MIDWEST SCHOOL DISTRICT TRANSITION ACADEMY:

A QUALITATIVE, PROCESS EVALUATION OF A PROGRAM FOR

STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

OR EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCES

A Dissertation

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the Faculty of the Graduate School

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

MIDWEST SCHOOL DISTRICT TRANSITION ACADEMY: A QUALITATIVE, PROCESS EVALUATION OF A PROGRAM FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS OR EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCES

Presented by Paul D. Myers,

A candidate for the degree of Doctor of Education

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Kristen, Sam, and Noah, my wonderful family and support during this process. Your faith and steady encouragement was the guiding light I needed to lead me through to the end of this road.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine the implementation of a special education program designed to support students with autism and social/emotional disturbances in a large, suburban school district. The study examined how services are delivered to students, staffing/personnel aspects, and budgetary considerations relative to programming. Consistent with Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman (2004), a process evaluation model allowed analysis of provisions specific to program implementation within the Midwest Transition Academy. The method allowed for an identification of program strengths and deficits within the evaluation process.

The study was considered through the lens of social justice leadership theory in terms of how leaders address subgroups within the typical public school environment (Theoharis, 2007). The findings identified in the study highlight a program that was meeting students' needs, but struggling to facilitate communication between stakeholder groups. Although environmental structures and financial supports were identified as positive, there were concerns about Transition Academy personnel feeling isolated from other district personnel. The findings also indicated that the program model was effective from a financial viewpoint. The program operates at a per pupil cost that is less than comparable private placement programs. Concerns related to staff attrition suggested improvements in procedural, communication, and supervisory elements are essential to improving program continuity in the future.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the Study

Background

Beginning with initial programming, services designed for special education

students have evolved from predominantly exclusionary practices to progressively more

inclusive models (Carter & Hughes, 2006). One recent aspect of current services has

focused on the complex task of educating students with low incidence disabilities

characterized by challenging maladaptive behaviors and significant developmental delays

(Riehl, 2000). Specific low-incidence special education populations, most notably

students with autism and students with severe social/emotional disturbances, are difficult

for school districts to effectively manage and teach due to the students' highly diverse

educational and behavioral needs.

As school districts strive to develop effective programs to meet the needs of

students with autism and social/emotional disturbances, their efforts are complicated due

to multiple factors. For example, districts must identify and train qualified personnel

capable of working with these student populations. Both the hiring aspect and the training

of staff require funding supports within an already limited financial landscape (Jennett,

Harris, & Mesibov, 2003). The district must then work to retain those personnel in the

face of high staff attrition rates due to student specific behaviors, work environment

stressors, and competitive employment opportunities in other districts.

The group of students with autism spectrum disorders has been a particular

subject of focus relative to mediating employee stressors and reducing staff attrition

(Billingsley, 2003). The focus also corresponds with increasing attention on the autism

population given by increased media reports on incidence rates and debates on causal factors. The ascension of autism incidence rates, combined with increased inclusive practices of the same student population, represents an opportunity to consider how this growing dynamic may impact school districts.

Parallel to increased rates of autism, school districts are exploring options for addressing the needs of students with social/emotional disturbances characterized by patterns of overtly aggressive behavior toward peers and staff. Within this context, school districts increasingly face the issue of how to develop, implement, and maintain quality programs to address the needs of students with autism and severe social/emotional disturbances.

<center>Statement of the Problem</center>

The growth of low incidence special education populations, specifically in the areas of autism spectrum disorders and social/emotional disturbances, represents an emerging challenge within school districts (Riehl, 2000). Existing literature specific to the development and implementation of programs targeting the area of autism spectrum disorders is particularly limited. Most of the current literature for both populations is targeted either to individual strategies (for example, reducing aggression) or instructional methods and does not present an overview from a program perspective. Within the diverse range of special education populations, the available studies specific to the autism spectrum and to the social/emotionally disturbed populations in regard to program development are less robust compared to other low-incidence groups (Billingsley & Cross, 1991).

As a result, school districts face a growing challenge to develop programs with minimal existing information on comprehensive programs designed to meet the needs of these specific student populations. Studying the implementation of a large-scale program for students with autism or severe social/emotional disturbances in a suburban school district provided an opportunity to consider how one district has approached the issue of program development in terms of overall effectiveness and program quality. In considering the program, the researcher will consider stated program goals and how they are met through staffing considerations, professional development structures, and financial expenditures.

<div align="center">Research Purpose</div>

The intent of the study was to examine the implementation and evolution of a special education program designed to support students with autism and social/emotional disturbances in a large, suburban school district. At its core, the exploration of a large-scale program provides a perspective on existing practices and insight into how one district is addressing the programming challenges connected with this student population. Specifically, the study examined how services are delivered to students, staffing/personnel aspects, and budgetary considerations relative to programming. Given the evolving nature of programs and the topic under consideration, the focus of the study was flexible to allow inclusion of issues discovered through the program evaluation process (Creswell, 2009).

For the purposes of this study, the program and student population under consideration were defined based on parameters of the Midwest School District Transition Academy (pseudonym used for confidentiality purposes). The Midwest School

District Transition Academy represents the most recent addition to a comprehensive, district-wide program originally developed to address the needs of students with autism. From a global perspective, programming for students with autism in the Midwest School District has developed from a small, one classroom program for students with autism at the early childhood special education level to a large, multi-site program across all grade levels within the district. Although originally intended solely for students with autism, the Transition Academy has evolved into a more comprehensive, center-based location for students with autism or severe social/emotional disturbances.

Research Questions

The core intent of the study was to develop a comprehensive picture of the Midwest School District Transition Academy. As an exploration of a center-based program, the study gathered information specific to the following questions:

1) What is the process for placing students, measuring progress, and determining program impact for students at the Midwest School District Transition Academy?

2) How does the district develop and retain quality personnel to work with students with significant aggressive behaviors?

3) How does the district fund the program needs for low-incidence populations?

4) What role do administrators and certified staff (teachers and behavior specialists) play in program development for students?

Conceptual Frameworks

Characterizations of public agencies, in particular large-scale systems, tend to focus on perceived inefficiencies within bloated bureaucratic structures. Programs developed and implemented within these same agencies tend to be viewed as fruit of the

same poisoned tree (Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999). For leaders within public school agencies, these broad characterizations present a challenge to program development in terms of combating negative perceptions from outside and within their local school districts (Jennett et al., 2003). The stated intent of the study is to examine the implementation and evolution of a special education program designed to support students with autism and social/emotional disturbances in a large, suburban school district. On a fundamental level, the study must consider the basic obligation, via federal and state mandates, of school districts to provide quality programming for all students. In particular, connected to tenets of social justice theory, public school districts must meet the needs of the full spectrum of students regardless of the severity of their disabilities. Related to this mandate are the issues of how leaders promote change, develop and implement programs within their organizations to effectively and efficiently meet the needs of students.

The core of social justice theory defines the mechanism by which society assigns responsibilities and distributes both the benefits and burdens of our cooperative social efforts (Rawls, 1999). Specific to the idea of special education students, social justice theory raises the issue of how the students' needs are effectively met within the global school environment. More importantly, Theoharis (2007) frames social justice leadership to characterize how leaders address subgroups, including special education students, who are often marginalized within the typical public school environment.

Social justice theory also connects leadership elements inherent in program development to the issue of addressing marginalized student populations. In this context, the root issue considers the role of the leader in implementing programs for high need

special education populations. Marshall (2004) illustrates this connection in explaining the lack of intensive training in leadership preparation programs specific to marginalized populations. The information on conflicting elements of inclusive practices and the articulation of the steps to building inclusive programs provide a template to study how principals may operate when working with diverse student populations. The information highlights the challenges encountered in working with low incidence special education groups consistent with the purposes of this study.

