ENGAGING IN THE GAP:
EXPLORING WORK EXPERIENCES OF PIONEER TRANSITION SPECIALISTS

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Abstract

Although “the compilation of lists of best practices accelerated”, significant resources have been allocated, and federal mandates requiring transition special education services for students with disabilities have been in place now for over three decades, post school outcomes for students with disabilities have still not improved significantly (Test, et al, 2006, p. 35).

This qualitative narrative inquiry study uses Giddens (1984) structuration theory as a guiding framework to explore how four pioneer transition coordinators experience and make sense of their work endeavors in this field to support student success in the northeastern region of the United States. It takes place during a period of time in which there is a newly increased focus on the educational goal to improve post-school outcomes for students with disabilities in this country.

Results were analyzed using an inductive coding method which provided findings of five themes: Creative Collaborations, Ongoing Assessment, Stakeholders don’t know what they don’t know, Providing Meaningful PD, and Bringing the real world into the school world. Results and findings provide rich detail and useful insights regarding what works, lessons learned, and ongoing challenges for consideration by invested transition special education stakeholders. While this study contributes to a better understanding of this significant problem of practice facing the field of transition special education and this nation today, additional research is needed. Findings also support a recommendation for engaging in a multi-disciplinary approach for future research endeavors, with suggestions shared from fields including psychology, organizational learning, and organizational leadership.

Key words: transition, special education, narrative
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Chapter One

The research topic regards exploring the experiences of pioneer transition special education specialists/coordinators (TSCs) in the relatively new field of transition special education (TSE) in the United States during a period of time in which there is a newly increased focus on the educational goal to improve post-school outcomes for students with disabilities.

The word transition is often used as a general, catch-all word in our society today to describe all types of changes people go through in a variety of contexts, but in the field of transition special education it refers more specifically to an important time in which students with disabilities are preparing to leave high school life to successfully engage in adult roles (e.g., careers, continuing education) in the real-life world. As authors Test, Aspel, and Everson (2006) share:

… Halpern (1992) defined this transition as a “period of floundering that occurs for at least the first several years after leaving school as adolescents attempt to assume a variety of adult roles in their communities” (p. 203). Unfortunately for students with disabilities, the “floundering period” often lasts for years, and in some cases a lifetime… (p. 5)

Statement of the Research Problem

Significant time and money has been spent on providing transition special education (TSE) services in this country in recent years, and there’s little to show for it.

The field of Transition Special Education (TSE) has been devoted to supporting students with disabilities prepare for the transition from high school to post-school adult life for over three decades now (Test, Aspel, & Everson, 2006, p. 7). And yet, “post-school outcomes for students with disabilities continue to be disturbing” (Test, et al., 2006, p.5). This unacceptable
current state of affairs in Transition Special Education (TSE) is despite federal transition-related legislation (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004) in effect requiring that transition services “be designed within a results-oriented process…”

(Test, et al. 2006) add salt to the wound when they state: “Following the 1990 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) revisions mandating transition services, the compilation of lists of best practices accelerated” (p.35). This unacceptable educational dilemma translates into a serious post-school economic issue for individuals with disabilities. The most current numbers available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013) indicates while 63.9% of people without disabilities were employed, only 17.8% of people with disabilities were employed in 2012

Justification for the Research Problem

There may be many factors contributing to this lack of student post-school success. One factor that warrants further exploration is a lack of well-trained teaching professionals to effectively provide TSE programs and services. While there are “practices associated with improved postschool outcomes” available for transition professionals (Test, et al., 2006, p. 38), there continues to be significant concern regarding the quality and availability of pre-service and/or continuing professional development opportunities for TSE teachers to access (Wandry, Webb, Williams, Bassett, Asselin, & Hutchinson, 2008, p. 15). In their 2004 article, authors Kohler and Green sound the alarm regarding TSE teacher education implementation barriers by stating: “…higher education faculty must determine not only how to teach transition-related
content, but also where it fits into their curriculum…very little … has been published on strategies for infusing transition content across a teacher education curriculum (p. 149-150).

Clearly, TSE teacher training needs and training delivery methods must be more fully researched in order to be better understood and effectively provided so that this nation finally, truly, prepares students with disabilities to consistently achieve successful, productive post-school adult lives.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

Upon review of the extremely limited literature regarding this problem of practice to date, it appears the vast majority of research has been completed by researchers from the field of special education, and the research methods/designs have been overwhelmingly quantitative (Holman, D., 2013a). Transition special education (TSE) is considered to be a relatively young and still evolving field and so would be considered a “nascent” topic according to guidelines provided by authors Edmondson and McManus (2007, p. 1161).

Clearly, the problem of practice has not yet been addressed effectively through quantitative research methods; there are many unanswered questions and there is much yet still unknown in this field. A shift from the narrow, primarily quantitative to more qualitative research studies using new perspectives/theoretical frameworks seems called for here. As Creswell (2012) notes: “We… use qualitative research because quantitative measures and the statistical analyses simply do not fit the problem” (p. 48). Therefore, qualitative studies may now be a good choice to best contribute to the “… inadequate existing literature” (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, p. 249).
This writer’s use of a qualitative narrative research design also makes good sense according to Edmondson and McManus (2007). As the authors share: “… qualitative data are appropriate for studying phenomena that are not well understood” (e.g., Barley, 1990; Bouchard, 1976; Eisenhardt, 1989a, as cited by Edmondson & McManus, 2007, p. 1155).

There are experienced transition special education specialists/ coordinators (TSCs) employed in many school systems across the country providing TSE teachers with the training, support, collaboration, linkages, and resources required to meet their students’ needs successfully. These transition specialists/coordinators (TSCs) are working among and across all levels of educational organizations as well as with a variety of stakeholders outside of the educational system (e.g., employers, colleges, adult agency providers). There are general position competency guidelines available from the Council for Exceptional Children (http://www.educ.kent.edu/cite/ttw/trans_competencies.pdf) for this unique and evolving role, however, literature regarding how these new TSC professionals work to support the TSE field goals appears non-existent. As an experienced TSC, this writer is in an ideal situation to reach out to potential study participants and conduct research to learn from regional seasoned transition “pioneers” (first staff to hold this new position in their school districts). The term “pioneer” used here is synonymous with the term “outliers” as described by authors Mohrman and Lawler III (2012): “Outliers provide fertile fields in which to learn about emerging designs that will impact all organizations… about new approaches that work and those that don’t” (p. 45). Increased knowledge about this key emerging position/role of the TSC might help to shed light on this significant problem of practice dilemma in transition special education. As an experienced pioneer TSC, this researcher is “close enough to practice to be able to generate knowledge that is useful to organizations as they consider how to address the challenges they face” to conduct
This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing the narrative inquiry method involving a small number of pioneer TSC participants.

**Relating the Discussion to Audiences**

The field of TSE is still relatively new and evolving; there are many gaps in the literature yet to be filled. This study contributes to a more detailed understanding of the problem of practice facing the TSE field and provides insights to addressing this dilemma in the future.

This study will “provide a voice for seldom heard individuals in educational research” (Creswell, 2012, p. 505). It contributes to a better understanding of the emerging role of the TSC, and how the TSC role supports the operationalizing of effective practices in TSE in this region. This study will “differ significantly from, and at the same time be connected to, established literature in order to be… meaningful” (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, p. 247).

This study provides an increased knowledge base from which to develop future research on the problem of practice, and adds to the understanding of the emerging role of the TSC in the northeastern region of the United States during this period of time of increased focus on improving post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. It may also contribute new knowledge to other disciplines (e.g., career development, educational change/leadership, organizational learning, organizational design).

Research-practitioners are provided with local “lessons learned” as well as guidance in determining targets for further inquiry, higher education administrators could use data to assist
developing new pre-service and in-service programs, administrators could allocate resources more effectively, and less experienced teachers and other levels/types of educators (e.g., paraprofessionals, guidance and adjustment counselors, related services professionals) might benefit from the sharing of this first-hand knowledge as well. Eventually, and most importantly, students with disabilities might benefit from improved educational service delivery.

**Significance of Research Problem**

Significant time and money has been spent on providing transition special education services in this country in recent years, and there’s little to show for it.

In response to this serious educational dilemma, there have been two recent pieces of legislation passed in the state of Massachusetts. A Fact Sheet provided by Massachusetts Advocates for Children (2008) shares compelling data regarding this problem and the reason for the passage of S.286 in 2008:

Students with disabilities have a disproportionately high drop-out rate that is 50% higher than the drop-out rate for nondisabled youth (annual drop-out rate for students with disabilities is 5.6%, compared to 3.5% for regular education students)…Too many of the Commonwealth’s young adults will exit special education ill prepared to live and work in the community if school district’s fail to provide transition planning and services in a timely manner…The dollars are already being spent on special education: The goal …is to ensure that existing dollars are spent in a more effective manner… so that students can succeed as adults. (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2008)

Upon review of the most recent national employment data available, it becomes abundantly clear that this educational issue continues on to become a serious economic issue for individuals with disabilities. The most current information available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013) indicates while 63.9% of people without disabilities were employed, only 17.8% of people with disabilities were employed in 2012 (http://bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm).

In their article, authors Blalock, Kochhar-Bryant, Test, Kohler, White, Lehmann, Bassett, & Patton in 2003 state: “…the information generated through transition practices research has direct implications for both the content and process of professional development at the in-service and pre-service levels” (p. 214). This research study adds to this knowledge base.

Legal mandates and a small but growing knowledge base developed over more than thirty years have not made sufficient inroads to solving this serious dilemma regarding TSE confronting our nation. Providing consistent, high quality transition special educational services is imperative in order for students with disabilities in this country to prepare for personally meaningful, successful adult lives. Additional research exploring some of the current gaps in the TSE literature will be an important contribution addressing this educational concern that will continue to negatively impact transition students now and in the future unless changes in professional practice are made.
**Positionality Statement**

This problem of practice directly affects the quality of transition students’ post-school lives across the educational domains of employment, post-secondary education, independent living, and community participation (Test et al., 2006, p.98).

As a researcher, it is important to be open and forthcoming regarding one’s personal perspective and potential biases regarding a research study’s problem of practice, or as Butin (2010) puts it: “where you’re coming from” (p. 58). Including this is considered an important research study internal validation strategy, as noted by Creswell (2012).

Prior to entering the educational field, my formal education and professional work experiences were primarily in business. After completing training to learn more about the field of transition special education and to learn to advocate for students with disabilities, I took on a position developing work-based learning experience opportunities for students with disabilities. Most recently, I served as the Coordinator for Transition & Career Development Services at a public educational collaborative for several years. In this role I worked with a variety of stakeholders and engaged in a variety of endeavors in order to support the primary mission of supporting our transition students preparing for successful post school lives. A few years ago, I earned a graduate certificate in Transition Special Education. The combination of my previous work background and recent graduate work in education has proven to be a welcome addition to the local educational system’s repertoire of resources. My varied experiences have armed me with a strong determination to work to learn, share, and promote effective practices in this still somewhat newly emerging field in this country. I have now been involved in the transition special education (TSE) field in various capacities for over a decade.
As a transition specialist/coordinator (TSC), I worked with many dedicated teachers, classroom coaches and aides, related services professionals, administrators, outside agency personnel, employers, and more on behalf of our transition students. They seem to be involved because they care and want to make a difference in the lives of our students. Implementation of effective practices in transition, as in any field, is essential for student success. A few years ago, I became part of a team providing professional development on transition special education for education professionals. Upon completion of this doctoral program, I’m interested in possibly conducting additional research in TSE, continuing to develop/provide professional development, and/or work in other new roles to assist interested education professionals and stakeholders in preparing to effectively support transition students’ journeys to successful adult life roles.

All of my experiences will continue to be a part of my identity as a scholar-practitioner. I approached this research on this problem of practice collaboratively and as a “co-participant”, as Briscoe (2005, p. 37) describes in detail in the approach option she shares here:

One way concerns the scholar’s intention and the manner in which research is conducted. …does the scholar approach a person or persons as co-participants in an effort to learn about, make sense, and teach others about their experiences? Does the scholar begin with the intention of working together to try to describe and interpret that person’s experience? Do they present their findings as what they learned with the participant(s) and note that what they learned is in part determined by their particular standpoint rather than an absolute truth described objectively? (Briscoe, 2005, p.37-8)
Research Question

My research question is two-fold:

- How do “pioneer” (first-ever) transition special education coordinators (TSCs) experience and make sense of their professional role working with a variety of stakeholders to provide educational services for TSE students?

- How have pioneer TSCs’ work experiences changed over time?

Theoretical Framework

Researching this topic with an appropriate qualitative research design aligned with a fresh theoretical lens should provide useful data and insights that contribute to the currently minimal literature on this significant problem facing the nation. Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory (ST) is the theoretical framework this researcher used to anchor this study. ST was initially introduced by seminal author Anthony Giddens in his (1979) book, “Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis” and later expanded upon in his 1984 book, “The Constitution of Society”. It was considered innovative for its time almost thirty years ago, and seems to have stood the test of time thus far, as many researchers continue to utilize it as a theoretical framework for a variety of research endeavors in many fields today. Structuration theory “occupies the middle ground between the modern and symbolic perspectives of organizational theory” (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 110). Anthony Giddens, a social theorist, developed the concept of ST in response to the need by social scientists to better understand and explain the concepts of “agency” and “structure” and their relationship in organizational change. Author Giddens (1984) shares in his book:
… The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time. Human social activities, like some self-reproducing items in nature, are recursive… It is in the conceptualizing of human knowledgesability and its involvement in action that I seek to appropriate some of the major contributions of interpretive sociologies. In structuration theory, a hermeneutic starting-point is accepted in so far as it is acknowledged that the description of human activities demands a familiarity with the forms of life expressed in those activities. (p. 2-3)

Author Alexander (2003) provides additional details and describes related terms according to Giddens (1993) well:

The social practices of actors and the spaces in which they operate are what Giddens (1993) refers to as “structural properties”, which persist over time by the production and reproduction of these practices. Seen as “systems of interactions” (Giddens, 1993, p. 128), social collectives generate and exist because of these ongoing forms of social praxis. He later extended this to include “structural principles” which result from the reproduction of social totalities, generally located within institutions (Giddens, 1994). Actors that populate a profession, having been socialized to their roles during formal training and other antecedent experiences, interact with colleagues either in face to face situations or across space and time. These interactions, defined by Giddens as social integration and structural integration, respectively, construct the social reality of a professional collective and persist over time. This persistence is facilitated by generated
knowledge of roles, rules, and resources that are inherent in their unique professional system. (p. 18)


It may be seen as an attempt to resolve a fundamental division within the social sciences between those who consider social phenomena as products of the action of human ‘agents’ in the light of their subjective interpretation of the world, and others who see them as caused by the influence of objective, exogenous social structures. Giddens attempts to ‘square this circle’ by proposing that structure and agency be viewed, not as independent and conflicting elements, but as a mutually interacting duality. … Structure is thus not simply a straitjacket, but is also a resource to be deployed by humans in their actions: it is enabling as well as disabling. (p. 104).

In 1997, authors Barley and Tolbert added their support for using structuration theory in qualitative research by sharing research methods they believed to be a good fit, including “data on actors’ interpretations of their behavior… retrospective accounts and archival data”, “observations”, and “interviews” (p. 105-106).

Giddens (1991) specifically directed that ST be used only as a “sensitizing” framework rather than a prescription for empirical study (as cited by Currier & Galliers, 1999, p. 112); this is how this writer utilized this theoretical framework for this study.

Through the recent completion of a seminal audit (Holman, 2013b) of Giddens (1984) ST, this researcher learned of other research studies in which the construct has been used in the general field of education. Author Gynnild (2002) demonstrates the usefulness of ST as a
theoretical framework researching educational change processes in a case study involving third-year engineering students in which the researchers explored learning how best to “improve teaching” and “promote a more in-depth approach to learning” in a college environment at both the individual and organizational levels (p. 297). In their 2007 research paper and literature review, authors Barrett-Pugh, Llandis, Clayton, Goldman, Comyn, Pardy, … and Pitard share a case study regarding vocational training and indicate support for the use of ST for exploring how learning takes place in the workplace during times of organizational change. Barrett-Pugh, et. al (2007) emphasize the usefulness of ST as a theoretical framework to learn at the organizational level of analysis as ST “… both investigates individual experience and then maps the effects of those experiences in terms of changes in the culture of the organization” (“Why Structuration Theory?”, para. 1). In 2010, authors Burridge, Carpenter, Cherednichenko, and Kruger used ST as a “guiding element” (p. 22) to effectively frame their case study regarding three different school/college teaching partnerships. The researchers share in their discussion: “… there is a potential for an increase in individual agency… teachers will be encouraged to utilize this process in their classrooms to effect change from the bottom up” (Burridge, et al., 2010, p. 36).

There is also precedence for using Giddens’ (1993) structuration theory regarding the topic of pioneer work roles. Researcher Alexander (2003) successfully uses Giddens’ (1993) structuration theory as the theoretical framework in her doctoral dissertation exploring emerging professional role identities over time of physician assistants. Alexander (2003) notes the context of her study was one taking place “during a time of great social change” in the United States, which made the use of Giddens’ theoretical framework effective for the author’s needs.
Similar to Alexander’s (2003) doctoral study, this writer’s qualitative research study is also situated during a time in American history of significant educational (e.g., special education) and economic challenges in which an emerging position/role, the TSC, in the relatively new field of transition special education (TSE), will be explored.

In summary, Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory aligns with both the perspective of the researcher and the research task at hand well. As Barrett-Pugh, et. al (2007) sum up in their study: “… it is a theory that gives hope. We can change, and be instrumental in changing our organizations” (“Why Structuration Theory?”, para. 2).

**Conceptual Framework for Study**

The conceptual framework for this study consists of exploring the study participants’ work experiences over time considered through the theoretical lens of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) and organized by Kohler’s (1996) Taxonomy for Transition Programming. A description of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) was shared in the previous section; a brief explanation of Kohler’s (1996) seminal work, “The Taxonomy for Transition Programming” follows.

Paula Kohler, a key author in the field of transition special education, developed the “Taxonomy for Transition Programming” in 1996. Kohler (1996) explains:

This monograph represents a major effort toward establishing the much needed link between research and practice by presenting a taxonomy for transition programming that provides a “user-friendly” framework for designing educational programs that reflect a transition perspective for students with disabilities… Our intention is that they serve to
link research and practice, thereby facilitating the work of administrators and service providers and benefiting youth with disabilities…” (p. iii-iv)

It consists of five inter-related and oftentimes overlapping categories “viewed as effective in promoting transition from post-school life for students with disabilities” (Kohler, 1996, p. 9) for use by transition practitioners as well as for researchers to continue to build upon. The five categories are: student-focused planning, student development, family involvement, interagency collaboration, and program structures and attributes (Kohler, 1996, p.9). The following sections provide the reader with brief descriptions of each category.

**Student-focused Planning**

Student-focused planning primarily concerns the transition planning process, which is (currently) federally mandated to begin by age 16, but can be required to begin earlier in some states. This category includes using transition assessment information, supporting the development of the student’s self-determination skills, and involving the student in developing his/her individual education program (IEP) in order to determine and provide appropriate transition services to support the student’s vision for adult life activities (Test, et al. 2006).

**Student Development**

This category addresses the need to teach students a variety of skills across different domains in order to prepare students for meaningful and successful adult lives. It includes:

- Determining, evaluating, and supporting individual achievement in the academic, life, employability, and occupational skills needed for successful transitions … includes teaching students a variety of skills including daily living skills, functional academics,
independent living and personal living skills, and self-determination and self-advocacy skills… Assessment plays a key role in determining what skills need to be taught as well as what skills students have learned… (Test, et al., 2006, p. 40)

**Family Involvement**

This category reflects the importance of the educational team members collaborating effectively with parents and families to support the transition needs and services of the student. As Test, et al. (2006) state:

> For this to be accomplished, educators must learn to communicate effectively with families to create a supportive environment for their participation in transition planning, since their involvement in the transition process is mandated by IDEA (P.L. 105-17; Section 300.345), is desired by students (Morningstar, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 1995), and has been shown to be key to successful postschool transition (Greene, 1996; McNair & Rusch, 1991; Sample, 1998)… (p. 41)

**Interagency Collaboration**

This category “refers to key people, businesses, and agencies joining together in their efforts to promote students’ pursuit of successful outcomes during the transition process” (Test, et al., 2006, p. 41). Collaborations can be developed by transition professionals and engaged in among a variety of different people and/or organizations to support student success.

**Program Structures and Attributes**

This category reflects elements largely at the organizational level, but which impact the other categories. Test, et al.(2006) explain:
Program structures are features that relate to efficient and effective delivery of transition-focused education and services, including philosophy, planning, policy, evaluation, and resource development. These structures and attributes represent many of the systems change targets that educators must be equipped and motivated to address in order to implement all the other practices featured in Kohler’s (1996) Taxonomy. (p. 43)

Figure 1 provides a graphic of the conceptual framework for this study.

Figure 1

*Conceptual Framework for Study*
Chapter Two

Literature Review

This literature review explores a contributing factor, the lack of well-trained transition teaching professionals, regarding the lack of successful student post-school outcomes problem of practice and three related elements. The first element is to learn more about the extent to which there are “effective practices in transition” available (Kohler, 1996, p. 9). The second element is to learn more about the perceived current state of affairs according to both research professionals and current transition teachers regarding teacher pre-service educational training/in-service professional development in this evolving field of transition special education (TSE). As for the final element, this literature review shares what is currently known regarding how to address transition teacher education/in-service professional development needs.

First, the term “transition” in the context of special education is defined, and definitions regarding three types of “practices” often referred to in this field are shared. The next section shares more about pieces of the transition problem puzzle in an attempt to identify and better understand these potential areas of need in order to best prepare and support transition teachers on the front lines endeavoring to prepare their students for individually meaningful, successful post school lives. Transition special education-oriented definitions and context are provided as needed throughout this literature review. The second and third components are explored using seminal author Paula Kohler’s (1996) work: “Taxonomy for Transition Programming: Linking Research and Practice” as a framework to most effectively organize the literature reviewed for this study. In the next section, a literature “gap” supporting the need for additional study is identified, as well as the general focus for further research to learn more about this serious transition special education problem. The intended primary audience includes motivated
transition teaching professionals (e.g., teachers, transition specialists/coordinators) and school administrators who are ready and willing to review their current practices and level of professional training and engage in the work necessary to transform their practices as needed to benefit their transitioning students, as well as transition special education providers and researchers.

**Transition Special Education: Defined**

The word *transition* is often used as a general, catch-all word in our society today to describe all types of changes in a variety of contexts. It is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “passage from one state, stage, subject, or place to another” (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transition). However, in the field of transition special education (TSE), this term possesses a much more clearly defined and legal meaning. Specifically defining what the term *transition* means in the world of special education for youth with disabilities is best shared by some of the experts in this field. Authors Kochhar-Bryant, Shaw, and Izzo (2009) explain:

> Transition refers to a change in status from behaving primarily as a student to assuming emergent adult roles in the community. These roles include employment, participating in post-secondary education, maintaining a home, becoming appropriately involved in the community, and experiencing satisfactory personal and social relationships. (p. 1).

The authors continue with more detail and emphasize key elements:

> …foundations … should be guided by the broad concept of career development.

