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Transition-Age Youth with Intellectual Disabilities: Providers' Perspectives on
Improving Postschool Outcomes

by

Nadine M. Rooney, B.A.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the
School of Social Work
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St. Paul, Minnesota
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

The transition from high school to adulthood is challenging for all youth, but especially for youth with disabilities. Youth with disabilities face a number of barriers to experiencing postschool success. Youth with intellectual disabilities (ID) in particular struggle to access employment and postsecondary education (PSE) after exiting high school. Recent research has focused on identifying means of improving postschool outcomes through transition services; however, much of this research examines the experiences of youth with learning disabilities, even though youth with ID appear to struggle the most with the transition to adulthood. The present qualitative study examined the perspectives of four transition service providers (i.e., teachers, a work coordinator, and a school social worker) in order to identify the barriers preventing transition-age youth with ID from accessing employment and PSE and to explore means of improving transition services to promote greater postschool success. A content analysis of participants' interviews revealed a number of critical factors contributing to postschool success (e.g., work-related experiences, collaborative service delivery), barriers to postschool success (e.g., unrealistic expectations, inadequate work opportunities, lack of PSE options), and ways to improve transition services (i.e., build more community partnerships, develop more PSE options, change transition program structure). The findings of this study emphasize the need to further explore ways in which to establish and maintain a variety of community partnerships in order to better prepare youth with ID for adulthood, as well as the need to evaluate and further develop PSE options designed for individuals with ID. Implications for social work practice, policy, and research are discussed.

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Transition-Age Youth with Intellectual Disabilities: Providers' Perspectives on Improving Postschool Outcomes

Historically, people with disabilities have been excluded from mainstream society, preventing them from living, learning, and working alongside people without disabilities (Shaw, Chan, & McMahon, 2012). Because of this exclusion, people with disabilities (including those with intellectual disabilities [ID]) have struggled to achieve personal goals such as participating in postsecondary education (PSE) and obtaining competitive employment (e.g., Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2012; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010; Shaw et al., 2012). This exclusion of people with disabilities remains a critical issue today, though the importance of inclusion has been increasingly recognized by legislators, researchers, and professionals who serve people with disabilities.

Importantly, there have been recent efforts to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in mainstream society. For example, federal legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 aims to protect the civil rights of citizens with disabilities by prohibiting discrimination and mandating equal opportunity in employment and reasonable accommodations in postsecondary institutions that receive federal funding (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). In the landmark federal court case *Olmstead v. LC* (1995-1999), the United States Supreme Court ruled that in compliance with ADA, citizens with disabilities “have a qualified right to receive state funded supports and services in the community rather than institutions” if community-based options are determined to be a reasonable accommodation, the persons with disabilities are willing to live in the community, and treatment professionals agree that community-based services are appropriate (Olmstead Rights, n.d., “*Olmstead v. LC: History and Current Status*,” para. 1). Recently, individual states (e.g.,

Minnesota) have created official plans describing strategies intended to facilitate compliance with ADA and the *Olmstead v. LC* ruling and to ensure that people with disabilities are served in the most integrated setting possible (i.e., in settings that include people with and without disabilities) (Minnesota Olmstead Subcabinet, 2015). Additionally, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) is federal special education legislation that aims to promote educational equity for students with disabilities by mandating access to free and appropriate public education and individualized educational services provided in the least restrictive environment (i.e., the most integrated setting possible).

Despite these legislative efforts, people with disabilities remain “severely disadvantaged socially, vocationally, economically, and educationally” (ADA, 1990 [as amended in 2008]); as cited by Shaw et al., 2012, p. 82-83). Much research indicates that people with disabilities – especially youth transitioning from high school to adulthood – continue to face significant barriers to experiencing full inclusion (e.g., Grigal et al., 2011; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Morningstar et al., 2010; Newman et al., 2010; Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Rifenshark, & Little, 2015). Inequitable access to PSE and employment has been the focus of recent research that strives to promote inclusion and postschool success among transition-age youth with disabilities (e.g., Carter et al., 2012; Grigal et al., 2011; Morningstar et al., 2010; Zafft, Hart, & Zimbrich, 2004).

The struggle for inclusion and full participation in mainstream society is particularly evident when examining postschool outcomes of youth and young adults with ID (Grigal et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2010). Longitudinal research funded by the United States Department of Education (i.e., the National Longitudinal Transition Study [NLTS] and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 [NLTS2]) shows how youth with disabilities, especially those

with ID, lag behind peers without disabilities in PSE and employment-related outcomes after exiting high school (Newman et al., 2010). In 2005, 45.6% of youth with disabilities from a nationally-representative sample had participated in PSE (i.e., vocational, business, or technical school; two-year or community college; or four-year college) within four years of exiting high school, in comparison with 62.6% of youth without disabilities; importantly, only 28.1% of youth with ID from the same study reported participating in PSE within four years of exiting high school (Newman et al., 2010). In comparison with youth who have other types of disabilities, youth with ID are the least likely to participate in PSE (Grigal et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2010). This lack of participation in PSE among youth with ID is also intertwined with the under- and unemployment of these individuals (Grigal et al., 2011; Thoma et al., 2012; Zafft et al., 2004).

The NLTS2 reports that in 2005, 56.3% of youth with disabilities who had been out of high school for one to four years were employed at the time of the interview, compared to 59.1% of youth without disabilities who had been out of high school for one to four years (Newman et al., 2010). However, only 29.8% of youth with ID who had been out of high school for one to four years were employed at the time of the interview (Newman et al., 2010). Research indicates that youth with ID in particular struggle to obtain full-time, integrated employment (i.e., working alongside people without disabilities) that pays competitive wages after exiting high school (e.g., Carter et al., 2012; Grigal et al., 2011). Therefore, it appears that the majority of youth with ID are not experiencing the economic and social benefits of participating and PSE and employment.

Youth with disabilities, especially those with ID, continue to face many barriers to accessing PSE and employment. Research suggests that many of these youth exit high school without the skills, experiences, and supports necessary to successfully participate in PSE and

work environments (e.g., Agran & Hughes, 2008; Carter et al., 2012; Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003; Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Participation in PSE offers important benefits, including enhanced employability and a lesser need for supports later in life (Zafft et al., 2004). Simply living in a PSE environment can cultivate independent living skills and greater awareness of personal and vocational goals (Kirkendall, Doueck, & Saladino, 2009). Engaging in meaningful employment in an integrated setting and earning competitive wages provide greater opportunity for financial well-being and the expansion of social networks (Test, Aspel, & Everson, 2006; as cited by Joshi, Bouck, & Maeda, 2012). As citizens in a democratic society, people with ID have the right to participate in PSE and employment in order to support themselves and to fully participate in their communities (Toft & Bibus, 2014). Therefore, it is important that researchers and professionals who work with youth who have ID determine ways to facilitate the transition from high school to adulthood in order to uphold the social and economic rights of these individuals.

Social workers play a critical role in improving postschool outcomes of youth with ID and in promoting community integration. Social workers are dedicated to enhancing the overall well-being of clients who are vulnerable and marginalized (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008). Inequitable access to PSE and employment among youth with ID is a social justice issue and is therefore particularly relevant to the field of social work. It is critical that social workers and related professionals work to address issues of access and discrimination experienced by youth with ID, so that these individuals may flourish upon their transition to adulthood and fully participate as members of mainstream society.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the perspectives of transition service providers (i.e., special education teachers, a work coordinator, and a school social worker) in

order to better understand the barriers preventing access to PSE and employment among youth with ID. Additionally, this study aimed to identify means of improving the transition services available to youth with ID so that they may smoothly transition into adulthood and experience postschool success in the areas of PSE and employment.

Literature Review

Definition of Intellectual Disability

There are both educational and medical/mental health definitions of intellectual disability (ID). For example, IDEIA (2004) defines ID (formerly known as mental retardation) as the presence of intellectual functioning that is significantly below average, in addition to challenges with adaptive functioning that impact educational performance. Importantly, schools may provide students who have ID with an educational label of developmental cognitive disability (DCD) (Minnesota Department of Education, 2015). Similarly, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) classifies ID as a neurodevelopmental disorder that significantly impacts intellectual and adaptive functioning. People with ID can experience challenges with reasoning, problem solving, planning, abstract thinking, and academic learning (APA, 2013). Challenges with adaptive functioning occur across conceptual, social, and practical domains and therefore impact an individual's ability to communicate, socialize, and perform activities of daily living in multiple settings such as home, school, work, and the community (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities [AAIDD], 2013; APA, 2013; The Arc, 2011). The onset of ID is before the age of 18, during the developmental period (APA, 2013; The Arc, 2011). Approximately 1 in 100 individuals is diagnosed with ID resulting from a variety of prenatal, perinatal, and postnatal factors (APA, 2013).

Causes of Intellectual Disability

ID can be caused by a variety of genetic and physiological factors, such as genetic syndromes (e.g., Down syndrome, Fragile X syndrome) and environmental influences (e.g., maternal alcohol use during pregnancy leading to Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder) (APA, 2013; The Arc, 2011). Perinatal causes of ID include labor and delivery-related events that cause injuries and/or temporary oxygen deprivation (The Arc, 2011). Traumatic brain injury and childhood diseases that impact the brain are also known causes of ID (APA, 2013; The Arc, 2011). Although individuals with ID experience a number of challenges associated with their disability, it is important to recognize that many individuals with ID can live, learn, and work in mainstream communities and lead independent and productive lives with the appropriate supports from families, friends, and various service providers (AAIDD, 2013; The Arc, 2011).

Special Education for Youth with Disabilities

The provision of special education services has been critical in promoting the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in mainstream society. As previously stated, individuals with disabilities (including those with ID) have been segregated from mainstream society throughout history (Shaw et al., 2012). For example, youth with disabilities were typically excluded from public education in the United States despite the establishment of compulsory education laws in the early 1900s (Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998). Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, the Civil Rights Movement, as well as parental advocacy groups, served as critical forces in the promotion of equal educational opportunity for youth with disabilities (Yell et al., 1998). In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was passed, granting students with disabilities the right to free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment and mandating the development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) describing

educational goals for each student with a disability in need of special education services (Yell et al., 1998). EAHCA was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, which subsequently evolved into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) in 2004. Today, IDEIA (2004) defines special education as:

specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings; and instruction in physical education.
(sec. 602.29)

IEP teams – which can include special education teachers, general education teachers, social workers, transition specialists, other educational representatives, the student, and their family members – work to create, review, and revise IEPs in order to help students with disabilities reach individualized goals over the course of their education and to ensure that these students receive appropriate accommodations and related services (e.g., speech therapy, occupational therapy, and mental health services) (IDEIA 2004).

Students may receive special education services in mainstream schools, separate schools for students with disabilities, separate residential facilities, private schools, other institutions (e.g., hospitals and correctional facilities), or at home (United States Department of Education, 2013). In 2013, the vast majority of students with disabilities (95%) received special education services in mainstream schools and participated in general education classrooms to varying degrees (United States Department of Education, 2013). It is important to note that nearly half of students with ID spent less than 40% of their school day inside a general education classroom with nondisabled peers (United States Department of Education, 2013); thus, it seems there is a need for continued efforts to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities, particularly

those with ID. Over time, amendments to special education legislation have indeed aimed to promote educational equity for youth with disabilities and to better prepare them for life beyond secondary education (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Kohler & Field, 2003; Morningstar et al., 2010; Yell et al., 1998).

Transition Services for Youth with Disabilities

History of transition services. The transition from high school to PSE and/or employment has been described as a period during which youth “flounder” and struggle to take on a number of adult roles (Test et al., 2009). The first few years after exiting high school can be a difficult time for all youth, but research indicates that it is particularly challenging for youth with disabilities (e.g., Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Kirkendall et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2010; Test et al., 2009). According to Kohler and Field (2003), federal special education legislation has acknowledged the struggles of transition-age youth with disabilities since 1983, when amendments to IDEA authorized spending for research on transition. In 1990, amendments to IDEA mandated that secondary schools assist students with disabilities in identifying and achieving transition goals in order to better prepare them for adulthood and to promote positive postschool outcomes (Benz et al., 2000; Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Kohler & Field, 2003); these 1990 amendments also required the consideration of students’ interests, preferences, and needs in the development of transition goals (Kohler & Field, 2003). Subsequent amendments in 1997 mandated that students’ postschool goals be the focus of their secondary education and central to transition services (Kohler & Field, 2003).

Definition of transition services. The definition of transition services continues to develop with each amendment to IDEA, as legislators hope to enhance the overall efficacy of these services. Today, IDEIA (2004) defines transition services as:

a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability . . . focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. (sec. 602.34a)

Transition services must begin by the time students in special education reach age 16, and the IEP team is responsible for facilitating the transition planning process (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). The IEP team develops a number of transition goals in the areas of employment, postsecondary education, and independent living based on students' interests and abilities (Grigal et al., 2011; Morningstar et al., 2010; Sheppard-Jones, Kleinert, Druckemiller, & Ray, 2015). Preparation for postschool employment has remained central to the transition planning process since the 1980s (Carter et al., 2010). However, PSE-related goals are a more recent focus of transition services as educators, researchers, and legislators now have a better understanding of the importance of PSE for *all* youth (Flannery, Yovanoff, Benz, & Kato, 2008; Griffin, McMillan, & Hodapp, 2010; Hart, Pasternack, Mele-McCarthy, Zimbrich, & Parker, 2004; Sheppard-Jones et al., 2015; Thoma et al., 2012). In addition to legislators' efforts to improve transition services, researchers have been working to identify an increasing number of best practices that are associated with postschool success among youth with disabilities (e.g., Carter et al., 2012; Field et al., 2003; Kohler & Field, 2003; Morningstar et al., 2010; Shogren et al., 2015; Test et al., 2009).

Categories of transition practices. According to Kohler and Field (2003), the literature on transition services indicates that there are five categories of effective practices associated with improved postschool outcomes among youth with disabilities. The first category is student-

focused planning, which cultivates self-determination skills by challenging students to reflect on their interests, strengths, and needs in order to identify transition goals and to then advocate for themselves by communicating those interests, strengths, and needs to the IEP team throughout the educational planning process (Agran & Hughes, 2008; Ankeny & Lehmann, 2011; Kohler & Field, 2003). Self-determination is defined as a combination of skills and knowledge that allow one to “engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior,” while also being cognizant of one’s strengths and limitations (Field et al., 2003, p. 339). Student-focused planning helps to enhance students’ self-awareness and self-advocacy skills so that they are more able to make their own informed decisions and are better prepared for the transition into adulthood (Kohler & Field, 2003).

Kohler and Field (2003) identify student development practices as the second category of effective transition planning practices, which cultivate life and vocational skills through school-based and work/community-based learning experiences. For example, research suggests that youth who participate in paid, career-related work experiences while still in school are more likely to be employed after exiting high school and are better equipped for postschool success (Benz et al., 2000; Carter et al., 2012; Simonsen & Neubert, 2012; Test et al., 2009). Student development practices provide youth with opportunities to build and apply essential vocational and social skills in a variety of settings, as well as opportunities to identify supports and accommodations that will help them experience success in educational and community-based settings (Kohler & Field, 2003). Although student-centered planning and student development practices are inherently student-focused, Kohler and Field (2003) also identify a number of transition practices based on external factors impacting the transition planning process (i.e., collaborative service delivery, family involvement practices, and program structure).

The third category of effective practices is collaborative service delivery, which includes the involvement of community businesses, organizations, agencies, and institutions in students' transition planning (Kohler & Field, 2003; Test et al., 2009). According to Kohler and Field (2003), the purpose of interagency collaboration in transition planning is to “implement an integrated system that addresses the lifelong learning and support needs of a community’s members” (p. 178). Clear communication and role division among all parties involved (e.g., schools, students, families, postsecondary institutions, and other adult service providers) is critical in order to facilitate the transition process and to help youth achieve their postschool goals (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Kohler & Field, 2003). Interagency collaboration in transition planning enables youth with disabilities to develop strong connections with the service providers that will support them upon their transition into adulthood by helping them access employment, PSE, as well as other opportunities for independence and community participation (Flannery et al., 2008; Noonan, Morningstar, & Erickson, 2008; Sheppard-Jones et al., 2015).

