

Successful Transition Planning for High School Students with Learning Disabilities:
A Meta-Synthesis

Danielle Schultz

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RECOMMENDED: _____

Jill Burkert, Ph.D., Academic Advisor

RECOMMENDED: _____

Heather Batchelder, Ph.D., Assistant Professor Special Education

Date

Abstract

Transition for students with learning disabilities, as well as other disabilities, has been a heavily discussed topic in recent years. There has been much emphasis placed on transition plans and their effectiveness and relevancy for students. Students moving from the familiar and adult-led world of high school to the self-directed environment of post-secondary education and work face many obstacles that can be roadblocks to their success. Through effective instruction and practice in self-advocacy and self-determination, students can overcome those roadblocks and achieve their post-school goals. This meta-synthesis of the literature on students with learning disabilities and their experiences in transition planning investigates the effectiveness of transition services from the student perspective, as well as the perspective of the professionals working with these students.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

As a society, we tend to assume that students will progress through high school and leave after four years with the knowledge and skills needed to attend college and/or get a job and live independently. Ideally, this occurs with the support of family and friends who can guide the student as they learn to navigate the nuances and challenges of adulthood. Activities such as applying to college, signing the lease for an apartment, buying a car, and filing taxes are all steps to obtaining independence and becoming an “adult”. However, for students with learning disabilities, more formal support and transition activities are needed to make that leap from the teacher-led environment of high school to the self-led environment of post-secondary education or employment.

Students with learning disabilities make up approximately five percent of all students enrolled in public schools. (Cortiella and Horowitz, 2014). Forty-two percent of all students identified as having a disability are served under the category of Specific Learning Disability (Cortiella and Horowitz, 2014). Students with disabilities, such as learning disabilities, are entitled to an Individualized Education Program (IEP) in order to allow them access to a Free and Appropriate Public Education as guaranteed to them under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEIA 2004). Under IDEIA (2004), students must have a transition plan in place beginning with the first IEP in effect when the student turns 16; this plan must address post-secondary goals for each student. Transition planning is required for students in order to help them succeed in meeting their post-secondary goals (IDEIA (2004)). These

goals may include college, vocational training, or entering the workforce. According IDEIA (2004), transition services are

a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that (A) 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 post-secondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation; B) is based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences and interests; and C) includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, when appropriate, the acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation (U.S. Department of Education).

For students with severe cognitive and physical disabilities, this transition planning is typically very different than it is for students with learning disabilities. For students with severe cognitive and physical disabilities, it is appropriate for the transition plan to include independent living skills in order to allow them to live with as much independence as is appropriate for their needs. Students with learning disabilities often do not require independent living transition goals, but are in need of supports that will allow them to enter the workforce successfully or navigate the world of post-secondary education. How successful the transition plans are in high school can help determine how successful a student with learning disabilities will be in achieving their post-secondary goals.

1.2 Author's belief's and experiences

My desire to learn more about transition planning for students with learning disabilities began a few years ago when I began working with high school students with disabilities unexpectedly. My first job teaching students with disabilities was in a small rural school in North Dakota. When I was initially hired, I was solely to teach students in Kindergarten through sixth grade, although the school served children from Kindergarten through twelfth grade. There would be another teacher who would case manage students in grades seven through twelve. This was an ideal situation for me as I had no experience working with students in high school and little desire to do so. It was my first job working with students with disabilities in a case manager role and I looked forward to benefitting from my colleague's experience and learning from her. After one year of the students having a split resource room, the other teacher resigned from her position. I left school that spring anticipating that the district would hire another teacher for the junior high and high school students for the following school year. In August, preceding the start of school, I received a call from the business manager. They had been unable to hire for the high school position. I would now be serving as case manager for all students with disabilities in Kindergarten through twelfth grade. This was a shock to me as I had never desired to work with students in high school, and I felt ill prepared for what was expected of me. I spent that year learning about my students: their needs, wants, and desires, but I also spent the year acclimating myself with the transition IEP format and transition services. Having never worked with high school students, my experiences with Transition IEP's was limited to the one Transition Planning class I had taken as part of my Graduate Certificate program from the University of Alaska Southeast. While working with the transition coordinator from the Special

Education District to which my school belonged, I was introduced to various aspects of the Transition IEP for students ages 16-21. Many of these were mostly unfamiliar to me, including the extra sections of the Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP), the T-2 (Course of Study) page, and the T-3 (Transition Services) page. During this same period, I was also introduced to adult services agencies that can serve in a collaborative role with the school district in working with students with disabilities toward achieving their post-secondary goals. Prior to this year, I was unfamiliar with agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation. I felt that much of my year was spent playing catch up because of my own lack of knowledge.

Following the completion of that school year, I moved to a position at a new school. It was there that transition services became an even bigger part of my job. In this position, I strictly work with eleventh and twelfth graders as they finish out their high school careers and shift their focus toward their post-secondary goals. It is here that I find services can be lacking for students with Learning Disabilities. In my experience, there are many services and agencies available to aid in the transition for students with low incidence disabilities, as well there should be as those students need and benefit from this services. However, I have found a lack of resources available for students with learning disabilities to smooth their transition to post-secondary life. Even when services are available, many of the students and their families are unaware of them or not utilizing them to their fullest. Agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation and Rehab Services, Inc. are available to offer soft-skills training and job experiences to students. However, many of the students and their parents are unaware of these

agencies and all that they can provide for them. In my experience students are missing out on key instruction and valuable skills that these agencies can provide.