Transition planning should begin no later than age 14, and students should be encouraged, to the full extent of their capabilities, to assume a maximum amount of
responsibility for such planning. (Halpern, 1994, p. 117) Transition is not a fad. It is not a program or a project that has a beginning and an end. It is a vision and a framework for assisting youths to define their futures, take responsibility, and make continuous progress toward their long-range life goals. (Kochhar-Bryant, Shaw, & Izzo, 2009, p. 1)

The field of Transition Special Education (TSE) in support of students with disabilities moving from school to adult life has been in place in the United States in various forms now for over four decades. It is currently also mandated by the federal law known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) originally authorized in 1990, and most recently reauthorized in 2004 (Test, et al., 2006, p. 20-22). IDEA 2004 requires that transition services occur:

…within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child’s movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. (Section 602(34)(A); http://www.ncset.org)

IDEA 2004 requires that coordinated transition activities must be:

…based on the individual child’s needs, taking into account the child’s strengths, preferences, and interests; and includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. (Section 602(34)(B-C); http://www.ncset.org)
Definitions of “Practices” in Transition Special Education

There are three different types of “practices” often referred to in the transition special education literature: “best practices” (Peters & Heron, 1993, as cited by Kohler, 1996), “effective practices in transition” (Kohler, 1996, p. 6), and “evidence-based practices” (http://www.nsttac.org). These three related terms are clarified for the reader briefly in the following paragraphs before proceeding to the first section of literature review.

Regarding the term “best practices”, seminal author Kohler (1996) shares:

… To ensure that the term “best practice” represents a reliable, valid, and critical aspect of a program, Peters and Heron (1993) suggested that the following five criteria be applied to all strategies and practices under consideration: (a) the practice is well grounded in theory; (b) the practice is supported empirically through studies that are internally and externally valid; (c) the practice has some underpinnings in existing literature; (d) the practice is associated with meaningful outcomes; and (e) the practice is socially valid. (Kohler, 1996, p. 13)

Kohler (1996) continues with an explanation of her use of the term “effective transition practices” in her seminal work: “This manuscript provides an overview of four studies that have sought to apply the standard described by Peters and Heron to the identification of effective transition practices” (p. 6). She shares further details of the Taxonomy and the notion she refers to as “effective transition practices”:

… The practices in the Taxonomy are supported by evidence of effectiveness relevant to the five criteria proposed by Peters and Heron (1993) to support “best practices”.
However, the practices however, are more or less generic in nature. Thus, while serving as a template or conceptual model for program development or evaluation, the Taxonomy does not propose detailed strategies for how to implement particular practices…

Therefore, the usefulness of the Taxonomy must be extended through identification of particular strategies associated with each practice and assessment of effectiveness within specific contexts. (Kohler, 1996, p. 73)

A definition is provided for the term “evidence-based practice” by the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center:

An evidence-based practice (EBP) is a teaching method used to teach a specific skill that has been shown to be effective based on high-quality research (Cook, Tankersly, & Landrum, 2009; Odom, Brantlinger, Gersten, Horner, Thompson, & Harris, 2005). Evidence-based practices apply to secondary transition planning and instruction in the following ways: Evidence-based practices provide teachers information about what teaching methods in secondary transition have been effective in helping students with disabilities learn specific skills. Evidence-based practices can be used to support IEP goals and objectives as well as skill development.

(http://www.nsttac.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdf/pdf/ebps/Description%20of%20EBPs_updated.pdf)

For the purpose of this study, the term “effective practice” is utilized, consistent with the language used by Kohler (1996), unless identified otherwise. A table is provided in Appendix A sharing terms, acronyms, and definitions utilized in the field of transition special education (TSE) that will be referred to throughout this study.
Paula D. Kohler’s “A Taxonomy for Transition Programming: Linking Research and Practice” (1996) is considered to be the “seminal review of substantiated and implied best practices in transition” (Landmark, Ju, & Zhang, 2010, p. 166), and is the base from which much additional research study and programs have been developed. As Test, Aspel, and Everson (2006) explain:

…the Taxonomy for Transition Programming (Kohler, 1996) is the only model based on both empirical and validation studies as well as outcomes from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS)-funded model demonstration projects. As such, the Taxonomy provides a user-friendly conceptual framework based on practices associated with improved postschool outcomes for thousands of students with disabilities…It includes a comprehensive list of strategies organized into five categories including (a) student-focused planning, (b) student development, (c) family involvement, (d) interagency collaboration, and (e) program structures. (p. 38)

Additional research has been taking place in recent years, using Kohler’s 1996 “Taxonomy” as a framework from which to continue to increase knowledge and effective strategies regarding transition services. In their 2009 literature review results, authors Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering, and Kohler “provide the field with a springboard for creating systems change by providing practitioners information about … transition program characteristics that have been empirically linked to improved post-school success for students with disabilities.” (p. 179). Landmark, Ju, and Zhang’s article (2010), also sought to update
Kohler’s study, and a “… total of 29 documents were collected that substantiated best transition practices” (p. 165). A quantitative study conducted by authors Repetto, Gibson, Lubbers, Gritz, and Reiss (2008) regarding health care transition needs implementation on IEPs, however, reveals the need for additional information (and training) to be available for school staff on health care transition (p. 10). Authors Bloom, Kuhlthau, Van Cleave, Knapp, Newacheck, and Perrin (2012) again share the same need for increased research studies “to guide best practice in preparing youth with special health care needs for adulthood” five years later in their quantitative study (p. 213). In their article, “Evidence-Based Practices in Secondary Transition”, Test, Fowler, Richter, White, Mazzotti, Walker, Kohler, and Kortering conducted a literature review in 2009 and noted: “Findings provide practitioners with a set of evidence-based practices for improving transition services and researchers with an agenda for conducting future research” (Test, et al., 2009, p. 115).

Therefore, while research in the field of transition special education certainly needs to continue (particularly in the health care domain), according to the various peer-reviewed literature reviewed for this report, it is clearly confirmed through this literature review analysis that there is current information regarding effective practices in transition available for education professionals today.

**Perceptions of Current Transition Teacher Education/Professional Development Training**

The following section of the literature review shares the current perceptions held by teachers and researchers regarding current transition teacher education and in-service professional development training opportunities.
In their 2009 quantitative study, authors Benitez, Morningstar, and Frey suggested poor student post-school outcomes “may be due to special education teachers who are unprepared to plan and deliver effective transition services” (Benitez et al., 2009, p. 6) and so conducted a survey of teachers to learn more about this concern. They cited other research that indicated “almost one half the secondary special education teachers surveyed reported being unprepared to meet the transition needs of their students” (Blanchette, 2001 as cited by Benitez et al., 2009, p. 7).

Regarding the current availability of teacher preparation and professional development offerings, authors Benitez, et al. (2009) learned: “… findings from a national survey of 573 special education personnel preparation programs revealed that less than one half the special education programs addressed transition standards (Anderson et al., 2003 as cited by Benitez et al., 2009, p.7), and only 45% offered a stand-alone course devoted to transition” (Benitez, Morningstar & Frey, 2009, p. 7).

Numerous research articles reviewed for this paper note both the need for more properly trained transition professionals, as well as note the lack of effective training opportunities currently available to transition educators. Herewith, findings from several articles are shared detailing these issues, organized by the first four of seminal author Kohler’s (1996) five transition taxonomy categories: student-focused planning, student development, family involvement, interagency collaboration.
**Student-focused Planning**

The “transition planning process” is a critical component of Kohler’s first taxonomy category referred to as “student-focused planning” and involves working with a student’s IEP team to develop a long-range educational plan that includes personally meaningful goals and specific viable transition activities to achieve these to support student post-school success using a “backwards planning process” (Test, et al., p. 95-98). This type of long-range planning effort differs significantly from the one year at a time planning method utilized for pre-transition-age students. Given this significant shift in method and strategy, it is not surprising to learn about authors Beattie, Grigal, Test, and Wood (1997) study in which is found a specific need for teacher training opportunities on “multi-year team planning” (p. 370).

**Student Development**

Additional details regarding this need for professional transition educator training are provided by authors engaged in various research studies on self-determination skill development, a key component of the “student development” taxonomy category (Kohler, 1996). The concept of self-determination is best defined by internationally-recognized author Paul Wehmeyer: “Self-determined behavior refers to volitional actions that enable one to act as the primary causal agent in one’s life and to maintain or improve one’s quality of life” (Wehmeyer, 2011, slide 28). Test, et al. (2006) share there are “a number of teachable components” (p. 45):

… The components commonly identified in the literature (e.g., Field & Hoffman, 1994; Mithaug, Campeau, & Wolman, 1992; Ward, 1988; Wehmeyer, 1996) are choice/decision making, goal setting/attainment, problem solving, self
evaluation/management, self-advocacy, person-centered IEP planning, relationships with others, and self-awareness. (Test, et al, 2006, p. 45)

Supporting the development of self-determination skills, a key element of Kohler’s (1996) “student development” taxonomy category, is considered an effective practice in transition special education and must be addressed in every student’s Individual Education Program (IEP), per the federal IDEA 2004 requirement. In a study analyzing teacher surveys regarding self-determination conducted by Thoma, Nathanson, Baker and Tamura (2002), the authors learned: “…when asked whether the training or instruction they had received regarding self-determination was adequate to implement strategies successfully, only 33% said that it was; 67% said that their training was inadequate” (Thoma, et al., 2002, p. 244). In addition, authors Thoma, et al. (2002) found that teachers “were not aware of many methods such as person-centered planning methods and/or commercially available curricula that… provide a framework for teachers to follow…” (p. 246). In their concluding remarks, Thoma, et al. (2002) noted: “Further research to ascertain teachers’ awareness of the need to make changes at these levels, as well as strategies and techniques that work for implementing systems change efforts, would be a necessary next step to truly understand teachers’ awareness of strategies to facilitate student self-determination” (p. 247). And in their 2008 qualitative study, authors Thoma, Pannozzo, Fritton, and Bartholomew describe the alarming, continuing discrepancy between student learning needs and teacher knowledge and practice in self-determination:

…teachers must play a vital role not only in directing teaching self-determination skills but must also provide opportunities and supports for students with disabilities to use the
skills they possess… In addition…special educators typically fail to implement these practices in the classroom or provide opportunities for students to use and/or develop their skills. Previous research indicates that special educators either have not learned about self-determination in their pre-service training courses or do not feel competent in regard to their abilities to teach these skills… (p. 94-95)

Addressing student employment/vocational training is another required element of the IEP under IDEA 2004 that falls under Kohler’s (1996) “student development” taxonomy category. This is a topic of serious ongoing concern, as the national employment data shared earlier in this paper illustrates: only 17.8% of people with disabilities were employed, while 63.9% of people without disabilities were employed in 2012 (http://bls.gov). In their article, “Availability of and Access to Career Development Activities for Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities” (2009), the authors shared notable weaknesses in addressing this key transition educational domain identified in their quantitative study: “The limited availability of professional development and training opportunities focused on including youth with disabilities in career development programming may represent a second factor influencing the participation of youth in activities at these high schools” (Carter, Trainor, Cakiroglu, Swedeen & Owens, 2010, p. 20); “…and that virtually no efforts have been made to integrate such information into the professional development of vocational educators, guidance counselors, and other secondary-level staff” (Agran, Cain, & Cavin, 2002; Fives, 2008 as cited by Carter, et al., 2010, p.20).

Additional key components of Kohler’s (1996) transition “student development” taxonomy category include transition activities and transition assessment federally mandated by
IDEA 2004. Transition assessment (including the subset, vocational assessment) is mandated by the IDEA 2004 federal regulation. The term, “transition assessment”, is best defined by authors Sitlington, Neubert, Begun, Lombard, and Leconte (2007):

Transition assessment is an ongoing process of collecting information on the student’s strengths, needs, preferences, and interests as they relate to the demands of current and future living, learning, and working environments. This process should begin in middle school and continue until the student graduates or exits high school. Information from this process should be used to drive the IEP and transition planning process and to develop the SOP document detailing the student’s academic and functional performance and postsecondary goals. (p. 2-3)

In their 2008 quantitative study, authors Morningstar and Liss alert TSE professionals regarding the need for training in the implementation of these legally mandated transition assessments “because districts and teachers do not yet understand these new requirements” (p. 53).

Today, many students with disabilities are attending college either post- high school and/or through dual enrollment programs while still receiving educational services on their IEPs. Because of this growing trend, professional development is sorely needed for post-secondary disabilities services staff as well: “… there is a dearth of evidence-based training because we have little data on effective practices” (Brinckerhoff et al., 2002, as cited by Dukes III and Shaw, 2004, p. 143).
Although there are effective practices available in transition for teachers and other transition professionals, authors Wandry, Webb, Williams, Bassett, Asselin, and Hutchinson (2008) highlight broad teacher preparation and student service delivery concerns based on their research findings:

...research has indicated that students with disabilities are not currently being provided with transition services in accordance with federal requirements…Thoma, Baker, & Saddler (2002) reported that teacher preparation programs did not include instruction regarding active student participation in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings or strategies for enhancing self-determination in students. (Wandry, et al., 2008, p.15)

**Family Involvement**

“Family Involvement“ is the taxonomy category shared by Kohler (1996) regarding a student’s family becoming actively involved in their student’s transition. Some of the “strategies for effective family involvement” include: parents giving their children responsibilities (e.g., chores) at home, discussing career ideas with their children, attending school meetings, discussing transition assessment results with IEP team members, finding out about post school adult services available, and participating in transition planning meetings (Test, et al., 2006, p. 114). The most recent National Longitudinal Transition Study Wave II (NLTS2) results confirm both the importance of and several strategies for effective family involvement to support their children with disabilities (http://www.ncset.org/publications/printresource.asp?id=2473). In their 2001 study discussion, researchers Defur, Todd-Allen, and Getzel identify both a transition educator training need and
associated implementation dilemma for professional transition educators related to effectively supporting family involvement during the transition years:

… Clearly, the model we propose suggests that improved cultural competence and knowledge of the family context on the part of professionals can serve to improve parent involvement… professionals are often pulled by the demands of the system and may even feel their job would be threatened if they reacted to families in a more relational way. However, the way in which professionals react to families is crucial; it sets the course for the emergence of an empowering or disempowering course of parent participation in transition planning. (Defur, et al., 2001, p. 32)

**Interagency Collaboration**

The category referred to as “Interagency Collaboration” in author Kohler’s (1996) taxonomy is also in need of additional teacher professional development according to the literature reviewed for this study. This taxonomy category “refers to key people, businesses, and agencies joining together in their efforts to promote students’ pursuit of successful outcomes during the transition process” (Test, et al., 2006, p. 41).

In their 1995 research study, authors Benz, Johnson, Mikkelsen, and Lindstrom described the need for increased school staff training on interagency services and collaboration efforts (p. 136). Authors Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, and Mack (2002) suggest the need for the development of “cross-agency staff development programs” involving school staff, state, and local adult service agency staff members (p. 529). Authors Wandry, et al. (2008) continue to note the very same educator skill deficiencies several years later:
Researchers have also investigated the collaboration skills that secondary special educators must have to identify the linkages with adult service agencies that are necessary for effective transition planning. These studies have found that secondary special educators do not possess the requisite knowledge or skills. (Knott & Asselin, 1999; U. S. Government Accountability Office, 2003, as cited by Wandry, et al., 2008, p.15)

In their 2008 article, authors Noonan, Morningstar, and Gaumer Erickson stated: “In a time of such poor outcomes for youths with disabilities, interagency collaboration remains a fundamental challenge for educators” (p. 132). Authors Jen-Yi, Bassett, and Hutchinson (2009) provide an additional caveat: “… either pre- or in-service training must address not only teachers’ knowledge, but also their beliefs and attitudes toward transition services for students with disabilities” in their quantitative research article (p. 171). Author Trach (2012) sums up concerns regarding teacher collaboration skills very clearly: “The field of education and special education need to develop new innovative professional development programs that can facilitate better outcomes… special educators’ capabilities are stretched beyond their training” (p. 45).

The lack of specifically transition-trained teaching professionals as well as the serious lack of training opportunities available to them are both consistent themes evident in the literature spanning across all four of seminal author Kohler’s (1996) transition taxonomy categories.
Addressing Teacher Education/Professional Development Needs

Program Structures

Addressing transition teacher education/in-service professional development needs situates predictably well in seminal author Kohler’s (1996) fifth and final transition taxonomy category, “Program Structures”. Authors Test, et al. (2006) explain this final category well:

Program structures are features that relate to efficient and effective delivery of transition-focused education and services, including philosophy, planning, policy, evaluation, and resource development. These structures… represent many of the systems change targets that educators must be equipped and motivated to address in order to implement all the other practices featured in Kohler’s (1996) Taxonomy. Transition personnel must develop knowledge and skills to address systemic problems with coordination among schools, adult services agencies, and employers… (Test, et al., 2006, p. 43)

In their mixed methods research article describing exemplary transition services and policies evolving in three states, authors Destafano, Furney, and Hasazi (1997) suggest needed educational strategies for transition professionals:

Strategies used to develop capacity included inter-professional in-service and pre-service development opportunities for educators and adult service providers; summer institutes workshops, an conferences for students, parents, and educators; trainer-of-trainer models; dissemination of … resources and materials…; and technical assistance provided through state… and transition systems-change projects. (“Long-lasting Change,” para. 1)
Recommendations in a quantitative study regarding transition teacher education gaps and needs by Knott and Asselin (1999) include: “In-service and conference opportunities are necessary and desired by respondents…Teachers should be required to participate in these activities…” (p. 64). Authors Kamens, Dolyniuk, and Dinardo (2003) seem to echo this finding in their research study in which they suggest educators “… having realistic, hands-on experience to connect with course content…” (p. 116). Author Blanchett (2001) urges additional research efforts be undertaken to both identify the training needs of transition teachers as well as determine the effectiveness of new transition teacher preparation programs in her quantitative research article as well (p. 11). In a 2003 article, authors Morningstar and Clark summed up the dilemma:

Transition-specific content most appropriate for personnel preparation has been validated by research over the past decade (Knott & Asselin, 1999; Langone, Langone, & McLaughlin, 1991; Severson, Hoover, & Wheeler, 1994). Unfortunately, the question of how best to offer such content has yet to be resolved. While the research studies presented in this special issue offer a glimpse into current approaches to delivery of transition content, we are far from certain about the quality of those approaches, much less about the best mode of delivery. (p.230)

In their 2003 quantitative research article, authors Douglas Anderson, Kleinhammer-Tramill, Morningstar, Lehmann, Bassett, Kohler, Blalock, and Wehmeyer provide a critical reminder to readers: “… there are different instructional needs with regard to personnel preparation in transition” (p. 159). Congruent with earlier article statements shared here, authors
Rice and Owens (2004) suggest “supplementing textbooks with additional information” in their limited research regarding TSE textbooks (p. 189).

In their article, “Strategies for Integrating Transition-Related Competencies into Teacher Education”, (2004), Kohler and Greene proclaimed the need for transition-related professional development and pre-service training, as well as offered three approaches for providing it effectively. Kohler and Greene indicated that the leading authority “The Council for Exceptional Children’s Division on Career Development and Transition (DCDT) recently endorsed four principles on which transition-related professional development should be based” (Blalock, et al., 2003 as cited by Kohler & Greene, 2004, p. 148). They are:

… the issues regarding transition-related professional development include: (a) the inter-relationship between secondary curriculum and transition services, (b) core content reflecting effective transition practices, (c) roles of transition specialists and secondary educators, and (d) research and innovation in personnel preparation and retention. (Blalock, et al., 2003 as cited by Kohler & Greene, 2004, p. 148)

The three approaches suggested by the authors include: “infusing transition competencies across the curriculum…specialized transition course(s)… and a combination of infusion and specialized coursework” (Kohler & Greene, 2004, p. 149).

However, Kohler and Greene also described key implementation challenges: “…higher education faculty must determine not only how to teach transition-related content, but also where it fits into their curriculum” (2004, p. 149). They also shared additional barriers in the realities
of providing needed educational services to new and current teacher practitioners in the field, especially given the growing time and budget constraints evident today. They concluded, “…very little information has been published on strategies for infusing transition content across a teacher education curriculum. Such information should be useful to teacher education programs restructuring their curriculum content to include transition-related knowledge and skills” (Kohler & Green, 2004, p. 149-150).

In their quantitative study, authors Kyeong-Hwa and Morningstar (2007) share the need once again to also address teachers’ beliefs in professional development endeavors:

…professional development providers must address not only teachers’ knowledge but also their beliefs if they wish to affect how these teachers will plan, enact, monitor, and evaluate new interventions. It may be critical to include follow-up activities, such as site-based coaching or mentoring, to ensure that teachers implement new practices… Further research is needed… (p. 126)

As authors Cobb and Alwell (2009) stated in their quantitative study: “It seems our greatest need is in applying what we know- informing and supporting practitioners and families in a uniform fashion so that implementation of effective transition practices … might become more commonplace” (p. 79).

Authors Finn and Kohler (2009) emphasize the importance of states “establishing and applying relevant personnel standards, then providing resources for initial and continuing education and capacity building” in their quantitative study (p. 27). Authors Brownell, Sindelar,
Kiely, and Danielson (2010) frame the need for improved training and action more generally: “… special education teacher preparation is at a critical juncture. We can no longer afford to be unclear about who high-quality special education teachers are and how they should be prepared” (p. 374).

Summary

Upon review of the seminal, recent peer-reviewed literature, and additional recent documents regarding the serious problem faced by transition special educators in meeting the needs of the students they serve and the three related elements (regarding availability of effective practices in transition special education, the perception of teachers and researchers regarding the quality and availability of TSE teacher pre-service education and professional development opportunities, and how to address these transition educator training needs), clear themes and findings and a notable gap evident in the available literature become very evident.

In their 2009 study, Benitez, et al. raised the concern and provided in-depth analysis supporting the initial hypothesis of this paper: that inadequate teacher education is likely a contributing factor to the problem of the lack of transition student post school success.

Research reviewed for this literature review confirmed that many effective practices are in fact currently available to professionals practicing in the field of transition special education (TSE). In addition, ongoing research studies continue to build from and enhance Kohler’s original seminal work, “Taxonomy for Transition Programming: Linking Research and Practice” (1996).

In marked contrast to the positive news regarding effective practices, studies critically analyzed for this literature review revealed two consistent themes regarding the current state of
transition teacher education. The articles reviewed indicated that TSE teachers and researchers unanimously share a concern that there continues to be both a general lack of quality and a lack of availability of proven effective pre-service education and professional development opportunities for transition teachers in the United States to access.

Both Kohler and Greene’s 2004 study and Morningstar and Clark’s 2003 article were key in identifying the “gap” that needs to be addressed through further research, as they offered detail on what educational opportunities need to be provided and specifically highlighted the need for the determination of effective strategies for providing teacher transition-related training based on principles determined by the DCDT. As Kohler and Greene (2004) concluded clearly, “Sadly, many teachers, including those responsible for developing IEPs, lack the necessary competencies….transition-related teacher education must be improved” (p. 160).

For this study, both quantitative and qualitative studies were reviewed and were obtained electronically through the Northeastern University Library. Numerous and varied searches (with the guidance of a NEU librarian) of recent research studies regarding transition special education teacher education/professional development provided scant results. Other documents including conference power points, briefs and books authored by internationally-recognized researchers in this newly evolving field were reviewed as well, which is confirmed as acceptable for inclusion here by author Creswell (2012, p. 101). Searching references from retrieved peer-reviewed articles, as suggested by author Randolph (2009), proved to be one of the more successful means for locating pertinent literature (p. 7). Upon sharing this concern regarding the meager resource list with a (doctoral-degreed) transition specialist and professor (personal communication, November 14, 2012) experienced specifically in research in TSE, she indicated that she was not
aware of any additional or more current research studies, was not surprised by the small number found for this literature review, and that this was probably a great “gap” to study. The paucity of findings in the TSE literature was also shared with a colleague now working as a graduate research assistant in TSE at another major university. She suggested checking an additional educational research website (which has been checked), and echoed the previous transition specialist’s encouraging comments (personal communication, November 14, 2012). This apparent limited availability of literature supports the belief in the need for additional research regarding this contributing factor to the overall TSE problem of practice.

