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STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES AND THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCES TRANSITIONING FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

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A Dissertation

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

_____

by

Barbara Ann Wucherpfennig

May 2024

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the transition of students with learning disabilities (LDs) from high school to junior college, focusing on self-advocacy, self-determination, and the impact of transition services. Conducted with students aged 18 to 23 in Riverside, California, through semi-structured interviews, it employs hermeneutic interpretative phenomenological analysis to merge participants' experiences with social justice theories. The research underscores the need for educational strategies that are inclusive and adaptive, catering to the unique challenges of students with LDs. Key themes found are Awareness and Application of Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination, the Role of High School Transition Services in College Preparedness, Guidance and Skill Development, Managing College Life, and Advice for Teachers and Students. These themes emphasize the critical role of transition programs and personalized guidance in fostering essential skills among students. The findings call for systemic reforms in education to ensure equitable support and opportunities for students with LDs, highlighting the importance of ongoing research and development in special education.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation stands as a testament to the eternal love and unwavering support of Cecilia Baumgarten, my mother, and April Baumgarten, my twin sister. Their nurturing spirits served as my guiding lights, inspiring me to chase my dreams and fueling my determination to overcome hurdles. The achievement of this work owes much to their unwavering belief in my potential and relentless encouragement. Their indelible presence in my life has left an imprint of gratitude that will forever linger. As the embodiment of inspiration and motivation, they transform from individuals who merely love and support into pillars of strength, belief, and resilience. They have donned the mantle of 'champions'—ones who bolster courage, encourage dreams, and infuse life with irreplaceable strength.

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

Chapter One offers a comprehensive overview of post-secondary and higher education opportunities available to students with learning disabilities (LDs) and analyzes the factors contributing to their low completion rate in college. The chapter begins by examining the condition of students with learning disabilities (LDs) in high school who receive Individualized Education Program (IEP) transition services, which aim to prepare them for higher education studies. The chapter then evaluates how students apply the knowledge and skills acquired through their IEP transition plan to their college experience. An appraisal is conducted on the effectiveness of IEP transition services in adequately preparing students with LDs for higher education, with a focus on self-advocacy and self-determination.

This brief rationale leads to the problem statement and the reasons, motivations, and significance that make this research and area of interest important.

Understanding Terminology in Inclusive Education

Before discussing the challenges and opportunities faced by students with learning disabilities in post-secondary education, it is essential to address the language and terminologies used throughout this dissertation. The choice of words in educational discourse is not merely a matter of semantics but reflects deeper values and perspectives. While striving for sensitivity and respect, it is

recognized that not all preferred terms are represented, and apologies are extended to those who may find the choices unsatisfactory. Key terms used include 'learning disabilities' (LDs), reflecting legal terminology, and 'disability,' used in a non-pejorative sense to encompass a broad spectrum of physical, cognitive, and learning differences. The term "parent" is broadly defined to include all forms of caregivers, and "team" encompasses the collective of students, caregivers, educators, and professionals involved in post-secondary planning. This approach aligns with Terzi's (2005) insights into inclusive language and the conceptual frameworks in special education, particularly focusing on inclusivity and capability.

Cultural Awareness in Educational Pathways

The scope of this dissertation extends beyond traditional four-year colleges to encompass a broader spectrum of post-secondary education paths, including vocational schools, junior colleges, and universities. This inclusive approach recognizes the diversity of educational aspirations and the unique demands of different post-secondary environments. Acknowledging the variety of transition outcomes students may pursue, this research does not seek to prioritize one path over another. Instead, the research suggests the importance of aligning educational choices with individual aspirations and cultural contexts. As Trainor (2005) highlighted, 'individuals from different cultures may have different visions of successful transition outcomes.' This study aims to illuminate the range of post-secondary options available, particularly for students with

disabilities, to guarantee they are well-informed about all potential educational trajectories.

While the first intention of the research was to encompass a wide range of post-secondary experiences, all participants in this study attend the same junior college. This occurrence was coincidental and does not reflect a narrowed focus or diminished respect for other post-secondary pathways. The emphasis remains on respecting and valuing the variety of post-secondary choices as equally valid and significant.

Background

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a defining period for many young individuals, and the high school experience plays a significant role in shaping this journey. Characterized by various social and academic activities, the high school offers quintessential American experiences such as sporting events, cultural festivities, and milestone celebrations (Gil, 2007). However, beneath this layer of social engagement, high school students are also faced with important decisions about their future. As they approach the culmination of their high school years, they deliberate on important choices, ranging from entering the workforce to exploring diverse post-secondary educational avenues like vocational schools, junior colleges, or universities.

This phase, however, presents distinct challenges for students with disabilities. Their high school experience, unlike that of their typical peers, is often marked by added hurdles that significantly impact their transition to

adulthood (Lindstrom et al., 2007; Trainor, 2010). These challenges can manifest in various forms, from navigating educational barriers to facing heightened risks of unemployment, under-education, and social exclusion post-graduation (Raghavan et al., 2013; Gil, 2007). Consequently, the support of family, school personnel, peers, and community resources becomes vital in aiding these students to make informed and confident decisions about their post-high school trajectory.

Building on this understanding of the high school experience, it is important to recognize that education is a crucial pillar in American society. Equal access to quality education for every student is an educational institution's moral and legal duty at all levels (Jung et al., 2019). This duty encompasses the inclusion of students with disabilities (SWD), as outlined by civil rights laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (White et al., 2014; Gruber, 2016). The importance of this legal framework cannot be overstated. Legal frameworks assure SWD have the same right to education as their typical peers, mandating the provision of suitable accommodations and support services to help their learning (Gruber, 2016). Therefore, it is essential for educational institutions to prioritize creating a fair and responsive environment that addresses the unique needs of students with disabilities, thereby offering them a pathway to successful outcomes.

While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) significantly contribute to the inclusion and

equity of individuals with disabilities, the practical application of these laws in the educational setting is complex. These laws, along with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Higher Education Act (HEA), and the post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, have led to a remarkable increase in the enrollment of students with documented disabilities in post-secondary education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2006), there were over 1.4 million such students in the United States, marking a significant rise since 1978.

However, despite this increase in access and enrollment, research shows that students with disabilities tend to have higher non-completion rates in post-secondary education compared to their typical peers. This trend varies depending on the nature and severity of the disability (Fox et al., 2003; NCES, 2009; Webster et al., 2005; Wessel et al., 2009). The data highlights the necessity to focus on factors influencing the non-completion rates of undergraduate students with disabilities.

Decades of research have explored various aspects influencing the integration of students with disabilities in primary and secondary schools, encompassing teacher attitudes, specialized teaching strategies, identification of learning disabilities, and the unique challenges these students meet (Sideridis & Chandler, 1997; Sharma & Desai, 2002; Reschly, 2005). Despite these policy advancements, the persistent challenges in higher education settings highlight the ongoing need to bridge the gap between policy and practice. This dichotomy

forms the basis of this study, framed within the social justice theoretical

framework, to address these enduring challenges.

<u>Students with Learning Disabilities Pursuing Post-Secondary Education</u>

Over the past decade, there has been a marked increase in the number of

individuals with disabilities and learning disabilities pursuing post-secondary

education, with figures climbing from 27% in 2003 to 57% in 2009 (Connor, 2012;

White et al., 2014). Despite this growth, the completion rate for students with

disabilities obtaining a bachelor's degree or higher remains significantly low at

12.2%, compared to 30.9% among their peers without disabilities (White et al.,

2014). This disparity in college completion rates significantly impacts the financial

independence and overall well-being of individuals with disabilities (Gruber &

Martin, 2019).

The rise in higher education enrollment among students with disabilities

signals a move towards more inclusive education and social integration. Still,

their significant struggles to meet degree requirements within 2-4 years are

noteworthy (White et al., 2014). Those unable to finish their higher education

often meet hurdles in a competitive job market, finding themselves less

competitive than their typical peers (Newman et al., 2011). The connection

between post-secondary education and job market success for individuals with

disabilities is well-established. Higher education opens doors to employment

opportunities post-graduation, as Newman et al. (2011) have shown. Meanwhile,

lacking higher education usually leads to greater employment challenges,

showing a gap in job market accessibility (White et al., 2014). With more students

with disabilities entering colleges, their consistently low graduation rates become

a pressing concern (Connor, 2012; White et al., 2014; Gruber & Martin, 2019).

<u>Educational Barriers for Students with Disabilities</u>

Numerous studies highlight the importance of encouraging essential life

skills, such as self-determination and self-advocacy, for students with disabilities

(SWD) to better equip them to manage future challenges (White et al., 2014;

Gruber, 2016). Nevertheless, the low graduation rates among SWD in higher

education are often attributed to their difficulties in obtaining suitable

accommodations and support services (White et al., 2014; Newman et al., 2019).

Newman et al. (2019) discovered that while 67% of young adults with disabilities

enrolled in post-secondary education within eight years of finishing high school,

their completion rates remained stagnant over the fifteen years between 1990

and 2005 (Newman et al., 2010, 2011). These findings indicate that providing

adequate support and accommodations is essential in improving the graduation

rate of SWD.

Considering the skills that high school graduates with disabilities have

gained through their IEP Transition Plans, assessing how competencies like self-

determination and self-advocacy translate to their ability to advocate for

necessary support services in college and beyond is crucial. To enhance the

support for students with disabilities transitioning to higher education, addressing

the obstacles they meet when seeking support services and accommodations is

imperative. Although students with disabilities are mandated to take part in IEP transition planning throughout high school, they often fail to develop crucial skills such as self-determination and self-advocacy by the time they graduate (Palmer & Roessler, 2000). This situation prompts an inquiry into whether the primary cause is the scarcity of resources in higher education institutions, including limited funding or insufficient staffing, or a deficiency in the student's skill set and competencies.

As Palmer and Roessler (2000) suggest, the need for more comprehensive training on self-advocacy skills is clear, considering a study revealing the outcomes of an eight-hour training program designed to aid college students with learning disabilities in requesting classroom accommodations and supports. This study found that K-12 students with disabilities (SWD) require extensive efforts and focus on developing these essential skills. Therefore, it is important to examine the effectiveness of transition services provided in high school and the degree to which they prepare SWD for higher education, especially in self-determination and self-advocacy.

In their recent study, Russell and Pearl (2020) presented an innovative solution to the challenges that first-year college students with disabilities face in securing accommodations for their disabilities in higher education. Their proposed virtual self-advocacy training program, Keys to Self-Advocacy Training, aims to equip students with the skills to effectively advocate for themselves and secure appropriate academic accommodations to support their degree

completion. This program serves as a key intervention to address the challenges faced by students with learning disabilities in higher education and may have significant implications for policy and practice.

To what extent do students with learning disabilities acquire the proper skills in high school? Does the Special Education Transition Program in high school equip students with the skills and knowledge to self-advocate effectively? Have they learned self-determination skills and self-advocacy skills? These are just a few of the questions this study intends to answer.

Special Education Individualized Transition Plans

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates the incorporation of individualized transition services within an Individualized Education Program (IEP), a requirement that has been emphasized throughout the literature (Sawyer, 2020). Transition services are defined by the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaboration (NTACT: C) as a "coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability" (NTACT: C, n.d., para. 1). The process of developing an IEP begins with an evaluation of the student's current functional level by the case carrier. The IEP team then uses this information to set goals to improve college and career readiness, overall education, and independent living abilities (Transition Services, 2021). IDEA mandates special education to provide personalized transition services to support students reach these goals. Transition planning must take place before the student turns 16 (California Department of Education, n.d.). The purpose of

the IEP transition plan is to increase the likelihood that students pursue post-secondary education and achieve positive lifelong outcomes (California Department of Education, n.d.).

<u>Participation in the Individualized Transition Plan</u>

Given the importance of the IEP transition plan, the student must take part actively in its development. Sawyer (2020) highlights the significance of transition preparation in developing and applying self-advocacy and self-determination skills. Regular IEP transition planning meetings enable students to articulate their strengths and limitations, delineate their disability and accommodation needs, set goals that align with their interests and aspirations, and articulate their future career goals (Havranek, 1998; Havranek, 1999; Paradiz et al., 2018). The Transition Coalition has emphasized the importance of regular attendance at IEP meetings as a best practice for cultivating self-advocacy and self-determination skills. Notable and legally mandated is the annual evaluation of these goals to help the development and maturation of students (California Department of Education, 2023).

<u>Role of Self-determination and Self-advocacy in Transition Services</u>

Self-determination and self-advocacy are cornerstones of special education and transition services. These principles can be traced back to the Civil Rights and independent living movements (Wehmeyer, 1992). In the 1980s, the significance of self-determination and self-advocacy in special education, especially their impact on successfully transitioning students with disabilities

(SWD) into maturity, got recognition and legislative backing. The inclusion of self-determination and self-advocacy in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 was a significant milestone that legally acknowledged the role of these principles in promoting positive outcomes for SWD (Havranek, 1998; Havranek, 1999).

<u>IDEA 2004 Requirements for Transition Services</u>

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, the IEP must include measurable post-secondary goals derived from assessments of the child's independent living skills, education, training, and employment preparedness. In addition, the necessary transition services, such as the course of study, should be included to help the child achieve these goals (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The federal IDEA guidelines suggest an annual evaluation of transition assessments emphasizing employment, post-secondary education and training, and independent living skills. The planning process should consider all aspects of life after high school. The National Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) highlights a few recommended practices supported by scientific evidence:

1. At least one transition service should correspond to each post-secondary outcome.
2. The IEP should outline transition services that seek to improve students' academic and functional achievements to help them transition from school

to post-school activities (Havranek, 1998; Havranek, 1999; Paradiz et al., 2018).

3. Transition services should include academic and functional activities, supports, and services (Paradiz et al., 2018).

<u>Efficacy of Transition Plan in High School</u>

Effective transition planning for students with disabilities (SWD) is essential and is mandated within the Individualized Education Program (IEP) framework. The IEP transition plan is vital to fulfill legal requirements and promote inclusivity and equal opportunities. This initiative aims to grant SWD access to free public education (FAPE), equipping them with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources for full participation in educational programs and activities. However, challenges still need to be addressed in implementing these plans. Research, including that of Landmark and Zhang (2013), shows that SWD often do not fully develop crucial skills like self-determination and self-advocacy. Landmark and Zhang's (2012) study revealed a concerning trend: compliance with required transition procedures in IEPs was inconsistent, and the effective application of best practices varied depending on the student's disability and ethnicity. Their findings emphasize the need for improved adherence to IEP standards and the adoption of effective practices to promote better outcomes for SWD.

Notwithstanding the strong interest in facilitating students' participation, research showed that the involvement of students with disabilities (SWD) in their

transitional program is 1) less frequent than expected, 2) the determination of transition rests on the teachers' and parents' opinions, and 3) little participation of students in the IEP process (Agran & Hughes, 2008), all of which represent a notorious failure of the active incorporation of SWD into higher education.

Despite a national emphasis on encouraging self-determination and active student participation in Individualized Education Program (IEP) planning, there are indications of a need for more student engagement in these processes. Empirical evidence points to the need for more extensive opportunities for student involvement in IEP development and self-determination instruction (Banks, 2014). This gap is primarily based on feedback from parents and teachers, with limited direct input from the students (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2016).

Moreover, effective transition planning is crucial for successful transitions to post-secondary settings. These plans must be developed collaboratively with students, focusing on their interests, needs, and abilities and promoting self-determination and self-advocacy (Foley et al., 2012; Test et al., 2010). Active student participation in transition planning promotes empowerment and a greater sense of self-determination (Gil, 2007). Conversely, less involved students may face higher unemployment rates and under-education post-high school (Lindsay et al., 2012). The K-12 education system often supports a dependency culture, neglecting to prepare students adequately for the autonomy needed in higher education. This shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach in

educational planning is vital for students, especially those with disabilities, as they transition to more independent learning environments in higher education (Winn & Hay, 2009; Foley et al., 2012; McCall, 2015).

In short, the transitional process of students with disabilities (SWD) has been the focus of many research studies in the last two decades (Defur et al., 1994; Martin & Marshall, 1996; Kohler & Field, 2003; Petcu et al., 2014). However, SWD still do not seem prepared for higher education, and little research has been conducted on their perceptions of the transitional process.

Transition to College and Adult Life

Significant factors will affect the preparedness of students with learning disabilities (LDs) for higher education. According to the research of Villalobos-Weilhammer (2012), the transition from high school to adult life can be challenging for any student but proves to be exceedingly difficult for this population, showing that these students fall significantly behind their peers in the areas of post-secondary employment, education, and independent living. The findings suggest that transitioning from a K-12 setting, where teachers are primarily responsible for their students' success, to a college setting, where students are accountable for their success, involves significant adjustments (Hadley, 2006).

According to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, higher education institutions must provide support services and accommodations to students with disabilities;

however, these students are now responsible for claiming and self-advocating for access to the said accommodations and supports, proving their self-determination (Wehmeyer & Schalock, 2001). Researchers have found that for students with learning disabilities to transition from high school to college successfully, they require not only the development of new skills but also a behavioral change to navigate the change from one educational environment to another (Hadley et al., 2003).

As students with learning disabilities (LDs) transition from high school to college, they confront insurmountable changes affecting their academic outcomes and lifelong success. Here, 'success' implies not only the achievement of personalized academic goals but also the development of self-advocacy, social-emotional well-being, and the ability to participate fully in the school community. Furthermore, success includes the student's ability to thrive in the marketplace and gain meaningful employment. Therefore, it is essential to evaluate the adequacy of IEP transition services and their role in instilling the ideas of self-determination and self-advocacy. These services should lead to students who know how to request and seek out the accommodations and support services they are entitled to, thereby equipping them to succeed in academia and the job market. Despite efforts to reform educational disability rights regulation and improve post-secondary outcomes, statistics suggest that students with disabilities face a substantial risk of dropping out of college. They often meet challenges, including poverty, depression, and anxiety, compared to

their counterparts without disabilities (Newman et al., 2009). Crafting IEPs that fulfill legal and academic criteria for transition services is still a significant challenge for educators and academic institutions (Petcu et al., 2014).

Transition planning holds significant importance for leaders in special education, influencing the future success of students with LDs in post-secondary settings. Studies by Bakken (2019) and Petcu et al. (2014) delve into the roles of different participants in the transition from high school to higher education. Bakken (2019) emphasizes the value of involving students actively in their transition plans. Findings suggest ongoing support is necessary for students with LDs throughout their academic journeys. Thus, incorporating students' perspectives on their families, schools, and communities into transition planning is vital (Bakken, 2019). Prioritizing the students' needs and gathering input from all essential parties guarantee a smooth transition.

The American educational system highly values the involvement of diverse stakeholders in creating IEPs and transition plans to adequately cater to the needs of students with special education requirements. Despite the focus on developing IEPs and transition plans for students with disabilities, it is still unknown whether the IEP adequately prepares students for the rigors of higher education (Newman et al., 2011). Notably, the self-advocacy part poses a significant challenge as students struggle to voice their concerns, opinions, and input, often leading to unmet needs and challenges during their education (Martin et al., 1993; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Hadley, 2006; Sebag, 2010; Grella,

2014). This issue has garnered interest for several decades. Martin et al. (1993) saw that students who complete special education programs in the United States often struggle with self-advocacy and lack direction, relying on their professors, teacher's aides, and parents to make decisions about their future and chart a course to achieve their educational aspirations (White et al., 2014; Allen, 1989). The researcher thus raises an important question about whether these students are adequately prepared to navigate higher education independently and advocate for their own needs to obtain the required accommodations and support services.

The current study highlights potential inadequacies in transitional training and schooling for students with learning disabilities, questioning how these programs prepare students for the complexities of contemporary society. As shown by empirical studies, the literature holds evidence of dissatisfaction among respondents toward transition services (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). In addition, Petcu et al. (2014) highlighted the shortcomings of transition programs, as court rulings have revealed that the most frequent breaches of transition services include:

- deficiencies in developing the transition plan,
- involving the appropriate parties in IEP meetings,
- considering the student's strengths and interests,
- ensuring parental involvement in transition planning and
- establishing appropriate post-secondary goals.

The noted limitations show a need for more attention to students' unique needs during the transition process, which can impede their success beyond secondary education. The results of this study emphasize the importance of developing more personalized and effective transition programs that address the unique needs of students with disabilities better to equip them for success in post-secondary education and beyond. Therefore, raising awareness among the people charged with supporting a student's transition planning must be a priority, and efforts are needed in this sense. Bakken (2019) advocates for the active involvement of students in shaping their transition process, asserting that their direct participation is vital for effective transition planning. This idea reinforces the urgent need for more focused research to deeply understand and give voice to students' perceptions and experiences about their transition planning.

Research highlights the significance of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in fostering self-advocacy and self-determination skills among students with disabilities. These competencies are pivotal for post-secondary education and subsequent life stages (Sanches-Ferreira et al., 2013).However, the effectiveness of IEPs in teaching these skills varies, often leaving students underprepared (Thompson et al., 2009). In the study, Avant (2013) shows the need for IEP teams to formulate comprehensive achievement and support plans, measurable learning goals, and benchmarks for assessing progress. On the other hand, Laalje (2020) highlights a gap in IEPs for students with highly

individualized coursework, pointing out that these often need more functional content integral for post-secondary readiness.

Sanches-Ferreira et al. (2013) show a common issue with IEPs: they focus on the student's disability type and deficits rather than the support they need to lead a fulfilling life. To be effective, IEPs must be well-planned and balanced, with equal emphasis on the student's specific challenges and the functional skills they need to develop, such as self-determination and self-advocacy. Thompson et al. (2009) also stress the importance of support plans, measurable learning goals, and progress benchmarks in IEPs. However, Sanches-Ferreira et al. (2013) suggest that IEP goals are often inadequately written, leading to a decline in quality as students advance in their education.

While research has provided insights into the experiences of students with disabilities in high school and higher education settings, including their involvement in Individualized Education Program (IEP) planning (Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Landmark & Zhang, 2013; Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2016), a specific area that still is under-explored is the lived experiences of students with learning disabilities (LDs) during their transition from high school to post-secondary education. This study aims to contribute to the existing empirical data by focusing on the unique experiences of these students, particularly about transition planning and the development of vital life skills such as self-advocacy and self-determination. The intent is to deepen our understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by students with LDs as they prepare for life beyond high

school, an area where research has shown a need for more targeted investigation (Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007; Brinckerhoff et al., 1992; Finn & Kohler, 2009; Bhaumik et al., 2011; Banks, 2014; McCall, 2015).

Problem Statement

The transition from high school to higher education can be a daunting experience for students with learning disabilities (LDs), who often face significant challenges that can affect their college completion rates and future career prospects. Despite the mandated provision of transition services to equip these students with self-advocacy and self-determination skills to succeed in higher education, the effectiveness of these services still needs to be better understood, and the barriers to student success have yet to be fully identified. This study aims to fill this gap in understanding by pinpointing these obstacles and suggesting ways to improve the effectiveness of transition services and support for students with LDs. By focusing on self-advocacy and self-determination skills, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities for promoting educational equity and social justice for students with LDs.

Significance of Study

Since the 1980s, the United States federal government has actively sought to advance the education of students with disabilities (SWD) through legislative measures such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Huefner, 2000). As part of these efforts, amendments were introduced to

guarantee that students with learning disabilities received the necessary support to transition to higher education or employment. Kohler and Field (2003) highlighted the importance of the 1990 amendments, which mandated providing transition services to SWD. They emphasized the need for such services to be tailored to each student's needs, interests, and preferences.

In addition, transition support in IEPs has been mandated since 1997, focusing on the student's courses and post-school goals (Kohler & Field, 2003). The framework established by the IDEA for active participation is now integral to mapping students' IEPs. The 1990 and 1997 amendments to the IDEA have needed a more collaborative approach to education and service planning for individuals with disabilities. According to IDEA, students are expected to take an active role in planning their transition to adult life, with their preferences and interests considered when planning transition services. This idea confirms the importance of individuals with disabilities having a voice in their education and the ability to shape their future.

The emphasis on empowering students to self-advocate and exercise self-determination is a significant outcome of this requirement (Kohler & Field, 2003). Students are encouraged to actively take part in their IEP meetings and make choices about their education, emphasizing the importance of their involvement in the process. This requirement highlights the importance of considering the preferences, strengths, and needs of students with learning disabilities during the transition process and ensuring they receive the support they need to succeed.

Despite the efforts to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities (SWD) in education, studies suggest that their active engagement and participation in transition planning fall below the desired level (Petcu et al., 2014; Bakken, 2019). To further understand this issue, many scholars have emphasized the importance of capturing the experiences and perspectives of SWD in their own words, especially concerning the transition from high school to college (Cefai & Cooper, 2010).

Additionally, research has examined educators' attitudes toward including students with disabilities in their classrooms. Pearson et al. (2015) used a survey called *Attitudes of Teachers of Students with Significant Disabilities about Aspects of Their Jobs.* Pearson et al. (2015) found a significant relationship between increased inclusion rates and positive teacher attitudes toward their job. They stated: "These results expand the field of inclusion research from having a positive impact on students to demonstrating a significant relationship between increased rates of inclusion and positive teacher attitudes toward aspects of their job" (p.81).

This study aims to contribute valuable information to the research on integrating students with learning disabilities into higher education, specifically in Riverside County and across the United States. The focus of this research is to explore and understand the lived experiences of students in special education to improve their transitional services, with a particular emphasis on self-advocacy and self-determination, during their high school years. The goal is to facilitate the

effective transition and inclusion of marginalized special education students into higher education, as well as into society and the workforce, through the development of key skills.

