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Beyond a Planner: Effective Study Skills Instruction for Student with Disabilities
in Preparation for Success in Postsecondary Education and Training

Marlene R. DesMarais

**Augsburg College
Lindell Library
Minneapolis, MN 55454**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Education

Augsburg College
Minneapolis, Minnesota

2015

Thesis
DesMarais
2015

EFFECTIVE STUDY SKILLS INSTRUCTION

ii

Master of Arts in Education

Augsburg College

Minneapolis, Minnesota

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the Action Research Project of

Marlene R. DesMarais

has been approved by the Review Committee, and fulfills the requirements for the
Master of Arts in Education degree.

Date of Symposium: June 9, 2015

Date Completed: August 24, 2015

Committee:

Adviser: Elizabeth Madson Ankeny
Dr. Elizabeth Ankeny

Reader: Jennifer Niedzielski
Jennifer Niedzielski

Dedication

To my friend and fellow researcher, Vickie, without whom I would not have completed my master's degree, for her keen wisdom and steadfast encouragement, I will be forever grateful to you for helping me through this journey.

To my friend and colleague, Glenda, who has taught me more about students with disabilities than any textbook ever could, for her sincere and optimistic support throughout all of my learning, I am continually inspired by your unassuming dedication to all of our students.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank and acknowledge my family, who supported and encouraged me through this incredible journey. Thank you for your shoulders when I needed someone to lean on and for your understanding when I needed to be selfish with my time in order to complete this project. To my daughters for their technical assistance and the countless times they proof-read a section of my paper, thank you!

I have, and will have, an unending gratitude for my advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Ankeny, whose unwavering support helped see me through this process. Her gentle-loving kindness and deep sense of belief in me gave me the will to keep going. I have fond memories of you, Elizabeth, and I appreciate everything you have done for me.

I am greatly appreciative of my reader, Jennifer Niedzielski, who gave of her time to read this paper and whose brilliant feedback and insightful comments helped me solidify a piece of work that I am very proud of. I hope that I can be to my students what Jennifer was to me as an instructor. Her inspiring teaching motivated me to include literacy instruction in all that I teach and her inspiration to practice to the art of *Mindfulness* kept me sane through this journey and for that I am grateful.

I would also like to thank the students who participated in this research. I am grateful for their time they unselfishly gave to meet with me. Their genuine feedback will continually impact my practice and the affirmation I received from meeting with all of them was an unexpected pleasure that I will always remember.

I would also like to thank my current students who were some of my greatest cheerleaders on this journey. I wish all of you nothing but happiness and success in your future endeavors.

Above all, I want to thank my parents. Although they may not have encouraged me to pursue postsecondary education, they instilled in me a deep sense of resilience, dedication, and self-determination. I may not have known it at the time, but through this action research process, I now know that you have given me the blueprint for success. Thank you!

Abstract

Students with disabilities face many unique challenges in life but one of the most impactful and challenging moments they will face is the transition from high school to postsecondary education. This new phase in their lives is filled with dramatic changes and can prove to be especially troubling for students with disabilities. Yet, if these students receive the proper training prior to leaving high school, they may experience a smoother transition and ultimately achieve their goals and dreams.

Through qualitative methods using narrative and descriptive approaches, this research investigated what study skills are the most important to teach to high school students with disabilities to prepare them for the rigor and challenges of postsecondary education and training. Through the development of an in-depth questionnaire, and one-on-one interviews with former students who had received special education services while in high school, the researcher discovered themes that impacted these students' postsecondary success: study skills need to be taught; literacy skills are key; the need for self-advocacy and utilization of resources; the impact of student engagement; and self-determination and the effect of parental support. The findings strongly suggest that effective study skills instruction for students with disabilities, while they are in high school, greatly impacts their postsecondary experiences in a positive manner.

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Beyond a Planner: Effective Study Skills Instruction for Student with Disabilities in Preparation for Success in Postsecondary Education and Training

Chapter 1: Introduction

As I drove toward the Plymouth Hennepin County Library, my anxious anticipation grew. I was about to meet a former student to conduct an interview on his postsecondary experience. I wondered what it would be like to see him again and if he would follow through on the appointment. As I drove into the parking lot of the library, my cell phone beeped to alert me that I had a message, “I’m here, Ms. D., I’m waiting for you in the lobby.” My anticipation quickly changed to excitement. When I walked in, we gave each other a big hug and I commented to Damian how great it was to see him and how grateful I was for his time to interview with me. Damian replied, “Absolutely, I’ve always wanted to do something in return for all that you have done for me.”

Over the course of the next hour, I learned about Damian’s transition from high school to his postsecondary world of education at a large university in southwestern North Dakota and later to a large university in north eastern Minnesota. In order to gain a greater understanding of Damian’s character it is important to learn about who he is. Damian graduated from a large suburban high school in 2010 where he was an accomplished football player. Damian had learning difficulties and received special education services since first grade and had an Individual Education Program (IEP) throughout his schooling until he graduated from high school. An IEP is a legal document, completed annually, that lays out specific goals and objectives that are unique to each student that the

educators will focus on throughout the year (MN Dept. of Education). Damian specifically had difficulties with comprehension and writing. Although he never qualified for a Specific Learning Disability in the area of reading or writing, he struggled greatly with these skills, as well as processing information and recall. Damian received services for Other Health Disabilities and had a diagnosis of Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder.

Damian refused to allow these challenges get in the way of his dreams. Damian's greatest strengths were his determination to succeed and the vision he had for his future. He had a passion for football. From a very young age, it had always been Damian's dream to play football under the Friday night-lights at the high school and then at a large university in front of thousands of people. Not only was Damian a standout football player at his high school, he was such a fantastic running back that he received a full-ride scholarship to play football at a large four-year university in North Dakota. However, the scholarship was not a guarantee he would be accepted into the university because he needed to meet certain ACT and academic requirements to be admitted.

In order for Damian to be admitted academically to the university, he needed to receive a minimum of a twenty-two on his ACT. His IEP manager applied for special testing accommodations and he was allowed to take the ACT over multiple days and was provided a reader. Damian took the ACT four times before he received the required score of twenty-two on his test. He simply would not give up and stayed after school on at least twelve occasions to finish yet another portion of the test.

In addition, Damian did not have the required mathematics courses he needed because he had always taken special education math classes. This did not deter him. He worked with his counselor and IEP manager to find the required math classes through an online high school. Damian worked tirelessly on his math course work in addition to his other senior requirements. Damian even had his high school football coach, a high school math teacher, tutor him on evenings and weekends. Damian was determined and would do whatever it took to meet the requirements for admission to the university; and he accomplished his goal.

The interview with Damian, the first of four that I would conduct for my research, went by very quickly. I had learned of Damian's challenges and successes in his postsecondary education experience and exactly what helped him achieve his goals. These findings and the others will be shared in a subsequent chapter. Yet, first I want to share with you one thing I learned from Damian that day. Most importantly, I learned I might never know the impact I might have on a student's life. Solely because of this interview, I learned of the impact I had on Damian's life. You see, I was the reader for Damian the four times he took the ACT back in 2010. I will never forget the day we got the notice that he had received the magic score of twenty-two and that he would be attending the four-year university. Through tears of joy, we gave each other the biggest bear hug I have ever given or received from a student. At this interview, Damian shared how the ACT experience impacted his life:

I think about that all the time, all the time. And I think of all the successes I have had in college and in football and that's still the most important

thing to me. The awards I have received, the All-American, the Most Valuable Defensive Player, all those things and I still think about the ACT. That's the reason I am here. I wouldn't have gotten into college if it wasn't for that. Four times, but I made it.

Again, tears of joy! I left my first interview so humbled and so honored to be a teacher of students with disabilities. I felt affirmed about my Action Research topic. I was excited and passionate about continuing my research to find out exactly what study skills are needed for students with disabilities to be successful in postsecondary education and training. Through the entire Action Research process, I learned that and so much more. I learned about my students and I learned about myself. I learned that study skills can and do need to be explicitly taught. Yet, I also learned that it is more than just strategies with these students. I learned about the importance of a supportive teacher and a mentor for students with disabilities. Above all, I learned what an honor it is to be a teacher and that even the simplest lesson taught, or the smallest act of support and encouragement, can have the greatest impact on a student's life.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of the study skills needed for students with disabilities in preparation for success in postsecondary education and training. Study skills can be defined as specific skills and tools that students use to acquire, record, remember, and use information efficiently to learn and retain information (Hoover & Patton, 2007, p. 2). I selected this study because I am a special education teacher in a large suburban

high school, where I teach study skills to ninth and tenth grade students who receive special education. I am also an IEP manager for students with disabilities and responsible for helping them determine their transition goals in the areas of postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. Most, if not all, of the students in my classes and those whom I am IEP manager for, aspire to attend some type of postsecondary education or training.

Using qualitative methods, focusing on interviews and narratives, this study strove to understand what study skills are needed to be successful in postsecondary training for students who have received special education services while in high school. Special educators have a unique role in helping their students gain the skills needed to be successful in postsecondary education and training. I selected this study because I am passionate about helping my students look to their future and set goals for themselves, which will afford them the quality of life they deserve.

When study skills were discussed, I would often hear references to the use of a planner. I just wanted to scream, “It is so much more than just using a planner!” Yet, exactly what study skills are most important to teach; are they even study skills at all; or, are there other more important skills for students with disabilities to possess in order to be successful in postsecondary education and training? This study set out to unfold the answers to these questions.

Importance of Study

It is important to learn what skills are necessary for students to succeed in postsecondary education because we live in a work-oriented society and it is a

basic life necessity to earn an income. In addition, every human has the right to a career that one enjoys and gives one a sense of accomplishment and dignity. To improve the chances of finding a meaningful career, one typically needs some type of postsecondary education and training. Students with disabilities face many challenges in postsecondary education settings. With the knowledge gained from this research, students may benefit from more effective study skills instruction. I will be able to share my research with fellow educators. I want teachers to learn about my findings and understand the importance of teaching their students with disabilities specific study skills that will increase their effectiveness in postsecondary education. This improved study skills instruction will help students with disabilities prepare for the rigors of postsecondary education and training and afford them the success they deserve in their future careers and endeavors.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A review of literature was completed to better understand the skills that are needed for success in postsecondary education for students with disabilities. There is an abundance of literature that gives insight on how to better prepare high school students with disabilities for postsecondary education and training. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, an individual with a disability is defined as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009).

