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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
SARGENT COLLEGE OF HEALTH AND REHABILITATION SCIENCES

Thesis

**PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS' STRENGTHS
IN TRANSITION PLANNING**

by

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DIANA J. SMITH

Abstract

The most recent revision of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) mandates that students' strengths be considered in the transition planning process for students with disabilities; however, there is evidence that individuals' strengths are not being utilized to support their transition to adulthood (Shogren & Plotner, 2012; Landmark & Zhang, 2012). Strengths refer to *all* of an individual's assets, both personal and contextual, that improve that individual's ability to function (Davis et al., 2007; McCammon, 2012). Parents have unique perspectives of their sons' and daughters' strengths (Carter, Brock, & Trainor, 2014) and have the potential to influence the transition planning process in a positive way. This study used qualitative methods to understand how parents describe their son or daughter's strengths, both personal and contextual, in relation to transition planning. Findings indicated that parents identify equal amounts of personal and contextual strengths for their children. However, strengths were described as being context dependent; the trait or resource described as an asset in one aspect of transitioning to adult life was also described as a barrier to another aspect. These findings highlighted the value of including parents in the transition planning process and that students have many strengths available for consideration as they enter adult life.

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Introduction

In the 2004 revision of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) it was recommended that a strength-based perspective be incorporated into the process of transition planning for a student (Carter, Brock, & Trainor, 2014). Specifically, in the IDEA transition services are defined as:

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 ... taking into account the child's *strengths, preferences, and interests*. (20 U.S.C. § 1401 sec. 602 [34], italics added)

Prior to the 2004 revision of IDEA, transition planning was not a mandated practice and the focus on a student's strengths, preferences, and interests was not emphasized. The legislation regarding education for students with disabilities has remained dynamic since its inception, with revisions reflecting the current state of education and systems of care for youth with disabilities. For example, transition services were first incorporated into the IDEA in 1990 when it became apparent that high school students with disabilities were still not achieving the same outcomes as their peers without disabilities even with the support of individualized education programs (IEPs) while in school (Carter, Brock, & Trainor, 2014).

The more recent emphasis on a strength-based perspective in transition planning seems to parallel the emergence of strength-based research and the field of positive

psychology (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Buchanan, & Lopez, 2006). Shogren and colleagues compared the use of strength and deficit-based assessments in intellectual disability research and reported that use of measures focusing on strengths increased from 1975–2004 while use of measures that focused on deficits decreased in the same time period. This shift towards defining people by what they can do rather than by what they cannot do started in the 1980s when there were efforts to complement IQ scores and other intelligence testing with assessments of adaptive behavior (Shogren et al., 2006). Just as the shift in the 1980s guided practitioners to consider performance in addition to IQ scores, a strength-based perspective brings consideration to an individual's available assets, both personal and contextual.

According to McCammon (2012) strengths are “qualities that contribute to (the individual's) life in a functional way and are descriptors that reveal (the individual's) distinctive attributes” (p. 557). Davis and colleagues propose that a strength-based perspective can be used to create a dialogue that focuses on an individual's capabilities instead of his or her deficiencies (Davis, Mayo, Sikand, Kobres, & Dollard, 2007). Moreover, this perspective emphasizes utilizing existing supports to improve some element of an individual's life (Davis et al., 2007). Ultimately, embracing a strength-based perspective means identifying the assets that exist within an individual and within his or her context and employing those assets to improve his or her overall functioning.

Davis et al. (2007) identified seven types of strengths: (1) *talents or competencies*, activities at which the individual excels; (2) *resilience strengths*, traits like humor or religious faith that have enabled survival in the face of challenges; (3) *possibility*

strengths, individual goals or aspirations; (4) *available resources*, both tangible physical resources and intangible social and financial resources; (5) *borrowed strengths*, using the resources, knowledge, or experiences of another; (6) *past strengths*, successes from past accomplishments; and (7) *hidden strengths*, traits that appear undesirable on the surface but can be beneficial in the right circumstances. McCammon (2012) suggests an additional type of strength which includes cultural identity, or the traditions and customs associated with one's culture, ethnicity, community, or family that foster a sense of belonging and personal development for the individual. Davis's typology reinforces the notion that strengths are much more than the abilities of a person. Rather, strengths are a transaction between abilities and contextual assets that support a person's success.

A growing body of literature has described the benefits associated with a strength-based perspective in multiple therapeutic contexts. Generally, benefits associated with using this strengths-based perspective in social work have included increased motivation and adherence to intervention, and overall improved wellness (McCammon, 2012). For example, Wood and colleagues (2011) used the Strengths Use Scale to determine to what extent adults inherently use their personal and contextual strengths in daily life and to what extent those same adults perceive their stress levels, self-esteem, and positive and negative affect. Greater strength use was associated with higher self-esteem and positive affect, and lower perceived stress (Wood et al., 2011).

