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Review of Transition Programs for Autistic Students from Pre-k to Elementary School
and Elementary School to Middle School in a Midwest Suburban School District

By:
John J. Harrington III

A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education School of Education

Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

Full Legal Name: John Joseph Harrington III Date: 08/14/2024

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Abstract

This study is in place to identify what needs to be outlined within an IEP transition plan, so that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can experience success during their educational careers. The study will review results based on teacher-provided surveys to identify how high-quality transition plans impact the student's educational success when transitioning from early childhood education to elementary and elementary to middle school. The transition process plan is designed to provide the needed student information from one educational entity to another. The goal is to reduce the amount of time to get the student what the student needs to be successful. The teachers will be allowed to supply anonymous answers to a survey to help understand what is working during transitions and what needs to change within transition plans to be successful. The information will be derived from the teacher's knowledge of the students who have been part of the transition process within their tenure as either a teacher of typical or special education students. The study will survey teachers across a large suburban school district in the St. Louis area. In addition, a portion of the study will complete in-person interviews with targeted teachers to ask additional probing questions to understand what is required for a successful transition plan.

The goal of the study is to determine what high-quality transitional plans look like and explain how they are an important tool for providing a solid educational experience for students with ASD. The study hopes to provide school leaders and teachers with an additional resource that will showcase best practices across one large suburban school district in the St. Louis area. The study plans to collect data from Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers through the use of an anonymous survey and

in-person interviews. The researcher will analyze the participant's answers to the survey questions and compare them to the success criteria provided.

This study aimed to address current support, the effectiveness of services, successful programs, critical resources, potential outcomes, and limitations for the school district's transition services through the program evaluation. The researcher developed a qualitative research study focusing on six research questions to provide recommendations on special education transition services for ASD students transitioning from early childhood to elementary and elementary to middle school. The researcher and dissertation committee developed a survey distributed to 350 employees within 10 elementary schools and two alternative schools in the district. The group received 31 responses to the questions. The survey was designed to understand the current processes in place for students with ASD, understand the gaps in the processes, as well as best practices. The survey also reached out to 15 total Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers to see if they would be willing to be part of the interview process. Five employees volunteered to participate in the follow-up interviews. The survey and the interviews provided the needed information to help generate responses to the research questions. The researcher was able to use the provided information to align responses to the proper research questions. The research quickly identified patterns based on the responses. The patterns provided the researcher with the needed guidelines to produce the recommendations. The program evaluation response data supported the researcher's conclusion that the school district studied, provides basic transition services for students with ASD, but they have limitations that restrict the services from meeting the full potential that is needed to optimize the success of the students with ASD.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background of Study

Special Education Services continued to evolve and improve over the last 200 years (Noah Webster Educational Foundation, 2024). The first advocacy groups reported to fight for quality special education date as far back as 1933 (All Star Staff, 2000). The term “special education” refers to individualized programs, curricula, and instruction designed to address the needs of students with disabilities and to enable individuals with special needs to reach their fullest potential (WGU, Advice, 2020, p. 1). These services are put into place to provide students who have been diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) the needed accommodations and modifications to bring them equal to those students on a typical educational path. There are a set of federal regulations requiring public schools to provide students with disabilities with a free and appropriate education and track through an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that outlines specialized instructions, accommodations, and modifications to address the disability and sustain successful learning experiences adequately. Children can start this process as soon as they are identified as having a delay that affects their educational experience. This process can be initiated as soon as a child reaches 12 months old, through good visits with the pediatrician and self-monitoring by the caregiver. The children are run through a series of tests to identify the proper diagnosis to help with the development of these accommodations in modifications. The children can take part in a specialized childcare setting and start the Special Education process as young as 24 months old.

The monitoring process starts as soon as the child is born. The process can start as early as 12 months of age (Muacevic & Adler, 2023). The caregivers play an important

role in monitoring everyday activity to see if the child is performing at age-appropriate levels. This continues during well visits with the pediatrician. In the early childhood centers the children are constantly monitored to see how they can improve their skill levels.

During any of these processes, a student might be diagnosed with ASD. A series of tests are provided to identify any disabilities. This team will utilize these test scores to help guide their diagnosis of a student. All parties are pulled together to discuss observations and a plan moving forward to start interventions. Cross-disciplinary experts and parent representatives worked together to develop guidelines for early detection of autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2024). After this, the team is pulled together to talk through what might need to be modified if the child starts to show signs of regression. It is important to make sure that a solid set of accommodations and modifications are put into place to help guide future educators on the best ways to deliver content to the student. It is also important to make sure that the team puts together a proper transition plan for the educators to understand the type of student that will be placed in their Early Childhood classrooms through their High School career.

The schools use a timeline of events to incorporate the parents, teachers, and administrators to develop an annual plan supplied with goals that will help bridge the gap in educational knowledge. This collection of information is called an Individual Education Plan (IEP). This document presents all of the specific and measurable goals that will be worked on and tracked throughout the 12-month timeframe (Stober, 2024). The school meets annually to review how well the student is performing according to the goals that were set by the initial IEP team. The school needs to continue to keep track of

the performance every quarter and report back to the parents on the success of the quarterly goals. This process continues from the time the student is diagnosed to the time that they are exited from the IEP team.

The transition processes take place throughout the educational experience of a special education student. Transition refers to moving from one stage of life to another, such as moving from grade to grade, school to school, or from school to community (Education Reform, 2013). The first transition is in place from organizations like Parents as Teachers to Early Childhood Centers. The second transition is put into place from Early Childhood Centers to Elementary School, and the third transition put into place from Elementary School to Middle School. The transition process is concluded from high school and beyond. Transition processes are put into place to make sure that students' information is being properly relayed from one school environment to the next. It is also in place to make sure that the annual IEP is continued to be followed based on the legal requirements.

It is important to make sure that all parties are aware of the student's disability and what is needed to provide proper accommodations and modifications. It is the role of the educational institution to provide the needed resources to support the student's IEP. The document lays out the child's starting point, the expected outcomes, and how the child is going to achieve those expected outcomes (Stober, 2024). All services are started as soon as the initial IEP is signed by the parents and continues to follow throughout the years. IEP teams must develop transitional processes from the time that the IEP has been initiated to drive a successful educational experience.

The transition process is critical for the success of a student, specifically those students who are diagnosed with ASD. It is important to make sure the parents understand the process and are in complete agreement with what is going to happen moving forward. This is a new process for most parents and one that can be very scary and misunderstood. A well-developed transition plan sets the student up for a successful move to another environment, accepts new staff members, and copes more readily with change (Positive Partnerships, 2024). Providing your young child with a label and identifying your child with a disability, specifically that of ASD, can be very concerning for new parents. Students diagnosed with ASD perform on a spectrum of abilities. These abilities range from severe to very minor disabilities.

The word Autism is not enough to foreshadow what a student's abilities might be, making it difficult for a teacher to make the needed support plans. Educators have the responsibility to make sure that a well-planned transition process are put into place so that parents, students, and staff know the plan that will be in place to help students achieve. Transitioning from one task to another provides challenges when transitioning from one class, activity, or task to the next (Lindsay, 2013). It is important that educators that work with Autism parents and students have as much information as possible so they can better deal with the situation. Autism parents and students do better if they know what is coming up next or what might change in future the routine.

The qualitative evaluation of special education transition programs within a large suburban school district across the St. Louis area provides transparent data that exposes resources and gaps when promoting successful educational transitions for both student and teacher success.

Study Site

The large suburban school across the St. Louis area is one of five school districts in its geographic county. The student population is just under 17,000 students ranging from kindergarten through 12th grade, with 11% having an educational disability that requires special education services. The district consists of three early childhood centers, 10 Elementary schools, five middle schools, three traditional high schools, and two alternative schools. The study focused on 10 elementary schools and two alternative schools, resulting in approximately 9600+ students. The suburban schools across the St. Louis area that were a part of the study had the following ethnic breakdown of ethnicity within the student population: 79% Caucasian, 7% African-American, 5% Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 5% multi-race (2024).

Methodology

This is a qualitative study designed to gain information regarding transition programs for ASD students. The first step was to provide an anonymous survey that was presented to Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers, as well as targeted in-person interviews with Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers. (The hope was that teachers would offer insight into the positive and negative current practices).

The second part of the Qualitative study was a structured interview process that teachers could take part in. The focus of the interview was to get more defined informational responses about the transition processes in place and to delve deeper into what was successful and to identify any additional opportunities. The researcher attempted to detect specific transition processes that would benefit students with ASD as

they progress through educational institutions. It also identifies what are some best practices that should be in place to see the best possible outcome based on students with ASD.

The researcher asked specific questions to Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers that helped identify what transition processes are currently in place, what has been seen as successful in the past, and rank how they felt these processes helped their students in the future. The school district is responsible for partnering with Early Childhood educational entities as well as delivering content through High School. The programs that are in place help provide an educational system that is adequate for educating students with ASD. The researcher focused on gathering information from participants to help discover if students with autism are getting the utmost support and necessary tools to promote a successful educational experience. A successful educational experience is based on students' ability to close the gaps in their disability and how they are performing to their goals in the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). The goal of the study is to gain much-needed information to provide all teachers with knowledge that will help teachers provide a successful experience for all students with ASD and not fall into the traps.

Importance of the Study

The researcher hopes to first pass on best practices that others used to perfect the transition process for students with ASD. This provides educators with additional steps that have been tried and completed with success. The successes of a student diagnosed with ASD provides ripple effect during the student's educational experience.

A second important aspect of this study hopes to provide needed information to identify and diagnose students with ASD as quickly as possible. Special Education has been increasing in number of students, and the number of Autistic Student continue to increase. The CDC researchers reported that autism rates in the United States increased from one in 150 children in 2000 to one in 54 in 2016, and the rate now stands at one in 44 children (Gerrard, 2022). Teachers can identify students with special education needs during the times students enter early childhood education. The growing number of students with disabilities has put a tremendous strain on the educational system. It has also provided new challenges to provide the needed support for non-typical students. The teachers must work harder to develop strategies to support the increased number of students. These reasons have intensified the need for solid transition programs.

This information will help provide research that can be used to validate the plans to provide a successful educational experience for students with ASD. Furthermore, using this data will help identify the solutions that positively affected these processes and improved the students' experiences.

In Summary, this researcher hopes to provide a robust analysis of transitional plans within a large suburban school district across the St. Louis area. This study's goal is to explain the need for a successful plan, what components are needed for the plan, and what are some things that should not be part of the plan. Ultimately the goal is to provide a best practice study that can be used to support the students with ASD transitioning from early childhood education on through middle school.

Purpose of the Study

Navigating the educational system is difficult for typical students, but it is even more difficult for those students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The team at Lamar University stated that it is extremely important to have a solid Individualized Transition plan for special-educated students to be successful in education (Lamar University, 2021). The IEP transition plan is designed to provide the needed resources for ASD students to function within the education system as well as increase the likelihood of pursuing post-secondary education (Lamar University, 2021). These plans provided a personalized course of action based on students' strengths, desires, and dreams for a fulfilling life. In 2020, a total of 24% of college students entered with some sort of documented disability supported by an IEP transition plan (Lamar University, 2021).

This study is in place to identify what needs to be outlined within an IEP transition plan, so that a student with ASD can be provided with a successful educational experience. The study will review results based on teacher-provided surveys to identify what high-quality transition plans have on educational success when transitioning from early childhood education to middle school. The transition process plan is designed to provide the needed student information from one educational entity to another. The goal is to reduce the amount of time to get the student what the student needs to be successful. During the study, the Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers will supply the needed modifications to help understand what is currently working and what needs to change in the current transition plans. The information will be derived from the Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers' knowledge of the students who have been part of the transition process within their tenure as either a teacher of

typical or special education students. The study will survey teachers across multiple schools and within a district in large suburban school districts.

The goal of the study is to determine how high-quality transition plans can be used as an important tool to provide a solid educational experience for students with ASD. The researcher hopes to provide teachers with an additional resource that will showcase best practices across the Metro ST. Louis area

Research Questions

Research Question 1. What are the current transition processes in place for autistic students transitioning from preschool to kindergarten and elementary school to middle school?

Research Question 2. What are the opportunity areas within the transition process for students with autism?

Research Question 3. What are special education teachers' perceptions regarding how effective the current transition processes are for students diagnosed with autism?

Research Question 4. What are the perceptions of regular education teachers regarding how effective the transition processes are for students diagnosed with autism?

Research Question 5. What are the current strengths of the current transition programs?

Research Question 6. What are the weaknesses of the current transition programs?

Study Limitations

As with the majority of studies, the design of the current study is subject to limitations. The potential risks include but are not limited to not gaining access to the appropriate type of participants, not receiving the needed information on the returned

surveys, the risk to each respondent, and having limited access to the respondents once the surveys are received. The researcher must follow extra steps to gain the needed information to increase the validity of the results.

Limitation 1: The process of gaining access to the appropriate type of participants, based on the people who responded to the survey questions, may not truly be a random sample.

Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 1: The researcher sent out emails at different time intervals to make sure the anonymous responses are tracked based on location, and expertise. This increased the number of random responses and makes sure the responses are random based on location.

Limitation 2: The questions provided did not require the recipient to provide his/her name for a future in-person interview.

Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 2: The researcher included an option for the recipient to add contact information for a future in-person interview that this study will be critical for its validity.

Limitation 3: There is also some risk to each respondent. Their answers could reflect negatively on their current practices, which could be detrimental to their current positions.

Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 3: It is very important to make sure all recipients understand the survey was distributed through Qualtrics and that all answers will be received anonymously. All survey answers are confidential. The answers will be housed in a locked computer of which the information will be destroyed by the

completion of the reporting of the research. Recipients were not required to complete surveys and could opt out of the study at any time.

Limitation 4: It may be a problem of having limited access to the respondents to clarify or follow up on the answers provided in the comment sections

Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 4: Analyzing the data helps develop new trends and can provide different questions for the need for additional data to be highlighted. The follow-up interviews should be used to gain the needed information. Comparing the surveys with the interviews will provide confidence the analysis of data will provide a full picture.

Definition of Terms

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Is a developmental disability caused by differences in the brain. Students with ASD often have problems with social communication and interaction, and restricted or repetitive behaviors or interests. In addition, they may also have different ways of learning, moving, or paying attention (CDC, 2024).

Compulsory Education: the amount of educational attendance required of all students. The period of compulsory education is often determined by the student's age. The age requirements range from state to state on what amount of school attendance is required. Some allow students to leave school between the ages of 14 and 17 before finishing high school with parental permission, and other students are required to stay in school until age 18 (Kids Legal, 2004).

Data-driven decision making (DDDM): According to Northeastern University, data-driven decision-making is the process of making organizations' decisions based on actual data rather than intuition or opinion alone (Joubert, 2019).

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE): According to their website, DESE defines itself as primarily a service agency that works with educators, legislators, government agencies, community leaders, and citizens to maintain a strong public education system (DESE, 2024).

Early childhood: It consists of activities with experiences that are intended to affect developmental changes in children before they enter elementary school (Gerrard, 2022)

Implementation: Merriam-Webster defines implementation as the process of making something active (Merriam-Webster, 2022).

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): The Section 504 regulation requires a school district to provide a "free appropriate public education" (FAPE) to each qualified person with a disability who is in the school district's jurisdiction, regardless of the nature or severity of the person's disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): An IEP is a legal document that clearly defines how a school plans to meet a child's unique educational needs that result from a disability. The IEP is the cornerstone of a child's special education program. The goals of an IEP is to set reasonable, measurable goals for the child and to also specify the services the school will provide (Hayer, 2024).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that makes available a free appropriate public

education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special Education and related services are provided to students with a disability. It governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special Education, and related services to eligible students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): LRE is part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It states that children with disabilities should be able to learn in the least restrictive environment. This means they should spend as much time as possible with peers who do not receive Special Education (Morin, 2020).

Middle School: Is schooling after elementary school. In the United States, that would be grades 6 through 12. However, once a student reaches grade 9, they are considered to be a high school student (University of The People, 2024).

Midwest Suburban School District: A school district located in the Middle western portion of the United States primarily provides education to students outside of the urban and rural regions.

Region: Is an administrative area, division, or district (Merriam-Webster, 2022).

Suburban: Suburban areas are lower-density areas that separate residential and commercial areas from one another (Department of Health, 2022)

Transition: Typically refers to the three major transitional points in the public-education system: when students move from elementary school to middle school, from middle school to high school, and from high school to college (Pratt, 2022).

Summary

In summary, Special Education Services continue to evolve and improve over the last 200 years (Noah Webster Educational Foundation, 2024). The term “special

education” refers to individualized programs, curricula, and instruction designed to address the needs of students with disabilities and to enable individuals with special needs to reach their fullest potential (WGU, Advice, 2020, p. 1). These services are put into place to provide students who have been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) the needed accommodations and modifications to bring them equal to those students on a typical educational path. Special Education definition and then focus on autism spectrum disorder (ASD) with the needed accommodations and modifications to bring them equal to those students on a typical educational path.

The research questions will be answered by reviewing anonymous survey results and interviews with Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers. These questions are designed to review the experiences those have had with transition plans designed for students with ASD. In addition to the survey, the researcher will contact teachers to take part in an interview based on predetermined questions. This way the researcher can ask additional follow-up questions to acquire additional details on the subject.

Based on the results the researcher will be able to pass on to other professionals best practices that others used to perfect the transition process for ASD students. This provides others with additional steps that have been tried and completed with success. The successes of ASD students provide a wave effect during the student’s educational experience. ASD students' educational experience can be drastically affected based on the steps following to prepare the student for what is to come. The purpose of this project is to survey teachers to identify the best practices a local school district has in place.

Furthermore, using this data will help identify the solutions that positively affected these processes and improved the students' experiences.

This information will help provide research results that can be used to validate the plans to provide a successful educational experience for students with ASD. This study may showcase the benefits of a successful transition plan, what components are needed for the plan, and what are some things that should not be part of the plan. This information will help provide additional tools to help improve a student with ASD's educational experience. In addition, it will provide knowledge so that the school district can understand and review the processes and procedures that are in place. This review will help teachers prepare for students who will be entering the classroom, and it will provide confidence to the parents that the district is doing everything it can to understand their child. Ultimately the goal is to provide a best practice study that can be used to support elementary and middle school-aged students with ASD progress from one year to the other without the frustration of reinventing the wheel every year of their child's life.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Introduction

Evaluating a child's needs for success starts as soon as the child is born. As the child evolves through the different challenges and tests of life, caregivers strategize to evaluate if the child is performing at age-appropriate levels. Organizations, like Parents as Teachers and First Steps, are available to help caregivers with this process. It is a difficult task to provide a child with the needed steps to get them prepared for the educational system. Navigating the educational system is difficult for typical students, but it is even more difficult for those students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The team at Lamar University stated that it is extremely important to have a solid Individualized Transition plan for special-educated students to be successful in education (Lamar University, 2021). The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) transition plan is designed to help a child diagnosed with ASD acquire the needed educational resources to function within the education system, as well as increase the likelihood to pursue post-secondary education. These plans provided a personalized course of action based on students' strengths, desires, and dreams for a fulfilling life. It is important to identify what needs to be outlined within an IEP transition plan as soon as the child is diagnosed. The Special Education services were developed to identify what high-quality transition plans need to have for educational success when transitioning from early childhood education to middle school. The transition process plan is designed to provide the needed student information from one educational entity to another. The goal is to reduce the amount of time to set the student up with what the student needs to be successful. The literature review will focus first on the history of Special Education, then map out how to diagnose

a student with ASD to utilize Special Education, a Special Education onboarding process review, and what is needed in a solid transition plan from early childhood to elementary and elementary to middle school. In addition, it will provide teachers with an additional resource that will showcase best practices that can be used during the time a child progresses from early childhood to middle school.

