

Exploring Self-Awareness of Self-Advocacy Skills Among Senior High School Students with Mild to Moderate Learning Disabilities.

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership
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Nothing binds you except your thoughts; Nothing limits you except your fears, and nothing controls you except your beliefs.

– Marianne Williamson

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Section 1: Introduction to Dissertation

Background

According to the California Department of Education, over 750,000 newborns to age 22 students received special education services during the 2018-2019 school year (California Department of Education, 2019). In schools, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides 13 eligibility categories under which a student can meet criteria and receive special education services and accommodations regardless of a Diagnostic of Statistical Manual (DSM) diagnosis. Approximately 38% of the 725,000 students received services based on qualifying for special education under the category of a specific learning disability (California Department of Education, 2019).

Students considered to have mild to moderate disability are those who demonstrate a cognitive or processing ability standard score exceeding 80 on the Psychological Assessment Resources (PAR) bell curve. In high school, students with mild to moderate learning disabilities receive a continuation of accommodations, which may include classroom supports and special resource classes, all of which are outlined in the student's IEP. Sue Lawyer (2020) from the CA Transition Alliance shares that while IDEA mandates transition goals be included in the student's IEP at 16 years of age, teams should consider including student voice and developing goals in this area even earlier. Furthermore, best practice suggests that transition planning with students fully integrated with planning and meetings begin at 14 years of age (National Council on Disability, 2002). The IEP team emphasizes prioritizing students' active and meaningful participation since transition goals should and need to be generated once a student turns 14. The goal of student inclusion is to allow students to envision what their future may look like, plan for their post-secondary experience, and ultimately, be active participants in the IEP process.

While students may exit special education services before they graduate, their specific learning eligibility or disability does not simply disappear. Many high school graduates, most particularly those who have exited from special education at age 22, are participating in some form of a post-secondary educational path, trade school, or employment; all while grappling with their specific learning disabilities or disabilities. Field et al. (2003) suggest that students with mild to moderate learning disabilities may not have the self-determination skills which are necessary to allow them to advocate for themselves in post-secondary settings. Field argues that adults with disabilities who have graduated from high school “are less successful in seeking and maintaining employment, achieving a satisfactory standard of living, developing independence and other quality-of-life indicators than persons without disabilities” (p. 339). Mason et al. (2004b) found that students with disabilities rarely take advantage of the resources available to them at post-secondary institutions or places of employment, due to the lack of self-advocacy skills. The lack of self-awareness limits students' abilities in knowing how to ask for support in post-secondary institutions or the workplace.

Statement of Inquiry

Focus of Practice

When the Individuals with Disabilities Act was reauthorized in 2004, research on self-determination began to take form as the reauthorization emphasized transition planning and post-secondary outcomes (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). As of then, it has been documented that students with mild to moderate learning disabilities are entering post-secondary learning environments or the workforce without being able to articulate their specific learning styles or needs. Despite having a detailed Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and detailed meetings

every year to review eligibility, supports, and accommodations, students often become passive participants in these meetings and are oftentimes solely dependent on the scaffolded support they receive from their resource teachers or parents. Test (2005) argues that special education teachers identify the importance of developing self-advocacy skills as “crucial to the successful transition of students with disabilities into adult life” (p. 43), yet these skills are rarely explicitly taught. In addition, there are very few opportunities for students to practice self-advocacy skills before graduating from high school since teachers and adults generally provide the support needed to pass a class, not teach other functional advocacy skills.

Test (2005) suggests that while students with disabilities are in high school, they require “deliberate instruction in self-advocacy and self-determination skills” (p. 44) in order to give them the strategies needed to communicate their personal and academic needs. However, Thoma et al. (2009) found that teachers report challenges with incorporating self-advocacy skills into their instruction alongside their daily duties due to the multitude of responsibilities. Teachers report supporting students in reading/language arts, math, science, and social studies while addressing the gaps in content knowledge that are meant to be addressed by students' individual goals. It is this specific gap with teachers demands that may account for why explicit teaching of self-advocacy skills is not incorporated into students' daily experiences or in their educational plan leading students to not advocate for themselves in an educational setting or any area post-high school graduation.

Potential Contributions to Practice and Scholarship

Izzo and Lamb (2002) theorize that when students with disabilities leave the school setting, they do not fully grasp their capacity for learning areas for growth, or strengths so that they can properly advocate for the accommodations they need beyond school life. While some

research has been conducted in regards to adult college students on self-determination and self-advocacy (Shogren et al., 2018, Stamp et al., 2014 & Test et al., 2005); ultimately, there is a lack of research focused on students in their final year of high school. The potential contribution to scholarship is to better understand the lived experiences of high school senior students with mild to moderate learning disabilities as it relates to the development of self-awareness of their disabilities and the development of self-advocacy skills.

The potential implication for practice will be to inform the professional field of the conditions or events that, if at all, allowed the students to develop self-awareness of their self-advocacy skills in a high school setting. This study will be able to help identify the conditions under which high school students are able to develop an understanding of their learning disability and develop self-awareness and self-advocacy skills. This study was conducted at the researcher's place of employment, an organization whose ethos, in part, is to foster an environment where 21st-century adults will be able to have a vision and take the lead in the modern world. Understanding students' ability to advocate for themselves is in alignment with the organization's forward-thinking mindset. By conducting this type of research in the researcher's place of employment, the researcher and organization have the opportunity to move the conversation forward on transition planning and transition assessments for students with mild to moderate disabilities.

Research Design

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of high school seniors with mild to moderate learning disabilities and the experiences that may have encouraged awareness and development of self-advocacy skills. This study is framed around the following research question:

What are the lived experiences of high school senior students with mild to moderate learning disabilities as it relates to the development of self-awareness of their disabilities and the development of self-advocacy skills? The study was designed to investigate the complexity of this phenomenon through “exploring and understanding” (Creswell, 2009, p. 4) the meaning that students assign to their lived experiences in high school by exploring their interpretations of self-advocacy in high school and their perceptions of having the skills to advocate for themselves in a post-secondary or employment setting.

Theoretical Framework

While there are numerous similarities between the elements of a study in qualitative and quantitative research, how the researcher chooses to frame the components allows for distinct differences in process and product (Glesne, 1991, p. 4). In qualitative research, there is a desire to focus on individual meaning through language, understanding, and the possible meaning given to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). Typically, qualitative research is conducted in the participants’ setting with the researcher interpreting the data, or stories collected. Quantitative research aspires to test assumptions by measuring the relationships among variables (p. 4). This process includes collecting and analyzing pieces of data, so that the results may be generalized to a group of people, with the possibility that the study can be replicated.

Interpretivism is an approach to research that allows a researcher to look for patterns with individuals through personal involvement and empathetic understanding (Glesne, 1991, p. 10). The assumption made by a social constructivist researcher is that reality is socially constructed by the interactions between people, events, and the subsequent interpretations that individuals make of those experiences. The social constructivist researcher believes that reality is subjective, and consists of multiple perspectives. They seek to understand the perspectives of others with a

shared lived experience, with the intention of gaining a deeper understanding through a series of interviews with an exploratory mindset. Creswell (2009) notes that individuals hold subjective meanings of their experiences specifically because they are experiences that are formed through interaction with others (p. 8). As a result, social constructivists use open-ended questions so that participants can share their views, seek to understand the context which a specific question may originate from, and specifically addresses the process of interaction amongst individuals (p. 8).

Qualitative strategies of inquiry allow the researcher to analyze data based on specific models or designs for understanding. *Phenomenological research* allows the researcher to identify the “essence of human experience about a phenomenon described by participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). Creswell (2009) and Patton (2015) both address the phenomenological roots of this inquiry to philosophy due to its emphasis on participants' consciousness. It is through consciousness that individuals have a link to the world in order to experience events, label them, interpret them, make sense of them, and then share them with others (Patton, 2015, p. 115). This awareness, or consciousness, is a person's lived experience - the basis for this approach. Although this process recommends interviewing a small number of participants, phenomenology includes working with one participant at a time, so that a deep understanding can take place through the use of shared language. Phenomenology differs from ethnography where the researcher is observing an “intact cultural group” (p. 13) during a period of time where part of the data collection includes observations and interviews; whereas ethnography relies on the researcher becoming immersed in the cultural group or community for some time in order to understand cultural beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

This study is designed from a constructivist worldview. Social constructivists believe that individuals develop meaning from their experiences, which can be varied, through their

relationships with others (Creswell, 2013). Applying a social constructivist approach, the study was designed to establish an environment in which the students felt comfortable speaking openly and honestly about their experiences. By using interviews and open-ended questioning strategies, the researcher was co-creating with students. In turn, meanings can be derived from their stories, rather than making assumptions or starting with a specific theory of self-advocacy.

Setting

The setting for this study is a charter high school in an urban city on the west coast. The charter organization includes three high schools with a total enrollment of 1,640 students, including a total of 188 students with IEPs. Each school site has one principal, one assistant principal, and three counselors. Each site has a range of 528 students to 566 students with 30 full-time teachers. There are 10 resource teachers in total, but they are assigned to sites based on Local Education Agency (LEA) needs. Each LEA or school site has between 10-12% of the student population designated as neurodiverse learners. These students have been found eligible to receive special education services, as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004).

The study site, the school in which the researcher was employed and where the students attended school, allowed for interaction in their school setting and educational environment and placed the researcher in a position to serve as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. As such, the researcher explored their positionality within this research so that the voice, experience, and integrity of students' stories were solely theirs, without alteration by the researcher. Additionally, this study was designed to understand the students' conceptual world to understand how and what meaning they constructed around their daily lives (Creswell, 2007). By identifying a common or similar experience in their setting, or while they were students at our

organization, the researcher may capture what Moustakas (1994) has labeled an essence description. Possible commonalities in those descriptions can be utilized to inform the adults who are forward-facing with students and be implemented as a way to evoke educational change within our organization.

Participants

The researcher selected the student participants through a non-random sampling technique, purposeful sampling, in order to gain the most information from a group that has had a similar experience with the phenomena of interest. Patton (1990) suggests that the “logic and power” of using purposeful sampling “is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (169) by identifying cases by the researcher that may yield pertinent information on the topic. The researcher felt this was appropriate based on the topic and location of the study taking place.

As this was a Dissertation in Practice, the researcher utilized their place of employment for access to participants as the primary criterion for selecting the sample (Creswell, 2009, p. 178). Participants were recruited from three high schools within a charter organization in an urban city on the west coast. After receiving permission from the organization's CEO and the principal of each school site, the researcher presented the purpose and intention of the study to all senior resource classes within the organization, with a request for their involvement in the study. Potential participants were selected from those who had been students in the organization for at least four years, held an IEP for the duration of that time, and worked closely with resource teachers. The researcher felt that by speaking to this cluster of students, they would be able to hear stories and experiences that would be relevant to the research question and overall inquiry.

Miles et al. (2020) recommend interviewing five or six “richly researched” (p. 29) cases as a minimum in order to maintain sampling integrity for a multiple-case study so the researcher aspired to that sampling size for this phenomenological study. The researcher considered 23 potential students to participate; however, only seven participants met the following selection criteria:

- documented mild to moderate learning disabilities,
- attended the charter organization for at least two years,
- completed all coursework in order to earn their high school diploma,
- over the age of 18, and
- have not had their educational rights conserved by their parent's.

Exclusionary Criteria. Students with IEPs without a recent psychoeducational evaluation were not included in the study. Students with conflicting neurological conditions such as Intellectual Disability (ID), or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) were also excluded from the study. Additionally, students were not considered for this study if they were over the age of 18 and had their educational rights conserved by their parents. Students who are seniors, but not yet 18 years of age were also excluded.

Informed Consent

The CEO of the charter school organization from the three selected high schools was first emailed to obtain organizational consent to conduct the study. Once it was given and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study, an email was sent to the site principals asking if the research could be conducted at their school sites, with their special education teachers. Once permission from site leadership was granted, an email was sent to the special

education teachers explaining the purpose of the study and requesting a meeting to explain the procedures and answer any questions the resource teachers may have.

The researcher invited students to participate in the study and presented the idea in resource support classes, a time during the school day when students with disabilities meet with a resource teacher to review assignments, work on goals, and have time in a quiet space to work. All students heard the introduction from the researcher as to who the researcher was, what the purpose of the research was, and what the study was intended to accomplish. At that time, the researcher reviewed the Informed Consent form (Appendix A) for the classes and answered any questions that students had. The researcher also provided their phone number and email in case the students had any questions after the presentation. After presenting the study to the students, the researcher left the consent forms with the special education teacher. The special education teacher was able to answer general questions about the study. The potential participants were told to email the researcher directly if they had any specific questions, which two of them did. Five students agreed to participate and signed the consent form directly after the presentation. Two students contacted the researcher a few days later with a few questions related to confidentiality and the time constraints for their participation.

Data Collection

Data for this study was collected primarily from three methods: two qualitative interviews, two questionnaires, and a researcher journal. In addition, the researcher engaged in a series of member checks to ensure the efficacy of student voice, and to establish and maintain a trusting relationship with participants throughout the process. This validation component in qualitative research is defined as “an interactive process between the researcher, the researched, and the collected data that is aimed at achieving a relatively higher level of accuracy and

consensus by means of revisiting facts, feelings, experiences, and values or beliefs collected and interpreted” (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 321).

Interviews. Participants engaged in two interviews using semi-structured interview guides (Appendix B, and D). The interviews were designed to allow the researcher and the participant to establish rapport, build trust and ensure validity with validation strategies while also collecting data to support the research question (Creswell, 2007). According to Seidman (2006) “at the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language” (p. 8). For this reason, open-ended, semi-structured recorded interviews were useful for this qualitative phenomenological study. Semi-structured interviews set up a framework in order to keep to a theme, but also allowed for some flexibility to probe for clarity, ask follow-up questions and provide comments (Miles et al., 2021). The interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom, in order to accommodate participant schedules or comfort due to COVID-19. Each interview was scheduled for approximately 45 minutes in length. While the interviews were recorded, the researcher took wrote down additional notes.

Interview 1. The purpose of the first interview (Appendix B) was to (1) review the informed consent and answer any question the student may have, (2) to collect basic background information about each student, and (3) to establish an environment that will allow the participant to feel comfortable discussing their disability with the researcher. The interview began by explaining the purpose of the study and describing the process, which included the number and purpose of each interview. The researcher also used this time to review the informed consent form (Appendix A) and answer any questions the participant had about confidentiality. The first interview was guided by a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix B) which begins with the collection of basic background information and continues to build rapport. Following

the collection of background information, the researcher introduced the *Transition Assessment: Planning Transition and IEP Development for Youth with Mild Disabilities* (Miller et al., 2007). Although this questionnaire is designed to inform students' IEP teams about transition planning and designing, the researcher felt it important to capture this data in order to understand the knowledge and skill level of the participant in this area, to understand if a participant knows how to advocate and what to advocate for (Field et al., 1998a). After careful consideration, the researcher determined that it would be best for the students to complete the survey in their presence, in the event that further clarification or explanation was required.