Delving further into the issue may illuminate the inherent challenges for leaders in program implementation and effective organizational change. A key element for program implementation is the ability for an organization to recruit and retain essential personnel. When considering program efficacy for low incidence groups, recruitment and retention of staff speaks to the ability of an organization to sustain a coherent program structure (Zabel & Zabel, 2001). An organization experiencing problems in recruiting quality staff or retaining them for sustained intervals of time is likely to experience problems with consistent program implementation. At the same time, for an organization operating within a public funding setting, the importance of implementing programs in a manner that is cost effective is a vital aspect of program efficacy. High rates of staff turnover or poor recruitment strategies means the funds expended in these areas are used in an inefficient manner. An administrator entrusted with using public funds in a wise and efficient manner must be able to address these areas of concern as part of program management.

Design and Methods

Mertens (2005) provides extensive detail on evaluation standards for study utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy derived from *The Program Evaluation Standards*. Through a program review, the study considered efficacy challenges to the development of educational programming for students with autism or severe social/emotional disturbances. The study gathered information on program origins and current practices within a special education program designed to support students with autism in the Midwest School District Transition Academy.

Consistent with Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman (2004), a process evaluation model allowed analysis of provisions specific to program implementation within the Transition Academy. In essence, the process evaluation seeks to understand whether a program is implemented in the manner intended through the program design. The process evaluation model, as a subset of program monitoring, incorporates perspectives on how the program operates and achieves outcomes. Both issues connect to the core study goal of gathering a comprehensive picture of a program for students with autism or social/emotional disturbances. The method also allows for an identification of program strengths and deficits within the evaluation process and an understanding of how closely the program is meshed with the original design.

As referenced previously, the study purposefully selected the Midwest School District Transition Academy as the site of the study. The Transition Academy is the most recent program implemented in a chain of educational settings developed from a small program for students with autism at the early childhood special education level. The Transition Academy allows for a rich data source for a process evaluation model

specifically targeted to implementation issues. Since the particular aspects of the program are relatively new, a stand-alone evaluation can shed light on how well stated procedures have been implemented (Rossi et al., 2004).

The primary data sources were derived from program records, interviews, and focus groups (Creswell, 2007). A personal journal was also maintained during the course of the study to provide amplifying detail. The process evaluation approach within a program review clearly points to the three sources of data selected. Key information included gathering a current picture of the program (description of program operation) and reviewing how the program conforms to the intended design both globally and specific to stated program objectives. Data sources required development of an interview protocol; a focus group format; and program documents to illustrate the Transition Academy parameters. The use of multiple sources provided supporting documentation for accuracy, but transferability issues are noted due to site specificity. It should be noted that observations at the program location were considered, but were ruled out and deemed problematic due to the sensitive nature of confidentiality issues for special education students and concerns about disrupting educational programming. Interviews with parents, as another stakeholder group, were also ruled out due to confidentiality concerns across participant groups and potential legal or compliance issues related to special education law.

The data analysis process required the development of thematic units specific to the primary research questions. In order to develop themes, audio taped interviews and focus group outcomes were transcribed into a written script. An open coding process identified categories and subcategories about the Transition Academy that were most

pertinent to participants. The program documents provided a comparison point to contrast interview themes and outcomes with program parameters. Analysis of the program's historical records also provided a path for isolating program intentions versus program realities and defined financial details specific to cost considerations. A primary concern was soliciting information from personnel who may be reluctant to identify program faults due to my supervisory capacity within the program. The process of helping participants understand the benefits of a program evaluation was embedded within consent documents. Researcher bias due to familiarity with program and participants must be addressed. Additional considerations resolved within the research design included:

1. Identifying an appropriate peer to review and validate selected themes.

2. Development of a consistent interview protocol that fits multiple participant groups.

3. Development of a focus group protocol that provides structured feedback from multiple participants.

Terms

Within any individual program, there are idiosyncratic terms and descriptors used by program participants to delineate aspects of the program. As part of the study, the following descriptive terms will be used when referencing specific program components:

Transition Academy: A separate, specialized facility within the Midwest School District created at an off-site location specifically for meeting the needs of the most intensive Transition students within the district.

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Transition Academy Student: A student identified with educational autism or severe social/emotional disturbances as defined by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education State Plan for Special Education and placed in a self-contained special education setting within the Midwest School District.

Transition Room: One of six special education on-site classrooms in place across the Midwest School District developed specifically for students with autism.

The key locations and program elements associated with the study are identified by terminology currently used within the Midwest School District Transition Program.

Significance

The growth of low incidence special education populations, specifically in the area of the autism spectrum and social/emotional disorders, highlights an emerging issue for school districts from programming and funding perspectives. The study will add information to the literature specific to the development and implementation of programs targeting the areas of autism spectrum disorders and social/emotional disturbances. Most of the current literature is targeted either to individual strategies (for example, reducing aggression) or instructional methods and doesn't present an overview from a program perspective.

A program evaluation tracking the inception and growth of the Midwest School District Transition Academy may suggest avenues for other districts to consider in crafting their own approach to these student populations. The current information on students with autism spectrum disorders suggests the population continues to demonstrate increased identification incidence rates (Billingsley, 2003).

On a related front, school districts have long struggled to create effective programming for students with social/emotional disorders. In the coming years, schools districts should continue to see an increase in the number of students with autism spectrum disorders and, concurrently, an increasing need for staff qualified and trained to provide for the educational needs of this group. The literature suggests low incidence special education student populations may have an adverse impact on staff retention rates and increase the incidence rate of staff burnout (Jennett et al., 2003). At the same time, the available literature has only recently started to explore the specific relationship between stress responses in relation to school personnel working with students with autism spectrum diagnoses (Lecavalier, Leone, & Wiltz, 2006). One possible process outcome would be to highlight issues connected to staff burnout and suggest alternatives. The current study may also illustrate procedural errors that other districts may avoid in program development.

For the past ten years, with increasing intensity in the past three years, the Midwest School District has grappled with the issue of how to effectively provide instruction for students with autism and students with social/emotional disturbances. In particular, the challenge of working with highly aggressive students in a manner that is effective and safe for students and personnel has been daunting. Specific to autism spectrum disorders, the embedded information on instructional strategies highlights the cost intensive measures of training special education staff and directly references cost factors associated with specific types of instruction. School districts, based on both best practice considerations and educational mandates, invest significant funds to prepare staff members and facilities to meet the instructional needs of students with autism. Inefficient

program implementation and staff retention issues represent a potential threat to that investment (West, Jones, & Stevens, 2006). In addition, staff attrition adversely impacts continuity of service and the educational progress of students when employment changes result in the hiring of less qualified or trained staff (Zabel & Zabel, 2001). A program evaluation study specific to the Transition Program will provide insight into possible changes that would create a more efficient and effective environment for students and staff in the Midwest School District.

Assumptions

From a program evaluation perspective, the identified research questions and the overall format of the Midwest Transition Academy suggests certain assumptions entering into the study:

1) The highly unique nature of many Transition Academy students means the overall process for measuring student progress and outcomes will also be unique to the individual student.

2) The low staff to student ratio at the Transition Academy, necessitated by the aggression levels of the student population, results in a per pupil expenditure rate that is comparable to private placements for low incidence students at out of district locations.

3) The primary factors influencing staff recruitment and retention will focus primarily on issues related to levels of student aggression.

4) The secondary factors impacting staff recruitment and retention will derive from staff members' perceptions, both positive and negative, of working in an

unconventional school environment when compared to a traditional public school setting.

5) The relatively short history of the Transition Academy, combined with the limited number of school personnel and parents involved to date, means these individuals will have an inordinate degree of influence on program parameters and functioning in comparison with more established programs with entrenched norms and procedures.

