and resilience may manifest differently for people, especially across gender lines, and that one must understand how social institutions, such as schools, promote resiliency and minimize risk for students. Margalit (2003) extended this by noting that an interaction between personal and environmental factors may alter how a student with a disability responds to a challenge and that research must examine the dynamics of this interaction to understand how some students with disabilities become more resilient and others less so. Donahue and Pearl (2003) noted that what constitutes risk and protective factors may be a function of age, gender, cultural values and ecological context but that what is most important is determining the subjective experience of the individual facing those risk and protective factors, which is something phenomenological studies can reveal. These scholars clearly note that students experience these factors in context, either as personal characteristics or environmental challenges, and derive meaning from them thus prompting the student to respond favorably or negatively to their situation.

Morrison and Cosden (1997) suggested that risk and resilience factors may reflect environmental context as well as how students synthesize their experiences to respond to the environment. Morrison and Cosden have argued that risk factors, a catch-all term for the many conditions that may lead to negative outcomes for students with disabilities, may reside in the
individual, in the environment, or may be the product of an interaction of the two. While risk factors for students with disabilities may be the same as those for other students, the potential for risk is greater for these students due to their disability, which may result in greater parental disappointment, family rigidity or disorganization, school disruption, and school failure. The existence of a disability, along with these significant stressors in the family, school, and community, often puts the individual with a disability at higher risk for poor emotional, familial, and societal outcomes. Morrison and Cosden have identified protective factors that might mitigate the challenges students with disabilities face. Like risk factors, these can reside within the student, the environment, or in the interaction between the two. Protective factors include having strong verbal skills, an understanding of one’s disability, elevated levels of self-awareness, and an environment constituted by effective parenting, which includes appropriate expectations and flexibility in family functioning. They noted that schools may provide a supportive environment that allows students to develop these types of coping strategies although relatively little research has been conducted in this area (Morrison & Cosden, 1997).

Murray (2003) explored risk factors for students with high-incidence disabilities specifically in transition and concluded that disability status, racial status, and socio-economic status independently increase the likelihood that a student will experience a negative post-school outcome. Murray noted that an amalgam of these risk factors may increase this possibility although sorting out the effect of individual risk factors is complex because it involves relationships of these factors. Murray suggested that resilience factors, such as individual characteristics, family factors, school factors, and community factors, may work to ameliorate negative outcomes in an interactive way. Murray characterized these resilience factors as processes that change or modify a student’s experience of risk.
Murray (2003) argued that there is very little existing information outlining risk factors that specifically affect the outcome status of youth with disabilities and suggested that future research efforts must clarify the relationship between specific risk factors, resilience processes, and post-school adult outcomes. He recommended that researchers document the relationship of risk factors and resilience processes to the postsecondary status of students with disabilities. Murray argued that delineating these factors and processes may help educators eliminate or alter students’ exposure to risk factors and enhance their experience of resilience processes. He suggested that the focus for individuals, schools, families, and communities should be on creating intervention efforts that build students’ capacity for resilience (Murray, 2003).

Others have identified resilience factors that may help students with disabilities develop the skills necessary to overcome their risk factors and succeed. Spekman et al. (1992) completed a study involving 50 former students, 18 to 25 years old, from a private school serving students with learning disabilities (p. 162). They examined their educational, employment, and social-emotional post-high school status. The researchers interviewed the former students, reviewed case files and testing, and surveyed the young adults’ parents. Spekman et al. identified three themes working in concert to maximize the abilities of students with disabilities to face their challenges. Those themes included having a high level of self-awareness and an acceptance of their disability. If students are self-aware and accepting of themselves, they proactively engage their world with a high level of perseverance and emotional stability by setting appropriate self-directed goals. When working to achieve their goals, they actively utilize the support, guidance, and encouragement of others. Spekman et al. suggested that these resilience factors together serve to protect students and bolster their ability to overcome adversity. While this study
examined quantitative data, researchers distilled those themes from the qualitative data gathered during student interviews.

Similarly, Brooks (2004) suggested that effective teachers could be protective factors in the lives of students with disabilities if they incorporate the following themes in the environment of their classroom. If teachers construct learning environments that meet students’ basic needs to belong and feel connected, encourage them to become active participants in their education, and enable them to feel competent and accomplished, teachers create an environment that provides protection to students with disabilities (Brooks, 2004).

Like Spekman et al. (1992), Miller (2002) used a qualitative procedure to gather data and distill themes related to students’ resiliency. Miller interviewed 10 students diagnosed with learning disabilities at a college in a Midwestern state to identify how each student perceived the elements leading to his or her resilience (p. 293). Those interviews yielded several themes that may allow professionals to help non-resilient students with disabilities become more resilient. Those included helping students do the following: recognize a successful experience, identify a particular area of strength, develop self-determination, recognize distinctive turning points, create special friendships, bond with an encouraging teacher, and acknowledge their disability (Miller, 2002). As Miller noted, this type of qualitative data is critical because it enables educators to intervene by promoting these characteristics through experiences at school.

An area ripe for research is how students perceive the environments that teachers attempt to create for them as they engage in transition activities. As Donahue and Pearl (2003) suggested, what is vital to understand when exploring risk factors and resilience processes in students with special needs is what they experience and how they make sense of what affects them in the
process of setting goals and engaging in activities to help them pursue an adult life. The next section explores research on student perception of transition in the school context.

**Student Perception**

The field of special education has begun to shift from a strong adherence to quantitative studies toward advocacy of a broader range of research methods and increased acceptance of qualitative studies (Dudley-Marling, 2011; Klingner & Boardman, 2011; Michaels & Ferrara, 2005; Poplin, 2011; Trainor, 2011). As Klingner and Boardman (2011) have asserted, using qualitative methods can help researchers understand what facilitates and what impedes students with regard to special education approaches especially in the local context. This shift comes with greater recognition that the field has neglected the perspective of the student, undoubtedly the most important person in the transition process, which must inform the special education canon for the benefit of the field (Bursuck, 2011; Powers, Geenen, et al., 2009). Researchers have begun to value an examination of the lived experience of students, by analyzing what students believe, think, and feel about special education and its processes, for its utility in improving special education services (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Connor, Gallagher, & Ferri, 2011; Ferri, Gallagher, & Connor, 2011; Kortering & Braziel, 2002). While the literature on student perception of transition and the special education process has remained somewhat limited (Trainor, 2005; Trainor, 2007), it was important to the development of this study to analyze what researchers have learned about the student experience and to identify the methodologies they used to develop that understanding.

Kortering and Braziel (2008) examined the utility of using a one-time vocational assessment process with students who have learning disabilities. The authors sampled 29 students in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades from two rural school districts in a southeastern
state (p. 28). As a background feature of the study, they sought to identify the students’ views of high school and concluded that students do not necessarily appear to understand their individual education plan or the transition planning involving them. Kortering and Braziel suggested that research should explore how to assist students in learning about themselves within the context of their receiving special education services and via their participation in the individual education plan process. They argued that educators could better engage students in learning and school if they sought to understand students’ motivations and if students perceived what teachers asked them to do as meaningful and relevant to their lives (Kortering & Braziel, 2008). These results suggest the importance of understanding how students understand the transition process within their local context, so educators can improve the delivery of transition services. The finding that students with special needs experience a disconnection from educators is one that others have found specifically in studies pertaining to transition.

The following six studies reveal a common theme of students experiencing barriers to transition presented in the school context and of their dissatisfaction with the process. Trainor (2005) completed a phenomenological study to understand the self-determination behaviors, perceptions, and influences on transition for culturally and linguistically diverse adolescent males with disabilities. She purposively sampled males ages 16 or older who received special education services and free or reduced lunch. The sample included 15 students who self-identified as Hispanic, African-American, or European American from a large Southwestern metropolitan school district (Trainor, 2005, p. 235). Trainor (2005) gathered data by reviewing documents, conducting observations of individual education plan and transition plan meetings, taking field notes, and conducting focus groups and interviews. She noted that a limitation of the study was its lack of generalizability although she clarified that the goal was never to achieve
generalizability rather her intent was to explore the participants’ perspectives and experiences with transition planning (Trainor, 2005).

Trainor (2005) revealed that students do not connect their transition plans with their personal goals. They participate on the periphery, rely on family for transition planning, and attempt to be self-determined but lack opportunities to do so. While subtle differences emerged among racial and ethnic groups, she found that school culture mediates those results because each group feels thwarted at school and identifies more opportunities for self-determination at home. None of the groups of students perceive their teachers to be instrumental figures in their transition planning activities. Trainor (2005) recommended that researchers examine environmental and contextual aspects of self-determination, students’ individual skills, characteristics, and attitudes, and the influence of societal variables affecting students’ experiences with self-determination. Her findings suggest that Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model is an appropriate theory to use in a theoretical framework for understanding students’ perception, which is a conclusion she and her colleagues have begun to advocate for in subsequent work (Trainor et al., 2008).

Similarly, Williams-Diehm and Lynch (2007) completed a mixed methods study that examined students’ knowledge of transition planning and their perceptions of roles and responsibilities in transition. They sampled 103 students who received special education services in a mid-size city in Texas. Williams-Diehm and Lynch used a 10-question survey that included one open-ended question and took five minutes to administer to students individually (p. 14-15). They also randomly selected every ninth student’s individual education and transition plan to review. Like Kortering and Braziel (2008), Williams-Diehm and Lynch concluded that students do not understand the importance of transition planning. Similar to Trainor (2005), they revealed
that students perceive themselves to be making progress toward their transition goals despite feeling they receive little to no help from school personnel in preparing for postsecondary life. Students want more assistance with transition than teachers provide. They want teachers to spend more time listening, to offer more concrete career advice, and to provide them with opportunities to take more vocational classes (Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). Again, the message students convey is their local context presents barriers to their participation in transition activities, which affects their engagement in the process. What is important about this type of study is that the qualitative procedures surfaced student beliefs, which are critical for improving the provision of transition services.

Curtis, Rabren, and Reilly (2009) completed a mixed method study with a sample of 1,888 students who had received special education services in high school (p. 33). These students came from districts randomly selected from a set of districts already required to complete a larger phone survey on student participation in transition planning. The study also incorporated information from a focus group conducted at a conference on transition. Four young adults who had received special education services in high school and seven parents of such adults participated in the focus group (Curtis et al., 2009).

Curtis et al. (2009) sought to determine the outcome status of the students and ascertain the perceptions the students and parents had of the students’ outcomes and life satisfaction. The results revealed that students perceive secondary education teachers as sending mixed messages by developing expectations that students would live independently after high school. Curtis et al. suggested that educators must help students develop realistic postsecondary goals rather than ones that establish false expectations. Even though their finding that students felt teachers provided too much encouragement contrasted with Williams-Diehm and Lynch (2007), who
found that teachers provided too little support, it reinforces the idea that individual characteristics and the local context interact in ways that affect students differently. It supports the argument that improving transition services depends on understanding these relationships in local context.

One limitation of this study was that the phone survey only garnered a 53% participation rate, and the researchers did not attempt to determine the perspectives of the non-responders (Curtis et al., 2009). This suggests that there is a student viewpoint absent from the study. In addition, it brings into question the validity of including the focus group opinions of such a small group of students and parents attending a transition conference. Perhaps these were students and parents still seeking support in making the transition to adult life because they believed they had received insufficient services during their high school years. Perhaps this study would have yielded different data if these participants had been interviewed separately over time and if researchers had contacted non-respondents for their opinions.

Powers, Geenen, et al. (2009) surveyed male and female students receiving special education support in high school and parents of students receiving special education services in high school. The sample included approximately 1,200 students who were between 16 to 22 years old and who received special education services from two large, urban school districts in two Western states and 1,200 parents of such students but not necessarily the parents of the students in the survey (Powers, Geenen, et al., 2009, p. 135). The results indicated that parents and students share beliefs on the importance of goals related to independence but differ on the value of teacher support and the recognition of barriers to transition. Parents emphasize the value of teacher support in achieving transition goals much more than students do. However, students report greater barriers to transition than parents perceive, which suggests that students possess a heightened awareness of the challenges preventing them from achieving their goals. As a result,
students are more likely than their parents recognize to look outside the school environment for assistance in overcoming those barriers (Powers, Geenen, et al., 2009). Again, this reinforces the importance of understanding the specific interactions that drive students to make choices to engage or disengage from transition activities presented in the school context and the relevance of bioecological and empowerment theories as a theoretical framework. However, like other quantitative studies described in this literature review, this study had a response rate of 23% for parents and 20% for youth, and the researchers made no effort to determine the beliefs the non-responders might have had (Powers, Geenen, et al., 2009, p. 135).

The last two studies reveal reasons for students’ discontent with the transition process and the necessity of understanding the student perspective. Trainor (2007) completed a grounded theory study examining the self-determination perception and perception of strengths and needs related to transition of culturally and linguistically diverse adolescent females. Trainor (2007) purposively selected seven racially and ethnically diverse females, 16 years or older, who received special education services and free or reduced lunch (p. 34). The participants came from three high schools in a large, urban southwestern state. The researcher completed focus groups with the participants and individually interviewed each participant although she was not able to observe their individual education plan meetings. Trainor (2007) found that the participants believe they are self-determining although their comments belie this by revealing that they possess limited information about the consequences of their choices, lack faith that their choices have significant meaning for adults involved in their education, and are unsure about the availability of the resources needed to achieve their goals. Trainor (2007) discussed how these young women do not always have a strong enough rapport with their teachers to facilitate their willingness to share their ideas about transition. She concluded that teachers must understand the
extent of students’ negative feelings and reasons for their disengagement with transition, which supports the idea that students perceive barriers to their transition in the school context and do not always view teachers as facilitating their transition activities.

Hogansen, Powers, Geenen, Gil-Kashiwabara, and Powers’s (2008) ethnography examined the ways gender influences transition goals by studying females’ transition goals, factors shaping those goals, supports and impediments, and the role of cultural and linguistic diversity in female transitional experiences. Hogansen et al. purposively sampled these participants through two major urban high schools and one public university’s disabilities services office in a Western state. They recruited 146 youth, parents, and educational professionals to participate in one of 24 focus group sessions (Hogansen et al., 2008, p. 218). The results of the focus groups suggest that females have unique experiences related to the goals established for them, the factors that shape transition, the sources of support and impediments to transition, and the contextual issues related to cultural and linguistic diversity. Many of the participants reported that their teachers’ low expectations hurt their feelings, which contrasts with the findings of Curtis et al. (2009). This difference reinforces the idea expressed by Trainor (2005) that school context may mediate students’ experiences and outcomes. Hogansen et al. emphasized the importance of approaching transition planning from the youth’s perspective by suggesting that transition planning teams should examine issues related to gender and cultural context in order to provide the most appropriate and effective transition supports.

These studies revealed that students often have negative views of educators’ efforts to help them in the transition process. Students often feel frustrated with the transition process. Special educators do not appear to understand how to address the personal, environmental, and experiential factors that influence students in the transition process (Hogansen et al., 2008;
Powers, Garner, et al., 2007; Powers, Geenen, et al., 2009; Trainor, 2005). Teachers and administrators do not meet students’ perceived needs in this process, leading to dissatisfaction and disengagement (Curtis et al., 2009; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). These findings suggest the necessity of viewing students’ perceptions through a theoretical framework that enables one to examine both contextual factors and personal factors and how students interpret those interactions as they strive to achieve their transition goals.

A framework comprised of Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) bioecological theory and Cattaneo and Chapman’s (2010) empowerment theory allows one not only to examine these influences but also to understand how they affect students. What is equally important is that these studies demonstrate the utility of using qualitative methodologies to examine students’ experiences with transition. As these studies demonstrate, students may experience transition differently depending on their unique characteristics in combination with the experiences directly related to their local school system and community. A phenomenological study that purposively samples a group of participants who have experienced a particular type of transition services has the potential to reveal critical information about how those participants perceive the transition process. Conclusions developed from such a study would offer the participating school system the opportunity to consider what participants believe about the school’s transition services and to modify those services to make them more effective.

**Summary of Literature Review**

In this literature review, I examined research on self-determination, risk and resilience, and student perception of transition. I demonstrated that personal and environmental factors affect students in the process of learning to exercise self-determination through the various transition activities that special education teachers devise and implement. I explored research
suggesting that students with disabilities encounter many individual and environmental risk factors as students and later as young adults that make success difficult to achieve. In my review, I examined the idea that resilience factors exist, which may modify a student’s risk and enable them to succeed later in life. Research indicates that many protective factors emerge as a student’s disposition interacting in the context of a student’s experiences at school in the environment created by teachers. I also examined students’ perceptions of the transition process, which also supports the idea that a complex interaction of personal and contextual factors exists, which causes students to feel disempowered and disengaged from their teachers in the transition process. Most important, I suggest that these factors may be specific to the local context of a student’s high school.

In this literature review, I demonstrated how threads of bioecological theory and empowerment theory are important strands in each body of literature and how they comprise an appropriate framework through which to examine students’ perceptions of the transition process in the local context. I presented a rationale for how an examination of student perceptions of the transition process in a specific setting may reveal how that setting exacerbates risk factors or enhances resiliency processes for students with moderate special needs disabilities. I also discussed how qualitative methodologies are not only appropriate for the subject matter of this study but also accepted by the field. In the following chapter, I outline the phenomenological research design I employed in this study. It contains a detailed discussion of the research questions, the methodology, site and participants, data collection procedures, and analysis. I also present a section outlining the ethical issues related to the study, including a discussion of the procedure for the protection of human subjects.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Introduction to the Qualitative Study

Qualitative inquiry offered the best approach for this study because it focuses on describing how people make sense of their lives in natural settings (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research allows for the examination of how individuals experience and understand a common phenomenon and how that understanding influences subsequent behavior (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). Consequently, it represented the best option for learning how students with moderate special needs disabilities experience the complex interaction of factors specific to their local context during postsecondary transition (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). Using qualitative inquiry, I explored post-secondary transition from the perspective of the students who experienced it in context.