**Conclusion**

The information gleaned for this literature review confirms the need for and the direct usefulness of the plan to focus qualitative narrative research on learning more about how best to develop and provide effective transition-related pre-service education/in-service professional development for transition teachers in the context of the specified needs expressed by transition professionals, including the DCDT-endorsed principles, available effective practices, and professional perspectives and challenges that surfaced from the research culled for this literature review.

This researcher’s qualitative study endeavor provides new knowledge regarding a critical problem of practice facing the field of transition special education for decades. Time is of the essence. Successfully addressing the gap between effective practices and the lack of effective transition teacher education programs and strategies in place to teach them should ultimately serve to enhance the quality of transition services provided by transition special education professionals to transition students preparing for successful post school adult lives.
Chapter Three
Methodology

Research Question

The general, overarching qualitative research questions for this doctoral study are:

- How do “pioneer” (first-ever) transition special education coordinators (TSCs) experience and make sense of their professional role working with a variety of stakeholders to provide educational services for TSE students?
- How have pioneer TSCs’ work experiences changed over time?

The narrative inquiry method (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) coupled with Giddens’ (1984) structuration theoretical framework provide the guiding support for general interview questions and additional follow-up research questions. The interview protocol for this study is provided in Appendix B.

Justification for a Qualitative Study and Research Tradition

As Ponterotto shares: “Qualitative methods refer to a broad class of empirical procedures designed to describe and interpret the experiences of research participants in a context-specific setting” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000b, as cited by Ponterotto, 2005, p. 128). Taylor and Bogdan (1998) elaborate on this: “Qualitative findings are generally presented in everyday language and often incorporate participants’ own words to describe a psychological event, experience, or phenomenon” (as cited by Ponterotto, 2005, p. 128).

Numerous quantitative studies located by this writer for recent literature reviews have not provided data sufficient to effectively understand or address the DT problem of practice to date.
As Edmondson and McManus (2007) share: “… qualitative data are appropriate for studying phenomena that are not well understood” (e.g., Barley, 1990; Bouchard, 1976; Eisenhardt, 1989a, as cited by Edmondson & McManus, 2007, p. 1155). This writer’s topic of interest/research problem of practice falls in “nascent” territory, and so the intent to use a qualitative research design suits the purpose of this DT well (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

The qualitative research approach selected for this doctoral thesis is the narrative inquiry approach. This approach is most simply and effectively defined by authors Clandinin and Connolly (2000): “Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (as cited by Creswell, 2012, p. 75). Creswell (2012b) further describes narrative research well: “… a narrative typically focuses on studying a single person, gathering data through a collection of stories, reporting individual experiences, and discussing the meaning of those experiences for the individual” (p. 502).

Researchers Clandinin and Connelly (1990) are considered to be the key seminal authors regarding the use of the narrative research design specifically for the education field (Creswell, 2012, p. 503). In their seminal textbook, the authors share that their work is largely based on John Dewey’s writings regarding the conceptual meaning of the term “experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As the authors explain: “For Dewey, experience is both personal and social… Dewey held that one criterion of experience is continuity, namely, that experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences… each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also share that the narrative inquiry approach has been used throughout the social sciences “to present a picture of fields in transition” by several seminal researchers, including “… Geertz and Bateman in anthropology, Polkinghorne in
psychology, Coles in psychotherapy, and Czarniawska in organizational theory” (p. 4-5). They note that their own approach to narrative inquiry in education research is informed by all of these authors (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

This doctoral thesis seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the problem of practice facing the field of transition special education. In support of the narrative design for the purpose of understanding in career research, Cohen and Mallon (2001) share:

Preferred and traditional methods for examining career do not yield holistic understandings (Collin and Young, 1986). Rather, they tend to produce analytical frameworks based on fragmentation, polarization, and dichotomy (Derr and Laurent, 1989; Barley, 1989; Collin and Young, 1986)... they elucidate the inadequacy of positivistic approaches… and the need for theoretical perspectives which more adequately capture the dynamic ways in which individuals enact their careers (Weick, 1996). (Cohen & Mallon, 2001, p. 51).

In addition, Creswell (2012b) shares: “For educators looking for personal experiences in actual school settings, narrative research offers practical, specific insights” (p. 502). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state their reason for using a narrative research approach in education very simply: “Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively” (p. 19). By conducting a narrative research inquiry involving pioneer TSC practitioners in this field, this doctoral thesis contributes new knowledge toward better understanding this problem of practice facing transition special education.
Research Paradigm

It is important to select a paradigm of inquiry and corresponding research method that are congruent with the focus and goal of the research interest as well as the personal beliefs of the researcher (Butin, 2010, p. 63). The paradigm employed by this researcher for this study is Constructivism-Interpretivism (Ponterotto, 2005). Constructivism-Interpretivism is a qualitative research method that has “ideographic and emic goals (Ponterotto, 2005, p.128). Ponterotto (2005) defines ideographic research: “… focuses on understanding the individual as a unique, complex entity” (p. 128). He also clearly defines the term emic: “Emic refers to constructs or behaviors that are unique to an individual, sociocultural context that are not generalizable” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 128). Ponterotto (2005) further explains:

Thus a distinguishing characteristic of constructivism is the centrality of the interaction between the investigator and the object of investigation. Only through this interaction can deeper meaning be uncovered. The researcher and her or his participants jointly create (co-construct) findings from their interactive dialogue and interpretation. (p.129)

Schwandt (1994, 2000) shares: “Proponents of constructivism-interpretivism emphasize the goal of understanding the ‘lived experiences’ (Erlebnis) from the point of view of those who live it day by day” (as cited by Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). “Understandably, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm provides the primary foundation and anchor for qualitative research methods” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129).

This researcher, a recently practicing pioneer TSC herself, collected qualitative data from four pioneer transition special education specialists/coordinators (TSCs) for this study. This
researcher approached the research on this problem of practice collaboratively with the study participants, as a “co-participant” (Briscoe, 2005, p. 37).

**Participants**

The study participants are a group of four “pioneer” transition special education specialists/coordinators (TSCs) from different school districts in the northeast region of the United States. For the purpose of this research, the term “pioneer TSC” refers to a TSC who is the first person to hold that role in the school district. The study participants were “purposefully” selected in order to best “learn about the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 515). This small sample size makes sense for the narrative inquiry research study design framed by exploratory research questions regarding the work experiences and reflections of them over time of these pioneer TSCs (Creswell, 2012b, p. 73).

**Recruitment and Access**

In order to recruit participants, this researcher asked known pioneer transition special education specialist/coordinators (TSCs) located in the northeast region of the United States by phone or in person to participate in the study after thoroughly explaining the study, potential minimal related risks, consent and ongoing opportunity to opt-out, opportunity for “member checking”, and other information shared in the participant consent form (Creswell, 2012). A copy of the consent form is available in Appendix C. A copy of the participant recruitment script is available in Appendix D. No incentives were offered to potential participants. The study participants were also invited to review the professionally transcribed data (and each participant did so). Interviews were conducted in person at a location and time selected by each participant following IRB approval.
Data Collection

This is a qualitative narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2012) doctoral study. One form of data was collected for analysis. Data is comprised of study participant interviews conducted by this researcher in person.

One interview was conducted with each participant that lasted between 60-90 minutes using open-ended exploratory questions (Creswell, 2012b, p. 149). The interview protocol used is available in Appendix B. A “responsive interviewing style” was utilized by this researcher (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 37). Each participant interview was conducted in person by this researcher. Each study participant was provided the general interview protocol at least three days in advance of the scheduled interview date so as to allow adequate time for study participant reflection upon the questions. There were four questions added to the protocol during the study process that were not included in the initial interview protocol (see Questions 16, 17, 18 and 19 in Appendix B). The interview data was collected using two different audio-recording devices and written field notes by this researcher.

The recorded interview data was transcribed by an experienced transcriber selected from a list provided by NEU, and was member checked for accuracy by the researcher.

Participants were invited to meet again to also complete a “member check” following the completion of the professional transcriber’s transcription of the audio-recording data to ensure accuracy (Creswell, 2012, p. 259). Participants shared any edits during this process, and each approved the writing and final submission of the study without further review. The researcher and participants continued to communicate by phone on an as-needed basis during the final writing phase.
Data Storage and Management

Audio-data collected has been stored in a password-protected computer owned by this researcher, and recorders have been stored in a locked container belonging to the researcher to protect confidentiality of participants. Pseudonyms were created and used to protect the confidentiality of participants. The audio-data stored on the computer and on recorders will be deleted by the date specified by the principal investigator of the study and Northeastern University IRB following the successful completion of the doctoral thesis. The transcriber will be directed to delete all data upon successful project completion as well.

Data Analysis

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) share two different types of narrative inquiry analysis, “descriptive” and “explanatory” as described by author Polkinghorne (1988): “In descriptive narrative, the purpose is “to produce an accurate description of the interpretive narrative accounts individuals or groups use to make sequences of events in their lives or organizations meaningful” (p. 161-162, as cited by Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 16). In contrast, in the “explanatory narrative… the interest is to account for the connection between events in a causal sense and to provide the necessary narrative accounts that supply the connections” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 16). The descriptive narrative analysis approach will be used for this doctoral thesis because it appropriately addresses the research question posed, which seeks to better understand the phenomena studied rather than explain it.

The data analysis strategy for this DT involved using an iterative process comprised of *restorying*, which is “interconnected and not necessarily linear” (Creswell, 2012b, p. 513), and *inductive coding* (Thomas, 2006).
Creswell (2012b) defines *restorying*: “… the process in which the researcher gathers stories, analyzes them for key elements of the story (e.g., time, place, plot, and scene), and then rewrites the story to place it in a chronological sequence” (p. 509).

As Creswell (2012) shares: “Thus, the qualitative analysis may be a description of both the story and themes that emerge from it” (p. 75). Reissman (2008) concurs: “I believe … that category-centered models of research (such as inductive thematic coding, grounded theory, ethnography, and other qualitative strategies) can be combined with close analysis of individual cases. Each approach provides a different way of knowing a phenomenon, and each leads to unique insights” (p. 12).

The use of seven interconnected steps for narrative research analysis is described in detail and supported by Creswell (2012b): “Identify phenomenon to explore”, “Purposefully select” participant(s) from whom to learn about the phenomenon, “Collect the story” from the participant(s), “Restory” the participant’s story, Actively “collaborate with the participant”(s) throughout research process, “Write a story about the participant’s experiences”, “Validate the accuracy” of the project (p. 514-516).

For the initial *restorying* step of this narrative analysis, this researcher followed the “three-dimensional space approach” developed by researchers Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Creswell (2012) explains the Clandinin and Connelly (2000) approach: “… includes analyzing the data for three elements: interaction (personal and social), continuity (past, present, and future), and situation…” (p. 189).

This writer also followed the highly iterative process of *inductive coding* for this project which “begins with close readings of text and consideration of the multiple meanings that are
inherent in the text” (Thomas, 2006, p. 241). For First Cycle coding, “In Vivo” codes were used, as the codes are actual words quoted directly from the participants’ responses (Saldana, 2013). “Analytic memos” were used throughout the coding process (Saldana, 2013). As various themes emerged, they were assigned descriptive titles by this writer (Saldana, 2013). And, as Ponterotto (2005) suggests, ongoing collaboration with study participants is a key element of the data analysis in a qualitative research design grounded in the Constructivism-Interpretivism paradigm that has “ideographic and emic goals” (Ponterotto, 2005, p.128).

**Trustworthiness**

Maintaining the quality, trustworthiness and validity of the study as deemed appropriate in qualitative research as it pertains to this doctoral thesis project is essential. The following section shares the steps this researcher utilized to address these critical concerns.

**Quality**

To address the issue of the quality of this narrative doctoral study, this researcher followed the five “aspects of a good study” as shared by author Creswell (2012, p. 259). He asserts that the researcher:

- Focuses on a single individual (or two or three individuals)
- Collects stories about a significant issue related to this individual’s life
- Develops a chronology that connects different phases or aspects of a story
- Tells a story that reports what was said (themes), how it was said (unfolding story), and how speakers interact or perform the narrative
- Reflexively brings himself or herself into the study (Creswell, 2012, p. 259)
Reliability

To support reliability of the study, this researcher took field notes by hand as well as used good quality audio-recording equipment. During the transcription process, the inclusion of audibly identifiable details (e.g., expressions such as laughter) were included in the transcription as possible. The use of a transcription professional was employed to complete this effort. This researcher was the sole person to code the data and develop themes.

Validity

Given the qualitative narrative research design of this study, this researcher adopted the interpretive approach to validation based on several authors’ perspectives provided by Creswell (2012). As Creswell (2012) explains:

… I use the term validation to emphasize a process (see Angen, 2000), rather than verification (which has quantitative overtones) or historical words such as trustworthiness and authenticity... My framework for thinking about validation … is to suggest that researchers employ accepted strategies to document the ‘accuracy’ of their studies. These I call “validation strategies.” (p. 250)

For this doctoral study, this researcher employed five of the eight validation strategies suggested by Creswell (2012). The five validation strategies that were used for this study are: prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation, sharing researcher bias and positionality from the very beginning, member checking, and providing written “thick description” (Creswell, 2012, p. 250-253).
As an experienced and recently practicing pioneer transition special education coordinator (TSC), this researcher already has significant general field knowledge and cultural understanding of the field as well as a previously developed sense of collaboration with many potential study participants in the region to support high quality “prolonged engagement in the field” (Creswell, 2012, p. 250). “Triangulation” was addressed through the use of two types of data collected and analyzed in this project: transcribed recorded interviews and researcher handwritten field notes (Creswell, 2012, p. 251). Researcher “positionality” and “bias” is provided in a written statement provided in Chapter One of this study and addresses internal validity (Creswell, 2012). The providing of written “rich, thick description” is a cornerstone of this narrative study in order to “enable readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred” (Creswell, 2012, p. 252). “Member checking” of the transcribed audio-data was employed with each individual during the study, for as author Creswell shares: “This technique is considered by Lincoln & Guba (1985) to be ‘the most critical technique for establishing credibility’” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314, as cited by Creswell, 2012, p. 252).

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Several steps were taken by the researcher to protect the human subjects in this study. As the Institutional Review Board (IRB) training curriculum provided through Northeastern University (NEU) states, the relationship between the investigator and human subjects “… should be based on honesty, trust, and respect” (NIH Office of Extramural Research PDF, 2008, p. 3).
As described in the NEU IRB guidelines, written informed consent were obtained from the study participants after a clear description of the proposed study, its risks and benefits, participant guidelines/rights, research study contact information, and the plan for protection of participant confidentiality were provided and agreed upon. Participants were also assured they can opt out of the study at any time, despite having signed a consent form.

Of the possible risks associated with participating in research (e.g., physical, psychological, social, legal, economic), only the social risk might be applicable to this study, and it will be minimized by the investigator’s commitment to not disclose actual participant names and locations (NIH PDF, 2008). The professional transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement. Pseudonyms replaced actual participant names and school district names. Some information gathered (e.g., state names, specific organization names) was altered or not included in an effort to support study participant confidentiality as well. Any information included about a participant in the study was done so with approval by the participant during the member checking process.

The data has been stored in a password-protected database accessible only to the researcher, principal investigator, and professional transcriber. Recordings will be deleted upon direction of the principal investigator and the NEU IRB so as to protect the privacy and confidentiality of study participants (NIH PDF, 2008). The researcher will continue to adhere to all requirements set forth by NEU’s IRB. The transcriber employed made a commitment to maintain confidentiality as well.
Chapter Four: Results

As I worked to carefully weave together and share the study results in Chapter Four, important goals continued to resurface and keep me on track- to share the voices and real world experiences from those currently working in this still-evolving field that others may learn directly from them, and to do so in a manner that is accessible and readily digested. I took my cue from my own needs as a busy pioneer transition specialist/coordinator (TSC)- I was always eager to hear how others do it so that I can learn and apply knowledge to my own ever-evolving practice in the future. My experience with the transition field has thus far been that when you step back from all the technical terms, mandates, and jargon, many of the individual expectations, goals and methods are often really quite common sense. It’s just that successfully putting it altogether into practice on behalf of each student can prove to be quite complicated and complex.

This chapter will begin with brief introductions of the four participants in this study. One might note that typical demographic information (e.g., age, location, etc.) is not shared. This was intentional. Actual participant names and locations have been replaced with pseudonyms to honor confidentiality for each participant. Any participant information included was approved by each participant through the member checking process. Following the introductions, the next section provides the study results in three sections. The three sections are the actual “restorying” (Creswell, 2012b) of the study participants’ experiences as TSCs over time. The three restorying sections are organized by the initial interview protocol questions, designed to share these pioneers’ work experiences as they unfold over time. The first section covers beginning work experiences as a pioneer TSC, the second section shares the participants’ current work experiences, and the third section covers study participants’ thoughts regarding what the future
holds for TSCs. The chapter ends with a summary of the key themes that surfaced and will be explored in Chapter Five.

Meet the Participants

Four participants were recruited purposefully by the researcher for this study. Pseudonyms were assigned by the researcher to replace actual participant names and school districts to provide confidentiality with participant approval. The pseudonyms of the four participants that took part in this study were Lisa, Jennifer, Chris, and Susie. Each of these participants was already known to this researcher- we had interacted on some level professionally in this field. This collegial familiarity and established rapport was extremely helpful in being able to get to the heart of the interviews at hand immediately.

About Lisa

Lisa is a pioneer TSC with over four years on the job at Large City (LC) school district. She is the first and only TSC at LC. In this school district, the TSC is considered a teacher-level position.

About Jennifer

Jennifer is a pioneer TSC with over four years on the job at Big City (BC) school district. She is the first and only TSC at BC. At BC, the TSC is considered a hybrid teacher/administrator position.

About Chris

Chris has over four years of experience on the job as the pioneer TSC at Suburban (SS) school district. At SS, the TSC is considered a teacher-level position.
About Susie

Susie has been the TSC for over seven years at the Small City (SC) school district. At SC, the TSC is considered as an administrative-level position.

**Beginnings: Starting out as a Pioneer TSC**

Every conference or professional development training I attend on transition is often the same in one way for me, regardless of the topic area- I see so many attendees like myself devouring information from workshop sessions, information/resource booths, and from each other. So often I have struck up a conversation with someone random standing next to me (or s/he with me) about our shared passion for the field, and have unexpectedly walked away with a great new idea, understanding, resource, contact, or some serendipitous combination of any or all of that. These are the types of recurring experiences that have been instrumental in leading me to feel determined to conduct this research collecting data from actual, current practitioners, for this has been so very helpful in building my own practice in this challenging, relatively new field in special education.

**Beginning as a Pioneer TSC**

When collecting data for this study, it made sense to start at the beginning of participants’ experiences in this new role, and so that’s how the general interview protocol was structured. While each participant practices as a pioneer TSC in very different environments (e.g., suburb vs. city, large vs. small) at different organizational levels (e.g., teacher vs. administrative vs. hybrid levels within the school district’s organizational chart) and with different system structures and therefore different available resources/staff relationships/routines, there were some striking similarities and differences in their beginning experiences around role description,
barriers, and the selection of initial endeavors to support students with disabilities in their school districts.

**Defining this new TSC Job**

All four participants were consistent in describing entering this new position with a significant lack of clarity about what the position would actually entail as far specific tasks and roles were concerned.

Lisa shared insights about her beginning experiences as a pioneer TSC at LC school district:

… so when I started this was a brand new position, people were a little unsure of what the responsibilities would be of the transition person. They knew that they needed a transition person but they didn't really know why. I think that they had gotten cited on maybe like the … mid-cycle review or something like that... So that was kind-of my first month-ish, was figuring out what we needed as a district…

It was evident from all four participants that this lack of role clarity didn’t deter action on their part. Both Chris and Jennifer shared that while each had a hand in shaping their beginning job descriptions and roles in partnership with their school supervisors, ultimately the final decisions were made by their supervisors. In contrast, Lisa was left to her own to shape her position from the very beginning at LC:

I've really been able to tailor the position to what I felt the district needed… there were an awkward few meetings where I didn't know what my role was supposed to be, the people that I was speaking with were probably like who is this person and why is she talking… but I think that stemmed from the leadership at those schools, and how they approached
their entire departments… I think everyone … wanted me there, I think people wanted someone to talk to about transition… And were glad that there was an identified person but, I think just their communication styles and their leadership styles impacted how I was presented to those groups…

While Lisa noted these differences in introductions impacted how teachers and other staff perceived how and when they should “access” her for support, she also noted that she took the initiative “to clear it up.” She also emphasized: “…people have been extremely supportive, and the administration has been extremely supportive of how I view this role, and how to best utilize my time.” She explained that as she clarified the role expectations more as she went along that first year: “…it was easier for the leaders at the secondary schools to talk to their staff and say this is how we need to use Lisa.”

Jennifer’s position was initially partially created in response to an immediate school district need. It stemmed from a need regarding a specific student’s transition planning and service delivery. Jennifer explained how the role’s structure initially came about:

…Well the boss came up with the draft job description and e-mailed it to me and said you know, does this sound good to you and that sort of thing, it was kind-of like what the boss had in mind to do, and then, and it did sound good, it’s extremely broad and covers a lot of different areas, a lot of different responsibilities.

So while Jennifer’s role began and continues to be largely consultative, effectively providing direct services to this student was a key responsibility during that first year.

Chris shared his experience with the structuring of his new pioneer TSC role in the district, which ended up as a teacher level position: “You know it hadn’t been clearly defined in some
ways… But you know, they had some ideas, and I’d been doing some research … and looking around, workshops and so forth, kind-of … the way I do things…” Ultimately, the final job description was given to Chris, and he added: “I read it and … I think I do most of the things on it, and I probably do some things that aren’t on it.”

Susie not only shaped her role to fit the needs of her students at SC school district, she lobbied for the position in the first place. Susie explained:

…it wasn't really described to me … my interests that led me into doing this… as an occupational therapist I had been given the responsibility to supervise the other OT’s [occupational therapists] and PT’s [physical therapists] in the district, among other things. It gave me this degree of flexibility so I wasn't doing all direct service as a service provider… I was having some administrative time as well. So, it gave me the ability to shape the position, to what I wanted… So, I took it upon myself really to go in and start really collaborating with the teachers and staff in the program that we had which was more like the life skills type program, and that's what really got me into it. So, it wasn't like somebody from above said here Susie do this, and start to get involved in transition. I really, it was grass roots kind of for me, I just did it on my own. So it was pretty loose as far as you know what were my job responsibilities, this wasn't necessarily written into my job responsibilities…

While in two cases the role structure was primarily initially established by the supervisors and in two cases it was largely determined by the pioneer TSC, it became evident during our discussions that a sense of professionalism and trust that “you are the expert” pervaded the establishment of the position role by their school district administrations in all four participants’
experiences. Lisa, Jennifer, Chris and Susie each very enthusiastically voiced their appreciation for the strong support for this new role received by their individual school district administrators from the very beginning.

**Initial Barriers**

A variety of different initial barriers to performing the job were shared by the four study participants, some similar, some not.