Summary

From a program evaluation perspective, the study examined the current Transition Academy in the Midwest School District. The study explored the implementation and evolution of the Transition Academy in terms of overall effectiveness and program quality. Information drawn from the program evaluation process provides a point of reference for other programs, either already existing or under development. In addition, the process highlights existing structures within the program and areas of consideration for future programming development and revisions. In considering the program, I reviewed the current procedures and outcomes relative to the intended student service model, staff retention/training issues, funding considerations, and stakeholder perspectives. A measured review of these elements helps to refine existing practices, identify program strengths, and consider specific avenues for enhancing the overall quality of the Midwest Transition Academy.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Related Literature

Introduction

The growth of low incidence special education populations, specifically in the areas of autism spectrum disorders and emotional disturbances, represents an emerging challenge within school districts (Riehl, 2000). Existing literature specific to the development and implementation of programs targeting the area of autism spectrum disorders is limited. Most of the current literature is targeted either to individual strategies (for example, reducing aggression) or instructional methods and does not present an overview from a program perspective. Within the diverse range of special education populations, the available studies specific to autism spectrum disorders and emotional disturbances specific to program development are less robust compared to other low-incidence groups (Billingsley & Cross, 1991).

As a result, school districts face a growing challenge to develop programs with minimal existing information on comprehensive programs designed to meet these specific student populations. From a program exploration standpoint, the Transition Academy in the Midwest School District provided an opportunity to consider how one district has approached the issue in terms of overall effectiveness and program quality. In considering the program, it was possible to explore stated program goals and how they are met through staffing considerations, professional development structures, and financial expenditures.

The intent of the study was to examine the implementation and evolution of a special education program designed to support students with autism and social/emotional

disturbances in a large, suburban school district. At the core, the exploration of a large-scale program provided a perspective on existing practices and insight into how one district is addressing the programming challenges connected with this student population. Specifically, the exploration examined how services are delivered to students, staffing/personnel aspects, and budgetary considerations relative to programming. Given the evolving nature of programs and the topic under consideration, the focus of the study was flexible to allow for inclusion of issues discovered through the program exploration process (Creswell, 2009).

The core intent of the study was to gather a comprehensive picture of the Midwest School District Transition Academy. As an exploration of a center-based program, the study gathered information specific to the following questions:

1) What is the process for placing students, measuring progress, and determining program impact for students at the Midwest School District Transition Academy?
2) How does the district develop and retain quality personnel to work with students with significant aggressive behaviors?
3) How does the district fund the program needs for low-incidence populations?
4) What role do administrators and certified staff (teachers and behavior specialists) play in program development for students?

Connecting to these questions, from a conceptual viewpoint, the frames of social justice theory and organizational theory illustrate leadership elements inherent in program development related to addressing marginalized student populations. The past twenty years have demonstrated steadily increasing numbers of high need students participating in traditional public school environments (Carter & Hughes, 2006). On a theoretical

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level, the parameters and channels by which high need students are included speak to the society of public education and operational systems within school districts. The frames of program implementation and organizational change provide an avenue to consider administrative responsibilities specific to the inclusion of a wide range of students with disabilities in public school settings (Riehl, 2000).

School leaders, operating as primary authors of change within school environments, must consider program models and structures to successfully support special education inclusive practices. Specific to autism spectrum and social/emotional disorders, information on instructional strategies highlights the cost intensive measures of training special education staff and directly references cost factors associated with specific types of instruction (West et al., 2006). School districts, based on both best practice considerations and educational mandates, invest significant funds to prepare staff members and develop programs for students. They also face recurring training costs, particularly for ineffective programs, due to high staff attrition and adverse outcomes on the continuity of service for students (Zabel & Zabel, 2001). If a program is not effectively implemented, the school district has failed its fundamental responsibility to stakeholders and the public at large.

Beyond the impact of leaders advocating for low-incidence groups, there is also an expectation that leaders will convey this belief to personnel under their supervision. To this end, the dynamic of teacher rapport and relationships with students with autism or emotional disturbances serves as method for considering how social justice theory translates into the classroom (Zeichner, 2009). Robertson, Chamberlin, and Kasari (2003) summarize previous studies that suggest teacher/student rapport, across a range of student

populations, is adversely impacted by negative behavioral issues from students. In extrapolating specific to students with autism, the authors identified a similar relationship between teachers and students with autism. While teachers' ratings of inclusive practices for students with autism were positive, there was a consistent negative impact on teacher ratings as episodes of negative student behavior increased.

As an interesting corollary, the Robertson et al. (2003) identified the impact of paraprofessionals on the successful integration of students with autism in general education settings. The study found no consistent measureable benefit on the student-teacher rapport when paraprofessionals were present in classrooms. Another key is the illustration of particular behaviors associated with low incidence groups may adversely impact classroom environments and teacher dynamics. The correlation data is clear in suggesting a moderate, but significant, interaction effect on teacher/student rapport and the acceptance of students with autism in general education settings. Connecting back to social justice theory and organizational theory, the outcomes suggest that the ability of a leader to promote inclusion for low-incidence populations are markedly hindered as the level of aggression exhibited by a student increases. In this case, for students with autism spectrum disorders and emotional disturbances, perceptual stereotypes and direct observations of low-incidence groups engaging in aggressive behavior may result in a biased overall perception.

At the most basic level, drawing on social justice considerations, a program evaluation specific to special education students should consider the actual benefit to and impact on students in the program. As noted by Slavin (2008), research specific to educational programming has moved progressively in the direction of evidence-based

outcomes over the past two decades. Slavin's findings largely synthesize key considerations for quantitative studies, but a qualitative program evaluation can also consider evidence-based outcomes. Because the Midwest Transition Academy focuses on placing students outside their home school environment, there is a need to consider how the program identifies students for placement in the program. In addition, given the focus on transitioning students back to their home schools once behaviors are stabilized, the program supervisors also need a systematic process for charting student progress and measuring the program's impact.

Beyond the obligations associated with social justice theory, the implementation of quality programs for students with autism presents a challenge to school districts specific to developing and maintaining quality personnel. As an area of study, the impact of environmental stressors on teachers' emotional wellbeing and employee retention rates has focused predominantly on students with intellectual disabilities or emotional disturbances (Hastings, 2002). School personnel working with students with autism face unique training requirements (learning techniques for safely restraining aggressive students, liability issues associated with monitoring seclusion settings) and increasing stressors in the workplace environment.

Lecavalier et al. (2006) focused on parent and teacher ratings of student/child behavior as correlated with stress indicators for the parent or teacher. The study, specific to caregivers working with student with autism spectrum diagnoses, emphasized the negative impact of aggressive student populations on caregiver stress levels. Connected to staff retention rates, was the finding that increased caregiver stress levels are also tied with behaviors typically associated with even the milder aspects of autism spectrum

disorders (shy/avoidant behaviors, withdrawal, stimulatory behaviors). The correlation of increased caregiver stress levels for even the mild aspects of autism spectrum disorders adds an additional layer of complexity when exploring how effective programs retain quality personnel (Carter & Hughes, 2006). When contrasted with programming for students with social/emotional disturbances, the programming profile for students with autism suggests a similar pattern of need.

In considering other low-incidence student populations and teacher burnout, Beck and Gargiulo (2001) conducted an analysis of provider stress levels. Through self-reports on the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the study considered stress indicators across three populations of teacher groups: teachers of students with mild cognitive impairment, teachers of students with moderate cognitive impairment, and regular education teachers. Findings showed that there was a significant discrepancy between the two special education groups in comparison with the regular teachers. The findings were contrary to the authors' hypothesis in that both special education teacher groups reported statistically significant lower levels of stress indicators, higher positive ratings in job satisfaction and success, and positive personal health reports. The suggested rationales for the differences include considerations about different personality constructs between the groups and cultural expectations for special education teachers that might result in biased self-reporting. The study, based on the inconsistency with expected outcomes, provides a foundation for lines of inquiry into how special education teachers working with different sub-groups might exhibit different burnout reports.

The merits of gathering background information specific to early research into staff stress and challenging behavior because it provides a framework for current

analysis. Jenkins, Rose, and Lovell (1997) represented some of the initial analysis specific to stress indicators for staff working with special education populations. The authors noted the study was originally intended as a comparative analysis of staff working with two populations, one population working with clients with challenging behaviors and the second working in settings without challenging behaviors. However, the results of the study revealed an interesting finding because the research method relied on experts in the environments to identify which settings were characterized by challenging behaviors. In the data analysis, Jenkins et al. (1997) found populations characterized by experts as lacking challenging behaviors were characterized differently by staff members working directly with the population. Therefore, the two groups actually shared similarities in terms of challenging behavior, but incident reports gathered by the oversight groups prior to the study did not reveal this similarity.