One of the most important factors guiding me to select a qualitative research method is its potential to empower students by giving them a voice. As Creswell (2007) has noted, qualitative methods give participants the opportunity to reflect upon their experiences, identify their responses to situations, and reveal the thoughts and behaviors that prompted those responses (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research can strengthen the participants’ voice not only by emphasizing their perspective but also by allowing them to comment on the research results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005). In addition, qualitative research can minimize the power relationship between participants and a researcher by facilitating collaboration between them (Creswell, 2007). These were critically important features to me because researchers have neglected the perspective of students with moderate special needs, leaving the field with an incomplete understanding of how these students experience their education and community and
think and feel about the challenges they face (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Powers et al, 2009; Sabornie, 2006).

Another important feature of qualitative inquiry that appealed to me is its focus on process rather than outcome. Qualitative research offers an openness and flexibility in study design that quantitative studies do not (Creswell, 2009; Fraenkel et al., 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005). It enabled me to focus on identifying emerging questions and data sources, which allowed me to identify and analyze themes and patterns and create an in-depth interpretation (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I selected a phenomenological design from the range of qualitative methods because phenomenology seeks to describe the meaning that a group ascribes to a common lived experience (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological research strives to identify what all participants experience in common from a specific situation and to distill the essence of that experience for individuals (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). A phenomenological study of the postsecondary transition process experienced by students who graduated from a specific school setting would provide insight on the risk and resiliency processes inherent in the transition process at that school, suggesting ways to improve the overall quality and efficacy of transition services in ways most relevant to students in that setting.

**Research Questions**

As my discussion in Chapter Two suggests, an interaction of personal and contextual factors affects students with moderate special needs disabilities during the postsecondary transition planning process although little research exists exploring students’ perspective of this experience (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Powers, Geenen, et al., 2009). In an effort to fill that gap, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how students with moderate
special needs disabilities who are recent graduates from the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program experienced postsecondary transition planning and their initial transition after high school. The phenomenon of postsecondary transition included participating in transition planning activities, pursuing transition goals, and experiencing the initial transition from high school to postsecondary life. The central research question was: How do students with moderate special needs disabilities describe the experience of planning for and pursuing their postsecondary transition? In the process of answering the central question, the study explored two additional sub-questions: How do students with moderate special needs disabilities describe what has influenced or affected them in planning for and making their postsecondary transition? How do students with moderate special needs disabilities describe the outcome of their initial transition from high school to postsecondary life?

These were clearly process questions reflective of qualitative inquiry because they focused on exploring how students describe their experience rather than on identifying difference and correlation as variance questions would (Maxwell, 2005). The first question probed the overall meaning participants ascribe to their experience. The second queried how participants perceive context or other factors as influencing their experience of postsecondary transition. The third question sought to understand participants’ experience and understanding of the initial outcome of their transition. These qualitative questions mandated an open-ended, inductive research approach that allowed for the discovery of how participants derived meaning from their experiences of postsecondary transition (Maxwell, 2005).

The remainder of the chapter outlines the basic tenets of phenomenological research and how I used that approach to fulfill the goals of this study. It contains a description of the study, including the site and participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis strategy. It
culminates with an explanation of the procedures I employed to ensure the study’s validity and credibility and the ethical considerations I used to protect the participants.

Methodology

Phenomenology, as the study of lived experience, strives to create a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of people’s everyday experience (van Manen, 1990). It is a systematic attempt to reveal and describe the internal meaning of the lived experience people articulate. Phenomenological research strives for depth and richness in providing a full interpretive description and an explication of the essence of that experience. As a scientific study of universal phenomenon, it is systematic in its modes of questioning and explicit in its goal of discovering the meaning of lived experience through the content and form of text emerging from those questions. It is self-critical in its examination of its goals and methods and is intersubjective in requiring the development of a dialogic relationship (van Manen, 1990). It was the most suitable method for this study’s purpose, which was to conceptualize the essence of postsecondary transition for participants with moderate special needs disabilities as that experience presented itself to their consciousness through reflection (van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenology was appropriate because it strives to understand anything that presents itself to one’s consciousness, such as complex experiences like postsecondary transition, provided one uses data collection and analysis techniques eliciting the full qualitative dimension of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology befitted this study because it allowed me to discover the essence of participants’ experience through careful analysis of selected cases providing thick, rich description (Giorgi, 2009). I developed specific questions that prompted participants to produce concrete descriptions of the inner dimensions of their experience, which I analyzed to identify structures representing the invariant, essential
experience for all participants (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Using this approach, I examined participants’ expressions of their experience and employed intuition and reflection to integrate those into a description of the essence of the experience, reflecting wholeness rather than providing explanation or analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

I used methods that prompted participants to produce thick, rich concrete statements, which I integrated into a single structure by reading the data for a sense of the whole, determining meaning units, and transforming those into a nuanced description of the phenomenon as a universal experience (Giorgi, 2009). I achieved this through a process of repeated readings and data analysis (Giorgi, 2009). It is valuable to bear in mind that how participants presented their experience reflected the influences of society, culture, and the broader world (Giorgi, 2009), which reflected bioecological and empowerment theories and represented pertinent support for using this method.

It was important for me to select phenomenology as a method because I had a personal interest in exploring the experience defined in the study and a strong desire to discover the essence of it (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology allowed me to reveal the essence of how participants with moderate special needs disabilities experienced the phenomenon of postsecondary transition. Understanding that phenomenon allowed me to recommend ways to improve the postsecondary transition services protocol by revealing a nuanced, deep understanding of what influenced participants’ experience and perception of the postsecondary transition process. Completing this phenomenological study also enabled me to contribute to the field of special education by honoring the perspective of students with disabilities.

The remainder of this section explains the details of this phenomenological study by describing the site and participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis strategy I used.
Site and participants. The six participants were high school graduates from the classes of 2012, 2011, and 2010. Each had been a high school student in the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program, which is a substantially separate high school program for students with language-based learning disabilities located in eastern Massachusetts. Each participant has a moderate special needs disability and is over 18. Four of the participants are male and two are female. As students, participants took their major subjects (English, math, social studies, and science) in small classes within the program and inclusion classes in the mainstream based on their interest and ability levels. The students also took a series of Learning Strategies classes designed to facilitate the emergence of independent learning, self-advocacy, and self-determination skills. In their junior and senior years, the Learning Strategies classes addressed concepts directly related to transition. Students identified their interests in postsecondary education, vocation, and independent living, set goals in those areas, and implemented a plan to achieve them. I was the Assistant Program Director who managed administrative and programmatic aspects of the program, and I also taught several classes, including developing and teaching the Learning Strategies curriculum during their junior and senior years.

The participants represented a purposeful sample based on criterion sampling because each was a student with a moderate special needs disability who experienced the same postsecondary transition planning process through a curriculum in the same program. Criterion sampling was an appropriate sampling strategy for a phenomenological study because it was vital that all participants had experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2007). Dukes (1984) suggested that a sample size ranging from three to 10 is suitable for a
phenomenological study provided one’s data collection procedures gather sufficient data for analysis. The participants agreed to share their experiences in individual semi-structured interviews after I appealed to them as contributors in the effort to improve the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program’s postsecondary transition process. Each participant received a gift card for participating in the research project. The interviews occurred in convenient, comfortable locations chosen by the participants.

Each participant had graduated from high school and embarked on their postsecondary lives ranging from six months to two and a half years. If this study had occurred while they were still students, they may have perceived me as an authority figure. However, as research participants, they had the opportunity to perceive me as a person giving them a forum in which to voice their true experience, which altered the former teacher-student dynamic and empowered them as participants in the process (Rose, 2012).

**Data collection.** The data collection procedures involved amassing data from in-depth, individual, semi-structured interviews and field notes from each interview. I audio recorded and later transcribed each interview. I also took field notes capturing my observations, thoughts, and reminders about methodological decisions. Each interview entailed my asking three main questions with follow-up questions. A list of main questions and possible follow-up questions appears in the appendix although most follow-up questions arose naturally during the context of the interview. I also wrote reflexive memos as part of the data analysis procedures, which I describe in more depth below.

**Data analysis.** As the previous sections foreshadowed, data analysis in qualitative research occurs in naturalistic settings, is inductive and generative in nature, and moves iteratively between data collection, the process of analysis, and the final report writing (Fraenkel
et al., 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data analysis began immediately after the first interview occurred and continued through the data collection process as texts emerged in context (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). It was inductive because I read the text for a sense of the whole and then began a process of continuously comparing and reducing the texts via open coding by working from details to more general themes (Creswell, 2007). Open coding entailed assigning meaningful labels to sections of data reflecting major ideas captured in that text (Fraenkel et al., 2012). I continued to analyze, synthesize, and reduce the data by refining and reducing those codes to reflect the overarching themes capturing the phenomenon. I integrated data analysis with data collection and report writing as I worked through emerging raw data by developing increasingly broad categories captured by codes and organizing the data in diagrams that helped explicate thematic relationships (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Fraenkel et al., 2012). Though it appears linear, the overall process reflected a recurring spiral of collecting raw data, organizing and preparing the data, reading the data for an overall sense, coding text, and developing diagrams or visuals (Creswell, 2009).

To analyze data from a phenomenological study, Moustakas (2007) suggested employing a highly structured approach that includes horizonalizing the data, developing meaning units, removing repetitive statements and clustering what remains into themes, developing textural and structural descriptions, and integrating those into an essence of the phenomenon. An important part of this process required me to bracket my understanding, judgment, or knowledge of the phenomenon during the research process (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). The process of bracketing my biases, also known as epoché, allowed me to review my thoughts and feelings regarding the phenomenon continually, which enabled me to engage in the research process with a perspective free of prejudices. Epoché allowed me to focus solely on how participants
described their experience (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). In bracketing thoughts about an experience, I became aware of them and held them in abeyance while discerning the essential elements of the participants’ experiences (Giorgi, 2009). It was one element of the phenomenological research process known as phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). I achieved this by writing reflexive memos before and after the interview transcription (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These memos allowed me to engage in the process of analyzing the data while acknowledging preconceived ideas about it (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As I bracketed biases, I examined every statement as having equal value and eliminated those bearing little relevance to the topic and question. This process left what Moustakas (1994) referred to as horizons, the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon, which I grouped into themes using codes that emerged from the data to produce a textural description of the phenomenon.

I then assumed a phenomenological attitude of free imaginative variation in which I accepted all descriptions as the perspective of the participants regardless of whether the participant described an object that was real (Giorgi, 2009). As Giorgi (2009) described, I had to accept “the perception-belief complex as an experiential given” (p. 88). My aim in using free imaginative variation was to develop structural descriptions of participants’ experiences from the textural descriptions produced through phenomenological reduction. These structural descriptions reflected the universal precipitating factors underlying the experience (Moustakas, 1994). I applied free imaginative variation to the description to determine the essential features making it an example of the phenomenon experienced without adding or subtracting from the description (Giorgi, 2009). Free imaginative variation allowed me to contemplate the universal structures leading to what participants thought and felt about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I then synthesized the statements into an essence of the phenomenon by combining the
structural essences from imaginative free variation with the textural essences of the phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). I wrote a textural description, a structural description, and a composite description for each participant. Also, I wrote a textural description, a structural description, and a composite description reflecting the essence of the experience for the group as a whole. After completing the textural and structural description for each participant, I wrote a narrative analysis of each participant’s interview.

Figure 1, which appears below, illustrates my data analysis strategy.

Figure 1

_Data Analysis and Reduction Strategy_

1) Transcribe interview and field notes. Read for broad sense.
2) Treat all statements as having equal value.
3) Eliminate statements bearing little connection to topic.
4) Group textural meanings using codes to reflect major themes.
5) Use textural meanings to develop structural descriptions by developing codes.
6) Synthesize codes reflecting textural and structural essences into description of phenomenon.

Write reflective memos and narrative analysis for each participant.

I completed the data analysis for the interviews by analyzing one interview before the next one. This process included examining field notes, writing memos, and open coding, which helped me manage the growing body of data and drive the research forward effectively (Corbin
& Strauss, 2008). I used specific strategies in analyzing the data, including making constant and theoretical comparisons, exploring the meaning of words, examining the language carefully, and looking for negative cases (Corbin Strauss, 2008).

The research entailed one phase of data collection and analysis as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

*Data Collection and Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews and field notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>Synthesis of textural and structural descriptions via open coding using specific strategies and memoing. Writing narrative analysis of each interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeline</td>
<td>12 weeks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The process of data collection and analysis took approximately 12 weeks to complete. I used specific measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the results, which I describe in the following section.

**Validity**

Qualitative studies employ the concept of trustworthiness rather than the traditional concepts of validity and reliability, which quantitative studies use (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005). Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that a qualitative study has trustworthiness when it has met the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These qualities replace the more conventional concepts of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity necessary for determining the validity and reliability of quantitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Achieving credibility in a qualitative study is comparable to achieving internal validity in a quantitative study. It means that the findings emerging from a qualitative study are believable to those reading it. Employing specific measures, such as triangulation, member checks, and transparency, can strengthen credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is the rough equivalent to a quantitative study’s external validity, which refers to whether a study’s results generalize across various settings. In qualitative research, the researcher cannot suggest whether the results will transfer across settings and can only offer results that readers evaluate to determine if the findings apply to their specific situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability correlates roughly to the concept of reliability in quantitative research and emerges in qualitative research via credibility, which an inquiry audit can bolster (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rather than address objectivity as one would in quantitative research, one tries to establish confirmability, which refers to whether the researcher has achieved a level of neutrality in research interpretations as evidenced by an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve trustworthiness, by establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, I integrated certain measures into the data gathering and analysis process of this research.

I have attempted to create credibility through the following activities: prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checks, and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement existed based on my knowledge of the participants and site and the trust already established by my long relationship with the participants. It was important for me to remain vigilant in identifying possible distortions introduced through my own biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I achieved triangulation by using multiple data sources occurring from semi-structured interviews with many participants. I used member checks to ensure the credibility of data by testing conclusions with participants both informally during the interview process and
formally afterwards. I employed member checks in the following ways. During the interview process, I paraphrased participants’ statements periodically and asked if my paraphrasing reflected their description accurately. This allowed me to check my understanding of what participants had said. In addition, I sent each participant a copy of his or her transcribed interview and asked them to check that it reflected their experience. They had the opportunity to change their words, add ideas, or remove passages if they desired. I also sent each participant a copy of the analysis of his or her interview and asked them to verify that my analysis captured his or her experience accurately. The last technique to ensure credibility involved peer debriefing in which I asked my colleagues to review my analysis. Their critique helped me become more cognizant of the process I used to complete the study and helped me to clarify my thinking related to the data I had collected.

As qualitative research can only establish conclusions pertaining to the specific site of the study, I have suggested conclusions relevant to that context and time only (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To help others determine whether the study’s recommendations transfer, I have provided thick description obtained using in-depth, individual semi-structured interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A study should also contain the broadest possible range of information, which is another reason I used a purposeful, criterion sample of participants known to represent students with various types of moderate special needs disabilities, degrees of engagement in the postsecondary transition process, and types of transition goals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This provided a rich database that will facilitate readers in making judgments about the trustworthiness of the data and my conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I collected documentation during the study to facilitate an inquiry audit, which others can use to verify to the study’s dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I took field
notes throughout the study to document the research process and the decisions I made supporting that process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I created an audit trail including: the raw data from the transcribed audio recordings of the interviews, products used in the data reduction and analysis, data reconstruction and synthesis, and process notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The reflexive memos I wrote documenting my thinking during the research process represent an important component of this audit trail. Auditors can review the memos as well as the other materials to determine the degree to which biases affected my interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Protection of Human Subjects**

I incorporated protections to guarantee the safety of the participants. Those measures began with my obtaining the informed consent of each participant. All participants are over the age of 18. I provided them with a written and verbal explanation of the goals of the study using clear, concise language. I explained the details of how I would benefit and how the participants might benefit from the study. I also described the risks participants may have encountered, which primarily included experiencing potentially uncomfortable emotions during the interviews. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification before I formally asked for consent. I made sure participants knew they did not have to participate and could withdraw at any time without penalty. The participants were no longer students in the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program, so there was little risk of the former teacher-student relationship presenting an ethical problem as participants determined whether to consent (Creswell, 2007). I took specific measures during and after the research process to protect the confidentiality of the participants. I gave them and any community colleges, training programs, or work sites they described pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality and identity in the transcribed interviews,
data analysis process, and in the final research product. All audio-recordings and interview transcriptions remained in my sole possession. Last, during the member check process, I gave participants the opportunity to review and correct my conclusions (Creswell, 2007).

**Conclusion**

Special educators must provide transition planning services to students with special needs in Massachusetts beginning when students turn 14 years old (DESE, 2008). Historically, students with special needs have struggled with postsecondary education, vocation, community engagement, and independent living often leading lives marked by poverty (Newman et al., 2009; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996; Wagner et al. 2004). Efforts to examine transition have not included the student perspective on this process (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Powers, Garner, et al., 2007), which means special educators have developed transition services based on their assumptions of how students experience this process. To improve the efficacy of transition services and the outcomes for students, special educators must understand how students experience this process.

Qualitative research offered the best approach for achieving this goal. A phenomenological study offered the best method for learning how students with special needs experience transition planning because it focuses on understanding how people experience a common phenomenon. Bioecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 2005) and empowerment theories (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010) comprised a useful theoretical framework for conceptualizing such a study because they suggest that students experience transition in nested contextual systems and actively make meaning from their experiences in context, which affects their response to it. Research in the areas of self-determination, risk and resilience, and student perception suggests that personal and environmental factors affect students in transition as they
set and strive to achieve transition goals. Risk and resilience factors may modify students’ abilities to achieve their transition goals. However, researchers have not examined how students experience and react to these interactions by involving students in research to understand their experience. The special education field has neglected the student perception of transition, which supported the need for a phenomenological study distilling the essence of transition for a group of students in a specific context.