Purpose Statement

This qualitative-interpretive study aimed to explore and analyze the perspectives of students with learning disabilities (LDs) on their transition from high school to higher education. It examined the types of IEP transition services also known as the individualized transition plan (ITP), provided to former students with LDs during their high school years. The study assessed whether research-based standards were effectively implemented, and which specific life skills were taught. This research investigated how students with LDs have acquired and used self-advocacy and self-determination skills, recognized as vital components for student achievement. The State of California mandates that transition programs should incorporate these abilities.

Research Questions

In examining the challenging outcomes faced by students with learning disabilities (LD) after graduation, this study focused on their lived experiences. Emphasizing the importance of self-determination and self-advocacy, which develop over time, it investigated how students with LDs acquired and used these skills for improved outcomes. The literature highlights many factors, with

self-advocacy as the key to developing self-determination and enhancing life

quality. Table 1 below outlines the primary and associated research questions:

Table 1

Central Research Question and Three Sub-questions

Central Research Question
What are the lived experiences of students with learning disabilities (LDs) during their transition from high school to post-secondary education?
Research Sub-questions
1) How do students with LDs perceive the effectiveness of high school IEP transition services in preparing them for post-secondary education, particularly concerning their development of self-advocacy and self-determination skills?
2) What challenges and successes have students with LDs experienced during their transition into higher education, particularly related to the use of self-advocacy and self-determination skills?
3) According to college students with LDs, what practices can teachers use to promote the development of self-advocacy and self-determination skills?

Expected Contributions to Knowledge

This study investigated the post-secondary outcomes of high school

students with learning disabilities LDs, focusing on factors contributing to their

success. It particularly examined the role of support services in transitional plans

and the development of self-advocacy and self-determination skills. The study's

contributions were threefold: it expanded current knowledge on post-secondary

outcomes, informed best practices and interventions, and laid the groundwork for

further quantitative research. The study showed important support services and

skills to help students with LDs achieve their goals. Additionally, the findings have the potential to inform policy changes that better support the transitional needs of this population, ultimately improving their lives.

Theoretical Framework and Assumptions

The struggle for social inclusion among students with disabilities (SWD) and the acquisition and practice of important skills such as self-advocacy and self-determination are examples of social injustice. According to social justice theory, self-advocacy and self-determination are key concepts in promoting social inclusion for SWD. Furthermore, social justice and education are strongly connected, focusing on enhancing equity, fair distribution, and access to educational resources while closing the achievement gap among marginalized populations (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Zajda et al., 2006).

This study investigated how students with disabilities, more specifically 'learning disabilities' (LDs) are successfully included in higher education by employing a social justice framework. Key concepts such as self-advocacy and self-determination were central to this framework, which enabled students to overcome obstacles and achieve liberation (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). The social justice theory emphasizes the importance of ensuring equal access to resources, opportunities, and privileges for all members of society (Young, 1990). By employing this framework, the study shed light on integrating students with LDs into higher education and promoting their success.

<u>Assumptions</u>

In this research, several fundamental assumptions are considered pivotal. Firstly, we take for granted the veracity of the intersectionality of oppression, where students with learning disabilities (LDs) meet unique forms of marginalization and powerlessness that influence their educational journey. This viewpoint sets up the theoretical foundation for our inquiry. Secondly, the research posits that our study participants, drawn from the population of students with LDs in higher education, will offer honest and precise responses. This assumption is vital as the authenticity of our findings hinges on the truthfulness of these answers.

Moreover, it is presumed that our sample offers a fair representation of the larger group despite its acknowledged diversity. Also, expect a certain degree of similarity in our participants' educational experiences, allowing broader conclusions to be drawn. Lastly, the research assumes that educational institutions can substantially alleviate the impact of marginalization experienced by students with learning disabilities (LDs). With proper resources and opportunities, these students have the potential to flourish in higher education. Each of these suppositions directs our research, shaping our data collection, interpretation of findings, and next recommendations, thereby ensuring a credible, valid, and transparent basis for our study on social justice in education for students with LDs.

Delimitations of Topic

Due to the broad range of disabilities among students, this study focused on those with specific learning disabilities (LDs). By narrowing the scope to this group, the research aimed to gain a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of their experiences during the transition process. Participants were recruited from those who had attended comprehensive high schools within Riverside and San Bernardino Counties and were currently enrolled in neighboring junior colleges at the time of the study. Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured in-person interviews with a sample group of 7-10 participants.

A triangulation technique was employed to minimize the researcher's biases and increase objectivity, thereby ensuring the trustworthiness and validity of the study. This technique enabled other scholars to replicate the study in comparative contexts with similar characteristics. Ultimately, this study aimed to contribute to the existing literature by exploring the lived experiences of students with LDs during the transition process and to inform best practices and interventions that promote positive outcomes for this population.

Clarification of Terms

While the term "students with disabilities (SWD)" is utilized broadly to situate the literature and discussions within a larger educational context, the research precisely targets "students with learning disabilities (LDs)"—also referred to as "LD" in various academic publications. This focused approach is driven by an intention to narrow the investigation to a subgroup that not only

constitutes a sizable portion of the student population in educational settings but also faces distinct challenges and successes in post-secondary education. Concentrating on students with LDs allows for the extraction of detailed insights into the specific reasons these individuals might struggle or succeed as they transition into higher education settings. The distinction between the general category of *SWD* and the specific subgroup of students with *LDs* is vital to the accuracy of the study's findings and recommendations.

Description of Terms

The following terms were used consistently throughout this research study and are defined for this dissertation:

Accommodations & Services: Accommodations and services are "modifications or supports that provide equal access to education and learning opportunities for students with disabilities" (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Examples of accommodations and services include extended time for exams, note-taking assistance, sign-language interpreters, and accessible technology.

Case Manager: A case manager, also known as a case carrier in special education, is a professional responsible for coordinating and overseeing the implementation of services and supports for students with disabilities. This role typically involves ensuring that the provisions of a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) are effectively executed. The case manager serves as a key liaison among educators, specialists, families, and students, easing communication and collaboration to meet the unique educational needs of each

student. They are instrumental in monitoring progress, adjusting strategies as needed, and ensuring compliance with legal and educational guidelines. This role is paramount in promoting an inclusive and supportive educational environment that caters to the diverse needs of students with disabilities (Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2023)

Challenges: The term "challenges," in the context of this dissertation, refers to the complex barriers and obstacles that students with disabilities meet in their educational journey and during the transition from high school to post-secondary life. These comprehensive challenges encompass academic, social, emotional, self-advocacy, and institutional dimensions, influencing these students' ability to succeed and fulfill their potential.

Disability: A physical or mental impairment substantially limiting one or more major life activities. The definition of disability may vary depending on the context and the legal or regulatory framework (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 USC §§ 12101-12213, 2018).

Disability Services (DS) / Disability Resource Centers (DRC): Educational institutions are specialized departments that support and accommodate students with disabilities. These services offer equitable educational opportunities, inclusive learning environments, and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance. DS/DRCs help coordinate accommodations, offer guidance on disability rights, and provide resources for students and faculty to facilitate an

accessible and supportive educational experience for students with disabilities (Hadley et al., 2003).

IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004): IDEA is a law in the United States that guarantees students with disabilities the right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) from kindergarten through grade twelve. The law requires schools to provide IEPs and other supports and services to students with disabilities (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 20 USC §§ 1400-1482, 2019).

IEP (Individualized Education Program): A comprehensive, collaboratively developed document involving a team of professionals and the student's parents or guardians. This program documents students' present levels and needs and outlines specific goals. The IEP delineates the necessary accommodations, modifications, and services to guarantee the student's access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) throughout their K-12 education (National Center on Disability and Access to Education, n.d.).

IEP Team: A group of professionals, including teachers, parents or guardians, and specialists, who develop and implement an IEP for a student with a disability (National Center on Disability and Access to Education, n.d.).

The Individual Transition Plan (ITP): ITP is a documented strategy that guides students' transitions from school to post-school life. As stipulated by 20 U.S.C. Sec. 1401(34) and Cal. Ed. Code Secs. 56462 & 56345.1, the ITP is

crafted based on the student's unique needs, preferences, and interests, ensuring alignment with their personal goals. The plan includes specific goals, timelines, and designated individuals responsible for achieving these objectives. Integral to the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), the ITP is a roadmap for adulthood, encompassing further education, employment, and independent living.

Learning Disability: A neurological condition that affects a person's ability to learn and process information. Learning disabilities can affect a person's ability to read, write, or do math, impacting other skills such as memory and organization (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2021).

Lived experience: In the context of students with disabilities, it refers to the personal, subjective realities they meet while pursuing educational goals. These realities span social, physical, and institutional environments and are shaped by societal norms and institutional practices. Lived experiences encompass day-to-day interactions, the influence of societal norms and institutional laws, and perceptions, emotions, and reactions to the unfolding events (Hughes, 2023). As McIntosh and Wright (2019) discuss, the concept of 'lived experience' also supports the recognition and voice, especially for those facing marginalization or invisibility, such as students with disabilities. Therefore, lived experiences offer an in-depth, nuanced understanding of the complexities, challenges, and triumphs these individuals negotiate in their educational journey and personal growth.

Post-secondary education: Pursuits following high school completion encompassing two- and four-year academic institutions and vocational training programs beyond the secondary level (PACER's National Parent Center on Transition and Employment, 2009).

Self-Advocacy: The ability of individuals with disabilities to advocate for themselves and make decisions about their own lives. Self-advocacy may involve developing skills such as communication, problem-solving, and decision-making (Bangser, 2008)

Self-Determination: The ability of individuals with disabilities to make choices and direct their own lives. Self-determination involves developing goal-setting, decision-making, and problem-solving skills (National Gateway to Self-Determination, 2021).

Special Education: Instruction and support provided to students with disabilities to help them succeed in school. Special education may involve modifications to the curriculum, accommodations, and other supports and services (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 20 USC §§ 1400-1482, 2019).

Social Justice: Terzi (2005), defines social justice as emphasizing equitable treatment and inclusion of individuals with disabilities, focusing on expanding their *'capabilities'* and opportunities within educational and societal systems.

Success: Success for students with disabilities extends beyond academic metrics, encapsulating the achievement of tailored educational goals and life skills. It involves social integration, emotional balance, self-advocacy, and the effective transition to post-school activities. Success is the capacity to navigate educational and life challenges, using support systems to thrive personally and socially (Raskind et al., 2003).

Supports: Kauffman et al. (2017) found that in educational settings, support for students with disabilities involves adjusting the teaching or environmental components to improve or support the performance of these students. Such supports may involve incorporating assistive technology, customized educational materials, adjustments to the curriculum, and the availability of supplementary services such as occupational therapy or speech-language pathology.

Students with Disabilities: Students with Disabilities (SWDs) is a term used to refer to students who have been identified as having a disability as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (20 USC § 1400 et seq.). The term encompasses a wide range of disabilities, including but not limited to intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, visual impairments, hearing impairments, speech and language impairments, and emotional or behavioral disorders. These students may require specialized instructional support and accommodations to participate in academic programs and succeed academically.

The term SWD is commonly used in education to refer to this population of

students (National Center for Learning Disabilities, n.d.).

Transition: The process of preparing individuals with disabilities to move

from one life stage to another, such as from school to work or from living at home

to living independently (Special Education Law, 2004).

Transition Services: Services and supports provided to individuals with

disabilities to help them transition from one life stage to another. Transition

services may include vocational training, job coaching, and independent living

skills training (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004,

20 USC §§ 1400-1482, 2019).

Chapter Summary

Chapter One sets the stage for the study by presenting the problem

statement and the rationale behind the need for further research on the lived

experiences of students with learning disabilities (LDs) in high school and

transitioning into post-secondary education. The focus will be on the

competencies these students acquire through transition planning services and

their opportunities for higher education. This study will use a social justice

framework to examine equity in the American educational system. The chapter

outlines the research questions guiding the study, the underlying assumptions,

and the motivation for conducting the investigation. Key terms are defined, and

the delimitations of the study are clearly stated. Chapter one comprehensively

overviews the study's purpose, goals, and method.

CHAPTER TWO:

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Two begins by discussing research that explores the development of self-determination and self-advocacy skills. This chapter will define *social justice* as the overarching theoretical framework guiding this investigation. Through the lens of social justice theories, this study examines students' lived experiences with learning disabilities. Given the breadth and complexity of the social justice field, this study examines the perspectives on social justice by three prominent figures: Iris Young, Nancy Fraser, and Martha Nussbaum. Their ideas offer significant assistance and support to this study in valuable ways.

Overview of the Individualized Transitional Plan

The following section provides an overview of the components of transition planning implemented by many public high schools in the United States. These programs aim to equip students with learning disabilities (LDs) with the necessary skills to succeed in college and beyond.

Self-determination and self-advocacy skills are fundamental to transition planning in public high schools. Special and general education teachers are tasked with teaching these skills as part of the IEP transition services. Bouck (2011), Bouck and Park (2018), and Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003) note that these abilities are vital for employment success, leisure activities, and enhancing life quality in adulthood for students with disabilities.

Wehmeyer et al. (1998) contend that teachers' preconceived notions of students' intellectual capacity can restrict the student's ability to learn and apply self-advocacy and self-determination skills. However, research has proven consistent and prolonged cultivation can develop and refine these abilities (Wehmeyer et al., 1998). The absence of these skills can hinder the acquisition of autonomy, self-regulation, problem-solving, goal setting, task performance, psychological empowerment, and self-realization, all vital for achieving success in post-secondary education and other aspects of life (Wehmeyer et al., 2013). Wehman (2006) notes that integrating and promoting these competencies in the curriculum can enhance education, employment, and community integration for students with disabilities, regardless of IQ or other individual factors. These skills can be acquired and refined over an extended period, affording students with LDs ample time to develop these skills before transitioning to adulthood.

Including self-determination strategies in student-directed learning is essential for students with LDs to achieve successful and independent lives (Wehman, 2006; Wehmeyer, 2013). However, Wehmeyer et al. (1998) found that teachers' attitudes often limit the implementation of these skills. Despite these challenges, Gibbons et al. (2015) showed that with the necessary supports and services, students with LDs in post-secondary education can attain these skills and achieve positive post-secondary outcomes. Prioritizing developing and nurturing self-determination and self-advocacy skills in students with LDs can

enhance their ability to navigate various systems and advocate for their needs,

ultimately contributing to their overall well-being and success beyond graduation.

<u>Training Programs for Students with Learning Disabilities</u>

The issue of post-secondary success for students with LDs has been the

subject of extensive research. Many studies focus on the effectiveness of

competency training programs in colleges and universities. However, despite the

assumption that students with LDs enter higher education with the competencies

they need to succeed, many need help navigating college or university's complex

academic and social environment.

To address this challenge, researchers have increasingly focused on the

value of self-advocacy and self-determination training programs for students with

LDs at the higher education level. Palmer and Roessler (2000) examined the

effectiveness of a training program for students with LDs in higher education. The

study found that students who received the training were better able to pass their

competencies for self-advocacy at the institution and showed higher levels of

self-advocacy and conflict resolution behaviors, general knowledge of academic

accommodations, requesting accommodations, conflict resolution, self-efficacy,

and social competence. Other researchers have similarly emphasized the

importance of self-advocacy training programs in preparing students with LDs for

post-secondary education (Russell & Pearl, 2020).

In contrast, many high school transitional services embedded in classes,

such as Job Skills, Study Skills, or AVID, are insufficient in providing the life skills

that students with LDs require for career readiness, college admission, and graduation. This lack of emphasis on necessary skills for students with disabilities indicates a violation of social justice principles, particularly when educational rights and resources are not distributed equitably for this population of students. Research has shown that the right to education and the proper distribution of resources for students with LDs is only sometimes guaranteed, leading to the conclusion that these students are often excluded from the benefits of social justice (Astramovich & Harris, 2007; Landmark & Zhang, 2013; Rioux, 2013).

Given this situation, it is important to examine the issue of social justice as it relates to the education of students with LDs and to consider the legislative obligations designed to safeguard their inclusion. While there have been many federal efforts to protect the rights of students with disabilities, these efforts have not always resulted in social justice for this population. Many students with disabilities still face barriers to accessing educational resources necessary for post-secondary education and are exposed to further social and economic vulnerability (White et al., 2014; Gruber, 2016). This reality highlights the continued need to prioritize social justice for students with LDs and provide the resources and supports necessary for their academic and professional success.

Social Justice for Students with Learning Disabilities

Schools run within complex economic and cultural contexts that significantly influence their practices and objectives (Barida et al., 2020). These

educational institutions are committed to preparing students with diverse abilities and backgrounds for success in various professional fields. However, societal biases and misconceptions about individuals with disabilities often challenge this mission (Barida et al., 2020; Rioux, 2013). According to Rioux (2013), biases suggesting that individuals with disabilities are less capable of reaching educational and developmental milestones due to cognitive or physical challenges are deepened by standard assessments and narrow educational theories. These approaches prioritize normative achievement and conformity, overlooking the importance of individual differences and diverse learning styles (Rioux, 2013). This approach can undermine education as a fundamental human right, as entrenched power structures often prioritize efficiency and profitability over inclusivity and social justice.

Adding to these challenges, students with disabilities meet multiple barriers that hinder their full participation and success in higher education. These obstacles include lower performance expectations and prevalent discriminatory attitudes from the higher education community, including students, faculty, and staff (Barida et al., 2020; Hanafin et al., 2007; Gómez & Fernández, 2018). Assessment practices, such as traditional written examinations with strict time constraints, often do not accommodate these students, thereby discriminating against students with disabilities who process and express knowledge differently (Hanafin et al., 2007). Recognizing that disabilities impact individuals in many

ways, it is crucial to adopt a flexible and continually adaptive approach in higher education to cater to the diverse needs of all students (Escrivá & Pagán, 2022).

Rioux (2013) suggests that this situation is worrying, as it highlights a lack of progress in providing education for students with disabilities despite advancements in the social justice movement. Even with legal safeguards and anti-discriminatory policies, students with disabilities still face significant barriers to educational access and achievement (Vogel et al.,1999). The continued marginalization of students with disabilities reflects a fundamental failure to recognize their right to an education and the wider societal obligation to provide the necessary supports for their academic success. Moreover, the negative perception of individuals with disabilities further reinforces the view that the current education system and its social justice practices are insufficient. The social justice framework should guide educational policies that promote equity and access for all students, regardless of their disabilities, to ensure they are empowered to take part in and contribute to society (Connor et al., 2008).

Consequently, students with disabilities often find themselves sidelined from mainstream social and economic advancements, leading to limited access to higher education opportunities (Rioux, 2013). This section is structured as follows:

1. It introduces the three principal perspectives on social justice in education.
2. Subsequently, it outlines the key concepts derived from each perspective for this study, complemented by a diagram depicting their interrelations.

3. A comparative analysis of the three social justice perspectives ensues, elucidating their commonalities and distinctions.

4. Lastly, the section delves into the aspects incorporated from these perspectives, culminating in a comprehensive diagram that encapsulates these elements.

<div align="center">Social Justice: Theories from Literature</div>

Efforts to promote social justice for individuals with disabilities have been ongoing for decades, with multiple conceptions of what social justice should entail. Bengt Nirje's (1969) work is a necessary contribution in this area, as he argued for creating an environment for individuals with disabilities that closely resembled the typical development environment. Nirje emphasized that normalizing the lives of people with disabilities was crucial to safeguard their full incorporation into family life and society. His work provided theoretical foundations that guided all efforts to integrate individuals with disabilities into society.

Building on Nirje's work, Wolfensberger et al. (1972) proposed a management model for fully incorporating individuals with disabilities into society. Their work aimed to prove the most appropriate ways to support the rights of individuals with disabilities, examining aspects of independence, self-determination, and social programs like health and education services. The principle of normalization highlighted the need for individuals with disabilities to be encouraged to advocate for themselves and their needs, asserting that they

have the same rights as other individuals. In this way, Wolfensberger et al. paved the way for greater inclusion and support for people with disabilities (1972).

Nirje's work and the normalization principle became the foundation for what is now known as the social model of disability. This model posits that the social and physical environment, rather than the individual's impairments or medical conditions, are the primary causes of disability. This perspective emphasizes the need to create a supportive environment that promotes the full integration of individuals with disabilities into all aspects of society (Shakespeare, 2006).

Wolfensberger (1998) developed the concept of "social role valorization," emphasizing the need for individuals with disabilities to have a valued social position and role within their community. This principle holds that individuals with disabilities should be recognized and valued for their contributions to society rather than seen as burdens or objects of pity (Wolfensberger, 1998). Both Nirje and Wolfensberger paved the way for social justice for individuals with disabilities by empowering them to express their experiences and expectations. Nirje and Wolfensberger (1998;2013) advocated for a supportive environment that promoted independence, self-determination, and access to health and education services. The theoretical foundations provided by these authors continue to guide efforts to prioritize the choices, desires, and aspirations of individuals with disabilities and to promote inclusivity and equity in society.

This study examines the work of three influential social justice scholars - Iris Young, Nancy Fraser, and Martha Nussbaum - to develop a comprehensive framework for understanding social justice principles and their potential impact on education and special education. Iris Young's perspective is presented as a foundational part of the framework.

<center>Iris Young's Perspective on Social Justice</center>

According to Gewirtz's (1998) analysis of Young's perspective on social justice, this complex concept has two distinct dimensions. The first, termed the distributive dimension, is concentrated on the fair distribution of goods in society. Meanwhile, the relational dimension emphasizes the importance of the social bonds and connections that underpin our societal structure. The relational dimension refers to a holistic perception of the "inter-connections between individuals in society, rather than with how much individuals get" (Gewirtz, 1998, p.471).

Young's approach to social justice clarifies the necessity of acknowledging and rectifying the inequalities and exclusions enabled by societal structures and institutions. She posits that justice should be viewed as a collective and political ideal rather than merely a result of individual responsibility or choice. Furthermore, Young (1990) highlights the necessity of valuing marginalized groups' varied experiences and viewpoints in the quest for social justice.

Gewirtz's (1998) examination of Young's social justice framework is necessary for its insights into the involved nature of social justice, particularly

<center>43</center>

regarding education and special education. This analysis acknowledges the significance of social justice's distributive and relational aspects (Gewirtz, 1998). Recognizing these dimensions enables educators and policymakers to devise approaches and policies that guarantee the fair distribution of resources and opportunities and appreciate the role of social relationships and interconnectedness in pursuing social justice.

In Gewirtz's (1998) analysis, Young outlined the "five faces of oppression," exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. The current study emphasizes marginalization and powerlessness, particularly relevant in exploring opportunities for students with learning disabilities to access higher education.

Based on Foucault's (1977) notion of power, Young's concept of oppression recognizes that power relations extend beyond a dyadic relationship between an oppressor and an oppressed. Young contends that oppression can be structural, resulting from the practices of "well-meaning liberal societies" that perpetuate everyday habits and norms rather than the actions of a few individuals (Young, 2014, p. 5). These practices are ingrained in institutional rules and policies and are conducted through bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms (Young, 2014). Structural oppression can be unconscious and even perpetuated by individuals conducting their daily work (Young, 2014).

Young's insights into social justice significantly enhance the understanding of special education, shedding light on the unique hurdles and opportunities

students with learning disabilities meet when pursuing higher education. The focus on social justice's relational aspect highlights how individuals are intertwined within society. By acknowledging the systemic roots of oppression, Young's framework offers a valuable lens for examining the obstacles and prospects students with learning disabilities meet as they move toward higher education.

Gewirtz (1998) draws on Young's model of social justice to propose the following questions related to educational policies:

"How, to what extend and why do education policies support, interrupt or subvert:

1. Exploitative relationships (capitalist, patriarchal, racist, heterosexist, disablist, etc.) within and beyond educational institutions?

2. Processes of marginalization and inclusion within and beyond the education system?

3. The promotion of relationships based on recognition, respect, care a mutuality or produce powerlessness (for education workers and students)?

4. Practices of cultural imperialism? And which cultural differences should be affirmed, which should be universalized, and which rejected?

5. Violent practices within and beyond the education system?" (p.482)

Of the five questions presented by Gewirtz (1998), questions two, three, and four were pertinent to the research. Given Gewirtz's (1998) analysis, Young's

perspective was relevant to this study. This researcher continued to provide an in-depth understanding of Young's proposition and how it might be implemented in education.

<u>Iris Young's Model of Social Justice</u>

In addition to the distributional dimension of social justice, this research also considered the relational dimension, as outlined in Young's social justice perspective. Young's study (2014) revealed that social justice can be conceptualized in many ways, with oppression as a prominent feature. According to Young (2014), oppression refers to "all oppressed people who suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings" (p. 4). Therefore, it was important to recognize that the relational dimension of social justice encompassed not only the distribution of resources but also how individuals interacted with one another and the social structures in which they existed.

Young (2014) uses Foucault's concept of power to reframe the conventional understanding of oppression as a dyad consisting of two individuals: an oppressor and an oppressed. Foucault (1977) suggests that to understand the meaning and operation of power in modern society, we must look beyond the power model as "sovereignty," a dyadic relation of ruler and subject. Instead, Foucault asserts that the exercise of power must be analyzed as the effect of often liberal and "humane" practices such as education, bureaucratic

administration, production, distribution of consumer goods, and medicine, among others (p.6).