Organization of the Literature Review

The literature review will begin by providing a brief history of special education and how special education connects with the diagnosis in place and follows a child from Early Childhood through High School. Furthermore, the researcher walks through a timeline of events which include the processes it takes to identify a child with ASD, the steps needed to gain a diagnosis of ASD, as well as a review of the needs for interventions. Next, the research provides an overview of the support organizations that are in place for parents to provide support to their child with ASD. Finally, the literary review provides the trends of positive transition plans, what is needed to be part of a transition plan, and how a student with ASD benefits from adequate education by combining the proper accommodations and modifications with a successful transition plan.

History of Special Education

Special Education Services continued to evolve and improve over the last 200 years (Noah Webster Educational Foundation, 2024). The first advocacy groups reported to fight for quality special education date as far back as 1933 (All Star Staff, 2000).

The term “special education” refers to individualized programs, curricula, and instruction designed to address the needs of

students with disabilities. Special education intends to enable individuals with special needs to reach their fullest potential.

Teachers must participate in a relevant special education curriculum to teach these students. (WGU, 2020, p. 1)

During this time, over 4.5 million children were denied adequate schooling by not providing equal educational opportunities for all students, no matter the disability (All Star Staff, 2000). Currently, the United States provides more than 7.5 million children with disabilities with special education services designed to meet the individual child's needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The best part of the evolution of special education allows over 64% of the children with disabilities to take part in general education classrooms over 80% of the school day (Wehmeyer, 2022). Children who qualify for additional services and support have many indications to showcase their needs as special education students. American special education has come a long way from 200 years ago, but it is important to understand our history to improve our future (Bakken, 2019). We must continue our advancements and our development of resources to be able to provide support where support is needed. During this portion of the literary review, one will be presented with a review of timelines, with explanations of events that helped special education change over time. The timeline will include how special education evolves, what acts were developed to help bring equality for all children, and important court cases that provide legal support for the changes. Furthermore, the literary review will walk through the process of referring a student for special education, review the timelines between the steps of the process of referring a student, who should be involved in the process, and what the services will look like. All of the efforts are to provide all

students, no matter what their disability, with a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the United States (DOIT, 2021).

The first school to support disabled children was The American School for the Deaf, which opened in 1817 (Noah Webster Educational Foundation, 2024). The American School for the Deaf is especially significant, since it was the first to open the door to help children who were otherwise denied education. This was the first time that Americans were focused on helping those with physical handicaps at a time when society often ignored disabilities. Over 4.5 million children were denied adequate schooling or equal educational opportunities (All Star Staff, 2000). It was not until 1864 when it was asked by President Abraham Lincoln to authorize the counting of degrees from the Columbia Institute of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind (Gallaudet University, 2001). They offered primary education and moral training to the students in the DC area who were affected by blindness and the inability to speak because of deafness. Progress continued to support children with disabilities by expanding and building The Columbian Institute for Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind in 1864 (Noah Webster Educational Foundation, 2024). They called it Gallaudet University. It was the only college of this kind, making it the first national deaf-mute college in the United States, designed to specifically educate deaf students. Up to this point, there had been no other higher education schools for any type of child with a disability. Finally, in 1933 people started to speak up (Deron School of New Jersey, 2022). In 1933, the first advocacy groups started to fight for equality for the need for special education (Pardini, 2002). During this time students were denied access to education and opportunities to learn. Marriott Bailey, a student with hearing loss, speech impairment, and a form of paralysis

sued the Board of Education of Wisconsin (U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 2024). In *Beattie v. Board of Education Wisconsin*, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled in favor of the school district, allowing the school to expel the student on the basis that his disability was a distraction to the class (U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 2024). In contrast, the court ruling of *Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka*, in 1954, started to bring even more light to educational inequality (WGU, 2020). It ruled that segregation violated equal educational opportunities. Although this ruling was based on racial segregation, it established a broad understanding that all people deserve equal access to an adequate public education, including those students with disabilities. It was quickly identified that each child had a unique ability and requested individual strategies to help them succeed in a cookie-cutter educational climate.

This decision provided the constitutional foundation for parents of children with disabilities and disability rights activists to press for equal education opportunities for all children, including those with developmental and other disabilities. (Noah Webster Educational Foundation, 2024, p. 1)

Families made waves in the 1950s by lobbying for new laws to be passed (All Star Staff, 2000). They requested more funding from the federal government to offer training for teachers in these situations. It was quickly identified that the teachers were not qualified to support the students as they took on these new opportunities. In 1960, multiple laws were passed providing the extra funds that were requested (Martin et al., 1996). Still up to this point funding for special needs students was unreliable and

nonexistent. It was not until President Johnson drove the efforts on the “War on Poverty” in 1965 (Paul, 2016). Parts of his plan involved federal aid for special needs students. It was the state government's job to distribute funds they saw fit for their Educational Systems. This action sparked the growth of State Departments of Education. President Johnson developed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2024). This act provided professional development, instructional materials, resources to support educational programs, and the promotion of parental involvement. In 1966, there was an Amendment written to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act which required federal funds to be given to public education to specifically support students with disabilities (Govinfo.gov, 2019). In early 1970, the court decisions gave states the responsibility to provide special education resources and schooling to students with special needs. The 1970s would soon show the most Improvement for students with disabilities (Purdue, 2007).

The 1970s was the decade that brought significant change to the landscape of educating students with disabilities (All Star Staff, 2000). It was the decade that changed how educators were trained, how funding was provided for the classrooms, and how students were allowed to be part of the classrooms. The years 1971 and 1972 revealed two class action lawsuits that successfully gained ground for parents (Ross, 2022).

In Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children versus Commonwealth of Pennsylvania 1971 and Mills versus Board of Education of the District of Columbia 1972 parents were granted the rights to be involved in educational placement decisions concerning their special needs or disabled children and also the rights to be

notified of pending evaluations, placement, suspensions, and when services ended. (Noah Webster Educational Foundation, 2024, p. 1)

These two rulings provided the power that parents needed and the legal backing to support their children with special needs. They provided them with the resources to make sure that their child was provided adequate education that was not denied for any reason. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 guaranteed civil rights to all disabled people and required accommodations for disabled students in schools (ADA, 2020). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 provided the legal protection that children needed in the classroom (EARN, 2023). This law was titled Section 504. Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act was the first disability civil rights law in the United States. Children with disabilities can now be protected against discrimination from federal financial assistance programs (WGU, 2020). Then, in 1975 the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) guaranteed and enforced the right for children with disabilities to receive a free and appropriate education (IDEA, 2024). In addition, the child was also provided one free meal per day as part of this act. In the following years to come amendments were passed that entitled children to have services from the time of childbirth. This was the first time that students were provided an opportunity to be educated in the “least restrictive environment” possible (All Star Staff, 2000). Educators were no longer allowed to force students with disabilities into different environments or reject their ability to be educated in the classroom. The EHA allowed states and localities to protect the rights of individual needs that improve the results for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and their families. Before, the United States schools were only educating one in five children with disabilities, and many states had laws excluding certain students, including children who were deaf, blind,

emotionally disturbed, or had an intellectual disability (Noah Webster Educational Foundation, 2024). The teachers' training historically was something and sometimes proven to be very inadequate in many school districts that suffered from a lack of resources to improve matters. Special needs children were ignored up until this point by compulsory education laws, and when they attended schools, they were in danger of being kicked out (Yeban, 2024). The EHA opened the eyes of people who historically thought educating disabled and special needs students was not a priority and could be a fruitless endeavor. At this point, the rights of students with disabilities in K through 12 and post-secondary schools become protected under Section 504 and the ADA (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

As the years progressed, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) underwent several revisions and became known as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1997 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The learning disabilities Association (LDA) was instrumental in writing IDEA (Cipoletti, 2022). The IDEA added components to special education that required the use of individual education plans (IEP) for all special education students (Kupper & Kohanek, 2024).

The ACT States disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities. (WGU, 2020, p. 1)

IDEA also started the use of individualized transition plans (ITP) to help students transition from high school into the workforce to help with success in their adult lives (Kupper & Kohanek, 2024). This act continued the focus on guaranteeing students equal education, provided with valuable schooling options and addressing individualized needs. The IDEA governs how States and public agencies provide early interventions, special education, and related services. Today, infants and toddlers, birth through two years of age with disabilities and their families receive early intervention services under IDEA part C (Fielkow, 2023). Children and Youth aged three through 21 receive special education and related Services Under IDEA Part B. It is a federal law binding in all states (Ojeda & Corugno, 2022). IDEA guarantees four basic rights to children with disabilities: free appropriate education, least restrictive environment, supplemental aid and services, and assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). IDEA protects the student through the use of Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs), bringing forth due process for parents to use if they do not feel their child is being supported properly, and a comprehensive list of parental rights (Wiener, 2009). The LDA is constantly monitoring the execution of IDEA and how effective the laws are working in real-time (Bridges 4 Kids, 2021). LDA's goal is to continue to refine IDEA so that it continues to be efficient and effective as the years progress (All Star Staff, 2000). LDA reviews the effectiveness of IDEA about every five years or so, to evaluate the validity of the act (Bridges 4 Kids, 2021). IDEA is always undergoing revamping to modernize the act to conform to the learning disability changes that happened throughout the years.

As stated in the All-Star staff article, In the past, schools were required to wait until children fell behind grade level before being

eligible for special education. With the release of the final regulations of IDEA 2004, school districts are no longer required to follow this model but are allowed to intervene more appropriately and find other ways to determine if a child needs help. (All Star Staff, 2000, p. 1)

The passing of IDEA has resulted in the education of more children in the neighborhood schools without separating them from other schools or institutions. It contributed to improvements in the rate of high school graduations, post-secondary school enrollments, and post-school employment for youth with disabilities who have benefited from this act.

In 2004, President Bush transformed the Federal government's approach to education with the addition of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; WGU, 2020). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) provided further accountability to schools and added technology assistance and loan programs to help schools acquire needed special education resources. In addition, it improved the quality of special education programs at the state level by requiring Statewide assessments and highly qualified, specially trained professionals to teach students with disabilities. Congress reauthorized the continuation of IDEA in 2004 (IDEA, 2004). At this point, Congress started to call for early interventions for students with greater accountability. It required the improvement of educational outcomes and the need to raise the standards for instruction for those who taught special education classes. In addition, Congress required States to demand that local school districts shift up to 15% of their special education funds towards general education if it were determined that a proportionate number of students for minority

groups were placed in special education for reasons other than disabilities (Noah Webster Educational Foundation, 2024). In 2015, Congress amended IDEA to add the Every Student Succeeds Act (Hayer, 2018). This act helped clean up the controversial positions that were built into the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

It is important to understand what must be an appropriate evaluation, to determine if a student qualifies for special education services. There are 13 disability categories under IDEA and they include:

- Autism
- Deaf/Blindness
- Deafness
- Emotionally Disturbance
- Hearing Impairment
- Intellectual Disability
- Multiple Disabilities
- Orthopedic Impairment
- Other Health Impairment
- Specific Learning Disability
- Speech or Language Impairment
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Visual Impairment Including Blindness (WGU, 2020, p. 2)

If a student's disabilities are found to fall into one or more of these categories, they are eligible to receive special education services. Many signs can indicate if a child requires

additional services or support as a special education student. Some of the signs that can be present include:

- Trouble with school work such as in reading or math
- Conflict with peers or adults
- Challenging behaviors that are having an impact on the child being ability to access their education
- A diagnosis of autism or developmental delays. (WGU, 2020, p. 3)

Once a child is identified with one of these signs the child needs special education services and begins looking into the steps of those services. There is a specific timeline that is put in place by IDEA to make sure that the student is getting the services as fast as possible. The basic process is broken down into five steps. First, a child must be referred for special education evaluation. Second, review of the evaluation and determination to see if the child qualifies for special education. Third, developing an individual education plan (IEP). Fourth, review the IEP and services every year. Finally, a child is reevaluated at least every three years (Mikelsone et al., 2022).

A child's development is tracked as soon as the child is born. A child who starts the special education process must be referred for special education evaluation as soon as a disability is suspected. The child's pediatrician can start the process if the child is not of school age. The child's school takes over this process once the child enters the educational system. Based on the article written by Kids Legal (2004), they state that once the referral is sent to the school, the school has 15 days to set up an IEP meeting to discuss the details of the referral. In addition, Kids Legal also states the school must provide at least seven days' written notice of the date, time, and location of the IEP

meeting. Furthermore, the school must get consent from the parents in the form of an evaluation form within 15 days, if the school decides to not have the meeting for any reason. The school has 45 days to complete the evaluations and hold an eligibility meeting, once the parents sign and submit the evaluation form. Copies of the evaluations need to be sent to the parents at least three days before the IEP meeting to discuss the evaluations (Kids Legal, 2004).

A review of the evaluations provides the needed information to determine if the child qualifies for special education. Schools must provide services to a student within 30 calendar days if a child is determined to be eligible during the eligibility IEP meeting (Saloka, 2023). In some cases, the parent does not agree with the evaluations that have been completed. In this case, the parent has the right to request, in writing, an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE; FairFax County, 2024). This is an additional evaluation that is provided to the parent at no extra cost (MCDS, 2024). The school has 30 days to respond in writing, within 30 calendar days of the IEE request (Kupper & Kohanek, 2024). The schools are required to either provide approval to the parent's request, or they will need to file a due process hearing request to show that the IEE is not needed (Cull, 2024). Any future new evaluations must occur within three years, or during the triennial review (2024 Pennsylvania System, 2024). A parent can also request that the new evaluations happen more often than three years, but not more than once a year (Kids Legal, 2004).

Once the team agrees with the evaluations, the team starts the process of developing an individual education plan (IEP). A plan is developed to support the educational needs of the child. Every IEP document is designed to start by explaining the

child's current level of performance. This is a quick review of how the child is doing and reviews the evaluation report. Next, the document presents all of the specific and measurable goals that will be worked on and tracked throughout the 12-month timeframe (Stober, 2024). In addition, the document explains service delivery and what is needed to support each other. The document lays out the child's starting point, the expected outcomes, and how the child is going to achieve those expected outcomes. Furthermore, the team will review the proper placement for the child to receive the services. A best practice is to keep the child in his home school, but sometimes the IEP team determines that the in-district school is not able to provide the services required. If this is the case, the child can be placed in an out-of-district placement at no cost to the parents. In this case, the IEP team is required to meet 30 days after the child is relocated (Kids Legal, 2004). This is often called a transition meeting. The goal is to review how well the child transitioned to the new environment, or if there should be any modification to the plan. In some instances, the home school cannot provide the needed service to support the IEP. In this case, the school must meet with the parents within 30 days of the beginning of the school year, or the start date of the IEP, to discuss alternative services (FairFax County, 2024). The school is required to make up the missing services otherwise called compensatory education. All the IEP services must be reviewed every year (Cull, 2024).

At any time, parents can call for a due process hearing if they disagree with a decision made between the IEP team and the parents. A parent must file within two years of when the disagreement happens with the school and Department of Education (MPACT, 2022). The school must respond within 10 days addressing the issues that were spelled out in the request (Center for Parent Information & Resources, 2022). The

school has an additional 15 days to let the hearing officer know that the request needs additional information and that the request is defective (Pacer Center, 2024). “The hearing officer has five days to determine if the complaint meets all of the requirements” (Kids Legal, 2004, p. 1). At this time, the school can allow the parent to add more information or the hearing officer can allow additional information to be added. This must be added at least five calendar days before the scheduled hearing (Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013). “The school must schedule a dispute resolution session within 15 calendar days of receiving the due process hearing request” (Kids Legal, 2004, p. 1). All documents must be provided to the other party at least five days before the hearing, otherwise the documents cannot be used in the hearing (FairFax County, 2024). The school then has 30 calendar days to add the changes, if a resolution is met (Wolf, 2022). The hearing officer has 15 days to provide a written decision, once the hearing is completed (Lee, 2024). Due process hearing can be expedited if a child is involved in disciplinary action. Timeline change to sessions occurring within seven calendar days, with the hearing occurring within 20 days from the filed request (2024 Pennsylvania System, 2024). The hearing officer has 10 school days after the hearing to issue the decision (Understanding IEP Due Process, 2024).

If a parent or adult student does not agree with the due process hearing officer's decision, they may file an appeal with the federal district court or main Superior court. This must be done within 90 days of receiving the hearing officer's decision. (Kids Legal, 2004, p. 1)

Special Education services and process have continued to improve. One was provided with explanations of events that helped showcase the shift in government

support for children in need of special education change. The timeline included how special education evolved, what acts were developed to help bring equality for all children, as well as some of the important court cases that provided legal support for the changes. Today, there are more students with learning disabilities than ever before and continue to qualify year after year. The National Center for Educational Statistics notes that in the 2009-2010 school year, we saw 6.5 million students enrolled in programs through the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) and these students represented 13% of the public-school students that year (Noah Webster Educational Foundation, 2024). In 2020, 15% were eligible to enroll under IDEA (Schaeffer, 2023). That means that in 2020, the public school system processed 7.2 million students with learning disabilities (Schaeffer, 2023). Disability Scoop examines the specifics of the 2020 IDEA enrollment spike. Learning disabilities affected a third of the students, followed by speech and language impairment and other health impairments. Autism affected 12% of the students with disabilities, while 7% had developmental delays, 6% had intellectual delays and 2% had multiple disabilities (Noah Webster Educational Foundation, 2024). The continual support that is provided by Congress paves the way to provide all of these children with an adequate education and the possibility of a successful life after education. One can easily see after reviewing the process of referring a student, timelines between steps of the process, and who should be involved how intense the process needs to be. The Learning Disabilities Association (LDA) is committed to providing every child, no matter what the disability, with a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the United States. American special education has made significant changes from 200 years ago. Law makers are always reviewing the

requirements of special education and making the needed advancements. These modifications provide support for special education students.