As a result, the question arises of what factors had limited the incident reporting in the supposedly non-challenging environments. One consideration is whether employees were leery of reporting issues because it might reflect poorly on their job skills. In this scenario, it would be difficult for program managers and evaluators to garner a true picture of staff feelings and perceptions and hinder efforts to correct problems that might lead to staff leaving.

Related to quality professional development, West et al. (2006) emphasized the importance of ongoing collaboration with other practitioners and the process of building a shared knowledge base between colleagues (paraprofessionals in particular). The researchers noted there was an initial expectation teachers would seek out professional development workshops and access to continuing education through professional

coursework. In relation to working with low incidence special education populations, the actual findings suggested that increasing access to collaborative elements may be more important than providing access to high end workshops or instruction. In considering program development and implementation, the findings point to possible avenues for districts to consider when structuring staff training aspects.

In relation to funding aspects and additional financial costs tied to programs, Browder and Cooper-Duffy (2003) articulated the conundrum districts face in allocating resources in an attempt to meet multiple federal and state mandates. Per Browder and Cooper-Duffy, public school districts repeatedly face the question of how to develop programs for the functional needs of low incidence special education and still allocate resources to meet accountability standards for all students. Beyond simple costs for personnel and training, there are additional expenses embedded in specific types of instruction and programs for students with autism or other low incidence student populations (Chaikind, Danielson, & Brauen, 1993). The high costs of augmentative devices, legal advice/consultation, facility expenses, and other elements associated with the delivery quality instruction to low incidence populations represent a significant financial challenge to local districts. All of these factors must be balanced against the other costs incurred by school districts in meeting the standing obligation to provide a free and appropriate public education.

In a related analysis, Chasson, Harris, and Neely (2007) explored the specific benefits of early intervention programs for students with autism. The study compared the actual cost to school districts specific to traditional special education interventions in contrast to intensive, highly focused behavioral methods at very early ages. The

comparison is valuable information that points to the benefits of intensive intervention. At the same time, a related finding illustrated that early intervention for students with autism is significantly more cost intensive compared to traditional models. In a time when budgets for education are limited, Chasson et al. (2007) referenced the logistical challenge of districts shifting funds to early intervention when the educational payoff and cost savings are not evident for many years down the road.

Specific to funding and competing interests, school districts also have to consider the role of private agencies in meeting the educational needs of low incidence groups. For many school districts, even large districts, there are frequently students with intensive needs that outstrip the capabilities of traditional services models. Private agencies specializing in educational programming targeting very specific student populations step in to fill this void, but often at substantial costs well beyond per pupil expenditures (Slade et al., 2009).

It is within this context that the costs inherent in providing quality special education programs begin to conflict with political issues connected back to social justice theory. A resource book compiled by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation & Progressive Policy Institute (2001) presents a narrative overview of the evolution of special education services since the implementation of P.L. 94-142 in the 1970s. Drawing from the historical data on special education and current incidence trends, the material presents a profile of special education as a well-intentioned legislative mandate with unanticipated consequences and growth over time. Key information discussed includes a summary statement noting that roughly ninety percent of special education placements and services are for comparatively mild disabilities (learning disabilities, attention issues, articulation

disorders, etc.). Given the relatively mild nature of the disorders, and the concurrently expressed view of limited efficacy through special education interventions, the authors advocate for a reconsideration of what is considered special education.

The financial data provided by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation & Progressive Policy Institute (2001) authors gives valuable information about the profound financial costs incurred through providing special education services. The Progressive Policy Institute, based on additional information, does espouse specific political leanings consistent with the idea of limiting federal spending. Despite the overt political orientation, the data provided is clear and consistent with generally acknowledged information about the increase in spending for special education services. The data is helpful in considering how budgetary issues related to special education services may impact school districts and programming for the entire spectrum of services. An interesting consideration is the question of how spending for an increasing number of students with mild disabilities may negatively impact overall services for low-incidence, high-need special education students by absorbing funding needed to meet the high costs associated with low-incidence groups.

Along these lines, a CATO Institute (2002) narrative report proposed introducing more school choice and parent options into special education services. The intent would be to allow for a more competitive environment wherein parents of students with disabilities could place their children in certain private or public school locations of their choice. In this model, parents would be able to "carry" the special education funding for their children to specific locations of their choice. As an ancillary benefit, public schools would be less financially burdened and able to focus services on meeting accountability

measures. The statement oversimplifies the process involved in privatizing special education services. In particular, the study ignores the fact that per pupil funding allocation in most districts would only pay for a fraction of the costs of most private agencies specializing in low-incidence special education groups. In addition, most private agencies would be ill-equipped to receive a sudden influx of low-incidence students. In addition, the private agencies would need a significant amount of time to expand facilities and recruit quality staff. In effect, this method would simply shift the problem from a public school issue to a privatized system. In doing so, it would also reduce the funding pools needed by public schools to provide appropriate programming.

As a final area of consideration, social justice theory and organizational planning also point to the importance of stakeholder involvement with program development (Marshall, 2004). Conceptually, aspects of stakeholder involvement have been interwoven with other areas of the literature reviewed. For example, the perspectives of teachers and paraprofessionals are considered when discussing their views on working with low incidence populations. Also, when reviewing funding aspects, the attitudes of administrators are an essential element in considering how funds are spent for all educational programming. At the same time, speaking to particulars of the Midwest Transition Academy, there is an additional need to consider how stakeholders function within the program model and perceive program outcomes.

Specific to programs for students with autism or emotional disorders, the role of the stakeholders extends beyond instructional programming. As noted by Callahan, Henson, and Cowan (2007), there is a social validation component to program development and implementation that bridges the gap between theory and

implementation. Social validation, related to programs for low incidence special education populations, relates to how stakeholders actually view the program and the constructs supporting program implementation. Callahan et al. (2007) state that a key reason many evidence-based practices fail to transfer into routine program implementation is due to how stakeholders actually view the practices. Given this consideration, it is important to consider how stakeholder groups view program development within the Midwest Transition Academy.

Drawing on the identified research questions, the study will examine program implementation and evolution of the Midwest Transition Academy. The program evaluation approach and design supports considerations discussed within the review. In particular, the model allows for an exploration of existing practices and insight into how one district is addressing the programming challenges connected with this student population. Drawing on social justice constructs, there is an ingrained responsibility for school districts to provide effective instructional practices and programs surrounding low incidence special education populations. The increase in incidence rates of autism spectrum disorders and emotional disturbances has prompted school districts to develop programming in a relatively short timeframe to meet the needs of this growing population. At the same time, districts must consider the financial ramifications associated with providing these programs as compared to the needs of all students in the district.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

Within current service models, school-based services for students with special education needs are often characterized by a diverse array of challenges and unique needs. Following the inception of formalized services in the 1970s, programming for special education students has moved from segregated settings to progressively more participation by students of all levels in typical school environments (Carter & Hughes, 2006). As part of this transition, some low-incidence special education populations, in particular students with autism and students with emotional disturbances, have proven difficult to fully integrate. For many school districts, the educational needs and sometimes intensive behavioral issues have presented a challenge in terms of effective programming for these student groups.

As school districts consider how to implement effective programs for students with autism or emotional disturbances, their efforts are complicated by both several factors. Foremost among the challenges is the issue of locating or training qualified personnel both capable of and willing to work with either population when the students are on the severe end of the spectrum. The group of students with autism spectrum disorders has been a particular subject of focus relative to mediating employee stressors and reducing staff attrition (Billingsley, 2003). As school districts struggle with attrition rates for teachers and support personnel, there is also a corresponding pressure derived from the increasing incidence rates and more students with autism and emotional disturbances entering the school environment.