Based on Foucault's vision of power relations, Young introduces a novel concept of oppression that clarifies how oppression plays a significant role in many daily pursuits, including schooling. Young (2014) states the most recent notion of oppression:

In its new usage, oppression designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society… Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few people's choices or policies… Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules (p. 5).

Thus, Young's (2014) perspective on oppression suggests that injustices can take new forms, often linked to "unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media, and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal processes of everyday life" (p. 5). This understanding implies that individuals can maintain and reproduce schemes of oppression, even unconsciously, through their daily actions. Therefore, it is important to recognize that oppression is not limited to overtly tyrannical acts or individual actions but

can also be a product of the normal processes of social structures and interactions.

Young's Five Faces of Oppression

Young (2014) offers a nuanced understanding of oppression by naming five distinct categories that reflect the diverse conditions and manifestations of oppression experienced by marginalized social groups. These categories include exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Young's classification emphasizes the importance of a context-specific understanding of oppression. In the scope of this research, the categories of marginalization and powerlessness are particularly relevant and will be further examined in later sections (Young, 2014).

Oppression: Young's Perspective

This research delved into the lived experiences of students with learning disabilities pursuing higher education, specifically focusing on how marginalization and powerlessness affected their transition process. By exploring these categories, the study aimed to contribute to promoting social justice and equity in education for this population.

Marginalization

According to Young (2014), marginalization is another face of oppression not necessarily linked to economic status. Young (2014) reported on the marginalized groups among older adults and the Latino community, where increasing racial oppression occurs in the form of marginalization rather than

exploitation. Marginals are people the system of labor cannot or will not use.

Described as an expanding underclass, these individuals are often relegated to

social marginality, including various ethnic groups, older adults, and those unable

to find work (Young, 2014). A detailed interpretation reveals that this scope of

marginalization further extends to include individuals with disabilities, reflecting a

substantial number of people living with mental and physical challenges (Young,

2014; Shakespeare, 2006). Consequently, individuals with disabilities are

'marginalized' or prevented from actively taking part in society. Because of the

obstacles of marginalization, discrimination constrains possibilities for material

wealth, access to products and services, and a stable existence (Young, 2014;

Sargiacomo, 2009; Rioux, 2013).

Marginalization of Students with Learning Disabilities

Although Iris Young's analysis does not explicitly focus on the

marginalization of students with disabilities, her framework can be applied to

understand how the educational system, as a societal institution, may perpetuate

oppression through the marginalization of these students. In the United States,

the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) aims to promote inclusion

and equal treatment for individuals with disabilities in the educational system.

However, research by Coster et al. (2013) suggests that the reality of inclusion

often needs to be revised in legislative intentions. Despite the legal provisions,

students with disabilities may not fully receive the benefits, help, and support

services guaranteed by laws like IDEA. This discrepancy shows that while

inclusion is a legal mandate, its practical implementation in educational settings often seems to be more theoretical than actual. The gap between legislative intent and practical application highlights the persistent challenges in truly integrating students with disabilities into mainstream educational environments, reflecting a form of systemic marginalization.

According to Coster et al. (2013), parents of students with disabilities report that their children take part less often in school clubs and organizations and socialize with peers outside the classroom. They also say that their children are less involved in all school activities. Parents of students with disabilities are more likely to report that the physical and social environment hinders school participation and that resources needed to support their child's participation are inadequate. The findings of this study suggest that barriers limiting school participation include physical and social-environmental factors and a lack of resources (Coster et al., 2013).

Listening to the voices of students with learning disabilities (LDs) is critical for addressing their unique needs and gaining a deeper understanding of their assistance, support services, and training. When students with LDs can share their real-life experiences openly, it offers valuable insights that can inform the development of high school transition plans, ensuring they are adequately prepared for future challenges. This approach is supported by research showing that student feedback is essential in creating more effective and tailored educational strategies.

Powerlessness

        Concerning powerlessness as a form of oppression, Young (2014) used the examples of professional and nonprofessional people to illustrate how oppression manifests differently in both groups. Professionals have access to acquiring and developing a profession and the opportunity to further such professional growth (Young, 2014). Professionals have several opportunities to advance and progress in their professions. These characteristics of professionals extend beyond the scope of their employment and into their social and communitarian status (Young, 2014). As a result, professionals tend to regroup, make acquaintances, and live in communities amongst other professionals (Young, 2014). However, nonprofessionals cannot access the same opportunities for personal and professional advancement and growth. Young writes, "The powerless lack the authority, status, and sense of self that professionals tend to have" (p. 22).

        According to Young (2014), professionals, while not necessarily belonging to a higher social class, benefit from certain conditions that help to mitigate their oppression: "Professionals are privileged in relation to nonprofessionals by virtue of their position in the division of labor and the status it carries. Nonprofessionals suffer a form of oppression in addition to exploitation, which I call powerlessness" (p. 21). People who are powerless have no way of wielding power: "The powerless are those who lack authority or power, even in this mediated sense, those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it. The powerless

are situated so they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them" (p. 21). Based on the rationale, this researcher wonders how powerlessness impacts students with learning disabilities.

<u>Powerlessness in Students with Learning Disabilities</u>

The argument posits that insufficient training, education, and preparedness for students with disabilities may lead to a dearth of opportunities for personal and professional growth. This lack of facilitation for these students in pursuing higher education can be perceived as a form of oppression, representing a distinct injustice. This view aligns with the findings of Demchuk (2000), who reported that students in her study experienced a significant level of uncertainty about their educational trajectories. This lack of knowledge and uncertainty inhibited their sense of control. It impeded their capacity to take decisive actions, ultimately resulting in a feeling of powerlessness over a significant aspect of their lives: their education (Demchuk, 2000).

The discussion surrounding students with learning disabilities (LDs) has brought to light their limited engagement in transition planning processes. This situation leads us to question the quality and extent of competencies that students with disabilities have acquired, particularly in self-determination and self-advocacy. These foundational skills, self-determination, and self-advocacy, significantly shape their future lives. Intrigue arises about these students' prior experiences in high school, the impact of these experiences, and the ways they

navigated their transitional processes, with a particular focus on developing self-determination and self-advocacy.

Summarizing Iris Young's bi-dimensional perspective on social justice, it is supported that the distribution of goods in this situation implies the equal allocation of tools, devices, and services for all students with disabilities (SWD). This allocation aims to equip them with the "tools necessary to (a) make informed choices and decisions, and (b) achieve equality of opportunities, full inclusion and integration into society, employment, independent living, and economic and social self-sufficiency" (Demchuk, 2000, p.1). Furthermore, oppression is kept from the relational dimension, acknowledging that it manifests under diverse and varied circumstances. In the context of this study, the distribution of goods must be equitable for all students, accounting for the unique needs of SWD. Also, from a relational perspective, it is supported that oppression appears in two ways: a) the marginalization of students with disabilities and b) the feelings of powerlessness these students experience. These two sides of oppression are challenges that students with learning disabilities meet in high school and college. The figure below encapsulates the notion derived from Young's social justice perspective.

Figure 1

Concepts Retained from Young's Perspective of Social Justice
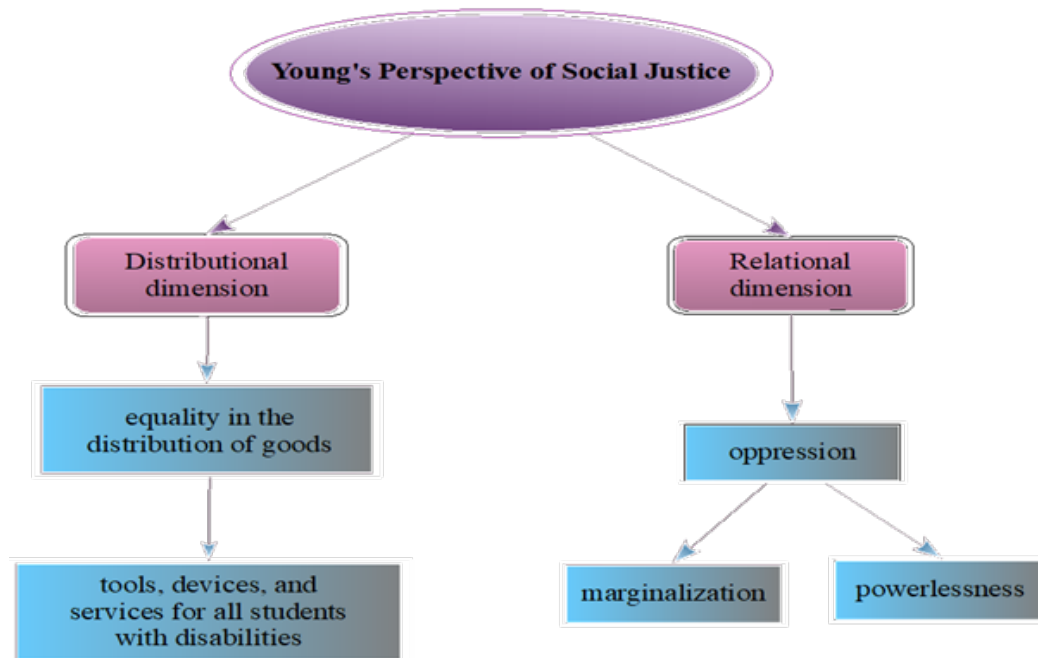
Nancy Fraser's Perspective on Social Justice

Cazden (2012) presented Fraser's perspective on social justice, situating it explicitly within education. According to Cazden (2012), Fraser's theory of social justice consists of three dimensions: "Redistribution (economic), recognition (cultural), and representation (political)" (p. 181). The first dimension, redistribution, is associated with the economic domain and shows that all students may have equal access to all available resources (Cazden, 2012). Cazden emphasizes, "The educational meaning of the "redistribution" is more obvious. "Resources" that require more fair distribution certainly include

intellectual matters as well as monetary" (Cazden, 2012, p. 182). Redistribution is strongly related to recognition. Fraser (2001) contended that examining institutionalized patterns of cultural value is essential in understanding recognition as a matter of status and its impact on the relative standing of social actors. The author suggested that if these patterns enable individuals to be regarded as peers and to take part on an equal footing in social life, then it is possible to speak of reciprocal recognition and status equality (Fraser, 2001).

According to Fraser (2001), recognition is not a question of identity but rather a state of parity of participation that "valorizes cross-group interaction, as opposed to separatism and group enclaving" (p. 90). Cazden (2012) applied Fraser's perspective to education to explore the relationship between redistribution and recognition. According to Cazden (2012), educational recognition involves providing equitable access to an intellectually rich curriculum for all students, particularly those whose families and communities have historically been deprived of such opportunities. In contrast, Cazden (2012) notes that the meaning of recognition in education is comprehensive. Historically, Fraser (2001) has described the emergence of identity politics, where members of marginalized groups challenge deficit theories and practices that devalue their cultures, knowledge, values, and humanity.

Fraser's third dimension within her social justice framework is representation. The political factors influencing decision-making processes are significant. They decided 'who was making decisions was becoming increasingly

important' (Cazden, 2012, p.183). More specifically, Cazden (2012) said, "In decision-making in education, the importance of representation extends down to the school level, especially in countries where considerable authority is devolved from federal and state governments to each local public school" (Cazden, 2012, p. 184). Figure 2 below summarizes Fraser's perspective.

Figure 2

Concepts Retained from Fraser's Perspective of Social Justice
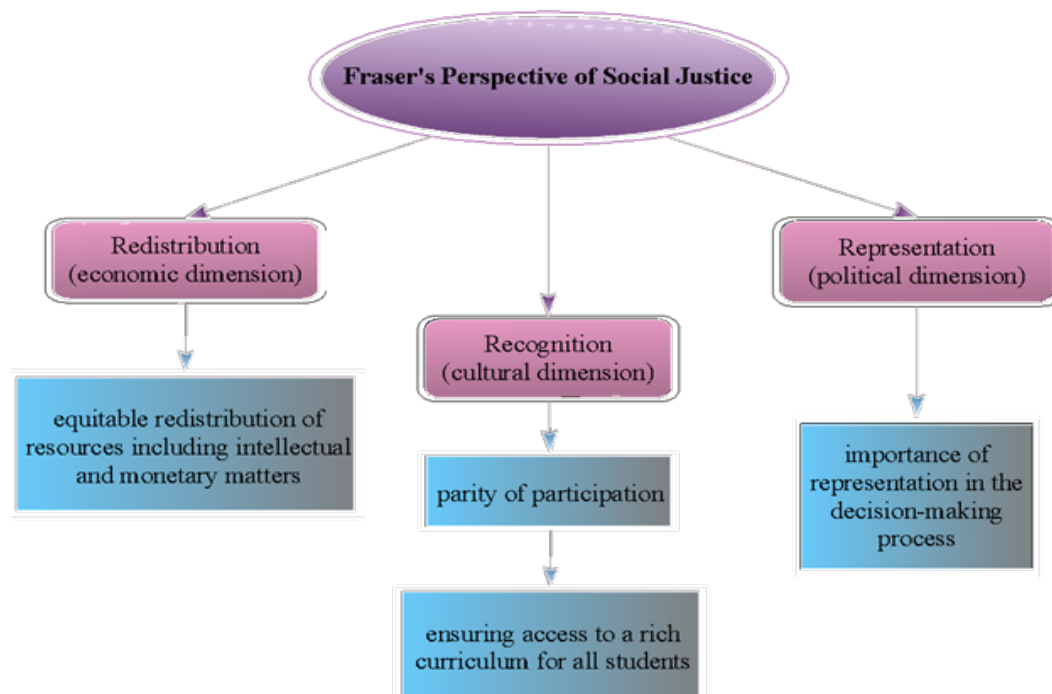
Based on Fraser's social justice perspective, this study emphasizes the importance of promoting redistribution and acknowledgment to achieve equity of participation and access to a diverse curriculum for children with disabilities.

Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of integrating this demographic into decision-making processes.

Martha and Sen's Capability Approach: A Lens for Social Justice

The capability approach is a theory first developed by Amartya Sen (1985) and Martha Nussbaum (2000). The capability approach is a theory based on people's abilities and ability to make the most of them. In other words, the capability approach is about what people are capable of and can actually do (Sen, 1985). The capability approach has two primary components: *'functionings'* and *'capabilities'* (Sen, 1999). Terzi (2005) stated that 'functionings' refers to the beings and doings individuals value, while '*capabilities*' describes the opportunities available to an individual (Sen, 1999). The capability approach focuses on the opportunities available to people rather than on their preferences and satisfaction. Thus, this approach is also used to evaluate the well-being of individuals and their social arrangements and the design of policies and plans for social change (Robeyns, 2003; 2006).

Based on this approach, a student who has a disability and who is not provided with equal resources may feel that their *'capabilities'* are diminished (Robeyns, 2003; 2006). Such a feeling of diminished '*capabilities*' might occur if the student is not given access to the same resources as their peers (Robeyns, 2003). In practical terms, the student is caught in a predicament of helplessness and vulnerability, which makes it exceedingly difficult for them to realize their full

potential about their '*capabilities*' and lead a joyful existence that is in line with the goals they have set for themselves (Robeyns, 2003; 2006).

The primary components of the capability approach are categorized as '*functioning*' and '*capabilities*' (Sen, 1999). '*Functionings*' refers to goods and income but also describes what a student with disabilities can do or become with them. Terzi (2005) states '*functionings*' as "the beings and doings that individuals have reason to value." Walking, reading, being well-nourished, being educated, having self-respect, or acting in one's political capacity are all examples of '*functionings*'" (Terzi, 2005, p. 450).

The term "Capabilities" describes the opportunities afforded to a person with disabilities, such as the ability to read, run, study, attend college or university, and secure a job that compensates well (Terzi, 2005, p.450). Capability, therefore, refers to the competence an individual must choose, from a pool of possibilities, those 'functioning' that one judges to be valuable and suited to implement in one's everyday life (Terzi, 2005). As a result, Terzi (2005) posits that children with disabilities will be less at a disadvantage since they will have the chance to develop and refine their capabilities. Terzi (2005) concludes that providing students with disabilities access to learning and enhancing their '*capabilities*' will minimize their initial vulnerability.

Initially conceptualized by Amartya Sen and further expanded by Martha Nussbaum, the '*capabilities*' approach was originally rooted in economic theory with a feminist lens. This approach has proven to be applicable and highly

relevant to social justice theory. Nussbaum's adaptation of Sen's work focuses on capabilities, emphasizing what individuals can achieve and become rather than merely what they want or prefer. She aligns with Sen's distinction between '*capabilities'* and *'functionings*,' stressing the need to differentiate between a person's potential abilities and opportunities and their actual actions and accomplishments (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1985). This perspective is pivotal in examining the range of opportunities and freedoms available to individuals and exploring how they can use their '*capabilities*' to achieve various states of existence and activity.

Rather than focusing on students with disabilities in the present, Nussbaum's capability approach would concentrate on what these students can do if given the chance to develop their *'capabilities'* (Nussbaum, 2000). The central idea of Nussbaum's (2000) approach is that 'capabilities' (as freedom) demand more than citizens (people) having rights 'on paper;' it also requires citizens to have the resources to exercise such rights.

Table 2 below represents the '*capabilities'* Nussbaum outlined that are essential for ensuring a high quality of life (Robeyns, 2005). These *'capabilities'* are relevant to the context of special education and can be used to construct a social justice framework for the research.

Table 2

Nussbaum's 10 Essential Human Capabilities

Capability Number	Description
1	Being able to live to the end of human life of normal length.
2	Being able to have good health, adequate nutrition, adequate shelter, opportunities for sexual satisfaction and choice in reproduction, and mobility.
3	Being able to avoid unnecessary and non-beneficial pain and to have pleasurable experiences.
4	Being able to use the senses, imagine, think, and reason, and to have the educational opportunities necessary to realize these capabilities. In other words, this capability refers to the opportunity to be informed and cultivate oneself through an adequate education.
5	Affiliation. Being able to have attachments to things and associations with people outside themselves. It also involves being able to live with others in forms of social interaction like friendship and work, being protected against discrimination, and having the social basis of self-respect and non-humiliation, which entails provision of non-discrimination based on race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, caste, and ethnicity.
6	Being able to form and practice practical reason, having a conception of the good, and engaging in critical reflection about planning one's life. This entails the protection of the liberty of conscience and religious observance.
7	Being able to live for and with others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings.
8	Being able to live with concern for and concerning animals, plants, and the world of nature.
9	Being able to laugh, play, and enjoy recreational activities.
10	Control over one's environment. Being able to vote and take part in politics, having freedom of speech and association, owning property, and working are all important parts of being a human.

Most of these *'capabilities'* may be used to construct the social justice framework for this research since they reflect many of the requirements that students with disabilities must acquire to achieve a high quality of life.

Nonetheless, proving the capability approach's relevance to special education is essential.

The Capability Approach in Education

Scholarly research on the capability approach names two essential elements in creating a social justice framework for students with disabilities: 1) education aimed at enhancing their *'capabilities'* or human capital, and 2) employing the capability approach to assess how well students with disabilities can lead a fulfilling and healthy life.

1. Enhancing Capabilities in Students with Learning Disabilities (Human Capital)

Nussbaum's capability approach is useful in addressing disability as an essential element of social justice in education (Polat, 2011). According to Robeyns (2006), when examining Nussbaum's list of capabilities, individuals with disabilities are subject to various forms of deprivation. However, it is most visible in the scarcity of material means to lead a meaningful life. In this manner, Robeyns (2006) emphasizes that "disabled people suffer from at least two types of material disadvantages: they earn less income than the non-disabled, and because of their special needs, they need more income to achieve similar functions, for example, to buy a wheelchair" (p. 366). Thus, individuals with disabilities face challenges in converting income into material well-being, putting them at a disadvantage. Individuals with disabilities require a higher wage than their peers without disabilities to access the same fundamental aspects of material life: employment, health, and leisure opportunities.

Thus, to access some 'functionings,' students with disabilities found themselves in a vulnerable and deprived position: "A full assessment of the 'functioning' well-being of the disabled might also reveal other considerable deprivations (for example, in leisure activities and social interactions)" (Robeyns, 2006, p. 366). However, such deprivation can be minimized through education. According to Robeyns (2006), education is seen as a way for students with disabilities to expand their capabilities; that is, to enlarge their possibilities to learn, increase their human capital, and get access to a greater range of 'functions;' in turn, these functionalities will lead them to develop all the dimensions of their life. Robeyns (2006) said: "The kind of education that a capability perspective would recommend may be different (not only education that maximizes one's chances in the labour market but also education that empowers a pupil or student in all dimensions of life" (p. 370). Thus, it can be contended that according to Nussbaum, the deprivation and vulnerability of students with disabilities will be minimized through their access to higher levels of education.

2. Evaluating Student Potential Through the Capability Approach

The capability approach has been suggested as an effective method for evaluating the development of 'capabilities' and access to functional resources for students with disabilities in public schools. Terzi (2005) explained that this approach posits that measurements of equality and societal structures should focus on 'capabilities' or the real freedoms individuals must achieve valued

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'functionings' essential to their well-being. Furthermore, Terzi emphasized that the capability approach suggests that the assessment of equality should not primarily focus on the means to freedom but rather on the individual's freedom to choose from valuable *'functionings'* (Terzi, 2005).

The Capability Approach emphasizes assessing justice by the actual opportunities people have to achieve what they value, focusing on their freedoms and capabilities rather than just their access to these opportunities. This framework aims for a society where everyone can thrive by truly having the choice and means to pursue what matters to them (Terzi, 2005).

In the context of this study, it is widely recognized that students with disabilities often face significant barriers to living a productive and successful life. Despite considerable progress in recent years, these students still need to meet many challenges that hinder their ability to access higher education and obtain fulfilling employment. Research has shown that students with disabilities often receive inadequate or insufficient instruction and training during high school (Test et al., 2009; McDonnell et al., 2015). Insufficient instruction and training can leave them ill-prepared for the complex transition to post-secondary education and the workforce (Test et al., 2009; McDonnell et al., 2015). The IEP transition plan, intended to prepare students with disabilities for the challenges of adult life, is often insufficient to address the complex needs of these students (Test et al., 2009; McDonnell et al., 2015).

As a result of these challenges, many students with disabilities find themselves limited to employment opportunities that offer insufficient salaries, inadequate living conditions, or a lack of intellectual challenge (McDonnell et al., 2015). Furthermore, students with disabilities may have negative experiences during their elementary and secondary education, which leaves them feeling powerless and insecure about their opportunities (McDonnell et al., 2015). Such experiences and feelings can lead to low self-esteem, a lack of confidence, and a reduced sense of agency in shaping their futures (McDonnell et al., 2015).

Conversely, students with disabilities have also faced various challenges and discrimination attributed to their disabilities during this period, leaving them vulnerable and deprived of opportunities their average counterparts enjoy (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). These challenges and experiences of discrimination highlight the importance of examining factors contributing to a successful transition for students with disabilities.

The concept of the capability approach, as defined by Terzi (2005), is linked to equality. The linkage arises from the assertion that individuals with disabilities should have the same range of choices as those without disabilities. According to Terzi (2005), *'capabilities'* are the freedom to choose from diverse functions, which should be considered in evaluating equality and social arrangements (pp. 450). As Terzi (2005) explained:

"The focus of the capability approach is, therefore, on the real effective freedoms people have and their choice among possible bundles of

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'functionings' (…) Capabilities, as we have seen, constitute the space for assessing and seeking equality... The capability approach identifies capability with overall freedom, the substantive opportunities people must choose the life they have reason to value and identifies *'functionings'* with achieved freedoms" (pp.450-451).

The capability approach developed by Nussbaum (2011) provides a framework for understanding the conditions for individuals to achieve the freedom and well-being necessary for a fulfilling life. While all ten *'capabilities'* shown by Nussbaum are important, some may be particularly relevant for students with disabilities. For example, students with disabilities require the capability to experience emotions, learn, and take part in social life to nurture the necessary skills and abilities for success in adulthood.

Table 3 below presents an adaptation of Nussbaum's (2011) list of ten capabilities, providing insight into the *'capabilities'* needed by students with learning disabilities (LDs) to reach well-being.

Table 3

The Capability Approach in the Present Study

Capability	Students with disability
1.- Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length.	To what extent do students with disabilities have the ability to engage in imaginative thinking about their lives? What are their future options, and what are their limitations on available resources and services?
2.- Being able to have good health, adequate nutrition, adequate shelter, opportunities for sexual satisfaction and choice in reproduction, and mobility.	To what extent are resources and services available and accessible to students with disabilities, and how does the access or restriction affect their overall well-being, including their reproductive health and nutritional status?
3.- Being able to avoid unnecessary and non-beneficial pain and to have pleasurable experiences.	To what extent do the current living conditions of students with disabilities affect their security and well-being?
4.- the ability to use the senses, imagine, think, and reason, and to have the educational opportunities needed to realize these capacities	What are the expected aspirations and future expectations of students with disabilities upon completing high school?
5.-Affiliation. Being able to have attachments to things and associations with people outside themselves. It also involves being able to live with others in forms of social interaction like friendship and work, being protected against discrimination, and having the social basis of self-respect and non-humiliation, which entails provision of non-discrimination based on race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, caste, and ethnicity.	To what extent do students with disabilities form attachments outside themselves, such as loving others, grieving the loss of loved ones, and expressing justified anger? How does this affiliation attachment manifest itself after enrolling in higher education?
6.- The ability to form and execute practical reason, to have a conception of the good, and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's own life,	What changes do students with disabilities experience as they transition to higher education, and how do they cope with the challenges they meet during this period? How do students with disabilities perceive their lives as they navigate the demands of higher education and face various situations?