Process to Diagnose a Student with ASD and Interventions

Autism is the prototypical form of a spectrum of related, complex neurodevelopmental disorders referred to as autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) (American Psychiatric Association, 2024). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a disorder that affects a growing number of children in the United States. As of 2020, one in 36 children in the United States have autism, up from the previous rate of one in 44 (Autism Speaks, 2024). One in 45 adults in the United States have autism (U.S. Pharmacist, 2015). This breaks down to about four in 100 boys and one in 100 girls having autism. Boys are nearly four times more likely to be diagnosed with autism than girls (Cull, 2024). Cross-disciplinary experts and parent representatives worked together to develop guidelines for early detection of autism, in an attempt to optimize early access to best practices intervention (American Psychiatric Association, 2024). Individuals can be diagnosed with Autism at any age within a lifetime. People with ASD benefit from earlier detection that can start the process as early as 12 months of age (Muacevic & Adler, 2023). One must start the diagnosis process by reviewing what makes up Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and an understanding of the levels of the disorder. Children with ASD display different characteristics from that of a typical developed child. One must have an understanding of typical child development to notice early warning signs of ASD, as well as the importance of communicating those signs to the pediatrician during well visits (American Psychiatric Association, 2024). Being aware of the warning signs

as early as possible is the most important part of the diagnosis process. The earlier one is diagnosed; the quicker one can start a plan of interventions.

All levels of ASD show signs of impairments within three functional domains; communication, lack of behavioral flexibility with reliance on routines, and eye contact when speaking to another person (Faras et al., 2010). ASD is the most prevalent of the severe behavior disorders of development, and the most difficult and costly to treat of all disabilities. ASD is rising and more cases are being added every day. Furthermore, it is linked to strong and complex genetic underpinnings with modulations of atypical expression by environmental factors with male gender family history of siblings and parents with ASD.

Family pediatricians are the first layer of support during the identification of children with ASD (Johnson et al., 2007). They should take every opportunity to screen for ASD during the child's well visits. The first steps are during observations through regular health visits to the pediatrician while monitoring for development needs from parents' videos and the identification of any high-risk situations. High-risk situations are equivalent to those who have siblings who have already been diagnosed with ASD. Warning signs can be identified by both caregivers and pediatricians in the first phases of a child's life. Special Care needs to be taken with first-time caregivers, because they might not be aware of how a typical child performs during the different stages of life. The goal is to identify warning signs of children with ASD as quickly as possible so that one can start interventions as soon as possible. One way the family physician can screen is with the use of a modified checklist for autism for toddlers followed up with an MCHATR/F screening tool (American Psychiatric Association, 2024). These warning

signs can start as early as 12 months old by showing a lack of social gestures and using no meaningful signal words at 18 months. Most children with ASD are not interested in other children around them and are focused only on themselves. They are unable to do spontaneous word phrases at 24 months and can show delays in language skills from two years old on through the rest of their lives. Some ASD children can be perceived to be normal between 12 and 24 months of age, but regress after (Geller, 2024).

Pediatricians like to categorize their detection into two different stages of detection. The first phase of detection would be to monitor for signs of ASD during routine doctor visits. During these visits, the pediatricians would utilize early autism screeners and take notes based on the visual information to form a baseline report (Faras et al., 2010). Pediatricians and caregivers should start monitoring from 12 months of age; some can be detected at 18 months of age. Special attention should be taken between 18 and 24 months. Lack of signs by 24 months does not preclude the possibility of a diagnosis. It is important to make sure one focuses on patterns and the frequencies of the patterns. If a child is diagnosed with ASD, the pediatricians can supply the family with a list of appropriate specialist centers to perform a more in-depth screener (Robins et al., 2009). This type of screener is for risk, not decision-making. Early detection provides a strong foundation for the child. It is difficult to maintain an effective level of sensitivity based only on observation data from a single screening. Both extraction and refinement strategies are utilized by a public Children's Health surveillance program for advanced detection. First, extraction stages help identify all stages of delays in development. On the other hand, refinement stages exclude the cases that do not show developmental problems.

The Young Autism and Other Developmental Disorders Checkup Tool screener achieves high efficiency for early detection of ASD. Alternative screening tools for autism in toddlers and young children scored in the two-tiered screening improved both positive predictors value and sensitivity. Pediatricians must be aware of local resources that can assist in making a definitive diagnosis of ASD and provide the tools to help in managing ASD moving forward. Pediatricians must be aware of Developmental Education and Community Resources, as well as Medical Subspecialty clinics to help support these needs (Missouri Department of Mental Health, 2024).

In order to diagnose adults with Autism, one usually has an in-person visit with a doctor to ask questions and evaluate how one responds (Gotter & Rossiaky, 2023). Symptoms can also be tracked throughout one's high school and college career. Typically, people start to consider self-reported symptoms and track the data throughout the years. Some adults also look into an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis when relatives, and loved ones are diagnosed with ASD. Unfortunately, there is no established procedure for diagnosing ASD in adults, and adult autism specialists are hard to find (Hoffman, 2023). One can also reach out to an adult psychiatrist or psychologist that works with people who have autism, or reach out to a pediatric psychiatrist or psychologist to understand if they comfortable assessing for and diagnosing ASD in adults (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). Basically, ASD can be diagnosed at any time in one's lifetime. The sooner one is diagnosed, the sooner one can start intervention and receive the needed support.

Before 2013, children diagnosed with ASD were place in one classification of Autism. It was not until after 2013 that Autism was reclassified as an Autism Spectrum

Disorders (ASD) classification (Cleveland Clinic, 2024). Children with ASD struggle with the ability to communicate and relate with others, which continues to become a difficult task as the children get older. The developmental delays can range from the most severe of behavioral impairments to minimal signs of delays. Children with severe ASD may not be able to speak and might need to communicate with the use of technology. Children with ASD might also have a difficult time looking at someone and prefer to look at the ground or their hands in place of making eye contact (Hoffman, 2023). These range of developmental differences are broken down into seven categories of Autism that make up the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Children with ASD are not able to perceive the world with a reasonable reality.

The seven levels of autism are an attempt by the medical community to help clarify the needs and abilities of individuals with ASD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Unfortunately, a child with ASD could show signs in all or some of the levels, which makes it very difficult to understand what interventions are needed to help support the child. Furthermore, the child's abilities can and will change over time, requiring a constant review of next steps and maybe reclassification. Before 2013, children with Autism ranged from high-functioning to low-functioning. This did not provide enough detail to help support the needs of the child. The spectrum was too vast to only support a few categories.

In May 2013, the American Psychiatric Association developed "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders" (DSM-5), which provided a detailed description of the different types of autism

that were combined into one diagnosis: Autism Spectrum Disorder.

(ASD; Autism Expert Community Care Management, 2024, p. 2)

A child with ASD typically will show developmental delays in three different categories: developmentally appropriate social communication skills, restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities, and unusually intense or sensitive behaviors (Erie County Care Management, 2024). This variability is why autism spectrum disorder is recognized as a spectrum (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). When diagnosing the condition, doctors reference the seven levels of ASD to help the child get the correct amount of support that's right for them (Lovering, 2022).

Before 2013, pediatricians would diagnose children with Autistic Disorder. This was a term that referred to an individual who showed challenges interacting socially with their peers in addition to delays in communication skills. This type of child continued to present repetitive behaviors that would disrupt sleeping or eating. This would in turn cause the child to display tantrums or "meltdowns." This level would be identified as a more severe Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis today. Today, ASD is made up of seven different classifications to help one understand the level of support one requires (Hoffman, 2023).

Childhood disintegrative disorder (CDD) is a condition that is one of the classifications within the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in which children develop normally through about age three. After the age of three, the child starts to lose skills that have already been developed. Month over month the child starts to lose language and fine/gross motor skills (Mount Sinai, 2024). The child also stops functioning socially and becomes removed from other children. In addition, as typical children continue to reach

different developmental milestones, such as cognitive and reasoning skills, children with CDD begin to decline. This level typically ranges in age from two to 12 years old (Autism Expert Community Care Management, 2024).

Pervasive developmental disorder (PDD-NOS) is used to diagnose a child who presents with many symptoms of autism but does not fully meet the criteria of any specific level. Children with PDD can be seen as those children that one identifies as having something off, but there is not enough evidence to place them on a level or classify them with Asperger's syndrome. This is seen as the mildest form of ASD. Research by the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke has shown that children who qualify for a diagnosis of PDD-NOS in early childhood may go on to develop other ASDs (Koroshetz, 2024).

The highest functioning level of ASD is defined as Asperger's syndrome. Children with Asperger's Syndrome often can communicate well and can be a functioning member in social settings (Nationwide Children's, 2024). Although children with Asperger's are a functioning member in social settings, they often lack different aspects of social behavior that typically come naturally to others. The levels of abilities and strengths range from one child to the other. Children can still be rigid and inflexible with what tasks are completed and when. They have difficulties during transitions and will need a focus on life skills.

High-Functioning Autism (HFA) differs from Asperger's syndrome. Children with HFA typically cannot communicate well verbally and tend to be withdrawn socially (Ruby, 2023). They love to avoid eye contact so they do not need to interact with other people. HFA children would rather spend time alone, because they have a hard time

maintaining a conversation. They try to interact with others but do not do a good job based on their skill levels.

The next level is called "classic autism" (CA). CA typically has severe communication problems, with very limited, to no speech. They are very withdrawn socially and spend much of their time alone during the day. Classic autism is quickly identified by severe problems communicating, severe problems interacting with others, and severe problems taking care of oneself (Moller, 2023). In time they become increasingly disabled unless they receive extensive therapy throughout their lives. CA can start out looking like other levels of ASD from birth to three years of age. The length of time it can take for CA to be identified can make it difficult for parents and pediatricians to recognize the condition early on.

The final level is called "low-functioning autism" (LFA). Children with LFA typically have a very difficult time communicating verbally and may have limited speech or even be unable to speak at all. These limitations cause severe behavior problems that include running away from home, attacking other people, and/or self-injuring (Andreasen, 2022). They like to stay to themselves and do not like to be in social situations. In addition, they require a lot of assistance when caring for themselves, because they are unaware of what is needed to help them. Children with LFA are shown as immature children who do not act their age.

Once a child is properly diagnosed, it is important to supply a plan for the right type of intervention that will support the child's needs. In most cases, the types of intervention must include providing strict teaching interventions for social interaction, communication building, and thinking. One must try to develop interventions that can

increase self-help and personal independence for children with ASD. Once a diagnosis has been identified, the following general early intervention is the development of speech and language services. In addition, occupational therapists, Speech Language Therapists, Picture Exchange Communication Systems, TEACCH, and School Intervention Programs are among some of the support staff and programs that should be part of the intervention plan (Tsang et. al., 2019). It is valuable to work with different organizations and plan out a solid set of interventions that are age-appropriate and can provide immediate assistance. These interventions can be implemented from Early Childhood through High School as early as a child is diagnosed. The child's activity is tracked based on the goals of the intervention. Goals can be modified as the child starts to accomplish the goals that are provided for those interventions. Intensive Behavior interventions for a minimum of 25 hours per week, in a low student-teacher ratio classroom, for children diagnosed with ASD (Reichow et al., 2018). In addition, caregivers should take an active role in the interventions so that all activities can continue while the child is at home. It is important to challenge the child with different types of interventions. In some cases, paying for the needed interventions is one of the biggest challenges for caregivers.

It costs an estimated \$233,610 to raise a child to age 17, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Autism Speaks, an autism advocacy organization, estimates the cost to raise a child with autism or an intellectual disability is \$1.4 to \$2.4 million. The more severe the disability, the more expensive the lifetime cost. (Horvath, 2021, p. 1)

Typically, an individual family service plan (IFSP) is put into place to help with recommendations for treatments. An Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is provided to

make sure everyone is following the IFSP. Typically, givers try not to combine private and public services because the two might not be able to work together. The ideal program for a student with ASD is 25 plus hours per week, an ABA program with qualified consultants directing the program. These consultants would come to the house two to four times a month (Autism Speaks, 2024). Supervision should focus on working with children and providing training to the therapist and family. The local agency organizations may be able to provide a list of providers that can help with this type of intervention and behavior analysis. The certification boards can also provide a certificate of registered therapist that can be used.

The impact on families and the child's quality of life is enormous and sometimes devastating. Improved outcomes with early intensive behavioral interventions make parents know what to do to support their child's needs. As one can see, Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex disorder that has been seen as an untreatable developmental disorder. ASD has increased in diagnosis in the United States year-over-year with boys nearly four times more likely to be diagnosed with autism than girls (Autism Awareness Australia, 2024). Disciplinary experts all over the world are working together to develop new ways for early detection of autism, as well as developing new and improved replicable strategies for all to use. Children with ASD benefit from earlier detection that starts as early as 12 months of age (Johnson et al., 2007). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a multilevel disorder. Children with ASD display different characteristics from those of typical developing children who show signs of developmental delays as soon as 12 months of age. The review of warning signs will help one understand if a child is displaying signs of ASD and provide the knowledge to communicate these signs during

good visits to the pediatrician. Being aware of the warning signs as early as possible is the most important part of the diagnosis process. In addition, there are new and improved tests that help further diagnose a child, and pediatricians are the first line of defense when it comes to administering these tests. The tests help drive which interventions can be put in place to help with the child's needs. These interventions will be used to improve the quality of life for the child with ASD and the caregivers that support that child. Children living with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) benefit from early detection that will in turn give him/her the needed interventions to improve the livelihoods of the entire family (American Psychiatric Association, 2024).

Review of Needs for a Successful Transition Plan

Coping with a schedule change and new teachers, staff members, and peers is often nerve-racking for many students, but those with autism tend to have an especially hard time making changes and adapting to major life, academic, and social transitions (STAGES Learning, 2024). Transitions happen regularly for many students moving from one educational unit to the other. Transition refers to moving from one stage of life to another, such as moving from grade to grade, school to school, or from school to community (Education Reform, 2013). A transition plan (TP) is a critical document in supporting anticipated changes in a student's environment. It focuses on gaining a shared understanding of needs by all those involved to ensure individual student requirements are met successfully (Positive Partnerships, 2023). Broadstock 2019 raises the question of, "Can we imagine how different such a critical transition would be if a child's strengths, interests, preferences, and support needs were at the center of all planning, preparation, and communication, related to their transition into school" (Broadstock, 2019, p. 2)? The

process of transitioning involves three areas that children with autism may find challenging - socialization, communication, and behavior. Transitioning into any new environment can be stressful, confusing, and unpleasant for students. One needs to take the steps needed to pre-warn the autistic child so he can prepare for the change. This preparation will relieve some of this stress. This can also help to make a new setting or activity more predictable. Children with ASD are unique, so it is important to understand that strategies that work with one child might not work for another. A key step towards a successful transition is designing a transition plan that suits the autistic person's specific needs (AchievingStars Therapy, 2024). The most important thing to keep at the center of the transition is the subject of the transition: the child (Broadstock, 2019).

Proper transitions for a child with ASD are important because children diagnosed with ASD may have difficulties with changes in routine or in environments that need "sameness" and predictability. ASD children have difficulty understanding verbal directives or explanations, including multi-step directions (executive functioning deficits) and not recognizing subtle cues leading up to a transition. They tend to have restrictive patterns of behavior that cause issues when disrupted. These patterns include sensory considerations that produce greater anxiety levels during times of unpredictability (Reiss & Gibson, 2002). Children on the autism spectrum respond better to transition and change when it is supported by a planning process with involvement from caretakers teachers, allied health professionals, and the students themselves. Many schools provide 'orientation' opportunities where new students and their families may visit the new school meet with staff and become familiar with the physical environment. Transition plans are a more detailed plan of how the student will be supported to change

environments and when and who will implement this plan (Positive Partnerships, 2024).

A well-developed transition plan sets the student up for a successful move to another environment, accepts new staff members, and copes more readily with change (Positive Partnerships, 2024). During this transition to a school-age program, it is important for families to have as much information as possible about the process (ASERT, 2024).

Transitioning autistic children from early childhood education into a school setting is significant and can involve anxiety and concern for primary caregivers (Broadstock, 2019).

Transition Plans that Provided a Successful Experience for Students with ASD

Successfully transitioning a child on the spectrum from early childhood settings to school is a challenging task and a big responsibility for schools and their staff (UNSW Sydney, 2024). Student success does not happen by accident, the transition plans must be effective to provide a successful experience for students with ASD. One must start by evaluating the unique needs of the learner to create a personalized adjustable plan that can take place as smoothly as possible. The plans require extreme planning and consideration for the transitions to be successful (Broadstock, 2019). The planning for the child's transition will start as early as the year before your child is old enough to enroll in kindergarten or first grade (Collison, 2024). These times produce greater anxiety levels because of the amount of unpredictability for the child with ASD (Erin Oak Kids, 2012). Effective transition planning requires multiple components to be successful. These plans need to be supported by the school, parent, and child. The individualized transition plans need to reflect a student's strengths and needs. In addition, the plan needs to support the building of student resilience and independence (Reiss & Gibson, 2002). Next, it needs to

acknowledge a student's right to an appropriate education. The best plan utilizes a collaborative process that puts the student in the center and promotes independence and self-advocacy (Fouse & Wheeler, 1997). Furthermore, it must reflect inclusive practices that can identify context and goals, and define the strategies and actions by clarifying the roles and responsibilities, within a specific timeline (Collison, 2024). The team must involve the student and parents/guardians that take part in a collaborative team approach. The goal is to develop a shared future vision that can start as early as possible as a comprehensive, structured plan for the future (Reiss & Gibson, 2002). This collaborative approach should encourage active preparation from all aspects of the team. This approach will yield follow-up support with careful evaluation (UNSW Sydney, 2024). However, a successful transition requires the collaboration of more than just the child's family, early childhood staff, and the new school. The assistance, engagement, and advice of support staff (intervention professionals) and the local community can be invaluable. Reaching out and working in partnership with parents, caregivers, and other key stakeholders is recommended to facilitate a smooth and positive transition for children on the spectrum and their families (Lindsay, 2013). As soon as the child is diagnosed with ASD, the parents should inform the local director of special education via a letter that they will be enrolling a child with special needs in elementary school programming.

List the special needs of the child such as challenges with understanding and/or using language, medical issues, the need for a nap, drowsiness during specific times of the day, sensory needs and sensory distractions, responsiveness to visual supports such as

schedules, impulsiveness, need for structure, need for supervision, difficulty attending in a noisy environment, and so forth. (Vicker, 2009, p. 3)

Parents and children will want to tour the new school as soon as possible and meet the new principal. A formal appointment should be made with the principal as a best practice so he or she has the time to begin cementing a positive relationship with the family. With preparation, the principal will be able to tell the parents about school rules and operations and how parents can be involved in the life of the school through volunteering, organizations, and support for school functions (Pontz, 2019). Furthermore, it would be helpful for the team if the parent prepared a portfolio that contains easy-to-read information on the child (DDSB, 2024). To follow, the parents should establish a plan for future communication with the teacher that includes the frequency of visits and the amount of information needed. This information can include helpful tips to let the teacher know what information is helpful from home (Fouse & Wheeler, 1997). Finally, the transition team must establish parent involvement in planning, future child and parent visits to school, and visit support placement identification. This parent communication and information will help if the parent also provides consent for the teacher to be able to start sharing between preschool and school as fast as possible. The sharing of information helps understand what supports have been identified and are successful. This also should be in place for transition administrators to supervise and evaluate the transition; and peer, classroom, and school preparation (Beamish et al., 2014). The goal is to provide the needed supports in order for the student to best chance for a success when tracking from one school to another.