Additionally, service planning based on strengths provides opportunities to further explore an individual's positive attributes (McCammon, 2012). For example, a longitudinal study of at-risk youth revealed that youth who were not "exceptionally

talented” in school but who were scheduled to participate in regular activities that engaged their interests were more resilient to distress in their home lives (Werner & Smith, 1992). McCammon (2012) suggests that having the opportunity to explore interests and hobbies promotes positive identity development. This benefit is, perhaps, particularly salient for the transition age population who are still in the process of developing their identities.

The relationship between client and therapist also has the potential to be enhanced when a strength-based perspective is used. For example, a study of caregivers of children who had received psychotherapy at a public mental health agency provides evidence that when the children were given a strengths assessment and those results were discussed with the family, the caregivers had higher satisfaction ratings (Cox, 2006). The children who received a strengths assessment missed fewer appointments than those whose children did not receive a strengths assessment. The therapeutic relationship may be enhanced because the therapist and client maintain an overall positive view of the client as they consider challenges in the contexts of the client’s strengths (McCammon, 2012).

A few researchers have conducted studies to examine the use of a strengths-based perspective in special education and transition planning. Carter and colleagues (2015) sought to understand factors involved in parent evaluations of strengths in students with disabilities and found that parents could always identify at least one strength in their child with as many as 26 unique character strengths identified for one particular student. Additionally, students who were identified as having more strengths by their parents were more likely to be involved in community activities (Carter et al., 2015). Carter and his

colleagues used the Assessment Scale for Positive Character Traits – Developmental Disabilities (ASPeCT-DD) to evaluate the presence of strengths. This measure assesses strengths found within an individual. Specifically, the ASPeCT-DD has 10 domains of strengths: courage, empathy, forgiveness, gratitude, humor, kindness, optimism, resilience, self-control, and self-efficacy. Strengths external to the individual, such as financial resources, community resources, social supports, and other contextual characteristics were not considered in this parental evaluation of student strengths. Therefore, a narrower definition of strengths focused only on those that are found within a person was used. Information regarding how parents understand contextual strengths in relation to their sons and daughters is absent from the literature.

In an anecdotal description of his experience using a strengths-based perspective during IEP planning, the precursor to transition planning, one education professional reported that using a strengths-based perspective helped build a trusting relationship between the school and the parents, the parents were less likely to perceive the school as having a hidden agenda, teacher and parent anxiety was reduced, IEP meetings were more efficient, and parents' perception of schools improved (Weishaar, 2010). Thus, the explicit focus on student strengths in transition planning generates benefits that extend beyond the individual being served and has the potential to impact families and schools.

Moreover, when strengths are considered in relation to adult life, the benefits extend even further. Adults with ASD often have challenges with social interactions but can attend to repetitive tasks for long periods of time (Hendricks, 2010; Muller 2003). In the work environment, employers have seen this strength translate to employees with

ASD exhibiting a high attention to detail and intense focus that results in increased work output (Hendricks, 2010). Additionally, employers note that these same employees enjoy job tasks that are repetitive in nature that other employees do not enjoy. This demonstrates an effective use of an individual's strengths such as the employer meeting productivity needs and the employee experiencing the benefits of successful work performance (i.e., earned wages, enhanced personal dignity, and increased financial independence) (Hendricks, 2010). When individuals with ASD were asked to describe their vocational experiences, positive work experiences were frequently characterized by job tasks that did not require a lot of social interaction, utilized technical or mechanical skills, and involved interactions with supervisors who were aware of their strengths and preferences (Muller et al., 2003). These findings suggest that supporting an individual's strengths yields benefits to the individual and the setting in which he or she is working.

Despite these observations that suggest strengths are identifiable and beneficial in transition planning discussions, it appears that strengths are not being considered to the extent that they are mandated by the IDEA. Landmark and Zhang (2012) assessed the compliance with the transition requirements of the IDEA of over 200 IEPs from secondary schools in Texas. They assessed whether or not there was evidence in the IEP that transition goals were based on a child's "needs, strengths, preferences, or interests" (Landmark & Zhang, 2012, p. 115). More than 20% of IEPs in this sample did not address any of these attributes. Shogren and Plotner's (2012) analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) supports Landmark and Zhang's findings that services were not found to be based on the students' strengths. Furthermore,

NLTS-2 data indicated that family involvement was frequently limited or absent from transition planning for one third to one half of students who met the criteria for transition services. Transition goals for students with intellectual disabilities were created primarily by the school 52% of the time, and in collaboration with the parents and students only 29% of the time (Shogren & Plotner, 2012).

Carter and colleagues (2014) posit that the lack of family involvement may directly contribute to the lack of strength-based planning since parents and teachers have been shown to have different evaluations of a single student's strengths. They suggested that parent and teacher evaluations may be influenced by a number of factors. First, teachers and parents view the same student in different environmental contexts and generate different understandings of a student's abilities. Second, a teacher who interacts with many students with a range of capabilities may have a different point of reference for comparing students than a parent who, perhaps, has more limited interaction with a range of different types of children or adolescents. Finally, a teacher and a parent, depending on their personal knowledge and specific vocation, may have different understandings of what will be expected of a student after high school. Both teacher and parent can provide an important perspective, but neither alone can provide a complete illustration of a student's strengths and needs (Carter et al., 2014).