Kohler and Field (2003) describe family involvement practices as the fourth category of effective transition planning. Transition literature indicates that family involvement in the transition planning process promotes academic achievement, attainment of transition goals, and self-determination among students with disabilities (Kohler & Field, 2003; Morningstar et al., 2010). Family members' expectations about engagement in PSE and employment also appear to have a significant influence on the postschool success of youth with disabilities (Carter et al., 2012; Griffin et al., 2010; Simonsen & Neubert, 2012). For example, Simonsen and Neubert (2012) found that youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities whose family members expressed a preference for paid, community work were over six times more likely to be engaged in integrated employment 18 months after exiting high school in comparison with youth whose

family members did not express this preference. Importantly, researchers have found that among students with disabilities, those with parents who are not involved in their education are significantly less likely to participate in the community and postsecondary vocational education in comparison with peers who have very involved parents (Wagner, Blackorby, Cameto, & Newman, 1993). Family members serve as an important source of support for youth with disabilities as they transition to adulthood, and it is important that family members remain engaged and informed as they collaborate with secondary transition service providers and adult service providers in order to promote positive transition experiences among these youth (Carter et al., 2012; Griffin et al., 2010; Kohler & Field, 2003; Morningstar et al., 2010; Simonsen & Neubert, 2012).

Finally, Kohler and Field (2003) identify the program structure of transition services – the program’s philosophy, policy, and evaluation – as an important influence on postschool outcomes of youth with disabilities. Program structure impacts service providers’ abilities to deliver transition services to youth and their families in the most effective and efficient way possible. According to Kohler and Field (2003), students’ postschool outcomes are positively influenced by transition programs that focus on the inclusion of youth with disabilities in mainstream society and on promoting community involvement in the development of meaningful educational and vocational opportunities for these youth. Therefore, it appears that a philosophy of inclusion – the idea that people with and without disabilities benefit from living, learning, and working together – is critical in the provision of transition services to youth with disabilities. Importantly, each of these five categories of best practices described by Kohler and Field (2003) (i.e., student-focused planning, student development, collaborative service delivery, family involvement, and program structure) must be considered throughout the transition planning

process in order for youth with disabilities to experience optimal postschool outcomes (Kohler & Field, 2003).

Postschool Outcomes of Youth with Disabilities

Researchers have been tracking the postschool outcomes of youth with disabilities for decades, and much of this research focuses on participation in employment and PSE as measures of postschool success (Newman et al., 2010). Although there is an increasing number of youth with disabilities who obtain employment and engage in PSE, research indicates that youth with disabilities – particularly those with ID – continue to lag behind peers without disabilities and still struggle to access PSE and employment after exiting high school (e.g., Baer, Daviso, Flexer, Queen, & Meindl, 2011; Carter et al., 2012; Grigal et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2010; Zafft et al., 2004).

PSE outcomes. Research consistently shows that youth with disabilities lag behind their peers without disabilities, especially in PSE-related outcomes (Grigal et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2010). The NLTS2 is a 10-year-long study on the postschool outcomes of transition-age youth with disabilities (Newman et al., 2010). For this study, Newman and colleagues (2010) collected data from a nationally-representative sample of over 11,000 students, ages 13 to 16, who were receiving special education services in December 2000. Data on participants were collected from multiple sources (e.g., youth, parents, and teachers) in multiple waves, and youth were surveyed every two years until they had been out of high school for four years or until 2009 when data collection ended (Grigal et al., 2011). NLTS2 data show that participation in PSE among youth with disabilities increased from 26.3% in 1990 to 45.6% in 2005, indicating significant progress; however, it is important to note that PSE participation rates among youth without disabilities was 54% in 1990 and 62.6% in 2005 (Newman et al., 2010). This inequitable

access to PSE is especially evident when examining outcomes of youth with ID (Baer et al., 2011; Flexer, Daviso, Baer, Queen, & Meindl, 2011; Grigal et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2010; Sheppard-Jones et al., 2015).

Youth with ID in particular are struggling to access PSE – approximately 28% of youth with ID enrolled in PSE in 2005, in comparison with 48% of youth with learning disabilities (Newman et al., 2010). Among youth with various disabilities (e.g., learning, sensory, and physical disabilities), youth with ID are the least likely to participate in PSE within four years of exiting high school (Newman et al., 2010). In a secondary analysis of NLTS2 data, Grigal and colleagues (2011) found that students with ID were less likely to have a transition goal of attending a two- or four-year college than students in a comparison group who had a variety of other disabilities (e.g., autism, physical disabilities, and learning disabilities) (11% of students with ID versus 58% of students with other disabilities). They also found that the IEP teams of students with ID were less likely to contact colleges in comparison with IEP teams of students who had other types of disabilities (19% of IEP teams for students with ID versus 32% of IEP teams for students with other disabilities) (Grigal et al., 2011). Additionally, PSE representatives rarely participated in the transition planning process of both groups of students (with ID and with other disabilities) (Grigal et al., 2011). Although much research on the PSE experiences of students with disabilities focuses on youth with learning disabilities (e.g., Field et al., 2003; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002) or on youth with disabilities in general (i.e., grouping youth with a wide variety of disabilities together) (e.g., Morningstar et al., 2010; Shogren et al., 2015), researchers have just recently begun examining the PSE experiences specific to youth with ID (Grigal et al., 2011; Kirkendall et al., 2009; Thoma et al., 2012; Zafft et al., 2004).

Research indicates that even though PSE participation among youth with ID is limited, it does have important benefits (Flannery et al., 2008; Grigal et al., 2011; Kirkendall et al., 2009; Sheppard-Jones et al., 2015; Thoma et al., 2012; Zafft et al., 2004). For example, Kirkendall and colleagues (2009) interviewed six transition-age youth with ID before and after they participated in a college-based dormitory program, and they found that even though youth did not participate in PSE courses, they still benefited from living on a college campus, as indicated by greater independent living skills (e.g., cooking, doing laundry), increased awareness of personal goals, enhanced vocational goals, and improved assertive communication skills. According to Sheppard-Jones and colleagues (2015), PSE participation provides students with ID opportunities to “pursu[e] a valued social role” (i.e., the role of a college student) and to expand their social networks (p. 120). Research also indicates that participation in PSE significantly improves the employment outcomes (e.g., Grigal et al., 2011; Zafft et al., 2004) and financial stability (Flannery et al., 2008) of youth with ID, which is important considering that many individuals with ID struggle to obtain employment and to earn competitive wages (e.g., Carter et al., 2012; Lysaght, Ouellette-Kuntz, & Lin, 2012; Newman et al., 2010).

Employment outcomes. Much research indicates that transition-age youth with ID continue to lag behind youth with other types of disabilities and youth without disabilities regarding employment outcomes (e.g., Flexer et al., 2011; Carter et al., 2012; Grigal et al., Newman et al., 2010; Simonsen & Neubert, 2012). For example, NLTS2 data show that in 2005, only 29.8% of youth with ID were employed within four years of exiting high school, in comparison with 62.5% of youth with learning disabilities and 59.1% of youth without disabilities (Newman et al., 2010). Youth with ID were also significantly less likely than peers with other disabilities (i.e., a comparison group of youth with various disabilities such as autism,

learning disabilities, physical disabilities, emotional or behavioral disorders, hearing disabilities, etc.) to have engaged in paid employment since exiting high school (71% versus 90%) (Grigal et al., 2011). Of youth with ID who worked, 77% earned more than minimum wage, whereas 96% of youth with other disabilities made such earnings; thus, employed youth with disabilities other than ID tended to earn more than employed youth with ID (Grigal et al., 2011).

Employed individuals with disabilities work in a variety of settings that may be segregated (i.e., working alongside peers with disabilities) or integrated (i.e., working in the community alongside individuals without disabilities). Segregated employment settings include sheltered workshops, which are facilities that employ people with disabilities and do not necessarily pay minimum wage (Simonsen & Neubert, 2012). Integrated employment settings are community-based and enable people with and without disabilities to work alongside each other and to earn at least minimum wage (Simonsen & Neubert, 2012). Integrated employment can include competitive employment where a person with a disability works independently in the community with nondisabled coworkers and earns competitive wages, as well as supported employment where a person with a disability receives support (e.g., from a job coach) in order to work in the community alongside people without disabilities (Simonsen & Neubert, 2012). In their study on employment outcomes of 338 transitioning youth with ID and other developmental disabilities, Simonsen and Neubert (2012) found that the majority of participants (57.1%) were engaged in sheltered employment or non-work activities 18 months after exiting high school; only 14.2% of participants were engaged in integrated employment, earning at least minimum wage. Although secondary transition services have developed over time in order to better prepare youth for employment after high school, it is clear that youth with ID are still struggling to access meaningful employment upon entering adulthood. Research suggests that students with

ID often lack adequate opportunities to prepare for competitive, integrated employment throughout the transition planning process (e.g., Carter et al., 2012; Grigal et al., 2011).

Even though research indicates that many youth with ID engage in employment-related transition activities (Joshi et al., 2012), transition planning for youth with ID does not typically focus on preparing youth for competitive employment (Carter et al., 2012; Grigal et al., 2011); rather, youth with ID are more prepared to engage in supported or sheltered employment (Grigal et al., 2011). According to Grigal et al. (2011), students with ID were significantly less likely than students with other types of disabilities to have a transition goal of participating in competitive employment (46% versus 60%). Students with ID were more likely than students with other types of disabilities to have transition goals of participating in supported employment (45% versus 7%) and sheltered employment (33% versus 8%) (Grigal et al., 2011). Similarly, Carter and colleagues (2012) found that the majority of participants with severe disabilities (including ID) did not have paid work experience while in high school (110 participants with paid work experience versus 310 participants with no paid work experience). It is important that paid work experiences in integrated settings be accessible to students with ID in order to promote improved postschool outcomes and the inclusion of individuals with ID in competitive employment (Carter et al., 2010). Not surprisingly, research indicates that employment outcomes of youth with ID are also linked to PSE participation (Grigal et al., 2011; Zafft et al., 2004).

Links between PSE and employment. Participation in PSE is significantly associated with a greater likelihood of obtaining employment (Grigal et al., 2011) – including competitive employment (Zafft et al., 2004) – among youth with ID. Interestingly, Grigal et al. (2011) found that this positive association between PSE and employment was not significant for students with other types of disabilities; therefore, this research suggests that PSE participation is particularly

beneficial for youth with ID. In their study of 40 youth with ID, Zafft et al. (2004) found that youth who had PSE experience at a community college and were competitively employed were less likely to require accommodations in the workplace than their competitively-employed peers who did not have PSE experience. PSE and employment offer important economic benefits such as financial stability, as well as socio-emotional benefits, including enhanced psychological well-being (Jahoda, Kemp, Riddell, & Banks, 2008) and expanded social networks (Sheppard-Jones et al., 2015). Unfortunately, transition-age youth with ID continue to face a number of barriers to accessing PSE and employment and to fully experiencing the associated benefits.

Barriers to Postschool Success

Continued inequitable access to PSE and employment indicates the existence of a number of major barriers preventing the postschool success of youth and young adults with disabilities. Researchers have begun to identify some of these barriers, including shifts between special education and civil rights legislation, insufficient self-determination skills among youth with disabilities, and inadequate collaboration throughout the transition planning process (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Noonan et al., 2008). It is important that researchers continue to identify barriers – especially those that may be specific to individuals with ID – and explore means of addressing those barriers in order to facilitate the transition process and improve postschool outcomes.

From IDEIA to ADA. One of the major barriers youth with disabilities face during their transition to adulthood is the shift from receiving educational services as a student under IDEIA (2004) to being protected as a citizen under ADA (1990) (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Madaus, 2005). As previously mentioned, IDEIA is special education legislation that aims to protect the right to education for people with disabilities. Under IDEIA, the school is responsible for identifying

students in need of special education services and providing those services, which includes IEP and transition planning (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). Students' educational rights are protected under IDEIA for as long as they remain in a secondary education setting (i.e., up to age 21). It is important for youth with disabilities to know that once they exit high school, IDEIA no longer applies; rather, their civil rights (e.g., access to PSE and employment) are protected by ADA (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Madaus, 2005).

Students with disabilities are not guaranteed individualized educational supports when they enter PSE. PSE institutions are not required to modify admissions criteria or curricula (e.g., course content and programs of study) for students with disabilities; rather, PSE institutions are mandated to make "reasonable" accommodations that do not significantly alter the program (Madaus, 2005). Disability services at PSE institutions typically include the provision of appropriate academic accommodations (e.g., extending test time, allowing tests to be completed in a separate location) and auxiliary aids (e.g., assistive technology) in order to fulfill requirements of equal access (Madaus, 2005). PSE institutions can offer more intense levels of support (e.g., individualized tutoring and instruction), but services differ program to program and may require additional fees (Madaus, 2005). Importantly, the shift from IDEIA to ADA means that individuals with disabilities become personally responsible for disclosing and documenting their disability status in order to request any necessary accommodations (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Field et al., 2003; Madaus, 2005). Therefore, it is critical that youth with disabilities exit high school equipped with self-determination and self-advocacy skills (i.e., the ability to act on one's own behalf; Field, 1996) if they are to experience postschool success (e.g., Morningstar et al., 2010; Shogren et al., 2015).

Lack of self-determination. Research suggests that youth with disabilities tend to enter adulthood without adequate self-determination and self-advocacy skills (e.g., Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Morningstar et al., 2010). In one study involving focus groups of 34 PSE students with disabilities, many students shared stories about failing to self-disclose their disability status upon entering the postsecondary environment, which suggests that these individuals did not possess adequate self-advocacy skills (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Several participants also described how their high school education did not prepare them enough to “really understand their disability and how it affected their learning” (Getzel & Thoma, 2008, p. 80). Similarly, Janiga and Costenbader (2002) found that college service coordinators expressed little satisfaction with the secondary transition services provided to their students with learning disabilities, and they identified preparation for self-advocacy as the greatest weakness of transition services. In contrast, Agran and Hughes (2008) conducted a study in which the majority of participants from a sample of 17 high-school and 56 junior-high students with disabilities reported receiving some instruction on self-determination strategies. However, few participants reported playing an active role in their IEP planning, indicating that even though students received some self-determination education, they were not able to apply those skills in order to engage in the planning process (Agran & Hughes, 2008). Therefore, further research is necessary to determine the role of self-determination education in transition services for youth with disabilities, specifically for those with ID.

Inadequate collaboration. As previously mentioned, interagency collaboration is a critical component of transition planning that promotes positive postschool outcomes among youth with disabilities (Kohler & Field, 2003; Test et al., 2009). Despite the fact that youth and young adults with disabilities greatly benefit from strong connections with adult service

providers as they exit high school and enter adulthood, high-quality collaboration between secondary transition service providers and adult service providers remains difficult to achieve (Noonan et al., 2008). In their survey of college service coordinators, Janiga and Costenbader (2002) found that a number of participants desired better communication between high schools and college service providers, indicating some weaknesses in collaborative service delivery for transition-age youth. Similarly, Carter and colleagues (2009) found that representatives from chambers of commerce and other employer networks reported limited previous involvement in supporting the career development of students with and without disabilities; these researchers also found that employer network representatives' views about partnering with schools to provide youth with career development opportunities were influenced by disability status such that participants viewed involvement in such activities as less feasible if working with youth with disabilities. Inaccurate perceptions about students with disabilities, schools, and outside agencies prevent effective interagency collaboration (Noonan et al., 2008).