These proven results showcase why one should repeat well-known processes and use types of goals that will develop an ASD student to their fullest. Petersson-Bloom states that it is important to have multiple strategies in place to help a child with ASD get prepared to enter the educational career (Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022). Before starting the in-school meetings, it is important to start the communication between sending and receiving schools. This communication must start as early as possible. Start by also having conversations with the child about how the visits are going to go with the new school (Lowry, 2016). In addition, it helps the child know what to expect by creating a detailed transition plan and setting specific learning goals. Developing social stories that include pictures of the new school and staff, as well as what are the proper expectations (Silva et al., 2024). Make sure one creates a map and uses colors to highlight areas of interest for the child. Also, take photos of the new classes, library, multiple environments, visual school rules, and boundaries to use when describing the environment (Positive Partnerships, 2024). Talk about who the child will meet and where he needs help at any time. Establish a safety net and mentor or buddy system that can also be used on day one. Work together to develop a visual schedule that includes the receiving school information. A home-based safe place should be designed and presented to the child (Springbook, 2017). If changing schools, one must develop a calendar to determine dates that can be used to start a countdown to visit. Once the child is in the new school, communication, and visits should be on a six-month timeframe (National Autistic Society, 2024). This time should consist of a review of in-class observations and follow-up feedback meetings. Make sure all-important information that can help support the child is handed over to the existing supports in place. This information should also

include a copy of the supports created for the home (Positive Partnerships, 2024). Follow-up on initial meeting to determine start dates of future meetings and an understanding of follow-up meetings as needed. A Connections Team should be established to consist of school staff, including Principals, LST, counselors, SPED teachers, classroom teachers, and the parent(s)/guardian(s) (Reiss & Gibson, 2002). It is a must for the key stakeholders and parents to meet and develop the plan so that the plan provides enough time to carry out the plan, as the child may need several visits over the previous semester. Discuss how home-school communication systems will operate in the new setting (National Autistic Society, 2024). Plan what activities/areas will be the focus of each visit. Taking a tour of the new school with your child to meet their teachers, staff members, and peers before the first day is a must. Make sure this is set up before the child is dropped off on the first day. During this time review the picture cards to cue the transition from one activity to the next. In addition, establish predictability by preparing the student for any schedule changes in advance with multiple practices of the new routines. Always make sure the team is planning to use evidence-based interventions. Remember that communication with a child with ASD and their academic team—is key to success (ARIS, 2024).

The benefits of a successful transition plan when moving through the school years vary based on how well the team transitions through the process. The best outcomes are when transition strategies are used starting with reducing the amount of transition time that increases pro-social behaviors during transitions. Starting school is one of the most significant early transitions in a child's (and their family's) life (Ahtola et al., 2011). Children and families are preparing for significant role changes (Dockett et al., 2012),

increased social and academic demands (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2009), and the development of new partnerships with school and community members (Griebel & Niesel, 2009). Children show an increased independence that is showcased during the amount of time a child participates in school and community outings. A successful transition helps build self-esteem and resilience (Reiss & Gibson, 2002). It is not uncommon for the first few days or weeks of school to be difficult as your child adjusts to their new learning environment, schedule, and daily routines. During this time, it is important to extend grace as your child learns to adapt, make transitions, and cope with the changes (ARIS, 2024). Early transitions can be successful and seamless when time is dedicated to preparing for the shift and keeping the child at the center of the transition (Broadstock, 2019). A successful transition is child-centered, with family and support from educators, support people, and other systems for support (National Autistic Society, 2024). The key to any successful transition is to trust the process, explore the possibilities together, and celebrate the differences. This is especially relevant during transitions from early childhood education to a more formal school environment (Lowry, 2016).

A large proportion of the sample (84%) transitioned from the ASELCC setting to Year 1, with a full-time (5 days a week) school program. Parents reported that the experience of starting school ranged from very good (41%) to fairly good (41%), with a smaller proportion indicating that their experience was just ok (11%) or not very good (7%). (Marsh & Eapenv, 2017, p. 51)

The results of Marsh and Eapenv's (2017) study indicated that children with ASD had a significant influence on parental quality of life and parental stress increased when the children had an increase in autism symptoms. The study specifically noted that it increased when repetitive behaviors included self-injurious and ritualistic behavior. It appears that increasing the children's ability to control characteristics such as behavior, cognitive ability, language and communication skills and adaptive functioning help both at home and in school (Marsh & Eapenv, 2017). Thus, as part of a holistic approach to improving transition seven out of seven outcomes, it is important to target relevant issues as they emerge across both home and school contexts (Sayers et. al., 2012). Targeting these issues in early intervention programs will assist children on the spectrum and their parents with this important transition, allowing them to maximize their learning and behavioral potential. Autism symptom severity is not a significant barrier to school transition and is less important than behavior and the language, cognitive, and adaptive skills of the child (Marsh & Eapenv, 2017). Findings highlight the need to consider school readiness and transition planning from a holistic perspective, ensuring clear, collaborative, and ongoing communication between parents, teachers, and staff, using a strength-based approach, and individualizing transition planning (Chen et. al., 2020). In particular, children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), given their significant deficits in communication and social functioning, may require more comprehensive transition support than other children (Marsh & Eapenv, 2017). Cognitive ability and adaptive behavior were shown to be associated with successful transition to school outcomes including participation in the classroom and being comfortable with the classroom teacher. These factors were also associated with social skills in the classroom including

assertiveness and engagement (Eapen et. al., 2017). School settings often meet with parents of children with ASD to introduce the discussion between parents and kindergartens, establishing a connection between the children and the new school. Building collaboration between school settings and parents in favor of assisting teachers to understand the individual conditions of children with ASD. This promotion increased the effectiveness of teaching (Grindle et al., 2012). Transition Plans utilized in school eventually helps with all factors of the educational process and provide a better educational environment (Pettersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022). These success stories continue to add to the growing international interest in the transition to school experiences of children and their families, which reflects a paradigm shift from conceptualizing transitions at the local level to acknowledging transition policy as an important component of the international education agenda (Dockett et al., 2014). This international recognition of the importance of early childhood experiences for future development highlights the importance of investing in children's early years (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006). Successful school transitions have important implications for children's social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Tippins & Orland, 2021). These transitions can contribute to children's short and long-term learning and development (Sayers et al., 2012). In the short term, increased implementation of supportive transition practices is related to children's academic achievement (Hindman et al., 2010) and social-emotional adjustment (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). For example, research has demonstrated that children who begin school "ready" (socially, academically, and emotionally) to learn and who transition smoothly into an elementary school setting are more likely to be gainfully employed as adults

(Usen, 2023). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (2006) Starting Strong report states that policymakers need to address the transition difficulties facing children as they prepare for school. Furthermore, investing in high-quality early childhood education and care can lead to returns up to four times better reward on investment (Schweinhart et al., 2005). Supporting smooth transitions out of early childhood or early intervention settings is an important component of early childhood experiences (Fontil et. al., 2019).

Summary

In summary, children with ASD do not have the same characteristics from one diagnosed child to the other. The educators need to understand that ASD is a spectrum of disabilities that range from mild to severe. There is not one type of autism, but many. No two autistic students are alike (Autism Speaks, 2024). Autism or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech, and nonverbal communication (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). To start, students with ASD have reduced self-regulation skills that combine with limited interactions with teachers and peers. They have a difficult time remaining actively engaged in the classroom setting, and trouble focusing on the task at hand during school hours. The interaction throughout the day heightened their anxiety levels and increased sensitivity to sensory stimuli, like loud noises or unpredictable actions.

Anxiety is common for autistic students, but not all anxiety is the same. Neuroscientists have found structural differences in autistic people's amygdala, the brain's emotion and fear center, that suggest

autism-related anxiety is different from general anxiety. While autistic people can present with both forms, management can be vastly different, and different from non-autistic anxiety management.

(Autism Speaks, 2024, p. 1)

Autism is not a learning disability, though it can affect learning (Hoffman, 2023). It helps to make sure there is sameness and familiarity in one's daily routine. One will notice that children with ASD will have a difficult time understanding transition cues throughout the school day. Visual schedules increase the much-needed predictability in the school, home, and treatment setting.

Autism does not cause behaviors that present as challenging to the teacher or the class. Behaviors are a method of communication. They can be a response to a biological cause, such as pain or discomfort, or due to a social or sensory cause.

(Autism Speaks, 2024, p. 1)

Transitioning from one task to another provides challenges when transitioning from one class, activity, or task to the next. Other students tend to be distinct because of their poor social skills compared with typically-developing peers. They can be observed doing repetitive behaviors—like stimming, rocking, or rubbing fingers or feet together. Teachers are confronted with several daily challenges, including understanding and managing behavior, socio-structural barriers (i.e., school policy, lack of training and resources), and creating an inclusive environment (i.e., lack of understanding from other teachers, students, and parents) (Lindsay, 2013). It is the team's responsibility to develop a transition plan for children with ASD that begins well in advance of the expected

transition. The planning should be very detailed and requires communication between schools, educators, community agencies, and parents/guardians of the child to be successful (Reiss & Gibson, 2002).

Based on this review children diagnosed with ASD have a hard time coping with a schedule change and new teachers, staff members, and peers, and is often nerve-racking making changes and adapting to major life, academic, and social transitions (ARIS, 2024). Transitions that typically happen regularly for many students who move from one educational unit to the other, or from one stage of life to another, such as moving from grade to grade, school to school, or from school to community are devastating (Fouse & Whecter, 1997). A transition plan (TP) is essential to supporting anticipated changes in a student's environment to understand the needs of all those involved to ensure individual student requirements are met successfully (Positive Partnerships, 2024). The support provided will help guide critical transition to increase a child's strengths, interests, preferences, and support needs making them the center of all planning, preparation, and communication, related to their transition into school (Broadstock, 2019). One must focus on the three areas that children with autism may find challenging - socialization, communication, and behavior. Transitioning into any new environment can be stressful, confusing, and unpleasant for students. One needs to take the steps needed to pre-warn the autistic child so he can prepare for the change. The increased preparation will relieve some of this stress. This can also help to make a new setting or activity more predictable. Children with ASD are unique, so it is important to understand that strategies that work with one child might not work for another. As stated before, a key step towards a successful transition is designing a transition plan that suits the autistic person's specific

needs (AMAZE, 2019). The child is the most important thing to keep at the center of the transition planning (Broadstock, 2019).

Chapter Three: Research Method and Design

Introduction

The researcher used a qualitative evaluation of a large suburban school district across the St. Louis area to understand the transition plans for students with ASD. The researcher used this info to help other districts develop a sound transition plan that will improve a student's educational experience for students with ASD. The large suburban school district across the St. Louis area that was part of the study is one of five school districts in its geographical location, St. Charles County. Its student population is under 17,000 students ranging from early childhood to 12th grade. The district has three preschools, 10 elementary schools, five middle schools, three traditional high schools, and two alternative schools. The study focused on the three preschools, two alternative schools, 10 elementary schools, and five middle schools. The large suburban schools across the St. Louis area for this study have a mix of student bodies: 77% Caucasian, 7.4% African-American, 5.7% Hispanic, 4.2% Asian, and 5.3% multi-racial.

The researcher utilized a qualitative research method to gather data through an anonymous survey and over-the-phone interviews. This study intended to identify what needs to be outlined within an IEP transition plan so that a student with ASD can be provided with a successful educational experience. The study reviews results based on teacher-provided surveys and over-the-phone interviews to identify what high-quality transition plans have on academic success when transitioning from early childhood education to middle school. The transition process plan is designed to provide the needed student information from one educational entity to another. The goal is to reduce the amount of time to get the student what the student needs to be successful. The researcher

collected data from Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers through the use of an anonymous survey to review the different experiences and how those experiences affected the situation. The results were analyzed by reviewing the participant's answers to the survey questions to understand if the Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers felt the large suburban school district across the St. Louis area provided successful transition plans to support the students with ASD. In addition, the researcher conducted over-the-phone interviews utilizing multiple interview questions to get more defined informational responses about the transition processes in place to delve deeper into what was successful and to identify any additional opportunities. The researcher attempted to detect specific transition processes that would benefit students with ASD as they progress through educational institutions. It also identifies some best practices that should be in place to see the best possible outcome, based on students with ASD. The goal was to gain the needed knowledge to provide the district with information to deliver a successful process.

The study identified a large suburban school district across the St. Louis area that set up transitions from one level of school to the next in the early parts of a student with ASD. It also identified what was working to make it successful and understood the gaps that teachers need to be more prepared for future students in their classrooms. It identified different educational, communication, training, and best practices needed to improve today's current processes. The researcher used the data to develop trends to make a rational decision on what was working and what needed to be reviewed at a higher level. It was essential to utilize the years of experience and the type of teaching one performs daily to understand if the data is relevant to the challenges. The researcher

utilized this information to understand the current processes being used when an ASD student transitions throughout his early educational career and evaluate what components are needed to provide a positive educational experience.

The Research Sites and Participants

The researcher contacted a large suburban school district across the St. Louis area to seek permission to conduct a qualitative study. The researcher also completed the district's application and submitted it to the Director of Curriculum and Assessment in the Chief Academic Officer's office. In addition, the researcher inquired about an email distribution list that could be used to send out communications via the communication department's email to solicit feedback from Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers within a specific set of schools. The researcher was provided with the authority to conduct the research and the ability to reach out to the Communications Officer for additional help in communicating the survey link. The Communications Officer recommended the use of the school district's website and the websites of each targeted school to acquire the needed email addresses for all of the Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers per location. Each email address was copied into a spreadsheet and entered into Outlook. The researcher used the emails provided on the district's website to communicate with the recipients. The researcher emailed each of the individuals identified within the qualifying schools a link to the Qualtrics survey.

Next, the researcher identified the individuals surveyed by developing specific qualifications, which included Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers within the large suburban school district across the St. Louis area. The participants must have been ones who had experience teaching a student with ASD. The

teachers ranged from early childhood education through eighth grade for both Regular Education and Special Education. Other research qualifications included those teachers in typical classroom settings as well as special education school environments. All participants needed to be familiar with or part of an IEP transition plan that included students with ASD.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the current transition processes in place for autistic students transitioning from preschool to kindergarten and elementary school to middle school?

Research Question 2: What are the opportunity areas within the transition process for students with autism?

Research Question 3: What are the perceptions of special education teachers regarding how effective the current transition processes are for students diagnosed with autism?

Research Question 4: What are the perceptions of regular education teachers regarding how effective the transition processes are for students diagnosed with autism?

Research Question 5: What are the current strengths of the current transition programs?

Research Question 6: What are the weaknesses of the current transition programs?

Survey

The researcher requested approval from the university by submitting the prospectus to the institutional review board (IRB). The researcher proceeded to develop the anonymous survey that would be used once the researcher acquired approval from the IRB; the survey was published live after receiving approval from the IRB. Afterward, the researcher applied for approval from the large suburban school district the St. Louis area.

During this process, the researcher acquired the needed email addresses by reviewing all of the online websites to develop a database of contacts. As soon as approval was given by the district, the researcher electronically distributed the survey link to all of the contacts who had been collected.

The survey questions were designed to acquire information from the teachers to understand what type of teacher was filling out the survey, how much experience, the effectiveness of transition programs being used, review of different best practices, and how the district was supporting the needs of the teacher. The link to the survey was included in an informative email that provided every person with the reason for the survey, how to complete the survey, and a date when it should be completed. It was designed to be a completely anonymous survey so that the participants would feel comfortable providing as much information as possible. It was important to provide privacy and confidentiality, so all information was password protected, and all quantitative responses were removed once the survey was complete. The researcher utilized the anonymous settings on Qualtrics so that no information could be traced back to any participant. The researcher's target number of responses was a minimum of 20 responses and a maximum of 40.

Survey Questions

Survey Question 1: What type of teacher are you currently?

Survey Question 2: How long have you worked with a student(s) diagnosed with autism?

Survey Question 3: What grade level(s) do you currently teach?

Survey Question 4: How effective are the current transition plan(s) in place for student(s) diagnosed with autism transitioning from preschool to kindergarten and elementary

school to middle school? (Scale 1-5, 1 = Highly Ineffective 5 = Highly Effective, followed by a comment box)

Survey Question 5: What are the perceptions of regular education teachers regarding how effective the transition plan(s) are for students diagnosed with autism? (Scale 1-5, 1 = Highly Ineffective 5 = Highly Effective)

Survey Question 6: List the reasons why you felt the effectiveness of your transition plan(s)?

Survey Question 7: What are the perceptions of special education teachers regarding how effective the current transition plan(s) are for students diagnosed with autism? (Scale 1-5, 1 = Highly Ineffective 5 = Highly Effective)

Survey Question 8: List the reasons why you felt the effectiveness of your transition plan(s)?

Survey Question 9: How much information were you given before you met the student(s) diagnosed with autism for the first time? (Scale 1-5, 1 = Poor 5 = Excellent)

Survey Question 10: Was there a transition meeting before you met the student(s) diagnosed with autism? (Scale Yes or No)

Survey Question 11: Were you able to observe the student(s) diagnosed with autism before they transitioned into your classroom? (Scale Yes or No)

Survey Question 12: Was the student(s) diagnosed with autism provided additional time before or during the new school year to visit your classroom to get acquainted? (Scale Yes or No)

Survey Question 13: Rank the level of support the district provided special education teachers during the transition process for student(s) diagnosed with autism? (Scale 1-5, 1 = Poor 5 = Excellent)

Survey Question 14: Rank the level of support the district provided regular teachers during the transition process for student(s) diagnosed with autism? (Scale 1-5, 1 = Poor 5 = Excellent)

Survey Question 15: Rank your provided transition training based on the success rate for student(s) diagnosed with autism? (Scale 1-5, 1 = Poor 5 = Excellent)

Survey Question 16: Rank the level of student(s) success based on the transition plan(s) used with student(s) diagnosed with autism? (Scale 1-5, 1 = Poor 5 = Excellent)

Survey Question 17: What are the current strengths of the current transition plan(s) used for student(s) with autism?

Survey Question 18: What are the areas of opportunity within the transition plan(s) used for student(s) with autism?

Survey Question 19: Who were the key people that you worked with when developing the transition plan(s) for student(s) with autism?