This phenomenological study revealed critical information for special educators and administrators to consider in improving transition services. In Chapter Four, I provide an extended report of the research results. I begin Chapter Four by profiling each of the participants. I proceed with an in-depth presentation of each major theme and the subthemes that emerged from the data. In Chapter Five, I examine the research findings in reference to the theoretical framework and literature. My conclusion to Chapter Five contains a discussion of the implications and recommendations emerging from my analysis as well as the limitations inherent in the study.
Chapter 4: Report of Research Results

In this study, I used phenomenological research methods to reveal the experience of six participants with moderate special needs disabilities in planning for and pursuing their postsecondary transition. The individual interviews produced a rich description of participants’ experiences in planning their transition and pursuing their transition goals as well as what affected them as they made their initial transition from high school to early adult life. This chapter contains an in-depth analysis of the data gathered through these interviews. I begin by presenting a narrative description of each participant. In the Review of the Data section, I offer an in-depth analysis of the six major themes and 18 subthemes, which emerged from the data. My analysis includes the following: an introduction to a major theme, a table of quotes illustrating the subthemes of that major theme, a detailed explanation of each subtheme, and a summary of the major theme. I gave the participants and any programs or colleges they attended pseudonyms to protect their anonymity and confidentiality.

Participant Profiles

Patrick. Patrick is a 21-year-old man who graduated from high school in 2010. He currently pursues an Associate’s Degree in Computer Information Technology from a community college. Patrick received special education services in high school for his diagnoses of Asperger’s syndrome, Tourette’s syndrome, and specific learning disabilities in the areas of mathematics and reading. Patrick did not have “a clear idea of what [he] wanted to do [for transition goals]” in high school as he was content with just completing high school at the time. His postsecondary transition goal as a senior was to do well in high school and then adjust to community college.
Patrick felt a mixture of emotion as he began community college. He “was just getting nervous” wondering what his new routine would be and how he would react to it as he prepared to graduate from high school. His short-term goal became learning what to do in his new setting to succeed. His adjustment process included realizing that being a community college student required greater academic independence and necessitated his accessing disability support services. Patrick participated in the RISE Program at Riverdale Community College, which provides academic support to students with disabilities for two semesters. In addition, Patrick forged connections with community college peers who “kind of supported [him] along the way,” making his transition to the community college easier. Patrick’s parents also assisted him in various ways, such as helping him find a good fit in terms of a major and a college. Even though community college challenged him, he persevered by diligently employing tested study habits and reflecting on his progress each semester to make adjustments the following semester.

Patrick’s postsecondary goals have become increasingly specific as he confidently describes a clear long-term plan as opposed to the vague plan he recalled from high school. As a young adult, Patrick would like to:

Have a job at a restaurant … as a maintenance worker, and … [earn] my associate’s degree … and [attend] a four year school or a state school or university working towards a bachelor’s degree. On top of that, make more friends … [and] become better at throwing and kicking a football.

Referring to his above stated goals, he concludes, “I may not be good at them now but [I will] just make sure they happen later.”

Lydia. Lydia is a 21-year-old woman who graduated from high school in 2010. She received special education services under the category communication disorder for her severe language disability. In addition, Lydia has a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and has significant deficits in working memory. Lydia’s transition experiences
have revolved around her participation in a postsecondary transition program called the Vocational Preparation (VP) Program at the Sussex Institute of Technology, which she began the summer after high school graduation. The VP Program is a three-year comprehensive postsecondary transition program for students with disabilities who are over 18 and motivated to become independent. Lydia describes the program as being for “people who have learning disabilities and any type of disability like autism [or] Asperger’s.” She says the program admits students who have “Down syndrome” and “people with ADHD and regular learning disabilities.” Students learn academic, independent-living, and social skills and participate in vocational exploration and training. Lydia lives in a dorm and is currently “learning apartment living” and “resources for life.”

Before attending the VP Program, Lydia was “very scared of a lot of things” because she was unfamiliar with the routine of the program. Lydia relaxed and adjusted to the program after making friends who helped her by answering questions. While she is somewhat sad at the prospect of leaving this program in the spring, she is not nearly as anxious transitioning to Riverdale Community College, the next step for her, because she “might bump into people” she knows from high school. The VP Program works with students in their final year on “transitioning to the real world” by talking about their anxiety and how to “deal with it in a positive manner.” As a result, Lydia has “learned a lot from being in college” and is confident she will function well at Riverdale. Lydia acknowledges that her transition from high school to the VP Program represents one step in her transition as does going to Riverdale Community College. She realizes that there will be another step for her following that. Making social connections helped Lydia transition from high school to the VP Program and will continue to help her as she moves on to Riverdale Community College.
**Wyatt.** Wyatt is a 20-year-old man who graduated from high school in 2010. He received special education services in high school due to diagnoses of central auditory processing disorder, nonverbal learning disability, and ADHD. Wyatt’s postsecondary transition has included working part-time as a dishwasher at an assisted living facility, playing in a heavy metal band, and working toward an Associate’s Degree in Graphic Design at Riverdale Community College. Wyatt initially felt complacent about community college although that yielded to surprise as he began taking courses in his major. He fell victim to his procrastination habit during his first semester and barely passed, which suggested to him that college might present a greater challenge than he had originally anticipated. This became clearer to him as he struggled in his major classes when other students in his art classes “could draw circles around” him. Criticism from his art professors shook his confidence and compelled him to reevaluate whether he possessed sufficient talent to pursue that major and degree.

Wyatt did not always enjoy his classes, which negatively impacted his motivation. Even though he knew he had significant time management and attention problems, he resisted pursuing support from disability services or employing strategies that may have helped him, preferring to think he could handle the situation on his own. He says, “I didn’t want to do that kind of thing.” However, he now acknowledges, “Maybe [mastering time management and organization skills] would’ve helped.” Even though he struggles with whether to apply for disability services and implement known strategies, Wyatt has tried to change in other ways. After resolving not to fail any other classes, he mustered his motivation to succeed and began prioritizing his studies and resisting the lure of friends.

For Wyatt, nothing in his transition from high school to community college has been “completely seamless.” It has been “kind of … a tough transition overall.” His difficulty with
community college has prompted him to reflect, “All through life … it’s taken me later in life to grasp things. … it’s harder for me…. it doesn’t seem like it on the surface, but it’s harder for me.” Wyatt’s emerging awareness of himself and his community college experience helps him to prepare for the reality of the adult world even as he struggles to reconcile his strengths and weaknesses with the demands of that world.

**Nathan.** Nathan is a 20-year-old man who graduated from high school in 2012. He received special education services in high school due to a disability in the area of communication, specifically with expressive language. He works part-time washing linens for a restaurant and entertainment facility. Nathan’s part-time job satisfies him at the moment although he wants “to do other stuff” even if he is not sure exactly what that is yet. In high school, Nathan researched career paths as a junior and senior but eliminated job after job, deeming each unsuitable. He considered attending college but abandoned the idea due to the high cost because he “couldn’t afford it.” Nathan knew too many people who had paid to attend college but never obtained a job in their field. He adamantly does not want to waste his money training for a job he will never have. Plus, he admits that community college would have tortured him with writing assignments.

When he was in high school, Nathan investigated various careers; however, he gradually eliminated each field until there were no options that interested him enough to pursue after high school. As graduation approached, he became frightened, “thinking [about] what I was going to do in the future” and worrying that he would wind up poor. Nathan does not have a stable support system. His close friends are still high school students who do not have jobs. They act immaturely, and Nathan knows he needs to “do more grown-up things and not be acting like a teenager.” Although Nathan does not see his parents or friends as effectively supporting him in
determining the best option, his lack of a support system does not concern him because he believes figuring this out is solely his responsibility. Nathan’s transition reflects his profound uncertainty with which path to pursue.

**James.** James graduated from high school in 2010 and is 21 years old. He received special education services in high school for a language disorder affecting his auditory processing and receptive, expressive, and pragmatic language abilities. After graduating from high school, James intended to apply to Riverdale Community College. However, he opted not to after his aunt told him about Triumph Job Prep, a two-year, government-sponsored, residential, job training program. James applied to the program although a miscommunication delayed his acceptance for many months. In the interim, he attended a once-a-week support group for young men who have learning disabilities at Bradford Children’s Hospital. The group worked together to create better lives for themselves through games and activities.

When James began Triumph Job Prep, he pursued training in computer technology. However, when he struggled on the testing portion of the program, he felt as though it was not the right choice for him. James changed to train in office administration, and his early success with the skills made him realize he enjoyed the field. James has found translating his training into employment very challenging. While he received some job search support at Triumph Job Prep, he did not obtain a job and has struggled to do so since returning to his home community. His family has tried to help him, but locating work has been a frustrating experience. James explains, “Things have been really hard.”

James has an awareness of himself as a young adult and a sense of what he needs to do to succeed. He tries to practice good habits because being a functional adult entails being “alive and alert for anything,” remaining positive, and “going for it” instead of admitting defeat.
knows that some people might try to dissuade him from working toward his goals. However, he resists those ideas by thinking, “At least you can tell yourself that you tried. … [because] you learn from your mistakes.” It is important to James to know that he is doing the right things for him in the moment.

**Carmen.** Carmen is a 19-year-old woman who graduated from high school in 2011. She received special education services in high school due to a communication disability impacting her expressive and receptive language abilities. After graduation, Carmen attended a six-month training program at the Hightower Professional School, where she earned a certificate as a medical administrative assistant. Soon after completing the program, she found a job at a large, urban hospital. While Carmen spoke proudly of working at the hospital, the stressful environment caused her great anxiety. Working in the Intensive Care Unit and the Emergency Room during double overnight shifts overwhelmed her. She faced strict deadlines and managed frantic patients and their families. As she recalls, “I was working two shifts … [and] it was crazy.” Carmen resigned after four weeks, telling the hospital that she was going to college. Instead, she found a hostess position at an upscale restaurant. The hostess position also challenged her initially because it entailed learning new skills. However, she grew accustomed to the predictable tasks and now enjoys the job. Carmen prefers the regular working hours that end well before midnight. Although Carmen is content working at the hostess job, she would like to find another job as a medical administrative assistant but has struggled to find a less stressful position in that field.

Carmen’s experiences in her training program and job have helped her realize that after high school one has to be more responsible and act increasingly like “an adult and … be more mature.” Several difficult aspects of adjusting to adult responsibilities surprised Carmen,
including feeling exhausted after work. Her odd working hours, long commute, and stressful job meant, “You work all night. You’re exhausted. You just don’t want to do anything.” Carmen often found herself too tired to visit high school friends. Another difficult reality of entering the adult world has involved paying her bills. Now that she works full-time, her parents require her to pay her cell phone and tuition bills regularly and home utility bills periodically. Friends and family have encouraged Carmen to move out of her parents’ home. However, her parents, especially her dad, want her to continue to live there because they think she “is too silly” and is still their “baby girl.” Carmen wishes they would recognize that she is almost 20 years old and is an adult rather than a child. Carmen’s transition has involved understanding the demands of the adult working world and adjusting her life to those expectations.

**Review of the Data**

My review of the data obtained through individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews revealed six major themes and 18 subthemes. These reflect major aspects of participants’ experience with transition planning, pursuing their transition goals, and the initial outcome of their transition. The major themes are managing emotions, adjusting to a new environment, embracing adult responsibilities, relationships, perceptions of the transition process, and emerging metacognition. My analysis of these themes and their corresponding subthemes appears below. In each section, I present a major theme using the following components: a concise overview of the major theme, a table displaying relevant quotes from participants, a narrative presentation of each subtheme, and a summary of the major theme. The narrative presentation of data may not contain quotes from each participant. The tables provide an overview of examples of the subthemes. A blank cell in the table indicates that the participant did not comment directly on the subtheme.
Participant comments are direct quotes unless I explain otherwise. I rendered the quotes in a literary style to enhance the meaning of the subjects’ experiences. I accomplished this by inserting words in brackets to clarify a participant’s meaning and using ellipses when I omitted words to distill the message to its essential meaning (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). For example, I omitted words typical of oral speech, such as “like,” “you know,” and “uhm,” and sections of text that would impede the reader’s fluency and ability to focus on the meaning of the passage (Seidman, 2006).

Managing emotions. Participants reveal that embarking on their transition brings forth strong emotions. Participants experience an initial emotional response while planning for their transition followed by a predominant emotion while pursuing their transition. Depending on their success in transition, this emotion may change over time. The following subthemes reflect that experience of managing emotions: initial emotion, predominant emotion, and changing emotion.

Table 2 provides a selection of participants’ quotes to illustrate the major theme and subthemes.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Initial emotion</th>
<th>Predominant emotion</th>
<th>Changing emotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>It was exciting (to think of the future) … and then, knowing that I would just be nervous.</td>
<td>It was nerve-wracking… getting used to the environment, understanding what it was like, how to do this and how to do that, and meeting new people.</td>
<td>It was nerve-wracking, but over the first semester or even over the first couple of months it got easier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Initial emotion</td>
<td>Predominant emotion</td>
<td>Changing emotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
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<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>I was excited and I was nervous the same time, so it was mixed emotions.</td>
<td>It was kind of scary and, I was new.</td>
<td>It was very scary for me at the beginning of my freshman year and … then … it was better and every semester it kept getting better and better and better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyatt</td>
<td>I think [I] recall it being slightly daunting.</td>
<td>Being left to my own devices, it was a new experience, and, it was something I was totally unfamiliar with, so I wasn’t really sure how I was going to manage it.</td>
<td>I mean as far as first semester, kind of indifference, but I think when I finally started working on my major courses it was a bit of shock.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>It was obviously scary because … I did not know what I wanted to do.</td>
<td>I still don’t know what I want to do and it’s irritating.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>I feel like I struggle a lot.</td>
<td>Things have been really hard.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>I can say it was stressing.</td>
<td>It was like the anxiety…the stress of the pressure.</td>
<td>You’re kind of nervous about it but then, after it, you’re on it and you’re like, yeah, I’m good.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Initial emotion.** Each participant tells of having an initial emotional response to setting transition goals and pursuing their postsecondary transition plan. Several participants explain they felt a mixture of emotions. Two participants describe feeling excitement and anxiety about the newness of the situation and how they would adjust to it. Patrick describes, “being excited.” He says, “[I was also feeling] nervous about how I was going to use [my skills] and then just getting ready for college … being adapted to it and settling in.” Lydia felt, “Nervousness because [the VP Program] was a new setting and …it was exciting for me, but it was also nerve-racking because this is a new place, new situation, new people, new faces.” Lydia wondered, “What the
full schedule would be, how many classes [I would] … be taking, how many teachers [I would] … have, and what their names were and everything else.”

Wyatt’s comments also reveal the same concern for having to transition to a new environment with different expectations. Wyatt says, “[The transition] seemed very daunting because I wasn’t sure how well I would be able to handle myself.” He acknowledges, “It was a little daunting because … life was a breeze … [in high school because] a lot of things were done for me.” He elaborates, “Priorities, for one thing, were set for me,” such as his parents telling him, “You have to … do good in school.” Wyatt also knows that he struggled with aspects of high school saying, “It was … really difficult for me to … manage my own … tasks … or even follow directions.” Moving from high school to college intimidated Wyatt “because you’re going from getting a lot of support to very little.”

Carmen also speaks about recognizing that leaving high school means leaving a comfortable environment where she knows how to handle circumstances and herself. She started wondering, “What [am I] going to do … or how [will I] handle it or how [am I] going to handle the stress out there?” Likewise, James identifies not knowing certain important skills as causing him frustration. He says, “Things … have been challenging [for] me.” He has struggled to find a job because he lacked specific knowledge of that process. When asked, he agrees he is frustrated because, “It has been really hard considering I have applied for a lot of jobs.”

Nathan, the most recent high school graduate with the least amount of time out of school, articulates disillusionment and concern. Nathan says, “I thought I’d be coming out of high school and having a fun summer and then going straight to college knowing what I was going to do, but I’m not.” He describes how worried he is to end up in a life of poverty. Nathan says:

   I see … older people on the streets and they all look like bums and stuff, and … I know if I do what I’m doing now for the rest of my life until I’m older…I’m going to be living in
a tiny little house or in a trailer park or something. I don’t want to end up like that. I know I need to get up and find out what I want to do and try to do something.

These initial emotional responses often give way to one overriding emotion as each participant moves from high school to a specific postsecondary activity, such as community college, a training program, or work.

**Predominant emotion.** Many of the participants describe experiencing a predominant emotion during their transition. For Patrick, his transition to Riverdale Community College provoked significant anxiety. He says, “It was nerve-racking … getting all settled and getting used to it … was really the biggest part of it.” Patrick explains, “[I] knew that [nervousness] was going to happen … [since] everybody [in high school] did what they could [to help me] and I think it was just [going to] happen automatically.”

Lydia experienced fear. She states, “[I was] scared of a lot of things,” including “showing who I was.” In addition, Lydia explains, “The homework was a lot more than I had when in high school and they want[ed] more [from] me.” Lydia says, “I was a little scared of that, and I was kind of petrified of certain things.”

Nathan’s predominant emotion was a growing fear driven by his own uncertainty and paralysis regarding his plan. He says, “I wasn’t sure what I was going to do.” Nathan explains, “I wasn’t really thinking about what I wanted to do as I was graduating.” He says, “It was just scarier thinking what I was going to do in the future if I don’t find a job.” Nathan is still in the early stages of his transition, and his indecision and mounting concern override his ability to plan. He says:

It’s kind of not good because I just keep waiting … and taking my time and thinking about stuff and when I think of stuff sometimes … again, I’m lazy and that kicks in, and I don’t do stuff that I want to do.
For James, his predominant emotion has remained frustration with his inability to find work. He has struggled to master the skills required to locate work, such as interviewing and completing applications. James says, “I just stutter a lot … I could get … so many notes and saying this is what you need to do, and I follow it, and then I go for an interview and I just forget all about it.”

Carmen’s main emotion has been the significant stress she has felt while working. She describes an experience from her hospital job:

When you see at … two or three in the morning somebody died, a patient died, it is just too stressful because the family comes in. They talk[ed] to me and they made me cry. They literally made me cry.