The ascension of incidence rates for both student groups, combined with increased inclusive practices of the same student population, represents an opportunity to consider how this growing dynamic may impact school districts. Within this context, school districts increasingly face the issue of how to develop, implement, and maintain quality programs to address the needs of students with autism or emotional disturbances. The intent of the study, through a program evaluation, was to examine the implementation and evolution of a special education program designed to support students from both groups in a large, suburban school district. At the core, the exploration of a large-scale program provides a perspective on existing practices and insight into how one district is addressing the programming challenges connected with these student populations. Given the evolving nature of programs and the topic under consideration, the focus of the study was inclusive of issues discovered through the program exploration process (Creswell, 2009).

<center>Research Questions</center>

The core intent of the study was to gather a comprehensive picture of the Midwest School District Transition Academy. As an exploration of a center-based program, the study gathered information specific to the following questions:

1) What is the process for placing students, measuring progress, and determining program impact for students at the Midwest School District Transition Academy?

2) How does the district develop and retain quality personnel to work with students with significant aggressive behaviors?

3) How does the district fund the program needs for low-incidence populations?

4) What role do administrators and certified staff (teachers and behavior specialists) play in program development for students?

Design for the Study

The core intent of the study was to develop a comprehensive picture of the Midwest School District Transition Academy for students with autism or emotional disturbances through a program evaluation. Mertens (2005) provides extensive detail on program evaluation standards for study utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy derived from *The Program Evaluation Standards*. Through a program review, the study explored efficacy challenges to the development of educational programming for students with autism or emotional disturbances. The study gathered information on program origins and current practices within a special education program designed to support students with autism or emotional disturbances at the Midwest School District Transition Academy.

Consistent with Rossi et al. (2004), a process evaluation model allowed analysis of provisions specific to program implementation within the Transition Academy. In essence, the process evaluation seeks to understand whether a program is implemented in the manner intended through the program design. The process evaluation model, as a subset of program monitoring, incorporates perspectives on how the program operates and achieves outcomes. Both issues connect to the core study goal of gathering a comprehensive picture of a program for students with autism or emotional disturbances. The method also allowed for an identification of program strengths and deficits within the evaluation process and an understanding of how closely the program meshed with the original design.

As referenced previously, the study purposefully selected the Midwest School District Transition Academy as the site of the study. The Transition Academy is the most recent program developed within a comprehensive program for students with autism. The Transition Academy is an outgrowth of a small program for students with autism developed initially at the early childhood special education. The Transition Academy is now one location within a large program across all levels within the district. The Transition Academy allows for a rich data source for a process evaluation model specifically targeted to implementation issues. The Transition Academy is also distinct from other district programs in that it is a dual-purpose program that serves both students with autism and students with emotional disturbances. The shift to programming for students developed organically as the needs of the district evolved. Since the particular aspects of the program are relatively new, a stand-alone evaluation shed light on how well stated procedures have been implemented (Rossi et al., 2004).

Participants

Specific to a process evaluation model, the purposefully selected staff participants and sites were drawn exclusively from the existing Transition Academy location. The Midwest School District is a district of nearly 19,000 students located in a suburban area of a large city in the Midwest. In this scenario, the sampling process is a combination method that focuses on homogeneous staff and setting characteristics that meet defined criteria (Creswell, 2007). There are also elements of convenience and opportunistic sampling given my ability to access the program and targeted elements tied to a process evaluation. The identified sampling methods were appropriate given the process evaluation model and the focus on specific program outcomes. In considering the overall

participant and site selection, per Creswell (2009), there are four critical aspects to consider: setting, actors (participants), events, and process.

Related to setting, the key location incorporated in the study was selected because the Transition Academy specifically provides services for the identified students with autism spectrum and emotionally disturbance identifications. Although there are students with autism spectrum or emotional disturbance identifications at other district locations, the Transition Academy is a specific, off-campus site at a stand-alone facility not connected to any other schools. The Transition Academy is a district-level setting with defined entry criteria and uniquely trained staff. For reference purposes, the terms currently used within the Midwest School District Transition Academy to describe site locations are:

Transition Academy: A separate, specialized facility within the Midwest School District created at an off-site location specifically for meeting the needs of the most intensive Transition Students within the district.

Transition Academy Student: A student identified with educational autism or severe social/emotional disturbances as defined by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education State Plan for Special Education and placed in a self-contained special education setting within the Midwest School District.

Transition Room: One of six special education on-site classrooms in place across the Midwest School District developed specifically for students with autism.

In considering the participants to include, there are several stakeholder groups involved in the Transition Academy to consider for inclusion. At the core, given a process evaluation focus, the primary participant group will be current Transition

Academy certified special education teachers and behavior specialists plus a group of elementary principals who have placed students at the Transition Academy. It should be noted that the Transition Academy does not have an on-site administrator to include in the study. From the current staffing format, the participant pool was comprised of four certified staff (two special education teachers, two behavior specialists) and five building administrators (five elementary principals). Consistent with an emergent design philosophy, the inclusion of other participant groups depending on the direction of the evaluation was considered and ruled.

The events and process components are interconnected within a process evaluation model (Rossi et al., 2004). The core focus is on the implementation of the Transition Academy procedures and structures relative to the research questions and program goals/parameters. Therefore, the events and process focused on participants operating in the Transition Academy location to provide services and supports to students with autism and emotional disturbances. From this perspective, the primary events and processes are the actual planning and delivery of educational services to the student population.

<center>Data Collection</center>

Within a process evaluation model, the study targets information from staff interviews, focus groups, and program records (Rossi et al., 2004). The use of multiple sources of information provides for extensive, specific data that illustrate the particular details associated with the Transition Academy. The intent is to capture, through comprehensive and in-depth data collection, the fundamental aspects of the program (Creswell, 2007). It should be noted that observations at the program location were

considered, but were ruled out and deemed problematic due to the sensitive nature of confidentiality issues for special education students and concerns about disrupting educational programming. Interviews with parents, as another stakeholder group, were also ruled out due to confidentiality concerns across participant groups and potential legal or compliance issues related to special education law

Data Collection Procedures

Permission to collect data was received from the Superintendent of the Midwest School District as the gatekeeper responsible for access to the Transition Academy faculty and historical documents (Appendix A). Following permission from the Superintendent, the researcher completed an application for study approval with the Campus Institutional Review Board at the University of Missouri - Columbia. Once approval from the IRB (Appendix B) was received, a pilot study was completed on the interview and focus group questions. A pilot study is a valuable process because it provided a format to pre-test the questions with personnel independent of the study (Teijlingen & Vanora, 2001). In addition, it allows the researcher to see how the actual interview process may unfold. Per Teiglingen and Vanora, a pilot study provides an opportunity to walk through the data collection process from start to finish and identify potential problem areas related to the obtaining consent, order of questions and pacing.

The pilot study was conducted following approval from the superintendent of the school district because the selected participants were also employees of the school district. The participants were two certified special education teachers working in Transition Room settings at elementary buildings in the district. An elementary

administrator assigned to a building with a Transition Room location was also selected to maintain consistency with the overall study group.

The participants were selected because they interact with a similar student population as those students placed at the Transition Academy. In addition, the teachers were familiar with aspects of the Transition Academy based on their participation in district-level professional learning communities. The interviews with pilot study participants were conducted across two consecutive afternoons. Because one certified teacher and the elementary principal work in the same building, the researcher was able to conduct a trial of the focus group questions by bringing the participants together on the second afternoon following their individual interviews. Upon completing the pilot study, the interview and focus group questions were revised based on feedback from participants.

A basic consideration is the development of a method to track and identify the study participants given the multiple participants within the study. Descriptive information was gathered to classify participants based on personal identifiers and site locations. The information on the participant characteristics and site location might also suggest other variables for future consideration. Specific descriptive information gathered as part of the study relative to respondents included: respondent's gender, years of educational experience, years in current professional assignment, and professional certification(s).