Many of the students have become accustomed to having accommodations and help available to them through their time in the resource room and may struggle to advocate for their needs once they enroll in college or get a job. Without such services available to the students, we have perhaps done them a disservice throughout their academic careers. If we are sending a student from high school to college, have we adequately prepared the student to advocate for their academic needs? Does the student know what resources are available to them in college and are they able to adequately explain their need for accommodations in the academic or “real” world?

With this meta-synthesis, I hope to investigate the following research questions:

1. Is there research that focuses on transition services from a student’s perspective?
2. What does the research show to be effective strategies for planning transition?
3. What can secondary education settings do to help students with transition to post-secondary education or the workforce?
4. What are the feelings of professionals in the field of education regarding transition plans?

1.3 The purpose of this meta-synthesis

This meta-synthesis - which focuses on transition services as well as transition success for students with learning disabilities - had multiple purposes. One of the purposes was to locate journal articles that discussed the transition services available for students with learning disabilities as well as the students’ opinions on their success. I was also interested in what secondary schools can do to help students as they transition from the relatively teacher and

parent led world of high school to the self directed world of post-secondary education or work. My highest area of interest lay in the area of looking at information from the viewpoint of the students with learning disabilities and their perspectives on the success or failure of their transition plans. Another purpose of this meta-synthesis was to classify each article by publication type, research design, participants, and data sources. It was then to summarize the findings of each study. My final purpose was to identify and summarize trends and themes that emerged from these journal articles.

2. Methods

2.1 Selection criteria

The 36 journal articles included in this meta-synthesis met the following selection criteria:

1. The articles explored issues related to students with learning disabilities.
2. The articles explored issues related to transition services for students with learning disabilities to post-secondary education or work.
3. The articles explored issues related to the students perceptions of the transition services they received and their effectiveness.
4. The articles were published in peer-reviewed journals.
5. The articles were published between 1996 and 2015.

2.2 Search procedures

I conducted database searches to locate articles for this meta-synthesis.

2.2.1 Database searches

In the winter and spring of 2016, I conducted systematic searches of articles related to the disciplines of special education and transition services. One database utilized for these searches

was Education Resources Information Center (ERIC, Ebscohost). I used the following search term combinations to conduct Boolean searches of this database:

1. (“Learning Disabilities”) AND (“Transition”)
2. (“Learning Disabilities”) AND (“Transition”) AND (“Student Perceptions”)
3. (“Learning Disabilities”) AND (“Transition”) AND (“Post Secondary”)
4. (“Learning Disabilities”) AND (“Post Secondary Education”)
5. (“Individualized Transition Plans”) AND (“Learning Disabilities”)

Another database used for searches was the database of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). I used the following search term combinations to conduct searches of this database:

1. (“Learning Disabilities”) AND (“Transition”) AND (“Post Secondary”)
2. (“Learning Disabilities”) AND (“Post Secondary Education”)
3. (“Individualized Transition Plans”) AND (“Learning Disabilities”)

The various searches yielded a total of 36 articles that met my selection criteria: Blalock, 1996; Brooke, Revell, & Wehman, 2009; Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006; Carter, Trainor, Sun, & Owens, 2009; Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Connor, 2012; Daviso, Denney, Baer, & Flexer, 2011; Dipeolu, Hargrave, Sniatecki, & Donaldson, 2012; Dowdy, 1996; Farmer, Allsopp, & Ferron, 2015; Garner, 2008; Gartland & Strosnider, 2007; Gerber, Price, Mulligan, & Shessel, 2004; Gil, 2007; Goupil, Tasse, Garcin, & Dore, 2002; Hadley, 2007; Heffernan, 2012; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Johnson, Mellard, & Lancaster, 2007; Kaehne & Beyer, 2009; Kellems & Morningstar, 2010; Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007; Madaus, 2005; Madaus, 2006; Madaus, Gerber, & Price, 2008; Madaus & Shaw, 2006; Mazzotti & Rowe, 2015; O’Connor, 2009; Papay, Unger, Williams-Diehm, & Mitchell, 2015; Rabren, Eaves, Dunn, &

Darch, 2013; Szidon, Ruppert, & Smith, 2015; Thoma, 1999; Trainor, 2007; Trainor, 2010; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007; and Wilson, Bialk, Freeze, Freeze, & Lutfiyya, 2012.

2.3 Coding procedures

I developed a coding form to categorize the information presented in each of the articles. This coding form was based on: (a) publication type; (b) research design; (c) participants; (d) data sources and (e) findings of the studies.