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The researcher planned on a sample size ranging from 20 to 200 Special Education Teachers and Regular Education Teachers. In addition, the researcher planned to interview three to five Certified Special Education Teachers and Regular Education Teachers after receiving the surveys, to understand their transition processes and procedures. The sample size is based on the norms provided by those before me. In the book, *How to Design and Evaluate Education Research*, Fraenkel et al. stated that in a

qualitative study, the number of participants in a sample is usually between one and 20 (Fraenkel et al., 2023). Based on this information, 20 employee-returned surveys will give a solid basis of information that will support the thesis. It is important to stick with a minimum of 20 individuals because collecting data in a sample smaller than 20 may result in an inaccurate result of the degree of correlation. These methods support a transparent reflection of consistency with qualitative studies that have focused on understanding transition plans for students with ASD.

The study was a two-phase plan. The first phase acquired the data through an online survey, and the second phase performed over-the-phone interviews. The researcher's goal was to obtain a minimum of 30 responses to the online survey and perform five over-the-phone interviews. In phase one, the researcher sent out email communications with all Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers within the three preschools, two alternative schools, 10 elementary schools, and five middle schools of the district. The researcher used this communication to send out an informative email that stated the purpose of the study, the goals of the study, and for the participation of each recipient. In addition, the email included the link to the anonymous survey that included the questions that provide the data collected for this study.

The survey was sent out to 350 teachers on three different occasions. It was important to the researcher that the survey be anonymous so that individuals felt that they could speak freely when answering the questions on the survey. The information provided was more direct and to the point and showed a better picture of the current situation within the district. The researcher contacted the individuals to solicit

information on three occasions: September 21, 2023; October 22, 2023; and November 28, 2023.

On September 21, 2023, the first communication was sent to attract participants to participate in the online survey. The goal was to receive a minimum of 30 responses. After 30 days, the researcher received a total of 11 responses. eight out of the 11 responses posted at the end of the 30 days. The researcher reached out to his dissertation team to understand if this was a normal number of responses based on the amount of time and communication. The chair met with the researcher to review how many emails were sent out, who was on the list of recipients, and what the responses received. In addition, the team reviewed the information within the communication to identify ways to encourage more participation. The team agreed to send out a follow-up communication to the same list of 350 teachers with a more concise message. In the new communication, the researcher thanked those for helping out with the survey and once again stated the purpose of the study the goals of the study, and explained the study would only take 15 minutes to complete. In addition, the link to the survey was placed at the bottom of the message for easy access. The goal of the new communication was to keep it brief, with easy access to the survey.

The second communication was sent out on October 22, 2023, in an attempt to gain an extra 19 responses. Within the first five days, an additional six survey responses were received. After 30 days, the researcher did not receive any additional responses. The researcher and chair met again to develop a plan to acquire additional responses. The team agreed to contact the Director of Special Education to see if he could encourage the district employees to fill out the survey. The Director of Special Education was very

supportive and willing to help. The chair felt it was important to send out another follow-up email to the same list of 350 teachers with a more concise message. Once again, the communication thanked those for helping out with the survey and once again stated the purpose of the study and the goals of the study, and explained the study would only take 15 minutes to complete. In addition, the link to the survey was placed at the bottom of the message for easy access. The researcher kept the new communication brief, with easy access to the survey.

After contacting the Director of Special Education, a third email was sent out on November 28, 2023. Within five days, the researcher received 12 responses. Within 10 days the researcher received an extra two responses, putting the replies to the minimum of 30 responses required. The team met again to validate all of the responses. The team agreed the 30 responses had enough information to move forward with phase two.

All of the anonymous online replies were asked the same 20 questions. The questions requested background information on the person filling out the survey. It was important to understand the demographics of the individuals filling out the survey. A vast majority of the questions followed a five-point symmetric Likert scale. This provided a way for the individuals to supply feedback in a quick manor. In addition, the survey included a brief set of “Yes or No” questions, which were followed up with short-answer responses. These short answer responses were included to allow the individual an opportunity to elaborate on the answers.

Teacher Interviews

During phase two of the study, the researcher picked 20 of the 350 individuals that were sent the online survey to invite to be part of the over-the-phone interviews. The

researcher selected the individuals based on location, years within the district, classroom experience, and whether or not the individual was a Regular Education Teacher or Special Education teacher. The researcher sent out an email to the 20 individuals, utilizing the database of email addresses acquired from the district website inviting them to take part in an over-the-phone interview. Five of the 20 individuals replied to be part of the interview process. This process took over 30 days to complete, based on the schedules of the individuals. In addition, the interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes, and all information was recorded on a Google document that was deleted after the research was completed. The interviews were conducted over-the-phone, and answers were recorded for clarity.

The questions were developed to acquire additional information that was not supplied within the previous anonymous survey. It also provided an opportunity to ask follow-up questions that were not provided in the stagnant online survey. The researcher thought it was important to conduct over-the-phone interviews to provide certain individuals an opportunity to expand on their knowledge of the transition plans within the district. Also, pinpointing certain individuals helped solidify the procedures that were being described in the online surveys. The interviewees had the opportunity to deny the interview and not provide a statement. At no time were the interviewees required to take part in the interviews or felt they must take part in the interviews. The interviewees' names remained anonymous to everybody, except for the researcher. The goal was to get a cross-section of individuals based on whether they were Regular Education Teachers or Special Education Teachers, as well as years of service within the current school district. Furthermore, it was important to interview those who represented Preschool, Elementary,

and Middle School. The information that was acquired helped assist the researcher in identifying and validating any pros and cons within the current transition plans.

All five individuals were asked the same six questions to receive additional details on the transition responses acquired from the anonymous surveys. The first question dealt with the current transition processes that were in place for teachers to use within the district. In addition, the question focused on opportunities that the transition processes provided. The next couple of questions were based on the perceptions of the Regular Education teacher or Special Education teacher regarding the transition processes and its effectiveness. Finally, the last two questions asked for the interviewee to call out the specific strengths and weaknesses of the current methods that are in place for transitioning students with autism. The researcher recorded all interviews on a hand-held device, and later transcribed the information to a spreadsheet. The researcher consolidated all of the individual answers from questions one through six to help review the data collected from one individual to the other. It is important to note that the researcher also collected all the information gathered from the over-the-phone interviews and consolidated them with the online surveys into one document based on the corresponding research questions. This final document was used to review all of the information gathered in one location.

Interview Questions

Interview Question 1: What are the current transition processes in place for autistic students transitioning from preschool to kindergarten and elementary school to middle school?

Interview Question 2: What are the opportunity areas within the transition process for students with autism?

Interview Question 3: What are the perceptions of special education teachers regarding how effective the current transition processes are for students diagnosed with autism?

Interview Question 4: What are the perceptions of regular education teachers regarding how effective the transition processes are for students diagnosed with autism?

Interview Question 5: What are the current strengths of the current transition programs?

Interview Question 6: What are the current weaknesses of the current transition programs?

Limitations

Limitation 1: The process of gaining access to the appropriate type of participants, based on the people who responded to the survey questions, may not truly be a random sample.

Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 1: The researcher sent out emails at different time intervals to make sure the anonymous responses were tracked, based on location, and expertise. This increases the number of random responses and makes sure the responses are random based on location.

Limitation 2: The questions provided did not require the recipient to provide his/her name for a future in-person interview. Revising the questions to include the deficiencies would allow the collection of data to include missing elements that add to the random response.

Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 2: The researcher invited individuals to be part of an over-the-phone interviews based on location, years within the district, classroom experience, and whether or not the individual was a Regular Education

Teacher or Special Education teacher. The researcher utilized the database of email addresses acquired from the district website to invite them to take part of the over-the-phone interview.

Limitation 3: There is also some risk to each respondent. Their answers could reflect negatively on their current practices, which could be detrimental to their current positions.

Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 3: It was very important to make sure all recipients understand the survey was distributed through Qualtrics and that all answers would be received anonymously. All survey answers were confidential. The answers are housed in a locked computer, and the information will be destroyed by the completion of the research report.

Limitation 4: There was a problem of having limited access to the respondents to clarify or follow up on the answers provided in the comment sections

Strategy & Rationale to Minimize Limitation 4: Analyzing the data helps develop new trends and can provide different questions for the need for additional data to be highlighted. The follow-up interviews were used to gain the needed information. Comparing the surveys with the interviews provided confidence the analysis of data would provide a full picture.

Conclusion

The researcher utilized a qualitative research method to pull together data with the use of an anonymous survey and over-the-phone interviews focused on a large suburban school district across the St. Louis area. The objective of the study was to identify what is needed to help other districts develop a sound transition plan that will improve a student's

educational experience for students with ASD. The study reviewed results based on teacher-provided surveys and over-the-phone interviews to identify what was required for a high-quality transition plan to provide educational success when an ASD student transitioned from early childhood education to middle school. The researcher collected data for Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers through the use of an anonymous survey to review the different experiences and how those experiences affected the situation. The results were analyzed by reviewing the participant's answers to the survey questions to understand if they provided a successful plan. In addition, the researcher conducted over-the-phone interviews utilizing multiple interview questions to understand what gaps were present in the current systems. The researcher used these gaps to provide an analysis and help report the shortfalls in the current plans. The researcher used the surveys and interviews to gain additional knowledge and showcase what is needed to drive a successful transition plan and a roadmap to make the needed changes to better support ASD students.

Chapter Four: Analysis

Overview

This chapter illustrates the summary and themes of two qualitative data sources that provided the data and outcomes to the study's research questions (RQ). The researcher used two data sources for the study. The researcher started with the use of an anonymous electronic survey. This survey consisted of 20 questions and was distributed to Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers within 10 elementary schools, three early childhood elementary schools, two alternative schools, and five middle schools. The researcher's goal was to obtain a minimum of 30 responses to the online survey. The first attempt to receive responses yielded a total of 11 responses within 30 days. A second attempt produced an additional six survey responses within an additional 30 days. After contacting the Director of Special Education, the researcher received an extra 14 responses, putting the reactions to the minimum of 30 responses required.

Phase 2 of the project was a set of over-the-phone interviews. The researcher followed up by contacting individuals personally to set up the in-person interviews. The in-person interviews were designed to elaborate on questions that were provided in the anonymous survey. The researcher reached out to the individuals via email to solicit an over-the-phone interview. They were only selected if the individual felt comfortable with providing personal experiences, as well as additional information to help the study.

To achieve additional information, the researcher performed five individual interviews. The researcher randomly picked 20 names out of the previously developed email lists to contact based on grade, school, and whether or not the individual was a

Regular Education Teacher or Special Education teacher. The researcher received five responses and was able to interview the five individuals. The interviews were conducted over-the phone, and answers were recorded for clarity. All five individuals were asked the same six questions to receive additional details on the transition responses acquired from the anonymous surveys.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the current transition processes for autistic students transitioning from preschool to kindergarten and elementary school to middle school?

The researcher used survey question number 10, survey question 11, survey question 12, survey question 13, survey question 16, survey question 20, and interview question number 1 to compile information that addressed RQ1. Survey question number 10 states, “How much information were you given before you met the student(s) diagnosed with autism for the first time?” Survey question number 10 is a linear question with a scale of 1 to 5, ranging from 1 = poor and 5 = excellent. The lowest number of scaled items scored was 5, and the highest scored was 11, with an average score of six per scale. The responses ranged from poor, with the lowest number of five responses, to 11 for fair being the highest number of responses. There were no responses for excellent. Eight survey responses were placed in the Good scale, and the remaining six were placed in the Very Good category. 30 individuals responded to survey question 10. The mode results in 11 responses for Fair with an average score of 2.5.

Q10 - How much information were you given before you met the student(s) diagnosed with autism for the first time?		
	Percentage	Count
1 Poor	17%	5
2 Fair	37%	11
3 Good	27%	8
4 Very Good	20%	6
5 Excellent	0%	0

Figure 1. Faculty Responses to Likert Scale Question 10.

After reviewing the responses to survey question 10, the researcher quickly identified that the data suggested that the teachers do not feel that much information is given to them before they meet the student(s) diagnosed with autism for the first time. The Midwest suburban school district provides special education teachers and case managers at all levels of a child's educational experience. Based on the Midwest suburban school's website, they offer a free and appropriate education to every child who has been identified as eligible according to the criteria outlined in the Missouri state education plan for Special Education (Francis Howell School District [FHSD], 2024). The FHSD provides special education services for those ages three through 21 who require specialized instruction. Once diagnosed, a team is pulled together to develop an individual education planning (IEP). The IEP team reviews a particular student's functional and academic performance to develop appropriate individual long-term goals and short-term objectives for the child to achieve during one year (Patient). The district must provide special education and related services as identified on the IEP as of the student's third birth date unless the third birth date occurs during an average vacation period (FHSD, 2024). Unfortunately, the website does not detail the transition process from Early Childhood Elementary School to Elementary and on to Middle School. Based on the provided data, the teachers would like to see more information provided to them

when a child transitions from one teacher to the next. There is an opportunity for FHSD to improve the transition process by providing the teachers with additional information. This information is needed to provide the student with the best chance for a successful transition for a student who struggles with transitions.

Survey questions 11 through 13 were set up as a dichotomous survey with either a yes or no answer. These questions added additional support for RQ1 by offering responses that support if the team met to talk about the student's abilities, whether the teachers were able to see the student before the student attended the classroom, or whether the teacher and student got a chance to interact face-to-face to familiarize themselves with each other as well as the classroom. Survey question 11 states, "Was there a transition meeting before you met the student(s) diagnosed with autism?" Thirty-one people responded to the questions, with 65% answering "Yes" and 35% answering "No." Most teachers expressed the ability to meet as a team before the students attended class. Unfortunately, there was a large number of teachers who stated they never met the student before seeing the student in the class. This leaves a lot of unanswered questions about what could be a highly-volatile situation. Survey question 12 states, "Were you able to observe the student(s) diagnosed with autism before they transitioned into your classroom?" Thirty-one people responded to the questions, with 23% answering "Yes" and 77% answering "No." The majority of the teachers stated they were not able to visit or observe the student before the student attended class. A small number of the 31 teachers stated they could visit with the student before seeing the student in class. Once again, this removes the ability to plan for the type of students attending both regular education and special education classrooms. Survey question 13 states, "Was the

student(s) diagnosed with autism provided additional time before or during the new school year to visit your classroom to get acquainted?” Thirty-one people responded to the questions, with 42% answering “Yes” and 58% answering “No.” A slight majority of the teachers provided the student with additional time to meet before the student started school. Over half were not given this time with the students to get acquainted with the classroom or extra time for the students to meet future teachers. Again, this is another missed opportunity to give the students the support needed for a successful year.

Question Number	Yes	No
Q11 - Was there a transition meeting before you met the student(s) diagnosed with autism?	65%	35%
Q12 - Were you able to observe the student(s) diagnosed with autism before they transitioned into your classroom?	23%	77%
Q13 - Was the student(s) diagnosed with autism provided additional time before or during the new school year to visit your classroom in order to get acquainted?	42%	58%

Figure 2. Faculty Responses to Yes/No Questions 11 - 13.

Survey questions 11 through 13 were in place to gain the needed information to support the portion of the transition processes in place focusing on meeting as a team to talk about the student, allowing the teacher to see the student before the transition, and providing the student with additional time before the transition to get acquainted with the classroom and/or teacher. Based on the data received, most FHSD teachers take part in meetings to discuss the students. This is time spent talking about the student and the student’s abilities. The next step of being able to see the student is missed, which removes the teacher's ability to use their observations to plan for the future. Finally, a close margin exists on whether the student and teacher can come together before transitioning. When this does not occur an opportunity is missed for the teacher to meet up with the students and the student to get a feel for the new environment.

Survey question number 16 states, “Rank your provided transition training based on the success rate for student(s) diagnosed with autism?” Survey question number 16 is a linear question with a scale of 1 to 5, ranging from 1 = poor and 5 = excellent. The lowest number of scaled items scored was 2, and the highest score was 16, with an average score of six per scale. The responses ranged from very good, with the lowest number of two responses, to the highest number of responses being 16 responses for fair. There were zero responses for excellent. Four survey responses were placed in the Poor scale, and the remaining nine were placed in the Good category. Thirty-one individuals responded to survey question 16. The mode results in 16 responses for Fair with an average score of 2.29.

Q16 - Rank your provided transition training based on the success rate for student(s) diagnosed with autism?		
	Percentage	Count
1 Poor	13%	4
2 Fair	52%	16
3 Good	29%	9
4 Very Good	6%	2
5 Excellent	0%	0

Figure 3. Faculty Responses to Likert Scale Question 16.

The researcher reviewed all the data presented for survey question 16. After reviewing the responses to survey question 16, the researcher quickly identified that the data suggested that the teachers felt their training received regarding students diagnosed with ASD was not providing enough information to help the teachers in these situations. Based on the provided data, the teachers would like to see more training to help them support the needs of students with ASD. There is an opportunity for FHSD to improve professional development by providing the teachers with the needed training to support these types of transitions.

Survey question number 20 states, “Who were the key people that you worked with when developing the transition plan(s) for student(s) with autism?” The survey question received 29 unprompted short-answer responses. The response data provided a list of individual titles the teachers felt were the key people to include within the transition process. The teachers' 29 different responses identified 16 other titles of individuals. The top five responses shared included SPED Teacher (45%), SLP (28%), SPED Case Managers (28%), Current Teacher (24%), and OT (21%). Based on this information, teachers identified it as the top priority to work with the people who reside within the current location to develop the transition plans. The team is building a transition process within a team working together within the current location. All plans and updates are put into an IEP document, which are then forwarded to the following location. The top five responses do not include anyone from the future location, parents, or past locations. Having a meeting without these participants could be one-sided and might not be as productive as needed. Having the right people in the room is critical for the success of the transition plan development.

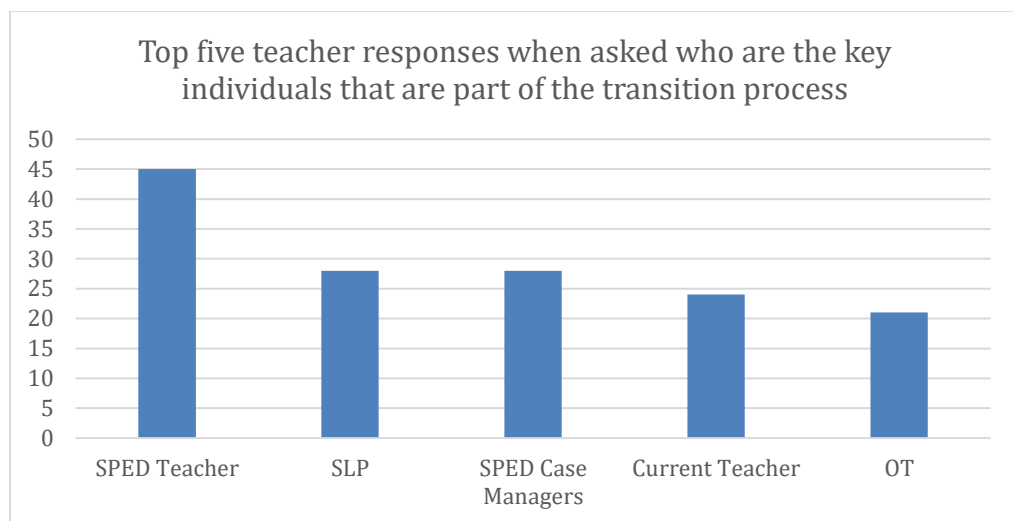


Figure 4. Faculty Responses to Question 20.