The measure is designed to help students and their support staff identify their level of knowledge and skills, in relation to concerns about self-determination and self-advocacy. The questionnaire (Appendix C) asked participants to respond to a total of 16 questions on a Likert scale where a "1" equates to Not at all, and "6" equates to All the time. Eight questions focus on Academic Skills while another eight focus specifically on Employment Skills. Students responded to questions such as

1. I can list and discuss the academic accommodations I need to be successful in High School
2. I can list and discuss my rights for reasonable academic accommodations under law
3. I can identify and discuss the amount and type of postsecondary education or training I will need to reach my long-term employment goals.

The purpose of utilizing this tool was to understand and identify what participants perceived about their self-advocacy skills. In addition, this tool provided the researcher with data that may reveal what skills the participants reportedly had and understand their comfort level when speaking about their needs. Considering that the participant may need to have the questions read

aloud to them, the researcher opted to do the Likert scale with them rather than them completing it before the first interview session or before the second interview session. The researcher encouraged the participant to inform the researcher of their preference, and if desired, the assessment was completed independently.

Participants' responses to this measure set the framework for the second interview. This interview ended with a description of the following two interviews and setting a calendar date with each participant for those interviews.

Interview 2. The second interview (Appendix D) was structured around the participants' responses to the *Transition Assessment: Planning Transition and IEP Development for Youth with Mild Disabilities* (Miller et al., 2007) and Stamp et al.'s (2014) protocol (Appendix E) served as a foundation for the design of this semi-structured interview. The questions, as designed by Stamp et al. (2014) were "designed to elicit detailed information about students' perceptions regarding obstacles to self-advocacy" (p. 144). The questions from this protocol are specific to one diagnosis as defined by the DSM-5, but the researcher changed that specific diagnosis for *your eligibility* or included their specific eligibility if the student felt comfortable speaking explicitly using that terminology.

Member check or member validation. After each, the researcher restated or summarized the information that was shared during the predetermined time together. The researcher reviewed the notes that were taken and restated the feelings, experiences, and views that were expressed during the interview. This gave the participants an opportunity to clarify what was shared and correct any statements that may have been misrepresented. Ultimately, this check was designed to seek the truth and produce change with the overall results.

Researcher journal. Keeping a reflective research journal allowed the researcher to become immersed in the data and engaged with what is shared to a degree that would be difficult otherwise (Birks et al., 2013). The art of memoing, or keeping a reflective journal helped the researcher by ensuring that ideas were retained, musings were recorded, and reflections were documented throughout the evolutionary qualitative journey. The entries recorded, no matter how small, can later prove to be significant in understanding the phenomena in question so that the researcher can return to a specific moment in time to react to the data collected. Moreover, the researcher recognized and acknowledged their proximity to this area of focus; both within the organization and as an area of interest for their dissertation in practice. By interviewing participants about their experiences, the researcher becomes a data collection instrument where information funnels in and out. A way to acknowledge the researcher's own perceptions, feelings, and thoughts throughout the interviews was for the researcher to "consciously acknowledge" those values, beliefs, and assumptions by utilizing a reflective research journal (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001, p. 325).

Data Analysis

This study utilized thematic analysis as its framework for understanding the phenomena of students' self-awareness of their self-advocacy skills. Thematic inquiry involves using a system of coding and categorization of data to analyze across multiple data sets looking for recurring topics and themes emerging across participants or contexts. Data analysis was built upon modified versions of both Moustakas (1994) and Saldaña's (2013) recommendations for data analysis which include following the six steps that are integral to any phenomenological approach: transcriptions, organizing the data, coding, deducing categories, identifying common themes and making interpretations and maintaining a reflective journal. The researcher focused

on the process of theme deduction through manual coding only. Once the data was collected and transcribed, the researcher organized the data after reading and understanding the transcripts keeping the purpose of the study top of mind.

Through coding, a researcher can systematically organize and understand the data (Tracy, 2013). Data was coded directly on printed copies of transcripts, circling, bolding, or highlighting significant quotes, while also noting and highlighting feelings that were shared. Since the process of coding qualitative data is a cyclical process (Saldaña, 2016) multiple rounds of In-Vivo coding and analysis were used to glean broader themes. In the first round of In-Vivo coding, the researcher analyzed the interview transcript to capture thoughts and phrases that allowed the researcher to understand their experiences within the high school setting. The researcher captured the data in tables in order to organize common themes, feelings identified and words that are the same among the participants. Ultimately, the researcher looked for patterns in feelings or highlighted similar experiences that were discussed, in order to make sense of this shared phenomenon.

Second-cycle coding intends to group the phrases that emerged in the first round into a “smaller number of categories, themes or concepts” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 79). For this analysis, the researcher refined themes following the “horizontalization” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122) process ensuring that all statements and data collected are of equal value, ensuring that the “researcher is receptive to every statement of the co-researchers experience” (p. 122). This process generated a data/theme list to emerge from the transcribed interviews in addition to outlier data unrelated to the phenomenon of interest.

Following the coding process, the researcher categorized data based on codes and on the notes or memos that were taken while reading the transcript of the interviews, and patterns

emerged. Through a process of constant comparison (Charmaz, 2006), specific categories were compressed and collapsed until the final themes emerged.

Ethical Considerations

Participants who chose to participate in the study were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix A). Participants learned once more of the purpose of the study and understood that they were not going to be monetarily compensated for their participation. The researcher did not identify any possible risks that would be incurred in participating in this research study, however, the researcher did acknowledge that the nature of the interview questions may cause some emotional distress for the participants. In order to avoid or minimize such risks, certain precautions were taken in advance. These included but weren't limited to frequent check-ins during the interview, reminders that a question may be skipped if participants did not want to answer, and finally, providing a list of free local or low-cost mental health services if needed.

In addition, participant information was coded so that participants could be assured of their anonymity. Every effort was made by the researcher to preserve confidentiality, including the following: assigning pseudonyms/numbers for participants used on all research notes and documents, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in a locked file cabinet in the possession of the researcher. Participant data was kept confidential, and there were no occasions that required the researcher to break confidentiality in order to legally report any incident that arose during any interview session.

Assumptions and Delimitations

When designing a study, the researcher needs to understand the assumptions; things that may be true, or are assumed to be true, based on the setting, participants, and even conclusions that are reached. The researcher identified the possible assumptions that could be made in

reading this dissertation in practice based on their identity and research setting. Additionally, the delimitations outlined below set the parameters for this study so that the researcher could focus on their scope of interest.

Researcher Identity and Assumptions

Moustakas (1994) encourages the acknowledgment of positionality of the researcher in the narrative. Subsequently, it is important to note that the researcher is currently the Director of Special Education, but was trained as a school psychologist and worked as one for 9 years at the same charter school. They identify as heterosexual, Latina female, who is a first-generation college graduate and doctoral candidate. The researcher does not have a learning disability, nor has she ever accessed special education services as a student in the K-12 or K-16 school system; which is something that the researcher has kept in mind throughout the entire research design process. The researcher knows that while working in special education, the majority of the scope of their work is done in collaboration with adults who support the student - not the individual student, which is an important distinction to make.

The impetus for this dissertation in practice comes from the researcher's own previous experience as a school psychologist. When assessing a student for special education eligibility or a special education re-evaluation, students would ask the reason they were assessed or what having an IEP meant. More often than not, students were unable to explain their eligibility, learning disability, neurodiversity, or the accommodations and support that they received per their IEP. The focus of the work was to not only assess students but to also provide psychoeducation around their learning disability. Since students lead their exit IEP meetings as seniors, the researcher wanted to understand the experiences, if any, that fostered awareness or increased their self-advocacy understanding. Glesne (1991) expressed the power of conducting

research, or social action research in one's own space, describing it as "backyard research" (p. 26). When practitioners conduct research in their place of employment, procedures develop that come from "collaborative, reflective data... contributing to the sociopolitical context" (p. 26) of the community. Ultimately, the researcher believes it to be essential that student voice be considered as a means to honor their individual experience as participants with special needs. By respecting and honoring student voice, procedural and systemic change can happen not only in our charter school but in their lives as well.

Delimitations

Understanding that the choices made in designing the dissertation in practice are fateful, the researcher chose to limit the design to only students who were over the age of 18 and had a current IEP. This can be considered a specific limitation because the researcher was going to speak to all students within the organization who had an IEP - limiting the possible subject pool and number of possible participants. Another delimitation is the assumption that the data collected from the students' completion of the Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy questionnaire is accurate. Additionally, the researcher assumed that participants would be open and honest in accurately describing their experiences with other staff members within the organization. The study is also limited to a specific time of data collection. The researcher interviewed students immediately upon completion of all coursework and after they graduated high school.

Definition of Key Terms

Throughout this study, the following terminology was used frequently:

- Accommodations - Changes made to the instructional deliverable that allows a person with a disability or eligibility to fully participate in an activity. (Understanding Special Education, 2009).
- Age of Majority Statement - This is to be signed no later than one year before the student reaches 18. The statement declares that your child has been informed of his/her rights and is aware that these rights transfer to them at the age of 18. At age 18, the student has the right to approve the development and implementation of the IEP and they will sign it themselves. (Understanding Special Education, 2009).
- Assessment or Evaluation - Term used to describe the testing and diagnostic processes leading up to the development of an appropriate IEP for a student with special education needs. (Understanding Special Education, 2009).
- Disability - Physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. (Understanding Special Education, 2009).
- Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) - Special Education and related services are provided at public expense, without charge to parents. (Understanding Special Education, 2009).
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) - The original legislation was written in 1975 guaranteeing students with disabilities a free and appropriate public education and the right to be educated with their non-disabled peers. Congress has reauthorized this federal law. The most recent revision occurred in 2004. (Understanding Special Education, 2009).

- Individualized Education Plan (IEP) - Special education term outlined by IDEA to define the written document that states the disabled child's goals, objectives, and services for students receiving special education. (Understanding Special Education, 2009).
- Individualized Education Program Team - Term used to describe the committee of parents, teachers, administrators, and school personnel that provides services to the student. The committee may also include medical professionals and other relevant parties. The team reviews assessment results to determine goals and objectives and program placement for the child needing services. (Understanding Special Education, 2009).
- Resource Specialists - Provide instructional planning and support and direct services to students who have been identified in an IEP and are assigned to general education classrooms for the majority of their school day. (Understanding Special Education, 2009).
- Resource Specialist Program (RSP) - Term used to describe a program that provides instruction, materials, and support services to students with identified disabilities who are assigned to the general classroom for more than 50% of their school day. (Understanding Special Education, 2009).
- School Psychologist - Assists in the identification of intellectual, social, and emotional needs of students. They provide consultation and support to families and staff regarding behavior and conditions related to learning. They plan programs to meet the special needs of children and often serve as a facilitator during IEP meetings. (Understanding Special Education, 2009).
- Special Education Student - Any student receiving special education services at a school or within a charter school organization. (Understanding Special Education, 2009).

- Specific Learning Disability - Special education term used to define a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language spoken or written that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical equations. (Understanding Special Education, 2009).
- Student Study Team (SST) - A group that evaluates a child's performance, makes recommendations for success, and develops a formal plan. The team includes the classroom teacher, parents, and educational specialists. They may make a recommendation for a special education evaluation. (Understanding Special Education, 2009).
- Transition IEP (GOALS) - should focus on training and/or education and should include vocational education and adult education programs. Other goals include employment either regular or supported and independent living skills. Goals vary depending on the needs of the child. The transition IEP must list what services are needed to assist your child in reaching their post-secondary goals. (Understanding Special Education, 2009).
- Transition IEP - IDEA mandates that at age 16, the IEP must include a statement about transition including goals for post-secondary activities and the services needed to achieve these goals. This is referred to as an Individual Transition Plan or (ITP). (Understanding Special Education, 2009).

Significance of the Inquiry

Implication for Scholarship

This study is framed around the following research question: What are the lived experiences of high school senior students with mild to moderate learning disabilities as it relates to the development of self-awareness of their disabilities and the development of self-advocacy skills? While most of the scholarship for this dissertation in practice was focused on college students (Field et al., 2003) or students in college with ADHD (Holzberg et al., 2018; Field et al., 2003; Stamp et al., 2014) this study will attempt to understand the lived experiences of students in high school, before they graduate high school and possibly attend college. This research will add to the scholarship surrounding supporting students with IEPs by understanding, and possibly prioritizing explicit teaching of self-advocacy skills in the high school setting.

Implication for Practice

Students who graduate from high school and have been identified as having a mild to moderate learning disability are “making the transition to adult life without the skills required to be successful members of society” (Miller et al., 2007, p. 3). Part of that transition includes being able to understand their neurodiversity and speak to the accommodations they received during their educational career that allowed them to be and feel successful. If students understand both their disability and its impact on their learning, they are more likely to ask for support in their post-secondary student support offices. Holzberg et al. (2019) noted that student knowledge of their rights and accommodations is imperative if students with disabilities are to succeed in more demanding educational settings (p. 176). One way to ameliorate some of these challenges is through the implementation of self-advocacy skills.

The dissertation in practice aims to understand the lived experiences that students with mild to moderate learning disabilities have had in school, which may have impacted the phenomenon of self-awareness of self-advocacy. An opportunity exists to research self-advocacy with students who are over the age of 18, in hopes that it may structure or focus the work that is done in transition planning as early as freshman year. Since self-advocacy is tied to work in future planning, the IEP can begin to include these researched areas as students' goals in the researcher's educational setting. Additionally, the researcher can work with resource teachers and school site teams to address the findings; creating a multi-year protocol to integrate the themes that emerged into our special education department.

Summary of the Inquiry

Students with disabilities do not take advantage of the resources available to them while in post-secondary institutions or places of employment because of a lack of self-advocacy skills (Mason et al., 2004). This inability to speak up for oneself results in a student's inability to access the accommodations that they need in their postsecondary places of education or the workplace. Where does that start? Or where can that inability end? Students with mild to moderate disabilities have an IEP in school that allows their team to work on areas of strength and growth. As such, goals can be created in the area of transition that can explicitly teach students about the importance of self-awareness in self-advocacy as a psychoeducational goal, so students can ultimately embrace their neurodiversity.