Similarly, Carmen felt overwhelmed after witnessing her first gunshot victim arriving at the hospital saying, “One day I literally came from the hospital, and I was so stressed out. I started crying because … I saw people… getting shot and everything.” After four months, Carmen decided she could not handle the stress and resigned, taking a position as a hostess. While her new position is also “stressful … because you always have to answer the phone calls, complaints … everything,” it is “better” because she has more reasonable working hours and a more predictable routine. Carmen’s description reflects what others explain, which is that their emotions change as they become accustomed to the demands of their new environment.

**Changing emotion.** Patrick, Lydia, Carmen, and James each describe how their initial feelings lessened in intensity as they adapted to their new environment. Patrick says, “It was nerve-wracking, but, over the first semester or even over the first couple of months, it got easier.” Lydia describes, “At the beginning … I was kind of scared, but during … the end I was kind of getting used to it.” Carmen mirrors those comments saying, “I felt stress about
[transitioning] … and I miss high school…but I mean after … it passes away.” James states, “I used to be a nervous wreck, but now that [I know I can job search online], it’s not that scary.”

Wyatt, however, describes a distinctly different change in emotion as his indifference yielded to shock once his community college performance forced him to acknowledge his lack of preparation, motivation, and skill for his chosen field. Wyatt did not take his first several classes seriously and fell “into bad habits pretty much.” He procrastinated and barely completed his work before the semester ended. He remarks, “I don’t know how I passed that semester, but I did.” Upon reflection, he says, “That really said something … big to me … maybe … you are managing but … maybe you and college have a little bit of rough water [ahead].” While his poor performance in those early classes only slightly concerned him, he realized, “Things [had] drastically changed” once he began taking classes in his major. He quickly discovered, “[My] drawing skills … weren’t as good and … didn’t stack up [to the other students].” He says, “[Last spring] was kind of particularly hard … [since my professor said my] drawings were immature, which was … kind of a blow.” Wyatt began thinking, “I wasn’t good enough.” He questioned, “If I’m not good enough [at creating] art to be this major, what can I do?” He wrestled with the idea, “This is what I’ve … strived towards and here I am being told that I’m not skilled enough.” Instead of growing more relaxed in his new environment, Wyatt’s emotions changed to deep worry about his ability to succeed in his chosen field.

**Summary of managing emotions.** Each participant describes feeling an emotional response when preparing for and embarking on their transition. That initial emotion might prevail through the process or may evolve into another predominant emotion. Most participants describe the intensity of the predominant emotion abating as they acclimate to their new environment and find the best fit for themselves there. If participants struggle to adapt to the new
environment, the emotion may prevail or grow in intensity. Adjusting to their new environment and finding a good fit for their skills and abilities can bring feelings of comfort and confidence. Failing to find a fit or being inadequately prepared for that environment brings feelings of discomfort and discontent.

**Adjusting to a new environment.** Participants describe a process of adjusting to a new environment where they encounter new expectations. Most begin adjusting to the new expectations within their environment by determining if their choice represents the best fit for them. For some participants, internal and external obstacles punctuate this process and complicate their progress. The following themes reflect the experience of adjusting to a new environment: new expectations, finding best fit, and facing obstacles. Table 3 provides an overview of participants’ quotes to illustrate this major theme and subthemes.

Table 3

*Quotes Illustrating Theme of Adjusting to a New Environment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>New expectations</th>
<th>Finding best fit</th>
<th>Facing obstacles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>The topics and information to learn were harder.</td>
<td>I started off by majoring in Computer Information Systems … then, I thought it might be a good idea to try something different.</td>
<td>(Commuting is) … another reason why I decided to stop going to Riverdale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>Now in college you get more freedom and there’s not that much structure.</td>
<td>It was safe for me to just kind of bounce around between different things.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyatt</td>
<td>You’re operating entirely on your own independent willpower and it’s … difficult.</td>
<td>Am I really cut out to be a graphic design major?</td>
<td>The time management. Yeah, that’s the biggest thing. And also… the prioritization. Those skills … are the ones that are hardest to overcome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>New expectations</td>
<td>Finding best fit</td>
<td>Facing obstacles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>I marked off jobs that I did not want to do. I had a list and then it just shrunken and shrunken.</td>
<td>[College] just seems it is way too expensive. We all know that, but I couldn’t afford it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>[You realized in the adult world you have to work together with people?] Yes.</td>
<td>To me it felt like my brain couldn’t take it, so it was way too much.</td>
<td>I went to a room just to look for jobs. … They didn’t really help me as much. They more just like threw me in there and …said … look for [a] job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>You know you’ ve got to do this … independently.</td>
<td>I was good with the health industry, but I didn’t know … which part of the health industry [I liked].</td>
<td>I had an interview … and they want …to put me in the emergency department, but I don’t want the emergency department.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**New expectations.** Many participants describe adjusting to the new expectations of their environment. For several participants that means acclimating to the expectations of community college or their training program. Patrick discovered that information presented in community college challenged him more than he anticipated. He says, “I’m in college and maybe that [harder information] kind of took me by surprise.” Lydia discovered, “The difference was that they’re asking more of you, and they’re asking you to do more for them.” She elaborates that when she attended high school, “The social piece fell into place and the academics was a little bit hard but still fell into place, and the balance between those was easy to figure out.” However, in her vocational program with more free time and new friends, “It was harder … to balance between those two.”

Wyatt is more strident in declaring there’s a “very stark difference” between high school and college. He says:
In high school … you are literally … forced. You’ve got someone reminding you constantly … ‘Hey, you have this due, you should be doing it.’ [In] college, that’s all up to you … and … if you don’t enjoy the course, you don’t want to do it.

Wyatt explains, “In high school, [teachers] told you … [you] need to do this assignment, or you are going to get a F.” However, professors in college project the attitude that:

Okay, you cannot do this assignment. I will just give you an F and you can decide for yourself how that is going to affect you because I could care less, frankly, because that just makes my assignments easier to grade.

Wyatt finds this, “More brutal than the high school teachers … because the [professors] are just so nonchalant about you.” He says, “That really does wake you up…. if you don’t realize it already, that the world doesn’t owe you anything.” Wyatt declares, “It’s up to you … to make [the grade] a good one or a bad one.”

Carmen also acknowledges that her training program required her to function more independently. The teachers in her program treated her as an adult by expecting, “[You to do] your studying yourself, projects … yourself, [and any] researching … yourself.” The experience required Carmen to behave more independently. She says, “It’s different in the way how you got to be responsible for things.” Carmen clarifies, “You’ve got to know what is your schedule, what are your classes, what books do you have to take, and high school is not like that, so it’s like more responsibility.” She concludes, “Professors are not there to take your hand whenever you want.” For each participant, their new environment forced them to acknowledge that the expectations of them had suddenly changed. For some, the expectations of their environment forced them to search for a better fit than what they had initially attempted.

**Finding best fit.** Participants describe exploring options until they can determine a field, a major, or a job that represents the best fit for them. For many, this process is ongoing. Patrick began as a Computer Information Systems major at Riverdale Community College but thought
he should try something different because he “was unsure at that point.” He changed his major to Early Childhood Education but later realized, “It would be a wise move to return to where I was before with computers.” Patrick arrived at that decision because the Early Childhood Education classes were “rather difficult.” He says, “It was a lot of fun but … it wasn’t the best option.” He explains, “Working with the kids was awesome … it was just the work. It was just too much.” Patrick continues, “I think I just needed more experience. I think I needed to spend time with … younger children.” If Patrick had more experience working with children, he would have been able to, “Gain that experience … to see what they’re like and see what their behaviors are like.” Having this experience would have given him “a better understanding, so when I get into those classes … [it]… makes [more] sense with what the teachers are explaining.” As a result, he reverted to computers and transferred to Madison College. He recalls, “I knew that I had made the best choice because there was a better selection of courses than Riverdale in terms of where I was headed.”

James describes a similar process of thinking about what he enjoyed in high school and trying to match that to options at Triumph Job Prep. When James started at Triumph Job Prep, he knew, “[I] wanted to learn computer tech,” so he began the training module. However, “All of a sudden … it didn’t feel like it was the right choice.” As a result, James explains, “[I] got out of it,” and “[I] went to office administration.” During the first two weeks in the office administration training module, James hesitated to believe this was a good fit saying, “I was a little like ‘ugh.’” However, as time progressed, he processed the instruction, “Really quickly, and it just started to come to me, and I just thought it was really fun.” He realized, “Wow, I really like this.” For James, office administration represents a good fit because it combines elements of
his initial interests in high school. He says, “I did help people. I did teach them. I did participate in moving stuff, so it’s sort of all combined [my interests] into one thing.”

Carmen still searches for a suitable position in the medical field. Carmen is not entirely content with her new hostess job and would like to return to the career for which she trained. However, she is not certain what type of medical administrative assistant position to pursue. She explains, “[I enjoy] more secretary stuff than dealing with blood and all that.” She says, “I want to go back to that [profession] because that’s what I studied.” However, the only interview she has had recently is for an emergency room position. Carmen knows, “Every single emergency department in every single hospital is exactly the same, and it was just too stressing.” When asked if she has considered finding a private practice job, she says, “Maybe. … They told me that a doctor’s office is much better because it’s not as much pressure.”

Nathan’s transition has involved searching for any fit, but his experience reflects a deep reluctance to attempt anything. Nathan found planning for his transition easier in high school. He explains, “I thought I knew what I wanted to do.” He clarifies, “It was easier because I had a lot of choices and stuff.” However, he struggled to identify one field to pursue. Nathan says, “I just found interest in a job, and I looked at more jobs, and I found something else more interesting,” which would prompt him to abandon the first job. Through this process, he developed an interest in the Air Force. However, he realized, “I don’t want to go there and do all the boot camp and stuff.” Instead, he would rather, “Just live life and find out what I’m supposed to do.” He envisions this happening by:

Continuing [to work] … [in] a low-pay job, obviously, unless I can find a good paying job, but just working and hanging out with my friends and try[ing] to get a place and grow up. … I’ll just eventually know what I want to do.
Nathan contemplates moving to California with a friend and “[saving] enough money to get a place.” After moving, he says, “[I will] find a job … like a career job.” He explains, “In school, I was starting to become artistic and visual with the graphic design thing.” He believes, “California [has] more of that kind of stuff, and I think going there would be a good choice for me.” Nathan says, “[I am] figuring things out.”

For participants, this search for the best fit involves encountering and dealing with obstacles in their environment. For some, struggling with but being unable to overcome obstacles prompts them to change course; for others, their difficulty with obstacles inspires them to recommit to their goals.

**Facing obstacles.** Participants describe encountering obstacles that are both internal and external. Patrick’s obstacle with the Early Childhood Education major is that the work is too difficult. He describes, “Some of the material, the work … was too hard to understand.” He says, “The tests and the quizzes were too difficult and just the amount of work was just too overwhelming sometimes.”

For Nathan, the obstacle is financial. He thinks about attending college but cannot afford it. He recognizes that some people earn a college degree but never work in the field in which they majored. Nathan states, “I don’t want to go to community college and waste a bunch of money on a job that I’m never going to get trying to train for something that I’m not going to do.” He had an opportunity to receive free training in the military but found the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) to be an impediment to his goal. He took the test, but his results disappointed him. He says, “It’s weird. I did … really terrible on the math, and I don’t know why.” He explains, “It’s disappointing because I’m good at math, and I did terrible.” He clarifies, “[The results] made me not want to go into the military.”
The obstacle for James is the lack of support he received in finding a job after completing the Triumph Job Prep program. James says, “They didn’t really help me as much” as he needed. James states, “They more … threw me in there and … said just look for job. I don’t really find that very helpful.” He believes, “[This is] why I’m probably a little struggling looking for jobs.”

Wyatt’s obstacles have been more internal. Even though he “barely took art classes in high school,” he wanted to pursue Graphic Design as a major. Despite a high school art teacher telling him, “A college art professor wouldn’t accept his work.” He dismissed that thinking, “Well, okay, I’m in high school, so this doesn’t really matter.” However, he knows, “Now this kind of thing matters.” His experience forced him to acknowledge, “You’re on the vanguard of the career world, so … that’s why everybody … and … everything is so serious.”

**Summary of adjusting to a new environment.** The process of adjusting to a new environment entails encountering and adjusting to new expectations. These expectations surprise some participants although they manage to adapt using trial and error and learning from their mistakes. For some participants, the new environment and expectations force them to evaluate whether they have made a good fit for themselves. Each participant encounters obstacles in their new environment. If they are not able to manage the obstacle, they pursue a different course. If they are able to handle the obstacle, they continue on their path. Many participants see this process as part of embracing the elevated expectations and responsibilities that accompany entering the adult world.

**Embracing adult responsibilities.** Participants transition to new environments that present unexpected responsibilities. Participants articulate a host of adult responsibilities of which they become aware and must begin to embrace. These range from speaking with adults in a more mature manner to managing their time, materials, and money with greater independence...
and efficacy. They begin to realize that their lives are their own to shape. The following themes reflect the experience of accepting adult responsibilities: adult communication, managing oneself, responsibility for oneself. Table 4 provides an overview of participants’ experiences of the theme and subthemes.

Table 4

*Quotes Illustrating Theme of Embracing Adult Responsibilities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Adult communication</th>
<th>Managing oneself</th>
<th>Responsibility for oneself</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>I needed some help understanding the concepts and finding ways to remember the material from the textbook.</td>
<td>You study a little bit now, take a break, come back, and study some more.</td>
<td>To try to improve my health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>You can go to the teachers themselves [at the VP Program] and they can actually tell us and they can help us.</td>
<td>College mode means that I’m focusing on what I’m going to do.</td>
<td>I’m learning apartment living right now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyatt</td>
<td>It just means I need to think of ways I can be a little more upfront about … “Hey, I really need help.”</td>
<td>I have honestly tried to-do lists.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>I think after having a job I can actually talk to managers.</td>
<td>Once you are not in school and you have a job, you have different hours…</td>
<td>I’m [going to] have tons of bills to pay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>[In] an interview, you have to maintain everything about yourself.</td>
<td>I started scheduling … on my phone on my calendar…</td>
<td>I’m trying to get up early so that way I can do things on my own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>[I learned] a more formal way of communicating.</td>
<td>Scheduling the times, knowing what time I have to be there …</td>
<td>I have a debit card, and I handle my credit card, and I handle checks.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Adult communication.** Participants describe two types of adult communication, which appear to break down according to the path the participant pursues after high school. The three participants who attend community college or college-like vocational training programs articulate the process of learning to self-advocate with staff members or with disability services. The three participants who have jobs or seek employment explain that they must communicate in a more adult-like fashion with employers or prospective employers.

Patrick explains how he accessed support services in the RISE Program at Riverdale Community College and later at Madison Community College. Patrick says, “[I] took advantage of [the] services [at The RISE Program] often.” After completing RISE, he would, “Go down to the Academic Resource Center,” and “I would wait a few minutes and then [find] the next available tutor.” He says, “They were very, very helpful.” He explains, “If I had a paper to write, I would go … and ask for help with formatting and organizing the information.” Patrick uses this self-advocacy skill at Madison College also. He explains, “I am part of the tutoring center down the hall from my class, so anytime I have a question or I need help … I go down there.”

Lydia conveys something similar. Once she overcame her fear as a new student at the VP Program, she self-advocated. Lydia states, “[I was] a little bit of afraid in the beginning of my years at the VP Program asking for help from the staff, but now … I ask them all the time for help.” Lydia says she now knows, “If I need help on certain things [in community college] … I’m going to [access disability services].”

However, this decision to self-advocate is a difficult one that does not always lead the participants to feel comfortable seeking help from disability support services. Wyatt describes his conflict over whether he needs to access support services in a structured format. Wyatt admits that he struggles with the required math classes at Riverdale. He says, “Math was challenging,
but I got through it.” He clarifies, “Math classes are probably the one thing that’s going to be the most trouble. … but I’m still pretty determined to get that requirement fulfilled, so I can keep going forward.” However, when asked if he has accessed services from the college’s disability support center, he responds, “I plan on getting the Academic Resource Center (ARC).” He says, “I guess the closest thing to disability services is my math class … [since my professor] … is one of the ARC tutors, and he doesn’t really have a problem with me taking extra time.” When asked to elaborate on the math professor giving him the extra time accommodation even though he did not register with disability services, Wyatt says, “Yes, even though I’m not even filed, … I just come down to the ARC and finish up my test.”

When asked why he accepts the accommodation but does not bother to register for disability services, Wyatt says, “Personality, I am realizing is a big factor in success in college, and I think something I’m realizing that’s giving me trouble is that I have a very introverted personality.” He continues:

Regardless of …what I’m dealing with, I just don’t talk. I don’t. I’m not upfront and out about things and I’m realizing what that’s causing, so I might need to work on that. … It’s tough when you’re left to your own devices really … when you’re on your own.

He continues with his insight about his personality:

I don’t know, maybe that’s the whole introverted thing again. I guess I really don’t feel like going up and being … I have trouble with this and that and signing a paper and all those things. I don’t know why that’s hard. It’s pretty easy. … I also feel like if I worked hard enough, which that’s … shameless self-denial right there. … If I push myself hard enough … I won’t need these disability services. Period, end of story, I need them … I don’t know.

Wyatt clearly acknowledges needing to advocate for himself and seek support services, but, at the same time, he recognizes his resistance to disclosing his disability, which would entail admitting he needs help. Wyatt explains the dilemma, “It’s kind of like I have voices in my head.” He hears, “One voice … telling me … this is going to be a good semester and the other
one is ... no, you're not going to do good. Remember last semester, you could fall right back [in] that trap again.” These competing voices make it “a little hard” for Wyatt to decide whether to accept the help he knows he needs.

Three other participants describe their realization that transitioning to life after high school requires that they communicate with adults in new ways. Nathan will be more at ease in future interviews because, “My managers are nice,” which has made him more comfortable communicating with prospective employers. He believes, “Going to another place to apply, I would know what to expect from a manager.”