Conversely, the teacher’s bottom five responses included Future Teacher (10%), Process Coordinator (7%), Department Chair (7%), Nurses (3%), and Counselors (3%). It was interesting to see that parents (21%), administrators (17%), board-board-certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA) (14%), and past teachers (14%) were in the middle of the list. The data collected is imperative to understand how the team thinks and where the education needs to be developed to understand what parties need to be at the table to help support the success of a student with ASD.

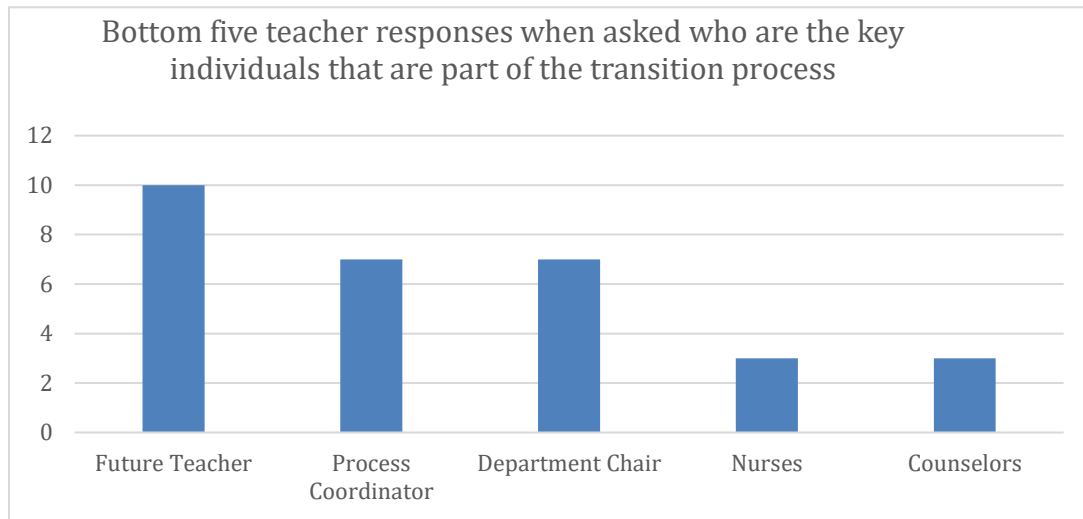


Figure 5. Faculty Responses to Question 20.

Picking the proper educators to staff the special education I.E.P. team is a significant task to develop a solid transition plan. It is essential to consider who has enough knowledge of the student in order to present the student’s past behaviors, present behaviors, and what is needed to be provided in the future to continue success. It is also necessary to consider including those who can get an outside perspective of the student and someone who can help when the student is outside the educational environment.

These transitions need to make early connections and, at the same time, be able to provide helpful information for the team.

The researcher identified interview question 1 as response data to provide information that addresses RQ1. Interview question 1 states, “What are the current transition processes in place for autistic students transitioning from preschool to kindergarten and elementary school to middle school?” The answers were consistent with all of the individuals interviewed. Each respondent identified similarly. The process started with Early Childhood Special Education team putting together a list of students that were identified with ASD that included but was not limited to accommodations, documentation, and name of case managers. The elementary school then sent a member of the Elementary Special Education team to the Early Childhood classroom to observe and take notes of the student before the student was transitioned. Someone from the Elementary Special Education team also took part in the transition IEP. During the transition IEP the Early Childhood Special Education team met with the Elementary Special Education team to discuss the best supports and accommodations that were needed for the student going into elementary school. The Elementary Special Education team worked together to identify the proper placement and case manager needed to support the student. Next, the information was transferred to the student’s future teacher from the student’s Elementary Special Education Case Manager.

The process for middle school differs from elementary. The focus shifts to more complex academic skills, critical thinking, and preparation for high school. Goals become more advanced and may include organizational skills, time management, and subject-specific knowledge. One needs to coordination among various teachers to ensure IEP

accommodations and modifications are consistently applied across all classes. Meetings may be larger and require more coordination among team members. Students may begin to participate in their IEP meetings and discuss their goals, strengths, and needs. There is more focus on fitting services into a more complex schedule with multiple subjects and teachers.

Research Question 2. What are the opportunity areas within the transition process for students with autism?

The researcher used survey question 4, survey question 5, survey question 14, survey question 15, and interview question 2 to compile information that addressed RQ2. Survey question number 4 states, “How effective are the current transition plan(s) in place for student(s) diagnosed with autism transitioning from preschool to kindergarten and elementary school to middle school?” Survey question number 4 is a linear question with a scale of 1 to 5 ranging from 1 = Highly Ineffective and 5 = Highly Effective. The responses ranged from Highly Ineffective, with the lowest number of one response, to neutral with the highest number of 14 responses. There were zero responses for highly effective. Eleven survey responses were placed in the ineffective scale, and the remaining five were placed in the practical category.

Q4 - How effective are the current transition plan(s) in place for student(s) diagnosed with autism transitioning from preschool to kindergarten and elementary school to middle school?		
	Percentage	Count
1 Highly Ineffective	3%	1
2 Ineffective	35%	11
3 Neutral	45%	14
4 Effective	16%	5
5 Highly Effective	0%	0

Figure 6. Faculty Responses to Likert Scale Question 4.

Thirty-one individuals responded to survey question 4. The mode results in 14 responses for neutral with an average scale of 2.74.

The researcher used survey question 5 as a follow-up to survey question 4. Survey question number 5 allowed users to comment on how they responded to survey question 4. Survey question 5 provided 19 unprompted short-answer responses that detailed how effective the current transition plan(s) are within the district. The researcher compiled all of the answers into one document. The researcher placed each one of the answers into categories that represented all of the responses. The response data suggests that the Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers feel the effectiveness of the current transition plans are successful when certain factors are in place. Over all the group felt the need for interaction with the student as soon as possible. Six respondents stated the need for every teacher involved in the student's education should be part of the pre-observations and given the ability to observe the student before entering the classroom for the first time. An additional respondent felt that field trips should be required for students transferring from elementary to middle school. This would give the teachers time to understand the students' needs and to allow the student to get to know the teacher and building before the first day of class. Next, six respondents acknowledged that in order to understand the student's abilities, one must review the information that is supplied in the student's IEP. This is because the teachers were not able to interact with the student prior to the first day. Next, the group agreed with one respondent who stated, "success depended on the type of students and the amount of information given by the SPED teachers who had the students in their class and reported on the student in the IEP." Another common theme was identified in a response that,

“planning between Elementary and Middle School is ineffective when Elementary School leaders develop the transition plan.” This is due to the multiple differences in how the students perform daily activities in Elementary and Middle School. Furthermore, the Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers felt data was not transferred from the Pre-K to the Elementary School in a way that could be used to help identify student needs. One respondent specifically communicated, “the ESDM reports are not included and must be provided to the elementary school as required.” Finally, one respondent stated, “they had done an excellent job with the transitions.” Another stated, “they need to gain experience with the transition process.”

After the researcher reviewed question numbers 4 and 5, the feedback that was delivered was that the team felt neutral about the complete transition process that had been taking place within the district. Most of the teams felt relaxed about the transition process. These surveys explained that individuals felt good about how the IEPs were put together and how well people communicated during an IEP meeting. They felt there was not much personal interaction available to see the student before the student arrived in the classroom. Furthermore, the survey results explained, “that it is a must that all students have time in the building before classes start.” “More communication needs to happen between Pre-K and Elementary, and they felt that it was important that the elementary school also receive the Early Start Denver Model (ESDM) reports from the preschool.” “Future communication between all parties must increase, and all parties need to be part of the IEP to provide the required transition information so that the data can be written into the IEP properly.” “The student will benefit tremendously if the members of the current IEP team can interact with the future IEP team.” In addition, “it is essential that

the child feels comfortable going to the new location and understands what will happen as soon as they enter the new location.”

Survey question number 14 states, “Rank the level of support the district provided special education teachers during the transition process for student(s) diagnosed with autism?” Survey question number 14 is a linear question with a scale of 1 to 5, ranging from 1 = poor and 5 = excellent. The responses ranged from very good, with the lowest number of three responses, to the highest number of responses, which was 12 for fairness. There were zero responses for excellent. Eight survey responses were placed in the poor scale, and the remaining eight were placed in the good category. Thirty-one individuals responded to survey question 14. The mode results in 12 responses for the fair with an average scale of 2.19.

Q14 - Rank the level of support the district provided special education teachers during the transition process for student(s) diagnosed with autism?		
	Percentage	Count
1 Poor	26%	8
2 Fair	39%	12
3 Good	26%	8
4 Very Good	10%	3
5 Excellent	0%	0

Figure 7. Faculty Responses to Likert Scale Question 14.

Survey question number 15 states, “Rank the level of support the district provided regular teachers during the transition process for student(s) diagnosed with autism?” Survey question number 15 is a linear question with a scale of 1 to 5, ranging from 1 = poor and 5 = excellent. The lowest scale submitted was 5, and the highest scale of 15. The responses ranged from good, with the lowest number of five responses, to poor being the highest number of 15 responses. There were zero very good and excellent responses. Eleven survey responses were placed on the fair scale. Thirty-one individuals responded

to survey question 15. The mode results in 15 responses for poor with an average scale of 1.67.

Q15 - Rank the level of support the district provided regular teachers during the transition process for student(s) diagnosed with autism?		
	Percentage	Count
1 Poor	48%	15
2 Fair	35%	11
3 Good	16%	5
4 Very Good	0%	0
5 Excellent	0%	0

Figure 8. Faculty Responses to Likert Scale Question 15.

The researcher specifically wanted to break down this category into two responses, one for the Special Education Teacher and one for the Regular Education Teacher. It was essential to allow both parties to respond based on their perception of the support for the position and the support of their counterpart's positions. It is evident from the results of survey question numbers 14 and 15 that the respondents felt that the support provided by the district has some opportunities for improvement. The Special Education Teachers reported 20 out of 31 responses that were in the fair to poor range, and the Regular Education Teacher reported 26 out of 31 responses that were either in the fair or poor range. It was interesting that the Regular Education Teacher felt less supported than the Special Education Teachers. It is essential to see the lack of support is an opportunity that needs to be increased to drive a more successful transition for students with ASD.

The researcher identified interview question 2 as response data to provide information that addresses RQ2. Interview question 2 states, “What are the opportunity areas within the transition process for students with autism?” Each person stated different opportunities for the process. Three respondents stated, “Kindergarten students within this district have an opportunity to go to a Summer Success program.” In addition, the

respondents stated, “[T]hose students identified with ASD should be required to attend these sections to help them get prepare for the next year and to give everyone an opportunity to observe the student before school starts.” Regular Education Teachers felt the need for the opportunity to observe the student during the days of the school prior to transitioning in addition to Summer Success. Furthermore, all of the individuals interviewed felt the need for more resources and additional classrooms to support the growing need of students that keep increasing year-to-year. Finally, one person interviewed stated that it would be nice to have a resource to provide parents that could outline and educate the parents on the transition process.

Research Question 3. What are the perceptions of special education teachers regarding how effective the current transition processes are for students diagnosed with autism?

The researcher used survey question number 8, survey question 9, and interview question 3 to compile information that addressed RQ3. Survey question number 8 states, “What are the perceptions of special education teachers regarding how effective the current transition plan(s) are for students diagnosed with autism?” Survey question number 8 is a linear question with a scale of 1 to 5 ranging from 1 = highly Ineffective and 5 = highly effective. The lowest scale submitted was 6, and the highest scale was 16. The responses ranged from adequate, with the lowest number of six responses, to neutral being the highest number with 16 responses. There were zero responses for highly ineffective and highly effective. Nine survey responses were placed on the ineffective scale. Thirty-one individuals responded to survey question 8. The mode results in 16 responses for neutral and an average scale of 2.9.

Q8 - What are the perceptions of special education teachers regarding how effective the current transition plan(s) are for students diagnosed with autism?		
	Percentage	Count
1 Highly Ineffective	0%	0
2 Ineffective	29%	9
3 Neutral	52%	16
4 Effective	19%	6
5 Highly Effective	0%	0

Figure 9. Faculty Responses to Likert Scale Question 8.

The researcher used survey question 9 as a follow-up to survey question 8. Survey question number 9 provided users an option to list why they answered the effectiveness of their transition plan(s) in survey question 8. Survey question 9 provided 27 unprompted short-answer responses detailing the effectiveness of the transition plan(s).

As stated in survey question number 8, the teachers were generally not overwhelmingly positive about the efficacy of the transition plans from a Special Education Teacher's perspective. Within the 27 provided comments, the Regular Education Teachers were in general agreement about several lacking areas in the transition process. First, seven of the 27 respondents felt that the whole team needed to be more involved in setting the appropriate expectations for the next level of IEPs and included the parties required to provide the much-needed information. In addition, very few responders felt they could observe the students early on and work with the appropriate Special Education Teachers to make the proper goals. Second, eight of the 27 respondents made comments about success of the student being based on the person that was writing or supporting the IEP. Two respondents agreed with the comment, "the transitions provided unrealistic goals for students that could not be fulfilled because they needed more resources to support the plans." Third, 5 out of 27 individuals made

reference to not having enough resources to be able to appropriately support the needs of the ASD students to provide the most effective educational experience. One Special Education Teacher stated, “this caused students to be placed in classrooms designed for behavioral needs versus the needs of a student with autism.” The transitions did not cover all the needs of the student or the teacher. Fourth, it was report by eight of the 27 response that neither the Special Education Teach or Regular Education Teacher felt an ASD student could see as much of the classroom before school started as they felt was needed to be successful. Furthermore, there was limited training for the teacher to support the students with autism and the different models provided to the teachers to utilize throughout the years. These responses provide heavy evidence that the perception of the transition plans needs to be improved to support the student to be as successful as possible.

The researcher identified interview question 3 as response data to provide information that addresses RQ3. Interview question 3 states, “What are the perceptions of special education teachers regarding how effective the current transition processes are for students diagnosed with autism?” Five out of the five individuals interviewed felt strongly that the Special Education Teachers process and programs are effective for the students. Both, the Regular Education Teachers and Special Education teachers were in general agreement about how the Special Education teams supported the transition process. First, the five interviewees felt the processes that are in place are strong and provide the needed information to place and support the students through the transition. They all felt strongly that there would be very little success, if these processes were not in place. Second, all of the respondents felt that the Special Education Teachers were

provided enough time to get to know the student and parents prior to the student entering the classroom for the first time. The process also allowed for the Special Education Teachers to work with past teachers in order to develop a solid support plan for the incoming student. Finally, all of the interviewees felt strongly that the Special Education Teachers were able to supply the students with the needed tools to be successful. In addition, the Special Education Teachers were also able to provide the needed resources to help prepare the Regular Education Teachers.

Research Question 4. What are the perceptions of regular education teachers regarding how effective the transition processes are for students diagnosed with autism?

The researcher used survey question number 6, survey question 7, and interview question 4 to compile information that addressed RQ4. Survey question number 6 states, “What are the perceptions of regular education teachers regarding how effective the transition plan(s) are for students diagnosed with autism?” Survey question number 6 is a linear question with a scale of 1 to 5 ranging from 1 = highly Ineffective and 5 = highly effective. The lowest scale submitted was 4, and the highest scale of 14. The responses ranged from practical, with the lowest number of four responses, to neutral with the highest number of 14 responses. There were zero responses for highly ineffective and highly effective. Thirteen survey responses were placed on the ineffective scale. Thirty-one individuals responded to survey question 6. The mode results in 14 responses for neutral with an average scale of 2.7.

Q6 - What are the perceptions of regular education teachers regarding how effective the transition plan(s) are for students diagnosed with autism?		
	Percentage	Count
1 Highly Ineffective	0%	0
2 Ineffective	42%	13
3 Neutral	45%	14
4 Effective	13%	4
5 Highly Effective	0%	0

Figure 10. Faculty Responses to Likert Scale Question 6.

The researcher used survey question 7 as a follow-up to survey question 6. Survey question number 7 provided users an option to list why they felt the effectiveness of their transition plan(s) in survey question 6. Survey question 7 provided 27 unprompted short-answer responses detailing the effectiveness of the transition plan(s). The team answered similarly to the Special Education Teacher's responses in survey question 8. Survey question number 7 also was not overwhelmingly positive about the transition plans' effectiveness from a Regular Education Teacher's perspective. Within the 26 provided comments, the majority of teachers felt that the IEP teams were supported by the Special Education teams and lacked solid representation from the Regular Education teachers. Regular Education Teachers thought they were not involved in the planning as much as one should be, specifically because the students were integrated into their classroom to be educated. The consensus is that the Special Education teacher creates the plan with little information from the early childhood ESDM team or feedback from the Regular Education Teachers. The goals are typically designed around behavior and social-emotional strategies with a limited focus on educational strategies. Unfortunately, according to the responses, there is still limited training and resources to support the Regular Education Teacher, and communication between the two teams needs to be improved for the transitions to be successful. Some Regular Education

Teachers even went as far as stating that no plans were presented to the Regular Education Teacher, only a copy of the IEP.

It was reported in most cases, the IEP was rejected by kindergarten because of no academic concerns. Then when academic concerns arose in first grade the whole process had to start all over again. Regular Education Teachers also did not feel there was adequate support for their efforts on day one for the child with ASD. In addition, the Regular Education Teachers felt like they had to figure things out on the fly in order to do well. In addition, Regular Education Teachers had to come up with options on their own if things changed for a student's schedule or classroom setting throughout the year. On a positive note, the Middle School Regular Education Teachers stated that the students were more successful in transitioning from Elementary School to Middle School because the Elementary School had prepared the child well to support the student once they arrived in Middle School.

The researcher identified interview questions 4 as response data to provide information that addresses RQ4. Interview question 4 states, "What are the perceptions of regular education teachers regarding how effective the transition processes are for students diagnosed with autism?" All of the individuals interviewed felt strongly that the Regular Education Teachers perception was the program is effective for the students because of their great Special Education teams. They all stated the Regular Education Teachers did not have a big role in the process and were not able to participate as much as they would like. Also, they did not have an opportunity to observe or meet the students prior to the student entering the classroom. All of the information was provided in the IEP meeting and in the IEP. They proceeded to state the Regular Education Teachers

needed more time with the students to really understand what was needed to support the student. Also, they felt the Regular Education Teachers needed additional training in order to support the ASD students at the highest level.