It is important to note that there have been recent efforts to improve interagency collaboration when serving people with disabilities; for example, Minnesota's Olmstead Plan, which was approved in 2015, emphasizes the importance of collaboration among state agencies in identifying strategies for improving disability services and achieving the full inclusion of people with disabilities (Minnesota Olmstead Subcabinet, 2015). Dialogue and clearer communication among all parties involved in transition planning – including schools, PSE institutions, adult service providers, and other community partners – is necessary in order to improve interagency collaboration and to promote greater postschool success among youth with disabilities, including those with ID.

The Present Study

As previously mentioned, much of the research on PSE and employment outcomes of transition-age youth with disabilities focuses on youth with disabilities in general or on youth with learning disabilities; therefore, there is limited research on ways in which to promote the postschool success of youth with ID (Zafft et al., 2004), even though these youth appear to struggle the most as they transition into adulthood (e.g., Newman et al., 2010). It is important that social work researchers address this lack of literature on strategies for improving PSE and employment outcomes for youth with ID in order to promote educational equity, as well as social and economic justice. Therefore, the present study examined the perspectives of secondary transition service providers in order to answer the following questions: (1) What barriers prevent transition-age youth with ID from achieving postschool success, specifically regarding participation in employment and PSE? and (2) How can we improve transition services to promote better postschool outcomes among youth with ID?

Conceptual Framework

Citizenship Social Work and People with ID

The Citizenship Social Work framework is central to understanding the importance of improving postschool outcomes of youth with ID. Citizenship Social Work is a framework for understanding the civil, political, social, and economic rights and obligations of citizenship (Toft & Bibus, 2014). Citizenship Social Work strives to achieve the inclusion of all citizens in a democratic society by upholding citizens' rights and promoting social responsibility (Toft & Bibus, 2014). Civil rights protect citizens' individual freedom, and civil obligations require that citizens respect each other's right to individual freedom (Janoski, 1998; as cited by Toft & Bibus, 2014). Political rights entitle citizens to political activism, while political obligations

include informed political participation and compliance with laws and regulations (Janoski, 1998; as cited by Toft & Bibus, 2014). Social rights protect citizens' rights to fully participate in society and to achieve basic well-being; social obligations include taking advantage of opportunities to better oneself as a citizen, which includes pursuing education and obtaining employment that contributes to the betterment of society (Toft & Bibus, 2014). Finally, economic rights protect rights to employment and participation in decisions at work; economic obligations include pursuing employment so that one can serve as a contributing member of society (Janoski, 1998; as cited by Toft & Bibus, 2014). Toft and Bibus (2014) assert that these "rights and obligations are universalistic and therefore, not differentiated based on class, gender, race, or any other characteristic or identifier," and that "as one born or naturalized in the country, one automatically should have access to citizenship and all that entails" (p. 48). Thus, these rights and obligations also apply to citizens with ID.

Many citizens, especially those with disabilities, do not have equal access to the rights and obligations associated with citizenship (Carey, 2009; Toft & Bibus, 2014). In recent history, there have been critical gains in promoting and protecting rights of citizenship for people with disabilities, specifically through the implementation of ADA in 1990. As previously described, ADA is federal legislation that strives to uphold the rights of people with disabilities by prohibiting discrimination in areas such as employment, education, transportation, public accommodations, public services, and voting (Shaw et al., 2012). Despite these efforts to promote equal access and opportunity for people with disabilities, excluding people with ID from engaging in full citizenship "is still widely accepted and viewed as legally justified and even morally imperative," and mainstream society is "only just beginning to question and de-naturalize the deprivation of rights from people with disabilities" (Carey, 2009, p. 2). Increased

discussion about the inclusion of people with disabilities – including research on improving access to PSE and employment – is critical in order to promote full citizenship among all members of society. Using the Citizenship Social Work framework, it is clear that people with ID have the social and economic rights to live, learn, and work alongside people without disabilities, while earning competitive wages, engaging in lifelong learning, participating in the community, and expanding their social networks. Denying people with ID the opportunity to work and financially support themselves and to better themselves through PSE keeps this population in a dependent position, preventing them from fulfilling their economic and social obligations as citizens. Therefore, improving transition services and increasing access to PSE, employment, and overall community integration appears to be an important step in ensuring full citizenship among individuals with ID.

Empowerment Theory and People with ID

According to Hutchinson (2011), empowerment theory focuses on processes that enable individuals to identify patterns of inequity and gain power. Miley, O'Melia, and DuBois (2013) define power as “having access to information, choosing actions from many possibilities, and acting on one’s choices” (p. 82). Empowerment theory asserts that all individuals have strengths and potential, and it emphasizes the importance of individuals voicing their experiences, wants, and needs (Miley et al., 2013). Miley and colleagues (2013) describe how empowerment occurs on personal, interpersonal, and sociopolitical levels: personal empowerment refers to one’s competence and strength, as well as one’s ability to both draw from and contribute to the pool of resources in the social and physical environment; interpersonal empowerment refers to one’s sense of support, interdependence, and social status; and sociopolitical empowerment refers to the allocation of power and the ability to access opportunities and resources. Empowerment

theory is particularly important to consider when thinking about issues affecting those who experience oppression and social exclusion, including those with ID.

As previously discussed, people with ID have been excluded from mainstream society in the past and present. In applying empowerment theory to transition services, it is important that service providers work to ensure that youth with ID have access to information about vocational and educational opportunities, and that they are able to consider a variety of possibilities and act on their own choices; empowerment is key if these youth are to experience postschool success and genuine inclusion in mainstream society. Although power is not something one can give to another (Miley et al., 2013), service providers can help youth with ID build upon their individual strengths, their ability to make self-determined decisions, and their ability to self-advocate (Kohler & Field, 2003). Empowerment-focused practice also emphasizes the importance of ensuring that these youth have access to a strong support network upon exiting high school. Empowerment theory calls for action among professionals to determine ways of increasing access to resources and opportunities – including participation in employment and PSE – so that youth with ID have the power to influence society. Therefore, the empowerment of youth with ID is essential if they are to enter adulthood with the ability to pursue many, meaningful opportunities for postschool success.

Method

Research Design

The present study used qualitative methods in order to identify barriers to and means of improving postschool success among transition-age youth with ID. Conducting semi-structured interviews of professionals who had direct experience working with transition-age youth with ID enabled the researcher to gather rich information on transition services and the experiences of

youth with ID. The qualitative design of the present study allowed for an in-depth discussion of the current issues impacting transition-age youth with ID, as well as the exploration of new ideas that were inadequately or not yet addressed in the literature.

Sample

The sample of the present study consisted of four participants, including one school social worker, one work coordinator, and two teachers. All participants were professionals working in three different transition programs that serve students ages 18-21 who have disabilities (including ID) in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota. The present study utilized nonprobability sampling methods, including convenience and snowball sampling. Convenience sample participants (i.e., school social worker, work coordinator, and one teacher) were identified through a public email listing of staff members of two separate level-four special education programs that belong to an intermediate school district and serve transition-age students with disabilities. The researcher interned for the same intermediate school district, but in a separate special education program at a different location; none of the participants in this study had a direct working relationship with the researcher. One teacher from a public transition program was recruited through snowball sampling methods (i.e., through one of the researcher's classmates).

Protection of Human Subjects

As previously stated, the present study consisted of convenience and snowball samples. The researcher interned as a school social worker for a special education program that belonged to an intermediate school district. The district offered a number of programs in various locations, including two special education programs that served students with ID (also known as developmental cognitive disabilities [DCD] in school settings) in need of transition services;

these two programs were separate from the researcher's internship, and they were housed in different locations. In accordance with the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher received written permission from the intermediate school district before recruiting district employees (see de-identified organization permission letter in Appendix A). The researcher sent a recruitment email (see recruitment email for convenience sample in Appendix B) to licensed staff listed in the online directory for each of the two programs, which was available to the public, in order to recruit a convenience sample. If any of the staff listed in the directories also worked at the researcher's internship site, they were not contacted in order to prevent recruiting participants who have a direct working relationship with the researcher and to prevent any perception of coercion. A second recruitment email was sent one week after the initial email in order to recruit more participants.

A snowball sample was also recruited for the present study. One of the researcher's classmates in the Master of Social Work Program contacted colleagues about participating in the present study. The researcher sent the classmate a recruitment email that was forwarded to professionals in the area who had experience working with transition-age youth with ID (see recruitment email for snowball sample in Appendix C). Individuals recruited through snowball sampling methods were encouraged to directly contact the researcher if they were willing to participate in the study. Although the snowball sample participant was encouraged to inform colleagues of this research in order to recruit more transition service providers, there were no additional snowball sample participants in this study.

Participation in the present study was confidential. Participants were not asked to share their names during the data collection process, and any identifying information was removed from the data (e.g., names of agencies where participants worked). Additionally, participants

from the convenience sample were reassured that even though the researcher interned for the same intermediate school district, the present study was not affiliated with the district and any participation would remain confidential. Audio recordings, transcripts, and notes were de-identified and saved in a password-protected file on the researcher's personal laptop. All audio recordings were erased from the recording device as soon as the recordings were downloaded onto the researcher's personal laptop. Recordings were erased from the laptop upon completion of the research project. Paper consent forms were scanned and then destroyed; scanned images of consent forms were also stored in a password-protected file on the researcher's personal laptop. Scanned images of consent forms, transcripts, and notes were destroyed three years after the completion of the study in compliance with the University of St. Thomas IRB.

The present study was approved by the University of St. Thomas IRB prior to recruitment and data collection in order to ensure that this research was in compliance with the Protection of Human Subject requirements and that participation in this study presented minimal risk. All participants were professionals, and the topic of the study (i.e., transition services for youth with ID) was not personally sensitive in nature. However, interviews were recorded, which can present some level of risk regarding the protection of participants' identities. All interviewees were required to give informed consent in order to participate in this study and to indicate that they understood that there were no known risks or benefits associated with participating in this study (see Appendices D and E for consent forms for participants from convenience and snowball samples, respectively). All participants received copies of the consent form and interview questions from the researcher via email prior to the interview. Directly prior to beginning the interview, participants received and signed a consent form describing the purpose of the study, as well as the voluntary and confidential nature of participation. Participants were

informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point in time without penalty.

Participants were also informed that any identifying information would be removed from the data. Participants were provided with hard copies of the consent form, signed by the researcher, for their personal records.

Data Collection

The data for the present study was collected through in-person, semi-structured interviews that included 15 open-ended questions, as well as a number of optional follow-up questions, developed by the researcher and approved by the researcher's committee and the University of St. Thomas IRB prior to data collection (see Appendix F). The interview questions were developed after a review of the literature on transition services and postschool outcomes of youth with disabilities. Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to further explore topics discussed by participants and to prompt participants to expand upon their responses to the researcher's questions. The interview schedule began with questions on participants' experiences and roles working with transition-age youth with ID and the purpose of transition services, as well as questions addressing the roles of different individuals in the transition planning process. Next, the questions addressed how the participants and their respective agencies/settings prepare students with ID for employment and PSE. Participants were also asked to discuss critical factors in promoting postschool success. Additionally, there were questions pertaining to the experiences of youth with ID in particular and the barriers they face in their transition to adulthood. The strengths and weaknesses of transition services, as well as areas of improvement, were also addressed during the interview. Finally, several of the questions pertained to other important factors impacting the transition process, such as student self-

determination, interagency collaboration, family involvement, and the shift in legislation from IDEA/IDEIA to ADA.

Interviews were conducted in person at locations of the participants' choosing that ensured privacy. All participants chose to be interviewed at their place of employment. Convenience sample participants were informed that the researcher was willing to conduct the interview at their places of employment, but that choosing to do so could have impacted participant confidentiality, as other district employees were recruited for this study and potentially could have surmised their participation in this research. All interviews were audiotaped with a digital audio recorder, which was checked out from the Academic Media Services at St. Catherine University. Interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes. The digital audio recorder created MP3 files of the interviews, which were downloaded and stored on the researcher's personal laptop. Then, the recordings on the digital audio recorder were erased, and the device was returned to the Academic Media Services. The researcher transcribed each interview for data analysis purposes; however, any identifying information was not included in the transcripts. All data from this study – including audio recordings, transcripts, and notes – were kept confidential in password-protected files. Recordings were destroyed upon completion of the research project, but transcripts and notes were stored for three years after the completion of this study.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, the present study utilized a grounded theory approach and content analysis. Grounded theory is a popular approach to qualitative data analysis that involves “inductive coding from the data, memo writing to document analytic decisions, and weaving in theoretical ideas” during the analysis process (Padgett, 2008, p. 33). Theoretical concepts emerged from the data throughout the analysis process.

Using a grounded theory approach, data analysis began with the open coding of participant interview transcripts, which involved briefly summarizing the main concept of each sentence. According to Padgett (2008) open coding may incorporate concepts from previous research, but this process is primarily inductive. This open coding involved a close reading of the transcripts in order to describe, not interpret, the data and to organize the data into categories (Padgett, 2008). It is important to note that codes are provisional and can be modified, even eliminated, throughout the data analysis process (Padgett, 2008). The researcher engaged in memo-taking throughout the coding process, especially during open-coding, in order to record observations and connections to the reviewed literature.

During the second phase of coding (i.e., axial coding), the researcher identified patterns and similarities among codes in order to develop overarching themes (Padgett, 2008). The third phase of coding allowed for the finalization of themes, as the coding process became repetitive and revealed no new information (i.e., the researcher achieved saturation) (Padgett, 2008). Then, themes were organized into categories (i.e., critical factors contributing to postschool success, barriers to postschool success, and ways to improve transition services), allowing for the organization of the identified themes. Direct quotes from the interviews were used to provide evidence of the identified themes.

Findings

A content analysis of data collected on the perspectives of four transition service providers working in special education programs (i.e., two teachers, one work coordinator, and one school social worker) revealed a number of themes surrounding transition services and postschool success that were organized into the following categories: critical factors contributing to postschool success; barriers to postschool success; and ways to improve transition services.

Critical Factors Contributing to Postschool Success

When describing the different elements and strengths of transition services, participants identified a variety of factors that appear to be critical in promoting postschool success among youth with ID. These critical factors represent major components of the transition services provided by participants and their agencies.

Work-related activities. A common theme discussed by all participants was the importance of providing transition students with opportunities to engage in work-related activities. Participants described preparation for future employment as central to the transition planning process. Participants discussed how their respective programs strive to engage students with ID in work-related activities by assessing their abilities and interests, providing them with opportunities to develop work-related skills, and placing students in volunteer or paid work positions that were located onsite or in the community. Some participants mentioned assessment of work-related skills and interests as a part of the transition planning process. The following quote from the work coordinator supports assessment as a subtheme of work-related activities:

We have a formal assessment that we use here called PAES. It stands for “Practical Assessment Exploration Systems,” and it gives us really good information about [students’] aptitude, their skills, interests, their general attitude, and then we tie that into jobs that they are successful in, whether it could be organizing, collecting data, you know, data entry, even basic custodial work.

The school social worker added that the PAES lab provides students with a “simulated work environment” where students can engage in a variety of work tasks:

They do all these different tasks and different sort of categories or groupings of jobs to see what they're . . . interested in, good at, capable of. It kind of gives a nice report that shows what's realistic for them, aligned with what they also like to do or enjoy doing.

In addition to assessment, building work skills through an onsite class or “seminar” was included as a subtheme of work-related activities. Both the school social worker and work coordinator discussed how their transition program offers a job skills seminar that help students “work on interview skills, résumé skills” and learn “what it means to be an employee,” respectively. Finally, all participants discussed how transition services provide students with opportunities to engage in hands-on volunteer and work experiences. The following quote from one of the teachers illustrates how his transition students have access to both onsite and community-based work opportunities:

We have some jobs that go throughout the school building, like we have a coffee cart . . . that students work on. We have a recycling crew of students that kind of go through the building. We have a community deliveries crew. We partner with a few different businesses in the community, and we have a group of students that will go out daily and do various tasks, like the Chamber of Commerce, we do a mailing project for them, so they'll go to their office, pick up all the supplies, come back here, and then, in our work center, they'll work on putting those things together, and then our community deliveries crew will make the delivery of those . . . Some students work every day, you know, for an hour or two. We have a couple students that work the majority of their school day at Goodwill . . . so that's kind of the job focus piece.