	Upon entering higher education, do students with disabilities experience changes in their circumstances, or do they persist?
7.- Being able to live for and with others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings.	How effectively do they show self-respect and resist marginalization and humiliation from others?
	Do students with disabilities receive equitable and dignified treatment, and if not, what measures are necessary to ensure fairness and respect for this marginalized group?
8.- Being able to live with concern for animals, plants, and the world of nature.	To what extent do students with disabilities have an interest in animals or plants, and how does this interest manifest itself? Additionally, what is the current nature of their relationship with the natural world, and how might this affect their overall well-being?
9.- Being able to laugh, play, and enjoy recreational activities.	To what extent do students with disabilities engage in leisure activities after high school graduation?
10.- Control over one's environment. Being able to take part in political decisions, have freedom of speech and association, hold property, and work as a human being.	To what extent are students with disabilities able to take part effectively in political life, including exercising their right to free speech and association?
	How do the abilities of students with disabilities to obtain employment compare to those of their atypical peers?

Nussbaum's (2011) *'capabilities'* resonate with the goals of this study. For instance, capability #4 emphasizes the importance of engaging senses, imagination, reasoning, and education, aligning with the research focus. Furthermore, capability #6 connects closely with the study, highlighting practical reasoning, understanding a fulfilling life, and reflective life planning. Capability #7, which includes living with others, empathy, and concern for humans, highlights the study's interest in self-advocacy and self-determination as tools for

equality in resource access. Lastly, capability #10, focusing on political

involvement, speech freedom, property rights, and employment, is relevant

because students with disabilities often meet barriers to living standards

comparable to their typical peers.

Figure 3

Nussbaum's Capability Approach to Social Justice
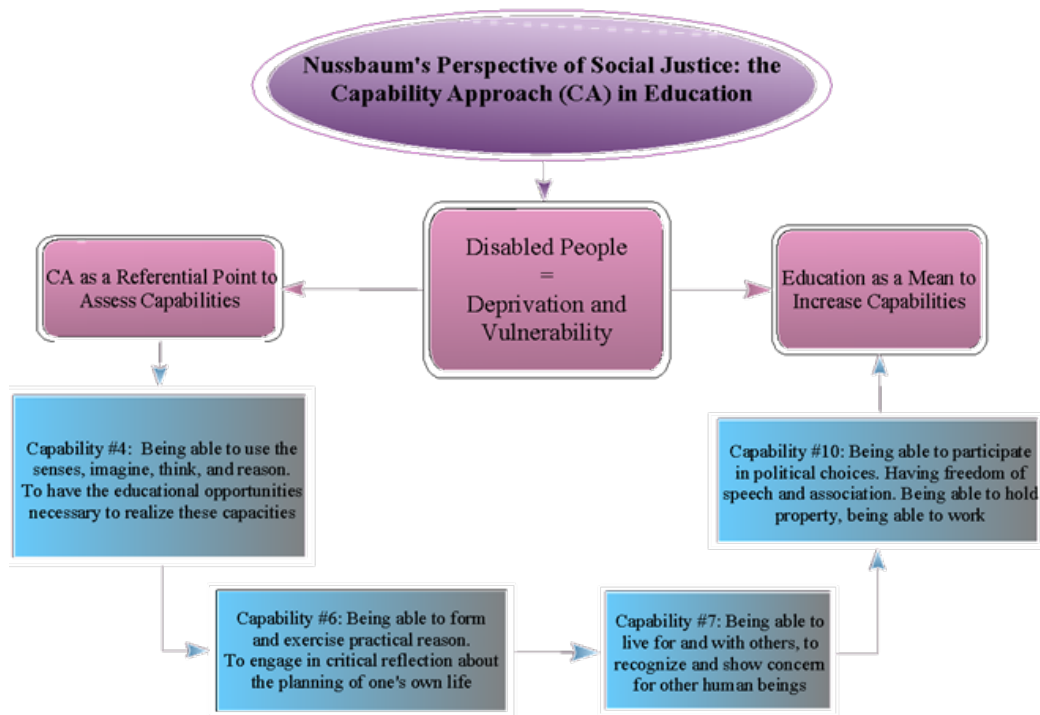
Comparing Young, Fraser, and Nussbaum's Perspectives

The perspectives of Young and Fraser are highly relevant in studying

students with learning disabilities (LDs), yet they present contrasting viewpoints.

While Young (1990, 2020) and Fraser (2001) contribute valuable insights into

achieving social justice, Nussbaum's capability approach offers a more

expansive range of actions to enhance social justice for students with LDs (Nussbaum, 2000, 2009, 2011). The later sections will explore the similarities among these three perspectives and show how the concepts from each author can be applied within the theoretical framework of this study.

The comparison of the three social justice perspectives thus far aids in constructing the research's theoretical framework. Indeed, upon comparing Young's (1990, 2020) and Fraser's (2001) viewpoints, it becomes clear that Young's distributional dimension aligns with Fraser's aspect of redistribution. In the same way, the relational dimension of Young's view shows the oppression, marginalization, and powerlessness in which students with disabilities can be found, like Nussbaum's point about individuals with disabilities and social justice (Nussbaum, 2011). This comparison leads to the conclusion that students with disabilities are an example of a marginalized, deprived, and oppressed population that has found itself in a vulnerable situation due to a lack of access to the resources and services they are entitled to that will aid in the development of their *'capabilities'* leading to a prosperous life.

Furthermore, Fraser's perspective presents an added part that must be examined within this framework: recognition. Recognition implies the acknowledgment and admission that this population exists and has the same rights—parity of participation—as other populations have (Fraser, 2001). This assertion aligns Fraser's concept of recognition with Nussbaum's capability approach. Nussbaum posits education as the arena for enhancing and

developing all individuals' *'capabilities'* to live fulfilling lives (Nussbaum, 2011).

Similarly, the third part of Fraser's perspective is 'representation,' which refers to

the political representation that students with disabilities must have (Fraser,

2001). Representation is comparable to capability, which is #10 in Nussbaum's

list, the ability to take part in political choices and have freedom of speech and

association (Nussbaum, 2011)

Reflecting on the social justice perspectives presented by Iris Young

(Young, 2020), Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 2001), and Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum,

2011), it becomes clear that recognition is a key element within the framework of

disability studies. Acknowledgment should emanate from individuals and groups

in positions of power and privilege, recognizing the existence and equal rights of

marginalized populations (Fraser, 2001) and students with disabilities

themselves. Realizing one's abilities and disabilities can be a large step towards

empowerment (Nussbaum, 2011), enabling students with disabilities to advocate

for their rights and needs while actively promoting an inclusive and equitable

society. Figure 4 below provides a visual summary of the comparative analysis of

these three distinct social justice perspectives.

Figure 4

The Social Justice Theoretical Framework
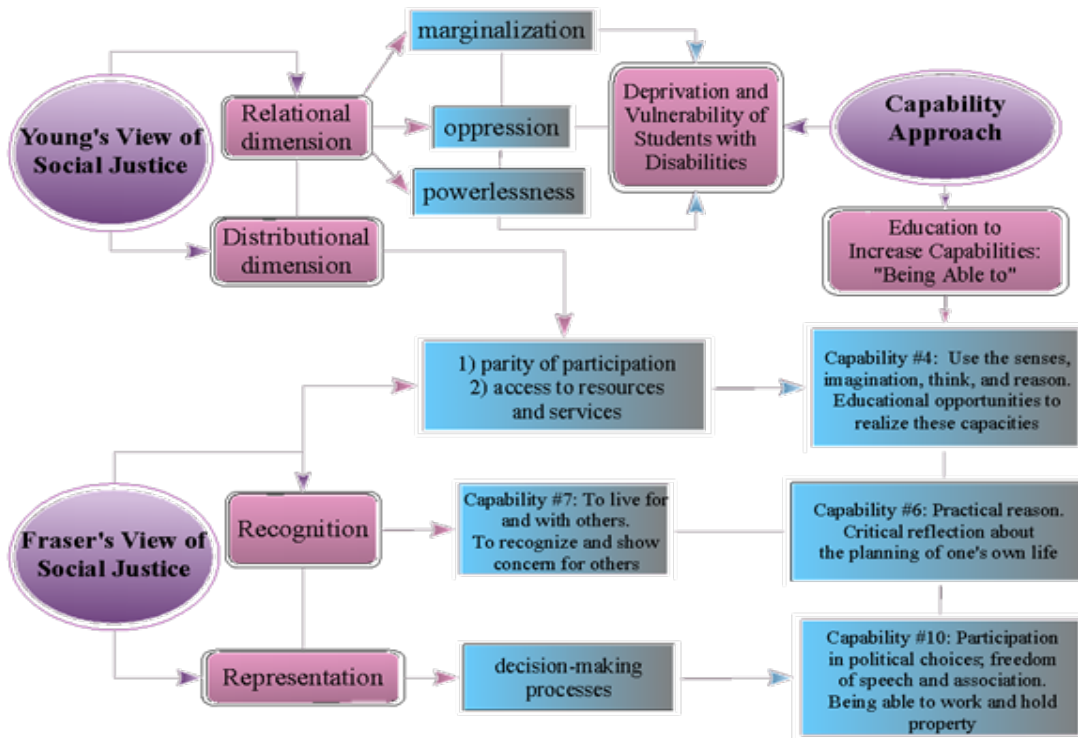
The Social Justice Theoretical Framework above illustrates *'capabilities'* #4, #6, #7, and #10 and how they relate to *distribution*, *recognition*, and *representation*, as these *'capabilities'* are nurtured through education. This study adopts a social justice framework, viewing these *'capabilities'* as fundamental to empowering students with disabilities. The research signals a need for the transition plan to prioritize teaching and reinforcing self-determination and self-advocacy skills to prepare these students for life beyond high school (Parsi et al., 2018).

Distinctive Roles of Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination

This study recognizes the important connection between self-advocacy and self-determination, acknowledging their integral relationship. While self-determination encompasses a broad spectrum of competencies essential for autonomous functioning, including decision-making, goal-setting, and self-regulation, self-advocacy is a principal component within this framework, particularly salient for students with LDs navigating post-secondary environments (Project 10, 2022). Self-advocacy, characterized by the ability to understand and communicate one's needs, wants, and rights, is important in actively empowering students with LDs to shape their educational and transitional pathways (Cabeza et al., 2013). Fiedler and Danneker (2007) further articulate the necessity of enhancing students' self-advocacy skills, emphasizing that a clear understanding of these skills and their significance in achieving successful outcomes for students with disabilities is essential.

The data shows how self-advocacy helps students effectively communicate their needs, secure accommodations, and assert themselves academically and socially (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007). This distinct emphasis on self-advocacy does not diminish the overarching significance of self-determination; rather, it highlights the need for a focused exploration of self-advocacy within the broader self-determination context. Recognizing self-advocacy as a distinct and influential side of the empowerment process aligns with the insights and recommendations from educational literature (Project 10,

2022). The research acknowledges that self-advocacy is integral to self-determination and has specific implications for students with LDs, especially in the post-secondary transition, calling for dedicated attention and exploration (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007). This nuanced approach aims to capture and understand the unique challenges and triumphs students with LDs face. It focuses on their efforts to assert agency and navigate complex educational landscapes.

While self-advocacy is nested within the broader concept of self-determination, the distinct treatment of self-advocacy in this study is justified by its unique role in helping the successful transition of students with LDs to post-secondary education (Project 10, 2022). This analysis of self-advocacy and self-determination provides insights into empowerment strategies for students with LDs, enhancing special education and transition services.

Self-Advocacy in Student Lives

Self-advocacy is an essential skill for students with disabilities, especially as they transition from high school to higher education settings. Janiga and Costenbader (2002) emphasize that instruction in self-advocacy skills should be an integral part of every student's transition plan developed in high school. This concept includes understanding one's strengths and needs and knowing legal rights and responsibilities.

The successful navigation of higher education for students with disabilities requires an awareness of their legal rights, as highlighted by Skinner (1998).

Understanding the differences in protections and provisions under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is extensive (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Gil, 2007). Despite the acknowledged importance of legal rights instruction, high school staff often overlook this area, leaving a significant gap in preparing students for post-secondary education challenges.

The need for in-depth education on disability accommodation laws is a pressing issue for staff and students. Studies by Test et al. (2005) underline the necessity of mastering legal frameworks like the IDEA and the ADA. Furthermore, Madaus (2005) and Hadley (2006) show that students struggle to understand these laws independently. This effort can result in noticeable gaps in their legal knowledge and readiness. Addressing this gap through targeted high school transition planning is imperative. Insights from Stodden and Whelley (2004) and Getzel and Thoma (2008) suggest that well-informed students are more confident and effective in advocating for themselves. Thus, embedding thorough legal education into transition plans is key to empowering students with disabilities, equipping them for self-advocacy in education and beyond.

Self-advocacy is necessary for students with disabilities, especially during the transition from high school to higher education. The California Department of Education (2022) outlines self-advocacy as students' ability to understand their strengths and needs, set personal goals, and understand their legal rights and responsibilities. Crucially, it involves the ability to communicate these aspects

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effectively to others. Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003) further emphasize the role of self-awareness and effective communication in contributing to positive post-school outcomes for these students.

Incorporating self-advocacy training into transition planning is vital. Janiga and Costenbader (2002) stress that such instruction should be integral to every student's high school transition plan, ensuring students are prepared to navigate the complexities of higher education. This instruction includes an understanding of one's legal rights under various legislations such as IDEA, Section 504, and the ADA, a point echoed by Skinner (1998) and further supported by Eckes and Ochoa (2005) and Gil (2007). Unfortunately, there is often a gap in high school education about this legal awareness, leaving students to fend for themselves in understanding and asserting these rights in college settings.

The role of instructors and peers is significant in this process. Parsi et al. (2018) caution that teacher biases and peer attitudes can sometimes inadvertently limit personalized learning opportunities and contribute to stigma. Thus, empowering students with disabilities through self-advocacy is about skill development and transforming the educational environment into a more inclusive and supportive one.

For this study, self-advocacy is conceptualized as the ability of students with disabilities to advocate for their rights, including showing their disability and initiating actions to secure necessary accommodations. These actions include knowing legal rights, understanding personal strengths and needs, and

developing effective communication skills. Self-advocacy is a process that requires active participation and continual practice to enhance and refine these skills, which are essential for success in both high school and higher education. As a result, self-advocacy is a continuous learning process rather than a collection of skills. Educators and peers must support students with disabilities in this way so that they can effectively advocate for their needs and rights, resulting in a more personalized and successful educational experience.

<div align="center">Self-Determination in Students' Lives</div>

Self-determination is pivotal in special education, primarily as it promotes equal access to opportunities and meaningful social inclusion for students with disabilities. Pennell (2001) describes self-determination as a shift of power from systemic control to individual empowerment, enabling people to choose their life paths and receive support aligned with their preferences (Pennell, 2001). Parsi et al. (2018) further emphasize that self-determination is not just an outcome but a set of abilities, including self-advocacy, requiring an in-depth understanding of individual strengths, limitations, interests, and goals (Parsi et al., 2018).

Field et al. (1998) outline a comprehensive skill set for self-determined individuals, including the ability to identify personal wants and needs, make informed choices, consider various options, understand potential outcomes, learn from past decisions, set goals, solve problems, strive for independence while recognizing interdependence, advocate for themselves, carry out tasks

independently, adapt to changing circumstances, persist in the face of adversity, assume responsibility for actions and decisions, and possess self-confidence.

Wehmeyer and Schwartz's (1998) research further uncovers the concept of self-determination in the college setting. They identify autonomy, psychological empowerment, self-regulation, and self-realization as key characteristics of self-determination (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). For instance, students with a strong sense of autonomy make decisions about their post-high school paths and majors informed by their preferences rather than external pressures (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Psychological empowerment gives students the confidence to navigate college life independently, including making decisions that align with their personal and academic goals (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Self-regulation and self-realization enable students to manage their time effectively, choose majors that align with their strengths and weaknesses, and make day-to-day decisions that shape their college experience (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998).

Denney and Daviso (2012) highlight that self-determination encompasses skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable individuals to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, and autonomous behavior. Essential components include self-understanding, awareness of one's strengths and limitations, and a sense of capability and effectiveness (Denney & Daviso, 2012).

The characteristics that define a self-determined individual are closely mirrored in those needed for self-advocacy. *Self-determination* is a broader

framework that inherently integrates the practice of self-advocacy. Given that both concepts involve skills that require deliberate teaching and ongoing refinement, it is crucial to understand their procedural nature. Field et al. (1998) serve as a guiding principle for this study, portraying self-determined individuals as those who show behaviors and attitudes that empower them to set up their goals independently. Students showing self-determination are conscious of their rights, interests, strengths, and limitations, enabling them to self-advocate, express their viewpoints and needs (Field et al., 1998).

Self-determination is essential for empowering students with disabilities to direct their educational journey. By acknowledging their disabilities and establishing their legal accommodations, these students pave the way for their success in both secondary and higher education. The continual enhancement and application of self-advocacy and self-determination skills are vital for achieving this success.

Self-Determination, Self-Advocacy, and Social Justice

To support the research, aim, and objectives, clarification of the roles self-determination and self-advocacy play in social justice is essential. So far, the theoretical notion of social justice has been considered from three perspectives. These perspectives have been contrasted to develop a theoretical framework for this study. However, these concepts are still theoretical, with the positioning of *self-determination* and *self-advocacy* within this framework yet to be confirmed.

As adopted in the earlier section, the definitions of self-determination and self-advocacy serve as a basis to argue that these concepts directly relate to the recognition concept and parity of participation within the theoretical framework (figure 5). Moreover, these concepts should be implemented throughout education, specifically in the transition program for students with disabilities. Figure 5 below illustrates where self-determination and self-advocacy fit within the social justice theory framework.

Figure 5

Role of Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy in the Social Justice
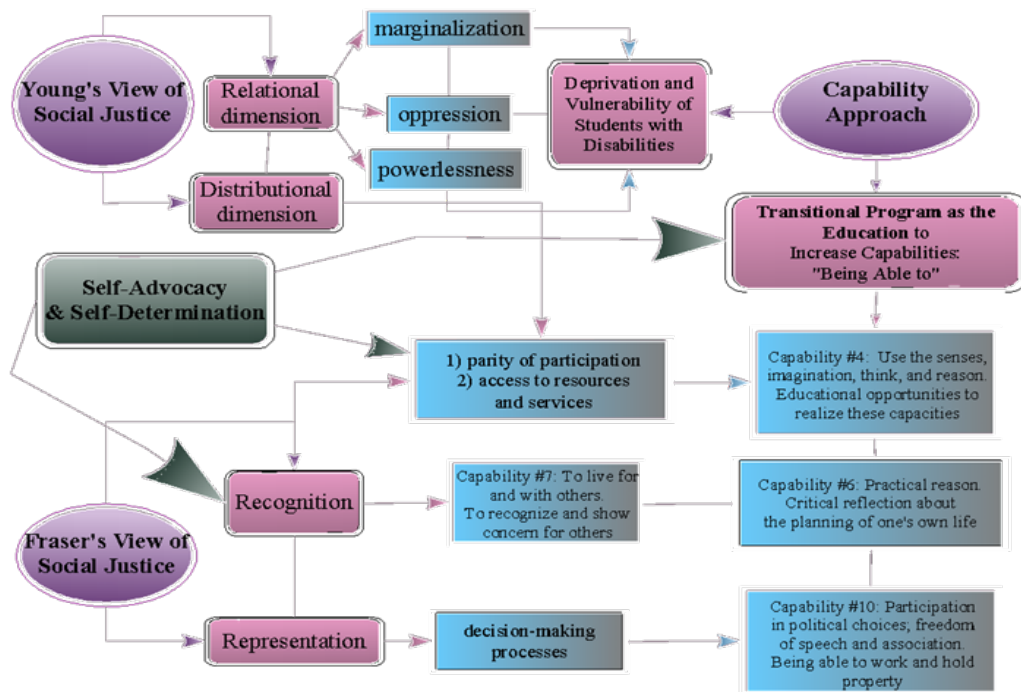
In Figure 5, the concepts of self-advocacy and self-determination are intricately connected to three key ideas derived from the social justice framework

(Field et al., 1998). This link asserts that self-advocacy and self-determination are integral to the recognition concept articulated in Fraser's social justice perspective. For students with disabilities, exercising self-advocacy and self-determination is crucial for a) revealing their true selves, b) overcoming stereotypical labels, and c) achieving their personal and educational goals. This relationship proves the value of this thinking in promoting an inclusive and equitable educational environment.

Furthermore, self-advocacy and self-determination are closely tied to the concept of distribution, as conceptualized in Young's perspective on social justice (Young, 1990), and to the ideals of parity of participation and access to resources and services, central to Fraser's theory (Fraser, 2008). For students with disabilities, integrating self-advocacy and self-determination into their behavioral repertoire is essential. They must skillfully use self-advocacy and self-determination to advocate for themselves, ensuring access to necessary resources and services. This integration empowers them and facilitates equitable participation in educational and social domains.

The connection between self-advocacy and self-determination with Nussbaum's capability approach (2011) is further elucidated through the lens of education. Nussbaum (2011) asserts that education is indispensable in developing the *'capabilities'* necessary for a fulfilling life. It is through the provision and engagement in transition services that students with disabilities can acquire and hone their self-advocacy and self-determination skills (Field et al.,

1998). These skills are crucial for overcoming challenges such as self-disclosure, labeling, and capability development, ultimately aiding students in achieving their goals. However, it is important to note that while self-determination and self-advocacy are well-established in theory (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003), their practical application requires time for development, assimilation, and internalization by students with disabilities. The practical aspects of these concepts need to be taught and refined in real-world settings, underscoring the importance of students actively engaging in developing these skills (Test et al., 2005).

Building upon the definitions of self-advocacy and self-determination and their principal roles in the social justice theoretical framework, the argument arises that self-determination encompasses an attitude entailing a mindset of abilities. At the same time, self-advocacy is the practical side of the self-determination attitude. Such premises guide the understanding that self-determined individuals have self-knowledge and awareness (Test et al., 2005). In other words, they understand their characteristics, interests, strengths, and needs (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). Additionally, self-determined people have a mindset that allows them to predict and figure out causes and consequences, assume responsibility for their actions, and have keen self-advocacy skills to defend themselves to achieve their general aims (Field et al., 1998). Therefore, it is assumed that the instruction provided in the high school transition program

equips students with disabilities to practice and develop self-advocacy and self-determination (Test et al., 2005).

The Practical Component of Self-Determination

This analysis of self-advocacy and self-determination offers insights into empowerment strategies for students with learning disabilities (LDs), enhancing special education and transition services. Indeed, the practical component of self-determination resides in the fact that it is a process that needs time to be developed. How deeply can transitional programs develop self-determination? The time required to develop the mindset will depend on each individual's personality characteristics. Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003) suggest that students with an LD who had a strong self-determination attitude obtained better results "across multiple life categories, including employment and access to health and other benefits, financial independence, and independent living." (p.131). In turn, Zheng et al. (2014) found a significant correlation between the dyads of self-determination and self-concept and self-determination and academic achievement, which highlights the substantial meaning that a self-determined attitude has for students with disabilities: "The results indicated that there were significant correlations among the three latent variables (i.e., self-determination, self-concept, and academic achievement), with self-determination being a potential predictor of academic achievement for students with learning disabilities" (p. 462).

More recently, Mahzer (2020) stated that there is available evidence implying "that students with disabilities mostly cope more poorly than their peers without disabilities and fall short of being self-determined" (p.306). Studies that focused on self-determination suggest that teachers' roles in transition planning must be revised: "Utilizing self-determination in the practice of post-secondary transition will require teachers to respond to the precepts of positive multicultural education: self-awareness, awareness of diverse cultures, empathy, and valuation of diversity" (Trainor, 2002, p. 722).

Finally, it turns out that self-determination's teachings can be elapsed, as suggested by Trainor's (2007) study with college girls having received transition services while at high school, which concluded that: "participants perceived they were self-determining individuals, yet several key component skills necessary for self-determination were missing" (p.31).

Self-determination is a complex viewpoint that needs a deep understanding and integration of various skills, especially for students with disabilities. Trainor's (2007) study, which focused on female college students receiving transition services in high school, revealed insights into the scope of imparted self-determination skills. While these students identified as self-determined, they were found to lack several vital components essential for effective self-determination. Specifically, the study highlighted decision-making, problem-solving, and goal-setting deficiencies. Additionally, these students showed limited ability in self-advocacy and self-awareness, particularly in

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understanding their rights and effectively communicating their needs and preferences. This limited ability in critical skills increases the need for a more comprehensive and continual approach to teaching self-determination within high school transition programs. Ensuring students with disabilities have these essential skills is imperative for successful navigation and self-management in post-secondary environments.

The Practical Component of Self-Advocacy

Indeed, self-advocacy is another skill intricately tied to social justice. Gruber (2016) reinforces this argument by associating self-advocacy with the act of an individual exerting their right to express their strengths, interests, and preferences. Gruber (2016) further emphasizes the crucial role of self-advocacy in the transition program designed to guide students with disabilities from high school to college. The development of self-advocacy skills during this period helps their ability to assert themselves on college campuses (Gruber & Martin, 2019). Hence, it is posited that students with disabilities who effectively cultivate self-advocacy can navigate their environments more confidently, addressing any potential challenges they may meet in their academic and professional journeys (Gruber & Martin, 2019).