Research Question 5. What are the current strengths of the current transition programs?

The researcher used survey question 17, survey question 18, and interview question 5 to compile information to address RQ5. Survey question number 17 states, “Rank the level of student(s) success based on the transition plan(s) used with student(s) diagnosed with autism?” Survey question number 17 is a linear question with a scale of 1 to 5, ranging from 1 = poor and 5 = excellent. The lowest scale submitted was 3, and the highest scale was 5. The responses ranged from poor, with the lowest number of three responses, to fair with the highest number of 16 responses. There were zero responses for excellent. Three survey responses were placed on the very good scale, and nine were placed for good. Thirty-one individuals responded to survey question 17. The mode resulted in 16 responses for the fair with an average scale of 2.38.

Q17 - Rank the level of student(s) success based on the transition plan(s) used with student(s) diagnosed with autism?		
	Percentage	Count
1 Poor	10%	3
2 Fair	52%	16
3 Good	29%	9
4 Very Good	10%	3
5 Excellent	0%	0

Figure 11. Faculty Responses to Likert Scale Question 17.

The researcher used survey question 18 as a follow-up to survey question 17. Survey question number 18 provided an option for users to list the current strengths of the current transition plan(s) for survey question 17. Survey question 18 provided 29

unprompted short-answer responses that detailed the strengths of the transition plan(s). The standard answer to survey question 18 was that the users felt the district did a good job filling out the IEP with the needed information in the present level portion of the IEP. They felt the Special Education teams were flexible, supplied the proper student diagnosis, and provided the best support that they could base on the plan developed. The IEP meeting tends to include all appropriate people, including family members, past Special Education teams, and the people needed for the transition. Finally, the comments explained the students were prepared to transition to Middle School, but felt the transition from Preschool to Elementary could be improved. For the most part, the responders felt FHSD did a good job inviting those parties that needed to be at the IEP. At the same time, the IEP teams did a nice job filling out the IEP and including what is required to provide the proper support for the student.

The researcher identified interview question 5 as response data to provide information that addresses RQ5. Interview question 5 states, “What are the current strengths of the current transition programs?” There was a consensus that the Special Education teams go above and beyond to develop the relationships with the students. Also, the Special Education teams provide the teachers with support and guidance for the Regular Education Teachers. The administration also helps provide the parents with the needed support and communication needed to keep everyone in the loop. The interviewees feel they do everything they can to not miss any students that need support or placement. Finally, everyone takes pride in helping the students get the best education possible.

Research Question 6. What are the weaknesses of the current transition programs?

The researcher used survey question 19 and interview question 6 to compile information to address RQ6. Survey question number 19 was a follow-up question for survey question 17 which states, “What are the areas of opportunity within the transition plan(s) used for student(s) with autism?” The teachers felt the most significant opportunity for improvement is being able to participate in a student observation before they enter the classroom. This allowed the teachers to have a pre-meeting with the school before the IEP and provided a gradual introduction to the teacher, classroom, school, and future schedules. In addition, it provided a more proactive approach to working with the child and ensuring the supports are in place before the child arrives. Next, there was a big concern with the lack of resources to support children with autism. Many respondents explained multiple times there is a lack of support and training that needs to educate the homeroom teachers. They would love to see examples of how to support specific scenarios based on tried-and-true approaches that have been successful with students with ASD. The teachers also feel the Special Education department is spread extremely thin and cannot perform the duties that must be achieved based on the transition plan in the IEP. These resources should also include copies of the behavior plans, any important IEP notes, and support for all parties that will be part of the transition plan for this student. During the transition process, respondents feel there is a miss of having Regular Education Teacher representation at the IEPs for the transition process. Finally, it was noted that it would be a great idea to provide a parent support organization to help educate parents on the IEP process, how to get the needed resources for home support,

and how to maintain the support while supporting the child at home. All the teachers felt that the IEPs were well-written throughout the course and provided a great transition plan. Unfortunately, the plans are not being shared with the proper people, teachers are provided insufficient training to support the plan or adequate resources to complete the plan with fidelity.

The researcher identified interview question 6 as response data to provide information that addresses RQ6. Interview question 6 states, “What are the current weaknesses of the current transition programs?” Once again, the group had different ideas around opportunities. First, there is an ask to add additional people to be able to support the growing number of ASD students. Second, everyone felt the need for the Regular Education Teacher to have the opportunity to observe and visit with the student prior to transitioning in the classroom. Third, additional time is needed to prep for incoming students with resources, training, and skills. Fourth, the Regular Education Teachers feel they need to have a larger role within the transition process, which includes more voice within the decisions. Overall, they feel the processes are going well but could use some minor changes to be more successful.

Summary

In summary, this chapter illustrates the summary and themes of two qualitative data sources that provided the data and outcomes to the study’s research questions (RQ). The researcher used two data sources for the study. An anonymous electronic survey consisted of 20 questions distributed to Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers within 10 elementary schools, three early childhood elementary schools, and an alternative school. After three attempts, the researcher obtained 31

responses to the online survey. All surveys were filled out by anonymous online replies. To achieve additional information, the researcher identified five individuals for phone interviews. All five individuals answered the same six questions for the researcher to understand the transition process. The researcher gave a detailed analysis of the current transition processes that are in place for Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers, the perceptions of the Regular Education Teacher and the Special Education Teacher on the current transition processes, and the strengths and weaknesses of the current methods that are in place. All interview answers were used for the detailed analysis. The researcher collected all of the information gathered from the online survey and phone interviews to organize the responses to help support the analysis of the study.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

Finding out your child has been diagnosed with Autism is a very life-altering realization for anyone to go through. The unknown is the hardest part for caregivers to come to grips with. Not knowing where to turn for information or guidance on how to support your child can be one of the most frustrating challenges at the start of the process. The researcher's study proposed six research questions to Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers within a large suburban school district across the St. Louis area to help identify what transition processes are currently in place, what has been seen as successful transition plans in the past, and to rank how the teachers felt these processes helped their students for the future. The researcher developed and shared a 20-question anonymous survey with 350 district staff members. This qualitative research method gathered data intending to identify what needs to be in place in the transition plan to provide students with ASD with a successful educational experience. The researcher reviewed results based on teacher-provided answers to the anonymous survey questions to identify what the teachers felt made it a positive experience for the students. In addition, the researcher conducted phone interviews with six teachers utilizing six interview questions to understand what details might have been misrepresented. The researcher used the interview responses to assess gaps and to provide an analysis that helped report the shortfalls in the current plans. The researcher used the surveys and interviews to gain additional knowledge and showcase what is needed to drive a successful transition plan.

The Healthline article written by Nunez (2022) showcases the many resources available to people with autism, with resources also designed for parents of children with autism. The research also identified that individuals can get diagnosed at any age using a test run during wellness pediatric visits and by reviewing daily observations the caregiver performs. Once diagnosed, a child can start to take advantage of the needed therapies or early childhood schools to start the educational process. An essential responsibility for the school district is to provide adequate teams to develop goals that will support the child's growth moving forward. This process must be followed up with proper transition plans throughout the educational experience.

The literature review showcased the need to diagnose children with ASD as soon as possible, start the individual with interventions, and the importance of a solid transition plan for a student with ASD to gain success when progressing through education. Warning signs could be identified by caregivers and pediatricians in the first phases of a child's life. Pediatricians and caregivers should start monitoring from 12 months of age; some can be detected at 18 months of age (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Special attention should be taken between 18 and 24 months (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Lack of signs by 24 months does not mean the child cannot be diagnosed (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). When students with ASD start school, they have a hard time coping with everything about the school, including schedule changes and new teachers, staff members, and peers, and it is often nerve-racking making changes and adapting to major life, academic, and social transitions (ARIS, 2024). The article from Broadstock (2019) states that the child is the most important thing to keep at the center of the transition planning. ASD students' team

is responsible for developing a transition plan that begins well before the expected transition, should be very detailed, and requires communication between schools, educators, community agencies, and parents/guardians of the child to be successful (Lindsay, 2013). Successful plans will help guide critical transition to increase a child's ability to cope and build confidence, and one must make them the center of all planning, preparation, and communication related to their transitions (Broadstock, 2019).

Discussion

The researcher's study centered around six research questions that reviewed the current transition processes, opportunities in the processes, the teachers' views on how effective the process is, and the strengths and weaknesses of the current transition programs. The researcher utilized a dissertation team that worked together to create the survey and interview questions to assemble data that addressed the research questions. The survey questions were sent to Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers within the Early Childhood, Elementary and Middle Schools, Pre-K through 8th grade. The researcher used the data acquired from the survey questions and interviews to provide the statements for the research questions. The survey questions were answered by 22 Special Education Teachers and nine Regular Education Teachers. In addition, the researcher had three Regular Education Teachers and two Special Education teachers participate in the over-the-phone interviews. A collection of the responses drove the researcher's recommendations at the end of this chapter.

Research Question 1

What are the current transition processes in place for autistic students transitioning from preschool to kindergarten and elementary school to middle school?

The researcher used survey question number 10, survey question 11, survey question 12, survey question 13, survey question 16, survey question 20, and interview question number 1 to address research question 1 (RQ1). The survey questions ask for responses based on the information provided, identify what practices were used, what trainings were offered, and which professionals were part of the transition teams for each Regular Education Teacher or Special Education teacher used within the transition process. In addition, the researcher used RQ1 to acquire additional data on the current transition processes that are in place for autistic students transitioning from preschool to kindergarten and elementary school to middle school.

Survey question number 10 was a linear question that stated, “How much information were you given before you met the student(s) diagnosed with autism for the first time?” Thirty individuals responded to survey question 10. The mode results in 11 responses for Fair with an average score of 2.5. Based on the analysis, the teachers feel “Good” about the amount of information provided to them before meeting the student. However, “Good” is the neutral response pattern for this scale. This is in accordance with Villegas, Steen, and Minnaert (2022) who stated that teachers need to get to know their students to become aware of the student’s strengths, which will allow the teacher to focus on increasing their sense of accomplishment.

Survey questions 11 through 13 focused on identifying specific practices that had been used during the transition planning. Survey question 11 states, “Was there a transition meeting before you met the student(s) diagnosed with autism?” Thirty-one people responded to the questions, with 65% answering “Yes” and 35% answering “No.” Survey question 12 states, “Were you able to observe the student(s) diagnosed with

autism before they transitioned into your classroom?” Thirty-one people responded to the questions, with 23% answering “Yes” and 77% answering “No.” Survey question 13 states, “Was the student(s) diagnosed with autism provided additional time before or during the new school year to visit your classroom to get acquainted?” Thirty-one people responded to the questions, with 42% answering “Yes” and 58% answering “No.” The results to questions 11 through 13 indicated that a majority of the teachers were part of a transition meeting about the student before meeting the student. Unfortunately, a majority reported that they could not observe the student before meeting the student, and the student was not allowed additional time before the first meeting to see the classroom. In Dr. Kluth’s (2010, p. 1) article “Getting Ready for School,” she states that students can benefit from a preview of their school. “Many students with autism will profit from seeing, experiencing and learning about the school before they show up on the first day” (Kluth, 2010, p. 1).

Survey question number 16 was a linear question that stated, “Rank your provided transition training based on the success rate for student(s) diagnosed with autism?” Thirty-one individuals responded to survey question 16. The mode results in 16 responses for Fair with an average score of 2.29. Based on the analysis, the teachers feel “Fair” about the amount of training they were provided to support a student with ASD. Based on this information, the teachers feel there is an opportunity for growth to provide additional training in order to support students with ASD. This would be a vital area of improvement to increase the teachers' knowledge base.

Survey question number 20 was a short answer response question that stated, “Who were the key people that you worked with when developing the transition plan(s)

for student(s) with autism?” The survey question received 29 unprompted short-answer responses. The teachers' 29 different responses identify 16 different titles of individuals to work with during the transition planning. The top five responses shared included SPED Teacher (45%), SLP (28%), SPED Case Managers (28%), Current Teacher (24%), and OT (21%). Based on this information, teachers identified that they currently utilize the Special Education team to work with those who reside within the current location to develop the transition plans. The top five responses do not include any teacher of the future location, parents, process coordinators, department chairs, nurses, or counselors. Having a meeting without these participants could be one-sided and might not be as productive as needed. Having the right people in the room is critical for the success of the transition plan development. It is essential to consider who has enough knowledge of the student to present the student's past and present behaviors and what needs to be provided in the future to continue success. In an article written by Behavioral Innovations.com it states to help make the transition to the new school year go more smoothly for the child, it is very important to try to connect with the child's teacher, the school principal, and any support staff that will be working with the child (Behavioral Innovations, 2024).

The plan needs to consider how we can take a systematic approach to educating the students. The most important item to note is that not all students with ASD are the same and will react to the same process and support. The students can change over time and develop differently based on the time and support provided. A solid team is critical to this success and transition. The answers to these questions quickly identify the need for education and explanation on developing a solid team.

Interview question number 1 was a phone interview question that stated, “What are the current transition processes for autistic students transitioning from preschool to kindergarten and elementary school to middle school?” Five individuals responded to Interview question number 1. The answers were consistent with all of the individuals interviewed. The process would start with the Early Childhood Special Education team putting together a list of students who have been identified with ASD that includes but is not limited to accommodations, documentation, and names of case managers. The elementary school would send a member of the Elementary Special Education team to the Early Childhood classroom to observe and take notes of the student before transitioning. Someone from the Elementary Special Education team also takes part in the transition IEP. During the transition IEP the Early Childhood Special Education team meets with the Elementary Special Education team to discuss the best supports and accommodations that are needed for the student going into elementary school. The Elementary Special Education team works together to identify the proper placement and case manager needed to support the student. The information is transferred to the student’s future teacher from the student’s Elementary Special Education Case Manager. The process is the same process for a student going from elementary school to middle school.

A transition plan (TP) is critical in supporting anticipated changes in a student’s environment. It focuses on gaining a shared understanding of needs by all those involved to ensure individual student requirements are met successfully (Positive Partnerships, 2024). A key step towards a successful transition is designing a transition plan that suits the autistic person’s specific needs (AMAZE, 2019). Effective transition planning requires multiple components to be successful. The school, parent, and child need to

support these plans. The individualized transition plans need to reflect a student's strengths and needs. In addition, the plan needs to support the building of student resilience and independence (Reiss & Gibson, 2002). The best plan utilizes a collaborative process that puts the student in the center and promotes independence and self-advocacy (Fouse & Wheeler, 1997). This collaborative approach should encourage active preparation from all aspects of the team (UNSW Sydney, 2024). Based on the information provided in the interviews, the district does a good job supporting the process from a Special Education perspective. The process described seems to provide the future Regular Education Teacher time to see the student in an educational environment before the student enters his/her classroom. In addition, it is not clear if the process includes time for the students to visit the future school or classroom prior to entering the next class. The current process is also rich in Special Education Resources, but lacks the resources needed to be a complete collaborative approach to provide the student with the best outcome for success.

Research Question 2

What are the opportunity areas within the transition process for students with autism?

The researcher used survey question number 4, survey question 5, survey question 14, survey question 15, and interview question number 2 to address research question 2 (RQ2). The survey questions asked for responses based on the current plans' effectiveness and the support levels provided to Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers. In addition, the researcher used RQ2 to acquire additional data on the opportunity areas within the current transition processes.

Survey question number 4 was a linear question that stated, “How effective are the current transition plan(s) in place for student(s) diagnosed with autism transitioning from preschool to kindergarten and elementary school to middle school?” Thirty-one individuals responded to survey question 4. The mode results in 14 responses for Neutral with an average score of 2.74. Based on the analysis, the teachers feel “Neutral” about how effective the current transition plan(s) in place. A neutral response states that the teachers do not feel positive or negative about the effectiveness of the transition plans. During the literature review the researcher identified that during the annual IEP or at the transition planning meeting, information should be exchanged about effective instructional strategies, needed modifications and adaptations, and positive behavior support strategies, as well as methods of communication to help drive a successful transition (Pratt, 2024). This means there is an opportunity for growth to review the processes to help provide the needed resources for the most effective education of students with ASD.

The researcher used survey question 5 as a follow-up to survey question 4. Survey question number 5 allowed users to comment on how they responded to survey question 4. Survey question 5 provided 19 unprompted short-answer responses that detailed how effective the current transition plan(s) are within the district. The group felt strongly that the only way they would be able to understand the student and the student’s abilities is based on the information supplied in the IEP. Next, the group felt that success depended on the amount of information given by the SPED teachers who either had the students in their class or supported them the year before. In addition, planning between Elementary and Middle School is ineffective when Elementary School leaders develop

the transition plan. This is due to the multiple differences in how the students perform daily activities in Elementary versus Middle School. Furthermore, data is not transferred from the Pre-K to the elementary school in a way that can be used as soon as the student arrives in elementary. Specifically, the ESDM reports are not included and must be provided to the elementary school as required. A small portion of the responses dealt with the need for everybody to be part of the observation and the ability to observe the student in real-time. Field trips should be required for students transferring from elementary to middle school to understand how it will be in the future. Finally, a couple of responses stated the teachers had done an excellent job with the transitions or needed to gain experience with the transition process. The data suggests that most of the teachers felt good about how the IEPs were put together and how well people communicated during an IEP meeting. They felt there was not much personal interaction available to see the student before the student arrived in the classroom. Furthermore, the survey results explained that it is a must that all students have time in the building before classes start. More communication needs to happen between Pre-K and Elementary, and they felt that it was important that the elementary school also receive the ESDM reports from the preschool. Future communication between all parties must increase, and all parties need to be part of the IEP to provide the required transition information, so that the data can be written into the IEP properly. The student will benefit tremendously if the members of the current IEP team can interact with the future IEP team. In addition, it is essential that the child feels comfortable going to the new location and understands what will happen as soon as they enter the new location. Pratt's article recommends to involve the important individuals in the IEP process early so that they may gain information about

the student's current level of functioning, as well as providing input into projected goals (Pratt, 2024).

Survey question number 14 was a linear question that stated, "Rank the level of support the district provided Special Education Teachers during the transition process for student(s) diagnosed with autism?" Thirty-one individuals responded to survey question 14. The mode results in 12 responses for Fair with an average score of 2.19. Based on the analysis, the teachers feel "Fair" about how much support special education teachers were provided during the transition process. These results indicate that the Special Education Teachers feel there is an opportunity for growth to provide additional support during the transition process in order to supply students with ASD with the best possible educational experience.

Survey question number 15 was a linear question that stated, "Rank the level of support the district provided regular teachers during the transition process for student(s) diagnosed with autism?" Thirty-one individuals responded to survey question 15. The mode results in 15 responses for Poor with an average score of 1.67. Furthermore, the Regular Education Teachers feel "Poor" about how much support Regular Education Teachers were provided during the transition process. These results indicate that Regular Education Teachers feel there is a tremendous amount of opportunity for growth to provide additional support during the transition process to supply students with ASD with the best possible educational experience.