Section 2: Practitioner Setting for the Study

Introduction

As a researcher who is conducting their study at their place of employment, understanding the specific school culture is imperative in order to navigate the educational landscape. The researcher's familiarity with the organization allowed for a determination that the school climate is appropriate for this study, with a perceived level of receptiveness among staff and students to participate in such a study. Bolman & Deal (2006) noted that "common ground and a shared understanding can strengthen organizations in every sector" (preface, xi). As such, the researcher is attempting to develop a common ground within special education so that the alignment can provide school leaders with the language that can help navigate difficult situations, and "can help move managers from feeling confused and stuck to discovering a renewed sense of clarity and confidence" (preface, xiv). The researcher would like to highlight the innovative spirit of their organization by producing sustainable change, integrating self-awareness of self-advocacy of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities as an emphasis in our department. By utilizing a strengths-based approach to growth, in addition to understanding the organizational frames that schools as organizations use, organizations can focus on what gives them life, which then allows leaders to focus on people, communication, and development.

History of the Organization

The charter organization is located in an urban city in southern California. The charter received its authorization in 2008 to serve as an option for a community's residents. In 2009 two Local Educational Agencies (LEA) opened with 445 students in total. Since then, the charter

organization has grown to five free public schools. One site or program combines a post-secondary pathway leading to college degree completion, and services students from TK to College. The organization has a total of 2,523 students that span the K-12 continuum. For the 2021/2022 school year, enrollment data indicates that 51.29% of the student body identify as Hispanic or Latino, 17.54% identify as Black or African American, 14.1% identify as White, 6.49 identify as two or more races, 5.5% identify as Asian, 4.79% identify as American Indian or Alaskan and 0.12% of the student body identified as Native Hawaiian or other.

Organizational Analysis

In their work, *Reframing Organizations*, Bolman & Deal (2017), have generated frameworks that allow leaders to continuously reimagine what their organization's potential could be through reflection, suggesting that "no single story is comprehensive enough to make an organization fully understandable or manageable" (p. 21). However, by introducing the human resource, political, symbolic, and structural frame, the researchers introduce parameters for one to analyze an organization. As such, the urban high school in Southern California will be analyzed through these frames.

The Human Resource Frame

The organization's CEO has always shared that they believe that the charter organization hires the right people (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 139). Beyond the employees holding the correct credentials and advanced degrees, they also need to have a passion for serving others, an innovative mindset, and creativity. The Basic Human Resource Strategies highlighted by Bolman & Deal are in alignment with the organizational practices of; rewarding the people that are hired, protecting their job, investing in learning, providing information and support, and, most recently

leading with the Promote Diversity principle (p. 138). The organization is fluid and responds to current socio-cultural needs as evidenced by speaking about police brutality. The organization generated a Solidarity Commitment to engage in Anti-Racism work as an immediate response to events that were impacting our communities. Our organization explicitly shared what we stood for and remained focused and persistent (p. 153) about our transparency in regards to inclusivity.

The human resource frame centers on what organizations and people do to and for one another (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 113). This is the framework that the researcher initially thought was going to be directly tied to the phenomenon of interest, but later found that it lends itself more to an organizational analysis instead. Due to the framework “highlighting the relationship between people and organizations” (p. 133) it is easy for the researcher to assume that the organization exists to serve student needs. The organization can also readily assume that school staff and the organization need one another and ideally are a good fit so that “individuals find meaningful and satisfying work, and that [the organization] gets the talent and the energy they need to succeed” (p. 133). For those employees that have left on their terms, employees felt they were undervalued, mistreated, and ignored, potentially triggering the “social and personal baggage” (p. 177) that they brought along with them from previous worksites and assignments. Not only did this impact the cultural community of the specific school site that they were assigned to, but also had a direct correlation to the work they did in supporting students.

The Political Frame

While rooted in power and possibly in politics, the political frame is the “realistic process of making decisions and allocating resources in a context of scarcity and divergent interests” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 179). The Human Resource framework also lends itself to dissecting

the organization as a whole, and also specifically relates to understanding the possible politics of special education within any educational system. It is not uncommon to hear about the rising or even the hidden costs of providing special education, which makes it sound disingenuous.

Whether the cost comes from hiring special education teachers and educators, buying intervention or remediation programs, proposing a non-public school for a student that did not make progress with the goals proposed, or even worse - paying attorney fees because a case went to mediation or due process, special education services as a whole can be costly for an organization. The special education department may be seen as one that spends excessively in order to support only 10-13% of the student population. The department, however, would argue that not nearly enough is spent on general education or preventative resources, which may help to mitigate or help to remediate those that are in general education.

Based on the researcher's role within the organization, the researcher knows that all school sites may have different values, beliefs, and perceptions of reality based on their specific focus, the culture that they have created, and where they see themselves in relation to different campuses. The researcher also assumes that groups within school sites are competing for resources from their admin team by way of a new program, training, etc. Bolman & Deal (2017) describe horizontal conflict as occurring “in the boundary between departments or divisions; vertical conflict occurs at the border between levels. Cultural conflict crops up with differing values, traditions, beliefs, and lifestyles” (p. 197). Based on this framework, the charter organization may be set up to have numerous horizontal conflicts based on the possible demands of each floor, school site, and department-specific funding based on their nuanced differing values.

The Structural Frame

In its simplest form, the structural frame is an organizational chart. It puts people in the right roles to form effective relationships designing an organization for “maximum efficiency” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 48). The organization has staffed special education in hierarchical roles to ensure that this area of education meets compliance, as set forth by the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA). The organization has a special education director, special education secretaries, School Psychologists, Speech-Language Pathologists, consults with Occupational Therapists and others from a wide range of specialties if needed. All staff members know who to report to and the lines of communication as they relate to working together to meet students’ needs.

When looking at students with an IEP from the structural frame, students can be seen as the product that special education teams are creating. Bolman & Deal suggests that the school psychologist tests for areas of deficiency to help the team “establish goals and objectives and devise strategies to reach those goals” (p. 48). The Resource Specialist Teacher tells the student what to do or how to solve a problem when it arises and functions to “coordinate and control [to] ensure that diverse efforts of individuals and units mesh” (p. 48). RSPs coordinate with the student, teachers, support staff, and even parents to make sure that the student’s performance is up to par. Interestingly, the researcher feels that the role of parents within the structural frame depends on their capacity of understanding the special education process in general. This understanding may be impacted by their socioeconomic status, their cultural trust in education, trust or mistrust of the educational system, and the acceptance that they can have of their child’s learning needs. Parents can either help or hinder team progress or goals and yet, when the

structural framework is in alignment with a student “the right combination of goals, roles, relationships, and coordination is essential to organizational performance” (p. 47).

The Symbolic Frame

As a whole, the charter organization loves culture building and thrives on connectivity, fundamentally believing that a solid culture is the “superglue that bonds an organization, unites people, and helps an enterprise to accomplish desired ends” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 242). The intentional connections between staff then trickles down into specific teacher-led advisories, with all advisories having their own mascot, chant, traditions, etc. Each school site, grade level team, and advisory within the organization highlights the “tribal aspect of contemporary organizations” (p. 263).

The researcher was hard-pressed to think through what the culture around having an IEP may look like within the organization. The researcher can assume that it is shrouded with more negativity than positivity, regardless of the degree of inclusivity within the organization. Based on conversations that the researcher has had with individual students, some may not even want to have an IEP in high school. A considerable part of the work is explaining to students how support, services, and accommodations will ultimately benefit them as a whole.

The authors, Bolman & Deal (2017) make *reframing* or being able to see an organization in various ways empowering. They suggest that leaders should look at an organization through a different framework, and ask different questions in order to develop novel solutions. Regardless of the researcher’s assumptions of the frameworks and their application to the charter organization, understanding their existence allows the researcher to ask questions which may potentially uncover an area of growth within the organization.

Leadership Analysis

Companies and organizations that identify as innovative have done the specific work to establish the following parameters: an appropriate leader is at the helm, employees buy into the culture of the organization, and stakeholders trust the direction of the entity as a whole. The literature around being an innovator, or engaging in innovative practices can be extremely broad—and may be intentional as companies, agencies and entities vary in direction and scope. Because “changing old patterns and mindsets is difficult” (p. 39) leaders can first begin with an understanding of the frame that their agency embodies to think about, “opportunities and pitfalls” (preface, x). In their work, *Reframing Organizations*, Bolman & Deal (2017) have generated frameworks that allow leaders to continuously reimagine what their organization is and can be like through reflection. Gareth Morgan (2006) in *Images of Organization* strives to “empower its reader with a way of thinking that can help ... navigate some of the ambiguity and flux” of globalization that is “changing the face of the world economy” (p. xi).

When leaders embrace their role in creating a developmental organization, there is an understanding that the organization is like an organism. The employee, member, staff, etc., play an important role within the organization by feeding the organization and then giving back to the organization. Kagan & Lahey (2016) share this image of a circular organization as a way for “organizations and workers to become each other’s greatest resource for flourishing” (p. 285). By viewing the organization as an organism, there is an understanding that “employees are people with complex needs that must be satisfied if they are to lead full and healthy lives and to perform effectively in the workplace” (p. 34). Most job settings and fields are transitioning to this idea of fostering the whole person, not just hiring an employee based on degree or technical skills.

The charter school organization where this dissertation in practice took place strives to make all its staff members feel like leaders in their own site, academic content area, and even in their grade level. There is a great sense of autonomy that staff enjoy within our organization. Teachers can generate their lessons based on the essential skills that are tied to the core standards, counselors can design and implement evidenced programs to work with students that are feeling stress, anxiety, or depression. Principals and Assistant Principals feel that the work they do matters because they support around 30 teachers and a little more than 500 students at each site. From a school leadership capacity, each school site has a Principal and an Assistant Principal, three counselors, 2-4 resource teachers, and shared support staff.

The idea of building relationships with people to work cooperatively and meaningfully for the betterment of the organization and people is now something that the researcher realized they were doing before they knew it was a practice backed by research in the field of Appreciative Inquiry. The researcher has attempted to build relationships, and foster a sense of community or ‘oneness’ with others on a school site in order to grow. Reading Scharmer’s work inspired the researcher to see their work in the organization through a different, innovative lens.

While it is important to understand the leadership structure in any organization, change comes from those individuals who can adapt to their settings and organically bring human connectivity, compassion, and understanding to others. Once that relationship is established, recommendations for change are welcomed and implemented.

Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting

Working in a small, collaborative charter school system allows the researcher to utilize the results of the dissertation that can be applied, in order to produce a change in our system. Students see and feel how well staff get along and are generally very receptive to answering

questions, providing feedback, and being respectful with the supportive adults on campus. As such, the researcher feels like they are in a position to work with students and teachers to honor their experiences as high school seniors with special needs. Creswell's (2009) reminder that "truth is what works at the time" (p.11) solidifies the researcher's understanding that by capturing senior students' truths around their self-awareness of self-advocacy skills during their senior year, they will be able to understand what the organization is doing well, in addition to what we can do to improve the program for others in the future. Moreover, the researcher can "look to many approaches for collecting and analyzing data" (p. 11) as a way for the researcher to share the data with educators within our charter organization.

Summary of Practitioner Setting

By delving into both Organizational Analysis and Organizational Innovation during their program, the researcher was able to align all of the readings through the funnel of Appreciative Inquiry. In firmly believing that any organization has within itself the power and positions to be successful at any point in time, the researcher appreciated the tone of understanding the place that one inhabits before proposing any change. What strengthened that notion was the idea of Relational Responsibility - something that the researcher feels they have been able to cultivate in their setting. In the *Positivity Strategist* podcast hosted by Robyn Stratton-Berkessel, Sheila McNamee (Episode 115, 2019) spoke of her experiences and breakthroughs with Relational Responsibility. That responsibility spoke to the work that the researcher is on the precipice of understanding, especially in the work of serving and supporting others.

The researcher finds the work powerful because it aids in workplace trust, vulnerability, and culture - similar themes in the work that Brené Brown speaks to in *Dare to Lead* (2018).

Learning theoretical frameworks that help systems thrive is rooted in people, as described by the Human Resource Frame (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The need for individuals to feel supported, heard, and validated without judgment is crucial and something that the researcher aspires towards, and has learned how these aspects impact the organization as a whole.

McNamee (2019) focuses on and encourages taking a pause when we want to react to something - when we hear something we may not understand, like, or necessarily agree with. Focusing on taking a pause or gap in responding to not having a knee-jerk reaction to any conversation or circumstance allows one to read the room, read people, and understand that our words can guide a conversation. Building trust in that capacity is ideal in a 1:1 setting, a classroom setting, and, in a setting, where others may look to the researcher for guidance. As a result, understanding how much of Scharmer's work is grounded on the ability to be present, absorb, and then react becomes transformational; aligning theory with practice. Most importantly, the researcher feels that this is the reason why they can be successful in completing this dissertation in practice at this organization.

Section 3: Scholarly Review for the Study

Introduction

Threading a line between the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its importance in the emergence of self-advocacy requires a dive back to 1975. Since the passing of IDEA in the 70s multiple movements (both in education and in civil capacities) have pushed the limits of what students with disabilities were thought to or even expected to accomplish. In understanding that "students are often their own best advocates" (McGahee et al., 2001, p. 5) students with mild to moderate disabilities are now fully included in general education

classrooms and are encouraged to participate in their own IEP meetings. During the planning stages of their IEP and at the meeting, students are encouraged to share their vision for their post-graduation life; leaning on the self-advocacy skills which are most important to the team planning and purpose once a student is 16 years old (West et al., 1999). To ensure that student voices are heard and that the transition components of the IEP represent the student's goals for their future, the IEP team must take steps to actively involve students with disabilities in the planning of their futures. Student participation may look different for every student, but the overall goal is for students to take on as much ownership in their IEP as possible.

Review of Current Literature

This scholarly review explores relevant literature related to special education legislation and transition services related to special education and fields, such as social work and positive psychology. The researcher reviews research related to social role valorization theory and self-determination theory and includes a particularly focused examination of Test's Conceptual Framework of Self Advocacy. The review culminates with a summary and a discussion about the potential gaps in research.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a piece of American educational legislation (Pub.L. 101-476) that ensures all students receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) regardless of disability. While it's comprised of four main parts (A, B, C, and D), six pillars highlight the Individualized Education Plan process (Individualized Education Program, Free and Appropriate Public Education, Least Restrictive Environment, Appropriate Evaluation, Active participation of parent and student in the educational mission and

procedural safeguards for all participants). The entire process is designed to protect students with disabilities, while also upholding the rights of their families. A small portion of IDEA includes transition services, which have evolved throughout the years as importance has been placed on the livelihood of students with mild to moderate disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Transitions and Transition Services

The specific and detailed interest in supporting students with post-high school graduation life and careers led to the redrafting of transition services, how they are measured, and how the school team can increase a student's independence. In 2004 IDEA was reauthorized to broaden and simultaneously clarify the support that schools provide to students, including but not redefining Limited English Proficient (LEP), highly qualified teachers, and wards of the state.