Lisa readily identified her three biggest initial barriers when she took on the pioneer job: TSC role expectations confusion, school vs. real-world perspectives, and school staff meeting family requests vs. meeting actual student needs. Lisa’s first barrier was one she’d already described early on in our interview—the position role confusion experienced by teachers and others regarding what she should be doing as a TSC. She explained this initial lack of clarity seemed to also fuel some staff resistance to her position:

… some of them were a little bit more, not wary but, not really sure where I fit in… You know because it’s a teacher level position. So if another… teacher level position is saying well, have we thought about doing something a different way does that hold as much power as if your boss says it?

The second barrier Lisa shared was that of first acknowledging and then determining how best to share her “real-world perspective” on preparing students for transition which was often perceived as in direct conflict with the more school-oriented perspective traditionally held by many stakeholders. She elaborated on this needed shift in perspective, carefully choosing her words:

…sometimes difficult because school people often have a school perspective and it's hard
to have that longer-term view of what are the implications of what we're doing now in the long run or, the reality is that accommodation doesn't exist once you leave high school.

So is it something we should be supporting up to second semester senior year? …so I think those were definitely challenges in the beginning…

She shared two examples of this dilemma regarding students on different behavior plans gaining work experience training in the “real-world” community. She explained that in both instances, long-term behavior plans that had proven effective in the school setting for many years were inappropriate for use in the real-world, yet there was significant resistance to making any change. Lisa explained that there was often much discussion in meetings around this challenge “…having a longer term view of we need to prepare for three years from now when that’s not an option.” She noted that it really was not her consistent gently delivered message around this concern that finally resonated with stakeholders that would lead them ultimately to act differently:

It was seeing the outcomes of what was offered to students when they would leave. When students and teachers would go to look at adult service providers, or programs and realize the ratios were 1 to 6, that being independent was really your gateway to accessing things, so great that the goal is competitive employment, but if you're staffed 1 to 1 and someone is standing next to you, no one's going to be able to find you that… It's as those key people started seeing the reality, they started reflecting on their programming a little bit… I think that group needed to go through that process… to make it real to them…

Lisa also shared an example of an interaction with parents that really surprised her initially but added to her own on-the-job learning process, providing her with helpful insights:
… I remember the first time I met with a group of very strong advocate parents, I was talking about how turning 22, it can be really such a celebration, and a wonderful next step into adulthood and they were mortified and told me that will be the worst day of their child's life, because everything will fall away… that was kind-of an awakening for me because I had come from a place of we did so much support about, around turning 22 and graduating, and really having it be a positive experience that, that was a harsh reality, but I understood that that's where they were coming from… That they were very afraid of what happened… So … with some of the systems that were set up, it probably was not helpful that I brought a different perspective…

The last barrier Lisa shared was a practice by staff of sometimes continuing to keep an accommodation on an IEP “just because a parent wants it “ rather than “figuring out what the student needs versus what the parent wants”. Lisa emphasized in this instance, once again, “I think it’s going through that process, and they need to go through.”

Jennifer had an immediate and very different answer to the beginning barriers question. She stated her most pressing immediate initial barrier was her own response to her new unique professional circumstances, referring to herself “… as a department of one.” She explained:

…I would say that the biggest factor was trying not to be overwhelmed as one person being called to address the needs of a large district, the many, many students and families really that fell into the transition, you know under the transition mandate … I think I spent awhile kind-of with my eyes glazed over [laugh] to just say what is the most important thing here and you know having this kind-of non-structured … job description … how do you balance between working … between state agencies and local agencies,
trying to work with the families … trying to work with the teachers and then you know
obviously why are we doing this, for the students… I spent a while trying to figure out …
what’s first things first, what's the most important thing to do and it's really taken years to
figure that out [laugh] to be quite honest.

As a second barrier, Jennifer also acknowledged some initial resistance by some school
staff who “weren’t necessarily excited that here’s this new person coming around” when she first
arrived. She worked diligently with this group:

… just listening to people and trying to form relationships with them. And not … you
know going crazy trying to make changes, I mean you just listen and like, it was like a
year-long needs assessment, I would say, trying to figure out what was necessary what
could be helpful to the staff, the families and ultimately the students.

Jennifer also shared how grateful she was to be able to make those kind of assessments and use
of time decisions single-handedly, and that it was largely due to “a very supportive administrator
right from the beginning, and I still have that now.”

Chris stated he felt the barriers he faced early on could be categorized into two main
issues. The first was similar in theme to one also shared by Jennifer and Lisa - this was a pioneer
position lacking role clarity and definition. As Chris put it, “I think probably the biggest barrier
is that no one had the job, it had never been done. So, what is it? … but I’ve gone out and defined
it…” He shared that taking transition coursework and talking to many teachers assisted greatly in
how he went about defining the role.

The second barrier Chris needed to address initially was to support finalizing some of the
components and staff for a new program developed to fit needs of students coming up to the post
high school level. He worked to recruit people to effectively develop/provide community-based opportunities for this new program for 18-22 year olds. Chris explained that addressing this was really a process, and explained how just getting out and talking to people is how he still approaches this barrier today:

… It’s a long process and just … talking to one person will direct me someplace else, like I was talking to the (name) guy … he came to the transition resource fair event and he said you know, you need to go over and talk to the people at (name) and that site gave me another contact… here’s another resource, these people can help you with these things, if you’re stuck, or if you want some help with something.

In contrast to experiences described by Jennifer and Lisa, when Chris was asked if there were any barriers regarding staff, he noted how his many years working in the district before had really proven to be a plus when he entered this new pioneer role. Chris sounded content as he summed up his positive reception: “… I really didn’t find any resistance at doing anything … I haven’t run into, no you can’t do that, or that isn’t appropriate for here, I have run into none of that, people have been very supportive.”

Susie shared two key barriers- the lack of time and the challenges of being the one and only pioneer TSC in a large school district.

Susie went into some depth regarding the lack of time: Time, lack of time, lack of staff [pause] well it's not even lack of staff, it's lack of staff time [laugh].” She clarifies what could be misunderstood right away:

…the staffing was pretty good but finding time where they weren't busy with students, because this, this kind of classroom they are all over the place. So, when you have a
teacher and several paraprofessionals, they are not in all one classroom, they are everywhere. They're all over the building, they're out in the community, so finding time to meet with everybody to pull the team together, to train, to do all of that was a big, was a big barrier, and I think will always be a big barrier.

When asked to explain how she has gone about addressing this barrier she carefully describes the many moving parts involved and the never-ending creativity required:

… one of the big things that I tried to do was facilitate staff meetings for that program … and then staff meetings and training for the paraprofessionals, which wasn't happening because they hit the ground running as soon as everybody came in and they were like off, doing what they needed to do. So, it was challenging, and every year I think we tried a different approach… I remember one year saying we’re going to have staff meetings at this time [pause] [sigh] we ran into union issues… and then I remember going around and soliciting, I don’t know if that’s the right word, other staff, can you cover in the classroom with the students while we meet with the teachers and the paraprofessionals.

When asked how that ongoing process worked, Susie explained:

… It would work for a while and, and then it would fizzle… I don't know why… I think, because I was not necessarily a daily presence in the classroom and it was my vision… I know the teacher felt it was valuable but … I think the … paraprofessionals had been … working kind-of how they saw fit, in a lot of ways so, they weren't always open to being trained in how to do things in a different way … it just wasn't part of the natural routine of the classroom up until that point. So it was hard to sustain it, I think over time. So … it would happen if I was there … but I wasn't in a position to always be there …
The second barrier Susie described regarding the pioneer role itself added another dimension to those already shared by the other three participants:

… I didn't have anybody to really go to, I mean I had … the director of pupil services and the high school Special Ed coordinator but, nobody that really knew this area. So I didn't have anybody to mentor or, or to help me with my direction and what I was trying to do there … You just have to figure it out and sometimes it's a little hard to decide which direction to go in because there’s a million things that you could be doing… I think for me personally, prioritizing, what am I going to focus on, was always a challenge.

**Initial Activities on Behalf of Students**

Lisa indicated when she began the position, most of her activities focused on finding and sharing resources and materials with staff, conducting job coach observations, and “just getting my name and face out there.” She also initiated collaborations with others to produce the first ever transition vendor information fair event night for students and families in her district. She noted how helpful her supervisor was in making connections with various stakeholders in the beginning- “… I think another good thing was my supervisor was plugging me into the meetings and groups that she thought I could be useful in, and that they would be useful to me.”

Lisa shared more details regarding the how and why of her early activities as a pioneer TSC:

…they had things, had been cobbled together, but not really a scope and sequence… So a lot of my work … first couple of years were directly with teachers and students... I went to a lot more student IEP meetings then… I think it was trying to get everyone up and running on transition and people at that point weren’t maybe as confident talking about
transition … I feel like any time a parent or an advocate said the word transition the first response would be to call Lisa… I think my first year I had my hand in just about everything across the spectrum of kids with disabilities, mostly at the high school, not so much at the middle school level.

Lisa shared a variety of endeavors she initially engaged in with teachers such as small group instruction on how to conduct vocational assessments, job development, and the like. However, she noted the difficulty that a lack of time posed- sometimes she would complete activities on behalf of students herself due to the pressing time element involved: “…if… we needed to do something, I just did it… As much as … I could, I would try and teach people or facilitate them learning how to do what I was doing…”

Largely because her first year was targeted to meet a specific student’s programming needs in the district, Jennifer’s first year activities were very different than in the following years. She noted that while she offered general consult services as needed, her primary focus given to her that year was “working with this student to, to try and ensure a successful transition into a college setting” through providing direct services such as engaging the student, meeting with the disability services office at the college, and meeting with the family to facilitate the process of learning about the college environment and requesting viable accommodations.

Jennifer shared details regarding the next priority for the job that first year:

…I was told just get to know people, meet people, go out in the community, participate in community meetings. I was asked to work on the state performance plan indicators. So I was kind-of just told go for it and just start networking with people in the community and so I did a lot of, the first year was really spent I think building relationships with
community members that I knew could in turn come back and support our students and families in the district.

Chris’s first year also included significant networking activities among a variety of different groups of people. He shared that he researched and spent time in the community to learn about the different local adult services providers in his region, seeking work experience opportunities for students in the new program, was involved in a transition group, worked with teachers, and acted as liaison with administrators within the high school. He also researched, selected, and posted transition assessment tools and timelines to his district’s website for teachers and others to access as they saw fit on behalf of students. He noted that while these will become valuable tools for staff use in the future, teachers haven’t accessed them much as of yet. When asked why, Chris explained there had been multiple significant changes going on in the school district the past few years: “… So there was just a lot of change and you know you can only absorb so much, and I think the transition piece got put on the back burner a little bit.”

Chris also described a key focus and use of his time during the first year was supporting implementation of that new 18-22 year old program described earlier. Chris shared the networking activities that took place to make this new program happen:

…So I started by calling everybody that I could think of you know that might have space. You know (organization name), the (name) department, and then the guy at the (name) department directed me, he said why don’t you call the (name) department … maybe they have something. So I did and he said yeah, you know we think we can work with you… while I was talking to the (name) director, they have a van they use for, primarily for programs and weekends … so we ended up with that, that’s the van we use for an awful
lot of our transportation… so it’s kind-of neat, you have three different … agencies cooperating in this one program which I think it’s kind-of unique.

Susie’s early endeavors were determined by her based on her assessment of the needs of her district. She chose to focus primarily on refining how they worked to meet needs of the students primarily in the life skills classroom. With this broad goal in mind, Susie initiated several activities with her staff including reassessing current job development and data collection practices, and providing training on how “to write IEP goals together” to a variety of staff (e.g., teachers, related services staff such as psychologists, OT, SLP, and PT ). Susie explained her targeted efforts on behalf of this classroom need in more detail:

…A big effort was to try to expand the curriculum to look beyond the classroom… doing more community, more or maybe better, better thought out, or … more systematic [pause] approaches to being out on a jobsite, like a work training site or a volunteer site … to do that more systematically with data collection and really looking at why are they there. It was a little looser back then, so they were just, they were going out and doing some of these things which was terrific but they weren't necessarily operationalizing it, they weren't necessarily taking data and really having clear individual student goals about why that student was at that site, which in fact is still something that I'm working on [laugh] all these years later…

Re-assessing how the district had approached job development for individualized student work experiences over the years was key to meeting Susie’s overall goal. Susie noted that for a while an in-house staff member provided this function, but most recently an outside agency had been retained to do this. In the past, one of the special education administrators oversaw the job
development role, but as Susie noted: “but it wasn't anybody that had the interest and the involvement at the level I had.” The re-assessment of job development practices then fell to her, for as she noted good-naturedly, “So, that stemmed from my having already stepped in on my own and saying this is an area where I really want to work and expand. So then, as a result of that, it became mine ...”

Successful Early Activities

Now that I had a sense of what the priorities were for the job in the beginning, I wanted to learn more about the early successes that these pioneer TSCs experienced. I intentionally left the question open-ended rather than asking about a specific category or transition domain, as I wanted to be sure each participant chose what was deemed most successful to him/her.

Lisa identified facilitating “collaboration” among school staff stakeholders to be by far the most successful past endeavor she’s engaged in, and one that continues in her district today. She described in detail how determining with whom and how to go about collaborating with others is a very thoughtful, intentional process:

… I think collaboration with people that were interested in transition was a very successful endeavor in getting together with people that wanted to talk about transition and make changes, has worked. So collaboration through professional learning communities… every summer I've written a proposal for summer curriculum money, to bring people together over the summer, anywhere from like one to three or four days to talk about transition, come up with a product, that way people are involved in the process, have a little bit more buy-in, it’s their voice involved in coming up with something.

Lisa explained that they collaborated with several staff stakeholders in this manner to develop a
transition planning brochure for the district: “… I think people liked that… and they’re utilizing the tools because they helped build them.”

Lisa pointed out that for the first time setting up this summer institute, with prior administrative approval, she hand selected the participants based on their interest in the topic of transition. This first-summer collaborative group created useful products for the district that included transition surveys, post-secondary planning surveys, a transition resource-sharing method, and a wiki with transition resources that school staff as well as students and families could all access. She noted that while additional time and money weren’t available during the school year for staff to collaborate in this way, they were available during the non-school summer months. Ensuing summer collaboration workshop participants since then have not been hand-picked, and have been opened up to all staff and have been well received.

Jennifer stated that one of the projects accomplished of which she is “proudest of” is the development of a transition resource fair. This annual event is held in the evening so families and students can all attend. It is an event in which several different local adult service providers that students may want to learn about and access upon exiting public school each host a resource table to share informational materials, contact information, and answer general questions. Jennifer attended a colleague’s Transition resources fair, and decided to organize her own. She describes what an effective tool it is for all involved:

… I feel that it is, it’s a way to make me feel like I’m being effective in a large district…so that will be something that I'll continue for as long as I’m in the position because there are so many families, and it’s a way to reach them, to invite them to come in and receive information in this format that they’re, you know they’re hitting a lot of
different resources in one place.

When asked if she assembled this transition resources fair event by herself, she indicated that she did it alone the first year, but started reaching out to others in subsequent years when the first one was clearly deemed a success: “…and then the second year I was, felt more comfortable asking for help… It’s increased in size in terms of attendance as well which thrills me… they look forward to it every year.” Her district’s special education parent advisory committee (SEPAC) now collaborates with her on this successful informational event supporting students and their families.

Chris shared three main endeavors he felt have been particularly successful, and that he plans to continue. The first he discussed was a transition resources fair in which he collaborated with other districts to provide on his campus last year, very similar in format and goal to Jennifer’s event for students and their families.

The second successful endeavor Chris shared was also an informational event created to benefit students and families directly as well. This event came about when a representative from a nearby college contacted Chris and offered to collaborate on an event regarding disability services (DS) in college. This event targeted potential college students and their families interested in this information. Presenters included both DS college staff, as well as actual previous students who had been through the college process and were willing to share their experiences in this forum. Chris was clearly pleased with the interest and (required) attendance of this first event. Chris indicated another year they did a similar event, but just for the students in-house with previous school district students that had attended college sharing their experiences. He emphasized with apparent satisfaction: “It was one of the best programs we
ever did… kids were transfixed for an hour, high school seniors.” We each commented on how meaningful it must be for students to learn from others who have actually experienced this transition to college. Chris shared his disappointment in a lower attendance experienced at last year’s event, but explained:

…last year we didn’t make it mandatory and the attendance was poor and we were really disappointed only about 20 kids maybe, you know the year before we had 50 or 60 or 70. And this year we’re going to make it mandatory for all our seniors, and they’re going to have to write a little reflection afterwards.

Chris shared that this next year the event will be changed up and expand yet even a little more, with the addition of a parent’s connection with another college presenting at the event as well.

The third success Chris decided to share was a school-based collaboration he initiated during his second year that he referred to as “the gang of four, to be subversive.” It has gained traction and become a very productive collaborative work group involving four high school staff including both special education and general education leaders: the TSC (Chris), special education department head, career vocational specialist, and the guidance department head. They meet regularly to brainstorm ideas to support transition and all are willing “to pool resources” from each of their departments to make things happen, collaborating on successful events supporting students with and without disabilities transitioning to adult life roles.

Regarding this question about early successful activities, Susie decided to return to the paraprofessionals and job development concerns she shared earlier during the initial barriers discussion. Susie described how she was able to leverage her OT knowledge and administrative duties to facilitate both a new way of best supporting the life skills classroom staff and improve
the work training experiences for students:

…when I started coordinating OT services in the district, the OT role in that classroom was you know, they might go in for a half an hour to work on something with a student, but they weren't really programmatically involved, they weren't really part of the classroom. So I was able to negotiate with administration to have a COTA [certified occupational therapy assistant] in there full time as classroom staff, and that COTA over time took on more and more responsibilities as far as setting up some of the in-house, like the coffee shop and things like that… because what was happening was the paraprofessionals were on their own without, I mean they were trained in how to work with the students and what to do there, but they didn't have the background training that this COTA had to be able to really look at the systems and the setup of the worksites, and what are we working on and how do you do that, and making sure that everybody that covers that site is consistent in how they do that…”

It was evident Susie was thrilled with this accomplishment, a win-win for both issues at hand. She wrapped up sharing, “Getting approval for the COTA to be in there full time instead of just a little bit of the day, had never, I mean that was a big deal.”

The key theme that permeated all of the pioneers’ successful activities shared was that of collaboration. Be it with stakeholders, colleagues, exploring new resources and/or relationships, each TSC developed or enhanced collaborations at different levels to effectively support their students in transition. It was interesting to note here that each seemed very driven in engaging in this process; none shared any confusion around how to go about this process of collaboration.
Background/Experiences/Factors Supporting Pioneer Role

Study participants shared a rich array of previous work and educational experiences in addition to current elements supporting each of them in this new role as a pioneer TSC.

Lisa shared that her previous work and educational training was not in the schools, as she originally hailed from the vocational rehabilitation field. She shared: “I wasn't trained as a school person- that has been helpful because we’re getting ready to transition kids to the real world and not to another school setting. I think that was a useful perspective to bring in.” She also noted she has continued to participate in additional educational programs and experiences that have proven helpful in her role as a pioneer TSC.

Jennifer also came to this new role with a varied background that includes experiences that she feels have not only enhanced her understanding of the TSC position needs, but her ability to appreciate other stakeholders’ perspectives and needs as well. She explains:

… I’ve lived in different states and worked in different places… I think seeing things at different levels, you learn from them. These experiences working in various positions, teaches you the big picture. So that’s employment I would say, influence of different employment. I have a couple of degrees, one with a counseling focus and one with an education focus, so that really shows you the perspective of families and the importance of engaging with families. So that has, I think been critical, and just being a teacher too. You know being able to say yeah, I know, I know you have a lot to do [laugh], I know it’s all on you and I’m sorry...

A genuine sense of understanding and appreciation for all people involved in transition really shined throughout the interview, but especially as Jennifer spoke here.
Chris noted one of the biggest strengths he brought to this position was that he had spent several years as a teacher working in the same school system he is currently the pioneer TSC. Many things he was able to readily accomplish as a beginning TSC, he attributes to the fact that he already knew the staff, the school and how it operated, the region, and even some helpful communication network connections were already established. As Chris put it:

…I’m not sure that someone else could have walked into that, the way I did, just because I’ve worked here for … years and knew everybody and everybody knew me and had confidence that if Chris was coming up with an idea, it’s probably a half decent idea, we shouldn’t just reject it out of hand, you know… as far as the system, the people, I knew how to negotiate…knew it from a lot of different angles…

Susie pointed out three main factors that have supported her as a pioneer TSC that she felt strongly about to share: her education and experience as an occupational therapist (OT), ongoing participation in a regional TSC community of practice (CoP), and her recent completion of transition coursework provided free by the state’s department of education. She elaborated a great deal on the first two.

Regarding the regional Transition CoP she explained:

… the transition coordinator community of practice … is a group of us who have met monthly and just share what we’re doing and problem solve together and share ideas and … things that people have done and it's extremely helpful to hear what people are doing in other districts. You know … what really comes out of that is that every district and program is doing it differently. There are no two districts that are the same. It is amazing when … the more you hear from other districts the more you realize that it's so unique to
the district and the set-up of the district and the student population and the area you’re in … that’s been extremely helpful.

From there, Susie launched into her self-professed passion for the field of OT and how it has helped her substantially working as a pioneer in this field. She noted that she originally started working for an adult agency providing services to adults with developmental disabilities when she finished her OT degree. She gained experiences in many venues, including a state program for adults with developmental disabilities, group homes, and a day-hab. Susie shared, “It's been huge in shaping, first of all my interest in working with students with developmental disabilities but then just having that experience of what to do in these areas of transition … that's my background, so that's been a big help.” Susie continued on her what she good-naturedly referred to as her “soapbox” with an enthusiastic description of the great fit that exists between OT and transition:

… I mean our whole mission as OT's is to … address the things that are important to an individual to be able to live the life that they want to live and all of those areas. We were trained in task analysis, we adapt, we modify through assistive technology, adaptive equipment … we do all those pieces- travel training, work training, independent skills, self-care, all of those aspects. … so that's been a huge thing, and OT also has a background, and I know I'm selling OT, I don't mean to be but, it's just such a good fit- we have a psychosocial background where we know mental health issues as well. Some OT’s work in mental health facilities, so we have that piece too. So we really can look at the whole person… not that OT’s need to be the lead person on this, but involving them in whatever way in your district or your school system makes sense, is I think an important thing...
The next section of this chapter will share the four pioneer TSCs’ current experiences navigating the transition field on behalf of their students.

**Present Experiences**

**Current Role/Activities- Changes from Past**

Each participant reflected over how their position has changed to how it operates currently. Each had both continuing elements as well as significant changes to report when compared to the earlier, beginning pioneer TSC days.

Lisa indicated that over time her position’s structure and expectations by others have definitely changed- and for the better. There’s no longer confusion about who she is or what her role entails. It seems the groundwork she laid early-on has paid off. As she explains:

… I think it's much clearer that I'm a consultant to teams by and large. If people have questions they can call me, families can call me for questions and clarifications, but that I am not expected to be at IEP meetings. I think originally some people just wanted me at meetings so they could check that box off, like we have someone to talk about transition, check it off.

She explained how people access her is generally pretty informal- they might stop her in the hallway, or call or email and make an appointment, or she will go meet them in their building. She shared an example of limited time well spent:

… I will meet with families if there is a very targeted, specific question. So one family had a lot of questions around Social Security and guardianship and that's something that the case manager just wanted me to be there to talk about with them and that made
sense... Because of my background, I just have more knowledge on that than a teacher would. And that was a better use of my time than sitting in an IEP meeting for a kid that was going to college ... to figure out reasonable accommodations... you don't need me there to do that.