Some students with disabilities recognize that different people have different interpretations of their strengths and weaknesses and these different perspectives may impact their ability to transition (Mitchell & Beresford, 2014). Specifically, those with high functioning ASD have indicated that they feel they are best understood by their

parents and that parents provide the most valued support in transitions to post-secondary education (Mitchell & Beresford, 2014). They also indicated that the transition to post-secondary education was easiest when they were working with a professional who understood them very well and with whom they had worked for a long time. Parents and other people with whom the student has shared a long-term relationship provide a unique and in-depth understanding of the student that is valuable to creating a successful transition plan.

Parents play an important role in contributing to and supporting students during the transition planning process. Transition planning should be a process that reflects the strengths, preferences, and interests of a student in order to create attainable and motivating goals for the future. However evidence supports the idea that the strengths of many students with disabilities are not being considered (Shogren & Plotner, 2012; Landmark & Zhang, 2012). Furthermore, little is known regarding how parents actually view the strengths of their sons and daughters in the context of transition planning. Understanding parent perspectives regarding their child's strengths is important to improving the quality of the transition planning process. Therefore, this study explored the following questions:

1. What are parents' perspectives regarding the transition plans created for their sons and daughters?
2. How do parents describe their sons' or daughters' strengths in relation to transition planning?

Methods

Participants and Data Collection

The data for this study were obtained through focus groups with parents of transition age youth with disabilities. Parents were recruited via flyers, letters, and/or direct contact with administrators at these agencies and then screened for eligibility via phone calls. Inclusion criteria for focus group attendees included that they be parents or legal guardians of transition aged students (14–22 years old) who received or are currently receiving special education services via an IEP. Student diagnoses included ASD, emotional disability, and intellectual disability. These diagnoses were chosen as they are often characterized by social, behavioral, and executive functioning challenges that limit one's ability to manage daily life (Diamond, 2013). In total, 14 parents of transition-age youth, 11 female parents and 3 male parents participated across four focus groups. Demographic and school placement information relating to the students whose parents participated in the four focus groups is represented in Table 1. To honor participant confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout this manuscript.

Table 1
Student Demographics

	Number or Frequency
Age	15–21 years old
Gender	10 Male, 4 Female
Diagnosis	
Autism Spectrum Disorder	7
Emotional/Behavioral Disorder	7
Intellectual Disability	3
Educational Setting	
Regular public or private high school setting	7
Transition program, residential program, post-secondary	6

Focus Group Data Collection

The four focus groups each included between 2–5 eligible parents. They were conducted in four school and community based settings serving youth with disabilities. All parents and their children were residents of the greater Boston area. The focus groups lasted approximately 90–120 minutes each and were audio recorded. Graduate level research assistants transcribed the audio recordings from these groups. Both the audio recordings and transcriptions were used during data analysis in this study.

During the focus groups, parents were asked questions about their son or daughter's current daily activities, current functional living skills, and living skills needing further development. Parents were asked to describe their hopes for their son or daughter's future and their experiences with schools and service providers to help their son or daughter work toward future goals. A semi-structured list of interview questions (see Appendix A) was used to guide these focus groups with follow-up probing questions to further understand responses.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of the focus group transcripts was informed by grounded theory principles (Charmaz, 2014). The initial open coding phase focused on any instance of a parent describing a strength of his or her child in relation to transition planning. For coding purposes, strengths were defined as the personal or contextual attributes that describe an individual or his or her environmental resources and contribute positively to his or her ability to make the transition to adult life. This definition was adapted from McCammon's work (2012) to explicitly identify strengths as qualities that are represented internally and externally to the individual. Throughout the initial coding

process all descriptions of strengths were maintained in their original wording.

These descriptions were then categorized as either personal or contextual strengths. These categories were further categorized into the codes listed in Table 2. A strength profile was developed for each student to summarize coded strengths for each student. These profiles were used to analyze the frequency and types of personal and contextual strengths attributed to each student. The profiles were then analyzed to identify the frequency and content of the various types of strength descriptions and to identify patterns in the data.

Table 2

Strength type codes and their definitions.

Strength Type	Definition
Personal	Any instance of a parent describing a characteristic within their child that was explicitly identified as or had the potential to be an asset to facilitating the transition to adult life
Trait	Any strength description representing a personality trait or unique characteristics of the student that could be an asset in the transition to adult life
Interests/Aspirations	Any strength description representing a child's strong interest, concrete plans for the future, or broader hopes and dreams for the future
Talents/Abilities	Any strength description representing a discrete skill that could be an asset in the transition to adult life
Contextual	Any instance of a parent describing a resource outside of their child that was explicitly identified as or had the potential to be an asset to facilitating the transition to adult life.
Programming	Any strength description representing a school, residence, staff member, or other output of program enrollment that had somehow benefitted the child's ability to transition to adult life
Community	Any strength description representing a benefit to the transition to adult life provided by the child's surrounding geographical region or surrounding people and resources
Family	Any strength description representing an act or statement by a family member that suggested they would be a support during the transition to adulthood.