2.3.1 Publication type

I evaluated and classified each article according to publication type (e.g., research study, theoretical work, descriptive article, guide, opinion piece/position paper, annotated bibliography, review of the literature). *Research studies* utilize scientific methods to gather data, either quantitative or qualitative, or mixed methods. *Theoretical works* offer theories about events and the possibility that they are related. *Descriptive articles* describe experiences, either those of the author or those told to the author, but no data is gathered or analyzed. *Guides* offer recommendations regarding specific strategies or programs and their use. *Opinion pieces/position papers* explain the author's opinion about an issue. *Annotated bibliographies* provide a list of articles and summaries on a topic. *Reviews of the literature* summarize previously published works (Table 1).

2.3.2 Research design

I classified each study by research design (i.e., quantitative research, qualitative research, mixed methods research). *Quantitative* researchers work primarily with numerical data and its

collection. This data is used to determine relationships between two or more variables.

Qualitative researchers seek to understand the reasons behind a behavior/phenomena. It is used to provide insight in to the issue. *Mixed methods* research combines quantitative and qualitative research methods within a single study (Table 2). Most of the research utilized in this meta-synthesis falls into the categories of either qualitative or mixed methods research. This is due in part to the nature of the research questions utilized in this meta-synthesis. The research questions to be studied were of a personal nature and requested feedback from participants regarding their perceptions of effective transition strategies. This type of data would be difficult to obtain in a strictly quantitative study. Therefore, much of the research in this meta-synthesis is qualitative in nature.

2.3.3 Participants, data sources, and findings

I identified the participants in each of the studies (e.g., high school students with disabilities, university students with disabilities, professionals). I also identified the data sources that were analyzed for each study (e.g., interviews, observations, focus groups, surveys, standardized tests). Finally, I summarized the findings of each study (Table 2).

2.4 Data analysis

I used a modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method previously employed by Duke (2011) and Duke and Ward (2009) to analyze the 36 articles that I included in this meta-synthesis. Significant statements were identified within each article. For this meta-synthesis, significant statements were those that addressed (a) self-advocacy, self-determination, or self-awareness and their importance; (b) the need for self-disclosure of one's disability following graduation from high school; (c) challenges faced by students

transitioning to post-secondary education; (d) student perspectives and tips for success from former high school or college students with learning disabilities; and/or (e) the partnerships between schools and adult service agencies. I created a list of these significant statements and created a paraphrased formulated meaning for each. These formulated meanings are my understanding of the significant statements that I found throughout this meta-synthesis. Finally, the formulated meanings from all of the articles used were grouped into clusters or emergent themes. These themes are the main points of the body of literature (Table 3).

3. Results

3.1. Publication type

I located 36 articles that met my criteria for selection. The publication type for each article is located in Table 1. Seventeen of the 36 articles (47.2%) for this meta-synthesis were research studies (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006; Carter, Trainor, Sun, & Owens, 2009; Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Daviso, Denney, Baer, & Flexer, 2011; Dipeolu, Hargrave, Sniatecki, & Donaldson, 2010; Farmer, Allsopp, & Ferron, 2015; Gerber, Price, Mulligan, & Shessel, 2004; Goupil, Tasse, Garcin, & Dore, 2002; Hadley, 2007; Heffernan, 2012; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Kaehne & Beyer, 2009; Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007; Madaus, 2006; Rabren, Eaves, Dunn, & Darch, 2013; Trainor, 2007; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). Eleven of the articles (30.6%) were descriptive articles (Blalock, 1996; Brooke, Revell, & Wehman, 2009; Dowdy, 1996; Gartland & Strosnider, 2007; Garner, 2008; Gil, 2007; Madaus, 2005; Madaus & Shaw, 2006; Mazzotti & Rowe, 2015; Trainor, 2010; Wilson, Bialk, Freeze,

Freeze, & Lutfiyya, 2012). Eight of the articles (22.2%) were guides (Connor, 2012; Johnson, Mellard, & Lancaster, 2007; Kellems & Morningstar, 2010; O'Connor, 2009; Papay, Unger, Williams-Diehm, & Mitchell, 2015; Szidon, Ruppard, & Smith, 2015; Thoma, 1999).

Table 1

Author(s) & Year of Publication	Publication Type
Blalock, 1996	Descriptive Article
Brooke, Revell, & Wehman, 2009	Descriptive Article
Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006	Research Study
Carter, Trainor, Sun, & Owens, 2009	Research Study
Cawthon & Cole, 2010	Research Study
Connor, 2012	Guide
Daviso, Denney, Baer, & Flexer, 2011	Research Study

Dipeolu, Hargrave, Sniatecki, & Donaldson, 2012	Research Study
Dowdy, 1996	Descriptive Article
Farmer, Allsopp, & Ferron, 2015	Research Study
Garner, 2008	Descriptive Article
Gartland & Strosnider, 2007	Descriptive Article
Gerber, Price, Mulligan, & Shessel, 2004	Research Study
Gil, 2007	Descriptive Article
Goupil, Tasse, Garcin, & Dore, 2002	Research Study
Hadley, 2007	Research Study
Heffernan, 2012	Research Study
Janiga & Costenbader, 2002	Research Study
Johnson, Mellard, & Lancaster, 2007	Guide
Kaehne & Beyer, 2009	Research Study
Kellems & Morningstar, 2010	Guide
Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007	Research Study
Madaus & Shaw, 2006	Descriptive Article
Madaus, 2005	Descriptive Article