Specific to interview design, an interview protocol (Appendix C) focused on semi-structured interview questions in a face-to-face format with individual participants was used (Creswell, 2009). The use of a semi-structured format allows for specific,

targeted information to be gathered while allowing for spontaneous information that may shed light on nuances of the Transition Academy. The interviews were structured for 30-45 minutes per individual. The interviews with certified staff were conducted at the Transition Academy. Individual interviews with the administrators took place at their assigned school. Also, given the program evaluation aspect of the research, two brief ranking exercises within the interview process were used to prioritize participant perspectives on problem areas and strengths within the Transition Program (Mertens, 2005).

To gather data on implementation, a focus group discussion (Appendix C) was conducted with Transition Academy certified personnel (teachers and behavior specialists) and building level administrators who have placed students at the Transition Academy. For structure purposes, the focus group was formatted to last roughly 1 hour, with an emphasis on flexible time limits depending on the direction of the group. The focus group provides comparison points and reduces the likelihood of isolated statements being interpreted to represent standard procedure (Mertens, 2005). Given the sensitive nature of the student population and the importance of the instructional services, it would be inappropriate for structured observations in the process given the risk of disrupting the educational environment.

The interviews and focus group activity were audio-taped as specified in the consent documents. McLellan, MacQueen, and Neidig (2003) noted that audiotapes provide a format that allows a researcher to amplify personal notations and revisit the content. Within the interview itself, the use of audio-tape allows the researcher to also focus on more nuanced elements of the process such as participants' nonverbal cues or

speech hesitations. The audio-tape also frees the researcher somewhat to stay more actively involved in the discussion and generate additional questions within a semi-structured interview process.

Following the interviews and focus group, participants were debriefed through discussion with the researcher. Sharpe and Faye (2009) emphasized the importance of debriefing in clarifying aspects of the research and decreasing any anxiety or stress incurred by the participants. The process involved highlighting key areas within the interview or focus group and allowing participants time to respond within the process. Specific to the focus group, Krueger and Casey (2009) describe debriefing as a process followed by researchers immediately following the focus group and independent of the participants. In this study, the debriefing process for the focus group utilized a peer debriefing structure. After the formal focus group concluded, the participants and researcher discussed main themes present in the discussion and how the topics may impact the Transition Academy program in the future.

After the interviews and focus group were completed, the audiotapes were transcribed to produce a verbatim narrative of the information (McLellan et al., 2003). McLellan et al. noted that part of the transcription process included a determination of what content will be transcribed. For this study, all interviews and focus group audiotapes materials were transcribed. Participants, in addition to the debriefing, were provided with electronic versions of the transcripts specific to their individual interview and the focus group. The participants had the option to respond or clarify the content and the transcripts were updated accordingly or amplifying notes were added to interview notes compiled during the process.

In terms of program records, the process evaluation structure and research questions pointed to the review of historical documents and financial considerations (Rossi et al., 2004). Information on the developmental arc of the program was gathered by examining annual special education reports compiled within the district. Financial considerations, tied to the Transition Academy's operating costs were accessed through the Midwest School District Financial Services Department. The focus of this information was to isolate overall expenditures and provide amplifying detail to interview questions focused on district funding supports.

Throughout the process of completing interviews and the focus group, the researcher used a personal journal to note items of interest and the overall progress of the study. Due to the supervisory role over this program, some of the participants' feedback reflected directly on decisions made in my role as the program supervisor. The journal was completed using personal reflections and observations following the debriefing of participants and the conclusion of an interview or the focus group. Marshall and Rossman (2010) reference personal journaling as a method for researchers to maintain their own mental and physical health. Beyond noting personal views on the content of the interviews, the personal journal allowed for individual reflection on how my decisions impact the program as a whole.

Human Subjects Protection and Other Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the student population and extensive privacy considerations, it was necessary to secure cooperation from school district officials as part of the process. Before contacting participants, permission was secured from the superintendent of schools in the district (Appendix A). Prior to the interviews and focus

group, each participant was provided with an invitation to participate and informed consent document (Appendix A) to review and sign as part of confidentiality procedures and to offer an opt-out provision (Kvale, 1996). Procedures to maintain confidentiality and security of participant information were maintained throughout the study. Identical procedures were applied to any student specific information derived from the study. The time commitment associated with participating in the interview process and focus group averaged less than two hours. While no tangible incentives for participation were offered, the potential benefit of the study for school personnel and educational program development was emphasized.

A specific consideration relative to confidentiality for participants was the relatively small scale of the participant population. In addition, given the number of participants, certain responses or narrative descriptions could provide potentially readily identifiable information given a few descriptors. A primary ethical issue was how to gather quality data, capable of shedding light on how practitioners' true opinions, without inadvertently divulging identities inadvertently. Therefore, appropriate use of pseudonyms was implemented and information associated with participants will be kept in locked files accessible only to the researcher.

To address any potential participant questions or concerns, the contents of the invitation to participate and informed consent materials specified how to contact the researcher and relevant personnel (faculty advisor, program chair) and University of Missouri-Columbia Institutional Review Board. The data collected will be destroyed seven years after completion of the project.

Data Analysis

Given the specifics of the Transition Academy parameters and the data collection

methods selected, data analysis procedures were ongoing and enmeshed within the data

collection structure (Mertens, 2005). The foundation data analysis process required the

development of thematic units specific to the primary research questions that were then

refined revisiting source information. To organize the raw information, audio taped

interviews and the focus group interview were transcribed into a written script and

refined through the use of reflective passages and a summary format (Creswell, 2007).

After the data was organized, analysis began based on a small number of

categories related to different aspects of the Transition Academy structures. The

categories served as a base group within a coding process to identify categories and

subcategories about the Transition Academy that were most pertinent to participants as

they connect to the core research questions. By starting with a small number, it was

possible to expand and modify the categories as themes emerged within the data analysis

process while still keeping the overall number of themes manageable (Creswell, 2007).

The use of a data collection matrix structured the interview and observation data to

isolate repeated phrases, program descriptors, and participant views and compare them

across the different respondents.

As an additional analysis tool, simple ranking exercises completed by each

participant specific to program strengths and weaknesses were reviewed. The ranking

exercises were plotted specific to each individual on a simple axis analysis chart

(Mertens, 2005). The profile yielded on the axis chart was reviewed on pertinent

categories defined in data collection relative to the themes derived from interviews and

focus group outcomes. Although it is a process evaluation model, the analytical approach shares similarities with ethnography or case study approaches in terms of seeking to understand the culture of the Transition Academy and present a descriptively rich profile of the environments (Creswell, 2007).

The program documents provided a comparison point to contrast interview themes and survey outcomes with program parameters. A review of program historical documents focused on previously identified program goals and structures. The information provides a comparison path for isolating program intentions versus program realities and provided data on how the process has evolved over time (Rossi et al., 2004). As an important element within a process evaluation, a review of financial information was also be implemented. Although the study will gather cost data, the intent is to create a simple descriptive profile of annual costs relative to the program design. Based on the types of program outputs (student outcomes, staff satisfaction levels) from the Transition Academy and lack of comparative programs, formal analysis through cost efficiency procedures would have limited functional use.

Role of Researcher

Specific to a program/process evaluation, the presence, perspectives and beliefs of the researcher are intricately connected to how data is viewed and interpreted. In this process, I attempted to limit the influence of known sources of bias. At the same time, my own experience working in special education can enhance outcomes from the study. During my 15 years in public education, I have worked extensively and, at times exclusively, in the area of special education services. I was initially trained as a school

psychologist and for the first 6 years of my career I provided evaluation and programming supports for special education programs.

During my subsequent 10 years as a public school administrator I have been assigned supervisory responsibility for special education services at my building assignment. During the past 5 years, I have been the assistant superintendent in charge of special services for the Midwest School District. Within this role, I have been assigned the responsibility of monitoring the ongoing development of the Transition Program for students with autism spectrum disorders. I firmly believe this background and intimate knowledge of the Transition Academy and the Midwest School District brings a nuanced and in-depth understanding of information gleaned through the process evaluation study.