Chapter Summary

This study's theoretical framework has been constructed by exploring three leading social justice perspectives, drawing from the scholarly contributions

of Young, Fraser, and Nussbaum. Their theories have been rigorously dissected to unearth and understand their implications for social justice within special education, specifically for students with learning disabilities.

Furthermore, this study highlights the significance of self-determination and self-advocacy in the social justice framework. These concepts promote the rights of students with disabilities. It is postulated that self-determination is a complex attitude that involves several skills and abilities, including self-advocacy (Gruber, 2016). These skills require time to develop and become integrated into the behavior of students with disabilities (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998).

While existing literature underlines the necessity of imparting self-determination and self-advocacy skills, it also acknowledges the hurdles in their successful execution. Many studies explore the viewpoints of teachers and parents embroiled in transition planning, leaving the experiences of students with learning disabilities in the shadows (Trainor, 2002). Consequently, a significant research gap persists in this domain, highlighting the imperative need for an amplified focus on understanding the lived experiences of students with disabilities. This comprehensive understanding will serve as a springboard for crafting more productive strategies that encourage the teaching of self-determination and self-advocacy, ultimately creating a more inclusive educational environment.

CHAPTER THREE:

METHODOLOGY

Chapter Three outlines the research design and methodological approach employed in this study, adhering to rigorous standards of academic inquiry. It offers a detailed description of the participants, the setting, and the data collection methods. Additionally, it details the data analysis techniques applied to safeguard the reliability and validity of the study's findings. Throughout the process, meticulous attention was paid to keeping the integrity of academic research.

Research Design

This study utilizes a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of students with learning disabilities as they transition to higher education. It draws upon Heidegger's philosophy, as Laverty (2003) interpreted it, to guide this exploration. It focuses on adult students enrolled in a junior college in Riverside, California. The research methodology includes in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight participants, analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as outlined by Tindall (2009). Ethical considerations are rigorously supported, following the guidelines of Sieber and Tolich (2012) and adhering to the IRB standards of California State University, San Bernardino (California State University, San Bernardino, n.d.). This approach aims to offer nuanced insights into the experiences of students

with learning disabilities, thereby contributing to the broader field of special education (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Test et al., 2009).

This chapter explores the transition of students with learning disabilities (LDs) from high school to post-secondary education. Recognizing the role of self-advocacy and self-determination skills in shaping their future, the study aims to uncover how these students develop and apply these skills to navigate challenges and seize opportunities in higher education settings. The investigation is guided by an understanding that self-advocacy development is central to advancing self-determination and enhancing these students' overall quality of life.

Research Questions

In pursuit of this goal, the study is structured around one central research question and three supplementary sub-questions. These questions are designed to probe deeply into the lived experiences of students with LDs, their perceptions of the effectiveness of high school transition services, and the strategies that can be employed to enhance their self-advocacy and self-determination skills. The research questions are as follows:

Central Research Question

1. What are the lived experiences of students with learning disabilities (LDs) during their transition from high school to post-secondary education?

Research Sub-questions

2. How do students with LDs perceive the effectiveness of high school IEP

   transition services in preparing them for post-secondary education,

   particularly concerning their development of self-advocacy and self-

   determination skills?

3. What challenges and successes have students with LDs experienced

   during their transition into higher education, particularly related to the use

   of self-advocacy and self-determination skills?

4. According to students with LDs, what practices can teachers use to

   promote the development of self-advocacy and self-determination skills?

These questions aim to provide an understanding of the experiences and

challenges faced by students with LDs, offering insights for educators,

policymakers, and support services to help successful transitions into post-

secondary education.

Data Analysis

In this study, the data analysis combined Interpretative Phenomenological

Analysis (IPA) with a hermeneutic approach, aligning with the methodologies

suggested by Tindall (2009) and supported by Heidegger's philosophical insights

(Laverty, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1984). The hermeneutic method, integral to

phenomenology, emphasizes the interpretation of textual data, allowing for a

deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Regan, 2012).

The process started with thoroughly reading and re-reading transcripts, an

essential step in becoming intimately familiar with the participants' narratives

(Tindall, 2009). This was followed by initial noting, which involved identifying significant statements and expressions related to the participants' experiences (Laverty, 2003; Tindall, 2009). The next step involved developing emergent themes from these notes. This thematic analysis, rooted in hermeneutic principles, sought to interpret the underlying meanings of the participants' experiences (Ricoeur, 1976). The connections across emergent themes were then explored, the relationships examined, and a coherent narrative was constructed from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The hermeneutic circle, a key element in this process, was used to iteratively move between parts of the data and the whole, enhancing the understanding of the text about the broader context of the participants' lives (Tindall, 2009). Finally, the analysis found patterns across cases, using visual aids for thematic representation, which aids in explaining complex psychological phenomena (Adu, 2019). Based on the interpretative tradition, the hermeneutic IPA method offered a thorough and nuanced understanding of the psychological experiences of students with learning disabilities. The study offers valuable input to special education research (Rose et al., 2019).

<u>Integrating Reflexivity in Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis</u>

Building on the hermeneutic phenomenological approach outlined, this study also integrates the concept of reflexivity, a crucial aspect emphasized in the works of Engward and Goldspink (2020). In the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) context, reflexivity involves a deep and

ongoing engagement with the research data, akin to living with 'data lodgers.' (Engward & Goldspink, 2020). This metaphorical concept describes how researchers immerse themselves in the participants' narratives, allowing these stories to continually inhabit their analytical and interpretative processes.

The reflexivity approach in this research will be operationalized through several strategies. Firstly, the study will involve keeping a detailed research diary. This diary will record analytical notes and thematic developments and reflect on how interactions with the data shape the researcher's understanding and interpretations. This process aligns with Engward and Goldspink's (2020) advocacy for a living, dynamic interaction with data, facilitating a deeper comprehension of the participants' experiences.

Additionally, the research engaged in a recursive analytic process, as Tindall (2009) outlined. This process involves revisiting the data multiple times, allowing for an evolving understanding that acknowledges the researcher's interpretative role. The study acknowledges the 'double hermeneutic' process, where the researcher's insights and the participants' narratives interact to generate deeper meanings (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

The reflexivity embedded in this study also draws from Heidegger's (Laverty, 2003) concept of 'Dasein' or 'Being-there.' Heidegger's philosophical standpoint speaks to the consequence of the researcher being deeply embedded in the analytic process, experiencing the data as a part of their being. Such an approach aims to integrate the voices of individuals with disabilities into the

researcher's experiential world, not just to hear them. This integration enriches the interpretive authenticity of the study.

This section of the design study highlights the integration of reflexivity in the hermeneutic phenomenological approach. This integration enhanced the depth and rigor of the research, ensuring that the lived experiences of individuals with LDs were interpreted with a nuanced and empathetic understanding. This approach is in line with the philosophical underpinnings of Heideggerian phenomenology and the methodological insights provided by Engward and Goldspink (2020), Larkin et al. (2021), and Smith and Osborn (2008), thus contributing to a rich, contextual, and authentic exploration of our participants lived experiences.

Research Setting

The study was conducted within an unnamed school district in Riverside, California, chosen for its relevance to the transition experiences of students with learning disabilities LDs. The coincidence that all eight participants, alums of this district, attended the same nearby junior college offered a unique perspective into their diverse transition experiences. This setting was key for an in-depth understanding of transition programs and their effectiveness for students with LDs. The Riverside district and its adjacent junior college offered rich insights into the continuity of support services from high school to post-secondary education (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Patton, 2014). The findings from this context are expected to contribute to social justice in special education, with implications for

educational practices and policymaking (Stodden & Dowrick, 2000; Hart et al., 2010; Test et al., 2009; Morningstar et al., 2010). The setting allowed for a focused study with broader applicability in similar educational environments.

<u>Recruitment</u>

This study recruited participants from a two-year junior college in Riverside, California, specifically targeting students who had attended the same comprehensive high school and received individualized transition services through their IEP. The study aimed to include 7-10 individuals with learning disabilities, categorized into two groups based on their progression through college: one group in the early stages (first and second years) and the second group in the advanced stages (third and fourth years) of their undergraduate education. This information, including a participant profile, will be detailed later in this chapter.

Participants were approached via email, focusing on keeping confidentiality as per Sieber and Tolich's (2012) guidelines. Creswell (2013) suggested that the recruitment strategy included detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and benefits. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, including participant anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw. Consent was requested for recording interviews, with the assurance of secure storage and restricted access to the data. The full content of the recruitment email is available in Annex A.

This study looked to capture the voices of students with learning disabilities, centering on their experiences transitioning from high school to post-secondary education. In an intentional outreach effort, 52 emails were dispatched by the school counselor, leading to 11 expressions of interest. Of these, eight students met the study's inclusion criteria, each self-identifying with a learning disability, corresponding to a response rate of approximately 21.15% and a qualification rate of about 72.73% from those who responded. This careful selection process aimed to create a relevant and engaged participant group for the study.

The participants ranged in age from 18 to 23 and varied across their junior college years. Under the pseudonyms Luna, Mia, James, Olivia, Hannah, Ethan, Sophia, and Arlene, these individuals represent a breadth of lived experiences. Each participant self-identified as having a specific learning disability, with some also reporting ADHD as a secondary condition. Figure 6 details their academic year, age, and the nature of their learning disabilities, providing a snapshot of the study's demographic landscape and highlighting the value of their insights.

The self-identification aspect of the participants' learning disabilities is crucial. It reflects their understanding and acknowledgment of their educational needs, aligning with research emphasizing the importance of self-advocacy in students with learning disabilities (Test et al., 2005). By self-identifying,

participants show awareness and initiative, key components of self-determination

fundamental to their academic and personal development (Field et al., 1998).

Figure 6

Participant Profiles

Name	Year in College	Age	Primary Disability	Secondary Disability
Luna	1st	18	Specific Learning Disability	None
Mia	2nd	19	Specific Learning Disability	ADHD
James	2nd	20	Specific Learning Disability	ADHD
Olivia	2nd	20	Specific Learning Disability	None
Hannah	2nd	20	Specific Learning Disability	None
Ethan	3rd	22	Specific Learning Disability	None
Sophia	3rd	23	Specific Learning Disability	ADHD
Arlene	3rd	23	Specific Learning Disability	None

Data Collection and Interview Protocols

According to the methodological guidelines recommended by Yin (2018),

the data collection process for this study was conducted with a strong emphasis

on participant privacy and transparency. Initially, a detailed invitation letter was

crafted, clearly outlining the study's aims and the criteria for participant

involvement. This letter, which received approval from the Riverside school

district, plays a crucial part in the recruitment process and is included for reference in Annex A of this study.

The school counselors played an involved role in the recruitment process. They were entrusted with distributing the letter directly to potential alum participants, ensuring an effective and targeted approach. As part of their responsibilities, these counselors engage in exit interviews with graduating seniors to understand their post-secondary education intentions. While the counselors cannot definitively confirm enrollment, they have informed perceptions regarding students' college plans based on these interviews, a technique supported by DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) in qualitative research.

The first invitation letter, once received by the counselors, was later sent to eligible alums. Interested candidates could contact the primary researcher. Importantly, the counselors were kept uninformed about which students chose to take part in the study, maintaining an added layer of anonymity and confidentiality, as recommended by Yin (2018). The list of students emailed about the research was limited to those believed to be attending post-secondary institutions, streamlining the selection process. Additionally, counselors were well-informed about students in the special education program, further enhancing the precision of participant selection. This approach safeguards a rigorous and ethical data collection process, prioritizing participant confidentiality and informed

consent throughout the study's recruitment and data collection phases. This aligns with the guidelines DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) set forth.

Data Collection

This study's data collection spanned one month, from November to December 2023. Interviews were conducted with students who met the inclusion criteria and volunteered to take part. Each interview lasted, on average, 65 minutes and was conducted via Zoom, a platform preferred by all participants. This virtual setup facilitated an in-depth discussion between the interviewer and the participant, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of each student's experiences transitioning to post-secondary education.

The semi-structured interview format provided a flexible framework to delve into topics "focused on the participant's experiences, feelings, beliefs, and convictions," as outlined by Welman and Kruger (1999). This approach elicited detailed insights into their transition processes and assessed how well these experiences prepared them for higher education. Consent for recording the interviews was obtained from each participant, ensuring that their narratives were accurately documented for in-depth analysis and interpretation. The specific interview questions used in this study are detailed in Appendix B.

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for this study needed participants to self-identify as students with learning disabilities who had used IEP transition services during their high school education. Recognizing that college students may no longer

have copies of their Individualized Education Plan (IEP), eligibility for participation was based on their self-reported history of having one in high school and their self-identification as having a learning disability. This approach aligned with qualitative research, often relying on participants' self-reported experiences and perceptions (Pekrun, 2020). To provide clear and precise information, prospective participants were requested to verify their prior use of an IEP and indicate their learning disability status during first contact. Research supports using self-reported data as a reliable source of information in educational settings, particularly when assessing personal histories and experiences (Pekrun, 2020). This method allowed for the inclusion of a diverse group of participants, encompassing various ages and educational backgrounds while focusing on students who had experienced transition planning as part of their education (Mertens, 2023). This strategy was designed to accurately capture and represent the genuine experiences of students with LDs, ensuring that the study's findings authentically reflect their perspectives and challenges. It aligned with the research's aim to explore their transition experiences. This was achieved without the need for formal assessment or current IEP documentation.

Ethical Considerations

This study adopted a comprehensive approach to ethical considerations, safeguarding participants' privacy and keeping data confidential. Per the guidelines of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at California State University, San Bernardino, the research proposal was subject to their approval. This step

was an essential prerequisite, ensuring that all ethical standards were met and the rights and welfare of participants were protected (California State University, San Bernardino, n.d.).

Furthermore, to maintain the confidentiality of the data, all collected information was stored securely on a password-protected computer. Guba and Lincoln (1994) recommended this measure as essential for preventing unauthorized access and safeguarding sensitive information. Data protection is a cornerstone of research ethics, assuring participants that their personal information is handled with the utmost care and discretion.

Additionally, the anonymity of participants was a priority in this study. Following the ethical guidelines set forth by Guba and Lincoln (1994), pseudonyms were used for both the students and the educational institutions they attended or had attended. The goal of this approach was to keep the participants' anonymity. It allowed them to freely exchange their experiences without concern for being identified or facing consequences. Using pseudonyms was a standard ethical procedure and a means to instill a trusting environment where participants felt safe and respected (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In this study, participants meeting the inclusion criteria were thoroughly briefed about the study's aims and the nature of the interview process. This briefing, as emphasized by Shenton (2004), was necessary for ensuring informed consent. Informed consent is an ethical requirement in research, as Sieber and

Tolich (2013) noted, making certain participants were fully aware of the study's scope and involvement.

Furthermore, the issue of recording interviews was addressed explicitly. Participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded for accuracy and depth of analysis, with the assurance that all recorded content would be treated with strict confidentiality. This approach aligned with the ethical guidelines outlined by Gall et al. (2003), emphasizing the protection of participant privacy and the sensitive handling of their contributions. Creswell and Creswell (2017) also highlighted the importance of confidentiality in qualitative research, noting that it was essential for keeping trust between the researcher and participants.

Participants were also informed of their rights during the interview process. These rights included the right to pause or stop the recording, decline to answer a specific question(s), and withdraw from the study without facing any repercussions. These rights are integral to ethical research practice, ensuring participants' autonomy and comfort, as Mertens (2014) discussed. Such measures not only fulfilled ethical mandates but also reinforced the trust and comfort level of the participants, which was crucial for the authenticity and validity of the research findings.

These ethical considerations, grounded in the principles of Sieber and Tolich (2013) and Creswell and Creswell (2017), informed the research methodology. These ethical considerations involved a dedication to following the strictest research ethics, which encompassed safeguarding participants' privacy

and upholding the study's integrity. By incorporating these measures, the study contributed to the reliability and credibility of the research findings.

Validity and Trustworthiness of Research

Qualitative-interpretative research requires a rigorous approach to validation and trustworthiness, with four key criteria: internal validity or credibility, external validity or transferability, reliability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981; Lincoln, 1995; Creswell & Miller, 2000). This study adopted various methods to achieve these validation criteria, including triangulation of data sources, member checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail (Lincoln et al., 1985). These approaches helped enhance the study's rigor and trustworthiness, ensuring the findings are robust and meaningful to the participants and the wider academic community.

Credibility

Credibility is a fundamental element in qualitative-interpretative research. It pertains to the degree to which the researcher's interpretations resonate with the participants' experiences (Guba, 1981; Lincoln, 1995). In this study, credibility was reinforced by selecting competent participants with directly relevant experiences about the research questions, specifically former students with learning disabilities. Additionally, to enhance credibility, the researcher kept a diary detailing every stage of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and decision-making. This diary is a valuable tool for conducting an audit trail to track and confirm the analysis process. The researcher also used

debriefing and expert review to enhance the study's rigor and achieve maximum objectivity. Specifically, the interpretations and data analysis steps were reviewed by peers who are experts in special education to reduce the risk of bias and enhance data interpretation. This approach improved the study's credibility and objectivity, strengthening the findings' overall trustworthiness.

Transferability

Transferability is defined by the extent to which the results of this study can be transferred or adapted to other contexts (Guba, 1981; Lincoln, 1995). A detailed description of the students' environments was provided to ensure this criterion is met. This rich description offers readers a comprehensive understanding of the circumstances surrounding this population (Lincoln et al., 1985). Such contextual detail allows others to assess the applicability of the study's findings to different settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Reliability

This criterion concerns the alignment between the study's results and the development process. As a result, a detailed account is kept in the researcher's journal, documenting the iterative process of reading and re-reading the interview transcripts and the rationale behind decisions made during data analysis (Guba, 1981; Lincoln, 1995). This journal will act as a roadmap, revealing the challenges met and the adjustments made in response to these challenges. It is important to ensure consistency in the analytical procedures, which allows for coherence throughout the study (Creswell, 2017).

According to Guba (1981) and Lincoln (1995), confirmability refers to the objectivity of the study's findings. In this research, minimizing biases from the researcher's individual experiences is important. Therefore, various triangulation techniques were employed to increase the objectivity of the findings. For example, the researcher has returned to the participants to verify their agreement with the interpretations made. Through these measures, the study aims for the highest possible level of objectivity. This approach helps accurately reflect the experiences of the students with LDs who participated in the research.

To keep accuracy and consistency throughout the data analysis process, the researcher employed a clear and strict analysis process, including appropriate data collection tools to meet the research goals. A structured data analysis approach helped minimize potential bias, making the interpretations sound and credible.

Positionality of the Researcher

My positionality as a researcher is a cornerstone of this qualitative-interpretive study, significantly influencing its execution and interpretation. My background in special education, particularly in delivering IEPs to students with diverse needs, combined with my personal experience of living with ADHD, provides a unique perspective to this research. Moreover, my tenure at a community college has enriched my understanding of students' and educators' attitudes and perspectives. I recognize the importance of reflecting on how my

experiences and background impact this study, as suggested by Creswell & Creswell (2017) and Merriam & Tisdell (2015). This self-awareness ensures that I approach the research with an understanding of the biases and insights I bring to the study.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Three of this research presents a qualitative-interpretive study that explores the lived experiences of students with learning disabilities (LDs) in transitioning from high school to post-secondary education. The study also examines how these individuals progress through the transition process and use the learning provided to achieve their higher education goals. To take part in this study, individuals must have met specific inclusion criteria, including being a student with LDs who received transition services, speaks and understands English, and has finished high school in the last ten years.

This study used semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to identify the major themes and meanings that participants attribute to their experiences, providing an in-depth understanding of their perspectives and perceptions. Maintaining ethical standards is of utmost importance in this study, especially when working with a population that may be vulnerable. Clear instructions were emailed to potential participants, ensuring their anonymity and the confidentiality of all exchanges.

Ethical consideration was given throughout the study, especially when approaching the population susceptible to participating in the research. An email detailing clear instructions was sent to potential candidates for the recruitment process. The communication was meant to reassure them about strategies to keep their anonymity and uphold the confidentiality of all exchanges.

Participants were carefully chosen based on specific criteria to support the integrity of the study, specifically targeting those who had received transition services in high schools within a Riverside school district. The selection of informed participants contributed to the study's credibility. Descriptions of the participants and the settings were provided to help the applicability of the study's findings. The research methodology included transparent data collection and analysis to support the study's dependability. Lastly, the data analysis was shared with all participants, seeking their concurrence or suggestions for modifications to depict the findings accurately.

CHAPTER FOUR:

FINDINGS

Chapter Four details findings from a study on transitioning eight students with learning disabilities (LDs) to post-secondary education within a social justice framework. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and hermeneutic methods, it evaluates the effectiveness of special education transition plans in high schools, their role in enhancing self-advocacy and self-determination, and their impact on students' progression to higher education. This analysis, building on Creswell's (2013) qualitative research, sets the stage for deeper discussion in Chapter Five, centered around four key research questions:

1. The lived experiences of students with LDs transitioning to post-secondary education.

2. Students' perceptions of high school IEP transition services' effectiveness in preparing them for post-secondary education, especially in developing self-advocacy and self-determination skills.

3. The challenges and successes students with LDs face in higher education, particularly concerning self-advocacy and self-determination skills.

4. Practices for college students with LDs are recommended for teachers to promote self-advocacy and self-determination skills.

These questions, driving the semi-structured interviews, allowed for an in-depth analysis of themes reflecting individual and collective experiences, connecting

personal stories with broader educational and societal contexts, as discussed by Larkin et al. (2021) and Eatough and Smith (2017). The chapter uncovers five major themes from the interviews, offering insights into the complex realities students with LDs navigate during their educational transitions:

1. Awareness and Application of Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination: This theme delves into the growing awareness and importance of specific skills in a college setting.

2. Role of High School Transition Services in College Preparedness: This theme examines the impact of IEP transition services on preparing students for the challenges and opportunities in higher education.

3. Guidance and Skill Development: This theme explores the effectiveness of these students' guidance and skill development support.

4. Managing College Life: This theme investigated how students with LDs adapt and cope with the new phase of their educational journey.

5. Advice for Teachers and Students: This theme offers practical recommendations to enhance support for students with learning disabilities.

Figure 7 below provides a structured overview of each primary theme and its associated sub-themes, offering a clearer understanding of this study's key focus areas.

Figure 7

Overview of Primary Theme 1 and Sub-themes
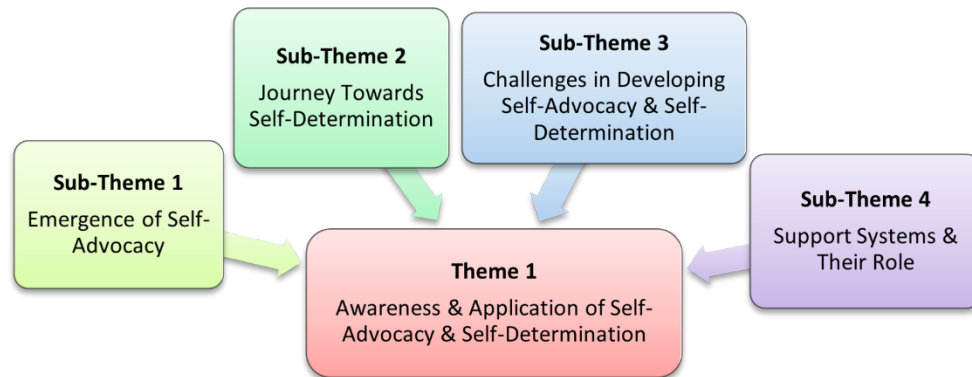
Theme 1: Awareness and Application of Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination

Theme one offers an in-depth look at the concept of self-advocacy and self-determination. It focuses on how these principles are recognized and applied in the lives of our students. This exploration is based on their accounts. Eight students with learning disabilities (LDs) have shown significant improvements in their development. The path from high school to college is emphasized, with a focus on the skills of self-advocacy and self-determination, which are important for growth and supporting independence. This change marks a turning point in their academic paths and a crucial time for them to gain confidence and improve their overall skills.

Emergence of Self-Advocacy

This sub-theme examines the transition students experience from a highly structured secondary education environment to establishing their support

mechanisms within the higher education context. Mia's case exemplifies this fundamental shift. When confronted with the inquiry on her ability to ask for help or advocate for herself (Question 5), Mia recounted a significant moment of self-awareness, saying, "I just waited around, thinking they'd (professors) come to me since they (professors) knew I was registered with the Disability Services Center. But nah, it didn't work like that." Mia elaborated that she eventually realized a proactive approach was necessary to arrange meetings with her professors. She noted that the experience was less daunting than she had expected, attributing this to the approachability of her professors, which facilitated a smoother process than expected.

Consequently, engaging with her professors and advocating for her needs became more manageable. Mia's narrative highlights the initial discomfort and adjustment needed to navigate the college system and secure her accommodations—an obligation not present during her high school years. Her story vividly captures her deliberate actions to communicate her needs, leading to a transformative shift in her educational journey by securing the requisite support on her terms.

When asked about the influence of high school teachers on his development of self-advocacy skills, James shared a pivotal revelation from his first year of college. Reflecting on his initial hesitation, he asked, "Do I really need to ask for help?" This led to a profound epiphany, as he recognized the importance of vocalizing his needs. James articulated, "It hit me that nobody's

gonna know what I need unless I say something, you know? I had to learn just to speak up. New territory, but it turned out all right." His journey highlights the transition from initial reluctance to the empowering realization that self-advocacy is crucial. James' story underscores the significant role of self-advocacy in personal growth, illustrating the deep impact of learning to assert one's voice.