From the literature review, six strong themes emerged. The following review of the literature focuses on these six areas: historical review and impact of laws affecting the education of students with disabilities; disclosure and self-advocacy regarding disabilities in postsecondary education; self-determination; study skills; the role of assistive technology; and other predictors of academic success of students with disabilities in postsecondary education.

Historical Review and Impact of Laws Affecting the Education of Students with Disabilities

Many civil rights laws have been passed in the last several decades that have changed the face of public education for students with disabilities. This federal legislation was designed to protect the rights of the disabled and the disadvantaged. Several key pieces of legislation have had far reaching effects for students with disabilities in respect to their continuum of education and transition

to the postsecondary world of education and training. These key pieces of legislation include: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), and the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1990 (IDEA).

Passed in 1973, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (P.L. 93-112), ignited the increased services in public postsecondary schools for students with disabilities (Hicks-Coolick and Kurtz, 1997, p. 31). Section 504 mandated several key requirements regarding postsecondary education institutions and students with disabilities (Lynch and Gussel, 1996, p. 352). These include equal access to facilities and activities, admission policies that do not discriminate on the basis of the disability, the provision of appropriate testing accommodations, and the provision of assistive aids and services such as large print, interpreters, and adaptive equipment (p. 352). Furthermore, according to Sitlington, Neubert, and Clark (2010), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 gives individuals with disabilities the legal right to access and to receive reasonable accommodations in public institutions which receive federal funding. This includes both educational and employment facilities (p. 38). Consequently, Section 504 opened the doors of opportunity for students with disabilities and provided the foundation for them to receive reasonable accommodations in postsecondary education and employment (p. 38).

The Section 504 law was soon followed by “federal legislation designed to protect the rights of the disabled and disadvantaged” throughout the United States (Hicks-Coolick and Kurtz, 1997, p. 32). Known as the Education for All

Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142), this law mandated that all public schools take a proactive stance to identify, evaluate, and provide appropriate services for students with learning disabilities (p. 32). Accordingly, windows of opportunity opened for many students with disabilities and public education was changed forever.

In 1990, the Individual with Disabilities Act (IDEA) reauthorized Public Law 94-142. The overarching mandate of IDEA requires states to “provide a free, appropriate public education to children with disabilities residing within that state between the ages of 3 and 21, except when its application to those children would be inconsistent with State law or practice” (Wehmeyer, Graner, Yeager, & Lawrence, 2006, p. 3). IDEA also mandated transition plans for all students with disabilities between fourteen and sixteen years of age and receiving special education services (p. 3).

Equally important, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was also signed into law in 1990. Although similar, its mandates are strikingly differently than those of IDEA. The Americans with Disabilities Act was modeled on section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Yuan, 2000, p. 153). This civil rights law extends the mandate for nondiscrimination on the basis of disability to the private sector and the nonfederal public sector (Lynch & Gussel, 1996, p. 352). The ADA defines a person with a disability as “someone with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities (p. 352). This means that a college or university must ensure equal access to all students who are otherwise qualified. Access means ramps and elevators and wide parking spaces

as well as access to information and technology. Accordingly, colleges and universities must offer reasonable accommodations for a student with a disability. An accommodation is a support that gives students an equal opportunity to participate and benefit from college, which has been authorized by the Americans with Disabilities Act (MN State Colleges & Universities, 2014, p. 25).

In addition, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) extended this civil rights protection for individuals with disabilities to include not only education and employment, but all public services, public accommodations, transportation, and telecommunications (Sitlington et al., 2010, p. 41). A key provision of the ADA was that it extended Section 504 from the public sector (those receiving federal funds) to the private sector in terms of access to and reasonable accommodations in employment, schools, and community facilities (p. 41). However, despite these laws protecting their rights, young adults with disabilities continued to face difficulties in securing postsecondary success (Etscheidt, 2014, p. 1).

As a result of these continued difficulties facing students with disabilities, several reauthorizations of IDEA have taken place, including its most recent in 2004. This reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) changed the definition of transition services from an “outcome-oriented process” to a “results-oriented process” that focuses on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child (Etscheidt, 2014, p.1). Furthermore, IDEA 2004 requires that a student’s Individual Educational Plan (IEP) include “appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age

appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and where appropriate, independent living skills (p. 2). In addition, an appropriate course of study and transition services needed to achieve these goals must be listed in a student's IEP. All of these components can have a profound impact on a student's success in postsecondary education and training.

According to Vaughan & Bos (2009), IDEA 2004 introduced another new component to the transition process (p. 520). Specifically, the component was designed to provide a student, receiving special education services or 504 services in high school, with a document upon graduation from high school for use in postsecondary education. This document, the Summary of Performance (SOP), summarizes the student's academic achievement and functional performance and includes recommendations on how to assist the student in meeting postsecondary goals (p. 521).

Furthermore, the process of completing the SOP includes the IEP manager meeting with the student to summarize performance and identify these recommendations. If the student is of legal custodial age, he or she may sign it signifying agreement; if not of legal age, a parent or guardian must provide a signature similar to the documentation required following an annual IEP meeting. The SOP document must be provided to the students receiving special education services upon their graduation or termination of services due to age-eligibility (Etscheidt, 2014, p. 2). According to the Council for Exceptional Children's Division of Career Development and Transition, "such a summary [Summary of

Performance] should significantly help the student gain access to further education and employment” (Planning 2007, p. 95).

The intent of these laws was to increase the chance of success in postsecondary education and training for people with disabilities and to affirm the right of a student with a disability to a level playing field. However, these laws do not guarantee success nor do they speak for the individual with a disability. Students about to enter postsecondary education quickly learn that things are much different compared to high school. These students need guidance and support in this transition (Uresky & Andrews, 2013, p. 47).

While these laws protect the rights of students with disabilities, it is important for students and their families to understand these laws and the distinction between entitlement and eligibility when it comes to receiving services. Researchers Sitlington, et al. (2010) explain that once a student is evaluated in schools and qualifies to receive special education services, he or she is “entitled” to a free and appropriate education until they graduate, exit the school system, or no longer qualify to receive special education services (p. 28). However, this changes once a student leaves high school and also applies to the outside services students may need while in the school system such as social services.

The change is quite drastic for students when they leave high school because now they must apply for and be determined “eligible” for services (Sitlington et al., 2010, p. 28). The accommodations only need to be provided “if” the institution is informed of a person’s disability (p. 41). Moreover, eligibility

requirements differ for each of the services and receiving the support one needs depends solely on the ability of the student to understand his/her needs and his/her ability to seek the appropriate accommodations to address those needs. It is imperative that students receiving special education services are informed of this long before they leave high school; and IDEA 2004 mandates that postsecondary planning be part of the students' transition IEPs (Etscheidt, 2014, p. 1).

Disclosure and Self-Advocacy Regarding Disabilities in Postsecondary Education.

While the aforementioned laws were designed to level the playing field in postsecondary education for students with disabilities, there is essential information that these students need to know and understand before leaving high school. First, the laws that protect their accommodations are much different in college than in high school (Planning, 2007, p. 94). For example, the way accommodations are made available to students differs significantly from high school to postsecondary school (Hicks-Coolick and Kurtz, 1997, p. 32). In postsecondary institutions, Section 504 requires that students let others know the nature of their disability to gain access to needed services (p. 32). This often poses a real challenge for students who have been protected during their K-12 years of schooling.

Second, the postsecondary schools will ask for documentation verifying the disability of the students who request accommodations. According to the Pacer Center, colleges, universities, and technical schools will ask for assessment documentation and the limitations it presents; while at the same time confirm a

student's need for accommodations (Planning, 2007, p. 94). Furthermore, this documentation needs to be less than three years old. It is imperative for students about to enter postsecondary education and training to understand that it is their responsibility to have available that documentation (p. 94).

Successful postsecondary transition planning includes teaching students with disabilities the skills they need to understand their strengths and needs, their wants and desires, and how to advocate for these needs (Sitlington et al., 2010, p. 122). As mandated by the 2014 Minnesota Statutes, "It is the district's responsibility to recognize the unique possibilities of each student and ensure that the contents of each student's plan reflect the student's unique talents, skills, and abilities as the student grows, develops, and learns" (para. 9. d). Then, as students are about to leave the sheltered confines of compulsory education, they must be taught how to go about applying for the services and support they will need to be successful in postsecondary education and training. The need for students to understand self-advocacy and to attain that skill in high school is essential. They need to be taught how to be great self-advocates.

According to Wehymeyer and Field (2007), "to advocate" means to speak up for (p. 43). Pacer Center defines self-advocacy as the ability to communicate one's needs in a straightforward and respectful manner (MN Dept. Education). A guide compiled by the Minnesota State Colleges & Universities (2014) to assist students with disabilities prepare for the postsecondary environment describes self-advocacy as follows:

Self-advocacy involves being able to speak and act on your own behalf, asking for help when it is needed, making informed decisions, and taking responsibility for these decisions. Being a self-advocate involves understanding yourself and your own disability, knowing your individual strengths and weaknesses, and being aware of your educational and personal needs. It also involves being able to express this information to others when needed (p. 7).

As you can see, self-advocacy involves much more than just speaking up for oneself. First, students must understand their strengths and weaknesses and how these affect them before they can learn to advocate for themselves (McConnell et al., 2013, p. 183). Wehmeyer and Field (2007) argue that self-advocacy skills are critically important if students with disabilities are to become independent, self-determined young adults (p. 42). Wehmeyer and Field have identified the following instructional areas that will enable young people to become their own strongest self-advocates:

- Assertive Behavior
- Public Speaking Skills
- Leadership and Teamwork Skills
- Active Listening Skills
- Decision-Making Skills
- Problem Resolution Skills
- Legal and Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities
- Transition Planning

- Goal Setting and Attainment
- Using Community Resources
- Communication, Negotiation, and Compromise (p. 43).