Importantly, the school social worker discussed how students typically start in unpaid, volunteer positions, but as they gain experience, students are able to work for pay at job sites in the community:

None of our kids just jump straight into paid work. They would first do an internship at the [local] movie theater, or we have some other sites that do volunteer work, like ARC Value Village . . . or there's some even here [onsite] for some of our kids that aren't ready for community work . . . I think it's just sort of assessing where they're at, where their skills are at, and then starting to build some confidence before we move them up to the next level.

Another teacher described how students' unpaid internships made available through partnering with a major hospital could lead to postschool employment:

The students spend an entire year there, unpaid, learning all of the different areas. They do sanitation, they do kit preparation, they do janitorial stuff, and they work for the hospital, and at the end, they have opportunities to be hired. They've got like an 80% placement rate . . . but the hospitals had to work with their unions to let these kids come in and do training on the job, and that was really hard, but thank goodness for them.

Therefore, these three subthemes of assessment, building job skills, and engaging in work placements – which includes work that is paid or unpaid, onsite or community-based – illustrate how work-related activities are a fundamental component of preparing youth with ID for the transition to adulthood.

PSE-related activities. Another theme that emerged from the data was the importance of providing transition students with opportunities to engage in PSE-related activities, such as courses in vocational programs, while they are still in high school. Even though participants

reported that very few of their students with ID actually go on to enroll in PSE after exiting high school, they still felt it was beneficial to expose students to PSE-related activities while they were in high school. Participants discussed how some students had the option to take classes at local community colleges and career and technical education programs in order to explore career options and to become certified in a specific trade. For example, the school social worker discussed how students could take courses in a PSE setting in order to learn more about PSE and explore potential career interests:

We do some postsecondary education through the career and tech center . . . it's not quite college level, but it gives them kind of an idea of the rigor, and also helps them focus on like an area, such as mechanics, or cosmetology, or health careers that might be of interest to them, to sort of give them a taste and get them used to that sort of higher level learning setting, see if they can handle that rigor.

In addition to exploring potential career interests, PSE-related experiences can also enable students with ID to become certified in a specific trade. The following quote from the work coordinator describes some of the trades in which her students with ID (also known as DCD in school settings) have become certified:

The students have access to classes at the career and tech for free . . . and some can qualify as a college credit course, so I think that's . . . a great service that we provide here, and a great partnership with the career and tech center, where students can develop a trade or an interest in a potential career by taking a course . . . We've had the food service class that some of our DCD students have done well in, and there's also been the MES Program, the Maintenance Environmental Services class, that students can actually apply for and work towards a boiler's license.

The following quote from one of the teachers provides additional evidence of the trade certification subtheme of PSE-related activities:

We also help kids hook up with different programs in the community that have programs that they want. There's forklift driving and CNA courses, PCA courses, that the school pays for to get those kids the training that they need.

Although relatively few transition-age youth with ID go on to participate in PSE at this time, accessing PSE-related activities while in high school can be important in helping these individuals decide if they want to continue with PSE after graduating, explore potential career paths, and even become certified in a trade.

Soft/social skills. All participants stated that cultivating students' soft skills, or social skills, was also a critical component of preparing youth with ID for adulthood and promoting greater postschool success. One teacher described soft skills as "being on time, being polite, following through, things like that." Participants discussed how building soft/social skills was fundamental in promoting greater community participation and postschool success in employment and PSE among students with ID, as these skills facilitate social interaction. The theme of soft/social skill development is supported by the following quote from one of the teachers:

Our particular program, what we focus on across the board is social skills. And we've just found through experience that . . . social skills get you a long way in the employment world, and . . . we've seen students who've had fantastic work skills but poor social skills fail when they leave school and go into the adult world, and then vice versa, we've seen students who weren't particularly good workers, but because of their social skills, they've had success and gotten outside employment.

Similarly, the work coordinator mentioned how her program focuses on strengthening students' soft skills as means of enhancing employability:

And [our job skills class] includes focusing on developing soft skills, so the importance of arriving to work on time, the importance of attendance, accepting constructive criticism without having a big blowout . . . a number of things, physical appearance, [and] the importance of taking care of yourself.

Finally, the school social worker emphasized the importance of working on social skills, such as “how to be out in the community, and how to ask questions and interact and be safe,” in order to enhance students' community participation experiences. Thus, it seems that this soft/social skill training serves as the foundation of transition students' learning, as these skills enable youth with ID to interact with others in a more socially appropriate manner, whether they are in the community, at work, or in a PSE environment.

Independent living skills. Another theme that emerged during data analysis was the need to work with transition students on gaining independent living skills, so that they could be as independent as possible in their daily lives. Many participants discussed how one of the major strengths of transition services is that these programs provide students with ID additional time to mature and focus on entering adulthood in a safe, supportive environment. In fact, the work coordinator stated that the purpose of her program was “to help students reach independence to the best of their potential.” The subtheme of treating students as adults and holding them accountable in order to foster independence is supported by the following quote from one of the teachers:

But here, you know, everyone gets a chance to do something different, and for some, it's just a maturity thing. Three extra years to grow up. Grow up! And we do it. And we do

grow them up, you know? And the things we see change in three years is amazing . . . and they grow up into these nice, articulate, kind, young adults who have decided that it's okay to be independent, sure of yourself, confident, and anyways, I love those guys.

This teacher also described how she challenges students to become more independent:

I personally . . . won't call home. If there's a call that needs to go home, you're calling home, you know? If there's something that needs to be signed, you're gonna sign it. You want your parent to read it? Fine. You bring it home and have your parent read it. If they want to talk to me, they can call me, you know?

Additionally, this teacher discussed how her strategies of holding students accountable and treating them as adults was “empowering because [students] have to start thinking about things outside of themselves.” Participants also talked about training students in activities of daily living as critical in promoting greater independence. The work coordinator stated the following about the need to teach daily living skills in order to foster independence within students:

I think we have a responsibility to teach [students] the importance of reporting absences, or, you know, setting up doctor appointments, or following through with their physician or their psychologist, or . . . getting a handle on their medications.

Further evidence of teaching daily living skills as a subtheme of independence is shown by the following quote from the school social worker:

I think [our program] really does a good, or aims to do a good job of . . . just the things that our society sort of assumes people can just pick up on their own. Here, we teach it really concretely. So how do you call and set up car insurance, or how do you go get a driver's license or a state ID . . . sort of the essentials for how they're gonna function as an adult are taught, instead of just assuming they're gonna figure it out or use the

internet . . . I like the real-life, functional learning. I think it's sometimes more effective than teaching them algebra and geometry and things. I love the, you know, the budgeting, and teaching them to cook, and teaching them all the safety stuff of how do you call 911 or when do you call 911. Things that we just assume they would know, that they don't.

Participants emphasized that treating students as adults and providing instruction on various activities of daily living help cultivate independence among transition-age students with ID. Supporting students in living as independently as possible is clearly a major component of transition services for youth and young adults with ID.

Self-determination skills. In addition to discussing the need to build students' level of independent functioning, participants also identified self-determination skills as essential for postschool success. Self-determination is certainly related to the previously discussed theme of independent living; however, self-determination emerged from the data as a distinct theme, emphasizing the importance of enhancing students' abilities to make choices and self-advocate in order to fulfill their needs. All participants mentioned how students with ID benefit from having many opportunities to make their own informed choices. The subtheme of making choices in order to promote self-determination is supported by the following quote from one of the teachers:

Choice, of course, always is important. In high school, you don't always have choices with things. We let students change their schedules. We let them drop a job site if they don't like it. We don't make them drag it out. We'll talk to them about, kind of counsel them about it, but . . . we give them [that] opportunity.

Participants also talked about helping students with ID become better self-advocates so that they recognize both their strengths and their weaknesses and ask for help when necessary. The work coordinator stated that her students had "self-advocacy IEP goals" that they worked towards in

order to graduate from the transition program. Further evidence of self-advocacy as a subtheme of self-determination emerges from one of the teacher's statements:

[A] student needs to be able to say to their employer, "I'm sorry, I can't read that. Can I get some help with this?" You know, "Sorry, I can't quite figure this out. I need some help." Or to be able to say, you know, "I have cognitive delays," or, "I have learning problems. Can you please help me with this?"

The school social worker also discussed working with students to help them become more effective self-advocates:

I think just helping them know . . . that they can, they can voice . . . appropriate ways to make complaints or to seek more help when they're not getting it or that kind of thing . . . We try to model sort of paring back the levels of support or the amount that we're willing to advocate for them and increasing the expectation that they're advocating for themselves.

Participants asserted that strong self-determination skills empower students with ID to make their own informed decisions and to voice their wants and needs; therefore, enhancing transition students' self-determination skills appears to be a critical step in equipping these individuals for adulthood and postschool success.

Community participation. Another theme that emerged from the data as a critical factor contributing to postschool success was community participation. One teacher described community participation as getting students "out in the community, learning where [their] resources are." Further evidence of this theme was another teacher's statement about how a significant part of his job was to "increase [students'] ability to participate in the community, to be safe in the community, to make good choices." Many participants talked about how taking

students out into the community and visiting a variety of local establishments provided students with the opportunity to apply the social skills and self-determination skills they learned about in class. For example, one teacher described his program's use of a "community bus" to promote greater community participation and social skills development among their transition students:

We have a community bus. We're going out in the community every day, just anywhere and everywhere. We go to libraries, coffee shops, a lot of the different stores and stuff, and . . . try to have different community experiences . . . as well as integrating the stuff we might be doing in school, like revolving around money management . . . You know, social skills are a big part of what we do every day.

Similarly, the school social worker stated the following about using community participation experiences to enhance students' soft/social skills:

We also do community participation to work on sort of building their rec[reation] and leisure, and their community participation, so going to community centers, and grocery stores, and libraries, and just sort of working on some of those soft skills, those social skills of how to be out in the community, and how to ask questions, and interact, and be safe.

Importantly, the school social worker also talked about how these community participation experiences can help prevent the isolation of youth/young adults with ID:

I like the community participation piece a lot, 'cause I think some of our kids would or are really isolated at home, or their parents are overwhelmed at the thought of taking them in the community because of some of their behaviors . . . I think we get them more acclimated, and even if they have behaviors, we figure it out while we're out there, and work through it, and give them some of those problem-solving skills.

Providing students who have ID with opportunities to participate in the community is a crucial component of transition services, as such experiences make it possible for youth with ID to access community resources, practice the skills they learn in school, and avoid becoming socially isolated; this community participation promotes the genuine integration of people with ID into mainstream society.

Collaborative service delivery. The theme of collaborative service delivery emerged as the final critical factor contributing to postschool success among youth with ID. One teacher described how special education in general “demands the team approach,” meaning the student, the student’s family or guardian, school staff, and even outside service providers work together to support the student throughout the transition planning process. When asked about who is involved in the transition planning process, the school social worker responded:

I just think of the IEP team primarily, so it would be [the] student . . . Most of the time, the parent or guardian is involved. I’ve worked with very few students who don’t want their parent or guardian at the table. County social workers come in and have a voice . . . school staff would include social worker, autism resource specialist – if that applies to that student – whoever their teacher/case manager is . . . we have an admin designee that’s at the table, so here, that’s our program lead . . . or our program manager . . . We have a district rep because all of our students come from other school districts, and they’re contracting with us, so we have someone from their home district that’s at the table making sure that the student’s needs are being met, so it’s just a big collaboration of different lenses and voices to make sure that we’re not missing any areas. We also have our work coordinator . . . who oversees that job and job training stuff.

This quote provides a great deal of evidence for the centrality of multidisciplinary teamwork in providing transition services. Importantly, the work coordinator described students as “the number one player” on the IEP/transition planning team. Additionally, one of the teachers emphasized the importance collaborating with families in order to facilitate the transition to adulthood and to promote postschool success:

[Family involvement] has a huge impact . . . I think what we see, by and large, is . . . just overall for our student population, if they have strong advocates for them, they end up in [a] better position to have maybe a better living situation, a better job situation.

The work coordinator also stated the following about family involvement in transition planning:

Family input is super important . . . I think families have a big responsibility in helping their child get involved in . . . selecting a DT&H [day training and habilitation], or . . . maintaining employment, or just providing that support system for that kid once they leave our programming here.

In addition to the collaboration among students, families, and multidisciplinary school staff, transition programs also partner with local businesses, PSE institutions, and nonprofit organizations (as previously described in the work-related experiences and PSE-related experiences sections). Interagency collaboration with community-based supports and services and local community transition interagency committees (CTIC) help providers connect students with community resources, lifelong supports, and opportunities to learn and work. For example, the school social worker mentioned how her transition program partners with county social services and Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) when serving students with ID:

I think primarily, probably, our interagency people that we work with are the county social workers, developmental disabilities or mental health. We have kids kind of in both branches of that . . . [and] vocation rehab services.

The school social worker stated that these interagency partnerships with lifelong, community-based support systems help to create “a safety net” for youth with ID, even after they exit high school and transition programming. Finally, the work coordinator shared about her experience working with other transition service professionals on a CTIC in order to connect students with more resources and opportunities:

I'm on a . . . CTIC committee . . . [and] right now, we're planning for a career skills day . . . and I know that there's going to be a number of vendors that provide resources for individuals with disabilities, so that's going to be a really good experience for our students . . . And it will be an opportunity for students to, you know, tidy up, wear something nice, as if they're going to a real job interview, and then also network.

Therefore, it seems that collaboration among students, families, various school/program staff, as well as community agencies and institutions, is essential in order to provide transition students who have ID with rich learning experiences and opportunities to better themselves in preparation for adulthood.

Barriers to Postschool Success

Throughout the interviews, participants were able to identify many barriers that prevent youth with ID from achieving greater postschool success. Participants described a number of barriers that stem from the youth with ID themselves (e.g., skill level) and from their families (e.g., family members enabling youth with ID), as well as more structural barriers that impact access to various work and learning opportunities and postschool success.

Student skill level. When asked about barriers to postschool success in employment and PSE among youth with ID, most participants identified students' skill levels as a significant barrier. Participants discussed student skills in terms of academic, work, and soft/social skills that impact the ability to participate in employment and PSE. For example, the school social worker described how the academic abilities of students with ID acts as a major barrier to even entering PSE, let alone being successful in such a setting:

Sometimes, sadly . . . their academic levels bar them [from PSE] or make the programs really difficult. Some of our kids have lower reading, writing, and typing, and grammar, and all of that's a big challenge for kids, so classes where they'd have to write a lot of papers is just gonna be too daunting.

One of the teachers also talked about how students' ID and challenges with intellectual functioning can limit their ability to achieve academically, regardless of how hard they work to build academic skills:

They can work on reading for the full 12 years of their career and still be very low in their reading. It doesn't mean . . . they don't have wonderful things ahead of them, but they're not going to college.

Importantly, the work coordinator linked limited academic skills to struggles in achieving success in both PSE and employment: "I think if you have limited academic abilities that prevent you from taking postsecondary ed courses or finding success in competitive employment opportunities . . . I think that your ideal jobs are maybe reduced." Thus, limits in academic skills may be a major barrier for many youth with ID when trying to access PSE and competitive employment opportunities. Importantly, one teacher also described how these students

oftentimes do not have the work skills to complete many of the job positions that are available.

Support for level of work skills as a subtheme is supported by the following quote:

So unfortunately, I have a lot of students who keep applying for jobs even though they can't do that job, you know? And they have other people around them saying, "Yeah, yeah! That's great! You should apply for that job," instead of saying to them, "Listen, that job requires that you are able to read what's in the box and put the box on the right shelf, and I'm sorry you don't know how to do that. You don't know how to read a map. You don't know how to, you know, whatever," . . . But they can't find the jobs because they can't do the jobs. The jobs that are available.