The Code of Federal Regulations redefined transition services as:

special education if provided as specially designed instruction, or a related service if required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education. See 34 CFR §300.43(b). The term *transition services* means a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that: (a) is designed to be within a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, and community participation; (b) is based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests; and (c) includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of

employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation.

(<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.43>)

In their simplest form, transition plans and their services seek to make education relevant and meaningful to students with disabilities and their families. These transition plans also strive to include student voice in the planning and implementation, tapping into both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, so that the students feel included and empowered with their goals for their future (Miller et al., 2007). The Division on Career Development and Transition of The Council for Exceptional Children has endorsed the following definition of transition assessment:

Transition assessment is the ongoing process of collecting data on the individual's needs, preferences, and interests as they relate to the demands of current and future working, educational, living, and personal and social environments. Assessment data serve as the common thread in the transition process and form the basis for defining goals and services to be included in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). (Sitlington et al., 1997 as cited by Miller et al., 2007, p. 5)

Hughes & Carter (2000) highlight the recent need to meaningfully include students in their transition plans and their IEP meetings. The researchers found that many students who graduate from high school do not understand their disability, areas of strength, weakness, or even how the accommodations that they have been afforded through their IEPs can enhance their lives. This is particularly true for students with mild to moderate disabilities that attend institutions of higher education, and do not access the support afforded to them by the University because of their need to ask. Lynch & Gussel (1996) share that until a student is self-aware they cannot self-advocate making the need to teach students about themselves a large priority in the transition process.

Social Role Valorization Theory

During the 1960s Wolf Wolfensber was building upon the work of Swedish academic Bengt Nirje who was working to integrate students labeled as Mentally Retarded in classrooms and society. They were interested in “making available to the mentally retarded patterns and conditions of everyday life which are as close as possible to the norms and patterns of the mainstream of society” (Nirje, 1969 as cited by Thomas, 2017, p. 1). Shortly thereafter and in the United States, Dr. Wolfensberger continued to introduce the concept, keeping in mind the two defining tenets of Normalization (interaction and interpretation). Normalization states that by identifying the value that is placed on whom society considers being devalued, society at large has limited its collective experience and growth. Normalization, now morphed into Social Role Valorization urges that the highest goal must be the “creation, support, and defense of valued social roles for people who are at risk of devaluation” (Wolfensberger, 2011, p. 435). Society or case managers can work to prevent the stigma or whatever characteristic may devalue the person in the eyes of society and work to change perceptions of that person or group so that it can no longer be considered devalued so that that person can have, “good things in life” (Wolfensberger, Thomas, Caruso, 1996, p. 12). Wolfensberger identified the *good things* that valued individuals should have as:

dignity, respect, acceptance; a sense of belonging; an education, and the development and exercise of one's capacities; a voice in the affairs of one's community and society; opportunities to participate; a decent material standard of living; an at least normative place to live; and opportunities for work and self-support. (p. 13)

Wolfensberger introduced the idea of socially valued or devalued positions or roles to the field of Human Services lighting an inclusionary spark within the field of Mental Retardation (now

known as Intellectual Disability) giving way to the continuous movement of inclusion. That movement and mindset continue to this day, as transition plans are created with and for students based on their cognitive abilities and ability to self-advocate. Social Role Valorization Theory (SRV) is a set of ideas that can be applied in order to positively impact the lives of people due to their devalued status, or who face disadvantages because of their societal status (Osburn, 2006). The goal is to encourage or create valued roles for people in society because if a person holds a valued social role they are likely to receive the “good things” (p. 4) that the society deems as socially acceptable. This “transacting human relationship and human service” theory was initially applied to individuals who are Intellectually Disabled (ID) in the community setting (p.4). Wolfensberger encouraged this theory and mindset to be used by, “those who wish to improve the status of devalued people” (p. 5).

Osburn (2006) states that in “North America it has been estimated that from one-fourth to one-third of the population exists in a devalued state because of impairment, age, poverty or other characteristics that are devalued in society” (p. 5). Furthermore, he argues that individuals who are devalued can be systematically set up to experience a slew of negative lifelong experiences such as:

1. Being perceived and interpreted as *deviant* due to their negatively-valued differentness. The latter could consist of physical or functional impairments, low competence, a particular ethnic identity, certain behaviors or associations, skin color, and many others.
2. Being rejected by the community, society, and even family services.
3. Being cast into negative social roles, some of which can be severely negative, such as *subhuman*, *menace*, and *burden on society*.
4. Being put and kept at a social or physical distance, the latter most commonly by segregation.

5. Having negative images (including language) attached to them.
6. Being the object of abuse, violence, brutalization, and even being made dead (p. 2).

Osburn depicts the Level of Action and Person (Figure 1) that is needed to support the person to become fully actualized and valued. The two major broad strategies for pursuing this goal for (devalued) people: (1) enhancement of people's social image in the eyes of others, and (2) enhancement of their competencies, in the widest sense of the term. Osburn suggests providing image and competency so that it forms a feedback loop that can be negative or positive. While this theory is primarily used in the field of social work, educators, and resource teachers, in particular, can tap into this framework in order to align themselves with creating goals for students that will allow them to feel like valued members of society during their time at school.

Figure 1

Social Role Valorization Action Implications (Osburn, J. 2006, p. 6)

		Primarily to Enhance Social Images	Primarily to Enhance Personal Competencies
Level of Action	Individual Person	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions for a Specific Individual That are Likely to Enhance Positive Perceptions of That Individual by Others	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions for a Specific Person That are Likely to Enhance the Competencies of That Individual
	Primary Social Systems	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions in a Primary Social System That are Likely to Enhance Positive Perceptions of a Person in & via This System	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions of a Person's Social System That are Likely to Enhance That Person's Competencies
	Intermediate & Secondary Social Systems	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions in Secondary Social Systems That are Likely to Enhance Positive Perceptions -- in & via Those Systems -- of People in Them, & of Others like Them	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions in Secondary Social Systems That are Likely to Enhance the Competencies of People in Them
	Entire Society of an Individual, Group, or Class of People	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions Throughout Society That are Likely to Enhance Positive Perceptions of Classes	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions Throughout Society That are Likely to Enhance the Competencies of Classes of People

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a motivational theory in the field of psychology that grew from the work of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. In their book, *Self-Determination and Intrinsic Motivation in Human Behavior* (1985) the authors introduced a theory founded on two assumptions that are said to drive an individual's need to grow and be fulfilled. The first assumption is that people are actively driven toward growth. Deci & Ryan note that individuals are looking for a cohesive sense of self, whereby overcoming challenges and embarking on new experiences help them grow. Their second assumption in their burgeoning theory was that although people may be highly motivated by extrinsic rewards and tangibles to keep them going,

people are more likely to maintain and sustain motivation by being intrinsically motivated. With intrinsic motivation, individuals are driven by a need for independence or knowledge acquisition.

Their early work on Self-Determination Theory supported the need for reinforcement (positive, specifically) and highlighted the notion of understanding the conditions in which individuals may be raised. Deci & Ryan (1985) argue that the individual's home environment can create the parameters with which an individual learns to be either proactive or passive. The authors state that social support is key because, through relationships and interactions with others, individuals can either foster or thwart well-being or personal growth. While it may be in a different field, Social Role Valorization honed in on the same idea - that students and/or individuals can develop skills based on the value that others hold, either limiting or expanding experiences.

The emphasis on self-determination in education sprouted from the understanding that adult students in post-secondary settings do not access the educational supports needed for them to pass their courses, and are typically in school for an additional three or four years before graduating as compared to peers that do not have either Autism or an Intellectual Disability (Carter et al., 2013). That research along with recommended practices on "giving transition-age students meaningful opportunities to develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes contributing to self-determined behavior" (Field et al., 2003, p.347) led to policies policy changes that aligned with the IDEA update. The emphasis on teaching self-determination skills to students with a learning disability has been linked to a plethora of pro-social and positive adult behaviors including but not limited to favorable employment, independent living, and success in a post-secondary college setting (Cobb et al., 2009 & Test et al., 2009).

Test's Conceptual Framework of Self Advocacy

Test et al. (2005) strived to operationalize Self-Advocacy from the broader theoretical framework of Self-Determination. Before the construction of this framework (Figure 2), the researchers combed through at least 24 working definitions of Self-Advocacy (Figure 3) which, “understandably lead(s) to confusion for anyone trying to design instruction to promote self-advocacy skills” (p. 51). Furthermore, “this lack of consistency might also explain the discrepancy between teachers’ belief that self-advocacy skill development is important and their lack of knowledge about how to teach it and the lack of self-advocacy skills as goals in students’ IEPs” (p. 51).

By generating a meta-analysis of 20 research studies of individuals with disabilities and including input from more than 30 invested stakeholders in the field, a conceptual framework was created. Test’s conceptual framework contains four components: knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership. Test’s conceptual framework emerged as an impetus to “serve as a guide for instruction planning, curricular design, and assessment of self-advocacy for students with and without disabilities” (p. 51).

Test suggests that there are four key components of self-advocacy. The first, knowledge of self is an awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, interests, and attributes of one's disability. The second, knowledge of rights, is an awareness of your rights as a citizen, as an individual with a disability, and the role of the federal government within that scope. The third component, Communication includes various subcomponents, such as negotiation, persuasion, and compromise as they allow an individual to speak to their disability. An individual can communicate their needs after understanding their own strengths and limitations to co-construct,

“needs and desires and an ability to say *no*” (p. 50). Lastly, leadership is not essential for self-advocacy but is noted as part of the conceptual framework due to student understanding of the roles of team members and IEP meetings as a whole. Students demonstrate leadership at the IEP team meetings by “performing their duties as a team member” (p. 50) and ultimately by taking political action on behalf of others.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework of Self-Advocacy (Test et al., 2005, p. 49)

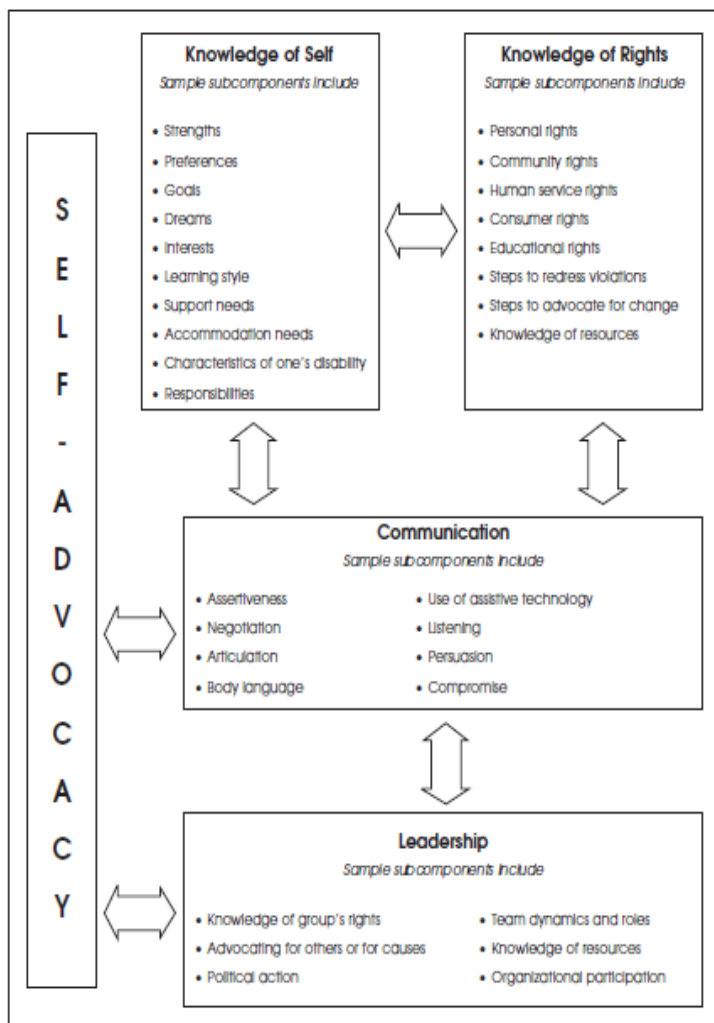


Figure 3

Table of Chronology of Self-Advocacy Definitions (Test et al., 2005, p. 47)

TABLE 2. Chronology of Self-Advocacy Definitions	
Reference	Definition of self-advocacy
Hallgren, Norsman, & Bier (1977)	Self-advocacy is a component of the advocacy movement that is directed toward increasing the knowledge and understanding of basic human and civil rights and responsibilities and is a pre-condition to meaningful citizenship (p. 143, in Williams & Shoultz, 1982).
Williams & Shoultz (1982)	Self-advocacy by people with disabilities includes pursuing their own interests, being aware of their rights and taking responsibility for tackling infringements of those rights, . . . joining with others to pursue the interests of the group and of mentally handicapped people in general.
Rhodes (1986)	Self-advocacy is defined as a social movement organized and controlled by mentally retarded people with the assistance of the nonhandicapped advisors that actively promotes the efforts of mentally retarded people to achieve equality, independence, and recognition as full-fledged members of society, and works to ensure and protect legislated civil rights and basic rights of consumer participation by mentally retarded consumers of human services (p. 1, in Longhurst, 1994).
Sievert, Cuvo, & Davis (1988)	Self-advocacy is described as one's assertion of legal rights and a challenge to the stereotype that people with disabilities cannot speak for themselves (p. 21).
Phillips (1990)	Self-advocacy is equated with the right of people with disabilities to speak for themselves (p. 466).
Balcazar, Fawcett, & Seekins (1991)	Self-advocacy is the ability to communicate with others to acquire information and recruit help in meeting personal needs and goals (p. 31).
Hayden & Shoultz (1991)	Self-advocacy is teaching people with a disability how to advocate for themselves and to learn how to speak out for what they believe in. It teaches us how to make decisions and choices that affect our lives so that we can become more independent. It also teaches us about our rights, but along with learning our rights, we learn our responsibilities (p. 3, in Longhurst, 1994).
Wehmeyer & Berkobien (1991)	Self-advocacy is to request or petition for oneself . . . represented as a group or organization directed by individuals with . . . disabilities. . . . Self-advocacy is a component of self-determination . . . a visible manifestation of self-regulation and, to a lesser extent, autonomy (p. 4).
Wehmeyer (1992)	Self-advocacy is a movement for people with disabilities and is a form of self-determination (p. 4).
Furney, Carlson, Lisi, & Yuan (1993)	Self-advocacy is an individual's ability to speak for oneself and one's own needs. Self-advocacy and self-determination are related concepts from the belief system that values the rights of individuals to make choices (p. 1).
Hartman (1993)	Self-advocacy means that the student understands his or her disability, is as aware of the strengths as of the weaknesses resulting from the functional limitation imposed by the disability, and is able to articulate reasonable need for academic or physical accommodations (p. 354, in Lynch & Gussel, 2001).
Martin, Huber-Marshall, & Maxson (1993)	Self-advocacy includes the realization of strengths and weaknesses, the ability to formulate personal goals, being assertive, and making decisions (p. 56).