Reflexivity

My personal experience likely influenced my interpretation of the data. Primeau (2003) suggests that multiple elements can influence data analysis, five of which are relevant to this study: (1) situating the study (how my events and experiences from personal life might influence coding and interpretation), (2) gaining access (how participant self-selection might influence results), (3) managing myself and living in the field, (how use of self during data collection might influence interpretation), (4) and telling the story (how my personal writing style influences the reader's interpretation of the analysis). In terms of situating the study within my experiences it is important to note that I am currently a second year student in a master's of occupational therapy program and I currently work in a research lab that focuses on the rights and empowerment of transition-age youth. In addition, I formerly worked as a direct service professional in a community-based program that provided both after-school services to transition-aged youth and opportunities for engagement for young adults with disabilities who have transitioned out of the school environment. These two experiences have exposed me to individuals who have made a successful transition to adulthood by participating in a program that brought them satisfaction and safety and individuals who have not yet made this transition, as well as their parents. My experience in working with the latter group highlighted that a transition period is often characterized by a lot of ambiguity, fear, and lack of communication between parties.

I had no influence over the focus groups or the participants' responses as I was not present at the groups nor did I play a role in recruiting participants or developing the

questions that were asked. I viewed all data for the first time after they had been collected. Thus, I was not able to reflect on how the participants gained access to this study. Primeau (2003) describes gaining access as the process of self-selection that participants perform to become part of a study. Analysis of this process may reveal a “hook” for the individual’s participation external to any research-based incentives. For example, the individual may have something to gain personally from the objective of the study. Discussion with the moderators of the focus groups revealed that the participants for the focus groups were self-selected and may have had a desire to talk about the transition process that they and their sons and daughters were currently experiencing. It is likely that the parents who participated were a group of parents who were already thinking actively about the transition process and may have been seeking a forum to share their thoughts and opinions or compare their experiences with the experiences of others. It may also be likely that because the topic of transitions is already salient to this group of parents they have previously identified the strengths of their sons and daughters. It is important to note that one focus group took place in a school facility directly after a support group for parents of students with disabilities and some of the members of the support group participated in the focus group, bringing perspectives that may have been shaped through sharing with others.

My writing style may influence a reader’s interpretation of the data analysis. Two professors of occupational therapy with years of experience in clinical and qualitative research read and provided suggestions for edits to my work to make it clearer to a reader and remove any instances of colloquial language. Additionally, in any instance of

referring to a specific description made by parents, I used a verbatim account wherever possible and made as few changes as necessary where it was not possible (Charmaz, 2014).

Findings

Parents identified many strengths of their sons and daughters during the focus groups. Analysis of the strength profiles revealed that parents described at least one personal and contextual strength for every student. Parents collectively described equal numbers of personal and contextual strengths. The most commonly described type of personal strength was interests and aspirations. The most commonly described type of contextual strength was family. An overarching theme of duality was identified during the content analysis process. When describing traits, attributes, or resources parents identified as an asset for their son or daughter in one context, parents frequently described the same strength as a barrier in another context. This recurring duality theme was labeled “describing an attribute as both an asset and a barrier.” When a strength trait was described as supporting the transition to adulthood, it was viewed as an asset. When a parent’s description of a strength implied that the strength negatively impacted the transition to adulthood, it was viewed as a barrier. Parents raised unique concerns for both types of strengths, personal and contextual, when describing the duality of strengths.

Duality of Personal Strengths

When a student’s personal strengths were described as being well matched to the environment, parents identified many potential supports for the transition to adult life. Personal traits, talents, and abilities that were described as assets provided opportunities for meaningful relationships, vocational or recreational success, and increased

independence in tasks of daily life. Parents often attributed their son or daughter's friendliness and positive social skills to having meaningful relationships and full daily schedules. A desire to follow rules and routines was frequently referenced as something that would promote independence in healthy habits in adulthood (e.g., maintaining doctor visits, or going to work on time).

"She's very social, very interactive, very happy, she has a pretty full day...you know one of her things was to work at Panera. Um, it's a really big community place, everybody goes there. It'd be fun to work there, lots of activity." [Jenna's Mom]

"He likes to go to the doctor because he has to have a clean bill of health. He likes to be on time for things. Those are the rules... He's a rule follower." [Cody's Mom]

However, these strengths, friendliness and rigidity to rules, were also described as threats to safety when in an unsupportive context. The same mother that felt working at a Panera would be a good match for her daughter because of her friendliness also expressed concern for her daughter's inclination to interact with strangers in a new work place.