Carmen acknowledges that she learned to speak differently in her training program. She explains, “You got to say ‘no, ma’am, right now I’m unavailable. Right now, I’m going to have to call you back.’” Carmen also learned to interact with adult classmates saying, “You’ve got classmates [who are in their] 40s and 50s and you [have] got to know how to talk to them.” She continues, “It’s not like they’re talking to a little girl and you’re … ‘yeah, what’s up?’” James describes how important it is to speak clearly and use social pragmatics when you converse with someone. He describes, “[I know I need to have] a good handshake … good eye contact, good voices … [that aren’t] all mumble and stuff because that will just get the person frustrated.”

Participants recognize that their exit from high school and entrance into their new environment compels them to adopt adult communication skills. Similarly, they acknowledge that surviving in their new environment, circumscribed by adult expectations, means learning to manage oneself with greater independence.

**Managing oneself.** Participants realize they need to manage parts of their lives more independently now. Patrick discusses the studying process he uses successfully in community college. He says, “[I have to] do this at a certain time and then take a break and … you want to
study a little bit and then take a break and then come back.” To be an effective student, “You
don’t want to study too much all at once because that can be overwhelming and can make it a lot
more difficult.” Similarly, Lydia says she now thinks about her responsibilities in the moment
rather than, “Waiting until tonight to do it because … procrastination won’t help.” James
manages his time by planning, “At this time, I have to go here and, at this time, I have to go
here.” James also works on his organization stating, “Organization hasn’t been too hard. I do …
need a little bit more help … I need to know … I have to put this here and not leave it here, but I
have been getting better at [that].” He concludes, “I’m starting to get good at organization. I’m
starting to follow along and hopefully it gets better as time goes on.” Carmen also says that
learning to manage her time has been critical as a young worker. She explains, “I mean the
scheduling … how to handle your schedule is the most important thing when you have a job.”
Participants recognize that they operate more independently by creating and following schedules
to manage their tasks without direct support. There are other adult responsibilities that they begin
to embrace with increased independence.

**Responsibility for oneself.** An important part of learning to manage oneself means
accepting responsibility for aspects of one’s life. Patrick researched his transfer from Riverdale
to Madison Community College saying, “Most of my research was online and I went in there and
signed up for the class, paid for it, and I started on September 5th.” He also describes setting
personally important goals, such as “building stronger relationships with my friends [and] trying
to hang onto those relationships and not … mess up … and then it goes downhill from there.” He
says, “[I want to] try to hang on to the relationships I have and value those more.” Implicit is his
realization that he bears sole responsibility for maintaining that part of his life now.
To continue making his transition, James knows he needs to work on, “Being calm and knowing] that I have to make sure I can do this on my own because if I’m going to be out into the real, real world where I’m … working, living, and surviving … I have to do things on my own that not everyone can really hold my hand for.”

Nathan and Carmen describe taking responsibility for their bills. Nathan says, “I am going to have to pay for my car [and] my cell phone. When I get my apartment, I’m going to have to pay for that.” Nathan realizes that adult life can be challenging. He says:

You’re not going to find a cheap apartment, either. If you want all the utilities included, it is going to be like $900 … it depends on how many rooms you get, so … the best thing to do is … try to find somebody to move in with, so the bills will be cheaper and paying for gas. And … spending your money, you’ve really got to be wise to what you use your money with.

Carmen describes managing her money saying, “I budget myself … if I want to eat something … I’m going to go grocery shopping, and I’m going to buy it and cook it at home.” Her parents reinforce this lesson by requiring her to contribute to the household income. She describes how her parents have helped her learn fiscal responsibility:

Now I [have] to sometimes pay the bills for the water or heat or whatever. So, those are the responsibilities that you take because if parents make you pay those bills that’s how they’re showing you responsibilities to be more mature and how to handle your money because definitely in high school, I wasted my money like crazy … I didn’t care.

Carmen has learned, “Just how to handle adult life because right now I’m experiencing adult life. Yeah, it’s totally different. The responsibility is just totally different.” As Carmen’s experience suggests, parents play an important role in participants’ transition to the postsecondary world, which foreshadows the next major theme of relationships.

**Summary of embracing adult responsibilities.** Transition includes embracing the adult responsibilities that are implicit in their new environments. Participants become responsible for communicating in more adult-like ways whether that means advocating for oneself in college or
communicating with the adults with whom one works. For some participants, this is a struggle because they do not want to admit they need assistance. In addition, participants reveal that they become the keepers of their schedules. To accomplish this, they plan and monitor their time, tasks, and materials. Finally, as participants become adults, they embrace other responsibilities, such as managing their finances, health, and future. Participants reveal that specific groups of people influence them in this process.

**Relationships.** The nature and value of relationships change for participants in transition. Participants describe several relationships that influence their transition. Some are ongoing relationships from their high school setting, while some are relationships forged in their new context. Relationships that functioned well in high school may function differently for participants after high school. Overall, participants describe whether their old and new relationships help or hinder them in pursuing their transition goals. The important relationships include their bond with parents and family, friends, and current and former teachers. The following subthemes reflect the types of relationships participants have in transition: parents and family, peers, and professors and high school teachers. Table 5 provides an overview of participants’ opinions, thoughts, feelings, and examples of this theme and subthemes.

Table 5

*Quotes Illustrating Theme of Relationships*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Parents and family</th>
<th>Peers</th>
<th>Professors and teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>My parents helped me and guided me along the way.</td>
<td>My friends pushed me.</td>
<td>The staff at high school was very, very helpful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Parents and family</td>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>Professors and teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
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<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>My parents have been there during the whole entire time that I was transitioning from high school to my college years.</td>
<td>I had a lot of upperclassmen helping me as well.</td>
<td>The [high school] program … did as much as you could. … the whole program really helped me a lot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyatt</td>
<td>I have kind of confided in [my mom] a lot about … what I’m going through and why, and what might be better for me.</td>
<td>Some of your friends can be a bad influence on you.</td>
<td>My professor has been a good influence on me now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>My mom tried to help me a little bit.</td>
<td>Not much my friends because I just hang out with them and we don’t talk about anything like careers and stuff.</td>
<td>Teachers do fine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>The main people for helping me are my aunt.</td>
<td>I was at a group at Bradford Children’s Hospital … we … help each other out.</td>
<td>One of the people that affected me was my Chorus teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>[My parents] talked to me how to handle … going to … college and when I was going to find a job at the hospital.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Parents and family.** Participants describe parents and family as being both supportive and as being absent supports. For most participants, parents are a consistent beacon helping participants navigate the adult world. Patrick says, “My parents helped me and guided me along the way” when he transferred colleges. His parents outlined options for him saying, “You could do this or you could do that, but, if you want to that, that is fine, or whatever you want to do, I am up for that.” When he struggled at Riverdale managing the more difficult coursework and
deciding between the computer and early childhood education majors, they said, “If you feel this is not the best fit for you then we can work on something to help you do better.”

Lydia’s parents also offer consistent support, prompting her to say, “My parents helped me by supporting me no matter what idea or decision I had.” They also “helped me with a lot of transitioning” by talking with her “about my goals for my college years and knowing the things that they don’t want me to do.” Carmen’s parents also provide her with solid guidance. When she encountered stressful situations at the hospital, her mother told her:

I know you’re responsible … you’re mature, and … you haven’t seen this, but this is life. … You have to know how to handle it. … If you need help, you always have the help from me and your dad, so don’t stress about it. Keep what you’re doing. What you’re doing is actually a good thing because you’re earning money and you’re helping people out, and that’s what life is.

Wyatt finds similar steadfast support in his mother. They are on “a similar wavelength when it comes to things,” so he feels comfortable discussing his struggles in community college with her. He says, “She has always kind of helped me out a lot in high school and… to a big degree [in college]…. and so she’s been a very positive influence.”

However, two participants have a different experience with parents, which suggests that sometimes parents are either unable to help or offer assistance that participants find unhelpful. Nathan reports that, although his mom believes she helps him, “She just keeps talking about the military and it’s annoying.” Nathan says, “[She] just keeps talking about [his enlisting] and talking about it and she won’t shut up.” When asked if he would accept help from others in determining his long term goals, he says, “I would accept help from other people whatever they would do to help me.” However, he remarks, “It is not something I really have thought of.”

James has a similar experience in which his aunt and grandparents provide support to him in his job search, but his “father and [step-mother] … can’t help me as much” since “they have work.”
James lives with his grandparents rather than his father and step-mother, which is the reason his dad and step-mom provide him with less regular support. Participants express a similar dichotomy with peers. Some participants speak of peers as a positive influence on their transition, but others categorize peers as not helpful.

**Peers.** Several participants describe peers as a source of support in their transition. James, who attends a support group for young men with disabilities, says the group works together on, “How you maintain your life outside when you are a lot older and what you should be doing and what you would want to do in order to create a better society for yourself.” Patrick describes how he met, “Some new friends [who] kind of supported me along the way” as he became accustomed to community college. He says, “Some of them were classmates, some I met in the RISE Program, and some I knew from outside of the college.” They provide him with encouragement, telling him, “I know you can do it. Never give up. I have confidence in you.” Their supportive statements prompt him to persevere when he struggles with the higher level college material.

Peers are also an important source of support to Lydia, who says her friends from the VP Program “don’t tell me to do things that could get [me] in trouble.” Instead, these new friends encouraged her to ask questions and become more comfortable at the program. Lydia will “miss so many people [from the VP Program].” She says, “That school is like a family.” Friends can be positive supports as participants pursue their transition although some participants have a different experience with peers.

Wyatt and Nathan find friends to be a negative influence on their transition. Wyatt admits, “It kills me but friends” have prompted him to adopt bad habits in college. He discussed this with his advisor, who told him, “Friends kind of make or break a college student.” Wyatt
wrestles with this realization saying, “I think that’s part of being young … you want to have friends, and … don’t want to be completely alone.” However, they pressured him to skip class by saying, “No, cut class, if you didn’t do anything, just cut class.” He says, “[I was not] thinking about the consequences.” He admits, “Some of your friends … don’t care about their classes and … they don’t really have that much to offer to you other than to set you back at times.” Wyatt now knows, “You just really got to be careful who you surround yourself with.”

While Nathan’s friends are not an actively negative influence on his transition, they just are not capable of supporting him in a positive way. He says, “I just hang out with [friends] before work because I usually work nighttime all the time, except for weekends.” Most of his friends are “sixteen and seventeen and are still in high school.” Only one of them has a job. As a result, “[We] do whatever we can and … chill at people’s houses.” Nathan’s friends are too young to support him in his effort to identify a career path.

**Professors and teachers.** Participants describe finding either past or present teachers as supportive of their efforts to transition to the adult world. Wyatt has a close relationship with a professor who advises him at Riverdale. Wyatt says, “[He is] probably one of the few professors who … is very invested in the students.” When Wyatt failed several classes in his major, after a particularly distracted semester, he confided to the professor that he thought he possibly had chosen the wrong major. The professor helped Wyatt realize that Wyatt reached that conclusion because he was “not in the greatest of standing at the moment.” The professor encouraged him, “Push yourself. You can do it.”

Patrick credits his high school teachers with preparing him to succeed in community college. Patrick says, “Each teacher helped me … in each subject area.” His high school teachers taught him, “Everything very well, [so] I think it was up to me to put the information I learned to
use and be successful with it.” Lydia also recalls that the high school teachers helped her transition. She believes, “Learning Strategies was the most thing that helped me” because she started “looking at colleges, knowing that there’s other colleges out there … for me.” In addition, each teacher helped her with “different parts of it,” such as “getting my brain to think in college mode instead of high school [mode].” James also credits his high school teachers with teaching him skills like “how to interview [with] someone” and content like “vocabulary where I could learn bigger words.”

Nathan appreciates his high school teachers’ efforts to help him prepare for his transition saying, “Well, obviously the teachers [were helpful in exploring what he should do].” They provided, “Words of advice … [and help in learning about] all the careers … and with my vocabulary and stuff.” The main difference is that Nathan says students need to take more responsibility for their part in the transition process. The teachers, he says, “Did fine,” but “the students need to pay attention and actually do stuff to do better to get … to college and stuff. They need to focus and do their work.” Nathan’s statement foreshadows perceptions the participants reveal about how they engaged in the transition process in high school.

**Summary of relationships.** There is a variety of people who influence participants in their transition. Many participants find their parents to be supportive of their transition. Supportive parents guide participants but refrain from decision-making by allowing participants to choose for themselves. Many participants find peers and the encouragement they offer to be supportive in their transition from high school to adult life. However, some find peers to be distractions who divert their attention and effort from practices that would help them achieve their goals. Many find their high school teachers or current professors to be helpful supports as participants learn the skills necessary to function in their adult environment.
Perceptions of transition process. Participants reveal perceptions they had of the experience of setting transition goals for themselves as high school students along with what they perceived to be the purpose of transition planning. Participants feel compelled to share lessons learned from their own experiences with students currently preparing for their transition. Now that they have experienced the process, participants have advice to share with current students based on what they wished they had known or done in high school to facilitate their transition.

The following subthemes reflect their perceptions of the transition process: reflection on goals, perceptions of planning, and advice to others. Table 6 provides an overview of participants’ opinions, thoughts, feelings, and examples of these subthemes.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quotes Illustrating Theme of Perceptions of Transition Process</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyatt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tell them that professors are not there to pick up your hand and tell you what you have to do.

**Reflection on goals.** Participants recall having transition goals in high school that lacked specificity. Patrick states, “[I] was still focused on high school” when teachers asked him to set transition goals. He says, “[My postsecondary transition goal as a junior and a senior was] to do very well [and] …to get in the swing of things.” He describes how those goals changed when he entered community college. Patrick states, “The part that [was] different [was figuring out] how do I transition properly … from high school to college.” He had to figure out, “When I get here … what do I do to make this work? What do I do here to make that work?” When he arrived at community college, he realized, “This makes a lot of sense. Now I understand how to utilize this properly. I just think now going to college and being in the college environment made a lot more sense.” Patrick struggled to envision his life after high school until he began that life.

Lydia also describes being focused on high school when teachers asked her to think about her transition. She says, “Actually my junior year and my senior year … I was thinking about how … I want to soak in every moment that I had during my two last years and to … know about more other friends that I made there.” Wyatt’s transition goals are “kind of foggy.” He thinks his goal was “to do good, to … really study hard and make sure I pass and move forward…. just move along.” His thinking was general. He describes, “[My goal was] to stay afloat in school.” He realizes now, “You could do that in high school [and] you can do that in college as well [although] I came to find that it’s a little harder than … you’d expect.”

Nathan describes the process of setting transition goals in high school to be both easy and difficult. He explains, “[It] seemed a little … easier [in high school] because I didn’t expect
anything.” Nathan says, “I thought I would’ve gone out of high school and gone to college and then I would’ve known what I wanted to do.” However, he has not figured out what he wants to do yet and realizes, “It’s hard to choose.” In high school, Nathan settled for goals reflecting whatever he was thinking at the moment. He says, “[I did that] because I did not know what to think at the time… because I still don’t know what I want to do.” Participants’ recollections of their goals are vague and suggest the next subtheme, which reveals their confusion about the purpose of transition planning.

**Perceptions of planning.** Participants describe the transition planning process as something that either did not make sense to them in high school or as something they did not realize would be important to them. Patrick’s perception pertains to the former description. He recalls learning skills for time management, memory, test-taking, and reading comprehension in high school but being unsure how he was going to apply those until he got to college. He says, “Understanding bits and pieces of those [skills was] difficult [in high school but] just using that in college, I think, was very useful.” When asked a clarifying question about that statement, Patrick agrees that he learned skills in high school related to college, but those didn’t make sense to him until he was actually a college student.

Lydia suggests that her high school teachers did everything they could to prepare her for her transition. She says, “There was nothing that [the teachers] … could have done.” She clarifies, “It was just … the experience. I needed to experience that.” Lydia knows she learned skills in high school that will help her throughout her young adult life as she changes environments. She credits learning about colleges and “knowing about certain classes and the syllabuses because to me I never knew about syllabuses and it was different.” She learned certain skills in high school that her vocational program has reinforced. She recalls setting, “Specific
types of goals and goal setting is exactly the same thing that we learned as a junior in my college. … It was like a refresher and it was like a review.” Another important idea she learned was the importance of understanding. “Everyone’s disability and … to show empathy about it.”

Wyatt and Nathan describe a different experience of transition planning. They did not profit from transition planning in high school. Wyatt describes the process of transition planning as “scare tactics for lazy students.” He recalls teachers talking to him about setting postsecondary goals related to attending community college as conveying the message, “If you’re not doing well in high school, there’s no hope for you in college.” When teachers tried to teach him skills related to college success, he says, “I kind of saw how it was important, but I didn’t know how [it] was going to work … for me because I knew back then I didn’t want to do that kind of thing.” Wyatt says, “I didn’t really see it being relevant to me because I never really had to prioritize anything…. it was so kind of irrelevant to me at the time.” However, now he realizes, “My mindset back then was just not right. This was for the future.” He was a “naïve high schooler” who thought, “I don’t need to know this now. Am I really going to need this in college? Am I really going to need to harass myself to get things done?” After his community college struggles, he says “[I] learned that is kind of the case.” He believes, “For whatever reason, [he] had a mental barrier against” learning time management, organization, and study skills for college. He thought, “[I] could function without that, which was a misconception.”

Nathan also perceived attempts to help him set transition goals or learn skills for the future as irrelevant. He says, “I didn’t pay attention that much during those tours [of community colleges].” When asked if any of the transition activities he participated in during high school helped, he says, “Nothing is much helpful … because I didn’t pay attention as much … because of how I was in high school, it didn’t help me. [In high school I was] lazy [and] procrastinating.”
Participants have a better understanding of the process now and offer advice to students still preparing to transition from high school to their young adult lives.