Lisa also noted that part of her role has become to build capacity within the school district “to kind of expand people that are go-to’s for transition... So, now I kind-of have identified in about half of the secondary schools, who my go-to transition people are, if people within that building have questions.” She explained that given the large size of the district and the many buildings involved, it just makes sense to have nearby knowledgeable staff to go to for assistance rather than always seeking her. The new “go-to’s” were identified by Lisa based on their expressed interest in transition. In one case it is a staff member whose role has been formally changed and time realigned to allow for this new role. In two other cases, the role isn’t a formal arrangement. As Lisa put it, “It makes sense, collaborate with someone ... so I try and help them figure out those natural ... supports which seem really obvious to me, but sometimes they aren't.” She shared a recent example of how she has facilitated a new way of thinking and acting by staff in her district. A middle school staff member asked Lisa if she had a sample completed document available to share. She continued with the story:

... at the time I didn't have anything middle school specific and I said well no, and I could create something but why don't you talk to the people over at the school who are doing it actively. And that had never really dawned on them, which again is surprising. But I think because it's so big, schools kind-of again, get their smaller lenses, and they see Lisa is the transition person ... I'm going to call Lisa. Instead of, let me look to my colleagues.
A last role change for Lisa is one she elected to build in for “her own professional satisfaction.” She really missed directly working with students in year one of this new job and also saw a critical programming need to fill. She now conducts a weekly transition seminar for students ages 18-22. Through this single shift, she’s meeting two goals. As Lisa explained, it’s an opportunity to work with students, plus an effective means for the various related services and teaching staff to work in unison “connecting all those dots together.”

Regarding change, Jennifer shared:

… Yes, it certainly has changed; it’s ever changing and ever evolving as I sit here right now [laugh]. I’ve talked a lot about year one already, years two through four were very distinct and very different. My job changed a lot from the original description for those years (two through four).

Jennifer agreed that while her job tasks had changed during those years in order to spend time on a short-term project, her formal job responsibilities on paper did not reflect that.

Chris shared that his role and expectations have changed in that he has begun to do more direct formal transition evaluations with students in recent years. He noted he thinks it is because transition has become “such a hot topic”. He expressed his concern with this somewhat new and possibly growing practice at SS: “I’m not sure that I agree with that because we know it’s supposed to be ongoing, you don’t need this formal, locked into the 60 day time frame.” He also indicated that while completing the evaluations was currently falling on his shoulders, he was not actively offering to do them. He suggested this may be because he’s the “transition coordinator so doesn’t it make sense that Chris do it? ... that’s sort of the mindset….” Chris also noted he’s started providing more direct services with students such as visiting community
colleges and talking to professors, and visiting the local center for independent living. In Chris’s case, his role and responsibilities have changed a lot, but on paper they appear the same.

Susie shared that the major shift in her role has been that while she began as a “hybrid” (part direct service OT, part administrator), she is now 100% administrator. She shares the implications of this shift in duties:

… secondary transition is one of the things I'm responsible for and it is only one of five other big things like that... So, what it's done is, it's made it really important that I have staff on board, and you know staff initiators, because I'm really directing staff, I'm training staff, I'm putting systems in place and directing staff. I'm not hands-on with the students … my role is not to work directly with the students, my role is to make all this happen by working with the staff.

New and Ongoing Barriers

Changes in barriers over time became clearly evident for all four study participants. While some initial barriers either fell away or continued to evolve, a variety of new barriers to address made themselves known to the pioneers.

Lisa shared that while the initial barrier regarding TSC role confusion had been effectively addressed over time, the real world versus school world challenge continued. Plus, a new barrier had become evident- regarding working with families.

In response to this new barrier, Lisa now spends time to “support people having tough conversations with families.” She shared an example in which staff wrote an IEP goal for a student, not so much based on student need, but to make the parents happy: “…I think a lot more I'm trying to help people feel more confident going into meetings and talking to parents… I think
it's an ongoing process, people have definitely started pushing a little bit more…” She noted sometimes inaccurate information dispersed to families about transition seems to fuel this barrier she sometimes comes across: “… I think a huge barrier is people getting the wrong information about transition, so people being like families and advocates and coming in feeling very strongly about something that's not true and that puts staff in a tough position…” Lisa described another aspect of this barrier involving parents/families:

… Just getting buy-in… getting parents involved more in a proactive way in seeing what their role is in transition… I think getting them to see that they have a huge piece of this transition and that transition doesn't just come from school because it can't all come from school. That it's still really important to have your student have responsibilities at home and have chores and you can take the bus with your child and teach them how to take the bus, it doesn't necessarily have to come from the school. So I think helping families see that that's a critical component of transition has been a barrier because they may have gone to a workshop and heard like, but the school’s supposed to take care of everything. And then you don't want it to be an adversarial relationship but, it's, we’re all working on this, it's a collaborative effort…

Jennifer happily shared that any initial resistance to this new job at BC had disappeared, that her efforts had paid off: “Now I have relationships with people, I think they like working with me and I don’t have an abrasive type of personality so I think you know, people have warmed-up to the idea of someone being in the job.”

However, Jennifer had two new current barriers she now actively addresses: the staff’s perceptions of “…the big bad dirty word of transition assessment…”, and getting needed
transition post-school services information out to families effectively. Jennifer shared her strategies for how she works with the transition assessment process concern with staff:

… I think it's a matter of framing things in the right context too. Showing them how transition, it's already being done, and if it's not being done say on your years when informal assessment is more required than you know if there’s not a three-year re-eval happening that year that you know, what simple things you can do to have a transition assessment and then just document it. So this is the new training that I’m going to be trying to roll out this year with the teachers, and the guidance department as well. So that we’re capturing what’s already happening too, that the teachers don't feel totally overwhelmed. I know I’ve been a teacher so I know how much there is to do and you don’t want to pile something in addition. But you know, my big message is that transition is not, it’s not an add-on it’s the reason that we’re doing what we’re doing, to have kids have a successful fulfilling life when they leave us.

The barrier regarding getting families to attend the helpful informational transition events was proving to be more elusive to Jennifer than she’d anticipated. She shared that she’s tried many different advertising strategies- direct phone calls, mailings- but still events targeting families are often not well attended. She thinks it may have nothing to do with the mode of communication, it’s more likely a broader issue at play:

…I feel like a lot of it has to do with the families don’t know what they don't know. They don't know that there’s a 10-year waiting list to get in … housing... I mean a 10-year waiting list, I mean that’s you know if your child is 20 right now, they’re not going to come off the list until they’re 30. So, I mean that has such implications in terms of what's
out there for families and students after they leave us. So a barrier is that people don't know what they don't know.

Chris noted that he really wasn’t experiencing new barriers, the initial barriers just continue to evolve and change, which necessitates ongoing assessment of program needs on his part. As he stated: “Every program evolves as you go along and you do more of this or less of that…”

Susie shared an immediate strong response to the question of current barriers: “… the biggest barrier is the high school schedule.” She articulated more on this very involved, ongoing barrier:

…student schedules, courses, requirements for graduation, and, and how the scheduling system works and the immovable parts of the schedule make it really hard to provide the transition related things within the structured academic schedule. So finding ways to work transition into the student schedules is a challenge…

Susie explained their high school is on a six day cycle, whereas the real work world is generally a five day schedule. She continues: “…So, setting up a schedule for these students is a nightmare… so that is the biggest barrier, hands down, bigger than time and staffing … well it is time related, that we don't have the flexibility in the schedule.”

Susie also noted a particularly difficult scenario to work through that can sometimes surface is regarding students staying in school for an additional fifth year, which is intended to work solely on transition activities. Sometimes students may still need school hours allocated to continue to do work in academic subjects, thereby cutting into time planned for needed transition activities. When asked how she tries to go about addressing this, she shared some strategies
along with additional insights:

... Well, we’re continually changing, we’re continually adapting … what works one year doesn't seem to work the next year. So, we have to be really flexible in a sense, and the other challenge is that the student population changes. So we might have you know, a bunch of students, several students who have really, pretty intense transition needs, and we’ll set up a program for them. Like at one point, we had a class … it was an elective class and ... actually it could have been two, three, four, five, or six days a week, depending on the students’ schedules, and there were plenty of students who needed that class… and that was a terrific class. The following year, there were some students who needed that but, there was no way that their schedules would come together that they could all be in that class together, they would have been … five different times a day, five different periods of the day and you can't staff that… it doesn't work.

She continued to explain some of the many intricacies of addressing this never-ending barrier:

... So the class didn't happen that year, even though there was student need and we had to try and find other ways to address student need, like through our transition seminars and through more individualized stuff, pulling them out of other classes periodically, which isn't great. So we find that every year we’re modifying and changing and kind-of going with what we have as far as the constraints in the high school schedule and the student population that we have and it's hard [laugh] so we don't have it fully addressed but, we do the best we can.

The existence of a variety of changing barriers and the dilemma regarding how best to manage them presented as a constant issue for these four practitioners. Here, I think it is useful
to note that in some cases identified barriers surfaced later in the interview rather in direct response to this question. Those responses were shifted to this segment whenever they seemed to fit here better. It is unclear why this happened. It is possible this delayed response could be due to the conversational style and flow of the interview protocol used. As a group, the four participants come across as very “glass half full vs. half-empty” types of people- perhaps it could be the that the word “barrier” was perceived as somewhat negative by the respondents.

**Current Activities Now**

All four study participants noted that their activities as pioneer TSCs now included continuations of previous activities, but with some refinements to them as well as some new activities they’ve put in place based on assessment of individual district needs.

Lisa shared an activity she’s concentrating on currently is to provide effective professional development on targeted transition topics for school district staff. When asked how she determines the topics she needs to cover, she explained that it’s really a continuous assessment process on her part once transition “basics” had been covered:

… I kind-of looked around and figured out okay what are the pockets of things that we need to address, so working on people accessing resources- we need to set up a system for them to access interest inventories so I'm not the person always sitting with the kid and doing it… How can they get their hands on different tools. So … I did a training on that.

Lisa explained she learned what staff needed most by asking them directly:

This year I sent a survey out to all the middle school and high school staff to gauge where they felt confident in in transition planning and topics that they would like to learn
more about… I already knew I was going to do something on transition assessment but what came out of that was also people identified three or four other topics they really wanted information on- very targeted specific topics.

She seemed pleased with this process as she shared, “I think the survey was kind of a really good way to gauge where they were and also again have their voice involved.” We discussed somewhat two currently elusive challenges to this process though, that some people don’t know what they don’t know, and “… some people don’t want to deal with it.” Lisa noted providing follow-up training to support these initial trainings can prove challenging due to time barriers around staff discussed earlier. However she was happy to report she had recently been able to secure approval to provide workshops during the day in which staff can earn professional development points.

Given the constant staff turnover issue in her school district, Lisa is also determined to begin work on a general how-to manual staff can access regarding general procedural issues in transition, such as the school district referral process to appropriate state adult agencies. She feels creating this manual and then handing it out as well as identifying a central location for it should be helpful for current and future staff, plus save her time by not having to train on the same things over and over again: “I think now my job is a lot of looking forward and what can we do to help support staff.”

Jennifer’s current work this year will be focused primarily on researching post school transition resources and sharing that vital information with families. She expressed how critically important this is to the district she serves:

… I think that I continue to try and bring the outside in as much as possible and try and
bring resources into the district that we don't necessarily know exist, that can provide services to families and students. I think the community is pivotal and the families and the students don't know what they don't know, and don't know what they don’t have … this community is rich with resources so it's a matter of finding things out and then kind-of helping the families to know about it … I work really closely with different contact people in state agencies to try and have the families know that … the services don’t come to them after they leave us, and we don't want them, the students falling off a cliff…

Her obvious, sincere concern shines through as she elaborates further why focusing energy on this endeavor is so very important for the students and families:

… You know they’ve been with us, sometimes until they’re 22 and what happens the day the bus doesn’t come anymore? And so trying to help the families understand that the special education that they knew as an entitlement that, that’s gone. … I think that that's the most important activity that I try and engage in, everything I do is kind-of framed with that in mind, and a lot of it does have to do with connecting students and families with what's available after high school.

Jennifer carefully clarifies that while this resource information is important to share with families, it’s all about only making the connections. She never advises them on a decision. For example, she shares: “You know if a family asks, I say it’s a family decision and I can point you in the direction of that resource about how you can apply for it but I’m not going to say yes you should have guardianship or no, you should not.”

Chris shared that this year he will continue to refine and provide the informational events for students and families and update the website resources as he has done in years past. He
Anticipates he will likely do more and more individual transition evaluations as family requests continue to grow in the district, despite his thoughts about that take on the practice of providing transition assessment. An endeavor he believes will grow and he clearly believes in, is supporting students in the career development process individually. This endeavor can entail developing and/or facilitating several different student activities, such as informational interviews, summer work experiences, internships, conducting interest assessments, collaborating with the career specialist, and seeking community service opportunities based on student strengths, interests, preferences, and goals. He explains how he is able to find and provide these highly customized learning experiences for these students:

… Well usually … those informational interviews, those are usually things I’ve set-up and usually its contacts that I’ve made, just by working here … So you know, I’ve used contacts like that, and you know just asking around, do you know anybody who does X, Y and Z.

Listening to Chris it becomes evident he comfortably goes with the flow and works as necessary to support a student’s career development process, which can often be a highly individualized path rather than a prescribed and direct one.

Susie shared four different activities she has recently been focusing on: setting up staff PD workgroups to address “transition needs of all students with disabilities at the high school level”, enhanced collaboration with general educators and participation in the district’s annual college fair event for families, supporting the marketing of a new social club implemented by staff for students with and without disabilities, and changing the current staffing model to improve overall community-based job development and training efforts for students.
Susie described how she went about designing the staff PD workgroups and why she feels this has been a successful endeavor. She emphasized a key component to this is that PD money (e.g., stipends) and/or PD points are awarded for staff engaging in this activity. She begins with providing training for the group, but then they take off from there. She shared the importance of her not always driving everything, that she facilitate the process of the workgroup members taking a need and developing a product themselves, and how she tries to go about that:

…sometimes you have to, I don't know what the word is, muster, garner, interest [laugh], so I would do that, I would offer professional development and yes you would already have to have some interest to take that but … teachers need professional development … and if they take that and it sparks an interest, a course or a workshop or a series of workshops on transition, that helped to bring people on board to understand what transition is all about and then they would be more engaged in it, they’d go back and try things with their students, and so it was good… Then what really helps is if you get these workgroups together and they are setting up these systems… but the fact that all these other staff have been involved in these workgroups and they are speaking up and they're already doing it and they are saying yeah you can do it this way, yeah you can do it that way … it helps the buy-in for the teachers who weren't involved in the workgroups. It's not just me telling them what to do, it's this … group of their peers that are involved also.

Susie also elaborated on her successful collaboration efforts in the district’s annual college fair event for students and families. In the past, college fair night was hosted by general education staff, and special education would offer pre-event informational sessions on disability topics for interested students and families. That was a great start, but it was essentially two separate endeavors taking place on the same night. Susie describes the major shift that’s occurred
over the last couple years:

… the first time we did it, … we weren’t really linked, I mean we did it on the same night but we weren’t really planning it together or anything like that, we weren’t advertising it together. Now the advertising goes out together, it’s posted on the website together … it’s not that separate thing, it’s part of it. So that just happened by being consistent and doing it and, and really collaborating more with the guidance department…

Clearly this was a very meaningful accomplishment to Susie, as she triumphantly wrapped up this story sharing:

… So the huge part is that it’s now really just part of the college fair… I don’t know if it sounds big, but it’s a big deal because now we’re part of it and [the principal] this year gave a shout-out, a kudos to the college fair but also a very specific one to the Special Ed info-session…

The last key current activity area Susie expanded upon in depth regards how she wound up addressing the concern she voiced early on about developing more individualized job training experiences for students. A full-time OT staff person’s time and location have been reassigned to meet this high priority. Susie explained how she was able to accomplish this and why:

… we let the outside agency who was doing some of the work site activities go … we didn't renew their contract and we took that money and we put it towards her … because we felt like the outside agency…didn't know the students enough to really do the best job that could be done as far as placing students … developing individualized student work experiences. They just didn't know the students, and they were never going to know the students because they were an outside group and they were just coming in to do certain
things ... so we went ... back to an in-house staff and ... not having the money to have a full-time person to do this, again, OT seemed like a really good way to go because we have this whole skill set around all of the transition areas, it just is a really good fit, and OT is often more flexible because OT's don't have a classroom, just how we work in the schools is different than a teacher...

She continued to explain more about why she facilitated this major change in depth, all the while good-naturedly apologizing for her very positive “bias” about the OT profession:

... occupational therapy in general is well-suited to transition, because we are trained in all of those areas. What we’re looking at, increasing independence, we’re looking at how to help people who happen to have disabilities to be able to function and do the things that they want to do that are important to them in life. So how are they going to hold a job, how are they going to get a job, what kind of job can they do, how can we modify that job? ... can they do their self-care activities, have you trained someone in improving independence in self-care and independent living skills? I mean, OT's do all of that stuff, that's what were trained to do. So it's like this awesome fit that you know schools, I think a lot of schools have yet to realize that they have these OT's there and they may not even be working at the high school level at all. So ... she's out there trying to do that, to meet the needs of individual students ... it's really around what do these students specifically need and so that's a piece we haven't really had before.

**Lessons Learned from the Past**

When the study participants reflected on past pioneer TSC experiences and lessons learned they will use now and in the future, a common consideration seemed to be regarding *how*
to best approach their work activities.

Lisa shared her experiences and thought process on this:

… I think now I know the key people to go to and the people I have to go to, to get something done. Because it's important to get people's voices and understand their perspectives but I think before I learned how to get stuff done, I was taking too much time of listening to too many people… I think it definitely varies by situation I think there's also just naturally people that I work very well with, that I can go to and align myself with to get things done… because we work well together, we have a good vision together, and then there's also just the key power people that if … I need something to happen I can go to the administration and say look I really need …

She explained this shift took time getting to know the environment, it couldn’t have started off that way without time to assess the situation, or as she put it” Because I think that first year or two was just like putting Band-Aids on things and trying to figure out where we were.” She noted part of this was also her own learning curve in the job:

… I think I didn't understand [pause] how to get my message across in an efficient way … that it is okay to go to the department chair and say I still need 10 minutes of your time to talk to your whole department… I was always doing program evaluation, but I have the flexibility to do that much more dynamically now.

She wrapped up her thoughts:

… It's a balance of getting buy-in from everyone but not getting bogged down in hearing everyone else's voices so that the end result doesn't get lost. So it's like all right let's get
buy-in, let’s have people’s perspectives, but the reality is we still need to do these 3 things, so let’s figure out how to do them effectively together.

It was evident Jennifer had also really reflected on this question. She stated:

… The training that I’m providing to the staff is different now… my training is different than it was at first, and I try and make it as bottom-line as this is what you need to know, you know? Transition’s been in the law for decades, but in the shadow of things …

Jennifer explains how she tries to see the needs and expectations by putting herself in their shoes:

… if I put myself in the position of a teacher I would think, do I have to know about SSI, do I have to know about guardianship, do I have to know about transportation and, but no it’s, it’s not, you know I don’t want to overwhelm people… So … if I’m training the people who run the meetings, my training is vastly different for them … teachers don’t need to know about that stuff. They need to know about how can I come to an IEP team meeting and effectively participate and bring the information that’s needed, and how can I support the students. So, I would say that what I’ve learned is how to tailor to the audience what it is that you’re doing in terms of professional development.

She seemed to emphasize this targeted training plan again as we wrapped up this segment:

“What people need to know, what do they need to know.”

Susie chose to highlight how she’s changed her approach on providing the family/student informational night events based on lessons learned. She noted changes are simply because there’s accumulated knowledge and experience now regarding basic logistics:

… I know the drill now, I know the routine, I know who, because there's all sorts of
guidelines too, about making sure you contact everybody, including students who are out of district, like there's all these regulations… that I didn't know when I first set out on this path… so once you’ve kind-of have done that stuff then it becomes much easier in a sense to perpetuate.

This question’s responses served as a reminder that even a group of knowledgeable, proactive specialists in the field, must be continually learning, assessing, reflecting on practice, and creatively seeking to do better. Aspects of many of their stories really resonated with my own experiences as pioneer TSC. Change is constant, and there’s always something new to learn and do.

**Challenging Activity to Consider Now**

While this question was originally intended to explore challenging transition initiatives that these four pioneer TSCs might like to address someday, it became clear as each answered that they were sharing challenging initiatives that they were already in the midst of working on at some level.

Lisa shared that she had two big challenges for which she already has plans in the works—shifting the beginning of IEP meetings to focusing on the student’s vision, and strengthening the development of students’ self-determination skills. She shared her thought process around strategizing the latter challenge to address the concerns involved in a goal of this nature:

… I think having a focus on self-determination skills would be awesome. I think if it's packaged like that people will not buy into it, they’ll say that sounds really nice, great, self-advocacy but that that won't be as meaningful. So I think we need to package it as, with this whole transition assessment initiative that we’re moving forward on. Because
transition assessment and self-determination really work together if you get a kid more involved with doing assessment tools, learning about themselves, they’re going to advocate more for themselves, be a more active participant in the planning process.

Lisa continued to talk about how change, even a small seemingly insignificant change, can be difficult to make happen at LC. She shared the example that IEP meetings are always held in specific rooms within each building at LC, each building has very ingrained routines that way. Going back to the idea of pushing self-determination, she said she really felt part of the underlying dilemma is that some staff don’t understand the concept themselves, plus everyone already has so many other priorities supporting students (e.g., test prep, homework). It was clear Lisa truly appreciated and accepted the staff’s predicament regarding teaching self-determination skills; with these points in mind she was also ready with a plan of action to try out. First, Lisa suggested what might be going through a staff person’s mind: “…I don't understand what self-determination is so how am I going to teach it to a kid? And how am I going to help them realize anything about themselves when I don't realize what this is…” Lisa then restated her understanding of many teachers’ multiple dilemmas and articulated her plan for resolution:

… with so many other bigger pressing things that teachers have to be involved with … I think they might not see the student's self-determination as relevant. So I’m trying to introduce that in conjunction with the transition assessment. So for the middle school I did transition assessment and self-determination together. I showed a video about middle school self-determination skill development … and these are transition assessment tools that you can use with self-determination… It's easier, it's relevant … And the by-product is you’re increasing a kid’s self-determination skills…
Jennifer shared again that rolling out trainings on transition assessment is her current big focus and challenging activity for the year. She, too, shared that she has a basic plan of action in place, and described her next steps:

…my next step is getting out with the teachers in a more intense fashion than I’ve done before and that’s really equipping them with the knowledge about transition assessment and where they can go to do a little quick assessment here and there, and documenting it in the IEP. So, it is challenging because again you’re trying to change the mindsets of folks who think oh, this is just another thing I have to do, but hopefully given the right framing, and given the right tools … So giving the teachers, giving every school a copy of that test kit is an endeavor… and so it’s not just going out and seeing them face-to-face and telling them what they need to know, but it’s also giving them the tools to do it, and maybe making the age appropriate transition assessment binder, giving them that as a resource in their hands.

Jennifer explained the initial trainings will likely be in a group format, but she aspires to follow up with more individualized trainings. A second challenging endeavor Jennifer plans to pursue this year is to provide some parent trainings on more specific transition topics such as transition planning and setting transition goals. She noted that she plans to collaborate with the parent that heads the school district’s SEPAC to consider and decide on session logistics. She learned parents wanted this type of training from survey results provided by their SEPAC last year.