Each of these areas contains several different components and can be broken into multiple lessons to be taught. All of these skills should be taught and are important to learning self-advocacy. Learning these skills will enable students with disabilities to practice and become effective self-advocates before enrolling in postsecondary education and continue to assist them as they pursue their education after high school (Wehmeyer & Field, 2007, p. 43).

Self-Determination

Along with self-advocacy, self-determination is another skill that promotes success in postsecondary education. Although the two tend to go hand-in-hand, each encompasses different skills. According to Field & Hoffmann (1994), self-determination is “the ability to define and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself” (p. 164). Field and Hoffman’s Model of Self-Determination is a solid foundation for teachers to use to guide their curriculum. The five major components are: Know Yourself, Value Yourself, Plan, Act, and Experience Outcomes and Learn (Field & Hoffman, 1994, p. 164). Individuals who are self-determined are able to exert some control over their lives by setting realistic goals for their future while keeping in mind their strengths and abilities (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2011, p. 280).

According to Field & Hoffman (1994), to be self-determined, “one must know oneself, and believe in oneself and the right to pursue what he or she

desires” (p. 166). This includes self-acceptance and “the ability to admire the strengths that evolve from dealing with one’s unique qualities, including aspects of the self that are often viewed as weaknesses (p. 166). This is an important issue for persons with disabilities as they often hide their disabilities, which may decrease their ability to be self-determined (p. 166). According to Connor (2012),

Many students have negative associations with being labeled *disabled* and receiving special education services. However, students who are able to shift this original disposition and “reframe” their understanding come to see how LD and/or ADD/ADHD is not primarily an academic deficit, but rather an integral part of who they are and how they operate in the world (p. 17).

To help students accept their disabilities, before they leave high school, students need to learn about their disabilities and accept how normal human variation is -- instead of seeing their differences as abnormal. Once in postsecondary, students can seek out support through groups such as Project Eye-to-Eye (<http://www.projecteyetoeye.org/>) and be paired with a mentor with a similar disability for encouragement and support (p. 17).

Equally important, young people with disabilities need to dream for what they want and desire, they need to understand their strengths, weaknesses, needs, and preferences and then make a decision about what is important to them. Still, that is not enough. According to Field and Hoffman (1994), to be self-determined one must possess the skills to seek what is desired (p. 166). The two categories of skills needs are: Plan and Act. Students must first plan and set specific goals to

reach their desired outcome. Then, they must act on their plan which will undoubtedly include taking risks. Students who are able to assert their needs and access available resources increase their likelihood of success in postsecondary education. Finally, when they encounter barriers, the ability to persevere is fundamental for success (p. 167).

Students have more choices now and legislation has affirmed the importance of self-determination for people with disabilities (Field & Hoffman, 1994, p. 160). The IDEA of 1990 requires a statement of transition services to be included in the Individual Education Program of all students with disabilities. In addition, this legislation requires that a coordinated set of activities planned for said students must take into account the students' preferences and interests and includes the students as participants in their own transition meetings (p. 159).

According to Ankeny and Lehmann (2011), for more than two decades, policy makers and researchers alike have recognized that self-determination is an essential educational practice that improves the postsecondary outcomes of students with disabilities (p. 279). Moreover,

There is agreement in the field that the extent of which students are able to make a successful transition from high school to adult life appears to be predicted, at least in part, by the successful performance of skills associated with self-determination (p. 279).

Self-determination is a vital skill for students with disabilities (and all students) to learn to become confident, independent adults.

The great news is that the skills to acquire self-determination can be taught. First, Wehmeyer defines self-determined behavior as “volitional actions that enable one to act as the primary causal agent in one’s life and to maintain or improve one’s quality of life” (Wehmeyer & Field, 2007, p. 3). In short, a causal agent is one who causes change. Self-determined people are causal agents in their lives and make choices regarding one’s actions free from undue external influence or interference (p.2).

Wehmeyer provides a Functional Model of Self-Determination and has identified four essential characteristics of self-determined behavior: “People who are self-determined act autonomously, self-regulate their behavior, and are psychologically empowered and self-realizing” (Wehmeyer & Field, 2007, p. 4). It is important to note that the degree to which each of these characteristics are present will vary with age, opportunity, capacity and circumstances but the fundamental principles of each characteristic remain vital to self-determined behavior (p. 5). Moreover, these characteristics emerge across the lifespan as children and adolescents learn and grow and develop attitudes and abilities that help them become the causal agent that is so important to self-determined behavior (p. 5).

Wehmeyer & Field (2007) contend that, “These attitudes and abilities are the component elements of self-determination and it is this level of the theoretical framework that drives instruction activities” (p. 6). Wehmeyer & Field have identified the component elements to be used in instructional interventions:

- Choice-Making Skills

- Decision-Making Skills
- Problem-Solving Skills
- Goal-Setting and Attainment Skills
- Self-Regulation/Self-Management Skills
- Self-Advocacy and Leadership Skills
- Positive Perceptions of Control, Efficacy, and Outcome Expectations
- Self-Awareness
- Self-Knowledge (p.6)

Each of these component elements can be taught and Wehmeyer & Field offer instructional strategies, methods, materials, and supports that enable educators to “teach” self-determination by enhancing student capacity in each of these areas, as described in their book, *Self-Determination: Instructional and Assessment Strategies*.

Study Skills Needed for Successful Transition to Postsecondary Education

Study skills taught and practiced in high school help prepare students for the increased rigor of colleges courses (Connor, 2012, p. 20). These skills can be explicitly taught and provide a strong foundation for using these skills once in postsecondary. There is an abundance of manuals and books written on effective study skills instruction; yet, what remains most important is to match the best strategy to a specific assignment for individual students (p. 20). Connor suggests that not only do students need to be taught effective study skills strategies, they need to be able to actively determine what they need to do and why they need to

do it. This helps them develop a strong sense of autonomy which Wehmeyer & Field (2007) argue is necessary for self-determined behavior (p. 20).

The practical learning strategies and study skills, as summarized from the Minnesota State Colleges & University Guide (2014), that increase the likelihood of success in postsecondary education include:

- Learning Assessment: know how you learn – are you an auditory, visual, or kinesthetic learner?
- Memorization Techniques: the new vocabulary, complex processes, and increased amount of information and fast pace requires memorization techniques
- Study Skills: maintain positive attitude, set goals, study in small chunk of time, allow for breaks, maintain health, study when most productive, study most difficult information first, meet with instructor if having difficulty, seek a tutor if needed
- Test Taking Strategies: review over time, arrange for necessary accommodations, learn test format, learn ways to reduce test anxiety, learn of test format, think positively, read directions and questions carefully, look over test before turning in, ask instructor for clarification if needed
- Note Taking: clear and concise, organize notes, audio record lectures if needed, review notes soon after class and often, use assistive technology when needed, access notes online or utilize a note-taker
- Time Management: prioritize, organize work, set realistic goals and deadlines, break down large assignments

- Reading Strategies: read in a quiet comfortable area, take breaks, read aloud or audio books to improve concentration, take notes, generate a list of unfamiliar vocabulary, highlight important points, read with purpose, practice Close Reading methods
- Writing Papers: budget plenty of time, use prewriting strategies, create an outline, write at least one rough draft, utilize support services such as writing center and peer tutors
- Reducing Stress: use lists to stay organized, use relaxation techniques, practice positive thinking, stay healthy, use visualization techniques, balance study with “rewards” (pp. 9-13).

Addressing each of these areas requires that instruction include systematic teaching of each strategy (Sitlington et al., 2012, p. 130). According to Sitlington (2012), regardless of the approach used to teach the strategy, it is this systematic teaching that improves the likelihood of generalization of the skills (p. 131). This systematic teaching includes the following steps: practice and commitment to learn; describe the strategy; model the strategy; verbally rehearse each of the steps of the strategy; provide controlled practice; provide advanced practice and feedback; confirm acquisition of the strategy; provide opportunities for and monitor generalization; and conduct ongoing evaluation of the strategy instruction process (pp. 130 - 133). This explicit teaching of these strategies leads to the explicit learning of these strategies by the students. The students need to know exactly what they are learning to do in order to replicate it again while in college. Therefore, there needs to be explicit awareness built into the teaching.

The Role of Technology for Students with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education

Technology is quickly changing how teachers teach and how students learn. Assistive technology was first introduced as a component of rehabilitation as early as the 1950s in response to soldiers needing prosthetics after war (Mull & Sitlington, 2003, p. 26). Through many legislative changes, policy makers have mandated that assistive technology be included in students' IEPs to help them attain their goals. Mull & Sitlington (2003) utilized IDEA's definition of assistive technology, "any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of a child with a disability" (p. 26). Examples of assistive technology include, but are not limited to, speech-recognition programs, electronic note taking, screen readers, large print books, audio texts, and electronic organizers. The types of assistive technology that students with disabilities require will be determined by each student's unique situation and his/her individual needs and are virtually limitless.

Mull & Sitlington (2003) found that studies identified assistive technology as one way to help adults with learning disabilities compensate for their difficulties in a variety of academic areas (p. 27). Equally important, a vast majority of the technology options are now readily available and often at a low cost because of the explosion of technology use across the mainstream (p. 27). However, some of the assistive technology is expensive and may pose a challenge for a student to access in postsecondary education (p. 28). For this reason, careful

planning must take place while a student with a disability is in high school in regard to the specific assistive technology needs they will have in postsecondary education.

Other Predictors of Success of Students with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education

The predictors of academic success of students with disabilities in postsecondary education seem as varied as the individuals themselves. Yet, the research indicates that there are common predictors of success for students with disabilities in postsecondary education. According to Murray and Wren (2003), there is substantial evidence that indicates young adults with learning disabilities fare poorly compared to their nondisabled peers following high school (p. 407). Rates of attendance of students with disabilities compared to their nondisabled peers lag behind significantly. Based on data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 2000, sixty-six percent of high school graduates within the general population have attended some college in contrast to thirty-one percent of youth with learning disabilities (Murray & Wren, 2003, p. 407).