Finally, all participants identified inadequate soft/social skills as a significant barrier to obtaining and maintaining employment, as well as participating in PSE. For example, the work coordinator made the following statement about students' soft skills development and employment:

There might be an issue with soft skills development. If you don't have the skills to form, you know, productive relationships with employers or employees . . . interpersonal relationship issues, [if] there's issues with that, that might be barrier in being successful in employment.

Further evidence of lack of adequate soft/social skills as a barrier to employment and PSE is supported by the following quote from the school social worker:

I think for our kids, their social skills sometimes and their ability to communicate the way they want to in that initial interview to win the job, or some of the other skills that are involved in keeping a job . . . but like their ability to be really consistent in coming to work on time and coming to work every day . . . I also think their . . . ability to communicate. We work hard on communication skills, but they still can get sort of easily

overstimulated or overwhelmed in a stressful or fast-paced situation, and they might not know how to manage that stress, so it might come out with them, you know, kind of fleeing from the worksite or shutting down, or we have kids that get real agitated and . . . more aggressive or verbally aggressive. I think sometimes their ability to handle conflicts on the worksite would get in the way of them keeping a job or in a school setting, in a postsecondary setting.

Clearly, participants believed that challenges regarding the academic, work, and soft/social skills of students with ID significantly limit their access to employment and PSE, as well as their ability to experience success in those endeavors.

Failure to follow through with services. There are a number of supports and services available to youth/young adults with ID because of the challenges they face as a result of their disabilities. As previously discussed, many transition students benefit from connecting with VRS or county social services; these services can greatly assist youth with ID in accessing employment and PSE opportunities. However, participants described how these services are typically voluntary, and some transition students may refuse potentially beneficial services, or they may fail to continue receiving services after they exit their transition program. Evidence of this failure to follow through with services is supported by the following quote from one of the teachers: “VRS services are completely voluntary, so a lot of kids will get hooked up with it, but once they get out in the community, they don’t go back. They’ve got a really low participation rate after graduation.” This teacher added, “If the kid doesn’t recognize they need help, they won’t get help. That’s the way it is.” Two of the participants linked this failure to take advantage of available services with students’ mental health issues; however, it is important to note that these participants worked with students who typically had both ID and mental illness diagnoses.

For example, the work coordinator stated the following about her students with ID who also had mental health issues when discussing barriers to postschool success:

I think it's also challenging for students that . . . struggle with mental illness, and they might be connected with VRS, but the, the service isn't something that – and this is just an example, not to say that it's the case for all individuals – but there are some individuals that are connected with VRS although, [they] don't want the service.

Similarly, the school social worker talked about how these youth cannot be forced to engage in services:

I think there's some kids that choose not to engage in everything that we're offering, so while we can create this awesome system and offer them all of these things, we can't, you know, force them to participate or engage. So some of our kids are shut down, or . . . not medicated correctly, or just have a, have a disability. Their anxiety's so severe, their depression's so great . . . so sometimes it's like I see kids that are here that aren't using their time or aren't getting the resources.

Thus, it seems that even when adequate supports are available, youth with ID do not always choose to take full advantage of those services, potentially because of mental health issues or simply not recognizing that they could benefit from such assistance.

Unrealistic expectations. Another theme that emerged as a barrier to postschool success was unrealistic goals and expectations among students and even their families. Participants described how many students enter their transition programs with unrealistic expectations regarding what they will be able to achieve after they exit high school. The school social worker stated that in her program, they “have so many kids that have these grandiose thoughts about what they're gonna do.” Further evidence of this theme of unrealistic expectations is supported

by the following quote from the school social worker, who also discussed the need to balance students' dreams and realistic life goals:

I think a lot of our kids that I work with, more in the high school age, have some pretty unrealistic goals, that they wanna be a singer, or an actor, or something like that, and not that they can't have those dreams, but they probably need to have a path to start on that's gonna actually support them.

Similarly, when asked about barriers to PSE among youth with ID, one teacher expressed a great deal of frustration with having to provide students with a "reality check":

I could bang my head against the wall on that one. Students are told since they're little, teeny tiny guys that if you dream it, you can do it. If you just believe it enough, if you want it enough, you can do anything you want. And DCD kids can't do anything they want, right? . . . and so the most difficult thing . . . [is] who gets to be the dream crushers, right? The training we went to, they said, "Well let's not call it dream crushers. Let's call it reality checks," you know? But that's supposed to start in 9th grade because part of the IEP is what do you want to be, right? And the kid says, "Oh, I'm gonna be an MBA player." Okay, well, "Let's look at what those qualifications are . . . Are you doing these things?"

Finding the balance between encouraging students to have dreams and helping them identify realistic, achievable goals seems to be a major challenge when serving transition-age youth with ID. The school social worker added that families can also have unrealistic expectations for their children, placing a great deal of pressure on these youth:

We have some parents that have really unrealistic [expectations], so they haven't been able to grieve and let go of the fact that maybe their kiddo is not going to a four-year

school, so they're still pushing that, and that can create tremendous pressure on the student and . . . it makes for . . . not conflict between us and the parent, but it's a hard situation for us . . . Then, trying to work with that family to adjust what, what they maybe should be looking for [as] success.

It is important that students, their families, and the IEP team work together to set realistic, achievable transition goals, so that these youth can experience some level of success once they exit high school. Although it can be challenging, it is critical that transition professionals work with youth who have ID to help them recognize both their strengths and their weaknesses in order to identify goals that provide opportunities for postschool success.

Family-related challenges. As previously discussed, students' family members often play a large role in the transition planning process. Importantly, participants talked about how families can both facilitate and complicate the transition process. The work coordinator described how in some cases, there is a lack of family involvement, which "can lead to lack of opportunities" for students; however, this participant noted that she has mostly positive relationships with her students' families. The school social worker described how she has some students who benefit from a support system at home – whether they live with family members or in a group home – and she has some students who do not receive that support at home:

So we have some kids, that, you know, might go home after school and just check out and be on video games and have no one check in with them or following up with them on homework, or you know, kind of reinforcing what we're teaching in the school setting, and I also think how the family values, or . . . what they expect of their student . . . like we have families that really want them out in the community or working hard to find those opportunities or are willing to support, you know, driving them to a volunteer sites, or

that kind of thing, or reinforcing all the resources we're putting in place, versus families that are like "You don't need that," or "I'm not driving you there." So it just, I think, opens up another world of possibilities if their parents are involved and are working on the same goals at home that we are at school, or group homes for kids that are in group homes.

Again, these quotes show how families/group homes can be a source of support in the transition planning process, as well as a source of some challenges. Additionally, some participants talked about how students may be enabled by their families. Evidence for this subtheme of enabling is supported by the following statement from one of the teachers: "Some students are still attached, fully and completely, to parents and home and are enabled . . . parents enable their kids. They love them. They want to do things for them." This participant also described how parents can both facilitate and complicate the process of preparing youth with ID for adulthood:

When families are involved, students tend to tell their families what they want to hear, right? . . . It changes from working with an adult to working with someone's child . . . we get those parents who are super supportive and . . . they want the kid to be independent, and we also have parents who are just as disabled and have just as much difficulty as their kid, and that parent might be steering them toward something the kid can't do, you know? . . . I suppose at any level, you've got the parents who make the process easier and better and smarter and more individualized, and you've got the parents who get in the way . . . We get it all.

Participants indicated that family involvement and/or supportive group homes are critical in reinforcing student learning and in providing these youth with opportunities to grow and experience success. Without this support, students are likely to miss out on various opportunities.

However, it is important to note that families are complex in that they can facilitate the student's transition to adulthood, as well as create some additional barriers to postschool success.

Inadequate work opportunities. Importantly, participants also emphasized inadequate work opportunities for students with ID as a major barrier to postschool success. Participants discussed how employers' expectations for employees can be a barrier when considering whether to hire and support an individual with ID, as well as how transition programs struggle to form new partnerships with a variety of businesses in order to provide diverse, paid employment opportunities that align with students' abilities and interests. Support for this theme of inadequate work opportunities is shown by the following quote from the school social worker:

Finding new placements continues to be a bit of a challenge because the kids . . . they need a lot of support and they need a lot of . . . hand-holding in the beginning . . . and a lot of businesses just need to run their business, and they don't have the time or they can't, you know, give a staff to really support them . . . It's also really hard to find a really diverse selection of work . . . a lot of our positions tend to be janitorial. I mean kids that want to do other things, like we have a really awesome young lady that wants to be a baker and wants to work at a bakery, and that's such a fast-paced setting, you know? So sometimes it's hard to find things that are specific to their interests, and I don't love just only teaching them janitorial or the sort of retail-type Arc Value Village, Goodwill kind of setting, so that's my other area that I know we all want to expand, but sometimes it's a challenge.

This participant identified a number of challenges, including employers' unwillingness to provide adequate supports that enable people with ID to access competitive employment, as well as the tendency to be limited to certain types of job opportunities (e.g., janitorial and retail).

Regarding employers' expectations and willingness to provide accommodations for employees with disabilities, one of the teachers stated the following:

Are [employers] willing to break down jobs for lower-ability workers? Because they could. Nope, they don't do that. They push it all together, and you have to be this multi-talented, multi-tasking, multi-purpose employee.

This teacher discussed how students with ID struggle to access competitive employment if accommodations are unavailable, as well as how it is a struggle to match students' abilities with the "expectations of mainstream employment." Participants also talked about how their programs particularly struggle to find paid work opportunities for students. One teacher stated that their partnerships were mostly limited to nonprofit organizations that offered youth unpaid, volunteer experiences:

We are so limited to [nonprofits] . . . We can't seem to get the private sector, where most of the . . . money is. You're never gonna convince someone to take on this person who can't do things as well, as fast, as efficiently for the same price that you're gonna pay this guy over here who's rarin' to go . . . That's our culture . . . That's our economy.

Importantly, the school social worker empathized with students who were resistant to participating in solely unpaid positions:

We have some kids who don't wanna work for free, or get sick of working for free, which you can't blame them after a year or two. And our number of paid opportunities tend to be limited.

Transition programs seem to struggle to form new partnerships with businesses that are willing to accommodate students with ID, and to place students in paid work opportunities that align with their individual interests and needs. All of these challenges create a major barrier to

preparing youth with ID for participating in integrated, competitive employment once they enter adulthood.

Lack of PSE options. In discussing barriers to postschool success, many participants talked about the absence of supportive PSE programs designed to meet the needs of individuals with ID. When asked about PSE among youth with ID, one teacher stated, “Let’s be honest – they don’t have options. They just don’t.” Further evidence of a lack of PSE options for these youth is supported by the following statement from the school social worker:

I wish that there was postsecondary, and there is one, the BUILD program [at Bethel University] . . . That just started, and I don’t know how it’s going . . . I would love a program that fits for these kids, too, to give them that college experience ‘cause they all want it, and it’s just not always realistic where they’re gonna be successful.

This participant pointed out that there is a dearth of PSE programs designed to meet the needs of individuals with ID; she was familiar with one, brand new PSE program in Minnesota, which was specifically designed for people with ID. Most participants also described how at this time, PSE institutions do not provide the level of support and accommodation necessary for individuals with ID to experience success in PSE settings. This subtheme of lack of appropriate supports in PSE is illustrated by the following quote from one of the teachers:

Schools, like colleges, their accommodations are very, very limited. So a kid who had gotten extra time, and tests read, and notes provided, and all this other stuff, they’re gonna get to college, and the ADA doesn’t say you have to be providing all that stuff, it just has to be reasonable, so suddenly, the supports that got them through high school are gone, and they struggle . . . They’re not slowing down for you! They’re not accommodating for you. They’re not gonna give you something different because you

have a disability – forget it! You either meet this standard with your couple accommodations, or you don't, and you're out!

Similarly, another teacher stated that the supports needed for his students to participate in PSE “just don't exist or aren't realistic.” Therefore, it seems that even if individuals with ID are able to meet the criteria and enroll in a PSE program after exiting high school, they are unlikely to experience success in those traditional PSE settings because they will not have access to the intense level of supports that were made available to them throughout their time in special education.

Challenges with interagency collaboration. The final barrier to postschool success that emerged as an important theme across most of the interviews was inadequate interagency collaboration. As previously described, participants identified collaboration with local businesses, organizations, and community-based services as a critical component of promoting postschool success among transition-age youth with ID. Although participants felt their experiences collaborating with outside service providers was mostly positive, they reported some challenges associated with that collaboration process. For example, one teacher described how even though he was generally satisfied with the interagency collaboration, there were some communication issues:

Like I said, it's kind of a communication chain where I think sometimes, you know, there's maybe a little break down in the communication and . . . maybe the family and, you know, the county . . . they have a clear vision for what's going on, but maybe that doesn't get relayed to us.

The school social worker also expressed a desire to communicate and collaborate more with community service providers in order to better serve transition-age students with ID:

I don't collaborate with [county social workers and VRS] as frequently as I would like, and sometimes it's because of their lack of availability, but often it's because . . . it's just too busy, and I don't have time to call, or I see them at a meeting and intend to follow up and then a month passes . . . so some of those opportunities, I think, are missed just by having high caseloads and having all of these clients right outside my door that need my help in the moment.

In her experience, the inadequate communication was based on the unavailability of both parties (i.e., the school social worker herself and the community service providers) due to high caseloads. Additionally, the school social worker discussed how both county social services and VRS seem to have become less involved in the transition planning process over time:

Probably because of the demands on their agencies,[county social workers and VRS] have cut back some of their services over the last 10 years since I've been working with them, so while they still exist, the role that they play in the student's life has been different. Also, it's interesting . . . to see . . . even just within the same county sometimes, they'll have two different county social workers, and I'm like, how do you guys do the same job 'cause you're doing completely different things for your kids.

This quote also shows how community services are inconsistent at times, which can create some challenges in the transition planning process. Thus, it seems even though transition service providers in schools are mostly satisfied with the interagency collaboration that occurs in the transition planning process, there is a need to improve the communication and level of collaboration between school-based providers and community-based providers in order to better serve youth with ID.

Ways to Improve Transition Services

Finally, participants reflected on ways in which they would improve transition services in order to promote greater postschool success among youth with ID. Participants identified means of improvement related to building more partnerships, developing more PSE opportunities, changing program structure in order to better serve their students with ID.

Build more community partnerships. All participants expressed the desire to foster new partnerships with local businesses and community organizations in order to provide youth with ID more opportunities for work experiences and overall community participation. For example, when asked about how to improve transition services, the school social worker emphasized the need for community partnerships in general, not just with businesses or social service providers, in order to promote the integration of youth with ID into the mainstream community: “So I [would] love – even beyond just work and social services – to add more community collaborators and get [students] more comfortable in more settings.” Participants also had ideas about what types of businesses and organizations they should try to partner with more regularly, in order to enhance postschool employment outcomes among youth with ID. For example, the work coordinator expressed an interest in connecting with an organization called Project SEARCH:

I would love to see our DCD population be actively engaged in things like Project SEARCH . . . Project SEARCH is a[n] organization where students are provided internships in different areas . . . like manufacturing, production, retail service, just different career clusters, and the follow-up is placing them in competitive employment, and if we had an increase in the number of Project SEARCH opportunities for our

students . . . the state would get the numbers that they want for DCD students in employment opportunities.

One of the teachers also shared her ideas about what types of partnerships to foster in order to promote greater postschool success regarding the employment of youth with ID:

There's a place that's coming in called . . . Bone's Pizza, 'kay? . . . He's using crowd funding to open up a pizza parlor . . . [and] he's gonna get these kids in there with some work skills, and attention to detail, and how to follow directions, and all that other stuff. That's what we need. And we need our district to be willing to invest in those things.

Connecting youth who have ID with more diverse work experiences seems to be a critical step in improving transition services and postschool outcomes.