Madaus, 2006	Research Study
Madaus, Gerber, & Price, 2008	Guide
Mazzotti & Rowe, 2015	Descriptive Article
O'Connor, 2009	Guide
Papay, Unger, Williams-Diehm, & Mitchell, 2015	Guide
Rabren, Eaves, Dunn, & Darch, 2013	Research Study
Szidon, Ruppard, & Smith, 2015	Guide
Thoma, 1999	Guide
Trainor, 2007	Research Study
Trainor, 2010	Descriptive Article
Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007	Research Study
Wilson, Bialk, Freeze, Freeze, & Lutfiyya, 2012	Descriptive Article

3.2 Research design, participants, data sources, and findings of the studies

As stated in the previous section, 17 research studies were located that met my selection criteria (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006; Carter, Trainor, Sun, & Owens, 2009; Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Daviso, Denney, Baer, & Flexer, 2011; Dipeolu, Hargrave, Sniatecki, & Donaldson, 2010; Farmer, Allsopp, & Ferron, 2015; Gerber, Price, Mulligan, & Shessel, 2004; Goupil, Tasse, Garcin, & Dore, 2002; Hadley, 2007; Heffernan, 2012; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Kaehne & Beyer, 2009; Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007; Madaus, 2006; Rabren, Eaves, Dunn, & Darch, 2013; Trainor, 2007; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). The research design, participants, data sources, and findings of each of these studies are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Author	Research Design	Participants	Data Sources	Findings
Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006	Mixed Methods	85 high school students with Emotional Disturbance or Learning Disabilities	AIR Self Determination Scale	Self-determination was found to be significantly lower in students identified as having emotional disturbance than students with learning disabilities with this being true for all parties completing the survey (student, parent, and teacher).
Carter, Trainor, Sun, & Owens, 2009	Quantitative	160 students with Emotional Disturbance or Learning Disabilities	Transition Planning Inventory (TPI) given to students, parents, and teachers	Students have more confidence in their self-determination skills than do other members of their team. The study highlighted the importance of using the perspective of a variety of team members when completing transition assessments.
Cawthon & Cole, 2010	Mixed Methods	110 undergraduate students with a learning disability	Online Survey	Students were knowledgeable about the type of disability and the accommodations they needed, however they did not consistently use all of the accommodations available to them at the university.

				Students were unprepared for how to advocate for needed services in college.
Daviso, Denney, Baer, & Flexer, 2011	Quantitative	416 Ohio students with Learning Disabilities exiting special education services	Surveys	The study determined that the post-school goals of students with learning disabilities in Ohio were correlated with their secondary programs and services. Students with learning disabilities experience better employment outcomes when they are involved in career and technical education, work study opportunities, and paid employment before leaving secondary education.
Dipeolu, Hargrave, Sniatecki, & Donaldson, 2012	Quantitative	139 high school students with learning disabilities	Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI), Career Maturity Inventory – Revised (CMI-R), and Vocational Identity (VI) scale of My Vocational Situation (MVS)	The purpose of this study was to determine if these inventories, which are used in transition planning for students with disabilities, were appropriately normed to give reliable information for students with learning disabilities. The study found that normed scales of these inventories were significantly different for students with learning disabilities and students without learning disabilities. The study concluded that developing norms for inventories based on student with learning disabilities in addition to norms based on the general

				student population could give professionals working with these students more information than inventories not normed on students with learning disabilities.
Farmer, Allsopp, & Ferron, 2015	Mixed Methods	Seven college students with ADHD or Learning Disabilities	Time Series Data, Self Determination Student Scale (SDSS, session notes, and participant interviews)	This study explored the impact of the Personal Strengths Program (PSP) to develop self-determination skills of college students. The results of this study were mixed. Data indicated that there was little to no effect from the program, however participant perspectives indicated that the program was beneficial and helped them increase their self-determination skills.
Gerber, Price, Mulligan, & Shessel, 2004	Qualitative	25 U.S. adults with learning disabilities and 24 Canadian adults with learning disabilities who were between 18 and 45 years old	Interviews	Most of the adults in the study did not self disclose their learning disability to their employer. They did not typically request accommodations, and those that did request them did not consistently have them met. The study found no major differences between the experiences of people in the United States with learning disabilities and the experiences of those in Canada.
Goupil, Tasse,	Qualitative	21 high school	Questionnaire and transition	Most participants were satisfied with the transition

Garcin, & Dore, 2002		students and their parents and 10 teachers	planning tools such as Making Action Plans (MAP)	plan process and felt that an Individualized Transition Plan was important for student success. Parents reported that they felt as though they were involved in the planning and that the student should always be involved in any transition meetings.
Hadley, 2007	Qualitative	10 first year college students with learning disabilities	Individual student artifacts (class schedules, copies of written assignments, tutoring reports, etc.), focus groups, and semi-structured individual interviews	The students expected accommodations similar to what they received in high school and felt the accommodations in college were lacking.
Heffernan, 2012	Qualitative	Four special education teachers/case managers at one high school in California	Interviews	None of the teachers reported receiving training on developing transition plans during their educational training. They felt unprepared to write effective transition plans.
Janiga & Costenbader, 2002	Mixed Methods	74 Coordinators of special services for students with disabilities at colleges in New York	Mail surveys	The results suggest college special services coordinators have little satisfaction with the transition services provided to students in high school. The highest level of satisfactions was in the fact that most evaluations were current (done within the last