Breaking the question into two categories allowed the researcher to see how both parties responded based on their perceived support for their position. It is evident from the results of survey question numbers 14 and 15 that the respondents felt that the support

provided by the district has some opportunities for improvement. The Special Education Teachers reported 20 responses that were either in the fair or poor range, and the Regular Education Teacher reported 26 responses that were either in the fair or poor range. In addition, the researcher noticed that Regular Education Teachers felt less supported than Special Education Teachers. During the literature review it was identified how Special Education has evolved over time. The review stated how difficult it was to get ASD students the support needed for a proper education. Currently, students are receiving the services they need in order to achieve a successful education. By law the student needs to be in the least restrictive environment. This placement is typically in the general education classroom. With this being said it is imperative to provide the needed support for all parties in order for the student to get a solid chance at a quality education. The district needs to review and increase the amount of support put into place for the teachers to help provide a more successful transition experience for students with ASD.

Interview question number 2 was an over-the-phone interview question that stated, "What are the opportunity areas within the transition process for students with autism?" Each person interviewed identified different opportunities to improve the current process. Kindergarten students within this district can go to a Summer Success program that provides time for the teachers to observe each student before attending the first day of school. It was presented that students identified with ASD should be required to attend these sections to offer time for the teacher to observe the student and for the student to experience the classroom before the beginning of the year. Regular Education Teachers felt the need for the opportunity to observe the student during the days prior to transitioning. There were multiple statements about experiencing more time with the

child during the prior year in order to plan for the future. These plans would allow for additional training, the gathering of resources, and time to strategize. Furthermore, all felt the need for more resources and additional classrooms to support the growing need of students that keep increasing year-or-year. Finally, one stated that it would be nice to have a resource to provide parents that could outline and educate the parents on the transition process.

Research Question 3

What are special education teachers' perceptions regarding how effective the current transition processes are for students diagnosed with autism?

The researcher used survey question 8, survey question 9, and interview question 3 to address research question 3 (RQ3). The survey questions asked for responses on the current plans' effectiveness based on Special Education Teachers' perceptions. In addition, the researcher used RQ3 to acquire additional data on the opportunity areas within the current transition processes.

Survey question number 8 was a linear question that stated, "What are the perceptions of special education teachers regarding how effective the current transition plan(s) are for students diagnosed with autism?" Thirty-one individuals responded to survey question 8. The mode results in 16 responses for Neutral with an average score of 2.9. Based on the analysis, all surveyed identified the Special Education Teachers with a perception of being "Neutral" about effectiveness of the current transition plan(s) in place. A neutral response states that the teachers do not feel positive or negative about the effectiveness of the transition plans. This means there is an opportunity for growth to

review the processes to help provide Special Education Teachers with the needed resources to provide the most effective education for students with ASD.

The researcher used survey question 9 as a follow-up to survey question 8. Survey question number 9 allowed users to comment on how they responded to survey question 8. Survey question 9 provided 27 unprompted short-answer responses that detailed how effective the Special Education Teachers felt the current transition plan(s) are within the district. Within the 27 provided comments, the Special Education Teachers felt that the whole team needed to be more involved in setting the appropriate expectations for the next level of IEPs and included the parties required to provide the much-needed information, specifically classroom teachers. The transitions provided unrealistic goals for students that could not be fulfilled because they needed more resources to support the plans. Not having enough resources caused students to be placed in classrooms designed for behavioral needs versus the needs of a student with autism. The transitions did not cover all the needs of the student or the teacher. Neither the Special Education Teacher nor Regular Education Teacher felt an ASD student could see as much of the classroom before school started as they felt was needed to be successful. Furthermore, they felt due to the limited training for the teachers to support the students with autism, lack of observations of students early on caused them to be less proactive. They felt they needed this information to be as effective as possible. The teachers felt they could not understand the students until the end of the first quarter. These responses provide heavy evidence that the perception of the transition plans need to be improved to support the student to be as successful as possible.

The researcher identified interview question 3 as response data to provide information that addresses RQ3. Interview question 3 states, “What are the perceptions of special education teachers regarding how effective the current transition processes are for students diagnosed with autism?” All of the individuals interviewed felt strongly that the Special Education Teachers' perceptions were that the program was effective for the students. The processes that are in place are strong and provide the needed information to place and support the students through the transition. The processes allow the Special Education Teachers time to get to know the students and parents, as well as being able to supply the students with the needed tools to be successful. Once again, this is based on the Special Education Teachers' perceptions.

After reviewing all of the data provided for the RQ3, the researcher clearly noticed all of the teachers feel the Special Education Teachers have good processes in place to allow for an effective educational experience, if the child is predominantly placed in Special Education. In most cases, students with ASD are not placed solely in Special Education. Students are placed in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Children with disabilities should be able to learn in the least restrictive environment. This means they should spend as much time as possible with peers who do not receive Special Education (Morin, 2020). When evolving the effectiveness, it is important to think of the complete educational experience. Based on the data, all of the teachers surveyed or interviewed feel the Special Education Teachers are taking the needed steps to provide an effective transition process.

Research Question 4

What are the perceptions of regular education teachers regarding how effective the transition processes are for students diagnosed with autism?

The researcher used survey question 6, survey question 7, and interview question 4 to address research question 4 (RQ4). The survey questions asked for responses on the current plans' effectiveness based on Regular Education Teachers' perceptions. In addition, the researcher used RQ4 to acquire additional data on the opportunity areas within the current transition processes.

Survey question number 6 was a linear question that stated, "What are the perceptions of regular education teachers regarding how effective the transition plan(s) are for students diagnosed with autism?" Thirty-one individuals responded to survey question 6. The mode results in 14 responses for Neutral with an average score of 2.7. Based on the results, all surveyed identified the Regular Education Teachers with a perception of being "Neutral" about how effective the current transition plan(s) in place. A neutral response states that the teachers do not feel positive or negative about the effectiveness of the transition plans. Similar to the results for Special Education teachers, this once again means there is an opportunity for growth to review the processes to help provide the needed resources to Regular Education Teachers to be as effective as possible in educating students with ASD.

The researcher used survey question 7 as a follow-up to survey question 6. Survey question number 7 allowed users to comment on how they responded to survey question 6. Survey question 7 provided 26 unprompted short-answer responses that detailed how effective the Regular Education Teachers felt the current transition plan(s)

are within the district. The team answered similarly to the Special Education Teacher's responses in survey question 8. Survey question number 7 also was not overwhelmingly positive about the transition plans' effectiveness from a Regular Education Teacher's perspective. Within the 26 provided comments, the teacher's majority felt the transition process was heavily supported by the Special Education Teachers and needed additional representation from the Regular Education Teachers. The respondents felt the Regular Education Teachers were not as involved in the planning as they should be, specifically with most of the students being integrated into the regular education classrooms. The consensus is the Special Education teacher creates the plan with little input from the early childhood ESDM team or feedback from the Regular Education Teachers. Furthermore, the plans typically are developed to focus on behavior and social-emotional strategies with a limited focus on educational strategies. The respondents felt the Regular Education Teachers continually provided limited training and resources to support the ASD students effectively. The two teams must bridge their communication to improve the transition plans. Some Regular Education Teachers even stated that no plans were presented to the Regular Education Teacher, only a copy of the IEP. It was also reported in most cases, the IEP was removed when the student entered kindergarten, because of the lack of academic concerns. This caused the whole process to start all over in first grade.

Regular Education Teachers also did not feel there was adequate support for their efforts on day one for the child with ASD. In addition, the Regular Education Teachers felt like they had to figure things out on the fly in order to do well. In addition, Regular Education Teachers had to come up with options on their own if things changed for a student's schedule or classroom setting throughout the year. On a positive note, the

Middle School Regular Education Teachers seem to feel that the students were more successful in transitioning from Elementary School to Middle School because the Elementary School had prepared the child well to support the student once they arrived in Middle School.

The researcher identified interview question 4 as response data to provide information that addresses RQ4. Interview question 4 states, “What are the perceptions of regular education teachers regarding how effective the transition processes are for students diagnosed with autism?” All of the individuals interviewed felt strongly that the Regular Education Teachers' perception was the program is effective for the students because of their great Special Education teams. They all stated the Regular Education Teachers did not have a big role in the process and could not participate as much as they would like. Also, they did not have an opportunity to observe or meet the students prior to the student entering the classroom. All of the information was provided in the IEP meeting and in the IEP. They stated that the Regular Education Teachers needed more time with the students to understand what was needed to support them. Also, they felt the Regular Education Teachers needed addition training in order to support the ASD students at the highest level.

Overall, the data supported the need to increase the Regular Education Teacher's involvement in the transition process. Regular Education Teachers need more time with the student before the student enters the classroom for the first time. Also, the Regular Education Teachers need to have a bigger part of the IEP conversation, so they are well informed on expectations, what is needed to properly support the incoming student, and how they can help in the transition process. The Special Education Teachers need to

continue to deliver on observations, training needs, and classroom placement. Special Education Teachers also need to be more understanding of the benefits of proper communication and the needs of the Regular Education Teacher. Based on the data, these couple of changes to the current processes can help improve the effectiveness of the current transition plans.

Research Question 5

What are the current strengths of the current transition programs?

The researcher used survey question 17, survey question 18, and interview question 5 to address research question 5 (RQ5). The survey questions are in place to understand what is working today within the transition plans. In addition, the researcher used RQ5 to acquire additional data on the opportunity areas within the current transition processes.

Survey question number 17 was a linear question that stated, “Rank the level of student(s) success based on the transition plan(s) used with student(s) diagnosed with autism?” Thirty-one individuals responded to survey question 17. The mode results in 16 responses for Fair with an average score of 2.38. Based on the results, all surveyed identified the student(s) success as being “Fair,” utilizing the current transition plan(s) in place. A Fair response states the respondents do not feel positive about the effectiveness of the transition plans. This, once again, means there is an opportunity for growth by reviewing the processes to best as effective as possible in educating students with ASD.

The researcher used survey question 18 as a follow-up to survey question 17. Survey question number 18 allowed users to comment on how they responded to survey question 17. Survey question 18 provided 29 unprompted short-answer responses

that detailed the strengths of the transition plan(s). The standard answer to survey question 18 was that the users felt the district did a good job filling out the IEP with the needed information in the present level portion of the IEP. They felt the Special Education teams were flexible, supplied the proper student diagnosis, and provided the best support that they could base on the plan developed. The IEP meeting tends to include all appropriate people, including family members, past Special Education teams, and the people needed for the transition. Finally, the comments explained the students were prepared to transition to Middle School, but felt the transition from Preschool to Elementary could be improved. For the most part, the responders felt FHSD did a good job inviting those parties that needed to be at the IEP. At the same time, the IEP teams did a nice job filling out the IEP and including what is required to provide the proper support for the student.

The researcher identified interview question 5 as response data to provide information that addresses RQ5. Interview question 5 states, “What are the current strengths of the current transition programs?” There was a consensus that the Special Education teams go above and beyond to develop student relationships. Also, the Special Education teams provide the teachers with support and guidance for the Regular Education Teachers. The administration also helps provide the parents with the needed support and communication needed to keep everyone in the loop. The interviewees feel they do everything they can to avoid missing students needing support or placement. Unfortunately, all felt there needed to be more resources, training, and time to completely support the needs of the students. In addition, all felt the need for more people in the classroom and more teachers to support the growing population of ASD students. This

support would allow time for the classroom teachers to be able to observe and plan for the future students. Finally, everyone takes pride in helping the students get the best education possible.

Research Question 6

What are the weaknesses of the current transition programs?

The researcher used survey question 19 and interview question 6 to address research question 6 (RQ6). The survey questions are in place to understand what did not work today within the transition plans. In addition, the researcher used RQ6 to acquire additional data on the opportunity areas within the current transition processes.

Survey question number 19 was a short answer question to follow up on survey question 17, which states, “What are the areas of opportunity within the transition plan(s) used for student(s) with autism?” The teachers felt the most significant improvement opportunity is participating in a student observation before they enter the classroom. They want to be able to have a pre-meeting with the school before the IEP and provide a gradual introduction to the teacher, classroom, school, and future schedules. This proactive approach can ensure the supports are in place before the child arrives. Next, they felt they lacked the needed resources to properly support children with autism for maximum effect. The respondents continue to reference the lack of support and training that is needed for the homeroom teachers. They would love to see examples of how to support specific scenarios based on tried-and-true approaches that have been successful with students with ASD. The teachers also feel the Special Education department is spread extremely thin. All the teachers felt that the IEPs were well-written throughout the course and provided a great transition plan. Unfortunately, the plans are not being

shared with the proper people, insufficient training to support the plan or adequate resources to complete the plan with fidelity. All of the plans need to keep staffing in mind, as well as include resources based on copies of the behavior plans, any important IEP notes, and support for all parties that will be part of the transition plan for this student. The Regular Education Teacher needs to improve the lack of voice during the IEPs, to show a united front. Finally, it was noted that it would be a great idea to provide a parent support organization to help educate parents on the IEP process, how to get the needed resources for home support, and how to maintain the support while supporting the child at home.

The researcher identified interview question 6 as response data to provide information that addresses RQ6. Interview question 6 states, “What are the current weaknesses of the current transition programs?” Once again, the group had different ideas about opportunities. First, there is an ask to add additional people to be able to support the growing number of ASD students. Second, everyone felt the need for the Regular Education Teacher to have the opportunity to observe and visit with the student prior to transitioning into the classroom. Third, additional time is needed to prepare for incoming students with resources, training, and skills. Fourth, the Regular Education Teachers feel they need to have a big role in the transition process, which includes more voice in the decisions. Overall, they feel the processes are going well but could use some minor changes to be more successful.

Recommendations for Future Research

The researcher designed a qualitative study to identify what needs to be implemented within an IEP transition plan so that a student with ASD can receive a

successful educational experience. The study reviewed results based on teacher-provided surveys to identify what high-quality transition plans have on educational success when transitioning from early childhood education to middle school. The goal was to reduce the time to get the student what the student needs to succeed. The study received survey results from 31 teachers across multiple schools and within a district in large suburban school districts. The survey consisted of 20 questions asking Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers to provide input on how the different schools utilized the transition processes, who are involved in those processes, and the strengths and weaknesses of those processes. In addition, the researcher interviewed five Certified Special Education Teachers and Regular Education Teachers to further understand their transition processes and procedures.

During this study, the researcher focused on a large suburban school district across the St. Louis area based on the results of information sent to 350 Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers. Future studies could expand the effort to all five districts within the area to acquire additional information to further enhance understanding of what is needed to be part of a successful transition plan. By expanding the demographics, one would receive additional responses that may or may not give different results. The study would pull in additional data and points of view based on the processes and procedures that are in place within the different school districts. This additional data would provide a wider range of examples that could be useful for future success. The goal would be to use the data to provide more successful examples that could help both Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers. Furthermore, by reaching out to additional districts, one could receive a better

cross-section of teachers to respond to the survey. This would provide the researcher with a more well-balanced representation of teachers within the schools.

Future research should space out the time when to send out the survey. Sending the survey out at the beginning, middle of the year, and end of the year would provide individuals more time to complete the survey. In addition, it would be important to ask individuals to be part of the interview processes within the survey itself. This would save time and preparation when conducting the interviews. Finally, having separate communications with each building principal to ask for help to encourage his/her staff to fill out the survey would help generate additional responses.

In order to maintain anonymity on the survey, the researcher only asked about the grade level taught, how many years of work with students with ASD, and the type of teacher currently. Unfortunately, the researcher did not ask for location information, so there is no way of knowing which schools were represented. Future research concludes a question about the name of the school the individual is representing. This would help the researcher understand what schools are being represented. The research could send additional invites out to those schools that were not represented. This could help balance the results throughout the district.

Conclusion

Navigating the educational system is difficult for typical students, but it is even more difficult for those students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The team at Lamar University stated that it is extremely important to have a solid Individualized Transition plan for special-educated students to be successful in education (Lamar University, 2021). The IEP transition plan is designed to provide the needed resources for

ASD students to function within the education system as well as increase the likelihood of pursuing post-secondary education (Lamar University, 2021). These plans provide a personalized course of action based on students' strengths, desires, and dreams for a fulfilling life.

This study identifies what needs to be outlined within an IEP transition plan so that a student with ASD can be provided with a successful educational experience based on the input of Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers within a large suburban school district across the St. Louis area. These individuals supplied their thoughts on what is working well and what needs to be modified to help the current transition plans. The Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers successfully outline their transition process through the 20-question study, as well as five over-the-phone interviews across multiple schools within a district in large suburban school districts. In addition, the researcher determined items that need to be included in order to achieve a high-quality transition plan. These plans need a team that can help understand what important tools are required to provide a solid educational experience for students with ASD. The study provided teachers with an additional resource to showcase what best practices should be included in transition plans.

Based on the data presented, the researcher feels the individuals identify multiple opportunities within their current process that were presented as positive influences and items that need improvement. The district has showcased the importance of meeting with the students as soon as possible to discuss their abilities and proper expectations. It is evident the IEP team needs to be developed with all parties present and willing to work together to share in all aspects of the student's journey. There needs to be an equal

representation of Regular Education Teachers, as well as Special Education Teachers to help provide resources based on a collaborative approach so the student can achieve the best outcome. The transition plan needs to include future home school visits from Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers before the student enters his/her classroom. In addition, the transition plan also needs to include time for the students to visit the future school or classroom prior to entering the next year or classroom setting. There is a tremendous need to get the Regular Classroom teachers involved in the process as fast as possible to see a solid transition from Early Childhood to Elementary. Most schools can deliver on this transition process using Regular Education Teachers and Special Education Teachers.

Meeting with the child before they enter the classroom allows the team to plan for additional teacher training, gathering much-needed resources and time to strategize. Furthermore, all felt the need for more resources and additional classrooms to support the growing need of students that keep increasing year-to-year. The Special Education Teachers need to continue to deliver on observations, training needs, and classroom placement. Special Education Teachers also need to be more understanding of the benefits of proper communication and the needs of the Regular Education Teacher to be part of the process. The administration also needs to provide the parents with the needed support and communication needed to keep everyone in the loop. Finally, it would be helpful to have a resource to provide parents that could outline and educate the parents on the transition process.

In Summary, this researcher provided a robust analysis of transitional plans within a large suburban school district across the St. Louis area. This study explains the need for

a successful plan, what components are needed for the plan, and what should not be part of the plan. Ultimately, the study provided a best practice study that can be used to support students with ASD transitioning from early childhood education through middle school. This information will help provide research that can be used to validate future plans to provide a successful educational experience for students with ASD. Furthermore, using this data will help identify the solutions that positively affect these processes and improve the students' educational experiences.

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