"But there's a lot of regulars, people come in, they hang out for a long time. I could just see them, "Hey! Katie, you're here again!" Because her name's written across their chest. "How are you today!" Just befriending her, and it's all downhill from there. How can I trust anybody?" [Jenna's Mom]

Likewise, the mother who described how adherence to rules and routines could benefit her son's ability to be independent in self-management but worried that his rigidity would prevent him from recognizing situations where the safe thing to do is break a rule or routine.

I can foresee how it plays out where he walks downtown... he had a light to walk but an emergency vehicle came. And he thought he had the...

right to walk. So it's those things...in life that are... it can be a very big deal that he does that.” [Cody’s Mom]

Interests and aspirations were described as assets for some students, as these interests supported vocational and personal exploration. Parents expressed hope that general interests could be utilized in the tasks of adulthood. Parents also described more detailed and developed aspirations for the future.

“He's very good with computers, so I'm hopeful to have him graduate, work on these skills and apply it to something he likes.” [Cody’s Mom]

“He's very simple. ‘I want to live in Jamestown in a luxury apartment and work at a pizza shop.’ [Noah’s Mom]

“He loves to listen to sports radio, and watch all the sports on TV and all that. And if you ask him what do you want to do and he’ll say, ‘I want to be a sports broadcaster.’ [Chris’s Mom]

While these interests provide directions for transition planning, parents did not express confidence in their sons or daughters’ abilities to independently utilize these concrete interests in realistic applications to adult life. Indeed, parents reflected that they were often the person responsible for helping their son or daughter envision a realistic future. For example, parents reported having many conversations with their transition-aged youth to help them better understand all the work that is required for their career aspirations. Additionally, parents made suggestions to alter those same plans to facilitate a more realistic goal for their sons and daughters.

“He's not had any exposure. We make the pizza at home, we make the dough and put the pepperoni on, but I can't even imagine him being a pizza maker because touching mushrooms and stuff like that... he's got a little bit of sensory stuff... He loves looking at expiration dates, finding that kind of stuff...we thought that might be it...we just keep asking him and that's what he says. But that's the part of him that makes him who he is I guess.” [Noah’s Mom]

“Seems easy, you just sit there all day and yak about sports. And I said, well, the people who do that went to college and they took something called communications. Of course, his natural disability is in communications but we didn't go there. I said, you know, they have to write everything they talk about...do you like to write in school? Is that one of things you're willing to do? He looked at me like, ‘Are you kidding me? I would have to write?’ And I said, ‘if that's something that you'd want to do, you'd have to be able to do this first...just trying to get him to think about this is the natural progression. This is what it means.” [Chris's Mom]

Duality of Contextual Strengths

Similarly, parents also described many contextual strengths of their transition aged youth. Programming and community strengths included opportunities for skill development, increased potential for independence post-school, and experiences simulating adult life. Programming that incorporated experiential components were frequently described as a strength for students.

“Um, right now- they did a great job of trying to get him an internship that he'd be successful in this semester and they put him in the local news station because he had said he wanted to try it.” [Peter's Mom]

“I think they're working on almost everything, which is great. They get this allowance, they do some banking, they go to the laundromat and do their own laundry. They go on a bus and stuff like that. It's just part of their week they do that every Saturday afternoon, that type of thing. And a lot of the classes are oriented toward practical things, they're not that academic and stuff like that so it's a great place for him they're providing what he needs. He just needs a lot of it...” [Andrew's Dad]

“One thing she's done is her own little pet-sitting business in our neighborhood since she was in eighth grade. You know it started out... with my friends in the neighborhood, and I'd go with her and monitor everything and then pull back a little bit... So she had a little savings account, she got herself a laptop. She wouldn't even walk in the neighborhood by herself as a freshman, she just never wanted to go out by herself, and then she got to the point, you know bit by bit she was doing it.” [Isabel's Mom]

These structured programs and community resources that afforded opportunities for personal growth were also described by parents as leading to negative outcomes. Programming was described as contributing to both decreased independence and stagnation of personal growth. Parents provided multiple examples of how their sons and daughters became less independent because they learned to rely on the structures and supports provided in programming. They expressed concern that their sons and daughters would not initiate the behaviors they were learning in the new environments and contexts associated with adulthood.

“He had an aide for 4 years. Which is good and bad... he's extremely prompt dependent... he can't get anything started because he's so used to (the prompting)...” [Peter's Mom]

Descriptions of community resources were connected to decreased independence and stagnation of growth as well. Often the geographical layout of a community was described as convenient such that it afforded opportunities but also discouraged striving for personal growth. Additionally, similar to how parents described the dual nature of personality traits, community resources were identified as threats to safety. For example, safety was described as a concern when the community itself facilitated feelings of security that may or may not be applicable in new environments in adult life.