				three years). The lowest level of satisfaction reflected that colleges do not feel that students with learning disabilities are adequately prepared to advocate for themselves in college.
Kaehne & Beyer, 2009	Qualitative	28 professionals from agencies that support students with learning disabilities as they transition from secondary education in the United Kingdom	Semi-structured interviews	Partnerships between schools and support agencies may at times be preoccupied with processes rather than ensuring an effective transition. Emphasis should be placed on the students and allowing for more work experience opportunities.
Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007	Qualitative	13 young adults who had been out of school for between three and five years.	Semi-structured interviews as well as records reviews and family background questionnaires	Family interactions and values have a greater influence on post-school outcomes for student with LD than family structure and socioeconomic status.
Madaus, 2006	Mixed Methods	170 college graduates with Learning Disabilities	Surveys	Many students surveyed felt their college programs were appropriate, but also provided specific suggestions to enhance current services. These included Internships, Mentoring Programs, Specific Courses, ADA Knowledge, and Follow-Up with Graduates

Rabren, Eaves, Dunn, & Darch, 2013	Mixed Methods	801 students with learning disabilities who had been out of school for one year during the 2007-2008 school year	Alabama Post-School Transition Survey	This study was to look at the level of satisfaction of young people with learning disabilities in their post-school outcomes in a variety of areas. Overall, participants reported satisfaction rates between .72 (regarding their satisfaction with their decisions) to .99 (regarding their satisfaction with their family life) one year after graduation. This study found that young adults with learning disabilities with lower status in employment and education and/or training were more likely to be dissatisfied with their current situation.
Trainor, 2007	Qualitative	Seven girls in grades 10 or 11	Interviews	Participants felt they possessed the skills necessary to make their own decisions and take care of themselves. However several skills, such as understanding personal strengths and weaknesses and goal setting were in need of greater development for increased self-determination.
Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007	Mixed Methods	103 high school students receiving special education	Survey	Teachers must have the time required for individualized transition planning in order for it to be effective. Relationships between high schools and adult service agencies must be strong

		services in Texas		
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3.2.1. Research Design

Seven of the 17 studies (41.2%) used a qualitative research design (Gerber, Price, Mulligan, & Shessel, 2004; Goupil, Tasse, Garcin, & Dore, 2002; Hadley, 2007; Heffernan, 2012; Kaehne & Beyer, 2009; Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007; Trainor, 2007). Seven of the 17 studies (41.2%) utilized a mixed methods research design (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006; Farmer, Allsopp, & Ferron, 2015; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Madaus, 2006; Rabren, Eaves, Dunn, & Darch, 2013; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). Three of the studies (17.6%) used a quantitative design for their research (Carter, Trainor, Sun, & Owens, 2009; Daviso, Denney, Baer, & Flexer, 2011; Dipeolu, Hargrave, Sniatecki, & Donaldson, 2012).

3.2.2 Participants and Data Sources

The majority of the 17 research studies utilized data gathered from adults (those over the age of 18 who were no longer attending high school). The studies were conducted with college students or students who had exited special education services and were either continuing in their post-secondary education and/or were working or unemployed. Seven of the 17 studies (41.2%) were conducted with data from adults with learning disabilities (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Farmer, Allsopp, & Ferron 2015; Gerber, Price, Mulligan, & Shessel, 2004; Hadley, 2007; Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007; Madaus, 2006; Rabren, Eaves, Dunn, & Darch, 2013).

Seven of the studies (41.2%) collected data from high school students with disabilities (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006; Carter, Trainor, Sun, & Owens, 2009; Daviso, Denney, Baer, & Flexer, 2011; Dipeolu, Hargrave, Sniatecki, & Donaldson, 2012; Goupil, Tasse, Garcin, & Dore, 2002; Trainor, 2007; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). Three studies (17.6%) collected their data from professionals working with student with learning disabilities in either the secondary or post-secondary setting (Heffernan, 2012; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Kaehne & Beyer, 2009). In addition to the primary subjects in each research study, supplemental information was also gathered from sources including parents and current and/or former teachers/case managers.

Interviews and surveys were the main sources of data for these research studies.

Fourteen of the 17 studies (82.4%) utilized for this meta-synthesis took advantage of surveys or interviews to gain their data (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Daviso, Denney, Baer, & Flexer, 2011; Farmer, Allsopp, & Ferron, 2015; Gerber, Price, Mulligan, & Shessel, 2004; Goupil, Tasse, Garcin, & Dore, 2002; Hadley, 2007; Heffernan, 2012; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Kaehne & Beyer, 2009; Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007; Madaus, 2006; Rabren, Eaves, Dunn, & Darch, 2013; Trainor, 2007; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). Three studies (17.6%) utilized some type of formal or informal transition assessment such as the Transition Planning Inventory (TPI) (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006; Carter, Trainor, Sun, & Owens, 2009; Dipeolu, Hargrave, Sniatecki, & Donaldson, 2012). Additional data sources used as supplemental data in the studies included record reviews, student artifacts, interviewer impressions, and session notes.