Murray and Wren examined the research to better understand this discrepancy in attendance rates between youth with and without disabilities in postsecondary institutions. In a study conducted by Halpren in 1995, data suggested a variety of factors during high school that influenced the students' post-school status one year after high school. The findings indicated that the characteristics and school experiences of the students with disabilities were stronger predictors of success than were gender, ethnicity, family income levels,

dropout status, access to integrated instructions, or similar parent and student expectations (as cited in Murray & Wren, 2003, p. 408).

Contrary to this finding, Murray and Wren also examined a study that Fairweather and Shaver conducted in 1999, which indicated that despite disability status, parental levels of education, income, and graduation from high school, were associated with attendance at postsecondary schools (2003, p. 408). The findings of the study indicated that youth whose primary caregiver graduated from college were four times more likely to attend postsecondary education institutions than those whose primary caregivers had not attended college. Income levels of the two groups also affected attendance with those making more than \$25,000.00 per year twice as likely to attend college. Lastly, youth who graduated from high school were three times more likely than those that did not graduate to attend some type of postsecondary school (p. 408).

Another body of literature focused on understanding the success of students with learning disabilities who attend postsecondary school. In a study done by Vogel and Adelman (1992), students with and without learning disabilities (LD) were matched at a university, had similar entrance American College Testing (ACT) scores, and were similar gender. Of these students, the students with LD had significantly lower scores on standardized measures of reading ability and sentence structure (as cited in Murray & Wren, 2003, p. 408).

In addition, Vogel et al. (1993) examined the differences between students with LD who graduated from college and those with LD who did not graduate from college. What they found was that the two groups were similar in ACT

scores, intellectual ability and academic achievement (as cited in Murray & Wren, 2003, p. 408). However, the key differences were that the group who graduated were significantly older, were more likely to have received private tutoring throughout their primary and secondary schooling, and more likely to have taken a greater number of English courses during high school than those who did not graduate (p. 409).

Another study, conducted by Uretsky and Andrews (2013) researched how finding the right postsecondary institutions can affect the success of students with learning disabilities and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in postsecondary education. This study focused on students with LD and ADHD because a fast growing number of college students are reporting that they have a learning disability or ADHD. According to Uretsky and Andrews (2013), the percentage of postsecondary students with learning disabilities increased from five percent to 8.9 percent from 2000 to 2008, whereas the percentage of students with ADHD nearly tripled during that time period (p. 47).

Uretsky and Andrews (2013) suggested that the college search process itself may be more stressful for students with LD and ADHD than it is for their nondisabled peers (p. 47). They contended that the difficulties that students with LD and ADHD experience in postsecondary education can be traced back to the college search process and how well they were prepared for the transition process (p. 47). Specifically, the high school environments often provided external supports for students with disabilities to ensure their progress towards graduation. In college, these external supports are limited and students with disabilities are

responsible for seeking their own accommodations and making these needs known to the appropriate staff (p. 47).

Equally troubling for students with learning disabilities and ADHD is the purported lack of a clear understanding of learning challenges by their peers, staff members, and instructors. This alone can lead to an increased anxiety level for students with LD and ADHD as they transition from high school to postsecondary education. Uretsky and Andrews (2013) suggested that the research indicates a greater emphasis should be placed on helping students with learning disabilities and ADHD in the college search process (p. 48). Uretsky and Andrews asserted that the college search process is an excellent opportunity for students to practice their self-advocacy skills:

The college search process is an excellent opportunity for students to practice their self-advocacy skills. Students can take the lead in scheduling college visits, making appointments with representatives at colleges of interest, and asking questions to determine if a college is a good fit. When students meet with ODS representatives, it is important that they are able to clearly articulate their educational, social, medical, and/or emotional needs. By taking the lead during the college search process, students can build confidence in their abilities to explain their needs, discuss their goals and make decisions. (p. 49)

Clearly, the ability to advocate on one's own behalf is one of the most valuable skills to teach high school students as they prepare to enter postsecondary

education and training and is a skill that is needed in many different aspects of a student's life.

A final predictor of academic success uncovered by the research focused on how family perspectives affected the postsecondary success of students with disabilities. A study conducted by Griffin, McMillan, and Hodapp (2010) found that parents are instrumental in transition planning for their children with disabilities; however, they were also among the most pessimistic about transition outcomes for their children (p. 339). This rather disheartening statement warranted further attention and additional literature was sought to gain a better understanding of how family support influences the success in postsecondary education of students with disabilities. A very limited amount of resources were found to augment the aforementioned study. However, one study conducted by Cooney (2002) found that parents were very concerned about the transition process but did not address the options (as cited in Griffin et al., 2010, p. 340). Furthermore, a study conducted by Chambers et al. (2004) found that participants in a study considered postsecondary education important, yet did not think their family member would pursue this option (as cited in Griffin et al., 2010, p. 340).

In conclusion, this literature review has provided background of what study skills, and skills in general, are needed to be successful in postsecondary education for students with disabilities. This research connects to the current study, conducted with the intent of improving study skills instruction at the high school level for students with disabilities in preparation for postsecondary education and training. The history of the legislation that has been passed in the

last several decades gives insight into the legislation's impact on the lives of students with disabilities. Furthermore, the importance of the self-advocacy skills and the need to disclose one's disability is of utmost importance to students' success in postsecondary education. Closely related, self-determination in a student is a key predictor of postsecondary educational success. In addition, explicit instruction of specific study skills is needed to match the best strategy to individual student needs. Assistive technology also plays a critical role in helping students with disabilities accommodate for their specific needs in their postsecondary learning environment. The literature review also uncovered other areas that were predictors of success in postsecondary education for students with disabilities including: finding the right fit, previous family members' level of education, and the parent perspectives on their children's ability to succeed in postsecondary education.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study used qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research uses narrative, descriptive approaches to collect data in order to better understand the way things are and the perspectives of the participants in the study, which drives the meaning of the research (Mills, 2014, p. 6). According to Mills, 2014, examples of qualitative research approaches might include: conducting face-to-face interviews, making observations, and video recording interactions (p. 6). Each individual researcher's area of focus is what drives the type of research methodology used to conduct the study (Mills, 2014, p. 7). In addition, a qualitative study typically uses a smaller sample size of participants.

This study is a form of action research. Mills (2014) explains that action research is, "any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about how their school operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn" (p. 8). The insight gained from this research gives the educator evidence to effect positive changes in the learning environment and improve student outcomes. This study aimed to understand the perspectives of former students with disabilities of what skills were most beneficial to their success in postsecondary education. The information gathered will be used to directly impact the practice of teaching study skills to high school students with disabilities.

Participants and Location

Four former students, two females and two males, were interviewed for this study. All of the participants received special education services in high school and were enrolled in at least one study skills class during their high school careers. To contact the participants interested in this study, the researcher used personal communication through cell phones and emails. All of the former students contacted were enthusiastic about the study and were happy to participate. The former students were interviewed at mutually convenient locations and times. This included various study rooms at a public library and a public coffee shop. The participants chose which location worked best for them and their personal situation. Three students were interviewed in a study room at a public library and one student at a public coffee shop.

Prior to the interviews, each former student was communicated with in regard to the purpose of the research and its details. A letter of consent was presented to all students and they were encouraged to read it and ask clarifying questions. Their official signed consent forms are recorded and available upon request. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities.

Damian. Damian is a twenty-four-year-old African American male who graduated from a large suburban high school in 2010. He is in his fifth year of postsecondary education at a large university in northern Minnesota and will graduate with a bachelor's degree in communications spring 2015. Damian received special education services in high school under the category of Other Health Disabilities and has a medical diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity

Disorder. Damian has a strong will to succeed and is determined to complete postsecondary education. Damian lives on campus in the dorm with a roommate. He is a standout football player and received a full-ride scholarship to play football in college. He comes from a lower socio-economic class and did not have the means to attend college without a scholarship. Damian will be the first family member on his father's side to attend or graduate from any type of college and the first family member on his mother's side to graduate from college.

McKayla. McKayla is a twenty-three-year-old Caucasian female who graduated from a large suburban high school in 2010. She is in her fifth year of postsecondary education at a community college in northwestern Minnesota and will graduate with a bachelor's degree in business in spring 2015. She plans to continue her postsecondary education to double-major and earn a degree in social work as well. McKayla lives in an apartment with friends and drives to campus for classes. McKayla received special education services in high school under the category of Other Health Disabilities and has a medical diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. McKayla can be described as a very spirited individual with limitless confidence. She is very outgoing and has many friends.

Natalie. Natalie is a twenty-year-old Caucasian female who graduated from a large suburban high school in 2010. She is in her second year of postsecondary education at a community college in the Minneapolis metro area. Natalie lives at home with her parents in an affluent suburb and commutes to campus each day to attend class. Natalie is currently taking the set college courses, which are required before she declares a specific degree. Natalie is

unsure of her area of study she will pursue but would like to work with children. Natalie received special education in high school under the category of Specific Learning Disability in the area of mathematics and has a medical diagnosis of Anxiety Disorder. Natalie can be described as a very quiet individual who takes a long time to feel comfortable in new situations. Natalie has developed many coping strategies to deal with her anxiety; despite these strategies, anxiety continues to affect her learning and independent living skills.

Max. Max is twenty-five-year-old Caucasian male who graduated from a large suburban high school in 2007. He attended postsecondary education at a large university in western Wisconsin. Max spent his fourth year of postsecondary education studying in Taiwan and when he returned home to the United States, he decided not to continue his education at the university in Wisconsin. He is twenty credits short of his bachelor's degree and plans to complete this in the near future. Currently, Max works as manager at a high-end designer handbag store. Max lives at home with his parents in large suburb and plans to move out soon. Max received special education services in high school under the category of Other Health Disabilities and has a medical diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Max can be described as a very creative, theatrical individual with a global perspective. He enjoys acting and dance.