“And the bus comes right where we are. We live in a very small community but she can really- if she had to- walk. Her stamina's kind of low, she has low tone, she gets tired very easily. She's not a big proponent of walking. However they'll tell me she walked to the Y and I'm like, "You've gotta be kidding me, she won't even walk to church which was around the corner from us!" So she does more when she has to. Which is why it's not doing her a service to live in this area for the rest of her life because she would fall into a trap. When she has to she can step up to the plate.” [Jenna's Mom]

“I don't know about your town, but my son grew up in a little teeny bubble where everybody is a friend. So, you know, he'll think that anybody walking down the street is like a friend, or someone that he should know, or somebody that, you know, he should go with to wherever they're going” [Peter's Mom]

Parents described many instances in which family members, including the parents themselves, were facilitating a successful transition to adult life. This contextual strength was described most frequently by parents. Parents were often described as advocates for their sons and daughters. Particularly, parents advocated for opportunities that would provide experiences simulating adult life. Parents and other family members were also described as encouraging interests and fostering skills that could be useful to adult life.

“We (the parents) got them to start a thing where they were selling bagels in the morning. And the kids loved it, and they were learning their money skills. But it took so much just for that one little piece to push.” [Peter's Mom]

“I definitely advocated for it (transition programming). I talked to the superintendent, the school committee. I talked to other parents who knew that their children were at risk.” [Cody's Mom]

“I wanted to push him towards technology because I saw the ability was there. So, I got him a coursebook on a certificate program - a lot of certificate based programs are there... a lot of them are very short certificate programs and he could better himself in his potential field with these short-based programs” [Cody's Mom]

“ABA... we started with that... but modified it on our own. My wife did a great job, and we were doing about 25 hours a week for a full year and that made a big difference.” [Andrew's Dad]

While the frequency of family strengths suggested that family members are the most readily available supports for the transition to adulthood for young adults, parents also expressed concern that they provided too much support for their children, further decreasing independence and complicating the transition to a more independent adult life.

“She has a few jobs... and she sets her own calendar in her phone that she reads all the time. So she's learning if she has a responsibility, it will go off on her phone and she has to be somewhere. But, she probably does that more at school than she'll do at home because she has us to remind her.”
[Jenna's Mom]

“At home...he always gets a break. We'll just do it fast for him...So there's no expectations ...but in real life, 5 years from now there's gonna be real expectations.” [Cody's Mom]

Overall, parents identified many personal and contextual strengths that could be assets in the context of adulthood; however, the theme of duality persisted across all types of reported strengths. Parents described multiple concerns resulting from an inadequate match between a student's strength and the demands of adulthood. Most consistently, the expressed fears around safety, unrealistic understandings of adulthood, and how current supports might foster too much dependence and prevent independent living in the future.

Discussion

The parents in this study identified many strengths of their transition age youth. This finding is congruent with the existing literature in which parents were reported to identify many personal strengths of their sons and daughters with disabilities (Carter et al, 2015). It is noteworthy that the parents in the focus groups represented in this analysis were not directly asked to describe the strengths of their children. Rather, the discussion of strengths emerged naturally, perhaps as a reflection of what parents perceive to be the most salient characteristics to consider in transition planning. This observation reinforces the need to consider strengths in transition planning. Recent large scale reviews of student IEPs document that strengths are not addressed in IEPs (Landmark & Zheng,

2012; Shogren & Plotner, 2012). Yet, studies of post-transition outcomes in work and school environments show that when strengths are considered and utilized, there are benefits to both the individual and his or her coworkers or colleagues (Hendricks, 2010; Muller, 2003). The study reported here adds to a growing body of literature that asserts that transition age youth have many assets for consideration in transition planning, both personal and contextual, but suggests that this consideration need be detailed to account for the duality of strengths and ensure a match between strengths and the novel contexts of adulthood.

While discussing their sons and daughters' futures, parents identified equal numbers of personal and contextual strengths. The existing literature provides some description of the personal strengths attributed to transition age youth with disabilities; however, the type and frequency of contextual strengths are not well understood. This study revealed that parents believe their sons and daughters' contextual strengths can provide opportunities for skill development, personal development, and experiences simulating adult life. Transition programming and community resources collectively provided opportunities simulating adult life allowing for practice and deepened understanding of skills relevant to adult life. Parents and other family members were also an asset, as they encouraged personal development in preparation for adult life. Furthermore, parents frequently described themselves as the primary advocates for the opportunities available through programming and community resources. Parents are aware of the practicality and value of these opportunities. Many programs described by parents had an experiential component relevant to adult life. Accordingly, identifying the

contextual resources and systems that are already in place is an important aspect of the transition planning process to build on opportunities that may allow for development and the practice of life skills.

However, the parents in this study also clearly and consistently described that their son or daughter's strength traits (personal and contextual) were only considered strengths in particular contexts. A trait that was an asset to one aspect of transition planning was also described as a barrier to another aspect. This contextual variability suggests that there needs to be a match made between strength trait and the surrounding context to ensure that the trait is supported. Parents often reported taking on the role of assuring that their sons or daughters were in a context where their strength traits would be supported and utilized. Given that the findings of this study indicate that parents have a good understanding of what contexts support and hinder their son or daughter's strengths, it is logical that parents would adopt this advocacy role. However, the transition to adulthood is a time characterized by a shift to great independence. Parents did not identify any instances in which their son or daughter independently adapted a personal or contextual strength to ensure a better fit with the current demands of the environment. Rather, parents described instances in which their son or daughter did not have the ability to realistically plan for adult life or change their behaviors to match the expectations of a particular new environments.