At the same time, my own bias due to familiarity with program and participants must be addressed. Because I carry a supervisory responsibility for the Transition Academy, the participants in the study may have experienced some reservations in the process. In particular, I needed to address the importance of accurate reporting (interviews) and natural participant interactions (observations). I mediated this concern by conveying the benefits of an accurate process evaluation to staff and emphasizing how the study can be used to improve program practices.

Trustworthiness

Within the study, the issue of credibility is first addressed through the prolonged and comprehensive interviews and focus group with the identified program evaluation participant pool (Mertens, 2005). The open-ended design allowed for additional interviews and focus groups if needed to improve credibility issues, but ultimately these were not deemed necessary. Given the intensive focus on study participants, I conducted

member checks by emailing copies of interview transcripts and conducting informal reviews of interview responses with participants. Because the process evaluation connects to program outcomes, a more formal member check involving sharing of outcome themes and findings was also deemed appropriate (Creswell, 2009).

Per Mertens (2005), entering into the study without predetermined themes to explore helps improve the overall credibility of the process evaluation. The use of multiple data sources within the study design allowed for triangulation of emergent themes and findings. Beyond triangulation, the use of multiple sources provided for substantial content leading to descriptively rich and thorough discussions of the findings (Creswell, 2009). Although transferability will be potentially limited due to the highly specific nature of the Transition Academy settings, the presence of descriptively rich reporting allows readers to determine how closely the study parallels their own areas of interest.

Also, since I will be the sole researcher in the study, the director of special education for the Midwest School District served as an appropriate peer to review and debrief with me regarding the determinations arising from the study. The director is familiar with Transition Academy parameters and also has a research background in her role as an associate professor at a local university. The peer review also served as an avenue for dependability and confirmability audits both via the peer and through a self-review to confirm the evolution of study findings and retrace data steps (Mertens, 2005).

Limitations

In this study, a concern was whether respondents would provide a candid description of their perception of the Transition Academy and elements of student

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programming. Special education is viewed, somewhat, as an altruistic profession working to meet the needs of students with disabilities and there was a potential for participants to minimize self-reporting in an interview format (Rossi et al., 2004). In the same vein, there was a concern that raising questions about how staff members feel about the challenges of this student population and program may suggest a lack of investment on their part. Introducing questions related to program weakness and personal beliefs suggests there may be a tendency to withhold some information on the part of participants. As referenced previously, an additional concern was soliciting information from personnel who may be reluctant to identify program faults due to my supervisory capacity within the program. The potential for concern in these areas was alleviated by helping participants understand the benefits of a process evaluation through content embedded within consent documents and interview protocols.

Relative to the research design, it was important to consider the presence of other factors that are not isolated within the design of the current study. Classroom environments, particularly those in complex special education settings, are characterized by a multitude of influences and variables. Teachers' responses at the time of interviews or focus groups may be exacerbated by both professional and personal factors outside the parameters of the current design. For example, a teacher dealing with a particularly intensive student or personal situation on the day of the interview may present a biased report specific to efficacy questions or other areas. The current design, due to the complexity of factors involved, does not compensate for the variations noted and should be considered accordingly in considering the information for other locations and within the process evaluation model.

Summary

The recent rise in incidence rates of autism spectrum disorders and emotional disturbances has prompted school districts to develop programming in a relatively short timeframe to meet the needs of this growing population. Questions regarding effective programming models and use of limited financial resources point to the need for additional information in this area. Specific to the Midwest School District, the size of the Transition Academy and financial obligations tied to the program provides a fertile source of information to review how effectively and efficiently the program is being implemented. As programs emerge to varying degrees across local districts, other districts may be able to review this process evaluation to guide their own practices. Within the district, the process represents an opportunity to consider how program parameters may be modified to improve outcomes for all participants.

CHAPTER FOUR

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Introduction

The intent of this research study was to add to the existing literature on special

education programs designed for students with autism and social/emotional disturbances.

Within the research design, aspects of social justice theory provide a framework to

analyze how leadership influences program design specific to special education

populations. The core of social justice theory defines the mechanism by which society, as

a whole, assigns responsibilities and distributes both the benefits and burdens of our

cooperative social efforts (Rawls, 1999). Specific to the idea of special education

students, social justice theory raises the issue of how the students' needs are effectively

met within the global school environment.

Social justice theory also connects leadership elements inherent in program

development to the issue of addressing marginalized student populations. In this context,

the root issue considers the role of the leader in implementing programs for high need

special education populations. More importantly, Theoharis (2007) frames social justice

leadership to characterize how leaders address subgroups, including special education

students, marginalized within the typical public school environment. The information on

conflicting elements of inclusive practices and articulation of the steps to building

inclusive programs provides a template to study how principals may operate when

working with diverse student populations.

The chapter includes an overview of the study design, data collection methods,

conceptual underpinnings, research questions, and procedural steps implemented within

the data analysis. Information defining program aspects of the Midwest Transition Academy and the participants in the study is also included. The research study utilized qualitative data collection measures of individual interviews, focus groups, and historical program data to isolate and capture themes specific to the research questions (Creswell, 2007).

Study Design

A program review design was used within the study to explore efficacy challenges to the development of educational programming for students with autism or severe social/emotional disturbances. Consistent with Rossi et al. (2004), a process evaluation model allowed analysis of provisions specific to program implementation within the Midwest Transition Academy. The process evaluation seeks to understand whether a program is implemented in the manner intended through the program design. Mertens (2005) provides extensive detail on evaluation standards for study utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy derived from *The Program Evaluation Standards*. The process evaluation model, as a subset of program monitoring, incorporates perspectives on how the program operates and achieves outcomes. Both issues connect to the core study goal of gathering a comprehensive picture of a program for students with autism or social/emotional disturbances. The method also allows for an identification of program strengths and deficits within the evaluation process and an understanding of how closely the program is meshed with the original design.

The study purposefully selected the Midwest School District Transition Academy as the site of the study. The Transition Academy allowed for a rich data source for a process evaluation model specifically targeted to implementation issues. Participants

within the study were selected based on their familiarity with the Transition Academy and their direct experiences working with students and staff within the program. For purposes of the student, each participant was interviewed independently and then as part of a collective focus group including all participants.

<div align="center">Data Collection Methods</div>

Permission to collect data was received from the Superintendent of the Midwest School District as the gatekeeper responsible for access to the Transition Academy faculty and historical documents (Appendix A). Following permission from the Superintendent, the researcher completed an application for study approval with the Campus Institutional Review Board at the University of Missouri - Columbia. Once approval from the IRB (Appendix B) was received, a pilot study was completed on the interview and focus group questions. The pilot study participants were selected because they interact with a similar student population as those students placed at the Transition Academy. Upon completing the pilot study, the interview and focus group questions were revised based on feedback from participants.

Following the pilot study, the researcher contacted participants and secured signed informed consent forms specifying the parameters of the participant's role within the study and the intentions of the research study. The interviews with faculty members and the comprehensive focus group were completed at the Midwest Transition Academy outside of the assigned school day to avoid disrupting services to students. Individual interviews with the administrators were held at the administrators' assigned school building.

Consistent with the research design, all interviews and the focus group were audio-taped and followed the position-specific interview or focus group protocol (Appendix C). Participants in the study were provided with an electronic record of the transcripts for the individual interview and the focus group. The use of member checking promotes accuracy within the data collection process and affords participants the option to clarify or provide additional insight to their interview (Creswell, 2007). The data collection process was completed by triangulating the data using the transcribed, member reviewed interviews and focus group; and a comprehensive analysis of historical documents specific to the program (Appendix E). A personal journal maintained during the course of data collection allowed for an individual perspective on the process and notations on the information being collected.

Conceptual Frameworks

The purpose of the study was to examine the implementation and evolution of a special education program designed to support students with autism and social/emotional disturbances in a large, suburban school district. The core of social justice theory defines the mechanism by which society, as a whole, assigns responsibilities and distributes both the benefits and burdens of our cooperative social efforts (Rawls, 1999). On a fundamental level, the study considered the basic obligation, via federal and state mandates, of school districts to provide quality programming for all students. In particular, connected to tenets of social justice theory, public school districts must meet the needs of the full spectrum of students regardless of the severity of their disabilities (Theoharis, 2007).