Importantly, many participants also shared potential strategies for cultivating more partnerships and networking in order to educate the community about transition programs and about youth with ID. For example, one teacher spoke of “educating the public” more about their program, and he described how his program uses staff development days to visit different community establishments in order to make those connections and spread information about their programming:

We've kind of been working on that for the last several years. We've taken some of our staff development days, and we've made days out of going to different agencies, to different supported employment sites, you know, group home companies, stuff like that . . . just trying to . . . meet people, see different things, see what is out there, see what's going on . . . [to] be able to tell them about ourselves and what we do here at school, you know, just trying to kind of make that bridge a little more solid.

Similarly, the school social worker had the idea to ask current business partners to write testimonials about their experiences collaborating with the transition program:

The sites that we have had, I think, have seen the benefit of working with our kids, and so it's cool. I want them to write testimonials and . . . encourage others . . . I mean our kids are so awesome and unique, and it's just getting to know them and sort of getting past the fear of . . . this complex kid that has, you know, all these potential issues, can be so great and work so hard.

The school social worker also discussed her program's efforts to network with the surrounding community establishments through an open house event:

We had an open house here and invited . . . a lot of the businesses and things around us . . . we didn't have a great turnout, but just, we just want them to know we're here and, you know, what our kids are about and stuff like that, and just increase their presence 'cause I think this is such a population that gets overlooked or people just kind of don't understand . . . so kind of helping them learn who [our students] are and all of their strengths.

Thus, it seems that educating the public about transition-age youth with ID is necessary in order to establish more community connections that will benefit these youth (and the community) as they transition into adulthood.

Finally, one of the teachers expressed her opinion that more macro-level change is necessary in order to ensure people with ID have access to competitive employment:

I do think that it's our responsibility as a society to open up those opportunities to everybody, I do. I do think that the workplace should be as diverse-looking as walking

down the street, and . . . the government needs to step up, otherwise it's not gonna change.

This teacher elaborated that the government should provide businesses with incentives in order to promote the hiring of individuals with ID and to encourage partnering with transition programs to create jobs that are more accessible to youth with ID:

I would have more incentives for employers to work with us 'cause right now there's, there's really not a whole lot of incentives . . . There has to be an incentive for employers to have those jobs opened up, broken down, and partnered.

Therefore, it appears that building more community partnerships – using a variety of strategies ranging from raising awareness to offering incentives – is a necessary step in order to promote greater postschool success among youth and young adults with ID.

Develop more PSE opportunities. Participants also discussed the need to improve PSE options for individuals with ID, as there is a serious lack of opportunities at this time. The school social worker discussed how we simply need to create more PSE programs that focus on meeting the needs of youth and young adults with ID in a PSE environment, as well as adjusting the academic rigor in order to make PSE more accessible to those with ID:

I would love to see postsecondary programs that are developed to help our disabled citizens be more successful . . . [and to] meet their needs, and lower the rigor . . . I mean, a four-year college? I've worked with maybe a handful of kids who are really ready from an emotional and an academic standpoint to manage that.

Additionally, one teacher discussed how she would stop pushing youth with ID to participate in traditional college, and how it would be beneficial to be more inclusive when thinking about

what qualifies as “PSE,” because youth with ID struggle to achieve success in traditional, four-year college settings:

I think that what I would do differently is to stop trying to make them do something they can't do and that's very hard and sometimes very painful for them. I would really be changing just the attitude of the difference between postsecondary education and postsecondary learning . . . You know, it can be on-the-job, it can be an apprenticeship, it can be one of our two-week CNA courses that, you know, [a local nonprofit] offers.

Participants seemed to believe that that traditional PSE programs (e.g., four-year colleges) are inaccessible to most individuals with ID at this time. However, one participant also acknowledged that as citizens, individuals with ID do indeed have the right to better themselves through PSE, which is consistent with ADA (1990). Participants suggested the development of more PSE programs – including alternatives to four-year colleges – that are better designed to meet the needs of this population so that they can continue learning and bettering themselves in adulthood.

Change transition program structure. A final theme that emerged from the data as a way of improving transition services was changing the structure of transition programs in order to better serve youth with ID. All participants described an on-site class component of their programming. One participant shared that she feels her program is pressured to fit in with traditional public education, even though transition programs are more focused on meeting the needs of students and preparing them for adulthood than on teaching academics. She discussed how her work with students used to be more community-based than class-based:

I teach all day long, you know? I didn't use to. I used to be out in the community. I used to be sitting down doing job applications with kids. I used to . . . have a week-long special

session on online applications, you know, and we could concentrate and get the kids focused on it, and now we're doing, you know, classes, and these kids are tired of high school.

Similarly, another teacher stated that transition services could be improved by being more, if not completely, community-based: "I think to the greatest extent possible, if transition services could be almost entirely community-based, I think that would kind of be the ideal." Changing program structure to include even more community-based learning seems to be an important means of better preparing youth with ID for adulthood and community living.

Some of the participants advocated for changing program structure in order to provide more specialized/individualized services to transition students. Participants worked in transition programs serving youth with ID, as well as youth with other types of disabilities. Two of the participants discussed the idea of restructuring programming in order to group students with similar disabilities and/or needs together and provide services that are more tailored to their specific needs. For example, the work coordinator stated the following about need to provide more specialized services:

Is it productive to have a student with EBD Conduct Disorder next to a student with Down syndrome [and a] lower IQ? . . . I'm saying that some of these disabilities have different, entirely different needs . . . and I think we can create a . . . system where both are thoughtfully being served.

Further evidence of specialization as a subtheme of changing program structure to improve services is supported by the following quote from the school social worker:

I wish we could sort of individualize like . . . kiddos with, you know, the sort of IQs in the 50s and 60s, even from our kiddos with 70s and 80s, or we have kids that are very street

smart, and then we have kids that are very sheltered and naïve and vulnerable, and they kind of all get mixed together just by default . . . we have so many people going in different directions that who's left here [on site] is in class together. I think the lessons can't be as specialized when you have such a diverse group in your classroom, so more specialization that way.

The school social worker also shared how lowering class sizes and caseloads for service providers may also facilitate greater specialization and individualization of services, and may even allow school-based providers to have “more time to communicate with outside resources,” as well as work “really closely with county social services,” thus strengthening the interagency collaboration piece of transition services and providers’ abilities to offer more individualized services. Thus, participants shared a variety of ideas on how to provide transition services that are structured to better serve youth with ID and promote greater postschool success.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the perspectives of transition service providers in order to identify barriers preventing transition-age youth with ID from accessing employment and PSE, as well as explore means of improving transition services to promote greater postschool success among these youth. A total of 17 themes were identified through a content analysis of the data. Themes were grouped into three different categories: critical factors contributing to postschool success, barriers to postschool success, and ways to improve transition services. The following seven themes were identified as critical factors contributing to postschool success among transition-age youth with ID: work-related activities; PSE-related activities; soft/social skills; independent living skills; self-determination skills; community participation; and collaborative service delivery. Additionally, the following seven themes were

identified as barriers to postschool success among transition-age youth with ID: student skill level; failure to follow through with services; unrealistic expectations; family-related challenges; inadequate work opportunities; lack of PSE options; and challenges with interagency collaboration. Finally, three themes were identified as ways to improve transition services: build more community partnerships; develop more PSE opportunities; and change transition program structure.

Although identifying the critical factors that contribute to postschool success among youth and young adults with ID does not directly address the research questions of the present study, this information is nonetheless essential in further developing best practices of special education and transition services and in promoting postschool success among these individuals. For example, the findings of the present study show that engaging transition-age youth with ID in work-related activities – which include assessing skills and interests, building job skills, and engaging in work placements – is vital in preparing these youth for adulthood and for future employment. As previously discussed, preparation for postschool employment has been a core function of transition services since the 1980s (Carter et al., 2010). Kohler and Field (2003) describe how strengthening occupational skills, engaging in work-based learning experiences, and increasing career awareness are best practices that promote student development throughout the transition process. Additionally, Kohler and Field (2003) mention the importance of providing these work-related experiences in both school-based and community-based settings, a notion that is also reflected in the findings of the present study. Thus, the identification of providing students with opportunities to participate in work-related activities as a critical factor of postschool success is indeed supported by the literature.

Research also emphasizes the importance of youth participating in paid, career-related work experiences while they are still in high school (Benz et al., 2000; Carter et al., 2012; Simonsen & Neubert, 2012; Test et al., 2009). The findings of the present study suggest that unpaid, volunteer work is also important in preparing transition students for postschool employment. In contrast, Carter and colleagues (2012) found that unpaid, school-sponsored work experiences in high school were not associated with postschool employment among young adults with severe disabilities (including ID). Perhaps these unpaid work experiences are valuable in that they serve as a first step in preparing youth for postschool employment; yet, participating in volunteer work alone is insufficient if not accompanied by either simultaneous or subsequent paid work experiences. Further research is necessary to clarify the role of volunteer work in preparing transition-age youth with ID for adulthood.

The findings of the present study indicate that even though relatively few transition-age youth with ID go on to participate in PSE after exiting high school, engaging in PSE-related activities while in high school can be important in helping students with ID decide if enrolling in PSE is one of their life goals and in providing students with opportunities to explore different career paths. The finding that few transition-age students with ID enroll in PSE after exiting high school is consistent with the previously reviewed literature (Grigal et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2010). Importantly, Zafft and colleagues (2004) found that youth with ID who did have PSE experience at a local community college before exiting high school were more likely to be competitively employed and to continue participating in PSE after transitioning into adulthood. However, Baer and colleagues' (2011) research contradicts these findings in that their study indicated that work study and career and technical education among students with ID were not significantly associated with postschool employment. Baer and colleagues (2011) posit that

perhaps PSE-related experiences must be more fully integrated into the general curriculum for students in special education, or that career and technical education must take place in an inclusive setting in order to significantly influence postschool employment outcomes. Thus, future research should further investigate the nature of the relationship between PSE-related experiences in high school and postschool success among youth with ID, as well as continue to identify ways in which to promote greater access to PSE-related experiences among transition-age students with ID.

The present study also found that soft/social skills training is fundamental in preparing transition students with ID for postschool success, including participation in employment and PSE. This finding is also supported within the literature on transition services and postschool outcomes. For example, Kohler and Field (2003) describe how student development practices that provide students with opportunities to build and apply social skills are considered to be a best practice in providing transition services. Further support for the importance of social skills training in transition services is that in their review of the literature on postschool outcomes of youth with disabilities, Test and colleagues (2009) found that youth who possessed higher levels of social skills had greater postschool success in terms of education and employment. Therefore, soft/social skills training should continue to be a major component of preparing transition-age youth with ID for postschool success.

Another critical factor of transition services identified by participants was cultivating independent living skills among students with ID. The findings of the present study suggest that treating transition students as adults and providing explicit instruction on various activities of daily living are important pieces of preparing transition-age youth with ID for adulthood. The importance of building independent living skills among these youth is strongly supported by the

fact that the IDEIA (2004) definition of transition services includes activities intended to assist children with disabilities in moving from school to independent living. Similarly, Benz et al. (2000) identify competence in community living (e.g., possessing strong daily living skills) as a contributing factor to education outcomes and postschool employment among youth with disabilities. Thus, enhancing independent living skills remains a crucial practice in promoting postschool success among youth with ID.

Building self-determination skills was another theme that emerged from the present study's findings as a critical factor contributing to postschool success among transition-age youth with ID. Participants described how it is important to help these youth enhance their capacity to make informed choices, gain an awareness of how their disability affects them, identify both personal strengths and weaknesses, and learn to effectively communicate their wants and needs through self-advocacy. As previously discussed, much research indicates that youth with disabilities must develop self-determination skills in order to be able to advocate for themselves and to access needed supports in adulthood (e.g., request accommodations in a PSE setting) (e.g., Agran & Hughes, 2008; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Kohler & Field, 2003). Importantly, the ability to self-advocate is an indicator of empowerment (one of the theories applied in the conceptual framework of the present study). Unfortunately, previous research also shows that youth with disabilities exit high school lacking the self-advocacy skills necessary for postschool success, despite the fact that self-determination education is considered a best practice in the provision of transition services (Agran & Hughes, 2008).

Participants in the present study reported that they strongly encouraged their students to develop self-determination skills and offered many opportunities to apply such skills in order to better prepare them for adulthood. Some participants acknowledged that building strong self-

determination skills can be challenging when working with youth who have ID because many of these individuals struggle with expressive communication and may be nonverbal, and/or because the intellectual challenges associated with their ID impact students' abilities to fully understand the consequences of their choices. However, participants used these challenges as further evidence for the importance of working on self-determination skills with transition-age youth who have ID. Therefore, it is necessary to continue developing best practices for increasing self-determination and empowering individuals with ID.

Providing students who have ID with opportunities for community participation (e.g., visiting the public library) also emerged as a critical factor in promoting postschool success, as going out into the community enables these youth to access local resources and to practice the various skills they learn through transition programming; these community participation experiences directly promote the integration of youth with ID into mainstream society. Improving community participation is indeed included in the definition of transition services (IDEIA, 2004), and research supports the use of community-based learning in providing transition services to students with disabilities (Kohler & Field, 2003; Test et al., 2009). The overarching goal of transition services is to promote the integration of youth with disabilities into mainstream society, and assisting youth with ID in becoming more involved in their communities is certainly a practice that should be incorporated into all transition programming in order to achieve this mission of genuine community integration.

Collaborative service delivery was identified as the final critical factor contributing to postschool success among youth with ID. Collaboration among students, families, school staff, community-based service providers, and local establishments is key in providing transition students with a wide variety of learning experiences and in promoting postschool success.

Special education legislation does indeed mandate a team approach via the IEP team (IDEIA, 2004), but participants elaborated that interagency collaboration (i.e., collaboration with outside resources and service providers) is crucial in helping youth with ID access opportunities for work-related experiences and PSE-related experiences, as well as connecting with adult services in preparation for their transition to adulthood. This theme of collaborative service delivery in transition planning is indeed supported by the previously reviewed literature, as Kohler and Field (2003) list collaborative service delivery as a category of effective transition practice. Much research agrees with the present findings in that interagency collaboration promotes greater access to community services and opportunities for work, PSE, and overall independence (Flannery et al., 2008; Noonan et al., 2008; Sheppard-Jones et al., 2015). The findings of the present study reflect previous findings on the benefits of collaborative service delivery, and although the present study adds little additional information regarding these benefits, it reaffirms the need for transition programs to engage in such collaboration in order to best serve youth and young adults with ID.

In addition to critical factors contributing to postschool success, the present study also found seven barriers to postschool success – student skill level, failure to follow through with services, unrealistic expectations, family-related challenges, inadequate work opportunities, lack of PSE options, and challenges with interagency collaboration – which directly address the research question of what prevents youth with ID from achieving postschool success and accessing employment and PSE. One of the major barriers to postschool success, as described by participants, was student skill level. Participants discussed how the academic level of some students with ID may prevent them from being admitted into PSE programs or from experiencing success if they are indeed enrolled. However, it is important to acknowledge that the previously

reviewed literature indicates that there are individuals with ID who do indeed participate in PSE. As previously stated, approximately 28% of youth with ID enrolled in PSE in 2005, and even though transition-age youth with ID remain the least likely to participate in PSE in comparison with transition-age youth who have other types of disabilities, more and more of these individuals are enrolling in PSE after exiting high school (Newman et al., 2010); therefore, it seems that there are individuals with ID who do have the academic skill necessary to participate in PSE, perhaps with appropriate supports. Further research is necessary to determine what factors enable success among individuals with ID who are participating in PSE. Additionally, it may be important that future research investigates potential differences in PSE participation (as well as other measures of postschool success) among individuals who have varying degrees of ID (i.e., mild, moderate, severe, and profound ID).