The reported duality of student strength traits might be related to challenges adapting these strengths in various contexts (Losh, Childress, Lam, & Piven, 2008, Mithaug, Mithaug, Agran, Martin, & Wehmeyer, 2003). Losh and colleagues (2008)

found that youth with autism are frequently described as having “rigid” personalities by their parents. Cognitive flexibility, the ability to adapt thinking patterns to novel conditions and environments, has been found to be less developed in individuals with ADHD, ASD, mental illnesses (Willcutt, Doyle, Nigg, Faraone, & Pennington, 2005), and brain injuries (Grattan, Eslinger, 1989). The parents in this study describe similar patterns of rigid thinking in their transition-age youth. Without this flexible thought process, adapting one’s strengths or choosing which strengths to draw from becomes more difficult. Consequently, transitioning to a new context, such as that of post-school life, may be more challenging. This lack of adaptability is one potential factor that contributes to the transition process.

Adaptability has been associated with many positive outcomes. In typically developing youth, higher degrees of adaptability have been associated with higher grade points averages in the first year of college (Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, 2004), higher probabilities of postsecondary school enrollment and graduation (Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts, 2012), a less stressful transition to one’s first career (Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig, & Platt, 2010), and higher self-esteem (Ismail, Ferreira, Coetzee, 2016). Youth with disabilities generally demonstrate less skillful adaptation to new life situations than their typically developing peers; consequently, there is not as much evidence linking adaptability to specific outcomes. However, one study documented that young adults with intellectual disabilities who exhibited greater flexibility at work had greater life satisfaction overall and felt more hope for the future (Santilli, Nota, Ginevra, & Soresi, 2014). Wehmeyer and colleagues (2000) evaluated

the efficacy of an instructional model to teach skills in adaptability and found that those youth with disabilities who received this intervention were more likely to attain self-chosen goals and complete goal-directed behavior (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000). Based on the connection between adaptability and positive outcomes, it is important to understand how to foster adaptability in transition age youth with disabilities.

Data from this study suggests that parents are currently the primary individuals responsible for this process of adapting strengths to ensure an appropriate fit with the context. Parents described their role in advocating for changes to the environment and helping their transition-age youth to have a realistic understanding of adulthood. However, simultaneously, parents expressed concerns that their actions resulted in decreased independence in their transition-age youth. This concern is relevant to the transition to adulthood since it is often characterized by an increase personal responsibility. This suggests a need for transition-age youth to learn how to adapt their strengths and environment independently. Some authors have proposed that adaptability can be taught by building and strengthening other skills. Mithaug, Martin, and Agran (1987) proposed the Adaptability Instruction Model for youth with disabilities as a response to characteristic inflexibility preventing successful transitions from school to post-school life. The model proposes easing this transition by building four distinct skills relating to adaptability: decision making, independent performance (following through on decisions independently), self-evaluation, and adjustment of behaviors and goals based on evaluations. Ultimately, these skills are used to support a process by which the

individual chooses the best course of action in relation to goals and then evaluates his or her own actions and makes adjustments as needed. However, the adaptability instruction model has been critiqued for emphasizing changing the person and ignoring the possibility of changing environmental barriers (Wehmeyer et al., 2000). The current study provides support for this concern as parents identified strengths that were either assets or barriers depending on the context. Thus, personal traits and contextual resources are both appropriate for modification.

Self-determination instruction (SDI) builds on adaptability instruction by recognizing that one can adapt both the person and the environment when there is not an optimal fit between the two (Wehmeyer et al., 2000). According to the Illinois Planning Council of Developmental Disabilities, self-determined behavior involves the ability to make choices between options, develop a plan of action based on available resources, determine what resources or actions are required, and request help as needed (Calkins et al., 2012). In this definition, consideration is given to both resources and actions. SDI strives to teach a framework for building a better fit between the person and environment by teaching seven skills: choice making, decision making, goal-setting, problem solving, self-advocacy, self-awareness, and self-regulation (Carter et al., 2013). A higher degree of self-determination in youth with disabilities has been demonstrated to be a predictor of enrollment in postsecondary education and attainment of post-school employment (Test et al., 2009), an ability to attain academic and functional transition related goals, and overall increased access to the general curriculum (Lee, Wehmeyer, & Shogren, 2015).

The need for programming, like SDI, to build the skills to capitalize on a person's strengths is evident.

This study suggests that strengths need to be discussed as they might apply to all contexts of adulthood. Parents and guardians often see students in the greatest number and diversity of contexts and have an understanding of which contexts may be supportive and what, if any, adaptations need to be made. Carter and colleagues (2014) noted that compared to teachers, parents often identify a wider range of student abilities and provide a unique perspective about the student. However, parents are not always part of the transition planning. Thus, school programming that allows students to practice in a diverse array of environments might provide the crucial contextual information to support student strengths.