3.2.3 Findings of the Studies

The findings of the 17 research studies included in this meta-synthesis can be summarized as follows:

1. Students with strong self-determination skills have a much better chance at attaining success in their lives. This is true in both post-secondary education as well as career. Self-determination skills are difficult to measure and students often feel that they possess more self-determination than do their parents or teachers. Self-determination skills can be taught to students with disabilities, however it is preferential to begin this early in a student's education.
2. Strong self-advocacy skills are needed as students with learning disabilities transition from secondary to the post-secondary level of education. Upon exiting special education services, federal law pertaining to students with disabilities changes from IDEIA to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and students must be aware of their rights and responsibilities under ADA. College students with learning disabilities emphasize that the support they have received in school through accommodations has been crucial to their ability to succeed at the post-secondary level.
3. Professionals working with students with disabilities on their transition plans are often unsure of how to write these plans. There is a need for strong collaboration between teachers, students, parents, and adult service agencies in order for the student to achieve the most success.

3.3 Emergent Themes

Five themes emerged from my analysis of the 36 articles included in this meta-synthesis. These themes include: (a) need for strong self-awareness, self-determination and self-advocacy skills; (b) self-disclosure in post-secondary education and training and the workforce; (c) unique

challenges in transitioning to post-secondary education; (d) former students perspectives and tips for success; and (e) partnerships between schools and adult service agencies. These five theme clusters and their associated formulated meanings are represented in Table 3.

Table 3

Theme Clusters	Formulated Meanings
Need for Strong Self-Awareness, Self-Determination, and Self-Advocacy Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Research has found that students with learning disabilities who are successful in college have good self-awareness.● Students who do not have strong self-determination skills often over-estimate their abilities and fail to seek out accommodations in an appropriate time frame.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Research has found that self-determination skills can be taught to students and there is a need for interventions to help develop these skills. ● People who are self-determined achieve at higher academic levels and have better quality of life outcomes. ● Young adults with learning disabilities can be in charge of their future with adequate self-determination and self-advocacy skills. ● The importance of self-determination for adolescents with disabilities is highlighted in legislative policies. ● Being successful in post-secondary education requires knowledge of one’s disability as well as knowledge as to what resources are available at the post-secondary institution. ● Students with learning disabilities need to learn to take an active role in their decision making process while in high school so they can use these skills when they enter college. ● Students who understand themselves and their disability can act in their own best interests and make choices with full understanding of the positive and negative consequences of those choices. ● Self-advocacy skills are crucial to early academic development. ● Research shows that students with strong self-determination skills speak up more during transition planning. ● Engaging students in discussion about their decisions has the potential to promote self-determination. ● Some transition experts suggest that learning social skills, self-determination, communication, and relationships should become a focus and everyday practice. ● Developing self-determination and career awareness should begin early.
<p>Self-Disclosure in Post-secondary Education and Training and the Workforce</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students with a disability must understand the supports/accommodations provided by disability laws (IDEIA and ADA). ● Employees must be aware of their rights and responsibilities under the law (Americans with Disabilities Act). ● Adults with learning disabilities are largely unaware of their rights under ADA. ● Young adults must be taught not only about their rights under ADA, but also about their responsibilities.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Most Americans and Canadians with learning disabilities did not tell their employer that they had a learning disability. ● Under the law, self-disclosure of a disability is vital when asking for appropriate supports and reasonable accommodations in the workplace. ● Students with disabilities who wish to receive accommodations at the post-secondary level must self-disclose their disability. ● There are no simple solutions to the issue of self-disclosure in the workplace. ● No one strategy can be applied to every situation regarding self-disclosure in the workplace. ● Self-disclosure in the workplace or post-secondary education level does not parallel the process in the school environment.
<p>Unique Challenges in Transitioning to Post-secondary Education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students with learning disabilities complete college degree programs less often than their peers without disabilities. ● Research shows that students with learning disabilities often lack the skills and strategies needed for the post-secondary setting. ● Transition planning and services for students with learning disabilities vary greatly from school to school at the post-secondary level. There is little consensus regarding effective transition practices. ● Many students with learning disabilities start college unprepared to manage the shift from others leading their learning to leading their own learning. ● Although effort has been placed on career development, the employment rate for young adults with disabilities is below that of young adults in the general population. ● Professionals who work with students with learning disabilities in the transition to post-secondary education should help the student choose a college that has the services to meet their unique needs. ● Students need to gather information required by universities for documentation prior to leaving high school. ● Transition planning is often started too late to provide for adequate transition services.
<p>Former Students Perspectives and Tips for Success</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students need to practice self-advocacy prior to entering college. ● Students should be familiar and comfortable with their disability.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students need to know their rights under the law. ● Take classes in high school to better prepare for college or career. ● The transition from high school to college can be confusing and overwhelming for students with learning disabilities and their families. ● There has been increased attention on individual transition planning; however there has been little research to assess student opinions and knowledge regarding the process.
<p style="text-align: center;">Partnerships Between Schools and Adult Service Agencies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Researchers have spent considerable energy trying to find out how to create the best transition arrangements between interested parties to ensure that young people with learning disabilities have options available to them after they leave school. ● Partnerships between schools, colleges, and adult service providers can create smooth transitions for students with learning disabilities. ● Funding can become a barrier to optimal transition services. ● The goals of young adults with learning disabilities are complicated by making the transition from familiar, coordinated, and free school-based support to the scarce, unmandated, and potentially costly adult services. ● The services required for transition by students with learning disabilities goes beyond what schools alone can provide. ● When the various representatives work as a team, a comprehensive transition plan is developed in a meaningful way. ● Specific services that are offered can vary across communities. ● Teachers and staff working with students on their transition plans must have resources available to help them evaluate employment services. ● The contributions of parents to the transition plan are especially important. ● The transition from school to adult life should be well planned. ● Receiving support services in college is important to the student’s success. ● Students with learning disabilities may not be aware of the services available to them or the process to sign up for services. ● Collaboration between school and adult service agencies is important to the transition planning process.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Engaging the student in the transition process enables the plan to be more meaningful for the student.● Students with learning disabilities need employment support specific to their needs. The plan is less intense than supported employment, but more than for students without learning disabilities.
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4. Discussion