According to participants, inadequate work skills and soft/social skills also present a barrier to postschool success. Youth with ID struggle to develop these skills, which is why transition services focus on employment and PSE preparation. Importantly, the *DSM-5* (APA, 2013) describes how individuals with ID experience challenges in conceptual, social, and practical domains, which can certainly impact their ability to participate in PSE and work; due to challenges regarding the use of soft/social skills, individuals with ID may need “significant social and communicative support” in order to experience success in work settings (APA, 2013, p. 35). Consistent with the present study’s findings, Flannery and colleagues (2008) list “lack of academic, transition, and self-advocacy skills” as a barrier to postschool success, specifically regarding access to traditional PSE (p. 27). Because transition programs already focus on developing all of these skills, it could be that more effective practices need to be identified,

and/or employers and PSE institutions need to be more responsive to accepting and accommodating individuals with ID in order to promote greater integration and equity.

Another theme categorized as a barrier to postschool success was the failure to follow through with services. Participants described how many of the community-based services available to transition-age youth and adults with ID are voluntary (e.g., VRS services), and that youth with ID do not always choose to take advantage of those support systems after they exit high school. Importantly, the literature does not seem to address failure to follow through with services as a barrier to postschool success among youth with ID. However, participants attributed at least some of this failure to follow through to the lack of disability awareness among youth with ID, as well as mental health issues. Self-awareness of one's strengths and limitations is an important part of self-determination (Field et al., 2003). Getzel and Thoma's (2008) research indicates that some transition-age youth are not fully prepared to understand the impact of their disabilities, even as they exit high school. The findings of the present study support the notion of lack of disability awareness as a challenge in promoting postschool success among transition-age youth. Additionally, research suggests that individuals with ID are at a higher risk of developing a comorbid mental illness (though prevalence rates vary), but dual diagnosis is often overlooked because ID can create some challenges in assessing mental disorders (White, Chant, Edwards, Townsend, & Waghorn, 2005). It is unclear as to how the dual diagnosis of ID and mental illness and/or the lack of disability awareness would impact follow through with services. Future research is necessary in order to better understand why transition-age youth with ID elect not to engage in voluntary community-based services, as well as how lack of disability awareness and the presence of mental illness impact youth with ID as they transition into adulthood.

A common theme in participants' discussions of barriers to postschool success was unrealistic expectations for life after high school. Both transition students and their families may have unrealistic postschool goals; their expectations may be considered unrealistic because of how disability impacts the student and/or because the necessary supports are not available at this point in time. Participants discussed how unrealistic expectations from family members can put a lot of pressure on students, potentially setting them up for failure. Research suggests that family members' expectations regarding PSE and employment significantly influences the postschool success of youth with disabilities (Carter et al., 2012; Griffin et al., 2010; Simonsen & Neubert, 2012). Additionally, parents' expectations of youth are impacted by the ways in which parents perceive their child's disability and the ways in which disability supposedly limits accomplishments (Newman, 2005). Newman (2005) states that lower expectations are more common regarding youth with ID. However, the findings of the present study indicate that both youth with ID and their families can hold expectations that are so high that they are unrealistic. Although it is important to have high expectations for all youth in order to promote greater achievement, it is also necessary to further understand the impact of unrealistic expectations – whether these expectations are held by youth, their parents, or others such as their teachers – on postschool success among transition-age youth with ID, as well as the function of these unrealistic expectations (i.e., explore why they hold unrealistic expectations). It is critical that the various individuals on a student's IEP team collaborate in order to set realistic goals for youth with ID so that they can experience some success once they exit high school.

Another theme categorized as a barrier to postschool success was family-related challenges. Families can both facilitate and impede the transition planning process. Consistent with the literature, participants discussed how family involvement tends to open up more

opportunities and promote greater achievement among students with ID (Kohler & Field, 2003; Newman, 2005), while lack of family involvement is associated with missed opportunities and less postschool success (Wagner et al., 1993). However, participants also discussed how parents can be overly involved by enabling students throughout the transition planning process.

Literature on family involvement in transition planning does not seem to address the issue of enabling youth with disabilities. In fact, research suggests that schools should promote family involvement in transition planning in order to promote greater self-determination among students with disabilities (Morningstar et al., 2010). Therefore, future research should aim to clarify the role of family involvement in promoting postschool success among youth and young adults with ID, as well as explore the potential for excessive family involvement and the enabling of youth with ID.

The theme of inadequate work opportunities was identified as another major barrier to postschool success. As previously discussed, engaging youth with ID in work-related experiences while they are still in high school is central to transition services and preparation for adulthood. Unfortunately, participants shared that they struggle to form new partnerships with businesses that are willing to accommodate students with ID, and to place students in paid, community-based jobs that expose students to a wide variety of career paths. In their review of transition literature, Carter and colleagues (2009) found that special education providers frequently cited the lack of partnerships with local businesses, as well as the unwillingness of employers to hire youth with disabilities as prominent barriers in providing transition services, which reflects the findings of the present study. Research also supports the present study's finding that students with disabilities often struggle to access paid work opportunities while in high school (Carter et al., 2012). This finding is particularly concerning because, as previously

discussed, research strongly supports participating in paid work experiences during high school in order to achieve greater postschool success among youth with disabilities (Benz et al., 2000; Carter et al., 2012; Simonsen & Neubert, 2012; Test et al., 2009). Providing additional support for the present study's findings, Carter et al. (2012) report that youth with disabilities tend to be limited to work experiences in certain areas, including retail, food service, and building cleaning and maintenance. These challenges prevent youth with ID from fully preparing for integrated, competitive employment as they enter adulthood. Therefore, it is imperative that transition service providers find ways in which to cultivate more business partnerships so that they can offer students with ID a diversity of paid work opportunities. Participants' ideas regarding ways in which to provide more work opportunities and to foster more partnerships are to be discussed.

Lack of supportive PSE options emerged as yet another barrier to postschool success among transition-age youth with ID. The findings of the present study indicate youth with ID struggle to meet the criteria necessary to gain entrance to PSE programs, and that even if these individuals are able to enroll in PSE after exiting high school, they are unlikely to experience success in a traditional PSE setting because the intense level of individualized supports made available through special education and transition services do not exist in traditional PSE settings. Research shows that PSE institutions are only required by ADA (1990) to make "reasonable" accommodations that do not significantly alter the program, thus supporting the finding of the present study that most PSE programs at this time do not provide the level of support necessary for students with ID to experience success (Madaus, 2005). One participant was aware of only one, brand new PSE program in the state designed to meet the needs of young adults with ID. According to Thoma and colleagues (2012), PSE designed for individuals with ID "is currently in its infancy stage" (p. 1127). These researchers state that at this time, there is a

“rich mix of programs” that vary greatly in terms of their design, and that the characteristics and effectiveness of these programs must be evaluated in order to move forward in developing more PSE options for youth/young adults with ID (Thoma et al., 2012, p. 1128). Because PSE for individuals with ID is a relatively new field, it is understandable that fewer options are available on the state level at this time, and that successful factors of current programs must be identified before building more programs. Therefore, it is critical that researchers examine current program structures and outcomes, so that providers may create more high-quality PSE opportunities for people with ID.

Moving forward in promoting greater PSE access among individuals with ID, it is also important to acknowledge that PSE offers the typical benefits of improving employment outcomes and financial stability later in life, as well as a number of other significant benefits. As previously discussed, Kirkendall and colleagues (2009) found that simply living in a PSE environment can enhance independent living skills and communication skills, as well as increase awareness of personal life goals among participants with ID, even when they do not engage in the academic component of PSE. Sheppard-Jones and colleagues (2015) also state that participating in PSE enables individuals with ID to expand their social networks and to play the valued role of college student. Additionally, experts in the field of PSE find that although improved academic performance and better access to competitive employment are key outcomes of PSE among students with ID, the outcome of enhanced social engagement is just as critical (Thoma et al., 2012). Thus, it is important to recognize that PSE participation benefits individuals with ID not only because it has the potential to improve their academic ability and employability, but also because PSE participation provides students the opportunity to better themselves by engaging in lifelong learning and connecting with others, which can enhance their

overall quality of life. In future efforts to design PSE programs that meet the needs of individuals with ID, it will be necessary to keep in mind the many potential benefits.

The final barrier to postschool success that emerged from participants' responses was challenges with interagency collaboration. Participants described how even though their experiences with interagency collaboration were mostly positive, there is nonetheless a need to improve the quality of communication and degree of collaboration between school-based providers and community-based providers in order to better serve transition-age youth with ID. Research supports the findings of the present study in that even though transition students greatly benefit from establishing strong connections with adult services providers (e.g., community-based services such as county social work service or VRS) before they exit high school, high-quality collaboration and communication among various providers remains difficult to achieve (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Noonan et al., 2008). Participants' ideas regarding ways in which to improve collaboration in providing transition services are to be discussed; however, future research must continue to identify potential means of improving interagency collaboration, especially the quality of communication among the various providers serving transition-age youth with ID.

Lastly, participants were asked to discuss means of improving transition services and addressing some of the barriers they had identified in order to promote greater postschool success among transition-age youth with ID, which was the main purpose of the present study. Building more community partnerships emerged as a main theme in improving transition services. As previously discussed, participants identified the lack of community partners, specifically regarding work-related opportunities, as a major barrier to postschool success among youth with ID. The literature on transition services emphasizes the importance of partnerships

and interagency collaboration, as well as the difficulties in achieving greater collaborative service delivery (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Noonan et al., 2008). Participants identified a range of strategies for building better partnerships, which included focusing on establishing a greater variety of partnerships (e.g., targeting the private sector and larger companies), networking and educating the public about youth with ID and transition programming (e.g., through open houses or even testimonials from current business partners), and offering incentives to partner with transition programs (e.g., through government intervention).

The previously reviewed literature does not directly address any of the three strategies for achieving greater community collaboration (i.e., establish a greater variety of partnerships, networking and educating the public, and offering incentives) that were discussed by participants. However, it seems that efforts to establish a greater variety of partnerships would indeed lead to more diverse work-related opportunities for youth with ID. The second strategy of networking and educating the public about youth with ID and about transition services is supported in that research suggests employers may have limited knowledge about youth with disabilities (including those with ID) and means of supporting these youth in the workplace (Carter et al., 2009). Therefore, efforts to educate potential business partners and the greater community may help to address potential stigma associated with ID and would help community establishments better understand their roles in supporting youth with ID. Finally, the literature reviewed for this research did not address the ideas of government intervention and providing incentives to local businesses for partnering with transition programs. However, all of these strategies are worthy of further investigation in order to determine the most effective way to connect with more community partners so that transition professionals can better serve youth

with ID and provide them with more opportunities for community-based learning and work experiences.

The theme of developing more PSE options for individuals with ID was categorized as another means of improving postschool outcomes. As previously discussed, both past research findings (e.g., Zafft et al., 2004) and the present study indicate that individuals with ID can benefit from PSE experiences, yet opportunities for individuals with ID to engage in supportive PSE programs are limited at this time because this field is in its infancy (Thoma et al., 2012). Participants certainly encouraged the further development of PSE programs that provide individuals who have ID with the appropriate level of support necessary for greater access to and success in PSE; there is indeed a call for further research and development regarding PSE programs designed to meet the needs of students with ID (Thoma et al., 2012). Importantly, one participant stated that she would stop trying to make youth with ID participate in PSE and would focus more on promoting forms of postschool learning (e.g., vocational training) as valuable PSE options for this population. Although identifying and creating alternatives to traditional, four-year college is certainly beneficial in that such endeavors would provide individuals with ID with more opportunities and choices regarding continuing education, it is important to acknowledge that individuals with ID have the right to engage in lifelong learning and to better themselves through PSE based on the Citizenship Social Work framework (Toft & Bibus, 2014); this right to engage in any and all forms of PSE is also supported by ADA (1990). Thus, there is a great need for researchers to systematically examine the PSE options that currently exist in order to determine what works well for this particular population, so that providers can continue to develop PSE programs and promote greater access to PSE among individuals with ID.

The final theme categorized as a way to improve transition services was changing transition program structure. Participants discussed a variety of ways in which to alter program structure, including moving towards entirely community-based programming for youth with ID, as well as placing students in programs based on their disability type and/or needs. Kohler and Field (2003) do indeed identify program structure as an important influence on postschool outcomes of youth with disabilities, and they support structuring transition services in such a way that promotes community involvement and community-based learning. It is important to acknowledge that many youth with ID participate in transition programs that serve students with a wide variety of disabilities. Some participants suggested grouping students in programs based on their disabilities or specific needs in order to promote greater specialization in the provision of transition services. The research reviewed for the present study does not address this idea of grouping students based on disability and/or transition needs, but effective transition practices are inherently student-centered and individualized based on each student's particular wants and needs (Kohler & Field, 2003). It is important to acknowledge that there are both between and within-group similarities and differences among individuals with various types of disabilities, and that further research is necessary to determine if there is a need for or even benefit of grouping transition students in the manner suggested by participants. Additionally, one participant mentioned reducing class sizes and the caseloads of transition service providers so that they can focus on providing even more specialized services and engaging in greater interagency collaboration in order to more fully meet the needs of each student they serve; however, the literature does not seem to discuss the impact of class size or caseload on the provision of transition services. Therefore, these proposed changes in transition program

structure serve as important topics for future research regarding the improvement of transition services and postschool outcomes of youth with ID.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The findings of the present study have important implications for social work practice, as social workers – both school-based and community-based – often play an integral role in facilitating the transition from high school to adulthood among youth with ID. Social workers should continue to promote transition practices that cultivate work skills, PSE skills, and soft/social skills, as well as greater self-determination and independence in order to empower youth with ID and to help them prepare for postschool success. Social workers must also continue to play a key role in connecting these youth with community resources and opportunities to learn and work in the mainstream community; social workers serving transition-age youth with ID must strive to build more community partnerships and enhance collaborative service delivery, whether this goal is achieved through networking or educating the community about ID in an effort to destigmatize disability. It is also important that social workers serving on IEP teams share their professional perspective in order to help transition students and their team members recognize both strengths and areas for improvement, as well as identify achievable, measurable goals that promote student growth and overall well-being. Social workers can also educate students and their families about available options for employment and PSE early on in the transition planning process – perhaps even before official transition planning begins – so that students and their families can develop a realistic idea of what life beyond high school might entail. Finally, it is essential that social workers, as well as other transition service providers, continue to advocate for and with individuals who have ID in order to address issues of social

injustice (e.g., inequitable access to competitive employment and PSE) and to protect the citizenship rights of these individuals.

Implications for Policy

The findings of the present study also have important implications for policies regarding the rights of people with ID. One of the participants in the present study suggested government-level intervention (i.e., the use of incentives to encourage businesses in hiring people with disabilities and in partnering with transition programs) in order to promote equity. Current policy (e.g., ADA, 1990) appears inadequate in ensuring that transition-age youth with ID have access to the opportunities and supports necessary for postschool success in employment and PSE. Based on the previously reviewed literature, as well as the findings of the present study, it seems that there must be greater effort to uphold the social and economic rights of individuals with ID, so that they are able to engage in work and lifelong learning, as well as fulfill their social and economic obligations as citizens (Toft & Bibus, 2014). Thus, stakeholders and policymakers must work to determine ways in which current policies do and do not support equitable opportunity for people of all abilities, as well as identify means of macro-level change that will promote the genuine inclusion of youth (and adults) with ID in mainstream society by upholding these individuals' rights to live, learn, and work alongside people without disabilities.

Implications for Research

Social work research must continue to explore ways to promote equitable access to PSE and employment among transition-age youth with ID. The findings of the present study suggest the following means of improving transition services: building more community partnerships in order to provide a greater diversity of work-related experiences; developing more PSE options that include appropriate supports; and changing transition program structure to offer more

community-based learning and specialization of services. Building more community partnerships is essential in providers' efforts to improve postschool outcomes among transition-age youth with ID. Future social work research should investigate the strategies described by participants in the present study (e.g., networking and educating the community on ID and transition services through open house events and testimonials from current partners, offering incentives for partnering with transition programs), as well as identify additional means of fostering greater collaboration with community establishments in the provision of transition services. Researchers should also focus on evaluating the PSE programs designed for individuals with ID that currently exist so that they can move forward in developing even more effective, accessible programs around the country. Additionally, future research should seek to better understand ways in which transition service providers can modify program structure in order to promote greater postschool success among youth with ID, whether it is through offering more community-based programming or the greater specialization of services.