(table continues)

(Table 2 continues)

Reference	Definition of self-advocacy
Longhurst (1994)	Self-advocacy is a way of life that encourages people with disabilities to become as independent as possible in their thought and actions, while teaching them to live as equal citizens in society (p. 3).
Nelis (1994)	Self-advocacy is about independent groups of people with disabilities working together for justice by helping each other take charge of their lives and fight discrimination. It teaches us how to make decisions and choices that affect our lives so we can be more independent. It teaches us about our rights, but along with learning about our rights, we learn responsibilities. The way we learn about advocating for ourselves is supporting each other and helping each other gain confidence in ourselves to speak out for what we believe in (p. 1).
VanReusen, Bos, Schumaker, & Deshler (1994)	Self-advocacy is defined as an individual's ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate, or assert his or her own interests, desires, needs, and rights. It involves making informed decisions and taking responsibility for those decisions (p. 1).
Martin & Huber-Marshall (1995)	Self-advocacy refers to the ability to assertively state wants, needs, and rights, determine and pursue needed supports, and conduct your own affairs (p. 149).
People First of Washington (1995)	Self-advocacy is a statement by people with developmental disabilities that we want to be seen as people who have something to offer and skills to share, rather than be seen as people with handicaps or limitations (p. 2).
Field (1996)	Self-advocacy is a term used almost interchangeably with self-determination. . . . The term refers to taking action on one's own behalf; acts of self-advocacy lead to greater self-determination (p. 42).
English (1997)	Self-advocacy is understanding and seeking support for one's personal rights (p. ix).
Merchant & Gajar (1997)	The ability to recognize and meet the needs specific to one's disability without compromising the dignity of oneself or others is self-advocacy (p. 224).
Wehmeyer & Schwartz (1997)	Self-advocacy skills include learning how to be assertive but not aggressive; how to negotiate, compromise, and use persuasion; how to be an effective leader and team member; and what rights and responsibilities exist (p. 253).
Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes (1998)	Self-advocacy is defined as skills individuals need to speak up or defend a cause. Self-advocacy instruction should focus on (a) how to advocate and (b) what to advocate (p. 20).
Cone (1999)	Self-advocacy is focused on the struggle for a life of quality in places and communities chosen by individuals with disabilities, for more and better services controlled by people with disabilities, and for greater social and political awareness in the disability community as a whole. . . . Self-advocacy is a social rights movement that is about building alliances and coalitions, working together to achieve personal and group goals, looking out for one another, learning, and fighting discrimination (pp. 308–309).
Stodden (2000)	Self-advocacy is referred to as the ability to articulate one's needs and make informed decisions about the supports necessary to meet those needs (pp. 8–9, in Izzo & Lamb, 2002)
Advocating Change Together (2002)	Self-advocacy is a social change movement. It is a civil rights movement of individuals and organizations to empower people with disabilities to speak for themselves, make their own decisions, and stand up for their rights, both individually and collectively (p. 7).

Summary of Scholarly Review

The scholarly review for this study needed to take a wide approach and include a variety of areas to understand their intersectionality. Because students with mild to moderate learning disabilities have an IEP that is intended to guide educators on how to best work with the student, the researcher needed to explore the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and specifically the Transition Services provision (2004) to build upon that education code. The researcher also needed to understand how far full inclusion in schools has come since the 1970's due to the work of Dr. Wolfensberger (1972) by normalizing all students with any disability or diagnosis. By bridging together IDEA, education codes, understanding of student disabilities, and disaggregating self-determination, the researcher aims to identify themes that may support and encourage student self-awareness of their self-advocacy.

Gaps in Literature Related to Focus of Practice

Although there are studies that explore why students do not advocate for themselves in the college setting, there seems to be a gap in the literature at the high school level, specifically with students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. Most studies explore students that are not doing well in their courses and are not engaging in self-advocacy (Hendrickson et al., 2020) almost as a reactive strategy. It is also important to note that self-advocacy, as a concept and theoretical framework, is relatively new. Self-advocacy needed to be separated from the broader construct of self-determination so that it could be explicitly broken down and understood by researchers intending to understand motivation within students (Test et al., 2009).

The researcher focused on emergent themes of how students' experiences in a high school setting in an urban high school on the west coast impact their self-awareness of their

self-advocacy by incorporating Test's Theoretical Framework (2009) to support transition plans in students' IEPs.

Section 4: Contribution to Research

Introduction to the Contribution to Research

This qualitative phenomenological study was designed to explore the lived experiences of high school seniors with mild to moderate learning disabilities in a charter school organization and the experiences that may have encouraged awareness and development of self-advocacy skills. The study is framed around the following research question: What are the lived experiences of high school senior students with mild to moderate learning disabilities, in relation to the development of self-awareness of their disabilities and the development of self-advocacy skills?

Participant Profiles

23 students were invited to participate in the study, with seven students reaching out to the researcher and signing the consent form. The seven participants in this study attended and graduated from a charter school organization on the west coast. While the charter organization includes three high schools with a total enrollment of 1,640 students, including a total of 188 students with IEPs; the seven participants for this study represented two out of the three school sites. The participants are all 18 years of age and met all graduation requirements for earning their high school diploma. All participants indicated they were aware of their disability. Table 1 lists the profile of participants listed by the researcher given pseudonym and the specific learning disability as described by the participant.

Table 1*Study Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Learning Disability/Eligibility
Jeremiah	Male	Black	ADHD
Madison	Female	Black	Described it, but could not label it
Chris	Male	Latino	Described it, but could not label it
Sophia	Female	Armenian	Tourette's / ADHD
Monica	Female	Black	SLD - Attention Processing
Jeff	Male	White	Dyslexia
Veronica	Female	Latina	SLD - phonological processing & attention

The participants included four students who identify as female and three who identify as male. Their ethnic identifications ranged from White, Black/African American, Latino(a), and Armenian. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to each participant to ensure confidentiality.

At the end of the first interview session, participants were asked to complete the *Transition Assessment: Planning Transition and IEP Development for Youth with Mild Disabilities* questionnaire (Miller et al., 2007). The majority of the participants (six of seven) presented as knowledgeable in academic skills on the *Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Questionnaire* (Miller et al., 2007) with a range of scores between 3.75-5.87. Participants shared that they felt able to list and discuss academic accommodations in high school, could independently request and effectively use academic accommodations in their classes and could list and discuss their rights under the law. When conducting an item analysis, Jeremiah

responded not at all when asked if they were able to lead their own IEP meeting. Other participants answered that they led their own IEP meetings some or all of the time.

On the same questionnaire, all of the participants presented as knowledgeable in employment skills with scores ranging between 4.62 to 5.75. Participants overwhelmingly shared that they have identified long-term goals, are able to discuss them, and can identify the training that is needed for identified long-term goals. An item analysis demonstrated that participants reported feeling knowledgeable in all areas of being able to advocate for themselves and their needs in the employment setting.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah is an 18-year-old Black male. He attended a high school within the charter organization for the past four years. He shared that he is excited to have graduated because he felt like senior projects were a “total hassle.” He felt that there was “a lot going on and a lot of transitions.” Jeremiah shared that he realized he had an IEP in 4th grade because he had a resource teacher that introduced herself to him as such. He shared that he knew that he learned differently than others in the 3rd grade because it was “hard processing information.” When asked what that meant, he said:

I remember one time I went up to the front of the class, and I thought I knew the information the teacher just said and I was in front of the class and when I said it out loud it did not sound like what I thought in my head.

Jeremiah shared that an IEP meant an “Independent Education Personality or Person” and that he has an IEP for his accommodations and disability. He was able to share that it was for ADHD. He plans to go to a local community college to study acting or join the coast guard.

Jeremiah shared that he can list the support services that he may need on the job to be successful *all of the time* and felt confident in being able to identify and discuss the amount and type of postsecondary education or training that he will need in order to reach his long term employment goals *all of the time*. Based on his self-rating, Jeremiah requires knowledge and skills in academic skills. He shared that he is not able to independently contact the adult service providers that will help him reach his post-secondary goals and cannot lead his own IEP meetings. During our interview, Jeremiah shared that he was comfortable in the school but was unsure as to what supports would be available to him as a student at the community college or as a member of the coast guard.

On the *Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Questionnaire*, Jeremiah demonstrated a relative strength in being knowledgeable in employment skills, scoring a 3.75 on Academic Skills, indicating he could benefit from additional knowledge in this area, and a 4.75 on Employment Skills.

Madison

Madison identifies as an 18-year-old African American female. She enrolled in the charter organization right before the pandemic shut down, so she has been a student at one of the high schools for at least two years. She shared that she first knew she had an IEP when she was in middle school but knew she learned differently or was different in elementary school. Madison shared that she would attend “speech class” in elementary school but she “knew something was wrong.” Madison could not tell the researcher what she had an IEP for but described it as:

Being in class I sometimes lose focus. When a teacher was teaching something, it's like I would just lose focus. I'll pay attention, but afterward, it's like I would just forget what

the teacher was talking about. I think the main problem about me having an IEP is that I used to struggle in my classes a lot. Mostly in math, I used to struggle.

Madison was not able to recall when she was told she had an IEP but knew that there were meetings about her. She shared, “I used to have meetings with my IEP teacher because paperwork was due.” Madison shared that an IEP meant:

[It is] like a private teacher, but isn't, who basically helps you. Almost like if you're struggling. For me, I look at it as a teacher who basically helps. If you're really struggling, they help you with it. If you're falling behind, they'll let you know and they'll help you with it.

Madison would like to go to college but missed the application deadline for enrollment at St. John's University. She is still weighing out her options until she is eligible to apply but is interested in biomedical science.

On the *Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Questionnaire*, Madison demonstrated relative strength in being knowledgeable in employment skills, scoring 5.5 on Academic Skills and 4.87 on Employment Skills. Madison requires no knowledge or skill in academic or employment skills. She responded *all of the time* to being able to identify as a person with a disability in order to get support services that [she] deserves in a postsecondary setting and can list and discuss the accommodations that make [her] successful. During our interview, Madison shared exactly what her eligibility is, in addition to her outside diagnosis. Madison shared that she knows exactly what allows her to be successful in the academic setting and can translate that to her college or place of employment.

Chris

Chris is an 18-year-old Latino male. He has been a student with the organization for the entirety of his high school career. He shared that he has an IEP for “just basically with what I’m having trouble with like needing time for work. For when I have something I am going to say, but I just don’t know how.” Chris shared that an IEP means having more time for work by “extending their work deadline or having enough time to finish the test.” He realized that he had an IEP during his sophomore year and found out because a teacher explicitly told him:

Teachers were telling me that I have it and that I needed to use that opportunity to help me with this and have more time to do this and that... I still need to use it to help me.

That is what it means for me to have an IEP.

Chris noted that teachers taught him what to ask for and how to ask for extended time because [his] parents do not know [he] has an IEP. He is excited to have graduated because he felt like the pandemic “made going to school weird.” He plans to attend a community college and go into the automotive business.

On the *Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Questionnaire*, Chris scored 3.75 on Academic Skills and 4.63 on Employment Skills. Overall, Chris does not require knowledge or skill in academic or employment skills, but there are certain statements where his response fell within the *not at all* range. For example, Chris cannot list and discuss the supports needed to be successful, cannot lead his own IEP meetings, and cannot identify long-term goals for after high school. Chris shared that he felt comfortable with the skills needed to independently contact service providers that could help him reach his goals and also shared that he identifies as a person with a disability *all of the time*. Chris is highly motivated to work as opposed to attending any post-secondary institution and feels like he could speak up for himself in the work setting.

Sophia

Sophia is an 18-year-old Armenian female who had attended a high school within the charter organization for the past 4 years. She is aware that she has an IEP, knows that it stands for Individual Education Plan, and stated that she “at first didn't want it because [she] thought it was weird.” She was able to share:

I have an IEP because I have Tourette's syndrome and because I have ADHD which is a low attention span. So, basically, I get distracted really quickly and that was like a big part, and because I have anxiety. So, with tests and stuff that was just really tough because I have anxiety and a low attention span. I get off track quickly and then I miss everything that I'm doing so it just helps me.

Sophia is knowledgeable in academic and employment skills. She scored 5.87 on Academic Skills and 5.75 on Employment Skills on the *Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Skills Questionnaire*. She feels highly secure in her understanding of herself and in her ability to speak about herself to others. Sophia responded *all of the time* to practically all questions that were asked about academic or employment skills. She shared that she can discuss the academic accommodations that she needs to be successful in an academic setting, can list the support services that she needs to be successful at a job, identifies as a person with a disability, is able to contact the adult service providers that will help her reach her post-secondary goals and was able to state her goals and aspirations for each school year during her IEP meetings. Sophia was very vocal about her experiences as a student in our setting and how those experiences helped her become more confident about her own abilities. During our interviews, she was able to share

specific instances where she was reinforced for speaking up and how that support allowed her to continuously reach out to others unabashedly for something that was academically related or not.

Sophia shared that she realized that she had an IEP freshman year because she had a meeting with her parents and the teachers but she knew that she was different in middle school:

In 6th or 8th grade somebody would tell me something, like a group of people would say something or a teacher would say something and I wouldn't understand what they were saying. But, if one teacher tells me something, even if it is the exact same thing, then, I don't know, I understand it better. I couldn't do simple math problems in my head.

She shared how she went to a counselor to talk about her learning experience, was assessed, and then learned that she “absorbs information differently.” Sophia would like to attend a Cal State school and major in special education. She would like to be a special education teacher or a special education counselor.

Monica

Monica is an 18-year-old and identifies as an African American female. She attended all four years of high school at the charter organization. She was so excited to have graduated because she felt like she is at the point where she is about to start “a new journey.” She shared that she is “a teenager but an adult at the same time.” Monica found out that she had an IEP second semester of 10th grade for attention processing, but knew something was different before then:

Well, before that I knew I needed certain things because I would notice that I would always be like, the last one to finish things, or like, I didn't always understand things or I needed to read things more than once. So, I already knew that I needed additional help.

Just because I had an IEP didn't mean that I noticed that I learned differently. I already knew that I needed something in order to be able to learn.