Limitations

The focus groups from which the data were analyzed were planned, conducted, and completed before the origin of the current study's question and design. Strengths were not the main topic of the focus groups. Thus, some opportunities for further explication of parents' perspectives of strengths were not pursued. However, even though strengths were not directly addressed through questioning, the theme of strengths was salient in parents' descriptions of their transition-age son and daughters. The lack of diversity in the focus groups was also a limitation to this study. Demographically, the parents were mostly Caucasian, middle class residents of the greater Boston area. Additionally, parents of students with physical disabilities were excluded from this study. All of these variables could influence the information shared about transition planning,

which is a highly individualized and unique process. The information presented by the parents in this study is not representative of all parents of transition age youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Thus, future research might consider the perspective of more diverse populations. Finally, although strict coding definitions were applied during the data analysis, the codes were based on the first author's interpretation. There was no member check performed with the parents from the focus groups to confirm a match between their intention and the author's interpretation. Therefore, the analysis presented here is constructed from the author's analysis of the data and alternative interpretations are possible.

Future Directions

Personal strengths have been studied both qualitatively and quantitatively in transition age youth (Carter et al., 2015). Further research may conduct investigation into quantifying and categorizing what contextual strengths are available to this population. As the parents in this study alluded to, knowing what contextual assets are available can help to identify what opportunities and supports exist in the future. Ultimately, that knowledge can better inform transition planning. Therefore, generating a general understanding of what contextual strengths are commonly present in youth with disabilities might provide guidance and insight beneficial to the transition planning process.

Additionally, the fact that the strengths parents in this study attributed to their children son or daughter were so often of a dual nature suggests the need to reinforce adaptability and problem solving skills among youth with disabilities. Advocacy for

programming influenced by self-determination theory should continue. Research evaluating the efficacy of these programs in relation to post-transition outcomes would determine if they can help to mediate the dual nature of strengths in transition-age youth.

Conclusions

All the students described in this study exhibited many personal and contextual strengths to support them as they make the shift from adolescence and school to adulthood and post-school life. Parents discussed these strengths without being prompted to do so, indicating the saliency of this topic in relation to transition planning. However, the students described in this study lack the adaptability and problems solving skills to utilize their strengths in a range of contexts. Education and transition programming have been successful in fostering life skills and some elements of personal development, but less successful in fostering more transferable and adaptable self-determination skills. The dual nature of the strength traits described by the parents of students with disabilities indicates a need for increased attention to the importance of programming for transition age youth that promotes adaptability and self-determination. Furthermore, because strengths were so context specific, it is essential to include student, parent, and/or primary caregiver in transition planning to provide information on when and where strengths can be best realized.

Appendix A

Focus group semi structured interview questions.

1. Let's start by having each of you tell us a little bit about your son or daughter [who is attending school/agency]. We will go around the room for this question.
2. What is a typical day like for your son or daughter?
 - a. What is his or her day like on weekdays?
 - b. What is his or her day like on weekends?
3. How satisfied are you with his or her current daily activities?
 - a. How satisfied do you think your son or daughter is with his or her daily activities?
4. What are your hopes for your son or daughter for the next 5 years?
 - a. What do you think your son or daughter's hopes are for the next 5 years?
5. What does your son or daughter need to do to get there?
 - a. What are the skills that your son or daughter still needs to develop to get there?
 - b. Why are those skills so important?

Transition Script: Now we are going to focus a bit more specifically on functional living skills. Sometimes people refer to these skills as adaptive behavior, daily living skills, or life skills. For the purposes of our conversation today, we want to talk about the ability to manage the life tasks that are needed for independent and community living.

6. Describe your son or daughter's ability to manage their own functional living skills.
 - a. Tell me about skills your son or daughter developed with ease.
 - b. Which skills have been more challenging for your son or daughter to develop
 - c. Are there functional living skills that you think are important for your son or daughter's success that require further development or refinement?
 - d. If so, what are the functional living skills that you would like your son or daughter to develop?
7. What have you done, as parents, to help your son or daughter be more independent in their living skills?

- a. On a day to day basis, how do you try and help your son or daughter manage their daily responsibilities?
 - b. What types of supports do you think would be helpful to you in this process?
[probe strategies]
8. What types of services or interventions does your son or daughter receive to address their functional living skills? [probe school as well as community agencies]
9. What types of experiences have you had with these services and supports?
- a. Have you worked together with school personnel or service providers in teaching these skills?
 - b. Are there other ways you would like assistance from school personnel or service providers in working on these skills with your son or daughter?
10. If you have other children, describe how you helped them to develop the skills necessary for independence in adulthood. [probe birth order]
- a. How does the approach you use to teach your son or daughter that you've been discussing today compare to the approach you use with your other children?

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