Chris shared that he really didn’t feel there was anything new that would prove challenging coming up. He sounded satisfied with the groundwork he has laid over the past years such as providing staff training workshops and building the website resources and
assessments links, which will be used as a framework to continue to address evolving transition needs. He noted that he will continue to brainstorm and work on ideas that come up with his "gang of four" group of collaborators.

Susie shared three distinct challenges she’s currently setting in motion at some level: providing the more individualized student work-based learning experiences that truly reflect student interests, strengths, preferences, and goals that she’d discussed earlier, researching and developing a program for supporting students in dual enrollment college coursework, and developing a systematic plan for providing travel training to all transition students needing it. The latter two are each still in the research/contemplation stages for Susie.

The concern regarding individualized work training experiences for students came across as most pressing for Susie, but it is also the one in which plans have been made. She describes the dilemma at length here:

…we need to look at student interests, we need to look at student abilities, we need to look at what they like, what they don't like, what they're interested in as far as jobs, work, career… But at the same time, they need to start in an entry-level position… so we need to do that … I struggle with that, that piece of here we are, we have the students who, some of whom may not be going on to college, and we have a responsibility to try and prepare them for work in areas they are interested in that fit their strengths and skills and yet, in reality, we’re not going to jump them right into being a computer game designer overnight and so, so what we end up with is kind of more generic work training sites, and work experiences. So one of my missions or things that I really want to address, find a way to address in a more individualized way, is how do we really do that? How do we
look at the students strengths and interests, preferences … and find something, put them in work training sites and volunteer sites and that kind of thing that are very specific to them, how do we have the staff to support that, if it’s individualized versus having two or three students go out, and how do we find entry-level positions and seek out entry-level positions, or carve out entry-level things in areas that might relate to their interests and preferences and skills. It's a big challenge but that's kind of my focus. Getting away from the more generic experiences and trying to be more individualized. Because what happens after high school is they may or may not ever get to that area of interest, they may end up in that entry level position for the long term. So if we could somehow find some way to get that entry level position be at least in there, related to their area of interest, that's better.

On the one hand Susie seemed frustrated by this career development dilemma, but then we discussed how it’s starting to be addressed already with the big OT staffing change she had brought to fruition she’d explained earlier. A big part of this re-allocated OT’s focus will be on this very activity. Recognizing this, she acknowledged: “That's how we’re approaching it but we don't have a bigger solution, I guess it has to be one student at a time…”

**Past Endeavor You’d Roll Out Differently Now**

As I was reviewing my notes, I began to think perhaps this question should have been planned to be paired with the question about “lessons learned”, but in the end I’m glad it wasn’t. This similar but separate question resulted in eliciting new and very different responses from each of the participants than had been shared in the earlier question.

Lisa explained that she really felt that she wished she would have spoken up more when
she sat in on team meetings and disagreed with team decisions that weren’t in line with building towards successful transition outcomes from her perspective. She shared a story about a nineteen year old student whose behavior plan at work still involved earning stars at his age and in a real world environment in which this could be perceived as very stigmatizing. She remembers offering more age-appropriate/environment-appropriate suggestions, but noted the staff in the meeting would not budge. She referred to this act of staff solidarity opposed to any change as “drinking the juice”. Her concern regarding this was evident as she continued with more details of this situation:

...So, I think that … if I could, I would speak up more and be like really, this is, we've got to come up with a game plan, like maybe by the end of the year we phase out the stars, because it's not appropriate... We're not doing him any favors...

She noted she felt that in this instance as in some others shared earlier, a part of the reason for everyone “drinking the juice” was likely to keep parents happy and comfortable with a familiar behavior plan that had always been effective in years past. She continued to discuss this instance and shared:

... I think that if I could've had a stronger voice in those situations, that would be great. I just don't know in that existing dynamic if I could have even [laugh] I could have been like the juice is bad for you, and they'd be like we're still going to drink the juice … We love the juice…

Lisa felt overall she did a strong job of spreading the general transition message, but believed she needed to learn to communicate and advocate better in these types of direct instances with a variety of changing staff, bringing their own styles and perceptions about transition practices to
the table. Her thoughtfulness and humility were very apparent as she described the many challenging aspects of this type of complex situation.

Jennifer responded to this question:

… Oh my goodness, so many lessons learned … I don’t even know where to begin. I would again revert back to how I’ve realized when you train people- what’s important? It’s important not to overwhelm practitioners.

Jennifer shared that this led to a key realization in changing her approach: “I think giving people only the information that they really need to know to do their jobs.” She acknowledged that required that she know enough about many staff jobs in order to make that determination and then create a targeted training plan, but she felt confident given some of her previous experiences to accomplish this. She gave an example in which she has already proceeded differently on a change effort plan using this new approach. Rather than introducing yet another new document outlining staff roles and responsibilities regarding transition, she has decided instead to work with an existing document by embedding the information there instead. She believes it will be received better this way, and believes she’s learning to really tailor how she works to folks’ existing “mindset”.

Chris noted that he would have had teachers completing transition assessments from the very beginning if circumstances had been different at the time. We discussed how really it was a matter of timing, and teachers using existing time differently that seemed to be the issues that went hand in hand. Chris referred back to the many major changes that had recently taken place at SS, and that while he would have preferred to have rolled out the transition assessment process with staff differently, in hindsight given the circumstances, it just wouldn’t have been prudent:
… I think they’re already overwhelmed, overloaded and I mean I know I was in that position it seemed like every year there was something else… I mean I was surprised, in some ways surprised it fell flat but I know how they feel … you can’t do everything… there’s too much going on and it’s hard to argue with them.

If he were to approach getting this process started during such a challenging time again, Chris said he would try to go at it differently: “I would probably try to do it more incrementally … can we do a little bit of this, at least start and hopefully get it to a point where it would be self-sustaining.”

Regarding this question, Susie shared that she would like to have started out with a “…more systematic, structured approach to train the paraprofessionals to make sure that they all have at least kind of a base line level of information around transition and facilitating independence…” She noted that so much of the paraprofessionals’ training happens “on the job, on-the-fly” and she would rather have initially provided them with a beginning baseline level of training first.

**Describe a Typical Day**

This was the one and only question in which the answer was resoundingly the same across all four participants. I had my own answer for this one, and it matched theirs as well. I asked if there was a ‘typical day’ as a TSC, and if so to please describe it. While the simple answer across the board was “No” unanimously delivered in a positive manner, each participant provided a bigger glimpse into their pioneer work experiences by also sharing an interesting array of types of activities they engage in during a typical day and/or week.
Lisa responded with: “No [laugh], every day is totally different.” She then proceeded to rattle off a variety of tasks she did that day as well as some from the day before including: answering parent questions by email, met with a case manager regarding a challenging case, met with a grants supervisor, met with her own supervisor, worked with a student on a vocational evaluation, met with staff to plan an event, and then met with another staff member to discuss presenting the subject of guardianship to a student. She looked at her calendar briefly and noted that the next day she would be providing a staff training, teaching a student seminar, and meeting with various staff on various topics. She wrapped up confirming again: “So every day is very different.”

Jennifer responded in a similar way: “There is no such thing, yeah no such thing. I mean I keep my own calendar… it’s like you’re the department of one and you just go with whatever.” She went on to describe how flexible she needed to be on a daily basis, and also shared examples of different types of activities she might be pulled into to address:

…You know I’ve been called to work intensely on some student cases because they’re the quote unquote heavy hitters, you know the ones who you think might end-up in litigation, that sort-of thing so, sometimes I’m intensely working on … a specific student case. Sometimes I’m doing a transition assessment because someone signed an evaluation consent and didn’t understand that transition is an ongoing process of data collection and they think it’s a moment in time or again, going back to heavy hitters, a family says you know, this organization told me I needed to come in and ask for transition assessment and so I want it on this paper…
Jennifer continued to rattle off a list of other tasks that could come up at any time such as going to a statewide or a local meeting, meeting with a family or an agency, or collaborating with other staff on behalf of a student. Jennifer wrapped up stressing:

… there’s no set schedule… because all of these other things that we’re supposed to do… You have to be comfortable with the lack of structure and I am to a certain extent, but I do like structure … but I enjoy the creativity too, so you have to, it’s almost like in some way of kind-of being your own boss because you are by yourself so much [laugh] hey, it works okay for me.

Chris also shared the same response, and expanded a little on the tasks he often undertakes as well: ”Not at all, I think every day is different.” He also shared a list of varied tasks he will often become involved in such as taking students on a field trip to a state adult agency or a community college, consulting with school program staff, meeting with community-based work site personnel, writing student assessment reports and returning phone calls and emails. He specified: “… one of the things I didn’t want when I got this, was an office… it would almost be a negative.” When asked if this was because he needs to be out and about for this job, he responded: “Right, exactly- it’s not happening here, it’s happening sort-of everywhere.”

Susie shared simply: “No, not at all … also because this is only a portion of my administrator responsibilities now … no [laugh] … not in the least.”

Enough said.

**Favorite “Tools of the Trade”**

This question (and questions 16, 18, and 19) came to me during the interview with Lisa,
so none of the participants had time to reflect on these prior to our meetings. I decided to add them to all the interview protocols after checking in with my advisor, as most were more quick, from-the-gut type inquiries. If I had any concerns about this, they were quickly dispelled. Lisa first heard the question (s) as they came up naturally in the interview. The other three participants heard the questions at the beginning of our meetings for the first time. Despite this minor change to the interview plan, each participant answered readily. Perhaps lack of discomfort regarding this was because the questions really flowed naturally given the established rapport and conversational-style of interview format. Perhaps it was also indicative of their comfort level with ongoing change and rallying effectively in the moment.

Lisa had an immediate response, with no hesitation at all: “Um food, I bring food [laugh]” she said. When I asked why, she continued:

… Because it’s a great … food just brings people together [laugh] or candy, people get excited… I love candy, I bring candy, and I’ve learned chocolate, non-chocolate, and mint, you need to have at least one of each of those things at every training. It makes things better. It also gives people a distraction.

We both laughed and agreed what a great, universal tool. She then shared another favorite communication tool of hers:

… I think humor, because there are some hysterically horrible conversations that you have to have [laugh] but I think just having humor is a huge tool. Not that I’m the funniest person in the world but, I think I can help people laugh in really bad times. I think bringing a positive outlook to something, like yes this might have been yep, the bus broke down and someone cut themselves and this is terrible, but that was a great learning
opportunity, what did the student do to problem-solve? That’s awesome, like wow, other student knew some first-aid and had a Band-Aid, great collaboration. So I think sometimes I can bring that positive perspective… Where people are like, it was a horrible day, and I’m like let’s look at the positive, like there was something great… You know, give yourself credit that you facilitated that.

Jennifer also had no problem coming up with an answer despite the short notice regarding her favorite tool of the trade:

… I do, that book that I talked about before [she identified it as: *Informal Assessments for Transition Planning*], because we know assessments for transition planning can be formal or informal and there’s no real mandate that they have to be formal, I really like it… You know it’s these quick and easy, I’ve used so many of them to incorporate into a larger transition assessment that I’m doing on a student, and it can, the contents can be used to help the students really reflect about every aspect of employment, community participation and their future education… I would say that’s my number one, favorite resource.

Chris shared a specific online resource assessment tool as his favorite tool:

… I use the [state online career information system], you know the interest survey and the career cluster thing, I use that a lot… I use that as a jumping off… If I’m doing a transition assessment, I use a lot of those, you know pick and choose and depending on the student...

Susie was the only one of the four to first ask for clarification as to what I meant by “tools”; I said it was up to her, whatever she thought of as a tool. She paused and then
responded:

… the use of workgroups, pulling together work groups of interested staff to develop [pause] systems, forms, contents, anything, so that you're not doing it all yourself, and that you are getting buy-in and I think that, that's a really good way to do things.

Favorite Part of the Job

This was another of the add-on questions that just seemed to pop up so naturally while talking about these jobs that clearly everyone seems so dedicated to and passionate about.

Lisa shared that she had two favorite parts of the job:

… The students, because they’re awesome. I really enjoy working with the students and I don’t get to do that often … and I also really enjoy working with staff to help them explore transition more and do staff development… so it’s really exciting when staff come to me and they’re like oh, did you see (name), and I’m like yes, but I’m excited you saw (name), or they’re like I read this article about you know parents having such a strong role in transition, and I’m like yes…

Jennifer shared her favorite part of the job is to help families through the transition journey:

…my favorite part of the job, probably it might be working with the families because the nice thing is families are so, they themselves are so overwhelmed at times in thinking about the transition of their child to the adult world, and to their future, and what’s going to happen, and they have all kinds of anxieties and if you can put just one thing in their hand, it might help them. … I do have the luxury, for as unstructured as it is, and of
interacting with families maybe on a level that other folks might not get to in their schedules because parents sometimes call me desperate looking for X, Y or Z and when you’re able to give them, it’s a relief to them… Rewarding, yeah, most of the time it is very rewarding.

Chris also had two favorites that came to mind immediately:

… I think my favorite part of the job is going out and meeting all the different people I’ve met you know, there’s some fascinating people, and I love the group of transition people … and a lot of the kids I’ve worked with. I’ve always enjoyed working with kids, you don’t stay in this profession if you don’t like to do that [laugh].

Susie explained there were two key favorites for her as well and elaborated on them:

…one is getting staff excited and involved about transition and then the other is seeing students who are self-determined and, and parents who understand the importance of the student having their own voice. So seeing those changes in some students, and, and families over the years that they are in high school and they’re a senior and they’re at their IEP meeting and they come in and they can talk about what they want to do, they can talk about their plan, and their parents are supporting that and not trying to say what the parent’s plan, and the parent’s vision is and overriding, which sometimes happens. So seeing … families where that shift has happened over time, and so that when they’re ready to exit high school, it’s a really cool thing, seeing that.

It was abundantly clear from the enthusiastic responses that this group of four TSCs share a passion and dedication for assessing the needs and thoughtfully putting into action endeavors that will ultimately help all stakeholders to support students in transition.
Considering the TSC Job in the Future

The following section is the final group of questions. These were intended to explore the four TSCs thoughts about the future of this pioneer role based on personal reflections of their work experiences thus far.

Anticipated Barriers in the Future

Across the board, the four study participants indicated past and current barriers would likely continue into the present in some form, but each also shared other concerns that they believed were starting to emerge or could do so in the future.

Lisa noted most of her previously mentioned barriers such as understanding transition by all stakeholders involved and just finding time to make it all happen will continue. She added that a concern that’s starting to appear more evident is the student planning to go to college who doesn’t think s/he needs transition planning or activities, doesn’t perceive transition to be “relevant”. Lisa shared concern about identifying these students and then “building in transition opportunities for those students, where they don't feel like oh I’m learning all these things that are below me, you know? Making transition relevant.” She noted it could be the student, the family, or both that don’t “buy-in” to the need for addressing transition. On the other hand, Lisa noted that some families are the opposite- they might want additional years of school services for their child that the school district might deem unnecessary with appropriate and timely transition planning and services in place.

Jennifer noted too, that many current barriers remain and will likely continue to do so. She indicated going forward, that her position needed more staffing, given that she serves such a large school district and is still only a “department of one.” She shared:
... I think I don’t think too much about the future because everything [laugh] has changed so much in the past but, I think the barriers, I mean staffing, you know I do need help [laugh] in terms of being able to reach a large audience, being able to get to all the schools … I don’t get to the schools on the level in any way that I wish that I could.

Jennifer noted that if this staffing issue improved, she might be able to have a stronger impact on other barriers, such as the need for providing more in-depth, direct staff training on transition assessment.

Chris indicated that the timing for teachers to get to everything in transition in his district will continue as a barrier in the near future. Chris also talked about many teachers’ perception that transition is adding on to their workload, and he agreed with them: “Yeah it is, and there’s just no way to sugar coat it.”

Susie also shared that many early barriers may well continue somewhat in the future. She noted a barrier that sometimes pops up is the teachers union. She shared that sometimes there’s pushback from some teachers regarding the adding in of transition activities like preparing vision statements and power points for IEP meetings with students.

Future Endeavors

The four study participants shared a variety of future endeavors they are planning or are already starting to engage in, which involve primarily working with various stakeholders in new ways to promote student success.

Collaborating more with the state department adult agencies (e.g., state vocational rehabilitation, state department of developmental disabilities) to share resources and collaborate on transition projects is at the top of Lisa’s priorities for the future. She noted she’s already
approached the state VR agency about this, and they’ve collaborated to create a hand-out that assists both families and schools in understanding better what the agency does and what it can offer students. She noted that putting these types of structures in place can be so helpful, especially when there is a lot of staff turnover, which is common at LC. Having a consistent go-to hand-out with current information can be really helpful to all stakeholders. She noted this first hand-out was accomplished simply because of “reaching out”. With this success, Lisa realized it would be great to start to put other systems in place to support an increase in collaboration efforts: “So we’re setting up more systems for communication.”

Jennifer shared that she’d really like to get out into the schools more to work directly with students in the future, stating she would like to:

… help them to become participators, and not just participators but drivers of their own future and you know so many kids don’t even know what an IEP is, and they have one, have had one since maybe very young. So being able to just talk with students and help them to understand, well this is how I learn and you know how I need to ask for help and what the implications of that are in my life. So, I would love to be able to, as a wish list, get out more with students.

Chris shared a great point when considering future endeavors: “You have to sort-of, I think you have to know institutional climate… Are they ready to do this? Is this a good time … or should I wait?”

Susie noted that many future endeavors will be a continuation of past and current ones she’s described. She noted an important addition though, which sounds similar to the issue raised
... the big thing is really ... expanding transition to ensure that we’re addressing the transition needs of all students with disabilities in high school not just those with the more significant disabilities... trying to work with General Ed to make this part of the culture of the school and not just Special Ed because all students have transition needs, all students need to be self-determined, all ... students need this stuff ... at varying degrees so, if we can really work with ... what ... guidance counselors do in their guidance classes ... just building things into all of the English language arts classes at the high schools for example, like if all classes talk about job applications and resume writing ... this is a big vision but, really getting it to be part of the culture of the high school and not just something that's for Special Ed.

When pressed to consider how she might go about this, Susie stated that it needs to come from a lot of different stakeholders with buy-in, that it can’t just be her voice. She thought and then continued: “…maybe getting a work group together that's not just Special Ed, who can really look at this… somehow this needs to merge…”

**Perceptions of Role in the Future**

While Susie and Chris anticipate the perception of the TSC role will likely remain relatively unchanged in their specific districts as time goes on, Jennifer and Lisa shared some definite role shifts they expected to unfold in each of theirs.

Lisa felt the role may be perceived somewhat differently in the future as she continues to spread the word of transition, facilitate collaborations, and build capacity by developing the go-to staff members in each building. She noted that there will always be new transition issues that
surface and require negotiation between school and family stakeholders, and sometimes having her to offer up as a trained, specialized resource in these situations can be useful in “making people feel comfortable.”

Jennifer answered this question with a big-picture thought of connecting special education and general education staff together more. She shared:

… I think a wonderful thing is that the trend is for all students, not just students with disabilities, but for all students to have the focus being on college and career and how we’re going to get students there. I think that’s a great opportunity for us in Special Education to kind-of say hey, we’ve been doing this for a long time, or trying to, and let’s partner, and pool our resources because we always have greater strength in numbers that way, instead of being this is just another Special Ed regulation that we have to follow. Well guess what, it really is what we’re supposed to be doing for everybody… And students with disabilities, yes we have to build it in to the requirements because … they might need more support in getting there, but it’s really … it’s like the trend of the future, I see it, and maybe even Gen. Ed will come to us and say, you know you guys are the experts in doing this, you know wouldn’t that be neat.

We marveled at what an enormous shift in how transition would be perceived and enacted in her scenario, and how great that shift in practice could be for all students.

Chris shared that staff and families have been very happy with the outcomes taking place in the school district thus far and he expects that to continue.

Susie felt that the TSC role, currently an administrative one in which she is “educating and mobilizing staff” will continue on that path in the future in her district. She shared her great
regard for and confidence in the school district’s staff:

…the teachers and a staff that are directly working with students have terrific ideas once they understand what it is we need to be trying to do, and once they are given some freedom … to develop things, to think about things, they have some terrific ideas.

Advice for a New Pioneer TSC

Each TSC shared different tidbits of advice for any new up and coming pioneer TSCs.

Lisa listed a few things she felt anyone new to the position should at least have an initial awareness about:

… I think so much of transition is collaboration, communication, and being creative. It's gauging people; I think so much of the transition is people and understanding what the staff is bringing to a meeting, what the parents are bringing, what the student is bringing… I think transition brings up a lot of grief for families of, I thought my kid was on this trajectory, and they’re not… same thing with kids- I thought I was going to get into Yale, and I didn't; didn't get in anywhere. So, it's knowing logistically what we have to do, and legally what we have to do for a transition planning…

Lisa continued to explain that often her role becomes that of the facilitator and leader, as a knowledgeable go-between when staff and families are having difficult discussions during decision-making meetings. She shared that she is happy to be that person “Because that's what's going to help us move forward in the process, you know?” We discussed in more depth how very important thorough, respectful communication efforts are to success in this position. She explained:
… I think you find your way through it and it's like with anything, you find the people that you can work well with. I think as long as you stay confident with what the vision of transition is, and that it is a collaborative effort, and be willing to communicate and again, think outside the box and be creative and meet with groups of people to have conversations and support staff.

Lisa noted in her graduate program in vocational rehabilitation (VR) that the VR counselor (VRC) was often referred to as a “jack-of-all-trades”, and how very similar this TSC position is to a VRC. She clarified, sharing more specifics:

… Like you might be an emotional support one day, you're looking at work skills the next day and you’re thinking of ergonomics and OT another day, you're thinking about PT another day, you’re thinking about the educational thing another day, you’re thinking about behavior, kind-of touching on all of these things. And transition is very similar.

She shared some great examples of how she reaches out to others just within the building to collaborate to support a student and/or share resources, including working with OTs, the mobility specialist, and speech therapist. Lisa explained how this collaborating and sharing of resources was such a natural and common-sense practice to her, yet it was a very new way of working for many at LC. Lisa’s descriptions here made it clear how very helpful collaborating with others was to her work.

Jennifer discussed how for her, it all comes down to “really forming relationships with people.” She continued:

… I think that if you spend time listening to people, if you spend time with staff, with families, with finding out about the resources that are out and available in your
community, which different communities are different of course, that it will give you a sense of where the needs are…

She also advised to any upcoming newbie TSC: “… don’t bite off more than you can chew, and don’t think you can do everything in one year, and maybe have an annual focus.”