On the *Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Questionnaire*, Monica scored 4.87 on Academic Skills and 5.37 on Employment Skills. Overall, Monica felt she knew herself well and could speak up when needed. Because she qualified for an IEP as a sophomore, she felt she had experience speaking to others about what worked or what did not work in supporting her. She too felt confident in her employment skills responding *most of the time* to all eight questions that focused on advocacy in the workplace. She shared that she could state the accommodations needed in the workplace that are guaranteed by law, and identified as a person with a disability in order to get support services from a future employer. During our interviews, Monica shared that having to talk to others about her accommodations - even via email - made her more comfortable speaking about them and using them when needed. Monica plans to attend Xavier University in Louisiana and is excited to move away from home.

Jeff

Jeff is an 18-year-old white male. He realized that he had an IEP in 7th grade because “[he] had a special class and just knew.” Jeff shared that he went home to ask his mom about his class placement and she told him he had an IEP. “She didn't really explain it, she just told me I had one.” He first realized that he learned differently in fifth grade because “I learned that I didn't read as fast or like reading at all. My learning disability is Dyslexia so I didn't speak so well most of the time either.” While he did not know the specific word then, he was able to tell the researcher that once he learned what the word dyslexia meant in 8th grade, he knew it applied to him and that he had it. Jeff shared that he is excited to have graduated and is planning to go into real estate.

On the *Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Questionnaire*, Jeff scored 4.785 on Academic Skills and 4.62 on Employment Skills. Jeff is knowledgeable in both academic and employment skills with both averages being relatively similar. Jeff shared that he can state the accommodations that are needed in the workplace and guaranteed by law *all of the time*. He also reported being able to state his goals and aspirations every year during the annual IEP meetings and felt that he could identify and discuss the amount and type of post-secondary education and/or training needed to reach his long-term goals. During our interviews, Jeff stated that speaking up for himself was something that always came easily to him. He shared that he never really needed an experience to make sure that he spoke up for himself, “I just did it.”

Veronica

Veronica is an 18-year-old Latina female. She is excited to have graduated but is also nervous because she is going to college. She knew that she had an IEP and shared that she had one for a “specific learning disability in the area of focus and attention and phonological processing.” She shared that she knew specifically what it was and what it meant because she had recently led her exit IEP meeting with the team. Veronica knew that she had an IEP in middle school:

I realized I had an IEP when I was in middle school, perhaps because I remember elementary school. I thought it was just something that I had to do and somewhere I had to go because I had trouble speaking when I was younger. So, then I was in middle school I thought ‘oh it's like that speech therapy thing’ but, I didn't realize that I had been exited from speech when I was in 4th grade but I was still in the Learning Center. I just thought it was for speech.

She shared her understanding of what an IEP meant after a teacher told her that she had a specific learning disability and shared:

I was like, wait what? I have a disability? What is a learning disability? I didn't even think that a learning disability was real at first because I've never heard of learning disability. The first thing you hear is disability and I was like oh my God something is wrong with me. That is how I took it at that time.

Veronica had a higher average score in employment skills (5.62) than in academic skills (5.1) on the *Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Questionnaire*, highlighting a difference in her comfort level in speaking up and leading meetings specifically. Her lowest self-ratings were on statements that included leading her own IEP meetings, stating goals and aspirations for each school year during the annual IEP team meeting, and identifying long-term goals for after high school. Veronica shared that she can independently request and use accommodations on the job and list and discuss the accommodations that will allow her to be successful at her place of employment. During our interviews, Veronica shared that the more she had to share her accommodations with teachers (over email or in person) it allowed her to feel comfortable with the language and with asking for what she needed to be successful. Veronica is planning on living at home with her family while she attends community college. She would like to transfer in two years to a UC school but is still unsure as to where. She is still unsure as to what her major will be and what she would like to do for employment.

Recurrent Themes

The researcher intentionally ensured that participants' voices and experiences were at the forefront of this data analysis. As such, the researcher was receptive to every statement of the

students' experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). The researcher built the process for analyzing the data upon modified versions of both Moustakas (1994) and Saldaña's (2013) recommendations for data analysis which include following the six steps that are integral to any phenomenological approach: transcriptions, organizing the data, coding, deducing categories, identifying common themes, making interpretations and maintaining a reflective journal. During the first cycle of In Vivo Coding, the researcher looked for recurring themes about the phenomenon of self-awareness of self-advocacy shared by participants (Saldaña, 2021). The researcher looked for patterns in feelings or highlighted similar experiences that were discussed to make sense of this shared phenomenon. After transcribing, organizing, coding, and deducing themes, the researcher was able to compress and collapse the data through constant comparison (Charmaz, 2006). Using this process of thematic analysis, three salient themes emerged:

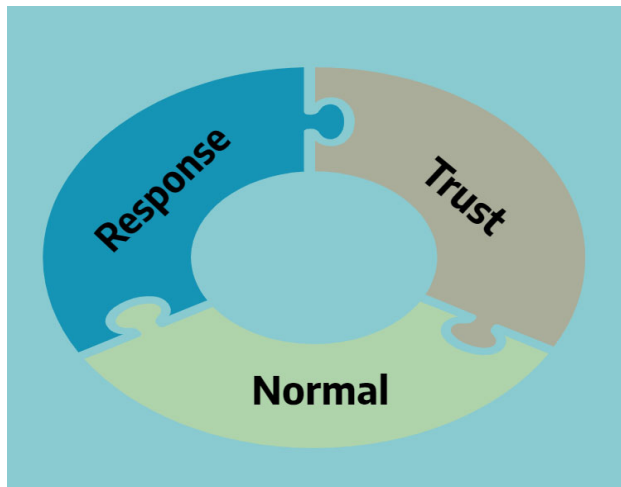
- 1) **Trust:** participants felt like they could trust the adults around them.
- 2) **Normalizing:** students felt that their disability was normalized by adults around them.
- 3) **Response:** students felt that the adults around them responded to their needs.

Further, the findings indicated a circular relationship among the three themes in the ongoing development of self-awareness and self-advocacy skills (Figure 4). The seven participants in this study described stories or instances where they understood that as students with special needs they could ask for what they needed to be successful and that it would be given to them - allowing them to develop trust with the adults around them; creating psychological safety. The act of being responsive to their request (asking for something accommodated via email or in person) reinforced their understanding that their needs would be acknowledged, increasing their ability to advocate for themselves. The researcher began to see these experiences as reinforcement loops in students' lives. Once the participants in this study felt comfortable with

the adults around them and developed a trusting relationship where they felt typical and like other students, they would be vocal about requesting accommodations or academic supports. When those requests were granted, students were positively reinforced by the action guaranteeing the student would continue to ask for what they needed (advocate for themselves). This behavioral pattern reinforces the action of self-advocacy and ensures that students will feel positive about advocating for themselves again.

Figure 4

Development of self-awareness of self-advocacy skills



Theme 1: Trust

Students develop and sustain self-advocacy skills when they feel comfortable with the adults and peers around them. Through adults' intentional and repetitive actions, students develop a trusting relationship with them in their educational space.

Participants identified experiences where they felt a sense of comfort or were comfortable and that this was a notable moment in their journey towards self-awareness and self-advocacy.

Participants reflected on those moments with nostalgia. Sophia for example shared:

I think in 10th grade we had to do presentations and I'm not really good at presenting at all. Like, I have severe anxiety and that makes my Tourette's flare up but I kept doing it and as I kept doing it over and over all the way up to this year, I've gained more. Like I got my comfort zone and I learned more about myself and how to use the people around me when I need to. I think it's because I met with my resource teachers and they just helped me get comfortable being me, you know?

The participants were able to identify who they were as freshmen students or students overall and attempted to articulate what changed throughout their educational journey. Veronica said:

When I was in elementary school or, like, in middle school people would always ask me about having an IEP or about having a resource teacher and everyone would be so nosy about it asking all these questions but like now, it's like its none of your business. I'm much more comfortable now because having extra time on things is just what happens if you have an IEP.

All participants expressed feelings of comfort, learning how to feel comfortable in order to obtain support, or explicitly said that feeling comfortable in speaking to their teachers and support specialists increased their frequency of speaking about their needs. Monica reiterated those feelings of comfort when she shared:

I guess teachers would be like, ‘I want her to be able to voice what she needs for classes and to tell me if she needs certain things or certain accommodations of sorts to be able to learn better’. So eventually, when I started to speak up for myself more and when I felt better doing it, like, I could just talk to them they would really be thankful and say things like, ‘thank you for telling me or thank you for letting me know’ and it made me feel and know that what I had to say mattered.

Jeff shared a similar sentiment:

... (a resource teacher) always said, ‘ask no matter what. Just ask your teacher for what you need and see what happens.’ The teachers are always nice and encourage us to speak up for what is in our IEP. Even if I didn’t do it before, or if new kids coming in don’t want to do it, everyone is so nice. They literally tell you to just ask, just ask! We ask and then we get comfortable doing it.

Jeff’s experience as a student with special needs appeared to be secondary to his experience as a learner overall. He was the most vocal about not letting his dyslexia define him and was adamant about the researcher telling freshman students that their IEP is not “their fault” and that teachers can do a lot to help them understand the material. Jeff was able to articulate how much he hated reading when he was in middle school because “it felt pointless” but was able to identify a change when he began attending this charter school and a resource teacher told him to “read anything. She told me that she didn’t care what I read but that I had to read for 30 minutes and listen to the book we were reading in class on my phone. That changed everything.”

The seven participants in this study spoke about, explained, or described how powerful feeling comfortable speaking to others is. They articulated possibly emailing, asking, or speaking

up often enough to the degree that they no longer felt shame or embarrassment around asking for help or additional support. Jeremiah shared that he “felt heard in classrooms and with teachers” because he was able to count on them when he needed them. Chris shared how pivotal the pandemic was in his educational journey because what he had done in the past could no longer work in a virtual or remote world. Chris specifically said:

You know what changed everything? The pandemic because I had to email everyone and ask everything. So, that changed how I talked to people and my teachers because I had to. I had to get comfortable because people were checking up on me and I didn't want to be lost.

The act of feeling comfortable was something that built up over time with many adults, including resource teachers telling these participants, *tell me what you need*. More importantly, the adults around them followed through on giving the participants what they asked for. That pattern of having an adult in a school setting give you what you ask for (such as extended time, or having something reduced) is empowering, builds trust, and diminishes the stigma that students with disabilities or designations are atypical or less worthy. The repeated shared experience of adults within our school being trustworthy allowed students to gain confidence and build up their comfort over time so that they knew that they were in a safe space regardless of what classroom they were in. By senior year and graduation, students with IEPs knew without a doubt that they could ask for an accommodation that they needed in order to access an assignment and that it would be given to them. Madison expressed:

I was always comfortable in emailing my teachers because first of all, they respond quickly and I did like that because it just made everything so much easier...I do feel very

comfortable now. In general, or in the past I did not feel comfortable asking for help on anything but now I do. Actually, I didn't feel comfortable in emailing my teachers at all or even in asking for help on anything, but now I feel much more comfortable.

These experiences might suggest that individuals with special needs may come to high school as freshman students with negative perceptions of who they are as learners. Adults in a school building can work on creating and increasing students' comfort in creating and maintaining self-advocacy skills by being receptive, trustworthy, and consistent.

Theme 2: Normalizing

Opportunity for student development of self-advocacy skills is improved when the adults around them make them feel “normal” or unexceptional from their peers.

Empowering youth with special needs is an integral component of the collective teaching experience. Super (as cited in Miller, 2007) found that “individuals with high self-esteem would be better prepared to identify needs, interests, values, and abilities and to make more appropriate career choices” (p. 12). While specific questions were not asked about students' self-esteem, the theme of being normal was brought up by six out of the seven participants. Similar to Theme 1 (*Trust*), the participants shared stories of initially feeling like something was “wrong” but then learned to embrace their differences. Sophia was very vocal about the idea of wanting to be normal in the past, but then recognizing that your difference could be an asset:

When I first got my IEP I didn't want it. I didn't want it because I thought I was weird, like, having a person know everything about you but now - now an IEP is not like you're weird or anything. It just means that you have support that you can fall back on when

you're not any different, like a normal kid, just with some support, extra support like teachers and stuff. They don't do anything to hurt you or to bring you down.

Monica's story was a great reminder of how important using inclusive language is to students because they are so aware of themselves as having difficulties in the school setting. She shared:

Feeling like a normal kid helps. And I mean you don't just get there. Teachers can try to find ways to make kids feel comfortable so that they don't feel different - just because you have an IEP does not mean that something is wrong with you, it just means that you need more support and there is nothing wrong with that. You just need more help than other people... I know that it's up to the student, or like me, to believe it, but it helps with teachers and just everyone around you remind the student, or reminded me that it was ok. That using accommodations when you need them help you and that that's normal too.

Veronica's experience is a perfect example of how students begin to develop self-awareness of self-advocacy skills. She was able to articulate how teachers asking her to tell them what she needs increased her capacity to speak up for herself while realizing that that skill is something that all students need assistance with as well. Veronica shared:

I'm a quiet person. I don't talk that much and I don't ask questions that much but, I feel like my teachers are always encouraging me to talk and ask questions. And especially senior year everyone said 'you have to practice doing this because no one is going to do it for you' not in a mean way, but in a way that helped me reach out more. Actually, that's helped a lot. Teachers ask me to tell them what I need and not in a way that they make me feel different even if an IEP says I'm different. If anything, I learned how to speak up

more than other people because I had to work really hard on what I was different in and in a way that makes me feel the same as everyone else.

The participants shared how powerful feeling different can be. It can limit how much or whether you speak up in classes, and how you perceive yourself to be as a learner, and, as shared by one participant, can lead to feelings of loneliness. Madison spoke with the researcher about feeling lonely when she couldn't understand why learning was hard for her and the perception that it came easier for others. She asked the researcher to work on telling incoming students they “weren't alone”

You know what's hard about this? Is that I know most kids are a little bit embarrassed but you shouldn't feel embarrassed about it. I can't tell people what they should think though. The only thing I can say is that if a student feels like they are not alone and that there are other students that have an IEP or the same learning disability as them and the teacher is just there to help them, they would know they can speak up more. Once I knew it wasn't a bad thing it made me just speak up

When students with special needs feel like they belong, that there is nothing wrong with them, and that they too are ‘normal’ it increases their comfort in speaking to adults, peers, and others. They no longer feel as if they cannot do their homework or a specific assignment, but recognize that they can do things differently or in a way that can be tailored for them because of their disability and IEP accommodations. Jeff also began to speak to the researcher about things to do with incoming students in order to help them feel more comfortable on campus. He stated:

I was never shy about having an IEP. Ok, fine, I didn't like the extra classes and sure, you can think to yourself, ‘my peers have a normal life and mind and they have normal

classes' but if people around you, like friends or people that work here, don't make you feel different - it's because you are not. My teachers have always made sure that I knew that I had an IEP and helped me not be embarrassed by it. Just because I have a learning disability does not make me unequal from my peers. We're equal too and that's the best way I can say it. I just learn differently.