Materials

The researcher created and used the same general questionnaire outline for each interview (see Appendix A). The questions were generated to be open ended, without leading thoughts, in order to elicit a genuine and detailed response. The

interviews were structured by the outline, but probing questions were used to help identify a better understanding of each individual's perspective. A recording device, predominantly the SuperNote App on an iPad, was used to capture the former students' conversations which were later transcribed into word documents on a computer.

Data Collection

This study was conducted using the data collection technique of using face-to-face interviews to obtain information. The type of interview used was a structured, formal interview. According to Mills (2014), a structured interview allows the researcher to ask all of the participants the same series of questions with the intent of eliciting the intended information (p. 92). Each former student was interviewed individually once; each interview lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes. The researcher took limited notes during the interviews to encourage keen listening and undivided attention to the conversations.

Immediately following the interviews, the researcher wrote observer comments and added notes to a journal log that was kept for the purpose of this research. In a timely manner, the researcher then listened to each interviewee's audio-recording several times and transcribed the information into a word document which was then used for the in-depth data analysis.

Data Analysis

The researcher began the data analysis by first transcribing the interviews, which were then analyzed and coded. Mills, 2014, describes coding as the process of finding patterns and meaning in the collected data (p. 135). Coding is the

process of breaking down the collected data and categorizing the meanings or understandings that emerge from the data (Mills, 2014, p. 134). Research that uses this type of data is common in school settings because it generates a great deal of information in a timely manner. The coding process for this study consisted of highlighting similar comments, using key words to mark the data, and looking for patterns. As the data was read and reread, common characteristics began to emerge, and themes developed. The process of deriving meaning from the data became the basis for the findings.

This action research study was based on grounded theory, the work of researchers Glaser and Strauss (1967) which employs the belief that if you use data to confirm your theories and research, then new theories and ideas emerge (p. 6). Glaser and Strauss gave researchers another method of research with its essence being that new theories are grounded in the data versus the data confirming long standing theories. Without grounded theory, only those theories that had been previously proven would exist, and there would be no new formation of original theory.

Subsequently, Charmaz (2014) defined grounded theory as, “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves” (p. 1). Grounded theory begins with inductive data; then the researcher goes back and forth between data and analysis, and uses comparative methods to interact with the data as new theories emerge (Charmaz, 2014, p. 1). Using Charmaz’s guidance, the predominant work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) on grounded theory guided this action research project, and in

summary is the discovery of theory from data (p. 6). This action research project consisted of conducting interviews with former students and from the data gathered, the researcher made sense out of the findings by coding and sorting through the collected data. The findings were then grounded in the data and will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter discusses the findings from the former student participant interviews. My research consisted of gaining information through formal structured interviews with former students who had received special education services while in high school. They were asked about their views on the study skills they had learned in high school that they found most beneficial in their postsecondary education experiences. The students were also asked to share what other skills or factors impacted their success in postsecondary education. The sole purpose of this study was to gather the students' perspective on this subject and use the findings to directly impact my practice of teaching study skills to high school students with disabilities to better prepare them for the reality and rigor of postsecondary education.

The findings in this chapter represent the themes that emerged from the data collected from the participant interviews. Through an in-depth analysis of the data, five distinct themes emerged: study skills learned in high school do impact students' success in postsecondary education; literacy skills are key; the need for self-advocacy and the utilization of available resources; the impact of student engagement; and self-determination and the effect of parental support.

Study Skills Learned in High School Impact Students' Success in Postsecondary Education

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that the study skills learned in high school were indeed beneficial to the students' success in postsecondary education. A closer look at the data suggested that all of the participants quickly

identified the most valuable study skills learned in high school that have played a significant role in their success in postsecondary education. These include test-taking strategies, organization techniques, and note-taking strategies.

Natalie shared that the visualization and memorization techniques she learned were extremely helpful and she continues to use them. She added that she still makes and uses notecards for studying for tests; she stated, “That really helps me a lot.” Natalie also shared that she especially likes the online site Quizlet and that she still utilizes it to make flashcards and its online study tools. “The stuff that high school taught me to help study, I still remember and use those things I learned in those classes.”

McKayla also quickly identified study skills that she learned in high school that she continues to utilize in college. She shared,

Be organized! I am an organizational freak now, with everything, not just my schoolwork. I do a lot of the color coding and highlighting like you taught me. It sounds so simple but those things really work for me. I also use post-it notes and I use index cards. I am a big rewriter of my notes. I will type them out and write them over again. That really helps me learn.

Along with those strategies, McKayla uses some online study tools depending on the subject but she prefers to hand write her notes. McKayla explained, “Just the physical act of typing out my notes and then rewriting them I think plays a big part in helping me recall the information.” Again, a strategy she developed while taking the study skills courses during high school.

Max also pointed out how the effective use of study skills helped him in his postsecondary pursuits. He shared,

Just having a note-taker in high school is what definitely helped me learn how to do that on my own in college and when I did notes in college that really helped me remember and take in the information. I would create bullets like I was taught in high school. I know it sounds silly but that was a huge thing for me. Also, having the different categories and the different notebooks for each class helped. I would keep it all in one expandable folder with the different dividers and label each class and I used that in college. Having it all in one place really helped me. The organization skills are so important.

Damian also felt that being able to take good notes was a crucial study skill needed to be successful in college. Still, Damian continued to struggle with this skill once in postsecondary education. However, because Damian had learned the necessity of taking good notes and was able to advocate for himself, he was able to recognize when he needed to ask for assistance. He shared, “A lot of the time, the professors will have their PowerPoints on their Moodle sites and I print those before class and add information as they lecture and that works well for me.” In classes where PowerPoints were not provided, Damian would contact the professor and make his needs known. Damian explained in greater detail,

I ask for a note taker if the professor doesn't put the notes online. What I do is I request one and the [disabilities] office asks the students if anyone is interested and then they email me the notes and they get paid for taking

the notes for me. But I don't need it for all of the classes because a lot of the time I can print off the PowerPoints.

Other times, Damian would simply ask a friend for copies of the notes. Along with note taking, Damian also continued to struggle with the writing of papers, which will be elaborated on in the next theme.

Literacy Skills are Key

The next theme that emerged from the data was that literacy skills played a fundamental role in the participants' success in postsecondary education. All four of the participants felt that strong literacy skills are essential. The ability to use effective writing, speaking, listening, and reading skills became evident through the interviews. Damian related his experience,

Writing papers was the hardest thing for me, and that was on my IEP. It was hard for me to use effective words to express how I feel in words on papers; especially working on the vocabulary parts. If I can write it down and I have more time to think about it, it is better. I have no problem expressing how I feel now but back when I first started was really a struggle.

Natalie also discussed her literacy skills and how they impacted her experience in postsecondary education,

My first semester at college, I had to take a preparation writing English class before I could take Freshman Composition because of my placement test. So, I took that and then I was able to take that Freshman Composition. Everyone has to take Freshman Composition but I just

noticed since college, I don't know, I have improved a lot with the writing.

I definitely think the class did help because they did teach us how to write.

I learned those things in high school too but it helped to have a refresher.

During the interview with McKayla, it became clear that literacy skills were very important to her success. McKayla shared, "If I didn't know the foundation of speaking and writing, I would not have been successful writing papers in college." She went on to say that the strategies she learned in study skills in high school contributed to her literacy skills. McKayla explained,

I'm very much a person that needs to have every step broken down. If I didn't learn that skill of breaking things down in high school, my writing and even my speaking, that's a big one, that's a hard thing to learn but once you have those skills it's a lot easier.

McKayla also shared how she loves to read and she believes reading has helped improve her speaking and writing skills. Even though she loves reading more now than she did in high school, she usually finds more time for it in the summer months.

Similarly, Damian also quickly realized how important his speaking skills were at college. He was an excellent football player and would often be interviewed by sports reporters following games. Damian found that he would stumble on his words and would usually be embarrassed after an interview. The most frustrating thing for him was that the words he had been searching for would later come to him. Damian went into great detail regarding his speaking skills,

I think there is always room for improvement. I know when I got to the school in northern Minnesota, I noticed I was still struggling expressing how I feel so what I did is I researched and I was trying to find someone within the university to help me with my communication skills, like a speech clinic or anything like that. I did find someone but it was a couple of miles away. So, we started working one on one together, she was a student too so we were both learning. It was at a speech clinic and she was taking courses at my college too and she had to get hours for her speech classes. So, she was able to help me with some things.

Damian also utilized the writing labs at the universities he attended. He shared, I go to the Writer's Workshop. It's so helpful. I did at [first university attended] as well and before I go to them, I have someone else proof read it too and then make those changes and then go to the Writer's Workshop and make more corrections.

Self-advocacy and the Utilization of Available Resources

While general study skills are critical to the success of students in postsecondary education, the participants also identified many other skills that have been instrumental to their success in postsecondary education. The data collected from the interviews showed that all of the participants felt the ability to advocate for themselves was paramount to their success. In addition, the utilization of available resources was mentioned time and again as being vital to the students' success. In order to utilize the resources available, it is essential to have good self-advocacy skills and to have the confidence to ask for what one

needs. Damian shared, “Once I got there, I remember I had to meet with someone to discuss that [my disability] because the coaches wanted me to meet with them [Disability Services].” For Damian to have the confidence he needed to utilize the available resources, he first needed to understand his disability and how it impacted his learning as well as which specific accommodations were helpful to him. Damian explain one example in greater detail,

With them, what I did at [first university], I would go to them [Disability Services], sign up for a test tell them the test and day and I would go there the day of the test and take it in a room, I think I got two and a half hours. I had to sign up a week in advance. It was way different than high school.

Natalie also found that asking for accommodations has improved her performance in her postsecondary education. She shared,

I have used them [Disability Services] before. Like when I took my placement test, I took it in the disabilities office in a private room. I asked for that because the first time I took it, I was with a bunch of people and it was too much and I got really anxious and did not do well. So, I asked for it and the next time I took it I saw a huge improvement.