Chris echoed Jennifer’s advice regarding the importance of talking and listening to a variety of different stakeholders:

… I think you would want to spend a lot of time just talking to the different people, I think… you know forming some relationships so that they know you and so you know what they can provide, and I think here, within here at the high school, you talking, guidance people, our, alternative school, you know, has a lot of kids who could use some help in their transition … working with that group of four people … what are we planning for the future… to keep that going … I spent two or three months just learning, talking to all the different people, what’s going on here … what’s worked in the past, what hasn’t worked … what would you like me to do that maybe hasn’t, that (name) didn’t do or, what did (name) do that was good and you want to see continue…

Chris discussed how different a TSC’s lens can be versus a teacher’s lens when it comes to considering resources and activities for youth in transition. Regarding this difference, he noted:

… I think as a teacher you look at those interests you know maybe we can direct him into a club or an activity or something or a sport or whatever the kid might be interested in, but I think this even looks beyond that… and so I think … that’s a change in mindset and I think you’re trying to make people aware of resources, what’s out there.
Susie also had some definite ideas she wanted to be sure to share with any newcomers to the profession:

… So there are several things. One, is, I would say, start with what you have. So look around the district and figure out what's already there, what resources do you have in the district, what's already in place and you know, there might be resources there that aren't being used in a way that they could be used, that could be used in a different way, like related services…

Susie shared that it took some time before she learned that the state department of employment and training had a representative available in her school building on a weekly basis. She continued with the positive end to her story: “…but once we found out about them and started meeting, they did a whole bunch of stuff with us…” She echoed the other pioneers in emphatically suggesting a new TSC should reach out to all different stakeholders and a variety of community-based resources and agencies. She also strongly advised seeking out other TSCs, and joining a regional Transition CoP like the one she is currently involved in, and feels greatly supported by. Susie also suggested finding out what transition coursework may be available to take through the TSC’s state department of education. She wrapped up: “…you don't have to reinvent the wheel, you just have to look at what you have, what your starting point is in your district, and then figure out where to go from there.”

**Transition Dilemma “Disconnect”**

As we finished with the interview and Lisa and I packed up our things and chatted, we started discussing some about my general research question, and how it was based on the dilemma in the transition field, that while there are effective practices for practitioners available
and federal mandates regarding transition, outcomes for students in general really haven’t improved significantly over the years. We talked about why we thought that might be the case for a bit, and then I thanked Lisa again for participating, we said our good-byes, and we each headed off to our next appointments. Walking back to my car though, it occurred to me that perhaps I should have included this big-picture question as part of the interview protocol in the first place. I called my advisor to ask if it was ok to add this question- she encouraged me to do so and to call Lisa back to request her input again by phone. And so I did. So Lisa responded to this one (again) by phone, while I asked it of the other three study participants as one of the four extra add-on questions that weren’t included in the list I’d sent them in advance.

Over the phone, Lisa summed up her thoughts on the transition dilemma that we’d discussed earlier that week:

… There’s definitely a disconnect for a couple reasons. One, researchers aren’t always practitioners… sometimes best practice is developed by researchers and not actually practitioners in schools in day-to-day settings…. So it’s trying to translate it into practical applications in schools… And the other thing, especially in transition, there are so many players involved… while some partners may be utilizing best practices … if not everyone is, you won’t get the great outcomes you’re hoping to see…

Jennifer shared her thoughts and concerns on the transition field dilemma:

I think that is the most difficult question to ask. You look at indicator 14, post-school outcomes … and you think, you do all this work … and I don’t have a good answer for it. I do think that the more we can empower the students to advocate for themselves, so that when they leave us, they know how to advocate for themselves, so building self-
advocacy and self-determination into the curriculum, making it active, and not a passive process . . . I mean I was just reading something about the outcomes for students seem to be better when that takes place, when they’ve had direct instruction in self-determination and self-advocacy. Maybe we’re not doing as good a job of that as we could . . .

Jennifer noted her district is already taking steps in addressing this:

…I know our high school right now is trying to focus on getting students to direct their own IEP’s and I think that will do wonders for our population . . . being able to then transition and leave us with the confidence that they can go on and be successful and direct their own destinies . . .

Jennifer brought up another potentially key, underlying element to this issue:

…I do think we need to do a better job of even just disability awareness with students . . . like . . . this is the way that you learn, you might need more help, . . . and you need this type of assistance in order to be successful and instead of making it like we don’t want to tell the student that they have a disability, well it’s like how, what does this mean for my life and what’s it going to mean when I go out to a job you know, can I talk to my boss and say, you know this is what I need to be successful on the job, can I go to college and ask for help because I gotta ask now, nobody’s going to be looking for me to have help . . .

Jennifer began to wrap up her response by stating: “…so I think it all, so much of it hinges on being able to help the students to advocate for themselves, and the families in the cases that the students are unable to . . . “At this point, I voiced surprise that Jennifer seemed to be referring to students who were transition-age who might not even be aware they had a disability, despite being involved in special education all these years. She confirmed this as she continued: “Yes, at
the very basic level. Some of them have no idea. It’s important for students to know about their disability.” I asked her how could this be, and why this was so often the case, and Jennifer continued to thoughtfully explain the challenging context:

… I think there’s a fear that you don’t want to disable the student, you don’t want to make them feel funny, feel bad about themselves, maybe students won’t understand, they’re just kids. It’s uncomfortable, it’s uncomfortable for teachers, it’s uncomfortable maybe for the families who, you know I don’t want you talking about my child’s disability with them or you know, a whole host of reasons… It happens more often than it doesn’t happen I think, that students are really not equipped to even know at that very basic level, what they need to be successful, or that they have, you know whatever disability.

Chris shared that he felt sometimes that a factor might involve a resistance on the part of families and/or follow-up by the students themselves. He thoughtfully shared that sometimes the parents might be “holding [the student] back” regarding trying out new types of activities or work experiences while still supported by school. Chris shared if there’s a lack of follow-through on the part of a student it is out of the control of the school staff, despite their best efforts:

… once they leave here … after you show them the resources, maybe get them signed-up okay this is what you need to do next, doesn’t mean they’re going to do that next… that’s what I’ve seen that gets in the way sometimes…

It was clear this was a tough issue Susie appreciated. She talked about this difficult issue, noting how “… the practices around transition are really different” in and across different districts and different states. She shared that a lack of time will always be a barrier, but that districts do seem to act when new legal precedents are set: “… So when things rise to the top,
they get addressed, and that's just kind of the way it is…” Going back to the question, she noted how each district is in such a different place in the process and has such varying resources to work with that the answer can’t be to over-regulate transition either.

It was interesting to note that each TSC had some definite ideas regarding the dilemma, and how thoughtfully they approached sharing their respective answers. To me it seemed very reflective of how respectfully and seriously each participant takes his/her role and how they professionally conduct themselves in general.

**Other/Wrap-up**

A key reason I selected this qualitative narrative method from the very beginning, was to give a “voice” to this group of TSC pioneers so that others may learn from their real-life experiences. So this final open-ended question was crafted to help to ensure that each participant had the opportunity to share any additional information or thoughts they wished to include that hadn’t been covered in the general interview protocol. While Susie indicated she didn’t have anything else to add, Chris, Jennifer, and Lisa each shared some brief final thoughts about the TSC role in general and their personal work experiences in this pioneer job.

Lisa strung together several quick wrap-up points regarding the evolving big-picture state of the TSC position, and emphasized how each district is so different in their needs and priorities:

… I think it’s just evolving … people do such different things in their roles, that’s it’s really going to evolve and I think shift with districts, and where they go with programming and things like that, and it’s going to vary from district to district, what the role is…”
She continued to emphasize that even schools in the same district or region may have different needs. As Lisa continued to elaborate, she stressed:

… There might be different programmatic things that are in place… I feel like we’re so behind the times in so many ways of trying to get up and running with certain things, but then compared to other districts we might be up and running in that aspect … so I think there’s some logistics that would be across all districts like everyone’s going to want to talk about the transition planning … and voc-evals, but the nitty gritty of what you do day-to-day I think is going to vary on what that district really needs.

At first Jennifer said she didn’t have anything to add, but then she did share some parting thoughts:

…I don’t think so, other than it’s just a blessing and a great experience to do this work, what better work could you engage in than helping students you know move onto fulfilling and hopefully satisfying lives and I think it’s great work and I hope it gets more and more recognized as being important, as an important role that people might have. I hope that it gets considered as, as a position to create in a district but also, like the way I view myself, is I, while I’m saying to you that I need help in the job, I do, because I want to make myself scarce, like I don’t, in other words, I don’t want people to be dependent on me, I don’t want people to look at me as the transition expert, or the specialist … I want them to see the importance in their practice of doing transition, take me out of the loop. I want them to recognize that transition is as, all these things we’ve talked about that … it’s helping all students to be successful and in theory that you know, it’s all the things that they should be doing themselves, and they don’t need me … to tell them what
they need to do [laugh].

Chris wrapped up sharing positive thoughts regarding the position:

… I think it’s been a good experience, I’ve enjoyed doing it, and I think people are pretty happy with the things I’ve done and I think … the other thing I’ve liked, it’s a nice variety of things, it’s not always the same thing, like you asked a typical day … a typical day doesn’t exist, a typical week doesn’t even exist really, in a lot of ways…

Chris continued to describe how this position has been so very different in terms of types of tasks from his previous positions in education and that he really enjoys the change required in this. He clearly appreciates having an opportunity to make a difference in students’ lives in this role, and to have had the opportunity to drive it for the most part himself thus far, given the trust and flexibility provided him by his school district administration:

… it hasn’t been driven by somebody giving me directives, we need to do whatever, I’ve sort-of … I look around and say gee, maybe we ought to try this or maybe this other thing… a lot of things weren’t in place and I was able to help put them in place, and without being given a set of directives that you know by December you have to have this in place, by June you have to have this in place, you know that kind-of thing, it was much, very open-ended.

This was the final question in the general interview protocol. Each of the interviews were lengthy (but within planned time allotted), and the genuine interest and care regarding the subject matter was evident throughout by each of the four study participants.

The next and final section, Chapter Five, will provide a review of the research problem
and significance, discuss the results organized into the five key themes that surfaced through the
data analysis process, identify limitations of the research study, describe implications for
practice, provide recommendations for future research, and share my final reflections regarding
the project.
Chapter Five

Introduction

This final chapter is organized into the following sections: discussion of results, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, implications for practice, and my final reflections.

This discussion section will be organized by the five themes which emerged from careful analysis of the results presented in the previous chapter. The five key themes that emerged from this study were: Creative Collaborations, Ongoing Assessment, Stakeholders don’t know what they don’t know, Providing Meaningful PD, and Bringing the real world into the school world. These themes will be discussed in conjunction with the literature review shared in Chapter Two and the conceptual framework grounding the study provided by the “sensitizing” framework of structuration theory (Giddens, 1991, as cited by Currier & Galliers, 1999, p. 112), and Kohler’s (1996) Taxonomy for Transition Programming.

Research Problem and Significance

Considerable time and resources have been spent on providing transition special education (TSE) services in this country for more than three decades now (Test, Aspel, & Everson, 2006, p. 7), and yet “post-school outcomes for students with disabilities continue to be disturbing” (Test, et al., 2006, p.5). This unacceptable situation continues, despite federally mandated transition legislation (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004) in place since the 1990’s, and effective practices in transition available (Test, et al., 2006).
The purpose of this qualitative descriptive narrative study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is to explore the work experiences of four “pioneer” (defined as first-ever in their school districts) TSCs working to support post-school success for students with disabilities in the northeastern region of the United States.

Paradigm and Conceptual Framework

This study utilizes the Constructivism-Interpretivism research paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). The conceptual framework for the study is grounded by Kohler’s (1996) Taxonomy for Transition Programming and considered using Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory.

The chart provided in Figure 2, adapted from the graphic shared by Test, et al. (2006, p. 39), outlines the five inter-related categories of Kohler’s (1996) Taxonomy for Transition Programming, which may prove useful to the reader when considering the discussion of results:

Figure 2


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student-Focused Planning</th>
<th>Student Development</th>
<th>Family Involvement</th>
<th>Interagency Collaboration</th>
<th>Program Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-IEP development</td>
<td>-Life Skills</td>
<td>-Family</td>
<td>-Collaborative Framework</td>
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<tr>
<td>-Student Participation</td>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Framework</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-Planning Strategies</td>
<td>-Career &amp;</td>
<td>-Family</td>
<td>-Collaborative Service</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>Delivery</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-Curricula</td>
<td>-Family Empowerment</td>
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<td>-Structured Work</td>
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<td>Experience</td>
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<td>-Assessment</td>
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<td>-Program Philosophy</td>
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<td>-Resource Allocation</td>
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<td>-Human Resource Development</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Hatch and Cunliffe (2013) provide a helpful table, which is shared here in Figure 3 to refer to when considering ST in conjunction with the discussion of this study’s themes. Their table depicts the “structures, forms of agency, and rules and resources that mediate between them as a matrix of material and symbolic social practices that, through mutual influence, produce the social context and outcomes (both structures and actions) of social systems” (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 112):

Figure 3

“How rules and resources mediate agency and structure” (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 112)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structures of:</th>
<th>Signification</th>
<th>Domination</th>
<th>Legitimation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rules &amp; Resources mediating Structure and Agency:</td>
<td>Interpretive schemes</td>
<td>Relationships within which power is exercised</td>
<td>Normative Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms of Agency:</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Sanction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hatch and Cunliffe (2013) both elaborate further on “the duality of structure and agency” inherent in the premise of structuration theory and explain in more general terms: “… agents are both enabled and constrained by structures comprised of resources, routines, and expectations. Agents are enabled to the extent that structures of signification, domination, and legitimation support their activity, and constrained whenever they do not” (p. 111).

This study provides descriptions of real-life experiences shared by current pioneer TSC professionals working in the field of transition special education that may shed new light on this problem of practice and research topic, from which a variety of stakeholders may benefit and new avenues for additional research may be considered.
Discussion of Results

The following section will discuss the results of this research study organized by the following five themes that emerged as the main findings from the researcher’s data analysis: Creative collaborations, Ongoing assessment, Stakeholders “don’t know what they don’t know”, Providing Meaningful PD, and Bringing the real world into the school world.

**Creative Collaborations**

The act of collaboration emerged as a very strong theme in this study. Study participants shared numerous examples in which the act of collaboration was successfully employed to meet their overall goal of effectively supporting their transition students.

Viewed through the lens of structuration theory (ST), collaboration can be considered as a form of communication and/or power used by the TSC to enable and support the development of relationships with others (e.g., intra-agency or interagency) to work together as a new resource to achieve a positive outcome in support of their students in transition. Interagency Collaboration is one of Kohler’s (1996) Taxonomy categories. Collaborations formed with others by these TSCs resulted in supporting other taxonomy categories- most notably program structures, family involvement, and student development.

Many of the early and ongoing barriers experienced by the pioneer TSCs, described in ST terms, consisted of structural resources, routines, and expectations acting in a constraining manner regarding their goals to support effective transition practices (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). The pioneer TSCs consistently “mediated” these structural challenges using an ongoing process of communication, often resulting in successful collaborations. Lisa’s stories of successful activities on behalf of students such as the annual transition resources fair and the summer
professional development workshops, can be viewed as the result of collaborative actions she either initiated and/or facilitated with a variety of stakeholders. In each of these cases, Lisa was generally enabled by her supervisor/school administration (structure of domination) but needed to continually negotiate other structures such as legitimation (current rules/routines of how the context does things) to support her transition endeavors (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). Jennifer shared similar experiences to Lisa’s regarding enabling and constraining structures; she also consistently employed positive communication methods to garner support and effectively collaborate to produce successful activities such as the annual transition fair, targeted professional development for staff, and informational sessions for families. Many of Chris’s initial efforts were received positively from the get-go, possibly due to his previously established working relationships in the system. Chris also already possessed a valuable working knowledge of the current structures in his system, and as he put it: “… I knew how to negotiate.” Chris also illustrated the recursive nature of his actions- how one collaborative effort often leads to another unanticipated one as well as sets into place a new structure of legitimization (new accepted ways of doing things, routines), such as when he collaborated with a variety of representatives to weave together the resources needed for the new transition program that first year (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). Susie’s situation was different from the other three, likely due to her formal dual role as both an administrator and as a TSC. Susie used her unique position to collaborate with other levels of staff to negotiate a change in the allocation of resources to both better support staff and enhance transition students’ learning experiences and opportunities when she utilized her knowledge both as an OT and a TSC in concert with her position as an administrator to facilitate a new targeted role for the occupational therapy staff members (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). A broader yet more focused role in the classroom for the COTA, as well as a realigned
role for the OT to better individualize job development and training endeavors for students resulted in a win-win change for all through the shifting of original structural resources and routines. There are articles supporting the changing engagement of education professionals present in the literature. Authors Barnes, Frihe, and Radd (2003) discuss it regarding the roles of speech-pathologists and school counselors, and authors Webb, Webb, and Fults-McMurtey (2011) discuss it as well regarding the roles of physical educators and school counselors. Susie’s facilitation of the summer professional workgroups to both learn and create useful products is another example of working with a system’s structure to effectively achieve the outcomes desired- in this case, developing new resources and routines to improve transition services delivery for students.

A common denominator of note across all four pioneers, was that each had the positive (structural) support of their supervisors/school district administration which enabled and empowered them to engage in effective collaborations (and other activities) to support transition student success. This administrative support was perceived by the TSCs as immensely important in being able to function effectively in their pioneer positions. Some TSCs noted how the act of collaborating was often perceived as a novel approach by some stakeholders in their districts’ existing structural systems, and yet it was often the preferred go-to communication and mediating method for the pioneer TSCs to accomplish a variety of different activities in varying structural contexts supporting effective practices in transition. With all the success created through acts of collaboration shared by these study participants, it came as no surprise that continuing to collaborate surfaced as both a priority and preferred method for accomplishing goals in the future in this study. Analysis of the data indicates the successful collaboration
activities shared by the pioneer TSCs have resulted in positive changes in how each of the TSC’s
districts and stakeholders now operate.

As described earlier in Chapter Two, Interagency collaboration is one of the five
categories of Kohler’s (1996) Taxonomy for Transition Programming. While researchers
confirm the vital importance of school staff knowing how to collaborate, and the critical need for
increased training opportunities for school staff in this area (Benz, et al, 1995; Johnson, et al.,
2002), researchers have also confirmed “… collaboration remains a fundamental challenge for
educators” (Noonan, et al., 2008, p. 132). The results in this study are promising, as they
indicate the pioneer TSCs are no strangers to the collaborative strategy. They have relied on it to
enact many of their most successful endeavors in the past and present, and anticipate continuing
to do so in the future. It is important to note that study participants did not lament a lack of
know-how when it came to the act of collaboration. The TSCs participating in this study
somehow know how to collaborate effectively. There is insufficient data available here to
indicate why this is the case. This apparent know-how can also be referred to as “tacit
knowledge” and a definition is shared by Jones (2001):

Tacit knowledge is about practical experience, know-how, and learning while doing. It
reflects intimate understanding of incrementally evolving work environments of what can
lead to abilities acquired over time that become difficult to replace and which users take
for granted because they become second nature. (Mann, 1999, as cited by Jones, 2001, p. 97)

These study participants shared a variety of experiences in different contexts in which the use of
their tacit knowledge employing creative collaborative strategies resulted in positive changes in
their system of transition services delivery in system structures exhibiting a mixture of enabling and constraining elements. This creative collaboration know-how needs to be effectively shared with more transition practitioners in the field, because as Lisa, Jennifer, Chris, and Susie have demonstrated- it works.

**Ongoing Assessment**

“Assessment is Never-ending” would be another appropriate descriptive title for this prominent theme that emerged from the data. Assessment activities engaged in by each of the pioneers appeared to be continuous. Assessment activities permeated each study participant’s day and clearly served as an important basis to inform decision-making and action-taking in their work roles. Viewed through the lens of ST, continuous assessment activities provided the data required for each study participant to determine the enabling and/or constraining structures (signification, domination, legitimation) present in the contexts or systems in which they were working, so that they could best determine how they would interact most effectively at any given time (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). Ongoing TSC assessment activities supported positive results in various activities spanning all five taxonomy categories (Kohler, 1996).

Participants shared stories of engaging in assessment and how they used it to inform the shaping of effective interactions with other stakeholders across a variety of dynamic contexts. From the very beginning, the study participants used assessment to get a sense of the systems and structures currently in place and how they might best work with them to improve educational support for their students. Each of the four study participants described how many of their most helpful initial and ongoing efforts involve simply listening to and communicating with numerous stakeholders in a variety of changing contexts. Participants regularly employ ongoing assessment
efforts to better understand the needs, concerns, and expectations of stakeholders such as students, families, school staff, community organizations, and outside agency personnel and then use them to help determine context-specific next steps. Susie utilized ongoing assessment to both inform and then develop many of her change efforts, including the development of professional development workgroups, and the classroom resources shift involving employing OT staff members in new more productive ways. Lisa’s ongoing assessment process informs her decisions around when and how best to communicate with staff and families about the differences between the “school world” they were currently engaging in and the real, “adult world” they were preparing to transition to. An ongoing assessment process assisted Lisa in developing the transition capacity-building plan currently in the works. Jennifer’s ongoing assessment process aided her in developing a more viable professional development process plan. Chris described how assessing the element of timing, a significant structural constraint in his school district, has impacted how and when the introduction of changes to the current embedded routines there will be determined. The continual assessment process serves to assist study participants in identifying transition training needs for staff and families and how to meet them, as well as transition service delivery gaps for students and considering how to fill them. Some participants also shared that the act of self-assessment was an important part of continually honing their craft.

Assessment is identified as an effective practice in Kohler’s (1996) Taxonomy for Transition Programming category called “student development” and at the organizational level in the “Program Structures” category. Through exploring the work experiences of these four study participants, it becomes very clear how essential the assessment process is for TSCs to
continually participate in to inform their decisions and actions at the individual level when working with others across Kohler’s (1996) conceptual framework categories.

It was interesting to note that the holistic, daily assessment strategies utilized by these transition professionals appeared to share features of the transition assessment activities designed to benefit their students (http://nsttac.org/content/age-appropriate-transition-assessment-toolkit-3rd-edition). Assessment activities were practiced by all four study participants on a consistent basis, and assisted each in supporting various efforts across taxonomy categories (Kohler, 1996).

Sometimes Stakeholders “Don’t Know What They Don’t Know”

The third theme that emerged from the data analysis is the notion of sometimes stakeholders “don’t know what they don’t know.” While this theme didn’t generate a high number of in vivo codes in the data collected, it emerged as a key theme because it often surfaced as an underlying element that appeared to significantly impact some of the study participants’ work experiences when interacting with various stakeholders. When this phenomenon becomes evident in a situation, it has the potential to impact the decision-making regarding the use of general effective practices available in the taxonomy categories.

Lisa first alluded to this notion when she noted that when she first started the job, initially people “knew that they needed a transition person but they really didn’t know why.” The example Lisa shared in which she suggested staff connect with one another to learn and to collaborate reflects this notion of “not knowing what they don’t know.” The potentially stigmatizing student behavior plan and “drinking the juice” stories described by Lisa may have roots in this notion as well. Jennifer and Chris both shared examples of concern about students and/or families not attending helpful informational sessions on transition topics, attributing it to
the possibility that they might “not know what they don’t know.” The issue Chris shared regarding allowing students to try out new career activities while still supported by school staff may also have a basis in families “not knowing what they don’t know.” Learning from one study participant that some transition students who have spent several years on IEPs receiving special education services are not aware that they even have a disability is a significant and worrisome example of “not knowing what they don’t know”, potentially carrying serious implications for these students’ futures. Study participants noted with concern what a challenge the phenomenon “not knowing what they don’t know” can be to address.

Susie’s experience in shifting the roles of the district’s OTs to better meet the needs of students and staff can serve here again, this time as a promising example of effectively addressing this “not knowing what you don’t know” phenomenon. The shifts she facilitated stemmed from her assessment, knowledge as both an OT and TSC, and administrative knowledge. Until Susie came along, the district hadn’t deployed the OT staff in this new, potentially more optimal manner in the transition classroom because how well their professional expertise aligned with the needs and goals there was unknown before. In other words, the previous authority structure in place “didn’t know what they didn’t know.”