In addressing the challenge of articulating her needs, Luna's story aligns with the theme of developing assertiveness. Her reluctance to draw attention to herself marked her high school experience, indicative of her introverted nature. However, the collegiate environment's emphasis on self-advocacy, as highlighted in Interview Question 5, "Do you know how to ask for help or speak up for yourself" prompted a significant shift in her mindset. Luna revealed, "I used to lay low and avoid attention," recognizing her earlier inclination. "But college was like, 'Speak up.'" This understanding forced Luna to recognize the importance of taking the initiative. She explained, "Had to learn that if I don't stand up for myself, no one else will. Gotta do you… I get it now," affirming her newfound perspective. This shift towards recognizing the value of self-advocacy marks a stage in Luna's personal growth, illustrating her journey toward embracing her voice and agency.

Sophia's narrative stresses the complexities of self-advocacy in pursuing academic accommodations. Her reflections are pertinent to Interview Question 8, "Do you know how to speak up for yourself or ask for what you need?" Sophia recounts her experience: "I really understood why it's important to advocate for

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yourself or whatever when I had to get my accommodations." She acknowledges the challenges during this process but names it a defining moment for her resilience. Through navigating these difficulties, Sophia came to fully understand the significance of her educational rights and the inherent personal strength needed to assert them. "The whole thing was tough, but it made me believe in myself more. It showed me that I got to fight for what I need in school. It's all about sticking up for myself and making sure I get the right help to keep up," she declared. During her first year of college, Sophia showed the initiative by proactively seeking help and sharing multiple accounts of this. She also discussed how she recognized the impact of her advocacy on her education. Her reflections on her advocacy's considerable effect on her education emphasize the value of self-advocacy in securing essential support and bolstering personal empowerment.

The participants' narratives present a unified path from initial hesitation in self-advocacy to a progressively stronger sense of confidence and assertiveness. This shared experience stresses a collective evolution from structured support in high school to the autonomous practice of self-advocacy within the college context. The transition to a higher education environment, characterized by less oversight and greater diversity, is a catalyst for encouraging self-advocacy skills among the students. Despite acknowledging the initial difficulty of adapting to this new responsibility, with many describing the process as "tough or hard," the participants, including Mia, James, Luna, and Sophia, ultimately reflected on the

experience as manageable and perhaps less daunting than initially perceived. The necessity to actively pursue their needs in college not only propelled them towards self-reliance but also marked a significant phase in their personal and academic growth.

<div align="center">Journey Towards Self-Determination</div>

In the second sub-theme, the focal point is the gradual progression of students with LDs toward self-determination as they transition from high school to college. This sub-theme is central, as it summarizes their personal stories of growth, the acquisition of independence, autonomy, and the cultivation of decision-making skills. This sub-theme reveals the progression of students' abilities to set and achieve academic goals, accentuating the significance of self-guidance in their educational development.

Olivia's account distinctly portrays her transition from reliance on high school support systems to achieving autonomy in college. This shift is notably aligned with the research inquiry into the efficacy of high school Individualized Education Program (IEP) transition services in preparing students for post-secondary education. Olivia reflects on her high school experience: "In high school, you're kind of on a set path." She notes that her academic responsibilities were predefined, diminishing her engagement in self-directed learning. Olivia also discussed how her counselor typically arranged her high school schedule, which worked well. However, she mentioned instances where she found herself in certain classes she had not requested and needed help understanding why

she was placed in them. Her "special ed" teacher informed her that these classes were mandatory, which she accepted. Despite this, Olivia desired greater involvement in the decision-making processes of her class schedule.

Upon entering college, Olivia met a stark contrast in the level of independence expected of her. "Then college hits, and suddenly it's all on you. No one's there to hold your hand. The first time I met with my college counselor, we made goals," she recalls. This marked a principal moment for Olivia, as her college counselor's approach to treating her as an adult and involving her in decision-making processes empowered her to take ownership. Olivia's aspiration to transfer to the University of California, Riverside (UCR) and the collaborative goal-setting session with her college counselor exemplify her evolving self-determination. Olivia's narrative reveals the significant transition from high school to college, the shift towards greater self-sufficiency and personal agency. Her experience illustrates the importance of students' active engagement in setting their educational goals, thereby employing and enhancing their self-determination skills crucial for navigating the academic environment and achieving success.

Ethan's insights reveal that self-determination encompasses not only significant life decisions but also the choices we make in our daily routines. He shares, "I used to think adulting was about making huge life choices." Further elaborating, "In college, I learned it's also about the small things, like just putting down your phone and getting your homework done." Ethan's straightforward

recognition of the importance of these everyday decisions highlights how such choices contribute positively to one's overall progress, revealing their role in nurturing self-reliance and autonomy. His reflection points to the understanding that self-determination is built through the accumulation of small, disciplined choices that shape one's ability to effectively manage and direct one's life.

Arlene discussed her experience from high school to junior college, pointing out the change in favor of self-determination that she underwent. She said, "Bruh (brother), in high school, everyone's pretty much babying you. JC (junior college) is a whole different level. You got to be on top of your game – keeping track of due dates, copping (buying) books, studying for exams and finals, and stuff… It's nothing like high school… You got to step up your game." Her story reveals the need for enhanced independence and self-reliance, vital components of self-determination. Her transition was a clear shift from the structured high school environment to the autonomy and self-reliance needed in junior college. The stories shared by Arlene, along with those from nearly all other participants, illustrate the cultivation of essential self-determination skills, including decision-making, goal-setting, and self-regulation. Their voices show the process of assuming personal agency and navigating academic responsibilities independently, marking a substantial evolution in their pathway to self-determination.

Hannah's college experience proves the development of self-determination. She highlights the significance of making informed choices and

managing her time effectively, emphasizing, "Deciding on what to study and keeping track of my time became so important." Facing initial challenges, she adapted by recognizing her strengths, interests, and limitations. This transformation extended beyond the mere management of her academic and personal schedule; it played a pivotal role in reshaping her self-perception within the unfamiliar environment and bolstering her confidence.

Hannah balanced her social life with academic responsibilities, saying, "I can still hang out with friends, I just need to make sure I got all my school stuff and work done... I just know I have less time to waste because in high school, I knew I could turn in stuff whenever, and they (teachers) would accept it." Since transitioning from high school, Hannah has focused on prioritizing her tasks, creating to-do lists, and setting reminders for due dates on her phone. Additionally, she takes photos of her syllabus to keep track of deadlines.

These strategies prove Hannah's commitment to self-determination, focusing on decision-making and enhancing self-efficacy. Her experience through college is not merely an adaptation to a new setting but reflects significant growth in self-reliance and self-awareness. The participants collectively describe an initial period of overwhelm attributed to the greater freedom met in college, progressively leading to a sense of empowerment through self-guided decision-making. The transformative impact of the college environment is notable, with its less structured nature and abundance of opportunities playing a key role in supporting them toward self-determination.

This sub-theme illustrates a transition from reliance on external support to developing self-reliance and intentional decision-making. The path toward self-determination develops as participants enhance their *'capabilities'* to oversee educational responsibilities and adeptly negotiate their new college setting. This evolution is shaped by a surge of new independence and a shift away from a closely supervised environment. For students like Olivia, Ethan, Arlene, and Hannah, mastering self-determination skills becomes a bridge to success, transforming academic challenges into personal victories.

Challenges in Developing Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination

In this sub-theme, we explore the shared obstacles students with LDs met as they sought to cultivate self-advocacy and self-determination skills during their post-secondary transitions. Their collective reflections touch upon a spectrum of issues, from the first hesitancy in expressing their needs to the intricate balancing act needed to manage newfound freedoms and academic duties.

<u>Initial Discomfort in Communication</u>

A common thread among all eight participants was the initial reticence to vocalize their needs and request help. Similarly, students recounted the "worry, stress, and anxiety" they felt when approaching professors for the first time, emphasizing the contrast from a more nurturing high school environment to the assertiveness and the proactive attitude needed in college. This discomfort reflects a lack of readiness for self-advocacy when students first enter college.

<u>Unfamiliarity with College Systems</u>

Many participants needed help with the college's administrative processes, especially when arranging accommodations. Moving from a highly structured high school environment to a more complex college system required navigating several steps. This process involved organizing intake meetings with the disability services office, compiling necessary documents like high school IEPs and recent psychological evaluations, and taking part in discussions about available services and accommodations. Furthermore, students needed to update their status with the disability office annually, locate campus resources such as tutoring, tech support, and learning centers, and learn how to find important information on campus. Successfully managing these tasks was essential for accessing the required support, representing a notable transition from their earlier educational settings.

<u>Balancing Independence and Responsibilities</u>

More than half of the study participants struggled to balance college life's independence with its academic requirements. This independence introduced a more flexible schedule and greater opportunities for social activities, including parties and late-night events. However, such freedom demanded a disciplined approach to avoid letting these distractions affect their academic work negatively. Luna and Ethan, for instance, found themselves overwhelmed by distractions to the extent that their academic performance suffered significantly, leading them to consider dropping out or facing the possibility of failing their courses. Luna

passed all her classes, albeit with a D in math, and Ethan also scraped by with barely passing grades. These situations highlighted a crucial lesson on the importance of managing responsibilities effectively. It became clear that developing stronger time management and organizational skills was key as they tried to meet academic and personal demands. This challenge of finding the right balance was emphasized by nearly all participants, who, while not explicitly mentioning terms like "setting personal goals" or "self-reliance," recognized the necessity of adopting such strategies for success.

<u>Adjustment to Self-Directed Learning</u>

Adapting to the expectations of self-guided learning in college presented a challenge for students transitioning from the structured high school environment. This shift required the development of new strategies for independent study and effective coursework management. Moreover, enhancing study skills became necessary as students required greater self-discipline and time management to handle college life's increased academic rigor and freedom. Learning to prioritize tasks, set realistic goals, and seek out resources for academic support were key components of this adjustment.

<u>Overcoming Self-Doubt</u>

Participants experienced self-doubt, often questioning their ability to succeed in the college environment. This challenge involved confronting internal fears and building the confidence to trust their capabilities. Overcoming these doubts took pursuing peer, family, and academic advisor support. Furthermore, it

became evident that becoming more self-directed and proactive in advocating for their needs and accommodations was valuable to their success. As they faced these challenges, developing self-advocacy skills were key in altering their self-doubt into a resilient belief in their potential to excel in college.

<p style="text-align:center">Support Systems and Their Role</p>

In this sub-theme, the study explores the indispensable role of support systems in developing self-advocacy and self-determination. The experiences participants share underline the essential contributions of faculty, friends, peers, mentors, disability services, and family in shaping their experiences.

<u>Support from Faculty and Peers</u>

Participants recall the positive impact of faculty and peers. Arlene noted, "Having profs who were down with helping out and giving a hand was legit. They were all about me speaking up about what I needed." Her story reveals the role educators have in supporting self-advocacy. Similarly, Sophia shares about peer support, "Getting together with other students on campus who got what I was going through was helpful. It really made me feel like I fit in at college, which was less intimidating." These peer interactions were instrumental in building a supportive community for the students. Almost all the participants acknowledged their constant support from faculty and peers. Many participants leaned heavily on support systems, especially in the initial stages of college.

Mentorship and Guidance

Mentorship stood out as a pivotal element in navigating the college journey, highlighted by Ethan's experience. Among the eight participants, he was the sole beneficiary of a high school mentorship program, significantly easing his transition to college. Ethan remarked, "My mentor in high school helped prepare me for what college was all about. Me and a few other students got lucky because the mentor program kind of started the year before we graduated, so we lucked out, I guess." This initiative was necessary in acquainting Ethan with the academic demands of college, offering practical advice, enhancing his confidence, aiding in grade improvement and attendance, and enlightening him about the consequences of academic performance. Ethan mentioned he had to change schools in his sophomore year, missing out on continued mentorship, which he believed could have further prepared him for post-high school. The program, especially its camaraderie, inspired Ethan to investigate various career options and understand the potential post-graduation earnings. This direct, personalized support uniquely positioned Ethan by equipping him with a thorough insight into college life and success strategies, setting him apart from peers who did not have access to such mentorship in high school.

Access to Disability Resource Center

The Access to the Disability Resource Center (DRC) was a game-changer for five students in this study. Each spoke about how essential the DRC was in helping them get through college with their required accommodations. Mia

mentioned, "For real, the DRC was like the only place I knew people's names. Whenever I needed something, like extra time for tests or help with notes, they were on it. They made letting teachers know what I needed way easier." This kind of support was a common theme among the participants. James added, "College can be hard at times, especially when you know you have a learning condition. That's why I am glad I signed up with the DRC, it's kinda like having an IEP in college. They help me sort out all the stuff I needed for my classes." Luna also shared her experience with DRC's support:

> The DRC didn't just hand things to us; they showed us how to stand up for ourselves, if a professor isn't answering your emails or whatever, they would just tell us how to ask for what we need. Plus, they are nice; they offer us free stuff sometimes, and you can tell they care… The help they were giving me was them trying to get me to hustle and like be my own boss... Wanting me to handle my biz (business) without always needing someone else.

Every student's narrative discussed the impact of the Disability Resource Center (DRC) on their academic progress. The DRC provided accommodations and coached them on voicing their concerns or requesting support. The DRC equipped students with resources and the support needed for their success. Students such as Mia, James, and Luna expressed appreciation for the DRC, emphasizing the contribution the DRC made in facilitating equal educational opportunities and promoting autonomy and self-agency.

<u>Family Support</u>

All eight participants recognized the role of family and guardian support in their college journey. Their stories varied. However, each student shared how the family support in their lives afforded them the confidence and resolve they needed during this phase of their lives. Mia reflected on her family's influence, "My parents were all about college. They'd always be like, 'Mijita (daughter), you are meant for big things.' They kept me going, even when it got hard."

Mia's support and the other participants were essential for their perseverance. Ethan added, "My family didn't just push me to enroll; they told me that without college, things are harder to obtain, like a good job. Their belief in me kinda lit a fire under me, you know, I didn't wanna let them down." The collective insights of the participants reveal the involved nature of support systems. Arlene shared:

> It wasn't just my family, though. Back in the day, my case carrier was always pulling me out of class to talk about college; she got me connected with RCOE. She (case carrier) was always calling home to make sure I'd get the paperwork signed so I could be part of the program. Like I was able to get a job with them, she (case carrier) was chill. My parents really like her.

The support network experienced by each participant encompasses familial and academic relationships. This sub-theme cannot be overlooked; it is instrumental in shaping a positive college experience for these students. Each

narrative highlights the importance of comprehensive support systems in promoting the academic and personal advancement of students with learning disabilities. These stories give us valuable insights into how different types of support, faculty, peers, mentorships, the Disability Resource Center (DRC), and family interact to enhance students' independence and well-being in higher education. The collective impact of these support elements is fundamental for these students. Maintaining strong support networks within higher education institutions is important for supporting students with LDs on their transition through college and into adulthood. These supports allow for the opportunity to achieve post-secondary success confidently.

Summary

An in-depth exploration of theme one, "Awareness and Application of Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination," provides a thorough understanding of students' lived experiences with LDs. It includes four sub-themes, each contributing to a nuanced insight into how these students navigate and adapt to the challenges and opportunities of post-secondary education.

<u>Self-Advocacy</u>

This sub-theme explores the evolution from depending passively on support during high school to actively advocating for oneself in college. Through personal stories, the participants share their transformative experiences, showcasing how they navigated their paths to communicate their needs and rights effectively. From Mia's journey towards proactivity, James's realization of

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his voice's impact, and Luna's triumph over timidity to Sophia's skill in securing accommodations, each narrative underscores the importance of self-advocacy as a key to thriving in the college environment.

Self-Determination

This section of the theme examines the development of self-determination skills among students. The sub-theme illustrates the experiences of individuals like Olivia, Ethan, Arlene, and Hannah, who have transitioned toward academic independence, refined their decision-making capabilities, and managed their studies without direct oversight. This part emphasizes the shift from a high school setting, where learning is often closely supervised, to a college environment that demands self-directed learning, signifying considerable growth in both personal and educational spaces.

Challenges in Developing Skills

This sub-theme addresses students' challenges in building self-advocacy and self-determination, such as communication difficulties, understanding college systems, managing independence and responsibilities, keeping disciplined, making wise decisions, adjusting to self-learning, and dealing with self-doubt. Student reflections point to their resilience and the vital role of support systems in overcoming these issues.

Support Systems and Their Role

The final sub-theme highlights the significant role of support systems in nurturing students' development. From faculty and peer support to mentorship,

disability services, and family encouragement, each support element significantly enhanced the students' confidence, independence, and academic success. The narratives show how these support systems addressed immediate needs and empowered the students towards self-reliance.

Overall, this broad theme, woven together by the experiences of eight participants, demonstrates the impact of self-advocacy and self-determination on the educational outcomes of students with LDs. It sheds light on each student's growth and challenges and highlights the importance of nurturing these skills before transitioning from high school to college. The findings highlight the need for educational systems to give more opportunities for students with LDs to develop self-advocacy skills in a supportive environment.

Theme 2: Role of High School Transition Services in College Preparedness

In this section, we examine the influence of high school transition programs on students' readiness for college. We investigate the impact of these programs on enhancing students' preparation for higher education. The foundation of this study lies in evaluating these programs' effectiveness through our participants' perspectives. Their accounts provide a detailed portrayal of their lived experiences, revealing both these transition systems' strengths and limitations. Figure 8 below divides theme two and its sub-themes, providing a structured overview to guide the later discussions.

Figure 8

Overview of Theme 2 and Sub-themes
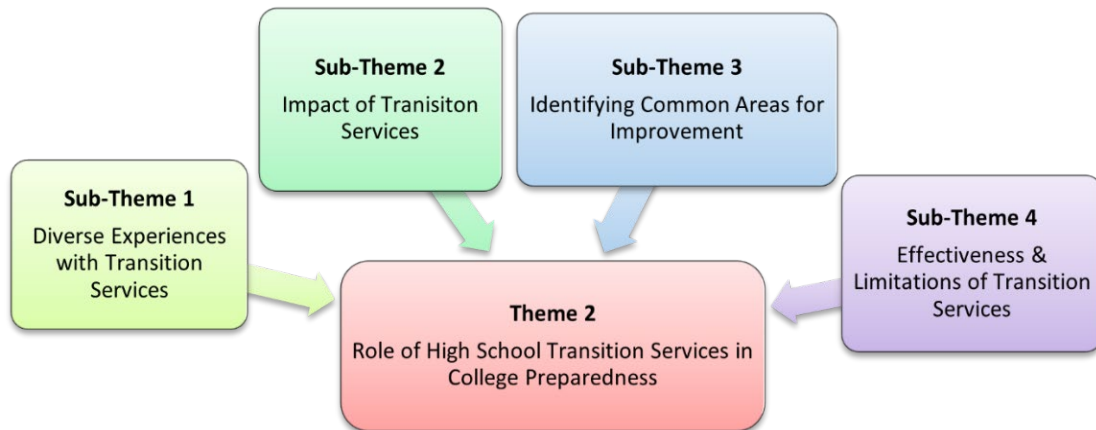
Diverse Experiences with Transition Services

Hannah shared the positive impact of transition services throughout her education. She recalls, "Study Skills classes taught me a lot and helped me stay organized. My teacher was making sure we knew about college and where to go to get the help we are supposed to get, like tutoring." When asked by the researcher, "How did the transition services prepare you for college?" Hannah expressed the important role transition services played in equipping her with the necessary tools for academic success in college.

Olivia acknowledges the modest effect of her high school transition services, recognizing their helpfulness and pointing out considerable gaps. "The services were good, but I wish they had focused more on real-world stuff. I mean, I'm sure there were classes on campus that did that stuff, but I didn't know about

them," Olivia remarks, responding to the question about her readiness for certain aspects of college life. Her comments emphasize the need for a broader, more complete approach in transition services covering academics and essential life skills. Olivia openly expressed her experience with IEP meetings, sharing a sense of missed opportunity in preparing for college. She recalls, "I kind of remember my case carrier talking about what I would do after I graduate, but it wasn't like a serious conversation. It seemed more about just getting through my classes, not really preparing me for what was after high school." Olivia's reflection shows a gap in the transition services she received, pointing to a need for more focused and deliberate planning that extends beyond immediate academic support to comprehensive preparation for post-high school life.

James' and Luna's accounts of transition services are notably vague. James comments, "I don't remember much about the IEP stuff, but I felt ready for college. I had gone on a field trip with my class and again with my mom, so I knew what to expect," in response to being asked if he remembered any high school services or classes that aided his transition. Although lacking in specifics, James' overall feeling of readiness indicates that the transition services and parental support positively influenced his confidence as he approached his college journey. Similarly, Luna has little to no detailed memory of transition services, confessing that she "should have paid more attention" but found it less significant compared to her social life and family at that time.

These varied experiences of Hannah, Olivia, James, and Luna with high school transition services provide a glimpse of the different levels of impact these programs can have. While some students like Hannah find them beneficial, others like Olivia perceive gaps in their application. Still, others like James and Luna feel generally prepared but cannot recall their experience overall. These insights are necessary in evaluating the effectiveness and areas for improvement in transition services for students with LDs.

Impact of Transition Services

Sophia's thoughts on a specific project from her Study Skills class demonstrate the real influence of high school transition programs. "There was this time we had to give a pretend interview for a job interview in my class. I was so nervous, I begged the teacher to let me skip it," she says of an assignment that influenced her later college experiences. "She said I had to, but she helped me prepare, and since it was a big part of my grade, I didn't have a choice." Despite her reservations, Sophia found this exercise beneficial in addressing potential employers, a skill she eventually found invaluable during genuine job interviews.

Sophia and three other participants also credited the Study Skills class, designed for students with IEPs, introducing her to practical methods for managing college work. For Sophia specifically, it allowed her to strengthen her time management skills, which she recognizes as a continual struggle. However, the emphasis on self-advocacy instilled in her by her high school support team

enabled her to articulate her demands effectively to her college teachers. "Self-advocacy isn't something I really remember learning, but like I know we definitely talked about standing up for ourselves and being told we need to ask for help or ask a question when we need help," she said. As told by Sophia, these lived experiences show the immediate relevance and application of transition services, emphasizing their ability to equip students with key skills for navigating higher education's academic and professional landscapes.

Ethan reflects warmly on his high school experience, particularly crediting his case carrier, who also doubled as his special ed English teacher. "My case carrier was cool. He was also my English teacher. We used to lift weights together during lunch a lot," Ethan shared. His connection with the school staff extended beyond the classroom, creating a sense of belonging and positivity. "I still stop by sometimes just to say hi to everyone. All the teachers were really nice to me and my little brother." Ethan expressed getting along with the principals and security guards, who were always kind to him.

Ethan's narrative shows the significance of a supportive and inclusive school environment. His positive interactions and experiences contributed to his well-being and feeling of school as a welcoming space. "I loved school, like I wish I could go back. Most of the teachers got me, and they were there to help, not just with class stuff but with everything," he explains. This sense of community and support played an important role in shaping his outlook and approach to education, instilling confidence, and readiness as he transitioned to college.

Identifying Common Areas for Improvement

As the participants reflected on their experiences with high school

transition services, several common themes appeared, showing areas for

enhancement. For instance, Olivia and Mia point out the need for more emphasis

on self-advocacy and decision-making skills. Others, like Hannah and Luna,

desire more personalized guidance tailored to their needs and learning styles.

Incorporating Student Suggestions

The insights gathered from our research participants underline the serious

role of high school transition services in preparing students with LDs for the

challenges of college. The experiences shared by Hannah, Olivia, and James

reflect a broader trend seen in academic literature, highlighting the variable

impact of these services (Wehmeyer et al., 2000). Studies show that students

transitioning to post-secondary education often confront a decline in supportive

services, significantly affecting their self-efficacy and success in higher education

settings (Kramer, 2015; Palmon et al., 2017). This is particularly pertinent for

students with disabilities, who, 2015-2016, constituted approximately 19% of all

post-secondary students (VonKrosigk, 2022). The need for enhanced self-

advocacy and self-determination skills is a recurring theme in educational

research. These skills are crucial for transitioning from high school to college,

especially as direct professional support in earlier educational stages diminishes

(Cleary & Persch, 2020; Hall Pistorio et al., 2021; Palmon et al., 2017). The

variability in experiences, such as those of Olivia, who noted gaps in practical life

skills, and James and Luna, who felt generally prepared but lacked specific

recollections, aligns with the findings of Hall Pistorio et al. (2021) and Hatfield et

al. (2018). These studies focus on the importance of tailored transition programs

that support academic readiness and address life and self-advocacy skills.

Impact on College Preparedness

High school transition services, as reflected in our participants' narratives,

have played a key role in shaping their readiness for college. These programs,

particularly those focused on study skills and time management, have provided

the participants with a solid foundation for navigating higher education's

academic and administrative aspects. For instance, Mia credits the Study Skills

class for giving her a realistic preview of college workload management, which

she found valuable.

Effectiveness and Limitations of Transition Services

The evaluation of transition services for students with learning disabilities

(LDs) highlights an imbalance: robust academic support stands in contrast to a

lack of comprehensive life skills preparation. Students commend the academic

help they receive, yet they consistently find a gap in readiness for daily life tasks.

Hall Pistorio et al. (2021) recognize the strengths of academic interventions but

also point to a shortfall in equipping students for practical challenges, a sentiment

confirmed by Hatfield et al. (2018), who note the omission of crucial life skills in

many transition programs.