However, Natalie shared that it did take her some time to get comfortable asking for the accommodations she needed. Natalie also received assistance in disclosing her disability to the college. She stated, “My IEP manager from high school and my parents helped me set up a meeting with the Disabilities Services and I met with them when I first got there; that really helped me.” Natalie feels this meeting prior to beginning her postsecondary education greatly helped her

with the process when the need arose because she was familiar with the staff in the disabilities office. She explained,

Um, I definitely think it's helped me a lot because just knowing that there's someone there who can support you... that's just a good feeling to have. Because, like before I had an IEP, I just needed like support and stuff like I couldn't do things on my own and now I'm able to... I don't know it just gave me more confidence.

Although Damian had met with staff from the Disabilities Services when he first started, he avoided speaking directly to his professors. While he said one of the most important things he did to be successful was to talk to his professors, he did not always feel comfortable doing so. He shared,

I will say just seeking help with professors, just going to them when I know I am starting to struggle in the course and just try to find ways that I can study better. But it was hard for me, because I wasn't much of a communicator. I was very quiet and shy and just kept to myself so it was hard for me to ask for help. But when I noticed I was really struggling and I had to meet expectations to be able to play football, I knew then I had to find ways to talk to my professors.

Max also shared his thoughts on self-advocacy and how the disclosure of his disability impacted his success in postsecondary education,

I did have contact with the disability services at first because my mom said I should do that. It was a little unnerving and scary going into college and it depends on the teacher. It was easier in high school. In college, the

teachers are a little harder to approach and intimidating. In high school, I was getting there but I needed the push from people like you to learn the skill. High school helped me to get the courage to talk to the college professors. I barely passed my first English class and then my second one, I ended up doing substantially better but it was easier for me to approach my second professor. I found out his office hours and I would question my grades and I even ended up getting a better grade. Biology was also hard for me to get the courage to talk to me professor. But having that experience in high school really helped me know that I had to do it and gave me the confidence to do so. I was ahead of the game because I knew what my needs were.

Of the four participants interviewed, McKayla appeared to have the easiest transition from high to college with regard to advocating for her needs and using available resources. She explained,

I was okay with advocating for myself because I learned that in high school. In 9th grade, I was horrible at it because I was embarrassed still; I was still in that stage. Because kids are mean, and you feel embarrassed if you have to leave the classroom [in front of others to use the resource room]. College is so different. I just think having an IEP in high school, it helps you get those skills of having the self-confidence that you are still a person, I just learn differently. I think having an IEP helps you learn to accept your disability. It helped me accept my disability – it was like a

light bulb went off and I knew I had to work harder than some students if I wanted to be successful.

The Impact of Student Engagement

Throughout the formal interviews, it was evident that the students' level of engagement clearly impacted their success in postsecondary education and the theme of the impact student engagement emerged. All of the students expressed how difficult it was for them to focus in the classes they were not interested in. Of the four students interviewed, three had struggled with class content until they found a program they were interested in. The final participant is in her sophomore year and is taking the required set courses before declaring a degree. McKayla shared,

I started out at a four-year university in North Dakota through the Pathways Program which is a program that helps students with disabilities. I lived on campus at the university and took one class at what is basically their tech school. My sophomore year I was doing retail major and I decided I hated it so I switched to social work. Once I started taking my classes in social work, I did much better. I'm doing a double major. So I'm getting a major in social work and a minor in business. I did the pathway program my freshman year; so, I went to the tech school too and took the majority of my classes at the tech but I took one class at the university so I was still able to live in the dorm at the university and participate in all the activities at that school. My sophomore year I

transferred all the way to the university and I didn't do very well. I got put on academic probation and now I am just at the tech school and I love it.

Damian also expressed how engagement impacted his learning which in turn affected his ability to advocate for himself. He explained,

It was very hard. In the beginning, I just sat back and listened and wasn't very engaged, I guess. Because some courses I was taking, I wasn't interested in so it was hard for me to focus and be engaged. It's hard to really focus when you have no interest in it so that was hard for me. But then I started taking classes I was really interested in so I would go to the professors after class and ask questions.

Through further analysis of the data, I realized one mitigating factor in the struggle to be engaged was the pressure for the participants to pick a major.

McKayla shared,

I felt like after my sophomore year I needed to pick a major and so I just picked one and I hated it, I wasn't happy. It's not that I didn't try in those classes; I did, but my grades didn't reflect it. I went home one weekend and I told my parents, 'something has to give, I'm not happy.' I've always wanted to take social work and I got talked out of it because you don't make a lot of money. Then the moment I started taking my social work classes, I loved it. Last spring semester I got almost a 4.0. I knew I found the right fit and it just clicked. I was more engaged and could do the work. Finding the right fit for you - don't let anyone deter you from what you want to do.

Damian had similar thoughts to share on the pressure to pick an area of study, I picked special education because I wanted to give back and help people like I had been helped in high school but it just wasn't for me. Once I switched from special education to a communications degree I did so much better and I was happier.

Although different, Max had also experienced a situation where he was not engaged in his learning. Max had an opportunity to study abroad his senior year of college and spent a year in Taiwan. When he returned to the United States, he decided not to return to his college in Wisconsin because he did not want to live in the dorm anymore. Instead, he lived at home and commuted to a community college in the metro area. Max suddenly realized he did not like it and he stopped going. When asked for specific details why he thought he did not like it, he stated, "I didn't like the environment. I never even contacted disability services; I just didn't like it there and could not make myself get to class."

Even though Max did not return to the university in Wisconsin to complete his degree when he returned from Taiwan, he does not regret his decision to study abroad. Max feels the life lessons he learned while studying in Taiwan are invaluable and he plans to complete his bachelor's degree while working. Max now works as a retail manager at a well-known high-end designer bag store. Max explained in greater detail,

I started for a full-time seller, and about a year later after lots of hard work and helping move to a bigger location, I was promoted to manager. I love it, it's a great place, great experience, it not only keeps my second

language alive from coming back from Taiwan and learning Chinese, but it gives me a global perspective. It basically covers all the bases that I want to grow as a professional and [on a] personal level.

Max also shared how he utilizes the skills he learned during high school to be successful as a sales manager. Max shared,

It's crazy how those skills follow you and even at your job. I mean, at my job at my managers' meetings, I hear a lot of important information and I have to take notes. Note taking, that's going to be with you for the rest of your life. It's always going to be there. So, I take them on my iPad and I do bullets. I learned how to do it in the study skills classes in high school. It sounds cliché but that is what really helps me be successful.

My experience in high school and college has really set me up for success at my job in that respect. You never know what's going to happen or who you will talk to and how that might lead to a career path.

Self-Determination and the Role of Family Support

The theme of self-determination and the role of family support also emerged from the data collected through the interviews. All four of the participants were greatly impacted by their parents' support, primarily their mothers. The participants made a variety of comments which indicated that the parental support was very positive and proved instrumental to their success. Along with parental support, the participants' own self-determination proved absolutely essential in the students continuing with their education and not giving up.

Max elaborated on how his mother influenced his success during his four years at the university he attended in Wisconsin,

Well, my mom is a great role model and she went back for her master's [degree] and I would see her study habits. Even though they are different than mine, I saw her and saw her dedication and hard work and I applied it in different ways.

Similarly, McKayla's mother greatly supported her and influenced her postsecondary educational success. McKayla expressed,

When I was on academic probation my parents would not let me give up. They said, you are not taking a break, you are not coming home, you need to figure this out. My mom said, "You've struggled so much your whole life, you're not giving up now." And I did, I figured it out. My mom did so much work; I would not be here today without her. She had a huge impact on me just getting there in the first place. She did, she did so much research on the Pathways Program. I was dead set on going to a four-year college and I think that hurt me. In May, I will graduate with my business degree and then I will go to a four-year school for social work – I will only have a year and a half left.

While Natalie's experience is strikingly different, she still received positive support from her mother which she believes has impacted her. She explained,

Well, I mean without my parents I wouldn't have even been in the special education program. I mean, I would have never thought anything of getting help but my parents noticed it and wanted me to get help and it

really helped me a lot. My parents were supportive of me going to some type of college. I mean my parents didn't go to college so they are not as strict as some other parents might be. Like if I wanted to go to community college or take a year off, I feel they would be supportive either way. But they are very proud of me.

Damian spoke fondly of how his mother and family have influenced his postsecondary success. He shared,

My mom, she's so proud of me because I will be the only one in my family on my dad's side that ever went to college and graduate with a degree. So she's proud of me and my dad's side is so proud of me too. Like I said, I'm the only man on his side who went to college. She supports me a lot and is so proud of me. That motivates me right there to keep going because I have so many people counting on me and I want to make them proud. It was tough but I made it, I knew I was going to have adversity. I graduate in the spring.

Clearly, parental support and their own self-determination to succeed played an immense role in the success of these students with disabilities attending and succeeding in postsecondary education. All of the participants shared how their parents supported them to enroll in a postsecondary institution, encouraged them while attending, and prevented them from quitting. In addition to the impact of parental support, each participant was also influenced by his or her own self-determination.

This chapter presented the findings; the five distinct themes that emerged from the data collected: study skills learned in high school do impact students' success in postsecondary education; literacy skills are key; the need for self-advocacy and the utilization of available resources; the impact of student engagement; and self-determination and the effect of parental support. The information was gathered from formal structured interviews with former students. The findings allowed the researcher to better understand what study skills are needed to be successful in postsecondary education for students with disabilities. The participants' honest and personal feedback will be incorporated into my recommendations chapter and used to better my own teaching practices.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of the study skills needed for students with disabilities in preparation for success in postsecondary education and training. Through qualitative research methods using narrative and descriptive approaches, one-on-one interviews were conducted to collect data. The interview participants were asked specific interview questions. All participants in this study had received special education services while in high school and received direct instruction in study skills. Participants were asked an initial set of questions to identify their views and perspectives of the impact their high school study skills instruction had on their postsecondary experiences. Interview questions were formed which sought to elicit genuine answers from the former students. Additional questions were asked to probe further into the participants' answers. The desired outcome of this action research study was to determine what should be done to improve study skills instruction for high school students with disabilities to better prepare them for the unique challenges and rigorous demands of postsecondary education.