It may also be important to determine whether there are differences in the experiences of individuals with varying degrees of ID, from mild to profound. Individuals with more severe to profound ID may face even greater barriers to accessing employment, PSE, and the mainstream community. Some of the previously reviewed research does indeed focus on the postschool outcomes of people with either mild ID (Joshi et al., 2012) or severe disabilities that includes ID (Carter et al., 2012), but most of the research reviewed for this study discussed individuals with varying degrees of ID as one group. Thus, it may be beneficial for researchers to examine whether there are significant within-group differences among individuals with varying degrees of ID regarding postschool outcomes and potential interventions to promote greater postschool success. Future social work research should explore all of these potential avenues for

improvement with the hopes of creating mezzo- and macro-level change that ultimately enables youth with ID to live, learn, and work alongside their peers without disabilities and to experience postschool success.

Strengths and Limitations of the Present Study

A major strength of the present study is its qualitative design. Conducting qualitative interviews of transition service providers who work with students with ID allowed the researcher to examine insider perspectives on ways of improving transition services and postschool outcomes. Qualitative research also allowed for a more holistic understanding of the barriers youth with ID face as they exit high school and of ways in which service providers can potentially improve postschool outcomes among these youth. Issues of inequitable access to PSE and employment among people with ID are complex and are impacted by a number of factors; qualitative interviews provided the researcher with the opportunity to gain a more in-depth understanding of these factors based on the perspectives of professionals who work to prepare these youth for adulthood and postschool success. Additionally, this qualitative approach was conducive to the exploration of new ideas for improving transition services and postschool outcomes of youth with ID, thus inspiring future research and posing important implications for social work practice and for macro-level policy.

The design of the present study is also associated with some limitations. Because the present study used non-probability sampling methods and included data from only four participants, the scope and breadth of perspectives and insights of transition service providers may not have been captured. All participants were recruited from an urban area in a Midwestern state, and it is important to acknowledge that there may be significant differences in the transition services provided in rural areas and across the country. Additionally, the sample of the

present study included two teachers, one work coordinator, and one school social worker, and it would be beneficial to examine the views of more individuals from each of these professions, as well as views of other types of providers that serve transition-age youth with disabilities (e.g., community-based providers such as day program staff and county social workers). Because of these limitations in diversity of locations and relevant perspectives, the findings of the present study should be interpreted with some caution.

Additionally, the present study aimed to gain a better understanding of the experiences of youth with ID and of ways in which to improve the transition process and promote greater postschool success; however, the present study is limited in that it examined data collected from professionals who have experience serving youth with ID, rather than youth with ID themselves. “Nothing about us without us” is a common slogan regarding disability rights, and it speaks to the importance of including the voices of people with disabilities in research and policy development processes. Youth with ID would benefit from having the opportunity to voice their opinions regarding the state of transition services and to share their ideas for improving access to PSE and integrated employment because they are the experts of their own experiences. Therefore, future developments in research, policy, and practice must include the perspectives of transition-age youth with ID in order to gain a more accurate and holistic understanding of what steps to take in order to promote equity for people with ID.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the perspectives of four transition service providers in order to identify the barriers preventing transition-age youth with ID from fully participating in employment and PSE, and to determine ways in which to improve transition services so that individuals with ID can experience greater postschool success and inclusion in mainstream

communities. The findings of the present study support previous literature regarding the importance of providing students who have ID with many opportunities to build a variety of skills (e.g., work skills, soft/social skills, self-determination skills) through hands-on activities and community participation in order to prepare them for the transition to adulthood. The findings of the present study emphasize the need to further investigate the nature of certain barriers to postschool success among individuals with ID (e.g., failure to follow through with services, unrealistic expectations) and to continue identifying and examining ways to facilitate the transition process, including strategies for building more community partnerships, developing more PSE options, and changing transition program structure. Service providers, researchers, and policymakers should further explore the implications of the present study with the hopes of creating micro- to macro-level changes that will ultimately enable individuals with ID experience greater postschool success and to be genuinely included as members of mainstream society.

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Appendix A

[District Letterhead]

11/23/2015

Dear Nadine Rooney:

I have reviewed your research proposal, entitled *Transition-Age Youth with Intellectual Disabilities: Improving Postschool Outcomes in Postsecondary Education and Employment*, and grant permission for you to recruit employees of this school district for your study and to use the district's online staff directory to contact potential participants. It is understood that your study aims to investigate the perspectives of professionals who have experience working with transition-age youth with intellectual disabilities in order to identify barriers preventing these youth from accessing postsecondary education and employment, and to determine ways in which to improve transition services in order to promote greater postschool success among these youth as they enter adulthood. It is further understood that:

- Participation is completely voluntary and the participants may withdraw from the study at any time throughout the research process without consequence.
- There are no known risks or direct benefits to participating in this study.
- Confidentiality of data will be maintained by conducting interviews in a location of participants' choosing. All research records (i.e., audio-recordings of interviews, interview transcripts, research notes, and consent forms) will be kept confidential in a password-protected file on your personal laptop, and only you will have access to data from this study. Additionally, I will not ask district employees about participation in your study, and you will not inform me of whether or not district employees volunteer to participate in your study.
- The study will begin in December 2015 pending approval from the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board and will end on May 20, 2016.

Sincerely,

[Official Signature]

[Name of Signer]

[Title of Signer]

Appendix B

Recruitment Email for Convenience Sample

Greetings!

My name is Nadine Rooney and I am a student in the Master of Social Work Program at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas. I am also the current school social work intern at the ____ Program in ____ Intermediate School District.

I am conducting a research project on transition services and improving postschool outcomes of youth with intellectual disabilities, specifically in the areas of employment and postsecondary education.

I am inviting professionals who have experience working with transition-age students with intellectual disabilities to participate in my research project. This study will involve a confidential interview, which will last 45-60 minutes.

You will be provided with the opportunity to share your views on ways in which we can improve postschool success among youth with intellectual disabilities. Your participation in this research will be confidential.

Please contact me by email or phone if you are interested in participating! Feel free to contact me if you have further questions about my research.

Thank you for your time,

Nadine Rooney

Email: nmrooney@stthomas.edu

Cell phone: ###-###-####

Appendix C

Recruitment Email for Snowball Sample

Greetings!

My name is Nadine Rooney and I am a student in the Master of Social Work Program at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas.

I am conducting a research project on transition services and improving postschool outcomes of youth with intellectual disabilities, specifically in the areas of employment and postsecondary education.

I am inviting professionals who have experience working with transition-age students with intellectual disabilities to participate in my research project. This study will involve a confidential interview, which will last 45-60 minutes.

You will be provided with the opportunity to share your views on ways in which we can improve postschool success among youth with intellectual disabilities. Your participation in this research will be confidential.

Please contact me by email or phone if you are interested in participating! Feel free to contact me if you have further questions about my research.

Thank you for your time,

Nadine Rooney

Email: nmrooney@stthomas.edu

Cell phone: ###-###-####

Appendix D

Consent Form for Convenience Sample

UNIVERSITY of ST. THOMAS
MINNESOTA**Consent Form*****Transition-Age Youth with Intellectual Disabilities: Improving Postschool Outcomes in Postsecondary Education and Employment*****IRB Tracking #835755-1**

I am conducting a study about improving the postschool outcomes of youth with intellectual disabilities through transition services. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because of your position as a professional in a special education program serving transition-age youth with intellectual disabilities at ____ Intermediate School District. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

This study is being conducted by Nadine Rooney, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas, and supervised by Dr. Jessica Toft. This study has been approved for human subject participation by the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to better understand the barriers preventing access to postsecondary education and employment among transition-age youth with intellectual disabilities, and to identify means of improving transition services in order to promote greater postschool success among youth with intellectual disabilities who are exiting high school and entering adulthood. The research questions for this study are: What barriers prevent transition-age youth with intellectual disabilities from achieving postschool success, specifically accessing employment and postsecondary education? How can we improve transition services to promote better postschool outcomes among youth with intellectual disabilities?

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to participate in an in-person interview, lasting 45-60 minutes, about transition services and postschool outcomes of youth with intellectual disabilities. You will be asked 15 interview questions. The interview will be conducted in a location of your choosing that allows for confidentiality. The interview will be recorded using a digital audio-recording device, and I will transcribe the interview. No identifying information

will be included in the interview transcript. I will complete a written report of the findings of this study, which I will present to the public in May 2016. Again, no identifying information will be included in the written report or presentation of this study. Eight to ten individuals are expected to participate in this research.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

This study has no known risks or direct benefits.

Privacy

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. In order to protect your privacy, you have chosen the location and time of the interview.

Confidentiality

Please note that although I am currently interning at ____ Program, this research is in no way affiliated with ____ Intermediate School District. No one, district employees or otherwise, will be informed of your participation, as any participation in this study is confidential. If you choose to conduct the interview at your place of employment, please know that this could impact your confidentiality, as other employees may then be able to surmise your participation in this study. The records of this study will be kept confidential. Research records (i.e., the recording, transcript, and research notes) will be kept in a password-protected file on my computer. The consent form will be scanned and saved in a password-protected file on my computer, and the paper copy of the consent form will be destroyed. Only I will have access to research records. No identifying information will be included in the interview transcript, the written report, or the public presentation of this study. The audiotape will be destroyed upon transcription. All signed consent forms, transcripts, and research notes will be kept for three years after the completion of the study and will then be destroyed by May 20, 2019. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas reserve the right to inspect all research records to ensure compliance.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the interview at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with me, my research advisor, St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used. You can withdraw by asking the researcher to stop the interview and indicate that you would like to withdraw. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Nadine Rooney. You may ask any questions you have now and any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions later, you may contact me at ###-###-####

or nmrooney@stthomas.edu, or Dr. Jessica Toft at 651-962-5803 or jetoft@stthomas.edu. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthoms.edu with any questions or concerns.

Statement of Consent

I have had a conversation with the research about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study and to be audiotaped. I am at least 18 years of age.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Print Name of Study Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix E

Consent Form for Snowball Sample

UNIVERSITY of ST. THOMAS
MINNESOTA**Consent Form*****Transition-Age Youth with Intellectual Disabilities: Improving Postschool Outcomes in Postsecondary Education and Employment*****IRB Tracking #835755-1**

I am conducting a study about improving the postschool outcomes of youth with intellectual disabilities through transition services. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a professional who has experience serving transition-age youth with intellectual disabilities. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

This study is being conducted by Nadine Rooney, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas, and supervised by Dr. Jessica Toft. This study has been approved for human subject participation by the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to better understand the barriers preventing access to postsecondary education and employment among transition-age youth with intellectual disabilities, and to identify means of improving transition services in order to promote greater postschool success among youth with intellectual disabilities who are exiting high school and entering adulthood. The research questions for this study are: What barriers prevent transition-age youth with intellectual disabilities from achieving postschool success, specifically accessing employment and postsecondary education? How can we improve transition services to promote better postschool outcomes among youth with intellectual disabilities?

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to participate in an in-person interview, lasting 45-60 minutes, about transition services and postschool outcomes of youth with intellectual disabilities. You will be asked 15 interview questions. The interview will be conducted in a location of your choosing that allows for confidentiality. The interview will be recorded using a digital audio-recording device, and I will transcribe the interview. No identifying information will be included in the interview transcript. I will complete a written report of the findings of this

study, which I will present to the public in May 2016. Again, no identifying information will be included in the written report or presentation of this study. Eight to ten individuals are expected to participate in this research.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

This study has no known risks or direct benefits.

Privacy

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. In order to protect your privacy, you have chosen the location and time of the interview.

Confidentiality

No one, including the individual who recommended you for this research, will be informed of your participation, as any participation in this study is confidential. The records of this study will be kept confidential. Research records (i.e., the recording, transcript, and research notes) will be kept in a password-protected file on my computer. The consent form will be scanned and saved in a password-protected file on my computer, and the paper copy of the consent form will be destroyed. Only I will have access to research records. No identifying information will be included in the interview transcript, the written report, or the public presentation of this study. The audiotape will be destroyed upon transcription. All signed consent forms, transcripts, and research notes will be kept for three years after the completion of the study and will then be destroyed by May 20, 2019. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas reserve the right to inspect all research records to ensure compliance.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the interview at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with me, my research advisor, St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used. You can withdraw by asking the researcher to stop the interview and indicate that you would like to withdraw. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Nadine Rooney. You may ask any questions you have now and any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions later, you may contact me at ###-###-#### or nmrooney@stthomas.edu, or Dr. Jessica Toft at 651-962-5803 or jetoft@stthomas.edu. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthoms.edu with any questions or concerns.

Statement of Consent

I have had a conversation with the research about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study and to be audiotaped. I am at least 18 years of age.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Print Name of Study Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix F

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

1. What is your experience working with transition-age youth with intellectual disabilities?
 - a. What is your job?
 - b. What type of setting do you work in?
 - c. How long have you worked in your field?
2. What is the overall purpose of transition services?
 - a. What is the mission of your program/agency?
3. What do transition services entail?
4. Who is involved in the transition planning process and what do their roles entail?
 - a. What is the role of the student?
 - b. What is the role of the family/guardian?
 - c. What is the role of school personnel?
 - d. What is the role of outside agencies (e.g., adult service providers, postsecondary education institutions, local business owners)?
5. How does your program prepare students with intellectual disabilities for adulthood, specifically regarding employment and postsecondary education?
6. In your opinion, what are the critical factors in promoting positive postschool outcomes for youth with intellectual disabilities, specifically regarding employment and postsecondary education?
7. Research suggests that transition-age youth with intellectual disabilities struggle to participate in postsecondary education and to obtain employment more than their peers with other types of disabilities and their peers without disabilities. In your opinion, what are the barriers preventing young adults with intellectual disabilities from participating in competitive employment?
8. In your opinion, what are the barriers preventing young adults with intellectual disabilities from participating in postsecondary education?
9. From your perspective, what are the strengths of transition services?
10. From your perspective, what are the weaknesses of transition services?
11. How would you change transition services to improve postschool outcomes of youth with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, so that more of these individuals can participate in postsecondary education and employment?

12. In your experience, what role does self-determination and self-advocacy education play in transition services?*
- a. How do transition services prepare students with intellectual disabilities to advocate for themselves once they exit high school?
13. In your experience, how does family involvement (or lack of family involvement) in transition planning impact students' postschool outcomes?
14. What has been your experience with interagency collaboration in providing transition services?
 - a. In your opinion, how does interagency collaboration impact students' transition experience?
 - b. Are you satisfied with the collaboration among your program, students, their families, and other agencies/institutions? Why or why not?
 - c. How could interagency collaboration be improved?
15. How does the shift from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) legislation upon exiting secondary education impact students with disabilities?*
- a. How does your program help students navigate the shift from IDEA to ADA?

*Researcher can provide interviewee with definitions of:

self-determination: To “engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior,” while also being cognizant of one’s strengths and limitations (Field et al., 2003, p. 339).

self-advocacy: Acting on one’s own behalf (Field, 1996).

IDEA - Special education legislation that aims to protect the right to education for people with disabilities. The school is responsible for identifying students in need of special education services and providing those services, which includes IEP and transition planning (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005).

ADA – Civil rights legislation that prohibits discrimination and mandates equal opportunity in employment and reasonable accommodations in postsecondary institutions that receive federal funding (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

IDEA to ADA means that individuals with disabilities become personally responsible for disclosing and documenting their disability status in order to request any necessary accommodations (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005).