In this discussion, I have summarized the themes from my analysis of the articles in this meta-synthesis. I have connected these themes to my own experiences and beliefs as a special education teacher for students with learning disabilities in transition planning.

4.1 Need for strong self-awareness, self-determination and self-advocacy skills

Self-determination and self-advocacy skills for students with learning disabilities were discussed again and again throughout the research studies utilized in this meta-synthesis. This serves to highlight the importance of these skills for students as they transition from high school to post-secondary education or the workforce. In order to build those skills, the first thing that a student should develop is self-awareness about their disability and their academic needs.

Without the knowledge of what their disability is and the accommodations they have utilized effectively in the past, it will be difficult to build strong self-determination and self-advocacy skills. In my experience working with students of transition age, if a student is not comfortable with their disability, or are ashamed of their disability, they are far less likely to request the accommodations they can utilize at the high school level. They are less likely to be active participants in their IEP meetings and are hesitant to ask for accommodations from school staff.

This would transfer in to post-secondary education or career where a student may also be hesitant to advocate for what they need in order to be successful. Being aware of one's disability as well as accepting that disability is the first step in building strong self-determination and strong self-advocacy skills.

Often, students with learning disabilities will overestimate their abilities in the areas of self-determination and self-advocacy. This overestimation can be very detrimental to the students in achieving their post-secondary goals as the student is more likely to wait to ask for assistance until they are in danger of failing, either in the post-secondary education world or in their career.

As a student with a learning disability leaves high school, they also leave the familiar model of receiving assistance and accommodations and must learn a new system, often without the help of someone who is familiar with navigating this system. Young adults with strong self-advocacy skills are more likely to seek out assistance in a post-secondary education setting and will ask for and receive accommodations far faster than a student with weaker skills who doesn't advocate for him or herself until they are already failing in class. Past research has shown that strong self-determination and self-advocacy skills in students are linked to higher post-secondary outcomes for young adults with learning disabilities.

While self-determination and self-advocacy skills do not always come naturally to students with learning disabilities, they can be taught and reinforced so the skills are developed prior to the student leaving the "safe" and familiar world of high school. Teachers and parents of students with learning disabilities should begin to teach and reinforce these skills at an early age,

even before the required age of transition planning as specified by IDEIA. In my own work with high school students with learning disabilities, I will use the knowledge gained through this meta-synthesis to continue to teach and reinforce the self-advocacy and self-determination skills that are so vital for students to have prior to leaving high school. Whether the student wants to attend a four-year college, a technical career-training program, or begin working immediately following graduation, they will need to have these skills in order to more easily navigate the options available and to make the best choices for themselves.

4.2 Self-disclosure in post-secondary education and training and the workforce

As previously discussed, self-awareness of your disability is vital to building self-determination and self-advocacy skills in students with disabilities. However, once a student exits high school, disclosing their disability to their teachers or employers becomes an independent task. In high school, the student's case manager is responsible for informing all of their teachers of the student's disability and the accommodations which they are allowed to access. Once a student graduates or drops out, that responsibility rests solely with the individual.

It is a very personal choice for young adults with learning disabilities to disclose their disability and their possible need for accommodations in college or on the job. Many people choose to never disclose that they have a learning disability and will often gravitate toward jobs that play to their strengths and allow them to cover their weaker areas. A student with a learning disability in the area of math, for example, may shy away from a job in a field that deals with money and may highlight their stronger areas. In situations like this, it may not be necessary for

a young adult to disclose their disability because they are not requesting and do not require any accommodations to effectively accomplish their career goals.

While many young adults will simply choose not to disclose their learning disability, they may also be unaware that in order to receive protection under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), they also have the responsibility to disclose their disability to their employer or their post-secondary institution. This is why it is important that students be taught what their rights as well as their responsibilities are under the laws that cover them when they leave high school and IDEA is no longer applicable to their situation. This is an important transition skill that should be taught in high school so that the students can make an informed decision about whether or not to disclose their disability to others once they leave high school.