Summary of Findings

Five themes emerged throughout the research process of interviewing former students with disabilities on their perspectives of their direct study skills instruction and its impact on their postsecondary educational experiences. The five distinct themes that emerged from the data collected were: study skills learned in high school do impact students' success in postsecondary education; literacy skills are key; the need for self-advocacy and the utilization of available

resources; the impact of student engagement; and self-determination and the effect of parental support. The findings allowed the researcher to better understand what skills are needed for students with disabilities to be successful in postsecondary education. The information garnered will be used to meet the individual and diverse needs of current and future students with learning difficulties.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This action research project helped me to revisit my own teaching practices and led to the question of where to go next. With such positive results from the participants' honest and personal feedback during the interviews, the information will be used to better my own teaching practices and used further to make recommendations to fellow educators. The themes revealed that direct and explicit instruction, in study skills as well as other skills, for students with disabilities, does indeed have a positive impact on their transitions to and experiences while in postsecondary education. The conclusions and recommendations for each theme will be elaborated on in this section and subsequently shared with my teaching colleagues to improve study skills instruction for students with disabilities.

Study Skills Learned in High School Impact Students' Success in Postsecondary Education

The findings revealed that all of the participants had highly positive perspectives of the direct study skills instruction they received in high school, which had a positive impact on their postsecondary experiences. The most notable

and beneficial study skills that the participants mentioned were test-taking strategies, organization techniques, and note-taking strategies. Hoover & Patton (2007) stated, “Many students with learning problems have deficient note-taking, listening, test-taking, organization, and scanning skills... perhaps the greatest key to understanding the study skills programs in school is the fact that these skills can and must be *taught*” (p. 15). The former students in this study communicated the need for direct and intentional instruction in several of these areas. Olson and Platt described direct instruction as,

A structured, teacher-directed program that includes a well-designed curriculum, (sequential order, positive and negative examples, well-constructed formats, prompts, independent practice activities, and mastery learning) and detailed instructional procedures: cueing, modeling, eliciting student responding, providing feedback, test individual students, and teaching to mastery” (as cited in Sitlington, et al., 2010, p. 131).

My recommendation is to deliver this instruction in a more systematic and deliberate scope and sequence manner to help students acquire and maintain study skills usage. Students who have learned practical learning strategies while they are in high school will have a smoother transition to college (MN State Colleges and Universities, 2014, p. 9). There is an abundance of manuals and books written on effective study skills instruction; yet, what remains most important is to match the best strategy to a specific assignment for individual students (Connor, 2012, p. 20). I also recommend a more intentional effort to explain to the students the importance of acquiring study skills and how each will specifically help them to

succeed in school and later in life. With this greater teacher awareness, we can be more explicit and intentional with our actions and teaching. We can then help our students become more aware of their habits and the skills they need to succeed.

The ultimate goal of education is to prepare young people for adulthood and part of this reality is the necessity of postsecondary education. I believe one of the most effective ways to teach students about this reality is through real-life stories. One recommendation I have is to invite the participants of this research study, along with other former students, to participate in a panel discussion with my current students. This would be an opportunity to directly hear the former students' personal stories about what they have discovered about themselves. During the participants' interviews, I was fascinated by their honest feedback and felt compelled to ask, "If you could give one piece of advice to incoming freshmen, what would you tell them in terms of what skills are necessary to be successful in postsecondary education and training?" The following are their responses:

Max candidly shared,

I would say use your resources, don't push them away like I tried to do. See what you can learn from them and maybe they aren't for you but just give them a shot and see what benefit you can get from them. In the future you will probably develop your own skills and learning processes, but be open to the sources and what they can do for you.

Damian passionately explained,

Be proactive, be engaged! I guess I would say don't be afraid to ask for help. If you have any questions, go talk to the teacher before or after class and don't wait. Use all of your sources, all of them. Get tutors or ask friends if they can help you study or anything like that.

Natalie quietly gave her advice,

My advice to them would be to take school seriously. Because I know when I was a freshman, I mean I'm not saying I didn't care about school because I did, but I was just kind of getting through it. Like, I didn't really think of college and all that but I think right away you should think about it.

McKayla adamantly responded,

High school matters, learning the study skills you learn in high school does help you learn even more study skills you will learn in college, it is the foundation! Take it seriously; don't mess up because it's hard to regain it back because I'm still trying to regain things in college that I messed up with.

These personal and honest comments sparked the idea to invite former students in for a panel discussion. I believe it would be a powerful learning experience for all involved. My recommendation is to directly use the advice to plan lessons for my current students that are relevant and dynamic.

Literacy Skills Are Key

All of the participants interviewed for this study shared their individual struggles with writing papers during their postsecondary experiences. In addition, most had difficulty initially effectively communicating with their instructors and giving presentations. These literacy skills are vital to success in postsecondary learning and in real-life. This knowledge calls for me to focus my instruction more intensely on the literacy skills of not only reading and writing, but also the critical skills of speaking and listening. Through specific and direct instruction in study skills, the students' literacy skills will also improve. Hoover & Patton (2007) support this statement through their research, "Generally, the study skills can immediately benefit a variety of listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities" (p. 3). Because of this action research study, I desire to instill in my students the need for good literacy skills and why they are important in every walk of life including education, employment, and daily living. In addition, I recommend that teachers incorporate more literacy skills lessons into their study skills courses. For example, students should be given more opportunity for structured writing practice along with consistent editing and grammar practice. Equally important, students also need to be explicitly taught active listening and effective speaking skills.

The Importance of Self-Advocacy and the Utilization of Available Resources

The findings revealed the importance of self-advocacy and the students' ability to communicate their unique needs. All of the participants spoke of the extreme significance that the ability to make their needs known had to their

success in postsecondary learning. Many of them struggled with this upon entering post-secondary education but the skills they had learned from their high school special education classes did make the transition easier. The adjustment was so drastic because they were accustomed to having the assistance of an IEP manager and their parents while in high school. Still, the participants understood the challenges their individual disabilities presented them and the accommodations that were helpful in effectively dealing with these challenges. Therefore, the former students were able to recognize when they needed to ask for help and were well aware of the ramifications if they did not seek assistance.

My recommendation for teachers that currently teach study skills courses is to be that relentless instructor who drills the students on the concept of self-advocacy. It should not just be a one-week unit that is taught and then on to another concept. The skill of self-advocacy needs to be explicitly taught and then revisited time and again. High school students with disabilities also need to be taught the differences in accommodations available in high school versus college. It is a delicate balance for IEP managers, to advocate for accommodations for students while in high school, while at the same time teaching them to become their own best self-advocates. It is essential for students with disabilities to understand their needs and what accommodations they are entitled to, and be able to communicate those needs to their teachers in preparation for independence in postsecondary education.

Another recommendation I have is to schedule fieldtrips with my current students to area colleges to visit their Offices of Disabilities. This would give the

students an opportunity to learn about available resources and supports as well as how to go about receiving those services. This unique experience, while in high school, would give students with disabilities a sense of familiarity when they venture off into postsecondary education and would hopefully make the transition a smoother one for them.

The Impact of Student Engagement

Throughout the formal interviews, it was evident that the students' level of engagement clearly impacted their success in postsecondary education. All of the students expressed how difficult it was for them to focus in the classes they were not interested in. Of the four students interviewed, three had struggled with class content until they found a program they were interested in. The final participant is in her sophomore year and is taking the required set courses before declaring a degree.

One recommendation I have is to incorporate more values and career search training using various assessment tools including Minnesota Career Information System. Students need the opportunity to gain a better understanding of whom they are and what they want to study in college before they leave high school. Students need to understand their core values before they can know how they want to spend their time; and set goals so the students have a road map of where they would like to go. Students must explore and research different areas of interest before they leave high school to help avoid the additional stress of not being enrolled in an engaging area of study.

Self-Determination and the Role of Family Support

Along with student engagement, the final theme of self-determination and the role of family support also emerged from the interviews. All of the participants were greatly influenced by their parents' support, which proved instrumental to their success in their postsecondary experiences. Still, the students needed to follow their own hearts in determining their own area of study. The students needed to understand what their values were, and their own hopes and dreams for their futures. The parents' unrelenting support of their children gave them the encouragement needed to verbalize these dreams and then later receive the support they needed to make these dream a reality.

My recommendation is to promote the teaching of self-determination at the high school level to all students, but in particular students with disabilities. The best way to achieve this is through education and increasing knowledge. This can be done through the Professional Learning Communities and the curriculum planning teams just as any other course is planned and developed. Wehmeyer & Field (2007) argue, "The teaching of self-determination needs to be infused into the general education curriculum and classroom for all students" (p. 71). Educators Wehmeyer and Field, and many others, have given us a wealth of resources to teach self-determination and the skills necessary for students to make decisions about their futures. I can be instrumental in sharing these resources with my fellow educators and taking the initiative to promote infusing self-determination instruction into the curriculum. Students who are given the proper tools and confidence are more likely to be self-determined individuals. Families

also need to be supported in their efforts to teach self-determination skills and a logical place to begin this conversation is at the students' annual IEP meetings.

Limitations of the Study

The overarching objective of this research was to gain qualitative information on the former students' perspectives of the most important study skills to teach in preparation for success in postsecondary education. This study included a number of limitations. First, each student was interviewed on just one occasion. It may have been beneficial to meet with each participant more than once. Through this, the researcher would be able to create conclusions that are confirmed by consistent responses, which increases the validity of the information. Second, all of the former students interviewed were familiar with me. Therefore, it may have been more effective to have an outside party interview the students to eliminate all bias. The students may have felt more comfortable sharing their candid thoughts and a completely unbiased interviewer may have elicited different responses. Still, this researcher believes all participants shared their honest opinions, and to the extent possible, the researcher remained as unbiased in the questioning process as possible.

As expected, certain things needed to be changed during the study and some things did not go as expected. For example, the first interview opened my eyes to how difficult the process is. I quickly learned that I needed to be diligent with my own active listening skills. Initially, I tried to take notes while I listened. I immediately felt insincere and inattentive. I set aside the notepad from that point forward. I was very grateful for all the participants' consent to audio-record the

interviews. This was extremely helpful in capturing their comments and responses to the questions, which later made it possible to transcribe them verbatim.