Chris spoke about the support that teachers give him when he has been unable to complete an assignment and the feelings that he has around having an IEP:

Like you have an IEP, ok, who cares? Even when I think that I can't do something teachers are there, they will come up to me and they don't hold things against me because I can't do it. I am just a regular kid.

The idea of being typical or normal might suggest that resource teachers or adults on campus play an integral role in normalizing students' learning differences or neurodiversity by reacting to and treating accommodations requests' as common, typical, and not out of the ordinary. This finding connects with theme one (trust) because by normalizing their designation or learning disability, adults on staff are helping increase students' self-advocacy by being consistent and responsive in a way that allows the student to feel typical and like the other learners around them.

Theme 3: Response

Students develop self-awareness of self-advocacy skills when adults are responsive to their needs.

When adults on campus respond to students' verbal or written requests for their accommodations or support in a relatively immediate manner, students feel validated, heard, and trust that their needs are being met. Sophia stated:

So, all the teachers here... they tell me - what's it called? To ask for what I need. And I have and then the teachers do give me what I need whether it's extra time or I need something explained again or if I need to take a test in a separate room - they do as soon as I ask. No one has ever said no they all help me because they want me to do good.

All seven participants recalled experiences that helped them identify their request being acknowledged by their content teacher or resource teacher. Madison shared that the immediacy of the response is specifically what allowed her to continue to ask for support:

I think the reason why I was so comfortable in emailing my teachers is because, first of all, they'll respond quick, and I did like that because it just made it easier. I know that if I was to email for example, if I was to email (resource teacher) I know that they will respond right away and stuff and with suggestions to help me.

Participants shared that their emails to teachers were met with solutions in their responses, teachers stopping them at the moment to verbally explain something in a way that made sense to them, and, again, encouraging them to speak up, say something, or email their needs. Chris shared his classroom experiences when he feels lost:

Even though when I say, 'I can't do this' or 'I am not going to do this' teachers come up to me right away and say things like, 'yes you can' or they say, 'remember to ask for what you need so that you can' so like, I can't even really say that I am alone in what I want to do because teachers don't let me feel or get that way. I either tell them that I can

do it and they help me right there in class or I ask (resource teacher) and they help me right away.

Veronica made an interesting connection when she shared that a teacher responding to her academic needs has made her stress with assignments decrease:

...it feels nice to have extra time when I need it and that they'll give you the extra time.

Or if I am really struggling and I show them where I am at and where I am stuck I will get help and I think sometimes it makes me feel less stressed to know that the teacher knows that I am taking time to do what I need to do, not like I am avoiding it, but that I need more time. And I show them what I am doing, so they support me. I feel like it's definitely made me feel empowered in a sense.

Listening to and reading participants' responses around adult responsiveness pushed the researcher to think about the immediacy with which students felt their needs were being met. All of their stories and memories of asking for help were met with either "I was told I could do it and keep going" and with an immediate response granting them an accommodation. This undoubtedly also supports students in building trust with the adults around them. Students within the charter organization have learned that adults respond to their verbal or written needs.

Summary of Results and Findings

In this study, the participants were asked to describe their experiences as students with an educationally identified disability under IDEA as it relates to the phenomena of self-awareness of self-advocacy. All participants had just completed the coursework in order to earn their high school diploma and were previously students at an urban charter school on the west coast. All

participants were 18 years old and knew they had an IEP. Three themes emerged from the 14 semi-structured interviews (1) Trust, (2) Normalizing, and (3) Response.

Participants were also asked to complete the *Transition Assessment: Planning Transition and IEP Development for Youth with Mild Disabilities* (Miller et al., 2007) questionnaire. Six out of the seven participants rated themselves as having Knowledgeable *academic skills* and seven out of seven participants rated themselves as having Knowledgeable *employment skills*. These results aligned with their responses in the semi-structured interviews. Participants shared that they had the language and skills necessary to ask for what they needed (accommodations) in any class and with any teacher. Jeremiah shared that he had never meaningfully participated in or led his IEP; which is an uncommon response for the participants in this study. Seven participants reported feeling comfortable with their IEP, and reported understanding what their eligibility was. Seven out of the seven participants could explain to some degree what their IEP was for, stating that it was part of an assignment in class. One participant, in particular, Veronica, shared that she felt empowered after four years of being encouraged to speak up for herself and tell the adults around her what she needed in order to be academically successful.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities as it relates to the development of self-awareness of self-advocacy. Conclusions from this study note the importance of schools creating cultures where students feel comfortable and are able to develop trusting relationships with students, school staff embraces neurodiversity to the degree that learning differences are normalized, and students have an overall increased sense of psychological safety because the staff is responsive to their requests and learning needs. The final section of this dissertation will

compare the findings of this study with existing research, and literature, draw overall conclusions and suggest recommendations for future research and practice.

Section 5: Contribution to Practice

Analysis and Discussion

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a United States Federal law created in 1975 that set out to provide all students with a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) regardless of disability or diagnosis. The student's appropriate education is outlined in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which details the specific accommodations, goals, and services that a student requires in order to access grade-level curriculum alongside typical peers. The IEP also includes a transition plan which serves two purposes: (1) to help students decide what they want to do after high school graduation and (2), to help them achieve that goal (Understood for All, Inc, 2002). The Institute for Education Sciences considers six types of transition outcomes that educators can focus on when proposing goals: (a) behavioral, (b) social, (c) communicative, (d) functional, (e) occupational, and (f) basic academic skills (Institute of Education Sciences, 2012). It is within the transition process that the full IEP team (including parents and the student) can generate goals and services that teach students about their neurodiversity, and the accommodations they will continue to need post-high school to develop self-advocacy skills.

McConnell et al. (2015) suggest that while other studies may have advanced the field by identifying instructional approaches associated with improved post-school/education outcomes (Test & Fowler, 2009) there remains a continued need to “identify non-academic behaviors and experiences to provide IEP teams student behaviors associated with post-school school education

and employment that can easily be used to develop annual transition goals” (p. 175). The researcher set out to identify these day-to-day experiences of high school students with mild to moderate learning disabilities in order to support IEP teams in transition goal creation, understanding that the majority of the research done in the area of self-advocacy is with college-aged participants with ADHD and college retention (Holzberg et al., 2019, Test et al., 2005, Izzo & Lamb, 2002).

Numerous studies highlight the discrepancy between students with special needs and typical peers in overall life independence. They can also list the skills that are lacking and that need to be taught in a school setting in order to develop, including the ability to speak up for oneself (Field et al., 2003, Mason et al., 2004b & Test, 2005). This study set out to understand the experiences that allowed students to feel as if they could learn and develop skills around self-advocacy. What were the experiences that allowed the student to feel as if they could be vulnerable in a school setting around their peers and learn a skill that would serve as a protective factor for their disability? Three themes emerged from the data collection and interview analysis from the seven participants: trust, normalizing, and response. These themes begin to pave a way for educators to consider the possibility that developing self-advocacy skills, while intentional, does not have to be a daunting or exceptional task.

Aune (1991) notes that a student understanding their disability sets the stage for all transition skills. All seven participants were able to share when they understood they had an IEP and highlighted that adults at school, whether it was their resource teacher or others did not allow them to see that as a hindrance. The participants noted that their high school experiences were overwhelmingly positive with all participants sharing that no adult on staff ever refused to grant them an accommodation when it was asked. Jeremiah was the only participant who was able to

identify an experience where he was told no to their request and also noted that it was by a substitute teacher, but most notably, the participant was able to remedy the situation by speaking to a paraeducator or someone on staff that knew his needs which, ironically, is a perfect example of self-advocacy. Jeremiah knew the accommodations in his IEP and could request what was needed. When he was told no by the substitute teacher, he made sure to continue to ask others that knew him so that the situation could be remedied.

All of the participants in the study highlight that all teachers have asked them for their accommodations or have asked the students to remind them of their needs. This is a specific and deliberate practice of a skill that will allow students to develop a muscle of asking for their needs. Aune (1991) notes that for students to learn the necessary skills for self-advocacy, they need to first understand their disability, strengths, and weakness, practice self-advocacy skills in high school to request accommodations and supports, and be actively involved in IEP meetings. All participants shared that resource teachers on campus have all had lessons on sending out emails to teachers with their accommodations even using language such as “per my IEP.” Participants shared that those active and guided experiences helped them with the language to use. Participants were given the tools to practice asking for what they needed without recourse, reminding them that their voice has power.

Research by Brown and Skinner (2007) highlighted five areas that allow staff or teachers to build relationships with at-risk youth, including those with special needs with the intention that students will be themselves when they are in school (p. 1). Their five recommended steps, known as the Brown-Skinner model are: (1) listen, (2), validate, (3) problem-solve, (4) positive regard, and (5) hope. While the teachers mentioned in this study did not know they were following some of the recommendations that would allow a student to feel hope, they listened to

their needs, responded to their requests, generated a plan of action, and worked with them to problem-solve any situation. Most importantly, teachers and support staff did it with positive regard, demonstrating to the participants that their neurodiversity was respected. Brown and Skinner state that showing students positive regard... “is the best way to create a trusting environment (2007, p. 3) while being consistent in responses, moods, and tone. All participants shared that staff normalized their neurodiversity allowing them to ask for support. Because teachers and staff were consistent in their responses and overall positive regard, students began to feel they could trust the adults within the organization.

Izzo & Lamb (2002) define self-advocacy as the ability to assertively state wants, needs, and rights, determine and pursue needed supports, and conduct your own affairs. The definitions provided by the participants focus on two things (1) speaking up and (2) being heard. At the end of the second semi-structured interview, the researcher asked specific questions about self-advocacy. All seven participants were asked, “what does self-advocacy mean to you?” Their responses were somewhat similar in that they included phrases such as “stand up for myself” (Jeremiah), “tell them what I need” (Chris), and “speaking up” (Jeff). Madison spoke about trust and shared, “it means trusting the adults around you when they say to ask them for what you need and to know what you need every time.” Her definition of self-advocacy is powerful because it identifies what this researcher believes is an integral part of students with special needs feeling empowered: trust.

While this study emphasized Test’s (2005) theoretical framework of self-advocacy as a construct for teaching that skill to students, it seems like the emphasis of work needs to be on sustaining and doubling down on school culture and respect for all student learners before specific self-advocacy constructs can be taught. Participants were able to describe an arc of

growth that they had as students within our organization that speaks volumes to the community that teachers have built. Regardless of documented eligibility or learning needs, staff has made it clear that they will push students to be aware of their learning styles, and documented needs, and respond to any request. By setting up this system, or cycle, students can begin to feel comfortable with themselves and get to the point where they can speak up for others.

Study Limitations

This study focused on participants who had just graduated from an urban charter school on the west coast. The findings are limited in scope due to the seven participants who were interviewed, which represents a small sample of the overall population of special education seniors and graduates. All participants attended the same high school for four years and shared similar educational experiences with similar general education teachers. Although this study included both genders, three identified as male, and four identified as female, it continues to be a relatively small sample size and does not include students who identify as non-binary. Students who may have expressed interest in participating in the study were excluded based on qualifying criteria.

An additional limitation of this study is that at present, no other stakeholder was interviewed. The themes generated from the semi-structured interviews are solely based on the responses to the interview questions and questionnaire. Additional information may have been provided if general education teachers, special education teachers, and parents were interviewed through a semi-structured interview or given the parent or teacher versions of the *Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Skills Questionnaire* (Miller et al., 2007). Although this study was designed to understand students' awareness of self-advocacy, it is limited in scope

because the findings and themes come solely from seven participants that had a similar high school experience.

A glaring limitation of this study is that its research findings are not directly impacting participants' IEPs or their transition plans. Because of the provision in IDEA that stipulates including student voice in an IEP, transition plans must include “measurable postsecondary goals based on age-appropriate transition assessments related to education, employment, and, independent living skills (IDEA, 2004). This study addresses all of the components specified but was gathered after participants graduated. The data could not be integrated meaningfully since they no longer have IEPs.

Suggestions for Future Research

The findings from this research imply that students had an overall positive experience in their high school setting as students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. As the interviews demonstrate, participants felt that their voice was heard when a request was made, increasing the probability that they would ask for an accommodation again. Future research into self-awareness of self-advocacy could include interviews with students who are in the 9th grade. Understanding their awareness of this skill could allow IEP teams to develop robust transition plans and integrate the students into every facet of the IEP process at an early age.

A finding from this research that has not been addressed in the literature is the idea of responsiveness. Participants shared time and time again how adults around them either responded to their emails right away or said something to them in class that allowed them to feel heard. These forms of communication acknowledged their need and gave them clear next steps for how to move forward on an academic hurdle. Connecting this theme (theme 3) to safety and security in self-advocacy could be explored in further studies of high school students with mild

to moderate learning disabilities. Future research can also include interviewing the student, teacher, and parent in order to understand students' perceptions of their self-advocacy and compare that to what teachers and parents see in their community or classroom. Lastly, this study can be replicated in different schools so that public or different school communities can understand this phenomenon in their learning community.

Implications for Practice

This study sheds light on the high school experiences of students with an individualized education plan in a charter high school in a large urban city on the west coast. More specifically, this study set out to understand the lived experiences of participants who had just graduated from high school as it relates to their self-awareness of self-advocacy. The findings of this study suggest that staff responsiveness, care, and school or community culture work together to create a space where students feel like their psychological needs are met. It is through this space of feeling safe that students build trusting relationships with adults (Theme 1: *Trust*), have normalized learning experiences (Theme 2: *Normalizing*), and have adults around them that are responsive to their requests (Theme 3: *Response*).

Upon successful defense to the committee, the researcher plans to use the summer of 2023 to incorporate the findings into a multi-year plan that will increase students' self-advocacy at the charter school where the study took place. The researcher will present to the cabinet in order to update the Chief Executive Officer and Central Management Office with their findings. The researcher will also propose to work with the Executive Director of Student Services in order to increase training, awareness, and support for transition plans, a crucial component of students' IEPs. Since the summer is a time for planning and collaboration, the researcher and the Executive Director of Student Services will begin to plan out professional development (PD)

days for the organization. During the two-week-long PD for staff, the researcher will be able to connect with the Special Education team for at least 4 hours in order to review the research that was completed and speak to the plan for dissemination.