4.3 Unique challenges in transitioning to post-secondary education

There are many obstacles that a student with a learning disability must face when they choose to attend a two or four year college. They are not easy obstacles to overcome and students with learning disabilities will complete their college degree programs less often than their peers without disabilities. Many students with learning disabilities start college without being prepared to take full control of their learning. They have grown dependent on the adults in their lives to help them and to advocate for their needs and have not developed the skills needed to do it themselves. This should be learned and practiced often in high school to prepare for college. School staff working with students with learning disabilities must take the last few years that a student is in high school and work on stepping back and guiding the student as they take charge of their own education.

Once the student has chosen to self-disclose their disability and has advocated for the accommodations he or she feels they will need to be successful, they are often surprised to learn that the accommodations they are eligible for in college are very different from those they had grown accustomed to in high school. Because high schools are governed under IDEIA and colleges fall under ADA, the accommodations and resources that a student has access to can vary. In fact, resources can vary from one post-secondary institution to another. Students and their team must be diligent in researching the resources available to them when choosing a college or university and making sure that they match what they student needs.

4.4 Former students perspectives and tips for success

While there has been increased focus on the transition process under recent legislation, there has been little research done to assess the opinions of the ones that are the most affected by the transition process, the students. This can be a confusing and overwhelming time for students and their families as they try to navigate the transition process and many special education teachers are unsure about how to help them.

There have been a few studies done on the student perspective on the transition process and the students in those studies advocate for the same things that are shared again and again throughout this meta-synthesis. The need for strong self-awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy are crucial to the students' success at the post-secondary level. These skills should be taught and practiced long before a student with a learning disability leaves high school. Other advice from former students who have gone through the transition process includes knowing and understanding your rights under the law as well as your responsibilities, taking classes in high

school to prepare you for the career you are interested in or to help you prepare for the rigors of college life.

4.5 Partnerships between schools and adult service agencies

While the transition process can be difficult to navigate, it is important for the student to realize that they are not in it alone. There are resources available to the student if they choose to seek them out and access their services. Having a strong partnership between high schools and adult service agencies can be vital in navigating the often confusing world of transition planning. I have been fortunate that in my school there is a very strong relationship between the school and our representative from Vocational Rehabilitation. The counselor is assigned solely to our high school and is able to spend two or three full days each week at our school. He is able to attend most of the IEP meetings to which he is invited and he meets with each student several times a quarter. We are also lucky to have another program through Rehab Services, Inc. in which students with learning disabilities are able to learn and practice soft-skills for current or future employment. They are able to participate in job programs that match them with a job coach to visit with them while on the job and help them navigate difficult or confusing situations. This job coach provides fewer and fewer services and eventually the student is completely independent in their employment.

While programs such as the ones described above indicate that there are strong relationships that are possible between schools and adult services agencies for students with learning disabilities, there are also barriers to these relationships. One such barrier is funding. Lack of funding can inhibit the development of much needed programs that would be beneficial

to the students. Another barrier is that the student must be aware of the programs and willing to participate. Many of my students who are not proficient in the area of self-determination also do not believe that they have areas in which they can improve. They are unwilling to practice the skills that they feel they are proficient in, even though their parents, teachers, counselors, and other school staff encourage them to work on building up those skills. The student must be engaged in the transition process and be willing to work on developing needed skills so that the transition plan is applicable to them and beneficial for them.

Strong relationships between adult services agencies, schools, and parents are vital because when the participants work as a team, they can develop a meaningful plan that is based on the student's individual desires and goals. This is the basis of an effective transition and will have the greatest long-term benefit for the student.

5. Conclusion

This meta-synthesis has highlighted many factors that are relevant to students with learning disabilities as they transition from the familiar world of high school to the unknowns of adulthood. Self-advocacy, self-determination, self-awareness, and self-disclosure of a disability were all recurrent themes throughout the research found in this meta-synthesis. These are not skills that will come naturally to all students, even those without learning disabilities; they must be taught and practiced before the student leaves high school. Once these skills have become

more natural for the student, they will be much more likely to utilize them in their life after high school.

Strong relationships between high school staff and adult services agencies staff were discussed in several of the research studies in this meta-synthesis. There are a variety of programs available to students with disabilities in the United States as they graduate from high school. However, many students and their families are unaware that these programs exist or how to apply for services. If outside agencies are able to become important members of the student's transition planning team, the opportunities available to the student increase. These agencies and services can help to bridge the gap between high school and post-high school. The stronger the relationship between the student, their parents, the high school, and the outside agencies the more beneficial it will be to the student.

While transition services have been the focus of recent legislation, there has been little research done from the perspective of those to which it matters the most, the students. One focus of this meta-synthesis was to look at research from the transitioning student's point of view. This is an area in which research studies were scarce. More can be done to evaluate the current practices in transition planning for their effectiveness based on the perspective of the student. Young adults with learning disabilities will have relevant feedback for professionals that can help to guide the current practices in transition planning in high schools across the country.

This meta-synthesis has demonstrated that there is not one right path to success after high school for all students with learning disabilities. While certain skills and relationships will be beneficial, the approach that each student takes is individualized for their unique situation and

needs. If the student is able and willing to work cooperatively with their team while still in high school and utilize the skills that they have learned, the transition to post-secondary education or work can be made much smoother.

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