Feedback from the students sheds light on the specific areas needing attention, notably financial literacy and social competency. They articulate a discrepancy between their academic achievements and their ability to navigate financial responsibilities or social interactions effectively. This gap poses challenges in transitioning to higher education and sustaining success there and in the workplace, stressing the need for a more holistic approach to transition services.

Participants advocate for enhancements to transition programs that integrate life skills training with academic learning. They suggest that workshops focusing on real-life applications, coupled with personalized support, could improve student outcomes. The diversity of student experiences shows a need for tailored transition services. These services prepare students academically and equip them with essential skills for navigating life beyond the classroom.

Summary

Theme two examines the impact of high school transition services for students with learning disabilities, illustrating their effectiveness in preparing students academically and noting a significant shortfall in equipping them for life beyond school. The lived experiences of these participants suggest that ample academic support exists; however, it also reveals the noticeable lack of life skills and personalized guidance to help students navigate post-secondary life. This discrepancy signals the need for a more integrated approach that boosts academic skills while actively promoting self-advocacy and decision-making

capabilities, a key to success in higher education. The third theme will explore

strategies to cultivate and enhance these essential self-advocacy skills.

<p style="text-align:center">Theme 3: Guidance in Self-Advocacy Skill Development</p>

This research area explores how students' guidance influences the growth

of their self-advocacy skills. Particularly addressed is the setting of IEP meetings.

The narratives provided by our participants reveal the complex interaction

between the guidance they received and their ability to advocate for themselves,

a key skill for successfully navigating higher education. Figure 9 below presents

a structured overview of these themes and their corresponding sub-themes.

Figure 9

Overview of Theme 3 and Sub-themes
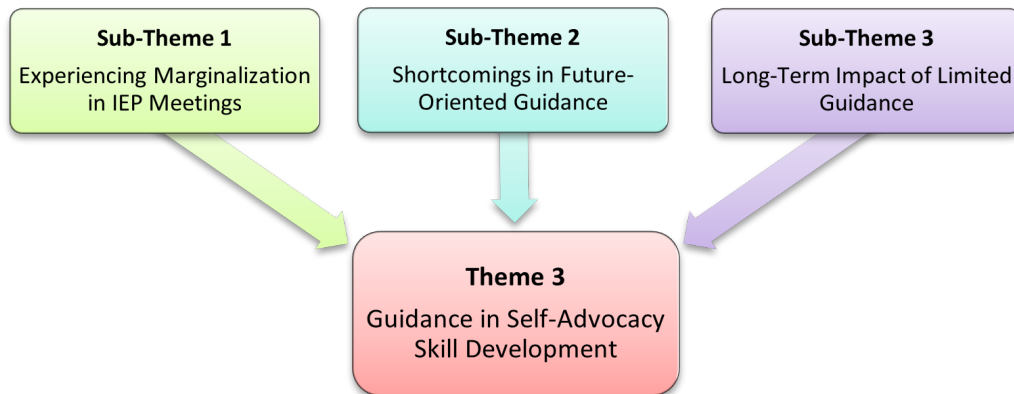
<p style="text-align:center">Experiencing Marginalization in IEP Meetings</p>

IEP meetings are designed as essential support structures for students

with disabilities. Nonetheless, narratives from six participants offer a mixed

depiction. Olivia, for example, felt she was more of an "observer" than a participant, showing a systemic issue where adults' decisions often overshadow students' voices. This common experience among the participants brings to light concerns about the true effectiveness of IEP meetings in genuinely empowering students and involving them actively in their educational planning.

Many students acknowledged the dedication of staff and teachers in providing necessary accommodations as outlined in their IEPs. However, the nature of the meetings themselves differ. The participants often felt they needed to control or own the proceedings. They described the content of the discussions as confusing and expressed anxiety over what might be said during these meetings.

Conversely, Hannah's experience stood out as notably different. Her voice was heard and valued in her meetings, crediting a strong relationship with her IEP team. "Meetings were long, but that is because we always covered so much, especially how I was doing in Math and English," she shared. Her final IEP meeting, in her senior year, focused extensively on her post-high school plans, including college enrollment and ensuring continued support. For Hannah, these meetings were a positive and empowering space where she could speak up, knowing the discussions were centered on her benefit.

Shortcomings in Future-Oriented Guidance

Participants voiced concerns about the direction provided during their Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, notably on how adequately

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prepared them for the challenges of college life. James's experience was enlightening: "I don't really remember making a plan for after college, I mostly figured it out on my own." James's experience was also informative. He saw that there needed to be more discussion concerning training key skills such as self-advocacy and self-determination. Although he ultimately became aware of these concepts, primarily due to his experiences in school, work, and college, he did not connect them to his Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. This sentiment echoes broader academic findings that, while IEPs efficiently address immediate educational challenges, they often do not adequately equip students for the self-directed nature of post-secondary education.

<div align="center">Long-Term Impact of Limited Guidance</div>

Participants' perspectives show that the support they received in high school often had a limited scope, primarily addressing immediate academic concerns and neglecting their preparedness for future challenges. This restricted approach left some students, like Mia, ill-equipped for life after high school. Mia reflects: "We did talk about some stuff, like FAFSA, but I don't really remember planning for college. I honestly think I did have talks with my case carrier, but at the time I didn't know what I wanted to do when I graduated, so it wasn't very important to me."

Mia's account, echoing the sentiments of three other students, highlights a gap between the timing and the information from guidance and staff students received, in conjunction with their willingness or ability to engage with it at that

time. These students have a vague recollection of discussing future plans with their teachers. However, these conversations did not seem pressing or relevant, suggesting a misalignment between their developmental stage and the readiness to grasp the significance of such forward-thinking guidance.

This disconnect becomes clearer when considering the participants' later experiences in higher education. Luna, for instance, while appreciative of her special education teachers, expressed that a structured class or specific training focusing on self-advocacy skills would have better equipped her for the challenges of college life. Despite not recalling in-depth discussions on these life skills being taught, Luna felt that targeted instruction could have significantly boosted her confidence and assertiveness in college.

Luna's reflections explain an essential aspect of transitioning from high school to post-school activities, emphasizing the importance of self-reliance and personal responsibility in educational settings. She pointed out that although she recognized the value of transition services, there was a disparity, causing her proactive efforts to seek the support and accommodations needed during high school. This insight not only underlines the need for more individualized and accessible transition services but also emphasizes the vital role of self-initiative. Throughout her interview, Luna's awareness of the necessity for personal accountability was a consistent theme. This theme stresses that the impact of support services is greatly augmented by the individual's active participation and resourcefulness. The relationship between external support mechanisms and

internal motivation reflects educational psychology insights, suggesting that self-efficacy and personal agency are key to successful transitions (Bandura, 2000). By highlighting the role of self-initiative in navigating life's journey, Luna's story connects with a widespread challenge many students face when moving from high school to further education or the workforce. It prompts a reconsideration of how current transition services are structured, advocating for enhancements that offer comprehensive guidance and promote and support the development of self-reliance and personal accountability.

In contrast, some students expressed a more positive view, highlighting the support they received in high school that boosted their readiness for college. Ethan shared that he was fortunate to have a counselor who guided him while preparing for college, offering insights into financial aid options, planning, and self-advocacy, which greatly helped him upon high school graduation. These students acknowledged the importance of the help they received during their junior and senior years. However, they also admitted that starting these discussions earlier would have been helpful. Hannah mentioned that while these conversations were necessary during her junior and senior years, she occasionally wished she had started thinking about them during her sophomore year. This was because junior and senior years were primarily focused on graduation, making it challenging to balance college preparations with other obligations, especially social commitments.

Summary

The findings from this theme highlight the fundamental impact of guidance on strengthening self-advocacy skills. Participants' stories call for a more student-centered approach in school, especially during IEP meetings (Winn & Hay, 2009; Foley et al., 2012; McCall, 2015). As suggested by these narratives, effective guidance should go beyond meeting short-term academic goals to enabling students to confidently and independently manage their education. This theme emphasizes the importance of comprehensive guidance in preparing students with essential skills for their immediate and long-term educational pursuits.

Theme 4: Managing College Life

The transition to college life presents students with unique challenges and opportunities for growth, highlighting the importance of self-discipline and the effective use of resources. This segment of the participant narratives provides insight into how they adjust to their new academic surroundings, showcasing their resilience and ability to adapt. To avoid redundancy, this analysis will be concise given the overlap of sub-themes within the five major themes already discussed and those to be covered. Figure 10 below outlines these themes and their related sub-themes in a structured format.

Figure 10

Overview of Theme 4 and Sub-themes
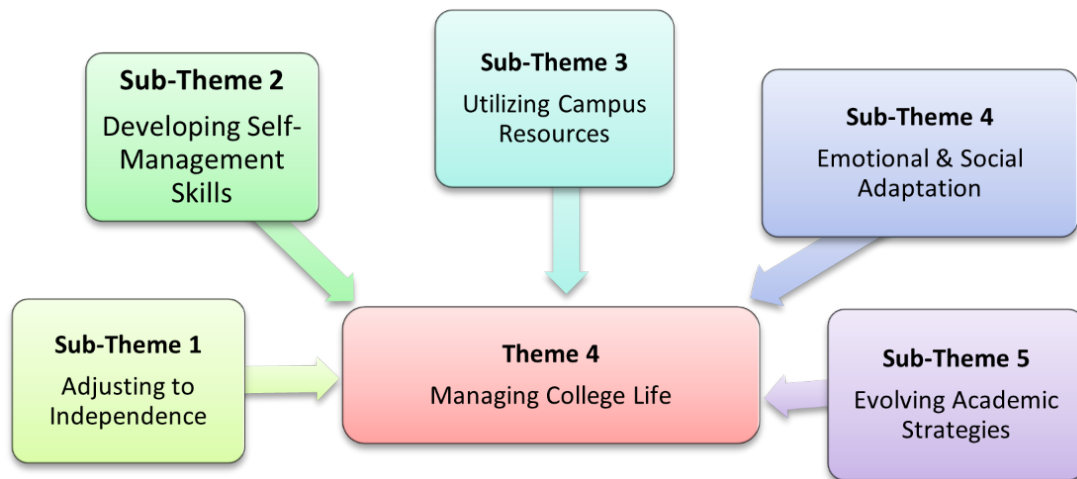
Adjusting to Independence

The participant describes their initial experience of college as a significant adjustment, marked by the need to become more self-reliant. Hannah shared, "Walking onto my college campus was stressful. It was a totally new experience for me, plus I didn't really know anyone, so it was on me to find my classes." This statement captures the heightened level of responsibility and independence met in college.

Developing Self-Management Skills

One key challenge highlighted was the transition from the structured environment of high school to the more self-guided college setting. "In high school, my parents made sure I got to class on time, and there were always people checking up on me. In college, I realized no one was gonna do that for

me. If I fail, it is on me," Ethan expressed. This reflection sheds light on the essential self-management skills needed in post-secondary education.

Utilizing Campus Resources

The participants also acknowledge the importance of using campus resources as support. Three students acknowledged that their college offered plenty of resources, such as tutoring, counseling services, the writing lab, office hours, study groups, and DRC support. Most admitted that learning to seek out and use these resources was a considerable part of adapting to college life. This insight reveals the participant's growing awareness of the support systems available in college and their role in academic success.

Emotional and Social Adaptation

Furthermore, all eight students were honest and revealed the social and emotional toll it took on them. One student shared, "No one can prepare you for what college life is gonna be like; you kinda learn as you go." The sentiment was common in that they felt more comfortable in the college as time passed, just as they had when they started high school, one of the students shared. Arlene shared:

I totally felt stressed out; it was a lot, like overwhelming, but like it got better, especially after I had some friends on campus and what professors expected of me. I think that was the scariest, not knowing all my teachers at first.

Evolving Academic Strategies

Another student shared that while they are finally finding their groove, keeping up with the workload is still challenging and that next semester, they will cut back on units just to be able to keep up with assignments and make sure they pass their classes. This comment illustrates their evolving strategies for managing and succeeding in their new academic setting.

Summary

This theme highlights the evolution of participants from dependent learners to independent individuals as they transition to college. It captures their first challenges in adapting to a more autonomous educational environment and their subsequent development of self-reliance and proactive engagement. The narratives emphasize the importance of personal accountability and the strategic use of campus resources. Participants' experiences reflect a journey from initial disorientation to confident navigation of academic and social aspects of college life. Theme four reinforces the transition from structured high school support to self-directed learning and personal growth in higher education.

Theme 5: Recommendations for Educators and Students

The participant's insights culminate in thoughtful recommendations to enhance educational practices for students with learning disabilities (LDs). These suggestions, rooted in their individual experiences, emphasize the importance of integrating self-advocacy and decision-making skills into educational curriculums

from an early stage. The participant's recommendations offer pragmatic guidance for educators and students, underlining strategies to better support students with disabilities in their educational goals. The figure below presents a structured overview of these themes and their corresponding sub-themes.

Figure 11

Overview of Theme 5 and Sub-themes
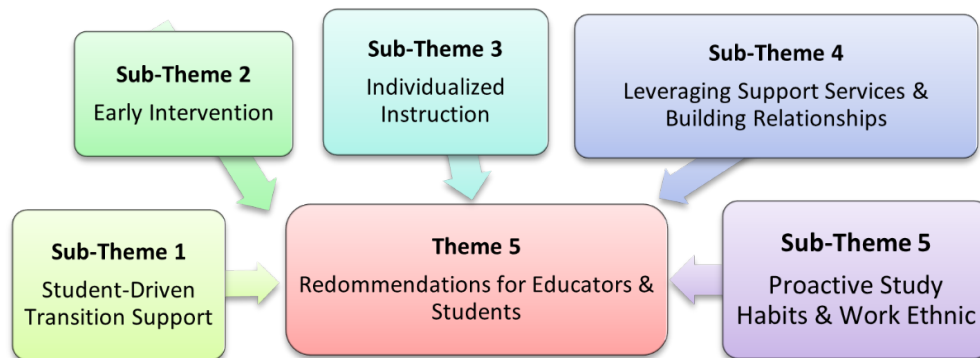
Student-Driven Transition Support

In recent feedback, Mia and Olivia have articulated the importance of involving students and their families more proactively in the educational process. Mia emphasizes the need for educational institutions to create strategies that encourage student self-advocacy. She suggests that such initiatives could help students overcome personal challenges like "shyness" and facilitate a smoother transition to post-secondary education.

Olivia's feedback focuses on the need for improvements in how Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings are conducted and

communicated. She sees that these meetings, although designed to be student-centered, often fail to be accessible or engaging. Olivia highlights a specific gap in her understanding of the "Individualized Transition Plan," showing a broader issue with how educational plans and terminologies are explained to students.

Both students point towards a critical need for educational settings to adopt a more student-centered approach. This entails making procedural aspects of education, like IEP meetings, more transparent and involving students more closely in decisions that affect their educational pathways. The insights from Mia and Olivia suggest that such an approach could lead to better preparedness for college and increase the effectiveness of educational planning.

Early Intervention

The study points to a strong consensus among participants on introducing self-advocacy and decision-making skills early in a student's education. Ethan questions the common practice of delaying these skills until later in school, suggesting that starting earlier could significantly help students. On a related note, James, while satisfied with the support he received, highlights a need for more college and career readiness initiatives. He argues that learning these skills early is crucial for a student's success in life. Both perspectives suggest that early skill development is beneficial and essential for preparing students for future challenges.

Individualized Instruction

Additionally, Olivia addresses the need for tailored support systems in educational institutions. "I don't think all of us need the same kind of help, but like for me, I need someone to pull me aside and work with me very closely. I do better one-on-one. As she has transitioned to college, Olivia is better at advocating for herself. However, she expressed a need for this type of support earlier on. This recommendation calls for a more individualized approach to supporting students with LDs.

Leveraging Support Services and Building Relationships

Luna advises students, especially those moving to higher education, to familiarize themselves with the Disability Resource Center (DRC), highlighting its valuable support. Sophia emphasizes the importance of seeking help without hesitation, underlining the role of self-advocacy in using available resources. Another student suggests not to shy away from attending office hours, noting that meetings with professors can ease academic challenges as instructors are keen to engage with their students. These recommendations collectively stress the benefits of proactive engagement and the positive impact of direct communication with faculty on a student's academic experience.

The participants highlighted the importance of building a strong support network. Arlene emphasized the value of connecting with classmates to form study groups, suggesting that these connections can enhance academic success. Ethan discussed the significance of mentorship, recalling how mentor

groups were beneficial during his high school years. Although he is not currently part of a mentor program in college, he is keen on finding a mentor. Their advice collectively points to the importance of peer support and mentor relationships in the college experience.

Proactive Study Habits and Work Ethic

In the study, four students highlighted the importance of self-discipline in their schoolwork. They recommended limiting time spent on social media and minimizing attendance at social events to keep a strong focus on their studies. These students pointed out the necessity of staying persistent and putting in hard work, stressing the significance of carefully planning daily tasks, studying for tests, and staying dedicated to their academic goals. According to them, such a method was key to avoiding procrastination and excelling in school.

Summary

Participants provide actionable recommendations to enhance education for students with learning disabilities (LDs), emphasizing early integration of self-advocacy and decision-making into curriculums, personalized support systems, and building robust support networks. These strategies foster a more inclusive and empowering educational environment, easing academic and personal growth for students with LDs.

Research Questions Addressed

Research Question 1

The theme "Awareness and Application of Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination" goes beyond surface-level observations to examine the intricate lived experiences of students with LDs. This theme explores how these students become aware of and apply important skills like self-advocacy and self-determination in a new educational setting. The narratives provide rich, detailed accounts of their experiences, highlighting moments of realization, adaptation, and growth. Students describe how they learned to navigate complex college systems, initiate support, and assert their needs, marking significant milestones in their educational and personal development.

Research Question 2

The study examines the role and impact of high school IEP transition services. It reveals mixed effectiveness, with services laying a foundational understanding of self-advocacy and self-determination but often not equipping students for the less structured, more demanding college environment. Students like Mia and James reflect on how high school provided a safety net, but college required them to step up and actively advocate for themselves, a skill they felt underprepared for. This gap shows a need for transition services to include more practical, real-world applications and training in self-advocacy.

<u>Research Question 3</u>

The transition into higher education brought a spectrum of challenges for these students, from adjusting to the less structured nature of college life to finding a balance between newfound independence and academic responsibilities. However, within these challenges lay opportunities for growth. Students like Ethan and Hannah exemplify this, proving resilience and adaptability. They evolved from relying on structured support to developing effective self-management and decision-making strategies. These success stories highlight the transformative potential of navigating and overcoming challenges in higher education.

<u>Research Question 4</u>

The research offers useful guidance for educators and academic establishments, urging the formation of educational settings that promote self-expression and enable decision-making. Engage students in active learning. Strategies should include holding interactive dialogues, applying problems from the real world in lessons, and starting mentorship programs to pair students with mentors. Making disability services accessible and tailored to the student's unique needs is key. The involvement of faculty and peers is equally important in providing an environment where students with LDs feel supported. This type of school culture encourages them to stand up for their needs and confidently navigate their future with confidence and fidelity.

Chapter Summary

Chapter four presents a nuanced and deeper view of the transitional experiences of students with learning disabilities. The detailed exploration of each research question answers specific queries and paints a comprehensive picture of these students' challenges and triumphs. The chapter contributes significantly to understanding educational transitions for students with LDs and provides a basis for further research and practice in this fundamental area of education.

CHAPTER FIVE:

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

In an educational landscape where diversity is increasingly acknowledged, this study explores the intricate lived experiences of students with learning disabilities (LDs) during their transition from high school to post-secondary education. Exploration is necessary given the evolving paradigms in special education and the pressing need to understand the real-life implications of these changes on this population of students. Additionally, this study will examine how social justice theories developed by Iris Young (1990), Nancy Fraser (2001,2008), and Martha Nussbaum (2000) intersect with the findings, offering a critical lens through which to view the support systems and policies affecting students with LDs, thereby situating individual experiences within a broader framework of equity and inclusion in education.

Overview

Adopting a qualitative-interpretive approach, specifically hermeneutic interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this study offers an empathetic and in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of students with Learning Disabilities (LDs) transitioning from high school to junior college. The method is ideally suited for examining personal narratives, providing a unique perspective on individual experiences and broader societal and educational contexts (Larkin et al., 2021).

This research's core comprises narratives from eight students aged 18-23 attending junior college in Riverside, California. Their stories, rich in detail and emotional depth, present a complex view of their educational path. These stories emphasize the importance of advocating for oneself and having control over one's decisions, the role of individualized transition plans to prepare students for life outside of high school, and the complex challenges of navigating post-secondary life. Together, they offer various difficulties and achievements young adults face. This method exposes the distinctiveness of every student's experience and incorporates their personal stories into the broader conversation about equity and social justice within education.

This study offers insights that could inform and possibly enhance transitional services for students with learning disabilities (LDs), suggesting areas for improvement. It aims to give special educators a deeper understanding of student perspectives, hoping to enrich their approach to support and deliver advocacy instruction. The research respectfully adds to the broader dialogue on educational challenges, making a small contribution to a larger issue. It seeks to gently nudge educational practices towards greater inclusivity and support, acknowledging its role as just one piece in the complex puzzle of educational reform.

The upcoming sections offer a thorough exploration and analysis of these key findings. Thus, we will explore their implications for educational practice, confront the limitations of our study, and chart potential avenues for future

research. This chapter aims to synthesize the findings and reflect on their broader implications, proposing pathways to enhance the educational experiences of students with LDs. Before discussing the analysis of our findings, let us first consider a visual representation of the core themes that have emerged from our study. The figure below outlines the five principal themes and their respective sub-themes, drawing from the narratives of students with learning disabilities (LDs) as they transition to post-secondary education. This schematic provides a concise overview of the areas this chapter will further discuss, setting the stage for the subsequent in-depth analysis.

Figure 12

Mapping of Major Themes and Their Sub-themes
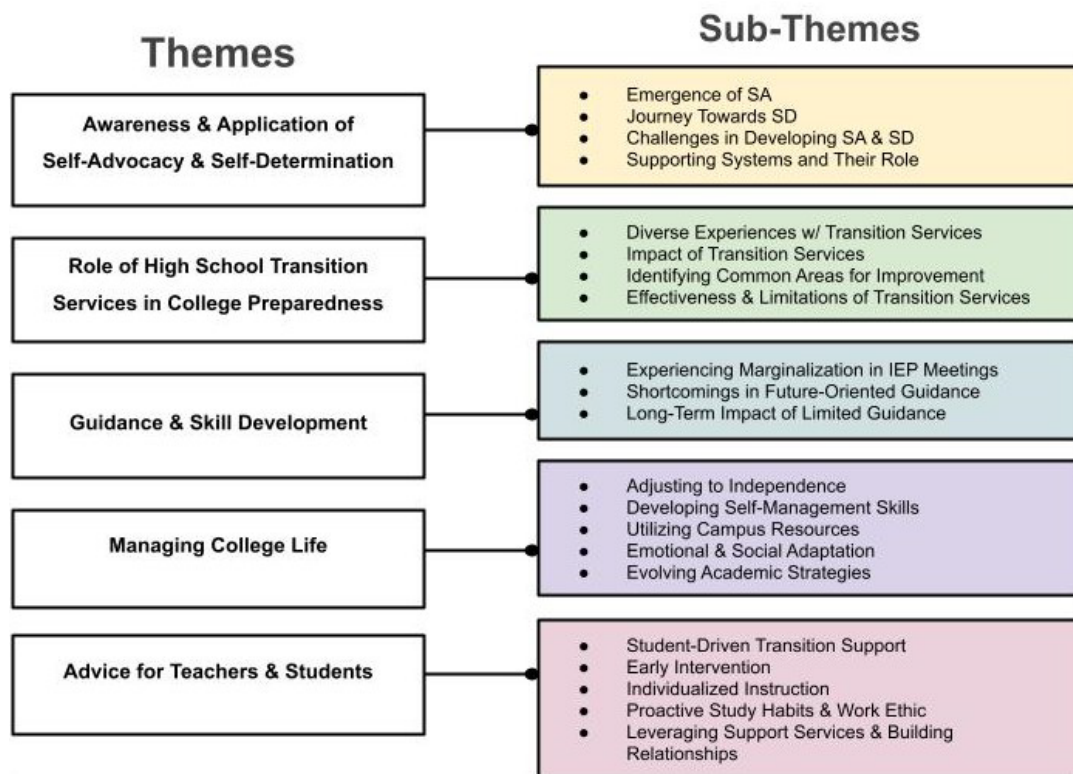
Key Findings and Social Justice Integration

The study explores the lived experiences of students with learning disabilities (LDs) transitioning from high school to junior college. It intertwines empirical findings with the social justice theories developed by Iris Young (1990), Nancy Fraser (2001,2008), and Martha Nussbaum (2000), whose works spanning from the late 20th to the early 21st century have significantly contributed to understanding the intersections of disability, education, and social justice. The study examines the journey from marginalization to empowerment, as illustrated by students' narratives, and assesses institutional structures and capability deprivation in educational systems.

1. The transition from Structured High School to Autonomous College Life: The shift from high school's highly structured support system to the autonomous, self-directed college environment presents a considerable challenge for students with LDs. This abrupt change often leads to feelings of unpreparedness and marginalization, concepts articulated by Young (1990, 2020) in her discussion on how structural conditions can marginalize certain groups. In this context, Young's theory is particularly relevant to the experiences of students with LDs who struggle to adapt to the less guided and more demanding college setting. The transition process emphasizes the importance of developing self-advocacy and self-determination skills in high school to better prepare students for this significant shift (Field et al., 2003;

Test et al., 2005). Furthermore, research by Newman (2009) on the post-high school

outcomes of youth with disabilities highlight the urgent need for transition

planning and support in helping successful adaptations to post-secondary

education.