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), transition plans need to begin as soon as the student turns 14 years of age. It would be a big ask for resource teachers to begin the transition plan process for incoming freshman students, so the researcher would make sure that students who are seniors in the 2023-2024 school year have the transition plans audited by the resource teachers. If transition plans do not have goals around self-advocacy or psychoeducation, the researcher will ask the resource teachers to hold an amendment meeting in order to update the student's transition plan. The goal for the 2023-2024 school year is to have students who are seniors be able to lead their exit Individual Educational Plan (IEP) meetings and be able to speak about their neurodiversity and accommodations to others. The ultimate goal will be for a transition goal to be added at a student's 30-day meeting; so that when they enroll at our school site and their IEP transfers over, IEP teams are ensuring that self-advocacy will be taught and addressed throughout the course of students' high school careers.

Plan for Dissemination

Consideration will be taken to submit the results of this study to the Remedial and Special Education (RASE) peer-reviewed academic journal. The Remedial and Special Education (RASE) is a peer-reviewed academic journal associated with the Hammill Institute on Disabilities in conjunction with SAGE journals. According to the Author Submission guidelines, the journal "offers interdisciplinary articles that bridge the gap between theory and practice involving the education of individuals for whom typical instruction is not effective" (Hammill Institute on Disabilities, 2021). This publication is of specific interest since it is where the

researcher was able to locate the specific framework of self-advocacy that is used in this dissertation (Test et al., 2005). More specifically, the researcher was able to operationally define what differentiated self-advocacy from self-determination and how to use the conceptual framework of self-advocacy in this publication along with the Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Skills Questionnaire from the Informal Transition Assessment Instruments in the *Transition Assessment: Planning Transition and IEP Development for Youth with Mild Disabilities* (Miller, Lombard & Corbey, 2007). Locating and adopting the conceptual framework for this dissertation was crucial in then being able to design a methodology that would take a theoretical idea and apply it to practice, such as this journal publication intends to promote.

The SAGE Journal site promotes its 5.258 Impact Factor in addition to its overall 5-year impact factor (Clarivate, 2021). The Remedial and Special Education journal and index metrics show that in the past calendar year (2020) 209,915 articles have been downloaded from the platform either via PDF or HTML. The journal is also available in over 15 indexing databases for exposure and use. The Remedial and Special Education journal accepts original research studies, literature reviews, and conceptual, policy, or position papers (Lane & Shogren, 2019). All submissions appear similar in length (between 20-40 pages), must be double-typed, and include references, tables, figures (if applicable), and an abstract. Acceptance Criteria must meet the guidelines above and must have “clear implications of special education policy and practice” (2019). Manuscripts can be submitted electronically with a turn-around goal of the committee to accept, accept pending revisions, or reject within 90 days.

Section 6: Practitioner Reflection

Summary of the Inquiry

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of high school seniors with mild to moderate learning disabilities, and the factors, if any, that influence the self-awareness of self-advocacy skills. The researcher was interested in identifying the conditions which may have allowed the students to understand their learning disability through deliberate teaching (Test et al., 2005) or if any adults, plan, or goal allowed self-awareness of self-advocacy to thrive.

Research has been conducted with adult college students around self-determination and self-advocacy (Shogren et al., 2018, Stamp et al., 2014 & Test et al., 2005), yet there was a need to understand students' experiences in the high school setting. By giving students with mild to moderate learning disabilities the opportunity to share stories of this phenomenon in a suburban charter high school, the researcher was able to capture how self-awareness of self-advocacy may have grown or flourished within them. This study is significant because students who graduate high school and have an IEP due to a mild to moderate learning disability are “making the transition to adult life without the skills required to be successful members of society” (Miller et al., 2007, p. 3). This research will add to the scholarship surrounding supporting students with IEPs by prioritizing school or teacher culture while explicitly teaching self-advocacy skills in the high school setting.

Holzberg et al. (2019) noted that student knowledge of their rights and accommodations is imperative if students with disabilities are to succeed in more demanding educational settings (p. 176). The findings from this study indicate that there are specific conditions under which students will advocate for themselves. Three themes that emerged from the compressed

transcripts are care, normalizing, and responsiveness. It is only when students feel that adults care for them, normalize their learning differences, and respond to their needs will they learn and retain the skills necessary to advocate for themselves in any school or work setting.

Personal Shifts

This work was extremely important for me to deeply understand after working in the field of special education for a decade. When working as a school psychologist I would ask students if they knew why they had an IEP, or what accommodation they used, and very rarely did I meet a student that would be able to share knowledge of themselves or their specific needs. It was alarming because in many instances, students had an IEP for many years and had received accommodations and supports throughout their educational career. It was through these assessments and interactions with students that I began to feel an urgency to understand how I could help the charter organization I work for (and truly the work of school psychologists') understand where we could do better in order to improve lives.

Conducting this research at my place of employment and engaging in this work in an area that I felt genuinely interested and passionate about is an enormous privilege that was never lost on me. I am grateful for the students that gave me the opportunity to get to know them and their experiences as students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. Interestingly enough, the students that gave me their time appeared so self-assured and confident in their skills and abilities that I am confident that they will be able to hold their own and lead a meaningful life - which is the ultimate goal and hope of this research and area of inquiry. How can we help support students in inching toward a meaningful life? In a very small way, it may start with building strong relationships, normalizing their learning, and being responsive to their needs.

While researching different topics for my literature review I also realized that integrating

students with disabilities with their typical peers is an idea that has been around for some time, but following through with that shift in educational settings takes time. Reading the work of Normalization from the 1960s and 70s grounded me in understanding why cognitive segregation existed and why the debate to have students fully included in all settings has reached a tipping point of integration. It makes complete sense to have all learners in a space and to provide accommodated work based on their needs. I am also well aware of the demands that this stretch of planning for all learners has on educators, their planning, and materials. It is one of the reasons why I believe teaching students about themselves early and often can support teachers in the classroom and lead to the point where students are able to speak to everyone about how their brain works, how it integrates information, and how we can accommodate them in the world. Ultimately, I want this work to change how students view themselves and their learning - understanding that it is the adults around them that can get them to a place where students do not feel bound by their IEP, but rather liberated because they do not always have to blame themselves for things they cannot do. Students understanding their neurodiversity removes the shame and blame of comparison when learning is hard.

SNHU's philosophical alignment in Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was very grounding during this journey. Understanding that organizations can focus on what they already have to help them grow feels oddly connected even with my own area of research. I too am telling students that they have everything they need to assist them in their educational and life journey, as does AI with organizations and educational settings. What conducting this study taught me, however, is that students and learners of all ages need to feel that their specific learning needs are typical and ordinary - so that they feel comfortable trusting themselves and others. Developing trust is imperative for educators in our setting - it will lay the foundation for our long-term goals of

students with disabilities leading their exit IEPs at minimum, and asking for needed support in any post-secondary school or place of employment at maximum. I believe that the results of this study will change the way that we work with students that come to us with IEPs - we are doing so many great things already: encouraging students to email their teachers for their needs, introducing them to the IEPs, and being responsive to their needs. What we need to integrate is a systematic approach to how this is done per grade level and ensure that it is done across the organization. The results of this study and my role with the organization will ensure it gets done.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Invitation to Participate and Informed Consent



Southern New Hampshire University Institutional Review Board

Informed Consent Form for

Exploring Self-Awareness of Self-Advocacy Skills Among Senior High School Students with Mild to Moderate Learning Disabilities

You are being invited to participate in a research project conducted by Lynn Rodriguez, who is a doctoral candidate at Southern New Hampshire University.

You are invited to participate in a research study about self-awareness of self-advocacy skills of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities.

The following sessions will be an in-person or zoom interview to ask about your specific experiences in our program. The researcher is interested in your lived experiences in special education and how those experiences have impacted your ability to speak about yourself.

- Session 1: Answering 16 questions. Should take no more than 45 minutes
- Session 2: Face-to-face or zoom interview with the researcher. Should take no more than 45 minutes
- Session 3: Face-to-face or zoom interview with the researcher.

While you will not be compensated monetarily, you may benefit from knowing that you are helping to expand the knowledge base in Education. The results of this study will contribute to our knowledge of self-advocacy in High School.

The researcher has not identified any possible risks that you would incur in participating in this research study however, the researcher does recognize that the nature of the interview questions may cause some emotional distress. Steps to avoid or minimize such risks include frequent check-ins during the interview, reminders that you may skip any question you do not wish to answer, and a list of local free or low-cost mental health services.

If you have decided to participate in this project, please understand that your participation is voluntary and that you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time with no penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason with no penalty.

In addition, your privacy will be maintained in all publications or presentations resulting from this study. Your responses to this survey will be anonymous. Please do not write any identifying

information on your survey. Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality including the following:

- Assigning code names/numbers for participants that will be used on all research notes and documents.
- Keeping notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in a locked file cabinet in the possession of the researcher.

Participant data will be kept confidential except in cases where the researcher is legally obligated to report specific incidents. These incidents include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and suicide risk.

When the research study ends, any identifying information will be removed from the data, or it will be destroyed. All of the information you provide will be kept confidential.

If you have any questions regarding this project, you may contact the researcher at lynn.rodriquez1@snhu.edu. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant or any concerns regarding this project, you may report them – confidentially, if you wish – to the UC Institutional Review Board Chairperson at IRB@snhu.edu or the COCE Institutional Review Board Chairperson at COCEIRB@snhu.edu.

A copy of this consent form will be provided to you.

I understand the above information and voluntarily consent to participate in the research.

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

IRB Approval Number: _____ IRB Expiration Date: _____

Appendix B: Interview Guide - Interview #1Purpose:

The purpose of the interview is to:

- Introduce myself to the student.
- Review informed consent and the purpose of the study.
- Address any questions they may have around their participation.
- Use a multimodal approach to show the student how their data will be protected (using a pseudonym, plan for deleting the data, etc).
- Remind them that they may opt out of the study at any time.

Questions:

Basic background questions to gain trust and familiarity:

- What school do you attend?
- Are you excited that you are a senior?
- What do you plan to do after graduation?
- Can you describe your experience as a student at our school?
- When I say IEP, what does that mean to you?
- Can you tell me what you have an IEP for?

Provide questionnaire to the students

Administer the *Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Skills Questionnaire* (Appendix C).

Conclusion:

- Thank the participant for their time.
- Begin the Member Check validation technique where the researcher re-states what was shared for clarification.
- Schedule the next interview.
- Access the researcher journal to record any thoughts, observations, or feelings about our session.

Appendix C: Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Skills Questionnaire

Miller, R.J., Lombard, R.C., & Corbey, S.A., (2007).

Name: _____

Today's Date: _____

Grade: _____

Age: _____

Anticipated Graduation Date: _____

Disability (Please be specific): _____

The following questionnaire was developed to identify your level of knowledge and skill in issues related to self-determination and self-advocacy. After reading each of the following sixteen statements, please circle **one number** that best describes your level of skill.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Not at all					All the time

1. I can list and discuss the academic accommodations I need to be successful in high school.
2. I can list and discuss the support services I need on the job in order to be successful.
3. I am able to independently contact the adult service providers that I will need to help me reach my employment goals.
4. I can independently request and effectively use academic accommodations in all my classes.
5. I can list and discuss the accommodations I will use to be successful in my job.
6. I can list and discuss my rights for reasonable academic accommodations under the law.
7. I identify myself as a person with a disability in order to get the support services I deserve in postsecondary education.
8. I can list and discuss the support services I will need in postsecondary education in order to be successful.
9. I can state accommodations I need in the workplace that are guaranteed to me by law.
10. I identify myself as a person with a disability in order to get the support services I deserve from my employer.
11. I am able to independently contact the adult service providers that will help me reach my post-secondary education goals.
12. I lead my own IEP team meetings.

13. I state my goals and aspirations for each school year during the annual IEP meeting.
14. I can independently request and effectively use accommodations on the job.
15. I have identified my long-term employment goals for after high school and I can state and discuss these long-term goals.
16. I am able to identify and discuss the amount and type of postsecondary education or training I will need to reach my long-term employment goals.

Appendix D: Interview Guide - Interview #2

Purpose: The purpose of this interview is to:

- Re-introduce myself and the purpose of the study.
- Reassure them of their confidentiality.
- Thank them for their willingness to participate.
- Review the results of the *Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Skills Questionnaire*

Questions:

Informed by Stamp, L., Banerjee, M., & Brown, F. (2014)

1. When did you realize that you had an IEP?
2. Can you tell me about the time you realized you had a diagnosis or learning disability?
3. What experience helped you learn more about yourself at our school?
4. Describe an experience at school that made you feel like we cared about your ability to speak up for yourself
5. Can you describe situations in which you have asked for help with issues related to your eligibility or diagnosis?
6. Tell me about a time when you felt like you could email or ask your teachers about your accommodations or supports
7. Were you ever asked to advocate for yourself at school? What did that look like? What did that feel like?
8. Can you think of a time when you asked for your accommodations and were told no?
9. Can you describe specific things people (students, teachers, counselors, other staff members, etc.) have done to encourage you to speak about what is in your IEP?
10. Do you feel confident in speaking about your eligibility and/or disability to others?

Conclusion:

- Thank the participant for their time
- Begin the Member Check validation technique where the researcher re-states what was shared for clarification.
- Schedule final interview (if needed)
- Access the researcher journal to record any thoughts, observations, or feelings about our session.

Appendix E: Self-Advocacy and Perceptions of College Readiness among Students with ADHD questionnaire

Stamp, L., Banerjee, M., & Brown, F. (2014, p. 160).

Interview Questions:

1. How would you describe the impact that ADHD has on the way you interact with others in social, educational, and/or work settings?
2. Can you describe situations in which you have asked for help with issues related to ADHD?
3. How have you coped with having an ADHD diagnosis? Can you describe specific interactions with others in educational, work, or social situations that have had an impact on the way in which you cope with ADHD?
4. What is your perception of how people in society think and feel about ADHD?
5. How do you decide whether or not to disclose that you have a diagnosis of ADHD? When do you decide to disclose, how do you explain ADHD to others?
6. To what extent do you feel that society perceives ADHD in a different light from other learning difficulties (like dyslexia or Asperger's)?
7. What do you think is the most important thing for adults to know and do to prepare students with ADHD?
8. To what extent has ADHD changed the way you perceive your strengths and weaknesses as a student, the way in which you interact with other students who do not share an ADHD diagnosis, and the level of success and independence you feel you can achieve as a student/future employee?

9. Can you describe specific things people (parents, teachers, students, administrators, other staff members, etc.) have said or done that have either helped or hindered your efforts to communicate more assertively in educational, occupational, and/or social situations?

10. What medication/non-medication interventions have helped you address/manage some of the symptoms associated with ADHD?