*Advice to others.* Now that they have experienced transition, participants offer advice to students with disabilities who are still in high school and planning their own transitions. Most participants advise current students to grasp the bigger purpose of transition. Carmen advises students to know, “It’s what you set up in your mind you have to do.” Carmen says, as a young adult going to college, “You set up your mind” to become more independent by taking responsibility for your work. Nathan says, “You kind of don’t really expect like the best of things… don’t think it’s going to come … easy.” He says, “When I was in high school, all I thought about was it being easy getting a job, and I was going to be rich and stuff and making all that money is going to be easy, but [it’s] not.”

Wyatt says, “[I wish I] could go back in time and take that College Skills course” offered at Riverdale Community College. He explains, “I think that class would have probably hammered in the things that I really need to know for college and would have hammered in the stuff I was learning [in high school] … a little better [like] time management [and making] to do lists.” He tells students to be more self-reflective and to think about their motivation. He warns, “If you are not feeling motivated, take the year off.” He suggests they ask themselves, “Do you really, really, really want to go to college?” Wyatt knows now:

If your head is not all the way in it, you should not do it. You should kind of take a year off and evaluate yourself. Don’t mess around. … evaluate yourself. Realize what kind of pitfalls you might fall into. See if you can get some help and then decide, “Okay, am I ready to go to school?”

Wyatt advises, “When you do go to school, realize that the things you are learning now are going to be really important.” Wyatt says, “You don’t think so now, but they are going to be important…. the to-do list, the daily calendars, everything is going to matter.” He admonishes
high school students to realize, “The world owes you nothing, so all the important skills that your teachers are desperately trying to pound into you, they matter.”

**Summary of perceptions of transition process.** Participants reflect on what it was like to plan for their transition in high school. Many recall reluctantly setting vague goals because they preferred to focus simply on completing their last years of high school. Many found the process of planning for their transition confusing because it entailed learning skills, such as managing time or prioritizing tasks, which were irrelevant to them as they received support in completing those tasks in high school. In hindsight, participants now understand how important it was to shift their thinking to what they now know to be the demands of the adult world. Some regret dismissing efforts to help them understand those changing demands. Participants’ abilities to reflect on their understanding of the purpose of transition and how it relates to their experiences suggest the final theme, which is an emerging metacognition that serves them well in continuing their transition into adulthood.

**Emerging metacognition.** Participants reveal an emerging metacognition about their transition that includes several important facets. Participants develop an awareness of their functioning in their new setting. Facing the challenges of that context prompts them to use self-talk and reflection to mediate their experiences. Their self-talk allows them to make resolutions regarding next steps in the process of becoming young adults. The following subthemes reflect this emerging metacognition: self-awareness, self-talk and reflection, and resolution. Table 7 provides an overview of participants’ opinions, thoughts, feelings, and examples of this theme and subthemes.
Table 7

*Quotes Illustrating Theme of Emerging Metacognition*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Self-awareness</th>
<th>Self-talk and reflection</th>
<th>Resolution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>You just go ahead and [ask for help] … because you know it’s going to benefit you if you need it.</td>
<td>Should I have … practiced more in this area?</td>
<td>I am doing whatever it takes … to get there, to earn my Associate’s degree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>I want to be what everyone wants me to be, but at the same time my true self doesn’t want to be that way.</td>
<td>Keep focusing on the big picture.</td>
<td>I’ll have to balance between work and school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyatt</td>
<td>You want to live in the moment … but it’s tough because there’s a lot of pressure to think ahead.</td>
<td>Not everyone is cut from the same block of wood.</td>
<td>My mantra is you got to do what you got to do. And, if it’s going to get you toward your goal …then it’s worth it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>I’m going to try to do it as much as I can on my own independently.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>I should … realize my mistake and …keep proceeding on.</td>
<td>There may be times where it may not be the right thing for you but at least you can tell yourself that you tried.</td>
<td>You have to go for the goals that you need to go for.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>It was really hard because I was like, oh my God, this is not for me, but I was like I’m going to be strong about it</td>
<td></td>
<td>After you leave high school, it all depends on you.</td>
</tr>
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**Self-awareness.** Participants describe an emerging awareness of themselves and how they have responded to their new environment and challenges in that context. Patrick describes realizing, “You don’t have to be shy or embarrassed to ask questions if you need help,” which is
what enabled him to be a tireless self advocate at community college. He speaks of now knowing, “I have to go ahead and ask [for assistance] in order to make it happen and help me succeed.” James describes the many connections he has drawn between lessons he learned in high school and how he applies them to the challenge of finding a job. He recalls learning about focusing on goals by participating in a charity dodgeball tournament in high school. He learned, “You need to focus on who your target is - your target as in your goal.” He relates this to his job search, thinking to himself, “If you want to hit the target, you need to go for it.” He also learned a valuable lesson from his Chorus teacher. When he prepared to sing a solo and made mistakes, she told him, “Don’t say sorry. Just say you’ll do it.” She wanted him to, “Stop saying you’re sorry; just know what you’re doing is wrong and fix it.” James now knows, “If I mess up, I shouldn’t say I’m sorry.” Instead, he should realize his mistake and correct it. He says, “[I’m] starting to do that now ... lessen my I’m sorries and to do more of the realizing.”

Wyatt also recognizes how he must persevere in the face of the challenges he has encountered at Riverdale. His performance in classes “could have been a lot better, suffice it to say.” He acknowledges, “[I was] having some time management difficulty … [because] I was just highly distracted.” Wyatt recalls, “It was not a fun semester because I was just ‘ugh.’” He states, “I don’t know how else to put it, but I felt I was living out of body … I [thought]... What the hell am I doing? I’ve got these ambitions. Where is my motivation?” He says, “Everything eluded me.” Wyatt met with his advisor at his “most dreaded advisor meeting,” which made him realize, “[I] can’t do that anymore.” Wyatt struggles knowing, if something doesn’t intrinsically interest him, “[I] don’t want to do it…so I guess that’s the hardest thing.” He says “[There are] little tricks I need to work out.”
For Nathan his awareness pertains to his desire to figure out his life’s path independently. He says:

I kind of think it’s something I need to figure out myself because if I’m going to … live life and find out what I’m going to do then … I can obviously take advice from people, and I do that and stuff, but I kind of want to do stuff on my own … find a job on my own, get a car by myself, get a house.

Participants reveal their awareness of how they function in their environments and what they need to do to function well, which foreshadows their using self-talk and reflection to manage challenges they face.

**Self-talk and reflection.** Participants describe a process of thinking through their experiences and trying to understand what that means for their future. Patrick reflects on his semester by making “a checklist” that allows him to think about, “Did I … read the book every day? Did I work as much as I wanted to or … could [I] have done this differently?” He reflects, “When I had a test or some homework, should I have given more clear answers?” Such self-talk and reflection enables Patrick to adjust to the demands of community college by helping him apply strategies. He uses the “checklist and reflecting [to] help me get a better idea of what I want to do next for the following semester and after that.” Patrick also applies a strategy from his experience of learning to kick a football as a youngster. He says, “[I take] the time to practice, take a break, practice and then over time it is making a lot more sense because it is getting easier, and I am getting better at it.” This ability to reflect and then strategize instills in him a sense of competence that allows him to proceed confidently toward his goal.

Lydia uses “positive reinforcement,” meaning she focuses on “doing the things you need to do to graduate and to prepare yourself.” She accomplishes this by “working harder and focusing on more of the positives in your life,” which she knows will be “ten times greater and ten times richer” if she perseveres and ignores those who are intent on “pulling you down [and]
pushing you down.” Lydia sees herself as “a work in progress.” She tries to and she advises friends to beware, “[Of] other people … telling [you] that [you are] not the way that [you are] supposed to be.” She thinks to herself and tells others, “There is… a placement for you in this world that you do not know, but you will figure it out during your lifetime.” She says, “There [are] things that you want to do and there [are] people you want to see,” so focus on the bigger goals rather than “focusing on the little picture.”

Wyatt uses positive reinforcement to help him overcome his “very traumatizingly bad semester,” which “really… made me wake up … [and] realize that college is extremely important to your future and that you shouldn’t take it for granted.” He reassures himself thinking, “Everyone is different.” He tells himself that if other graphic design majors at his community college “can do a really realistic portraiture and I can’t …well …good for them.” Wyatt knows, “I am at least trying to the best of my ability to do what I have to do to move forward.” Lately, he has tried to think, “What’s important now?” He knows, “If I’ve got to study for something, I really try to [think] … okay, this is important.” Also, if he struggles, he now seeks assistance from more competent classmates. For example, this past semester he spoke with, “One of the top performers in the class to see how I could get some help on a project.” Wyatt now knows:

That was definitely a move I should’ve been making way earlier on [by] surrounding [myself] with the right type of people because … when you surround yourself with unmotivated people, that’s going to affect you, and that will set you back. So, that’s something I’ve also come to find through experience.

James also learned from his experience. He says, “[You] learn from your mistakes.” He knows, “You try things that might not work, and you go for others.” Nathan also demonstrates reflection although he contemplates what he wishes he could have done differently in the past rather than what he will do differently in the future. Nathan says, “If I were to go in a time
machine, I would probably do some stuff different because I know I made bad choices back then [like] acting like a punk in school and not paying attention.” Nathan claims, “I would go back and smack myself in the face, so I would pay attention.” For most participants, their reflection leads them to assert what they will do in the future.

**Resolution.** The participants describe a process of resolving to work to achieve their transition goals. Patrick explains, “[I will do] whatever it takes … to get there, to earn my Associate’s degree, and to do very well.” He resolves, “To make the effort and do all the work that is required of me to get there.” Patrick says, “There were times when I [thought] maybe this is too difficult. Maybe this is not the right fit.” However, he reminded himself, “No, I need to make a little more effort and then from there get better and better.”

Lydia also knows, “I’ve learned a lot from being in college and knowing a lot about managing my stress, managing a lot of work, school, friendships, dealing with certain breakups and just dealing with everyday life.” She feels prepared to take the next step in her transition from the VP Program to Riverdale Community College. Lydia knows, “That different colleges would ask for more from students.” She has new goals. Lydia wants “to still have a job” and go “to Riverdale to get an associate’s degree.” She says, “[I need] an associate degree to be able to get a job to have benefits. So … I am going to get more education to get my associate’s degree.”

Wyatt resolves to remedy his past academic difficulties by thinking, “About how I felt about last semester.” He says, “[I didn’t like it, [I] made a change, or, at least I’m trying to.” Wyatt says, “[I have been] trying to put my studies first.” He knows, “[I am] still feeling my way.” Wyatt explains, “[College is] a crash course in independence and … your own will.” Wyatt says, “[This experience is] building me to be a more driven person.” He says, “An F does not look so good on your transcript.” Wyatt declares, “You’re going to do all you can to make
“sure it doesn’t happen again.” He believes, “Negatives can be turned into positives.” Wyatt strives, “To see how a bad experience … you can learn from it.” Wyatt now knows, “Your studies need to come first. … your most important activities … that will secure your future need to come first.”

James says, “If there’s a goal that you want to reach for, you should always try and go out for it, and always keep your chin up. Never give up.” He resolves, “You should not let anyone talk you [out of your goals] … because it’s just you and it’s only you.” James states, “There will be times when no one else will be there for you.” James explains, “There’s going to be a time … that it’s all on you, and you need to do what you want to do. You have to step up your game.” James concludes, “The main person you must be in true concern of is yourself.” You must know, “You are yourself and [another] person can’t tell you what [is] or what is not right. The only one who can say that is yourself.”

**Summary of emerging metacognition.** Participants become aware of themselves in their new contexts as they learn to function amid unexpected pressures and expectations. Many describe a process of talking themselves through their challenges via a reflective process. Some remind themselves that they may need to take a different path to become successful or it may take them more time to find their way. Most participants describe a process of resolving to achieve their goals. They coach themselves using positive self-talk and recommit their efforts to achieve what is important to them.

**Conclusion**

My in-depth phenomenological analysis of interview data from the six participants revealed six major themes and 18 subthemes, which describe the participant experience of planning for and pursuing postsecondary transition. Those themes and subthemes reflect the
theoretical framework of bioecological and empowerment theory by suggesting the importance of context and personal agency. The themes and subthemes also reflect elements of the literature review, suggesting that self-determination, risk and resilience, and student perception of transition are key elements of this experience. In Chapter Five, I explore the findings of this study as they relate to those elements. I begin by reiterating the purpose and goals of the study. I discuss the findings of the study and the implications arising from my findings. My analysis suggests that the nature of participant interaction with special education teachers within a specific high school setting affected the participants’ experience of transition planning and the initial outcome of their transition. My findings imply that improving transition planning involves understanding that student interaction at the individual, classroom, and school levels affects whether students acquire the skills and attributes needed to make a successful transition. I culminate Chapter Five by offering recommendations that emerge from the findings, discussing the study’s limitations, and offering suggestions for future research.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

Transition planning is important because it means helping students with special needs prepare to live successful, independent lives through the pursuit of further education, gainful employment, and community integration. It is a priority for special education teachers nationwide because students with special needs have struggled historically after high school to complete postsecondary education programs, obtain stable employment, and live productively within their communities as compared to their counterparts who do not have special needs (Newman et al., 2009; Wagner et al., 2004). According to the law, the elements of the transition planning process include identifying a student’s goals, interests, and needs related to postsecondary education, vocation, community engagement, and independent living, then implementing results-oriented activities to achieve them (IDEA, 2004; DESE, 2008).

Researchers have examined many aspects of transition; however, few researchers have examined the transition planning process and transition outcomes from the perspective of students with moderate special needs (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Powers, Geenen, et al., 2009; Powers, Gil-Kashiwabara, et al., 2005).

Using a phenomenological research design, I explored the lived experience of six former high school students with moderate special needs disabilities who planned for and pursued their postsecondary transition. The participants were students in the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program, which is a substantially separate program for high school students who have language-based learning disabilities and other moderate special needs disabilities. It is located in a suburban high school in eastern Massachusetts. Four participants received their diplomas in 2010. One received her diploma in 2011, and one received his diploma in 2012. Four participants are male and two are female. Each received special education services in high
school due to a disability, falling under the category of moderate special needs. The sample size of six fit within the recommended parameter of three to ten participants for phenomenological studies (Dukes, 1984).

It is important to describe the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program here briefly. It is a small special education program that operates within a high school. The program staff members include six special education teachers, two adjustment counselors, and a speech and language therapist. As students, the participants received instruction in all of their major courses (English, math, science, and social studies) in this substantially separate program during all four years of high school. They also took electives such as Learning Strategies, Health, Adult Living, and Computer Tutorial within the program. Their classes within the program contained an average of five or six students to one teacher. The participants had the opportunity to take inclusion classes if they possessed sufficient academic skill and interest. They also received related services in the form of counseling and speech and language therapy.

It was important to use this group of six participants because each had experienced the phenomenon under investigation via their participation in transition planning activities within the program. They had participated in those activities in their Learning Strategies classes during their junior and senior years of high school. Those activities included completing transition assessments and goal-setting activities along with exploring postsecondary education programs and career options. They also had the opportunity to learn specific skills and content that would be useful in a postsecondary setting, which included time management, organization, test preparation, and reading comprehension skills, as well as memory and test-taking techniques and skills for using a syllabus. Students intending to enter the workforce completed job applications, developed resumes, and practiced interviewing skills. Students researched community resources.
They also attended a session during which former students from the program returned to present their postsecondary experiences. Students received instruction in the difference between special education in high school and disability services in college or work settings. They visited local community colleges and their disability services centers. The participants also wrote an autobiography of their experience having a learning disability in school. They described their strengths and weaknesses as students, the academic strategies they used, the accommodations that helped them, and a turning point that indicated to them that they could succeed.

The study focused on these participants because understanding their experiences provided critical information about the efficacy of these transition planning activities within the program, which would contribute to modifying these services to increase their efficacy. This information could prove useful to special educators in similar programs or to schools seeking to provide the most effective transition planning services for students with moderate special needs disabilities.

Findings

In Chapter Four, I presented six major themes about the participant experience of transition, which included managing emotions, adjusting to a new environment, embracing adult responsibilities, relationships, perceptions of the transition planning process, and emerging metacognition. These themes and their subthemes, viewed in conjunction with the literature and the theoretical framework, suggest four findings. These findings inform the main research question driving this study: How do students with moderate special needs disabilities describe the experience of planning for and pursuing their postsecondary transition? These findings also help us think about the two sub-questions: How do students with moderate special needs disabilities describe what influenced or affected them in planning for and making their postsecondary transition? How do students with moderate special needs disabilities describe the
outcome of their initial transition from high school to postsecondary life? The findings reveal ways to improve transition services for students with moderate special needs disabilities. The findings are:

1. Students need to develop coping strategies to manage transition.
2. The nature and significance of relationships change for students in transition.
3. Teacher disposition inadvertently interferes with students developing self-awareness.
4. School environment moderates the degree to which students benefit from transition planning.

Coping strategies to manage transition. Participants reveal that transition involves learning to manage the strong emotions resulting from their entry into a new environment, which presents unknown demands and requires them to fill an unfamiliar role. They experience anxiety, fear, stress, worry, indifference, and shock as they exit high school and learn to acclimate. This finding is especially important since research on risk and resilience suggests that students with disabilities may have difficulty managing anxiety related to adapting to new situations (Bender & Wall, 1994). Identifying that transition is an emotional experience for students with disabilities prompted me to search the literature for research on the emotional regulation abilities of students with disabilities in transition. I searched the literature using the following keywords in multiple combinations: transition, postsecondary transition, learning disabilities, emotions, feelings, emotional regulation, and coping strategies. The search produced three studies pertaining to people with learning disabilities (LD) although those did not pertain to students in transition. It yielded two studies on the experiences students without disabilities have when entering college.

Price, Johnson, and Evelo (1994) have suggested that researchers have ignored the social emotional aspects of having a learning disability despite evidence that psychosocial issues affect
many students who have learning disabilities. Hoffman et al. (1987) completed a needs assessment of adults with LD, which strongly supported offering adults with LD counseling or psychotherapy to help them overcome adjustment issues arising in adulthood. While there is a lack of data pertaining directly to the emotional experience of transition for students with disabilities, research exists about the experience for students who do not have disabilities.