2. <u>Importance of Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination:</u> Self-advocacy refers to

the ability of students to understand and articulate their own needs and rights,

especially in academic settings. This understanding is vital for students with

learning disabilities (LDs), as it effectively empowers them to communicate

their needs (Test et al., 2005). Self-determination involves making informed

choices and taking control of one's life, emphasizing the significance of

autonomy and agency for individuals with LDs (Wehmeyer et al., 1998).

These competencies are crucial for students with LDs to effectively access

resources, seek necessary accommodations, and engage fully in the college

experience, thereby helping a smoother transition to success in post-

secondary education (Field et al., 2003; Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Cultivating

self-advocacy and self-determination is integral to navigating the educational

landscape and achieving academic and personal success (Wehmeyer &

Palmer, 2003). Additionally, as noted by Agran, et al. (2009), fostering

independence and autonomy is crucial for students with learning disabilities to

succeed in post-secondary education and beyond.

3. <u>Need for Embedded Training in High School:</u> The study emphasizes integrating self-advocacy and self-determination skills training into high school curriculum. Such preparation is fundamental for students with LDs to manage the independence needed at the college level effectively. This method resonates with Nancy Fraser's call for fair distribution of resources, aiming to provide students with LDs the essential tools and support for a smooth transition to higher education (Fraser, 2001, 2008). The value of incorporating these skills into educational programs is also highlighted by Wehmeyer et al. (1998), who points out the positive impact of self-determination on students with disabilities to higher education. Additionally, research by Agran et al. (1999) on teachers' views on self-determination stresses the need for educational approaches that prepare students for the challenges of post-secondary life.

4. <u>Resonance with Nussbaum's Capability Approach:</u> Martha Nussbaum's (2000) emphasis on enhancing individual *'capabilities'* aligns with this need for self-advocacy and self-determination training. Her approach advocates for education that builds a wide range of capabilities, enabling individuals to choose and engage in activities they value. By incorporating these skills into the educational curriculum, schools can contribute to the holistic development of students with LDs, preparing them not just academically but also for the broader challenges of life and higher education.

This study's exploration of self-advocacy and self-determination reveals a significant gap in transitioning from high school to post-secondary education for students with LDs. The research highlights the importance of proactive training during high school. Supporting the development of essential skills, creating a smoother and more empowered transition to college life. This approach aligns with the theories of Wehmeyer et al. (1998), Fraser (2008), and Nussbaum (2000), advocating for a more equitable, inclusive, and capability-enhancing educational experience for students with LDs.

<center>Role of High School Transition Services</center>

The results of this research found that high school transition services, including programs like Study Skills and those focusing on independent living skills, play an indispensable role in preparing students with LDs for the challenges of higher education. However, a notable limitation was seen in these programs: they often concentrate primarily on academic skills and overlook essential aspects of practical decision-making and self-advocacy. This oversight shows a gap in addressing the comprehensive needs of students with LDs.

1. <u>Lack of Focus on Practical Decision-Making:</u> Many transition programs emphasize academic preparedness, such as study techniques and organizational skills. While these are undoubtedly important, they must prepare students for real-life decision-making scenarios they will meet in college. This includes choosing course selection, managing time, and navigating college resources.

2. <u>Insufficient Emphasis on Self-Advocacy:</u> Equally key is the development of self-advocacy skills, which empower students to understand, assert, and autonomously address their needs, especially in a new and more independent college environment. However, current transition services often do not adequately equip students with these skills, leaving them underprepared to advocate for accommodations or support in college.

3. <u>Alignment with Nussbaum and Fraser's Theories:</u> This situation resonates with Martha Nussbaum's (2000) emphasis on developing *'capabilities'* beyond academic competence. Nussbaum advocates for education that enhances a student's overall capabilities, including decision-making and self-advocacy, essential for thriving in diverse environments. Similarly, Fraser's (2008) call for recognition and fair resource allocation is pertinent here. Her theory suggests that educational resources, including transition services, should be distributed in a manner that recognizes and addresses the varied needs of students with LDs, ensuring a more balanced and comprehensive approach to their development.

4. <u>Need for a Holistic Approach:</u> The study suggests a need to reevaluate and redesign high school transition programs to encompass a more holistic approach. This would include integrating practical decision-making exercises and self-advocacy training into the curriculum. Such an inclusive approach aims to prepare students with LDs academically and equip them with the necessary life skills. This approach allows students to navigate and succeed

in the college environment. While high school transition services like Study Skills programs provide a foundation for academic success, there is a significant opportunity to enhance these programs. By incorporating practical decision-making and self-advocacy elements and aligning with the theories of Nussbaum (2000) and Fraser (2008), these services can offer a more rounded and effective preparation for students with LDs transitioning to higher education.

Guidance and Empowerment in Skill Development

This research underscores a critical aspect of the support system for students with learning disabilities (LDs), particularly during the formulation and execution of Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. The study identifies a significant discrepancy: while guidance is ostensibly designed to empower students, it often fails to enable them to steer their educational pathways genuinely. This disparity between the supportive intentions and their empowerment outcome is a profound concern.

This issue aligns with Iris Young's analysis of oppression, specifically her discussion on the facet of "powerlessness" within the context of social justice (Young, 2016). Young argues that certain groups, in this case, students with LDs, frequently experience a form of marginalization that diminishes their agency and involvement in decisions that affect not only their education but also their overall quality of life. During IEP meetings and critical junctures in their educational journey, students should ideally occupy central, active roles, contributing to the

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planning and choice-making processes that tailor their educational experiences. However, reality often deviates from this ideal, positioning them in passive roles where decisions are made on their behalf without their full engagement or consent. This dynamic effectively sidelines them, treating them more as subjects of the educational process than partners.

This sidelining is symptomatic of a broader issue of powerlessness, where the structural relationship between the student and the professional—be it an educator, case carrier, or another authority figure—exacerbates the imbalance. The professional, endowed with expertise and authority, often dominates the discourse, inadvertently or otherwise, relegating the student to a passive recipient of decisions rather than an empowered agent in their formation. This dynamic stifle the student's potential for self-advocacy and significantly undermines their capacity for self-determination.

In the context of Young's social justice theory, this scenario reflects a relational dimension of oppression, where the professional's control over the IEP process can, intentionally or not, suppress the student's voice and agency. Empowering students with LDs in these settings requires a shift in this relational dynamic, fostering an environment where students are encouraged and supported to lead in discussions and decisions regarding their IEPs. Such an approach would not only align with the principles of equity and inclusion but also advance the realization of an educational system that truly recognizes and nurtures the autonomy and potential of every student.

To address this issue, the study advocates for a more student-centered approach to educational planning and support for students with LDs. Such an approach would involve:

1. Encouraging Student Participation: Students should be encouraged to participate actively in their IEP meetings. This means being present and having a voice in the discussions and decisions that affect their education. This approach is supported by Deci and Ryan's (2000) theory on the importance of self-determination in goal pursuits, suggesting that active participation can enhance students' intrinsic motivation and engagement in their education.

2. Fostering Agency and Decision-Making: Educators and support staff should work towards empowering students by helping them develop the skills and confidence to express their needs, preferences, and goals. This empowerment should extend beyond the IEP meetings to all aspects of their education. Agran et al. (1999) emphasized the benefits of developing decision-making and self-advocacy skills in students with disabilities, leading to better outcomes in educational settings.

3. Collaborative Goal Setting: The process of setting educational goals should be collaborative, allowing students to actively participate in setting and pursuing meaningful and relevant goals within the framework of their IEPs and transition planning. This approach aims to align the support with the student's aspirations and needs, enhancing their engagement and ownership

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of the process. Research by Shogren et al. (2015) supports this approach, showing that collaboration in goal setting enhances self-determination and post-school outcomes for students with disabilities.

4. Offering Tailored Guidance: Guidance should be individualized, considering each student's strengths, challenges, and circumstances. This tailored approach aims to make the support practical and effective, empowering students. Field et al. (2003) highlighted the importance of individualized support in enhancing the transition to post-secondary education for students with LDs. By shifting to a more empowering and student-focused model of guidance, educators and support staff can significantly enhance the educational experience of students with LDs. This shift aligns with social justice principles, ensuring that students with LDs are not just passive recipients of education but active, empowered participants in their learning journey.

Synthesis and Implications

Adapting to college life is a complex challenge for students with learning disabilities (LDs), causing a shift towards more personalized and comprehensive support systems in higher education (Connor et al., 2008, 2012). These students' resilience in managing academic, social, and personal responsibilities recognizes the importance of adaptable support beyond traditional academic accommodations. This includes a holistic approach encompassing mentorship,

tailored academic advising, mental health support, and developing life skills and self-advocacy.

Fraser's principles of equitable resource distribution highlight the necessity for colleges to offer accessible facilities and enhance disability awareness (Fraser, 2008). Such initiatives help the broader educational community by creating an inclusive academic experience for all students. This study interweaves empirical findings with the theories of Young (1990), Fraser (2008), and Nussbaum (2000) to offer a nuanced understanding of students with Learning Disabilities (LDs) in educational settings. It confirms the application of social justice theories in higher education, advocating for reforms that promote equitable resource access and inclusivity.

Recommendations for Practice

This section presents targeted recommendations for educators, policymakers, and academic institutions. Grounded in synthesizing of social justice theories and empirical research, our strategies are crafted to create inclusive educational settings, drive policy change, and enhance self-advocacy and self-determination among students with learning disabilities (LDs). These proposals look to address existing shortcomings and advance an educational system that is both equitable and supportive, ensuring that students with LDs can thrive.

Enhancing Transition Planning and Support

Supporting students with learning disabilities transition from high school to higher education requires a comprehensive approach. Educating students and their families on the legal distinctions between K-12 and higher education is critical, particularly the shift from IDEA protections (U.S. Department of Education, 2004) to those provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504. This knowledge sets realistic expectations for the accommodations and support available in post-secondary settings, preparing students for upcoming changes. Implementing targeted workshops that simulate real-life scenarios students might face in higher education can provide a practical understanding of the ADA and Section 504 protections (Wojtara, 2023). These workshops could involve role-playing exercises where students navigate the process of requesting accommodations in a college setting.

Equally important is developing non-academic skills, such as self-management, independence, and social interaction (Schwab et al., 2021). These skills are crucial for navigating the greater autonomy found in higher education, enabling students to effectively manage their time, use campus resources, and form meaningful connections with peers and faculty (Schwab et al., 2021). Schools could start 'Life Skills Labs' as part of their curriculum, where students take part in simulations and projects that build self-management, independence, and social interaction skills (Palardy, 2019). For example, a 'Campus Navigation

Challenge' could help students practice finding resources and interacting with faculty and peers in a controlled, supportive environment (Palardy, 2019).

Revitalizing the approach to transition planning and support causes a foundational shift towards embedding core life skills—self-advocacy and self-determination—well before adolescence (Shogren & Ward, 2018; Test et al., 2013). This strategy acknowledges the developmental stage of younger students, who are more open and malleable, thus circumventing the typical resistance seen in teenagers. By integrating hands-on activities like role-playing and peer mentoring alongside community engagement from an early age, students can gradually build a robust toolkit of skills (Burke et al., 2020). Starting from elementary education, this comprehensive framework ensures a deep-rooted understanding and application of these essential skills, laying the groundwork for a smooth transition into adulthood and beyond. This process, enriched with early and ongoing community involvement, prepares students for academic achievement and thriving in all aspects of their lives.

Strengthening School-Level Interventions

Providing educators with extensive training on the latest instructional strategies, accommodations, assistive technologies, and a thorough grasp of relevant legal and policy contexts (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020) ensures an informed and supportive teaching environment. Building an inclusive school atmosphere is vital for nurturing students' sense of belonging and reducing disability-related stigma. Creating a 'Teacher Toolkit' that includes updated

resources on instructional strategies and technologies (Galkiene &

Monkeviciene, 2021), coupled with regular professional development sessions

led by experts in LD strategies for knowledge exchange (Bryant et al., 2019), can

significantly enhance teacher preparedness and student outcomes. Additionally,

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) provide a dynamic environment for

educators to exchange insights and refine strategies, promoting an ethos of

collective growth and betterment (Brown et al., 2018). Cultivating an educational

environment that values diversity and inclusivity is paramount. This involves

training faculty and staff on disability awareness and inclusive teaching practices

and promoting a campus culture that views diversity as a strength. Such an

environment enables all students, including those with LDs, to achieve their full

potential, enriching the academic community with broader perspectives and

experiences.

Person-centered planning emphasizes customizing educational

experiences to align with each student's unique strengths, passions, and future

ambitions, highlighting the value of recognizing and nurturing individual

capabilities within a supportive learning framework (Keyes & Owens-Johnson,

2003). Implementing mentorship programs further supports this personalized

approach, pairing students with LDs with mentors who offer essential guidance

and encouragement, bolstering self-esteem and academic achievement (Claes et

al., 2010). Developing bespoke transition plans through a cooperative process

involving students, their families, and educators ensures support is precisely

calibrated to each student's needs, setting clear goals and monitoring progress (Brown et al., 2018).

Further, the designation of transition specialists within schools is suggested to offer specialized guidance and support for students and families navigating the transition to higher education (Bangser, 2008). Initiatives to help early engagement with post-secondary resources, including organized campus visits and interactions with college Disability Services (DS), are important for preparing students for the differences between high school and college support structures. (Hamblet, 2014). Such efforts aim to demystify the college environment, alleviate transition concerns, and promote successful integration into higher education (Carragher & McGaughey, 2016).

Policy and Community Engagement

Strong policy advocacy forms the foundation for enhancing support for students with learning disabilities (LDs), emphasizing the need for policymakers to understand the unique challenges these students meet. Advocating for policies that improve equal access and equity in higher education is crucial, particularly in securing increased funding for specialized support services and advocating for comprehensive, individualized transition programs (Learning Disabilities Association of America, n.d.). These programs are essential for preparing students with LDs for the complexities of post-secondary education. Create a coalition of educators, parents, and students to meet with local policymakers, presenting a unified front on the need for increased funding and support services

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(The Arc, 2023). This could include preparing a detailed proposal illustrating the benefits of such policies with case studies and statistical evidence from the school or at the community level.

Establishing strategic partnerships between educational institutions and community entities, such as local businesses, non-profits, and service organizations, is critical (Korbel,2011). These partnerships aim to provide students with LDs practical experiences, such as internships and mentorship opportunities, which help their integration into the community and workforce (Kreider, 2018). Such experiences allow students to develop valuable social and professional networks, enhancing their confidence and readiness for post-secondary education and career success (Hanson, 2021). Organize a 'Community Engagement Day' where local businesses, non-profits, and service organizations are invited to the school to discuss potential internship and mentorship opportunities (Hanson, 2021). This event could help direct connections between students and community partners, laying the groundwork for future experiences.

The role of families in the transition planning process cannot be overstated. Empowering parents and guardians with the knowledge and resources needed to support their child's transition is vital. Organized workshops and informational sessions can highlight the shift from high school supports to the self-advocacy required in higher education, creating a strong support network around the student (Sulewski, 2021).

This comprehensive set of recommendations offers a tactical blueprint for educators, policymakers, and academic institutions committed to keeping an inclusive and equitable educational environment for students with learning disabilities (LDs). We can address these challenges by embracing a holistic approach that covers improved transition planning, strengthened school-level interventions, and constructive policy and community engagement. Implementing these targeted strategies requires a collaborative effort, highlighting the importance of unity among all stakeholders in the educational ecosystem.

Limitations of the Study

Methodological Considerations

This study employs hermeneutic phenomenology and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the subjective experiences of students with learning disabilities (LDs) within a junior college setting. While these methodologies offer profound insights into individual beliefs and lived experiences, their intrinsic focus on personal interpretation limits the generalizability of findings to broader populations (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2001). The interpretative nature of the analysis, subject to the researcher's subjectivity, may influence outcomes, highlighting a need for cautious interpretation of the data (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Pekrun, 2020).

Enhancing Diversity and Generalizability

Future research should aim for a more inclusive participant selection to address generalizability and demographic focus limitations. This includes

broadening the demographic scope beyond the initial sample drawn from a single

junior college and a narrow age range, as Salkind (2010) and Creswell and Poth

(2016) noted. Expanding research to include students with LDs from various

geographic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, as suggested by Gerber

et al. (1992) and Banks (2014), would provide a richer, more comprehensive

understanding of the experiences across different contexts.

Furthermore, extending the study to encompass students with a wider range of

disabilities can offer valuable insights into the diverse challenges and

opportunities these students face in educational settings. Marshall (1996)

emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the varied educational experiences

of students with various types of disabilities, advocating for research that reflects

the wide range of student needs and experiences.

<u>Broadening Research Scope and Methodological Approaches</u>

Future research should not only diversify the participant pool but also

adopt mixed methods approaches to combine the depth of qualitative insights

with the breadth of quantitative data, as Creswell (2014) recommends. This

approach would enhance the robustness of findings and support more

generalizable conclusions. Longitudinal and comparative studies examining the

experiences of students with disabilities over time and across different

educational systems would further contribute to understanding the effectiveness

of support mechanisms and educational strategies (Newman et al., 2011; Riddell

& Weedon, 2014). Incorporating perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders,

including educators, parents, and policymakers, can provide a more all-inclusive view of the academic setting, informing more effective support strategies for students with LDs and other disabilities (Turnbull et al., 2015).

Chapter Summary

This research aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion about students with Learning Disabilities (LDs) and their transition from high school to post-secondary education. Employing hermeneutic interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), it offers insights into the varied experiences of these students, focusing on their challenges and resilience. The study finds key themes such as the necessity of self-advocacy and self-determination, the pivotal role of high school transition services, the effects of inconsistent guidance, and the challenges faced in daily college life of young adults. These observations support the call for educational reforms that enhance inclusivity and responsiveness to the needs of students with LDs. By adding to the existing body of research, this dissertation seeks to contribute to a more equitable and supportive educational environment, advocating for a system where fairness and empowerment for every student are prioritized, ultimately enhancing their overall quality of life.

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORMS

District permission from the sped department for alumni research

Letter of Informed Consent – College Student Participate

Dear Gatekeeper's Name,

I hope this letter finds you well. My name is Barbara Wucherpfennig, a Doctoral Student in Educational Leadership at California State University, San Bernardino. I am conducting a research study to understand the experiences of students with learning disabilities as they transition from high school to higher education.

Purpose of the Study: The primary objective is to delve into the IEP transition services these students received and to ascertain how well these services prepared them for their higher education journeys. Our aim is to gather these lived experiences in hopes of better shaping future support mechanisms for students with similar needs.

Request: I'm seeking your assistance to facilitate this study within the **** Unified School District. I respectfully request permission for the counselors to send out invitations to potential alumni who might fit the criteria and be willing to participate in this research.

Assurances:
1. Participation is entirely voluntary; alumni can choose to opt out at any point.
2. We have rigorous confidentiality measures to protect participants' identities and information.

Benefits: The experiences and insights of alumni can greatly contribute to enhancing transition services and overall support for future students with learning disabilities.

Understanding the profound responsibility, you hold regarding the well-being and privacy of alumni, I assure you that every step of the research process is undertaken with utmost respect to these principles. The inclusion of voices from **** Unified School District will deeply enrich the study.

For any clarifications, concerns, or questions, please do not hesitate to contact me directly at bar If additional documentation or verification from the Institutional Review Board is needed, I am more than willing to provide it.

Thank you sincerely for considering this request. Your support will be pivotal in this endeavor that seeks to amplify and better understand the experiences of students with learning disabilities.
This study has been approved by the California State University, San Bernardino Institutional Review Board

Respectfully,

Barbara Wucherpfennig

Resource Specialist
**** Unified School District

INFORMED CONSENT
(College Student)

PURPOSE: Barbara Wucherpfennig, a Doctoral Student in Educational Leadership at California State University, San Bernardino, invites you to participate in a study. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of students with learning disabilities as they transition from high school to higher education. The study seeks to uncover the kinds of IEP transition services these students received in high school to prepare for this next step. It's essential to learn if students are properly taught skills like self-advocacy and self-determination, which are crucial for success.

Understanding the lived experiences of these students and hearing their voices is vital. Their stories provide unique insights that can help shape better support mechanisms for future students with learning disabilities transitioning into higher education. This project fills a significant gap in the existing research. By diving deep into the services these students received and the skills they were taught, this study offers insights that can help improve policies and practices. Furthermore, it will point the way for more research in the future.

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at California State University, San Bernardino.

DESCRIPTION: I'm inviting you to be part of a significant research endeavor. As adult students with learning disabilities, your transition from high school to higher education institutions, whether vocational or college, holds invaluable insights. For this study, you'll be participating in two distinct sessions:

The first session is a detailed one-on-one interview via Zoom, expected to last between 1 to 2 hours. During this conversation, I aim to delve into your experiences, the challenges you faced, and the support you've received during your transition to your current institution. This session will be audio-recorded with your permission to ensure that every detail is captured accurately. Following our initial discussion, the information will be transcribed and analyzed. This brings us to our second session. Here, I will present my interpretations of our first meeting. You will review and ensure that my documentation precisely mirrors your experiences and sentiments. This step is crucial, as it safeguards the authenticity of your narrative and ensures that your voice is truly represented.

Your perspective, as someone navigating higher education with learning disabilities, will play an essential role in shedding light on areas that need attention and improvement. Your involvement contributes to academia and potentially paves the way for future students, ensuring they receive the right guidance and support.

PARTICIPATION: Your involvement in this study is entirely up to you. Participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to join, you should be aware that you have the right to skip or not answer any questions with which you are uncomfortable. You also have the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. To qualify for this study, you should have experienced an IEP transition service and must be 18 years or older. If you decide to participate in this research, you will be interviewed

via Zoom. These interviews will be in a secure environment, specifically in a private, password-protected Zoom session. For the sake of accuracy and to aid the research process, these interviews will be audio-recorded. However, these recordings will be securely deleted once the study concludes. It's crucial to emphasize that your decision to participate will not affect your employment or student status, ensuring that your choice remains unconnected to any external influences.

CONFIDENTIAL PROTOCOL: Your confidentiality is our utmost priority. Here are the measures we've established to ensure it:

- Identity Protection: We'll never disclose your real name or the specific name of your institution in any publications or presentations. Instead, pseudonyms will be assigned to both you and your institution.
- Data Storage: All research data will be stored securely. Digital files are password-protected, while physical documents are safeguarded in a locked facility.
- Transcription Procedures: Conversations will be transcribed with accuracy in mind. I will review and correct these to ensure no identifiable details are included.
- Zoom Meetings: Our Zoom meetings will have both video and audio active, but only audio will be recorded. This audio data is slated for deletion three years after the study's conclusion.

DURATION: Our initial meeting will involve a one-on-one interview via Zoom, which is expected to last between 1 to 2 hours. This interview will explore your experiences transitioning to your current academic setting. With your consent, this discussion will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. Afterward, I'll transcribe our conversation. We'll then have a follow-up meeting, roughly 30 minutes, to review and validate the transcriptions. Your commitment will be 1.5 to 2.5 hours, spread over two sessions.

RISKS: While the risks are minimal, discussing your firsthand experiences might cause discomfort, especially if we delve into sensitive areas. We're committed to ensuring a respectful and understanding environment for this dialogue. You always have the option to skip any questions that make you uneasy or to withdraw from the study entirely. For confidentiality reasons, your identity and your institution's will remain anonymous. Your institution will be identified as a higher education institution in California to ensure further protection. Should you share details about your academic journey, information protected by FERPA (including names, abilities, and performance) will be immediately redacted and de-identified. No individual, program, or institution will be specifically named in the research. Your decision to participate will not be tied to your status or involvement with your institution.

BENEFITS: By participating, you offer a unique voice to the discourse, potentially paving the way for improvements in how educational institutions support students with learning disabilities. Your shared experiences may inform educators, making a genuine difference in shaping higher education practices.

CONTACT: If you have any questions or concerns about this study, contact Barbara Wucherpfennig at barbara.wucher~~[redacted]~~ or call ~~[redacted]~~ For further inquiries, you can contact California State University, San Bernardino's Institutional Review Board Office at 909-537-7588.

RESULTS: The outcomes of this research will be shared across multiple channels, such as conference presentations and publications. A concise summary of the key findings will also be made available to all participants and their affiliated institutions.

AUDIO: By initialing here [_____], I acknowledge that this research will involve audio recordings.

CONFIRMATION STATEMENT: I must be 18 or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document, and agree to participate.

SIGNATURE:

Example: Signature: _____ Date: _____

*This study has been approved by the California State University, San Bernardino Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about your time in high school?

2. How did you feel moving from high school to college?

3. How has your experience been in college since enrolling?

4. Do you remember your IEP from high school? If yes, did it help you get ready for college?

5. Do you know how to ask for help or speak up for yourself? Can you remember a time when you did?

6. Were there any teachers in school who taught you to speak up or make decisions for yourself?

7. Have you ever needed special help in college? How did you ask for it?

8. Do you know how to speak up for yourself or ask for what you need? Can you remember a time when you did?

9. Have you learned to make decisions for yourself? Can you give me an example of a big decision you made on your own?

10. How can teachers help students like you speak up or make decisions?

11. Do you think it's important for students to learn to ask for help or make their own decisions in school? Why or why not?

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