Another aspect that did not go as expected was with the first interview; it was difficult for me allow the interviewee time to think and not finish the interviewee's sentences while he paused to conjugate his thoughts. Again, I was able to recognize I was doing this and corrected my interviewing technique.

Through this action research process, ideas for further research also emerged. One area of further research would be to determine what type of postsecondary education is better suited for students with learning difficulties. Is it better to attend a two-year university and then transfer to a four-year university? In what type of setting do the students with learning difficulties experience the greatest success? Another area of research that I think would be fascinating is a study conducted exclusively on how the parents' perspectives impact the students' postsecondary experiences. This was touched on briefly in this research but a study of its own might be justified. Lastly, a study conducted on how the use of technology has impacted the students' success with study skills and learning strategies in postsecondary education is an idea for further research that was sparked during my process of interviewing former students. The participants I interviewed did not use iPads for learning when they attended high school. Subsequently, none of them mentioned technology as having a big impact on their success in postsecondary education. Given the rapidly changing world of education, due to the advances in technology, technology is sure to have a

profound impact on our current high school students' experiences in postsecondary education and further research is warranted in this area.

Chapter 6: Self-Reflection

Through the completion of this action research project, I have learned more about myself, both on a professional and a personal level. It has given me a great opportunity to reflect on being a critical thinker and how to use these skills to affect my own learning and my own teaching practices. At the beginning of this journey, I was reminded of a scene from my childhood: I used to sit on the concrete slab atop the milk house on my family farm in west central Minnesota; and it was there that I developed self-determination. If I perched myself precisely in an opening between our old red barn and our iconic orange silo, I could see the freight trains roll down the tracks in the far distance. There, with the sound of the thundering train in the foreground, I would dream of where those train tracks might take me when I turned eighteen. I did not know exactly what I wanted to do upon graduation from high school, but I did know that I wanted to get off of the farm and I did know that I wanted to go to college. I had a dream.

I grew up on a farm in a very small community. I have eight siblings and my parents worked very hard to feed, clothe, and give us the basic necessities that we needed. I worked in the fields at a very young age and the value of working hard was engrained in my being. Of my few older brothers and sisters who pursued post-secondary education, all attended a vocational or community college. When I expressed my interest in attending a more traditional, and thus more expensive, two-year or four-year college, to my absolute disappointment, my parents discouraged me from going. My mind flashed to the train tracks and

all of the time I spent dreaming of going to college. I decided then and there that I would figure it out myself and I would go to college.

Looking back now, I did not know it at the time, but I had self-determination. According to Field & Hoffman (1994), self-determination is “the ability to define and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself” (p. 164). To know oneself, one must know one’s strengths, weaknesses, needs, and preferences. Somehow, I had the ability to figure things out on my own and I possessed perseverance in a challenging situation. However, most of the students I work with do not and they need guidance to learn the skills needed to be successful in postsecondary education. Because of my research, I reflected on what it was that helped build this character in my own life. This has made me realize, that perhaps, my work is meant to help my students uncover and discover their natural capacities, like I noticed in myself, and cultivate them so they become strong.

Through this action research project, I have learned the answers to my questions that I sought on how to improve my study skills instruction for high students with disabilities in preparation for success in postsecondary education. I learned valuable information from the student interviews, which will be used to inform my teaching practices and shared with fellow educators. I have a passion for helping my students set and achieve their goals in all areas of transition including education. Most of my students desire to attend some type of postsecondary schooling. I wanted to be able to reflect on my own practice and determine what I could do to improve my instruction to better meet the needs of

my students. In doing this project, I realized that not only are study skills important, there are many other life skills that are equally important to teach. Still, without solid basic study skills habits, students will not be prepared for the rigor and demands of postsecondary education.

But, I learned so much more than that. I learned about myself. I learned I can persevere through the very difficult and long process of this action research journey. I learned I have more resilience than I ever dreamed I had. I learned to work through the fear of failure that undoubtedly became a hindrance on more than one occasion. And, I learned that I could not do all of these things on my own. I too, needed to ask for help on several occasions. I had an accountability partner, whom I am forever grateful to. I had an understanding instructor and advisor whose unwavering support and gently encouragement nudged me along to the completion of this project. I had an amazing family who is so proud of me and my accomplishments. And, I had my students, without whom this process would never have happened. I am so honored to have had the opportunity to reconnect with my former students and I am grateful they gave of their precious time to interview with me. Above all, I am honored to be a teacher of my current students and this action research project has made me a better educator and will continue to affect my thinking and pedagogy.

As I reflect on this entire journey, I have fond memories of working with my current students and sharing my journey with them, who seemed genuinely interested to hear about it. They became the sounding board for me and were some of my greatest cheerleaders. My students love stories and I believe some of

the greatest teaching comes from real-life stories which students can relate to. What better way to find out which study skills to teach than through my practicing them myself throughout this action research process? In my current study skills classes, I have students set short-term and long-term goals. Concurrently, my students have heard about my goals and personal deadlines that I had set for myself to complete this project. Most days, at least one student would ask me if I had worked on my paper the night before, or if I had done what I had told them I was going to do. This is a strategy I teach my students: write down what you intend to do or better yet, tell someone and ask them to hold you accountable. My current students held me accountable! As a result of this, some of my fondest memories of this entire process occurred in my current classroom. I think to live it, to teach it, and to reflect on it together with students is one of the greatest ways for all of us to learn.

The most surprising aspect about this entire process is how enjoyable it was to meet with the former students; and how affirming it was to hear that the study skills instruction they received in high school really did make a difference in their postsecondary learning. It was so rewarding to hear of their personal successes, and how they overcame the challenges, in their postsecondary pursuits, and to see how they have grown and become such fine young adults. I will never forget the experience.

What was especially fulfilling about my interview with McKayla was that her IEP meeting was the very first one I ever held, and I was just a student teacher. At her IEP meeting we discussed the Pathways Program, which her

mother later helped her research. At that same meeting, when I was making the final recommendations for her transition to postsecondary, her mother just broke down and cried. She shared that when McKayla was in second grade, McKayla and her parents had been told that she would never attend college, that she was not smart enough. Second grade! They never forgot that devastating moment. I knew from that moment on, I would never tell a student what he or she would not be able to accomplish. McKayla graduated this spring with a bachelor's degree in business and will pursue further education in the fall to also major in social work. I wish that second grade teacher could see McKayla today. I am so proud of her – and of all the students I interviewed.

Perhaps the most compelling knowledge I learned from this research is the power of relationships that students with disabilities have with their parents, mentors, and teachers. My first interview with Damian opened my eyes to the impact I had on his life. This experience showed me how important my supportive relationship was to him and how it impacted him throughout his college career and into his adult life. Moreover, through my other interviews and an in-depth reflection of my research, I better understand how students' school experiences are shaped by the relationships they have with caring, attentive, and responsive teachers. These relationships have a significant impact on the students' attitudes that impact their future successes or failures.

Because of this action research, I believe I am a better person and a better educator. I am more prepared to teach students with disabilities the skills they need to be successful in their postsecondary education and training. Above all, I

learned that I may never know the impact I might have on a student's life and it is the smallest things that sometimes make the most difference. My sincere desire and mission is to give my students the support they deserve and to teach them the skills they need to ultimately achieve their goals and dreams – and most importantly, lead happy and fulfilling lives.

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Appendix A**AUGSBURG COLLEGE**

*Beyond The Planner: Effective Study Skills Instruction for
High School Students with Educational Disabilities
in Preparation for Success in Postsecondary Education and Training*

You are being invited to participate in a research study about what you found to be the most valuable skills you learned while in high school that you have used in postsecondary to help you be successful in your educational pursuit. This study is being conducted by Marlene DesMarais and Augsburg College Advisor Elizabeth Ankeny from the Education Department at Augsburg College. This study is being conducted as part of a graduate thesis project and would involve me interviewing you to gain valuable information for my research.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you were a student enrolled in a study skills course(s) during your time at Wayzata High School. You may or may not have had me for a teacher for this course; nonetheless, I believe you will remember me.

There are no known risks if you decide to participate in this research study. There are no costs to you for participating in the study. The information you provide will be used only for the purpose for use in the research study. The interview will take about 60 minutes to complete. The information collected may not benefit you directly, but the information learned in this study should provide more general benefits to society at large.

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report we publish, we will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. All data will be kept in a locked file and will be destroyed after five years. While we will make every effort to ensure confidentiality anonymity cannot be completely guaranteed due to the small number to be studied.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decline to answer any particular question you do not wish to answer for any reason.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact Marlene DesMarais 612-XXX-XXXX or at desmarai@augsborg.edu. My Advisor is Elizabeth Ankeny, her phone number is 612-330-XXXX and email is Ankeny@augsborg.edu

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

I hereby give permission to the investigator, Marlene DesMarais, to use my information in the final copy of her action research project. I understand that pseudonyms will be used when discussing me being quoted and that I may withdraw from the study at any time. I also understand that I may skip any questions during the interview. I consent to participate in this study. I also give my consent to be audio taped for interview sessions.

Subject's Printed Name: _____

Subject's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Investigator's Printed Name: _____

Investigator's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B: Participant Interview Questions

1. Provide current demographic information about yourself: age, hometown, postsecondary institution attending/attended, major(s) and minor(s), years in school.
2. What are the most valuable skills you learned while in high school that you have used in postsecondary to help you be successful in your educational pursuit?
3. Along with those skills, how do you feel literacy skills played into your success?
4. Have you used the disability services at your post-secondary institution? If so, what services do/did you use? And, how did you go about accessing those services.
5. What impact do you feel having an IEP in high school has had on your postsecondary education? And, did you disclose to your postsecondary institution that you had an IEP in high school?
6. How many semesters were you enrolled in Study Skills classes or some type of special education support class while you were in high school?
7. What specific study skills did you learn that you feel you still apply to your studies/and or life today?
8. What effect do you feel your family perspectives on postsecondary education have had on your success?
9. If you could give one piece of advice to incoming freshmen, what would you tell them in terms of what skills are necessary to be successful in postsecondary education and training?