Arthur and Hiebert (1996) and Gall, Evans, and Bellerose (2000) examined the experience of students without disabilities in transitioning to postsecondary education settings. Gall et al. found that students experience acute stressors when entering their first year of college. Arthur and Hiebert discovered that students needed and used coping strategies to adjust to the shifting demands and roles presented by their entry into college. They discovered that the most successful students identified the stressful demands in their environment and selected specific coping strategies to manage them. The strategy these students selected most frequently was re-interpreting the situation positively and implementing problem-focused coping skills. Applying this strategy helped students develop a proactive mental set, which means they addressed the source of their stress through active planning and coping, suppressing competing activities, and seeking key social or emotional supports. Developing and implementing this set of skills allowed students to manage the increased academic, relationship, and financial demands stemming from their new role as college students (Arthur & Hiebert, 1996). Regardless, Arthur and Hiebert have argued that all students would benefit from learning a variety of coping strategies to help them address the transition to college directly and manage the associated stress effectively.

Firth, Greaves, and Frydenberg (2010) examined the coping styles and strategies of students aged 12 to 13 and 14 to 15 who have and do not have LD. They discovered that students with LD use nonproductive coping strategies more often than their counterparts without
disabilities. However, they use the productive strategies of seeking physical recreation as often and employ positive thinking more often than their counterparts without disabilities. While Firth et al. categorized seeking physical recreation and using positive thinking as productive strategies, they defined them to be passive strategies rather than proactive strategies. Physical recreation focuses one’s attention away from the source of stress, but it does not address the source of the stress. Firth et al. differentiated the strategy of positive thinking from the strategy of positive cognitive restructuring. Similar to engaging in physical recreation, positive thinking means students focus their attention away from the source of their stress by thinking positive thoughts in general; in contrast, positive cognitive restructuring necessitates focusing on the source of the stress while learning to think differently about that stress. They recommended teaching students with LD a repertoire of strategies for responding to their stressors in ways that are not only productive but also proactive rather than passive (Firth et al., 2010).

In this study, participants appear to apply an emergent coping strategy of using self-talk and reflection as they adjust to new demands and roles and manage stressful challenges associated with entering a new environment. As participants encounter obstacles, they reflect on what has or has not worked in the past in similar situations. Often, they resolve to work harder at applying their current skills. They encourage themselves to persevere by positively reinforcing their efforts. When viewed in conjunction with the evidence presented above on coping strategies, this finding raises the question of whether participants’ self-talk and reflection are active or passive coping strategies and, in essence, whether they are effective.

This is an important finding in light of evidence from studies identifying the attributes of successful adults who have LD. One key point is that adults with LD report experiencing significant stress throughout their lives as a result of their learning challenges (Goldberg,
Higgins, Raskind, & Herman, 2003). A moderate special needs disability does not go away when one leaves secondary education; it simply manifests differently based on environmental challenges (Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, & Herman, 1999). However, successful adults with LD recognize what triggers their stress and apply effective coping strategies to diminish their anxiety and frustration (Goldberg et al., 2003). Successful adults with LD reframe their problems by recognizing how their disability manifests in context (Reiff, Ginsberg, & Gerber, 1995). Then, they implement a proactive solution, knowing that this will be an ongoing process due to their learning issues (Reiff et al., 1995). Adults with LD who are successful exhibit emotional stability, meaning they use a repertoire of effective strategies for coping with stress, frustration, and ambiguity, which allows them to maintain a positive, optimistic outlook when facing obstacles (Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, & Herman, 2002).

The participants in this study do not appear to possess effective coping strategies upon their exit from high school. Developing such strategies is crucial to their long-term success as adults, which is a valuable observation to consider through the lens of the theoretical framework. Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979, 2005) posited that human development occurs through reciprocal interaction between a person and an environment. Cattaneo and Chapman (2010) suggested that people apply their self-efficacy, knowledge, and competence in attempting to achieve a goal, and they learn from the experience of attaining or not attaining that goal. Using that lens, this finding suggests that something about the transition curriculum or educational environment at the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program failed to facilitate a reciprocal interaction wherein participants faced an appropriate challenge and learned effective strategies for coping. This represents a lost opportunity to help students develop a lifetime transition skill.
Nature and significance of relationships change in transition. Participants reveal that there are primary relationships that are meaningful in their transition to the adult world. Participants describe that their parental and peer relationships support them in transition. This finding may seem predictable. However, participants reveal that the nature and significance of relationships change based on the demand presented in the environment.

Parents. Participants appreciate the type of support their parents provide as they encounter challenges in their postsecondary environment. Participants describe how helpful it is that their parents guide them in processing a challenge. Their parents suggest and model how to examine a difficult situation and then frame options for participants to consider. Most important, participants describe their parents as supporting whichever choice the participant selects. This reflects the literature, which suggests that a resilience factor for students with disabilities is having parents who exhibit appropriate expectations and a flexible approach to family functioning (Morrison & Cosden, 1997). It appears that parents recognize that participants do not have the decision-making skills they need to succeed independently. As a result, parents model effective decision-making skills for participants and provide them with constructive support as they practice those skills. This differs from research on the relationship of parents to students without disabilities who transition from high school to college. Students without disabilities experience a re-organization in their relationship with their parents in which they typically move from relying heavily on their parents to having a greater reliance on themselves (Christie & Dunham, 1991).

What is important to discover with this finding is whether it represents a significant shift from how parents interacted with participants when the participants were high school students. If parents create these chances for participants to practice self-determination at home while
participants are still in high school, it would reflect Trainor’s (2005) finding that students find more meaningful opportunities for cultivating self-determination at home than at school. If parents begin this approach after graduation, it suggests that the environmental demand of postsecondary settings differs from that of high school. It implies not only that postsecondary settings require that participants have the skill of making important life decisions but also that high school settings do not facilitate participants in developing effective decision-making skills. Regardless of when parents begin using this approach with participants, it signals that participants exited the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program with limited decision-making skills. This finding is important because successful adults with LD proactively make their own decisions and accept responsibility for the outcome (Goldberg et al., 2003). Again, it suggests a lost opportunity within the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program to develop an important transition skill.

**Peers.** Participants reveal that peer relationships are important to them as young adults. They describe trying to maintain peer relationships from high school while also developing peer relationships in their new environment. While both old and new peer relationships affect participants, what is important is that peer relationships break down into those that help and those that hinder participants in transition.

Several participants describe having supportive peer relationships, meaning their friends provide encouragement and are a resource for participants as they adapt to their new environment. This finding reflects what Miller (2002) found in a study of college students with learning disabilities, which is that having a supportive peer relationship is a protective factor for college students with learning disabilities. However, one interesting difference that this study
reveals is that some peer relationships, both older and newly formed friendships, do not help participants and actually preclude them from working productively to achieve their goals.

One participant realizes that the peers he met at his community college enticed him into bad habits that inhibited his success. A second participant explains how he has entered a new stage of his development while his friends, who have not yet graduated from high school, persist in activities that prevent him from working toward defining his goals. Despite acknowledging the negative effect these peers have on their lives, both participants hold fast to these relationships. One participant states poignantly that he does not want to be alone, which reflects Bender and Wall’s (1994) finding that loneliness is a risk factor for students with disabilities.

Bioecological (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and empowerment (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010) theories intersect to suggest that the nature and significance of parental and peer relationships change for participants as demands and roles shift. Participants received tremendous support from special education teachers in high school and had limited opportunities to choose their courses or accommodations. However, as young adults, participants suddenly have to make important decisions that will directly affect their lives. Parents recognize that participants lack the necessary decision-making skills. Essentially, parents model elements of the empowerment stages by helping participants reflect on the outcome of their attempts to achieve goals, recognize and access personal or environmental resources, and then set new goals (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). Parents become a crucial support for participants as participants interact more actively and independently in fluid, high-stakes environments.

While participants’ friends could have been a supportive or a non-supportive influence in high school, the high degree of assistance participants received in the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program may have mitigated the effect of non-supportive high school peers. In
contrast, when participants transitioned to postsecondary environments, they received limited support, which may have exacerbated the effect of non-supportive peers in those settings. The stakes are higher for participants who have non-supportive peer relationships in their postsecondary environments. Participants from this study failed college classes and stagnated in their plans, in part, as a result of the influence of non-supportive peers. Participants reveal an emerging awareness of how important it is to select their peers carefully as young adults. They realize they must consider not only the environmental demand but also the consequence of making poor peer relationship choices in that environment. It reflects the importance of empowerment since participants must know to evaluate the efficacy of their relationships in relation to their goal achievement as young adults in high-stakes environments.

This finding reflects research that suggests successful adults with LD create supportive social ecologies, constituted by an effective moral and psychological support system of family members, peers, and mentors (Reiff et al., 1995). Successful adults with LD willingly and actively access this support system for help and guidance throughout their lives (Raskind et al., 2002; Reiff et al., 1995). These support systems evolve over time as successful adults shift from having an over-reliance and a high dependence on others to taking more responsibility for themselves and their decisions (Goldberg et al., 2003). Again, this points to the learning environment of the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program and suggests that its protective nature prevented participants from learning about the importance of creating a supportive peer network and developing needed decision-making skills.

**Teacher disposition inadvertently interferes with self-awareness.** Participants reveal an emerging self-awareness as they encounter obstacles in their new setting. They begin to evaluate themselves more critically in light of new demands. After they leave high school,
participants have the opportunity to choose the degree to which they want to identify as a person with a disability, by accessing formal disability services in their community college or by asking for help from important adults in their lives. What is important about this finding is the great variability in participants’ awareness and acceptance of how their disability affects them in their new environments.

Two participants have an abiding acceptance of their disability and easily embrace that difference as part of their identity. They openly admit they need help, pursue assistance in addressing their weaknesses, and accept their disabilities. One participant struggles with accepting his weaknesses and resists pursuing formal help. Most important, three participants do not speak substantively of how their weaknesses affect them in transition, revealing they may have limited awareness of how their disability manifests in their new environment.

Morrison and Cosden (1997) suggested that understanding one’s disability coupled with self-awareness can be a protective factor for students with disabilities. Research on adults with LD has suggested that successful adults have a deep awareness of their disability and an internal locus of control, which allows them to accept responsibility for themselves and make decisions proactively. They recognize and accept their disability will manifest differently under specific demands across their lifetime and apply this accurate self-perception in accessing appropriate services as needed (Raskind et al., 2002; Reiff et al., 1995). The finding of such variability among the participants in this study suggests a lost opportunity within the program to develop this critical attribute for students in transition.

It is likely that the disposition of the special educators within the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program interferes with students developing this awareness. The role of high school special educators is to understand a student’s disability and how that may prevent students from
independently accessing the curriculum and making effective progress. Special educators develop and provide services, accommodations, and curricular modifications that enable students with disabilities to succeed. They face tremendous pressure to provide a high degree of services to students. Teachers of students with special needs encounter significant pressure to help students acquire the content and skills necessary to pass state standardized testing requirements, which determine whether they receive a high school diploma or a certificate of completion (Kochhar-Bryant & Bassett, 2002). There are consequences for school districts if students with disabilities underperform on standardized testing, which also compels special educators to provide significant services to students (Kochhar-Bryant & Bassett, 2002). As I explained in the introduction to this chapter, participants from the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program received their education in an environment characterized by an even higher degree of support than students in resource room or other inclusion settings may have received. Under these educational conditions, the special education staff within the program implemented a level of support that effectively eliminated participants’ weaknesses to facilitate their passing mandatory state standardized testing and their completing the necessary graduation requirements.

While having such a high degree of support may have enabled participants to pass state testing, complete their high school requirements, and earn their diplomas, it appears to have masked the true nature and severity of their disabilities. Participants did not have an opportunity to develop a realistic understanding of how their disability would affect them in other settings. Participants reveal their great surprise at the difficulty they encounter in trying to achieve their goals after graduation. They describe not understanding the relevance of skills presented in their transition curriculum, such as time management, prioritization, and specific study skills, because their high school environment did not require them to master those. Participants explain their
shock that post-secondary instructors expect them to be independent learners. As participants have learned, no one will hold your hand in post-secondary settings.

Special education staff members in the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program created a learning environment in which the participants had a high degree of support and a low degree of challenge. Participants developed a false sense of their abilities and an unrealistic picture of adult expectations, which prevented them from truly understanding their strengths and weaknesses. This suggests that it may be detrimental to participants to provide them with a high degree of support and a limited degree of challenge in high school and expect them to know how to manage a postsecondary environment constituting a limited degree of support and a high degree of challenge.

Brooks (2004) has suggested the importance of constructing learning environments for students with disabilities that meet their basic needs to belong and feel connected and that encourage them to become active participants in their education. Teachers who create environments reflecting these characteristics enable students with disabilities to feel competent and accomplished (Brooks, 2004). Clearly, it is important to create educational environments displaying these characteristics as they are protective factors for students with moderate special needs disabilities in high school. However, this study suggests that teachers should also invest in creating educational settings that gradually shift the dynamic from high support-limited challenge to high support-high challenge. By gradually elevating the challenge for students while still supporting them, special educators will assist students in adapting to those elevated expectations, which will prepare students more effectively for the reality of post-secondary education and workplace settings.
Shifting their expectations for students by creating a high support-high challenge dynamic in high school will allow special educators to guide students in developing crucial self-awareness. Gradually changing the dynamic for students in high school gives students time to adjust to new demands under the supervision of teachers who can guide them in acquiring the skills and strategies they need to thrive. If students falter within this dynamic in high school, the consequence is an opportunity for growth and development. If high school special education teachers do not shift to increase their demands gradually in constructive ways, the risk is that students enter a limited support-high challenge adult setting without having the opportunity to develop under caring supervision. If students enter that setting unprepared for the limited support-high challenge dynamic, the result may be their struggling and failing with more permanent consequences. It may mean losing a job or failing classes in community college. Special educators need to think about their disposition toward students with disabilities and how that compels them to structure the learning environment. Students must have sufficient support in conjunction with appropriate challenges in order to recognize how their strengths and weaknesses affect them in different situations.

This speaks to bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and the empowerment stage (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010) by which participants make meaning from their effort to achieve. Entering a demanding postsecondary setting when they have never faced appropriate challenges may lead participants to struggle and conclude that they cannot overcome their failure despite any effort they make. As Ryan and Deci (2000) might suggest, giving students a false sense of autonomy and competence in high school risks crushing their sense of agency as young adults. It achieves the opposite of what transition planning seeks to accomplish.
School environment moderates degree of benefit. Participants reveal that they did not have a clear concept of what their transition goals were in high school and how those related to their entry into their postsecondary environment. Participants explain that they did not possess concrete experience in the fields they selected before choosing them, which contributed to their struggle to master the demands of those fields later. They describe experiencing a prolonged period of identifying a best fit for themselves in terms of a major or a job. For most participants, this search for a best fit is on-going. One participant says he still has no idea what he wants to do as an adult. Participants reveal that the transition planning they experienced in high school was not a meaningful opportunity to define realistic goals within a field of interest. Participants lacked an understanding of how their strengths and weaknesses would manifest as they worked to achieve their goals.

This reflects what Kortering and Braziel (2008) have suggested, which is that students do not necessarily understand transition planning and do not see what teachers ask them to do as meaningful and relevant in their high school context. It also mirrors what McEachern and Kenny (2007) have confirmed, which is that many high school students with special needs graduate possessing little knowledge of the demands of the work world or postsecondary training programs and of the barriers their disabilities may present in those contexts. It suggests that something about the environment of the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program prevented participants from developing a realistic set of postsecondary options based on their own individual needs, strengths, and interests. This is important because research suggests that a readiness factor for students with disabilities in postsecondary education is self-knowledge, meaning one has a strong sense of one’s personal strengths and weaknesses as those manifest in various settings (Milsom & Dietz, 2009). In addition, successful adults with LD understand that
finding goodness of fit matters, which means identifying a career that maximizes one’s strengths while minimizing one’s weaknesses (Reiff et al., 1995). Goldberg et al. (2003) have suggested that successful adults with LD who do this have successfully picked their niche.

This finding suggests that something about the high school setting prevented participants from identifying realistic niches to explore after high school. While participants took their major classes within the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program, they had the opportunity to take inclusion classes within the broader high school setting. However, the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program operates in a high school that has eliminated all vocational electives. Due to education reform initiatives in Massachusetts and the implementation of standards-based curriculum frameworks, the district eradicated departments and courses that were vocational in nature, including classes offering instruction in woodworking, electro-technology, video technology, automotive repair, sewing, cooking, and computer technology. Participants had virtually no opportunity to explore areas of interest beyond traditional academic options.

This reflects Williams-Diehm and Lynch’s (2007) finding that students recognize the importance of having access to opportunities to explore and develop vocational skills. Having had the opportunity to explore their interests and skills beyond traditional academic offerings might have enabled students to develop a clear understanding of their interests and a realistic picture of whether certain fields represented good niches for them. It confirms the inadequacy of trying to accomplish transition planning in a setting restricted to academic offerings. This finding suggests that introducing a purely skills-based transition curriculum in a high school setting characterized by a paucity of vocational opportunities significantly restricted participants from engaging in fruitful and relevant transition planning.
Viewed through the lens of bioecological (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and empowerment (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010) theory, this finding suggests that effective transition planning must include chances for students to explore multiple fields of interest. According to these theories, students develop through progressively reciprocal interactions between themselves and their environment by attempting to pursue a goal, applying self-efficacy and knowledge, taking action, and reflecting on the impact of that action (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). To the extent that this is the case, providing students with disabilities the opportunity to interact in vocational settings is crucial for helping them determine whether that field of interest represents a realistic option with regard to their disability. Students with disabilities must begin to define the goodness of fit between themselves and careers they select before entering the high stakes post-secondary world where lacking goodness of fit may mean loss of employment or failure in community college. Students must have the chance to learn from these interactions in high school to begin to understand their own personal resources and how best to bring them to bear in the adult world.