The literature review shared in Chapter Two seems to make a reference to the phenomenon of “not knowing what you don’t know.” In the study conducted by Thoma, et al. (2002), the researchers found that teachers were not just unfamiliar with, but were unaware of key self-determination skill building strategies and curricula for students available to them (p. 246). This notion of “not knowing what you don’t know” is evident and has been broached in other disciplines as well. In his book, author Howard (1999) discusses this dilemma in education. In his article, author Koehler (2007) discusses this issue regarding political
forecasting experts. Koehler (2007) credits John Kenneth Galbraith with the saying: “Those who don’t know, and those who don’t know they don’t know” (p. 3).

This sometimes known, sometimes unknown, structural (constraining) element can be present across organizations and organizational levels and individual stakeholders, making it a particularly challenging issue encountered by each of the TSCs in this study, with the potential to affect decision-making regarding strategy options in any of Kohler’s (1996) Taxonomy categories.

**Providing Meaningful Professional Development**

The fourth theme that consistently emerged from the data in this study is the TSCs’ determination to provide meaningful professional development (and informational sessions for other stakeholders, such as students and family members), rather than simply meeting formal organizational goals and/or other compliance standards. While professional development is considered part of Kohler’s (1996) Program Structures and Attributes category, and providing informational sessions to family members fits in the Family Involvement category, successful efforts in these areas can ultimately support efforts in the other three categories.

Currently, ongoing and planned training efforts for staff shared by some of the pioneers in the study include initial group professional development sessions along with follow-up training opportunities, collaborative workshops/institutes on various transition topics, as well as direct in-the-moment training whenever an opportunity presents itself. These strategies align well with the suggestions by researchers Kyeong-Hwa and Morningstar (2007) to address teacher knowledge and “beliefs” through a combination of professional development and direct coaching and/or “mentoring” activities (p. 126).
Jennifer shared how mindful she is in determining the details of what to share in professional development sessions with each type/level of staff so that it is both relevant and directly useful to them. She noted that the subject of transition assessment is on her agenda for professional development this year, stating “… my next step is getting out with the teachers in a more intense fashion than I’ve done before and really equipping them with the knowledge about transition assessment…” Viewed through the lens of ST, her description illustrates current constraining elements of structures of signification (systems of meaning) and legitimization (current norms), and how she uses targeted communication and provides useful new resources “… to change the mindsets of folks… hopefully, given the right framing, and giving the right tools….” to support her training efforts (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). The need to provide effective professional development in transition assessment is confirmed to be a serious training need in the study by researcher’s Morningstar and Liss (2008).

One of Susie’s successful professional development experiences regards the summer workshop group she has facilitated for a few years. She shared how it started with her providing initial training and resources, and then the group took off from there and developed a transition seminar program for students. She shared that these summer workgroups have created successful products, and both spurred and supported others’ new interest in learning about and engaging in transition work. Lisa has also experienced notable success with her summer institute professional learning community (PLC) engaging to learn and produce tangible resources, such as a transition planning brochure for the district. Both Lisa and Susie have found this strategy for professional development of collaborative, group learning to be very positive and successful in their districts. Seminal author DuFour (2004) describes the concept of a PLC, which lends understanding as to why it fits well for both pioneers’ overall transition goals:
… The professional learning community model flows from the assumption that the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn… Educators who are building a professional community recognize that they must work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all…

Professional learning communities judge their effectiveness on the basis of results… (p. 8-11)

In terms of providing effective professional development opportunities, research studies seem to support the myriad of training activities the study’s pioneers were providing or planning to provide, including activities such as summer institutes workshops, conferences, and capacity-building professional development opportunities (Destafano, et al., 1997). And while researchers Morningstar and Clark (2003) share concern that “the best mode of delivery” for teacher professional development is still unclear (p. 230), these pioneers shared thoughtfully constructed professional development activities and future plans for more, designed with the intention to best support their particular staff’s needs and structural contexts. Perhaps in the future these study participants will be looked back upon as professional development pioneers in transition special education as well.

**Bringing the Real World Into the School World**

The final theme that emerged consistently from the data analysis concerns the challenging experiences of the pioneer TSCs when working to bring the real world into the school world. This is a particularly poignant theme because, after all, preparing students with disabilities for personally meaningful, successful lives in the real adult world is what the field of transition special education is all about. Study participants shared examples of some of the
difficulties encountered when trying to bring the real world into the school world that impacted decision-making regarding effective practices in each of the taxonomy categories.

The school vs. real world perspective challenges these pioneers often face would likely come as no surprise to the researchers cited in the Chapter Two literature review. The differing perspectives (school world today vs. real world future) on student extra-curricular activity choices between secondary teachers and the TSC described by Chris seems to be an example of what authors Beattie, et al. (1997) refer to when they report a teacher training need for “multi-year team planning” (p. 370). Lisa shared examples of how she tries to continually share “the real world perspective” with staff and families when communicating in meetings and trainings, but noted it’s probably not her words that make the difference, that sometimes folks need “… to go through that process [of visiting and seeing adult program contexts directly themselves]… to make it real to them.” The barrier to effective student preparation for the future Chris described regarding allowing students to try new career development activities now while still carefully supported in school, illustrates this school vs. real world challenge in action, and how difficult it can sometimes be to negotiate bringing the real world in with various stakeholders. Susie’s goal to enhance student career development training and opportunities in her district would likely be welcomed with open arms by many researchers in this field, for as authors Carter, et al. (2010) share regarding professional development in career development programming: “… virtually no efforts have been made to integrate such information into the professional development of vocational educators, guidance counselors, and other secondary-level staff” (Agran, Cain, & Cavin, 2002; Fives, 2008, as cited by Carter, et al., 2010, p. 20).

Upon review of the numerous and varied activities engaged in by the study participants in the Chapter Four results section, it is evident that these endeavors spring from the overall goal of
bringing the real world in during the school years in order to support many stakeholders to support successful student transitions to adult life. As Jennifer emphasized: “… I think that’s the most important activity that I try and engage in, everything I do is kind-of framed with that in mind… connecting students and families with what’s available after high school.”

Reflecting on the variety and types of activities conducted by the four study participants and the dynamic contexts in which each TSC works, I decided to consider this theme from an organizational leadership perspective. What came immediately to mind is that these pioneers are consistently working in their own organizations (traditional, bureaucratic school systems), as well as with a variety of other organizations in the real world in what complexity leadership theory (CLT) refers to as “adaptive” and “enabling” leadership activities (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2011, p. 474). An overview of CLT leadership processes is shared by Yukl (2010):

… Complexity theory involves interacting units that are dynamic (changing) and adaptive, and the complex patterns of behaviors and structures that emerge are usually unique and difficult to predict from a description of the involved units… One recent complexity theory of leadership identifies three types of leadership processes (e.g., Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Administrative leadership involves actions and decisions by formal leaders who are responsible for planning and coordinating activities for the organization… Adaptive leadership is an emergent process that occurs when people with different knowledge, beliefs, and preferences interact in an attempt to solve problems and resolve conflicts. The result of this process is the production of creative ideas and new conceptions… Enabling leadership facilitates the process of emergent solutions by fostering interaction among
people who need to be involved … helping to get innovative ideas implemented in the organization… (p. 521)

These pioneers appear to be operating in very unique positions in their school districts in order to support the mission of TSE to prepare transition students to live successfully in the real world. A common denominator evident in this study participant group, is that each indicated s/he had the positive administrative support of their respective organizations, and each seemed to be authorized to operate in “adaptive” and “enabling” leadership capacities, as the context demands (Yukl, 2010). Uhl-Bien and Marion (2011) state: “A critical implication of CLT is this: complexity leadership theory recognizes that although organizations are bureaucracies, they do not have to be bureaucratic” (p. 478). In a previous seminal audit (Holman, 2013b) conducted on Giddens’ (1984) ST, a literature review was provided by sociologist Fuchs (2003), in which he makes the connection between structuration theory and complexity theory concepts, and determines that Giddens’ (1984) ST “fits well” with complexity theory and the self-organization concept specifically (p. 133). Therefore, CLT may provide another useful mechanism for describing how it is these informed, proactive TSCs are able to engage effectively working in varying organizational contexts, comprised of both enabling and constraining structures (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013).

This final, all-encompassing theme of school versus real world provided key words of significance for me when considering the title for this study. In the study title, the word Engaging is used to refer to the idea that there are a variety of types of activities a TSC may participate in on some level at any given time. And the phrase, in the gap, refers to the notion that the pioneer TSC seems to often act as a bridge or interpretive connector between the
stakeholders in the different worlds they work within— the current school world and the future world they’re supporting the preparation of transition students to enter and thrive in.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The work experiences shared by the participants in this study provide a rich array of opportunities for learning for a variety of stakeholders to consider, and contributes new knowledge to the problem of practice. The results also provide the opportunity to consider diverse avenues for future research to be conducted. A common denominator noted when the study participants are considered as a group, is the variety of disciplines that are represented by their combined work and educational experiences (e.g., teaching, administration, OT, counseling, vocational rehabilitation). Therefore, a general suggestion for additional research is to look to these and other disciplines for new ideas and/or potential guidance in this matter. Given the insights from the literature shared in this study, looking to disciplines outside of the special education arena such as organizational leadership, organizational learning, education, and psychology could prove helpful. The following represents some specific areas I believe could be worthwhile to consider for future research endeavors regarding this research topic.

Regarding learning more about effective collaboration strategies, two opportunities for continued research come to mind. Many participants shared how important learning from and collaborating with others through a professional learning community or community of practice had proven to be in their roles. Additional research in the area of collaboration using a theoretical framework such as Wenger’s (1999) community of practice model may prove fruitful. Collaboration as an effective practice in transition special education is confirmed as important by researchers, but *how* to best teach this skill continues to be elusive (Kohler & Greene, 2004).
The pioneer TSCs in this study all demonstrated evidence of “tacit knowledge” regarding collaboration (as well as other) strategies. Therefore, further research regarding how best to share tacit knowledge could be another useful research endeavor.

As indicated by the many authors in the literature review in Chapter Two, the need for increased offerings and of more effective professional development regarding many transition topics continues to be present for professionals in the field of transition (Benitez, et al., 2009; Beattie, et al., 1997; Thoma, et al., 2002; Thoma, et al., 2008; Carter, et al., 2010; Wandry, et al., 2008). In addition, determining how best to provide this training also continues to be a concern (Kohler & Greene, 2004). Considering research gleaned from a systems perspective such as the 4I framework for organizational learning shared by researchers Crossan, Lane, and White (1999) which regards learning processes at all organizational levels (p. 522) seems promising and could prove useful.

This study indicated that continuous assessment was an important activity engaged in by all four pioneers across environments and stakeholders alike. This essential activity is key to an individual TSC’s decision-making process across multiple contexts. Assessment activities are included among the core competencies in the CEC competency standards for transition specialists (http://www.educ.kent.edu/cite/ttw/trans_competencies.pdf). Often relied on as the single transition “expert” in a school district, it seems a lot rests on the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the TSC. Given these high stakes, it might be useful to learn more about the required skills involved. A different means to learn more might be through new research conducted using the lens of Emotional Intelligence Theory shared by Goleman (2006). Ashakanasy and Humphrey (2011) share research and state: “… we identified that emotional intelligence (EI) is an individual difference variable that, despite controversy, appears to be critically important for
effective leadership” (p. 370). Conducting research using role and/or identity theoretical frameworks might also prove useful. To learn more about the TSC role from a leadership perspective, the complexity leadership theory lens, described in the organizational leadership literature, could prove insightful (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2011; Yukl, 2010). A more narrowly defined, in-depth qualitative or mixed methods study on any one of this study’s interview protocol questions (e.g., barriers) could yield additional understanding of this problem of practice. Last, a follow-up study with these study participants several years in the future, could be helpful to learn more about how their respective positions have continued to evolve over time.

**Limitations of Study**

This qualitative study is limited due to its small size and is not intended to be generalizable to other contexts. Readers must critically read and decide for themselves if portions are applicable in some way to their own work contexts. Analysis of data is biased by my personal perspectives, recent educational experiences, and biases shared in the positionality statement in the first chapter, as well my own experiences as a pioneer TSC for over a decade. As Saldana (2013) states: “… multiple realities exist because we each perceive and interpret social life from different points of view” (p. 8).

**Implications for Practice**

Upon consideration of the study results and findings, two big-picture implications for practice surfaced from my perspective. Each situates well specifically within Kohler’s (1996) Taxonomy “program structures and attributes” category, but has potential to impact the other four categories as well.
The first implication is based on what was learned from the findings of this study regarding providing meaningful professional development to practitioners. Study participants shared successful examples of both supporting program structures and student development taxonomy categories through the use of targeted, hands-on professional development efforts using collaborative workgroups and professional learning community models, as well as supporting the family involvement category through informational events such as through the transition resource fairs. For designers/providers of pre-service and professional development, these findings confirm the importance of emphasizing and providing direct, real-life, and collaborative learning experiences along with direct support from a seasoned transition professional to support acquisition of tacit knowledge for professional educators, in lieu of traditional textbook, exams, and formal research paper assignments. It is also evident from the results that somehow the message that transition educators must always be learning and evaluating their practice needs to be sent and truly received by PD participants.

The second implication regards the notion of structures that often have a “constraining” effect on educators’ goals in the overall secondary school system, especially when it comes to providing real-world learning opportunities for students in transition (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). The inflexible high school schedule described by a study participant is an example of a school structural element that does not support the community-based career development activities needed for student preparation for adult life roles in the real world. This statement was shared earlier in this study: “…The dollars are already being spent on special education: The goal …is to ensure that existing dollars are spent in a more effective manner… so that students can succeed as adults” (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2008). This organization appears to be calling for a restructuring of current educational resources. This study
provides support for each district taking a systems approach (Meadows, 2008) to review and consider the (individual) current secondary school structures in place regarding what works, what doesn’t, and how some aspects might be redesigned to be more effectively aligned with meeting student goals. More effectively designed school structures would benefit all students in a district, for as pioneers emphasized, preparing for successful adult life is the goal for all students in the educational system, with and without disabilities. This is no small task and there are no quick answers, as each district has such varied and changing contexts in which it operates. Systems author Meadows’ (2008) words seem particularly fitting here: “To paraphrase a common prayer: God grant us the serenity to exercise our bounded rationality freely in the systems that are structured appropriately, the courage to restructure the systems that aren’t, and the wisdom to know the difference!” (p. 110).

Final Reflections

“Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has” (attributed to Margaret Mead).

The purpose of this study was to learn more about pioneer TSC work experiences from the actual practitioners themselves to contribute to a better understanding of this problem of practice in the field of TSE. The use of Giddens’ (1984) ST as a theoretical lens to consider the results of this study has provided a useful format for better understanding and making sense of the complex, dynamic relationship between structure and agency taking place every day in transition special education. It helps to make sense of how it is that determined, engaged agents can effect changes within contexts with enabling and constraining structural elements present (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013).
The results and findings of this study will serve to inform and shape any future professional development projects I engage in. Consistent with the successful experiences of the pioneers in this study, I anticipate building in directly-supported, field-based and collaborative learning opportunities as key elements in future training efforts.

The stories shared by these four pioneer TSCs provide living examples supporting the Margaret Mead quote that opened this section. The work experiences and thought processes shared by these four determined study participants clearly demonstrate that through intentional actions of informed and truly engaged agents, transition professionals can transform the current discouraging transition special education success rates, one student at a time.
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http://bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm


Appendix A: Table of Transition Special Education Terms and Acronyms

The table below provides a list of commonly used terms, acronyms (if there is a commonly used one), and corresponding definitions referred to in this study and often used in the field of transition special education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term/ (Acronym when applicable)</th>
<th>Definition/Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evidence-based practice (EBP)</td>
<td>“An evidence-based practice (EBP) is a teaching method used to teach a specific skill that has been shown to be effective based on high-quality research (Cook, Tankersly, &amp; Landrum, 2009; Odom, Brantlinger, Gersten, Horner, Thompson, &amp; Harris, 2005).” Retrieved from <a href="http://www.nsttac.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdf/pdf/ebps/Description%20of%20EBPs_updated.pdf">http://www.nsttac.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdf/pdf/ebps/Description%20of%20EBPs_updated.pdf</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Education Program (IEP)</td>
<td>“The IEP is an educational program mandate by law (most recently, IDEA 2004) that states the goals, objectives, and timeline of activities necessary for educational program implementation. An IEP is developed for each student with disabilities; it is highly specific only to the student for whom it is designed (Capizzi, 2008)…” (Wehman, 2013, p. 21). Wehman, Paul (2013). Life beyond the classroom: Transition strategies for young people with disabilities. 5th ed. Baltimore, Maryland: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004) Transition service requirements | “The term “transition services” means a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that:  
- Is designed to be within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child’s movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment); continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation;  
- Is based on the individual child’s needs, taking into account the child’s strengths, preferences, and interests; and  
- Includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. [34 CFR 300.43 (a)] [20 U.S.C. 1401(34)]” Retrieved from |
### Secondary Transition Special Education IEP Requirements

“Beginning not later than the first IEP to be in effect when the child turns 16, or younger if determined appropriate by the IEP Team, and updated annually thereafter, the IEP must include:

- Appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age-appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment and, where appropriate, independent living skills;
- The transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the child in reaching those goals; and
- Beginning not later than one year before the child reaches the age of majority under State law, a statement that the child has been informed of the child’s rights under Part B, if any, that will transfer to the child on reaching the age of majority under §300.520 [see 20 U.S.C. 1415(m)].

(U.S. Department of Education Transition Guide. Retrieved from [http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transitionguide.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transitionguide.html))

### Transition Coordinator or Transition Specialist (referred to as a TSC in this study)

“We defined a Transition Specialist as . . . an individual who plans, coordinates, delivers, and evaluates transition education and services at the school or system level, in conjunction with other educators, families, students, and representatives of community organizations.” (Retrieved from [http://www.dcdt.org/wpcontent/uploads/2011/09/DCDT_Fact_Sheet_Competencies_3.pdf](http://www.dcdt.org/wpcontent/uploads/2011/09/DCDT_Fact_Sheet_Competencies_3.pdf))
Appendix B: Interview Protocol (Rev. 10.29.13)

The researcher will conduct semi-structured interviews with study participants for this study. The interview questions for this study will include, but are not be limited to:

**Interview Questions Regarding Past**

- When you first started your position as a Transition Coordinator/Specialist (TSC), what were the expectations, how was the job structured (where are you in the formal organizational chart?) and described to you?
- When you first started as a TSC, what types of activities on behalf of students did you initially engage in with teachers and other stakeholders?
- What types of barriers did you first have to address and how did you do this?
- Please describe some of your past successful endeavors with other stakeholders in this position and why you think they were successful.

**Interview Questions Regarding Present**

- How has your position/expectations/structure changed (if at all) since the beginning?
- What types of activities on behalf of students do you as a TSC currently engage in with various stakeholders?
- What types of barriers do you address now and how do you do this?
- What types of endeavors to promote student success are you engaging in now, and how are you approaching them given what you know now from past experiences in this job?
- Please describe a transition endeavor you believe would be useful in your district now that would be particularly challenging, and how you would need to go about it.
- Please share any previous work experience, education, or other factor(s) that you believe has/have been helpful to you as a pioneer TSC, and describe how.

**Interview Questions Regarding Future**

- What types of barriers do you anticipate in the future and what do you think will be needed to address them?
- What types of endeavors do you anticipate engaging in the future in this position, and how do you anticipate approaching them and why?
- How do you believe this position will be perceived/what will it encompass in the future?
- Please describe a past endeavor(s) you would approach differently if you were to engage in it again (or something similar) in the future.
- Reflecting on your experiences as a pioneer TSC, what would you want to share with a new TSC to support preparation for “success” in her/his new role in this field?

**Final Wrap-up Interview Question(s)**

- Is there a “typical” day for you as a TSC? If so, please describe.
• Do you have any favorite “tools of the trade” you’d like to share?

• My general research question stems from a dilemma in the transition field - that there are many (and a growing number) of best practices available for practitioners to implement, but student outcomes haven’t improved significantly. So my question here is- Given your experiences as a practicing TSC, what do you make of that/do you have any thoughts you might share regarding that?

• What is your favorite part of the job?

• What else would you like to share regarding your experiences as a pioneer TSC?
Appendix C: Study Participant Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, Department
Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator’s name: Dr. Kristal Clemons, Student Researcher’s name: Deborah Holman
Title of Project: Exploring TSEC (transition special education coordinator) Work Experiences

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you are a pioneer (first-ever in your school district) transition special education coordinator.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this qualitative study will be to explore and learn about the role and work experiences of pioneer TSECs working to support post-school success for students with disabilities in the northeastern region of the United States.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in a semi-structured interview with me. You will be provided the general interview questions at least 3 days in advance to give you an opportunity to think and reflect on them in preparation for the interview. Once the interview data has been analyzed, you will be invited to review what I have written to check it for accuracy before the study is finalized.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes. We will schedule it on a date/time and location convenient to you.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
It is not believed that there will be any risk or discomfort to you. I will be sure to minimize any risk by my commitment to you to not disclose your real name or location name to anyone other than the PI (Dr. K. Clemons). Pseudonyms will replace your actual name and school district. You may select a pseudonym for yourself or I can select one for you if you prefer.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may contribute to the knowledge available to others interested in this field of study.
**Who will see the information about me?**
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study, D. Holman and Dr. K. Clemons, will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.

Pseudonyms will be used throughout the interview process. Participant identities will be known only to the researcher and PI (Deborah Holman and Dr. K. Clemons), and will be stored in a locked container separate from other study documents. Dr. Linda Beltz, Dr. Joan Kester, and the transcriber employed will have access to data only with pseudonyms in place.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board [or if applicable the sponsor or funding agency e.g. NIH, NSF, FDA, OHRP] to see this information.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**
You may always choose not to participate in the study.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**
No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of participation in this research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have [as a student, employee, etc].
Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Deborah Holman (xxx.xxx.xxxx or email: xxxxx), or Dr. Kristal Clemons (xxx.xxx.xxxx or email: xxxxx), the Principal Investigator.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
No, you will not be paid for your participation.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There are no expected costs that will be incurred by you to participate.

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 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: Study Participant Recruitment Script

The following script will be used by the researcher during either a phone call or in-person conversation with each potential study participant for recruiting purposes.

Hi Name of Potential Study Participant,

As you know I have been in a doctoral program over at Northeastern University. I’ve finished all the coursework and am now ready to start my research study phase. I’m going to do a qualitative study about the experiences of pioneer (meaning first-ever staff to have this job in their school districts) transition special education coordinators in the Northeast. I need to recruit a few people to participate, and since you’ve been a pioneer in this position for a while now, I was wondering if you might be willing to consider being a study participant? If they say no, I’ll cheerfully say: Thanks anyway! If they say yes, I’ll say: Great! Let me share more details about it to see if it sounds like something you would like to do. As I go through this information, please be sure to ask me any questions you have along the way.

I will next read each of the study details as written in the consent form (see Appendix C) in the order that they appear in the form.

I will then ask if the person if s/he has any other questions about the study, and then answer them.

Last, I will ask: Now that you know what participating in this study entails, would you be willing to be a participant? If we are meeting in person and the person says yes, I will show her/him the consent form (Appendix C) and then ask the person to read it over and then sign and date it. If we have this conversation over the phone and the person says yes, I will offer to either email the consent form to the person using a personal email address provided for this use by the person, or send a paper copy of the consent form to the person using regular U. S. postal mail to
the address provided to me by the person for this use. I will explain to the person that I need the consent form signed and dated and received by me by as soon as possible, and before any data collection will take place. Once I have received the signed consent form, I will make a copy of it and get it to the person as soon as possible (in person or by regular U. S. postal mail).