High schools that strengthen academic classes and limit vocational opportunities inadvertently prevent students from engaging in transition planning effectively. Kochhar-Bryant and Bassett (2002) warned that special education teachers and administrators would have to work vigilantly to ensure that transition planning efforts align with standards-based education efforts. Staff members in the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program will have to create opportunities for students to explore vocational opportunities within the broader community if they want to engage students more fully in effective transition planning.

**Summary of findings.** I sought to understand how students with moderate special needs disabilities describe the experience of planning for and pursuing their postsecondary transition.
The six themes and 18 subthemes I outlined in Chapter Four and the four findings I outlined in this chapter suggest that postsecondary transition represents an emotionally challenging time for students as they learn to interact in new roles in unfamiliar environments. They leave a comfortable environment in which they understand the demands of them, their role as high school students, and the routine they have always used to succeed. Participants suddenly enter a new environment that presents surprising demands, requiring them to adopt a new role and develop their own routine. Participants manage their emotions as they begin the process of acclimating to elevated expectations and new roles with less direct support. They experiment with options to identify the best fit for themselves. Participants face many obstacles in this process ranging from external to internal challenges. They show an emerging self-awareness with regard to their progress in context and use reflection and self-talk to overcome challenges and to resolve to achieve their goals. Participants receive support from parents, peers, and teachers, which can be helpful.

Another goal of my study was to identify what influenced or affected participants in planning for and making their postsecondary transition. My analysis reveals that the interaction of students with their teachers within the environment of their high school has the broadest influence on students in transition. The disposition of high school special education teachers and the school environment may affect students most during the transition planning process and in their initial outcomes. Participants’ special education teachers created classroom environments characterized by a high degree of support and a limited degree of challenge. This disposition to support students strongly while protecting them from challenge achieved the opposite effect teachers should strive to achieve for students with disabilities. Participants exited the program having little awareness of the true nature of their disability and how that would manifest in
various settings. As a result, participants did not anticipate the elevated expectations adults would have for them in postsecondary settings. In addition, the protective disposition of special education teachers may have negated the effect of non-supportive peers in high school, thus preventing participants from developing the skill of evaluating their peer relationships in light of environmental demands. In addition, the high school environment appears to have restricted participants’ access to concrete opportunities to explore fields of interest, which prevented students from understanding how their disability may manifest within a specific career field or position. As a result, participants struggled to identify their niche after high school.

Due to their restricted access to educational and vocational opportunities coupled with the high degree of support participants received, participants did not have had sufficient experiences to learn decision-making skills. They relied on their parents to model decision-making skills as they faced important life choices. Participants also lacked the opportunity to develop effective coping skills because they faced limited challenges that did not require them to master such skills. Their high school environment, circumscribed by the nature of special education services and educational reform efforts, prevented participants from engaging in productive transition planning and developing important transition skills due to a lack of access to real challenge in the context of directed support and due to restricted vocational experiences.

A final goal of my study was to describe the outcome of participants’ initial transition experiences. Participants reveal their strong resolve to achieve their goals through hard work and perseverance. Their comments reflect emerging skills, such as self-awareness about their ability, use of strategies, and attempts to develop supportive networks. However, it is unclear how effective participants are in applying these skills in high stakes environments where missteps risk diminishing their sense of agency through repeated failure. What is also not clear is whether
these emerging skills will codify into the attributes students will need to possess to succeed as adults with moderate special needs disabilities. While some participants appreciated learning skills from the transition activities they engaged in during their Learning Strategies classes, the findings of this study suggest that a skills-based transition curriculum is not effective unless the environment in which students complete the tasks also facilitates their developing the important attributes necessary for success as an adult with a moderate special needs disability.

Participants’ experiences with transition planning and their description of their initial outcomes reveals that the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities should not rely on skills-based transition planning to accomplish something so dependent on context and interaction in that context. As Kochhar-Bryant and Bassett (2002) and Raskind et al. (1999) have suggested, special education teachers and administrators should not view transition planning as a compliance issue but as an opportunity to understand how interactions in the high school environment can help or hinder students from developing the crucial skills and attributes needed for adult success. The results of this study indicate that a critical aspect of effective transition planning involves helping students understand how their disability will manifest depending on context and how to manage the interaction of their disability in that context by anticipating and understanding the personal resources they can bring to bear in these interactions.

**Implications**

The results of this study suggest that special education teachers must rethink their disposition in preparing students with disabilities for transition. Many high school special education teachers must provide significant support to student with disabilities based on their needs. However, if they provide too much support with too little challenge, special education teachers effectively eliminate a student’s weaknesses. Doing so prevents students from
developing the skills and attributes they need for adult success, meaning teachers will have achieved the antithesis of what transition services should achieve.

To help students develop the personal attributes and life-long adaptive skills needed for adult success, special education teachers need to provide students with high support while also challenging them in ways that allow students to understand their disability and the strategies that will help them manage those challenges over their lifetime. Special education teachers need to see every interaction they have with students in high school as an opportunity to create the personal attributes and skills, such as coping strategies, self-awareness, and self-determination, which students will need in order to manage their disabilities over their lifetime. In addition, special education teachers need to work with parents to develop opportunities for students to develop critical decision-making skills before they enter high stakes environments. Also, teachers and school administrators need to examine the environment of schools to create opportunities for students to engage in relevant and meaningful activities that help them understand the niche in which they may function best as adults. Educators need to understand that creating an effective transition planning protocol begins with examining the interactions that students have at the individual, classroom, and school levels.

**Recommendations**

The findings and implications I described above compel me to make specific recommendations for the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program and other programs like it. I suggest five specific recommendations designed to help special education teacher and administrators engage students with disabilities in transition planning that will effectively prepare students for adult life. The specific recommendations include:

1. Introduce high challenge in the context of high support.
2. Teach proactive coping strategies.

3. Create opportunities for vocational exploration.

4. Increase opportunities for students to exercise self-determination.

5. Rethink how to cultivate skills and attributes students need in transition.

**Introduce high challenge in the context of high support.** Special education teachers should rethink how they challenge and support students with special needs. It is important to challenge students while offering them appropriate support because it will enable students to develop an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses while creating a sense of agency. Special educators should develop a graduated program of increasing academic challenges for students to help them develop a repertoire of strategies for managing elevated demands. By challenging high school students this way, special educators give students the opportunity to embrace the nature of their disability and to understand that it will manifest differently based on context and demand. It allows students to process and embrace this before they leave the nurturing environment of high school and enter an environment that will challenge them yet provide them with little support.

**Teach proactive coping strategies.** Evidence from this study suggests that students need to develop a repertoire of proactive coping strategies that help them to identify the source of stress in their lives and directly address the source of the stress. If educators create classroom environments of high support and high challenge, as recommended above, they will create a natural environment in which students can develop these strategies. However, special education teachers will have to work with other staff members, adjustment counselors, and parents to reinforce the development and emergence of these skills by actively assisting students in identify the strategy, evaluating its efficacy, and selecting it, or a more effective strategy, in the future.
Create opportunities for vocational exploration. Special education teachers and administrators should work together with parents and community organizations to create opportunities for students to explore vocational options. Students will benefit from having concrete experiences through which to understand their strengths, interests, and needs in relationship to real world, on-the-job demands. Educators may have to work with state vocational agencies and local businesses to provide students with job-shadowing or internship experiences. When students participate in this type of exploration, parents, educators, and counselors should process with students what they learned about that option in relation to their strengths and weaknesses. Creating opportunities for students to have real-world experiences will better engage them in transition planning by helping them see the relevance of planning for their future as they learn from experiences outside the high school setting.

Increase opportunities for students to exercise self-determination. Special education teachers and parents should work together to increase opportunities for students to develop self-determination in high school. This should start at students’ Individual Education Plan meetings. Students should have the chance to explain what is and is not going well for them in school and should contribute to the discussion of goals to include in the plan. Teachers, counselors, and parents should engage students in discussions related to key decisions about their education and future. Teachers should work with students, so students learn to decide independently which strategies to use to manage academic tasks. Each of these activities should involve reflection designed to help students consolidate what they have learned about the decision-making process and any outcomes of those decisions.

Rethink how to cultivate skills and attributes students need in transition. Special educators need to think carefully about the utility of using a transition curriculum that primarily
seeks to develop the academic or work-related skills students will need in postsecondary settings. While those are certainly important, these findings indicate that there are personal attributes that are equally important to a student’s postsecondary success. Educators are unlikely to build these attributes without examining their approach with students and the demands within their classroom and the broader school environment. Creative thinking with other educators, guidance counselors, school adjustment counselors, and parents will lead special education teachers to develop real opportunities for students to develop the self-awareness, self-determination, and emotional stability necessary for postsecondary success.

Limitations

As an example of qualitative research, this study does not purport to offer external empirical generalizability to all programs educating students with moderate special needs but instead seeks to create internal generalizability to the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program (Maxwell, 2005; van Manen, 1990). Consequently, the recommendations and implications I suggested may pertain most directly to the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program rather than all programs educating students with moderate special needs. The reader must determine if the results and recommendations I offer in this study apply to their school situation. They should consider the procedures I used to create trustworthiness and should focus on whether the data I presented in Chapter Four provides rich, thick description. Readers must decide whether I coherently and persuasively analyzed and synthesized the data. They should note whether I highlighted points where participants’ experiences converged and diverged within the identified themes (Reissman, 2008). If the data are sufficiently rich and the analysis and synthesis appears adequately coherent and persuasive, a reader may deem the recommendations and implications applicable to their own setting (Reissman, 2008). Regardless, like all studies,
this one contains certain limitations pertaining to the participants and setting, which readers should consider when deciding whether to embrace these recommendations and when designing their own research studies on this topic.

While six participants agreed to be part of the study, there were five students from the class of 2012 whom I invited to participate but who elected not to share their experiences. Their voices may have contributed critical information pertaining to how students early on in this process experience transition. Similarly, there were other graduates from the program whom I did not invite to participate due to their co-morbid diagnosis of a mental health disorder or a physical disability. It is likely that students with more complex disabilities have a different experience. While six participants saturated the data, the sample included four young men and two women. It is possible that transition experiences are significantly different for young women and that a larger sample of young women would reflect different results. In addition, the participants attended their high school classes within a high school that offered virtually no vocational exploration classes coupled with substantial daily support from a team of special educators. The results of this study may have been different if the participants had been able to explore vocational options in their high school classes, which may have guided them to have more specific transition goals and different outcomes, or if they had experienced their education in more challenging inclusion classes, which may have initiated them more effectively with regard to adult expectations. These limitations suggest important avenues for future research.

Future Research

There are many fruitful avenues of research for educators seeking to understand how students with disabilities experience postsecondary transition. It will be important to determine if this experience differs for students who have greater opportunities to explore vocational options
and inclusion courses and, as a result, have a more specific set of transition goals upon their high school graduation. Also, it will be important to explore the specific experiences of students based on how long it has been since they graduated from high school. It will be important to understand if the experience differs for recent graduates as opposed to those who have been out of school two or more years. In addition, it would be interesting to explore whether the experience is substantially different for young men than for young women or for students with more significant disabilities.

This study explored the transition experience using a group of participants who had a variety of goals ranging from pursuing a community college degree to earning a training certificate to enlisting in the military to entering the workforce full-time. It would be interesting to examine transition experiences based on the specific types of goals participants had to determine how those experiences might differ. Another interesting avenue of research would be to explore what special educators view as the purpose of transition planning to ascertain how closely their ideas match the experience of students undergoing that process. On a methodological note, while the participants were comfortable with me and gave in-depth responses, it might have served the data collection process better if I had provided them with the questions in advance to give them more time to process their ideas and compose their thoughts.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of my study was to understand how a group of former high school students with moderate special needs disabilities experienced transition planning and their postsecondary transition. The results revealed that the participants’ high school environment affected them greatly in transition. Receiving an education in a high support but limited challenge environment made it difficult for participants to develop needed coping skills. It also interfered with their
ability to develop a true awareness of their disability, which may have helped them manage the challenges of the postsecondary environment more effectively. Participants left high school possessing limited decision-making skills and relied heavily on their parents as they entered environments offering them tremendous choice with long-term consequence. Participants did not understand the purpose or relevance of transition planning because their high school environment moderated their ability to develop an accurate sense of what the best niche might be for them as adults. This study revealed that special educators and the high school environment have a tremendous influence on whether a student engages in transition planning in ways that enable that student to develop the critical attributes and skills needed for managing his or her disability as it manifests in the adult world across his or her life.

Special educators must pay attention to how interactions at the individual, classroom and school levels affect students in transition if their goal is to engage students with disabilities in transition planning that enables students to overcome obstacles and capitalize on resources. Understanding these interactions will lead special educators to modify their approach with students and the opportunities they afford students in the school environment, which will foster the competence, power, and engagement of students in working to achieve their transition goals. The results from this study provide special educators from the Metropolitan Learning Disabilities Program an opportunity to reevaluate how they interact with students by gradually increasing the challenges students face while still providing them with needed support. The results also suggest that these educators must evaluate how standards-based reform efforts have reduced the quality and efficacy of transition protocols by restricting the experiences students with disabilities have to academic opportunities. By accomplishing these tasks, these educators can move beyond providing transition services that merely comply with the law. They can create an environment
replete with interactions that lead students to develop the personal skills and attributes needed for long-term postsecondary success and fulfillment.
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Appendix A

Initial Phone Call

Hello _______________________,

This is Petra Platt. I hope you are doing well. I am finishing my thesis at Northeastern University and wanted to interview you about your experiences with transition planning in high school and your experiences working toward your transition goals after high school.

I would make it as easy as possible for you. I would meet you wherever you are most comfortable at whatever time is most convenient for you. The interviews would take between one to two hours.

I will send you a transcript of the completed interview. You can comment on what you said if you wish. You can also request that what you said be amended or omitted. I will also send you my analysis of your words. You are welcome to respond to this with comments if you wish.

The information you provide is completely confidential and anonymous. No one will ever know that you participated in this project. Your name will not appear in print associated with the project.

I am offering participants a $75 gift card.

Would you be interested in participating by allowing me to interview you?
Appendix B

Project Summary
1. Interview:
   • We will arrange a private meeting wherever you are most comfortable at a time that is best for you.
   • I will ask you questions about your transition from high school to the adult world.
   • This will take 1-2 hours.

2. Opportunity to Comment
   • I will send you a copy of your interview transcript. You can comment if you wish, which includes requesting that what you said be amended or omitted.
   • I will send you a copy of my analysis of your interview, so you can comment if you wish.

If you have questions, contact me: email platt.p@husky.neu.edu or call [redacted].
Appendix C

Signed Informed Consent Document
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Educational Leadership, Doctoral Program
Investigator Name: Jane Lohmann, EdD
Title of Project: Experiencing Postsecondary Transition Planning: The Perspective of Students with Moderate Special Needs

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
You are invited to take part in a research study. This form tells you about the study. The researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask questions. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Tell the researcher if you want to participate when you have made a decision. You sign this form if you decide to participate. You will get a copy of the form to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are a high school graduate who received special education and postsecondary transition services in high school.

Why is this research study being done?
We want to understand how students with moderate special needs disabilities experience postsecondary transition planning and its outcomes.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, you will speak to Petra Platt in an individual interview. She will send you a copy of the transcript of the interview. You can respond to that if you wish, which includes requesting that what you said be amended or omitted. She will also send you a copy of the analysis of your words. You can respond to that if you wish.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
We meet privately wherever you are most comfortable at a time that is best for you. This will take 1-2 hours.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
You may experience emotions when discussing your experiences. If you begin to show significant distress, Petra Platt will stop the interview. She will offer strategies for managing your emotions.
**Will I benefit by being in this research?**
Reflecting on and sharing your experiences may be a positive experience. You may feel empowered by speaking about your experiences. You may feel rewarded knowing that this may help improve services.

**Who will see the information about me?**
Your information will be confidential. Petra Platt will record the interviews using a digital recorder and will copy them to text using a fake name for you. Your real name will not appear in any documents aside from the consent form, which will be stored in a secure location for three years and then destroyed appropriately. Petra Platt will delete the audio-recording once she has copied it to text using the fake name. The text copy will be stored securely and destroyed once the research is complete and the findings have been used in a doctoral thesis.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**
There is no risk of physical, psychological, social, financial or other harm occurring due to your participation in this research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. You may quit at any time and will not have to return the gift card. You will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have if you do not participate or if you decide to quit.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
Petra Platt at [contact information] or Jane Lohmann, Ed.D. at [contact information]

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?** If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, contact:

Nan C. Regina, Director of Human Subject Research Protection
Northeastern University, [contact information]

You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?** You will be given a $[amount] gift card.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?** There is no cost to you if you participate in this project.
Is there anything else I need to know? You must be at least 18 years old to participate unless your parent or guardian gives written permission.

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________   ____ ____________________
Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part    Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent    Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix D

Interview Questions

Interview Questions:
As a semi-structured phenomenological inquiry, the interview will begin with three main questions that allow the participant to tell me about their experience with transition. Follow-up questions will evolve from what the participants tell me in the moment. The purpose of any follow-up questions will be to elicit depth and nuance from the experience. I have listed the three main questions and possible follow-up below but cannot exactly predict or pre-determine those follow-up questions:

Main question: Tell me what it was like for you to think about and then plan your transition goals as a junior and senior.
Follow-up question: What is it like to try to achieve them as a graduate? How is what you are doing now the same or different than what you planned to do when you were in high school? Why do you think that is?

Main question: Tell me about the transition activities you recall doing in high school.
Follow-up question: How do those transition activities relate to what you have experienced as a graduate? Describe the transition activities that helped you now that you have graduated. Describe the transition activities that did not seem helpful not that you have graduated. Why do you think that is?

Main question: Tell me about your experiences trying to attain you transition goals as a recent graduate.
Follow-up question: Tell me about the people who may have affected you in transition. What, if anything, has been easy as a graduate? What, if anything, has been challenging as a graduate? What do you know now that you wished you had known in high school that may have helped you make the transition to the adult world?