Social justice theory also connects leadership elements inherent in quality program development to the issue of addressing marginalized student populations. Marshall (2004) illustrates this connection in explaining the lack of intensive training in leadership preparation programs specific to marginalized populations. The exploration of the Midwest School District Transition Academy through this conceptual lens can be used to illuminate the inherent challenges for leaders in program implementation and effective organizational change. When considering program efficacy for low incidence groups, leadership characteristics are identified by the ability of a leader to sustain a coherent program structure (Zabel & Zabel, 2001). At the same time, for an organization operating within a public funding setting, the importance of implementing programs in a manner that is cost effective is a vital aspect of program efficacy. An administrator entrusted with using public funds in a wise and efficient manner must be able to address these areas of concern as part of program management.

Research Questions

The core intent of the study was to gather a comprehensive picture of the Midwest School District Transition Academy. As an exploration of a center-based program, the study gathered information specific to the following questions:

1) What is the process for placing students, measuring progress, and determining program impact for students at the Midwest School District Transition Academy?

2) How does the district develop and retain quality personnel to work with students with significant aggressive behaviors?

3) How does the district fund the program needs for low-incidence populations?

4) What role do administrators and certified staff (teachers and behavior specialists) play in program development for students?

Process of Data Analysis

Specific to a process evaluation lens, the presence, perspectives and beliefs of the researcher is intricately connected to how data is viewed and interpreted. Per Mertens (2005), entering into the study without predetermined themes to explore helps mitigate bias in determining outcomes within a process evaluation. The use of the focus group, interviews, and program documents with the analysis process of the study design allowed for triangulation of emergent themes and findings (Creswell, 2009). The use of multiple sources, in particular comparisons between viewpoints from administrators and faculty members, also provided for substantial content lending support to the cohesive themes. The program documents provided a comparison point to contrast interview themes with program parameters. As an important element within a process evaluation, a review of financial information was implemented and tied with specific research questions.

Given the process evaluation framework and the focus on a single agency, data analysis procedures focused on identifying emergent themes within base groups aligned with the research questions. The categories served as a base group within the coding process to identify categories and subcategories about the Transition Academy that were most pertinent to participants as they connect to the core research questions. The use of a data collection matrix structured the interview and focus group materials to isolate repeated phrases, program descriptors, and participant views and compare them across the different respondents. As an additional analysis tool, the simple ranking exercises

completed by each participant specific to program strengths and weaknesses were reviewed by a simple axis analysis chart (Mertens, 2005).

Each participant within the interview and focus group process was assigned a code (Appendix F): Administrator 1 (AD1), Administrator 2 (AD2), Administrator 3 (AD3), Administrator 4 (AD4), Administrator 5 (AD5), Faculty 1 (FA1), Faculty 2 (FA2), Faculty 3 (FA3), and Faculty 4 (FA4). For continuity in analysis, the codes assigned for interviews were used within the focus group analysis. To promote accuracy and consistency within the analysis process, the transcripts from interviews and the focus group were reread by the researcher. In addition, the Director of Special Education for the Midwest School District served as a peer reviewer during data analysis and debriefed regarding the determinations arising from the study.

Setting

The Midwest School District is a district of nearly 19,000 students located in a suburban area of a large city in the Midwest. Related to setting, the Transition Academy was selected because it specifically provides services for the identified students with autism spectrum and emotionally disturbance identifications. Although there are students with autism spectrum or emotional disturbance identifications at other schools or programs within the district, the Transition Academy is a specific, off-campus site at a stand-alone facility not physically connected to any other schools.

The Transition Academy opened in April of 2010 and is classified as a specialized, district-level setting with entry criteria and trained staff. The facility was initially 6,100 square feet with four classrooms, one office area, and a large multipurpose area that accounted for nearly fifty percent of the usable space. After an expansion in

January of 2012, the current facility encompasses 9,000 square feet that is divided into eleven classrooms, three office/workroom areas, and a large multipurpose area that accounts for roughly thirty percent of the usable space. The facility is leased by the Midwest School District and all internal structures were designed and constructed by the district. The facility has a clean and new appearance as would be expected given the relatively recent construction.

<div align="center">Participants</div>

Consistent with the process evaluation model, the purposefully selected faculty participants were drawn exclusively from the existing Transition Academy location. The school administrators participating in the study were selected on the basis of having placed at least one student at the Transition Academy. The participants were selected based on their direct knowledge and experience specific to the Transition Academy and familiarity with the intent and origins of the program. The final participant pool was comprised of four certified faculty (two Transition Academy special education teachers, two district-level behavior specialists) and five building administrators (five elementary principals, all females).

Faculty. Four faculty, one male and three females, from the Midwest School District were interviewed separately specific to their experiences and perceptions relative to the Transition Academy. All four part participants have direct experience working at the Transition Academy and are familiar with students placed at the facility. The male faculty member was a special education teacher in his first year of teaching. He previously worked at the Transition Academy and other special education settings as a paraprofessional (classroom aide) prior to beginning his teaching career. One of the

female faculty members has taught for three years as a special education teacher with all of her teaching experience taking place at the Transition Academy. The two other faculty members interviewed for the study were behavior specialists assigned to district-level support roles. The first behavior specialist has two years experience within the Midwest School District and five years as a behavior specialist in a previous district. During the course of the research study, her role shifted from generalized behavior supports in the district to a specific, full-time assignment at the Transition Academy. The second behavior specialist has worked in the Midwest School District for three years. She has two years of previous experience as a special education teacher working on a grant program for students with emotional disturbances. Her role in the school district is to provide specific supports to schools working with students demonstrating noncompliant and/or aggressive behaviors. She has worked directly with several students who were eventually placed at the Transition Academy.

Administrators. The first administrator, Carla Ramore (all names are pseudonyms), has been an administrator in the Midwest School District for over 15 years. Her career prior to administration includes several years as a special education teacher and extensive work with students with autism and social/emotional disturbances. She has a master's degree in education leadership. The second administrator, Diane Montgomery, has been an administrator in the Midwest School District for over 12 years and has a doctorate degree in education leadership. Her experience also includes a background as special education teacher assigned to work with students with social/emotional disturbances. The third administrator, Dottie Yew, has been administrator in the Midwest School District for the past six years. She previously worked as a director of special

education in a small school district in the rural Midwest. She has over 20 years experience in special education related teaching and administrative positions and possesses a doctorate in education leadership. The fourth administrator, Kathy Morgan, has been an administrator in the Midwest School District for the past nine years. Prior to working in the Midwest School District, she was an administrator for three years and taught elementary students in a large, suburban school district in the Midwest and has her doctorate in education leadership. The last administrator, Jennifer Thomas, has worked for one year as a building principal and three previous years as an administrative assistant within the Midwest School District. Her previous experience includes teaching at the elementary level in general education and she has a master's degree in educational leadership.

Themes

The emergent themes within the student were identified based on collected data and the preliminary grouping. The program information and financial data supplemented aspects of theme development in terms of supporting the findings and providing amplifying detail for the process evaluation structure. The identified themes include: 1) Program Continuity, with subthemes of: a) Program Goals, b) Procedural Systems, and c) Communication Methods; and 2) Student Outcomes, with subthemes of: a) Environmental Structures, and b) Targeted Outcomes; and 3) Staff Cohesion, with subthemes of: a) External Validation, and b) Support Structures. The identified themes illustrate the interplay between leadership elements and program goals for an emerging, recently implemented program striving to find a core philosophy while adjusting to changing student populations characterized by frequently intensive behaviors.

Program Continuity

In the context of this process evaluation study, there is a sense of a program in flux as the original tenets and purpose shift to fit changing expectations and needs within the Midwest School District. The program is relatively new specific to implementation, but the program constructs already have fluctuated to capture a more expansive student population. Slavin (2008) notes there is an expectation for programs in school districts to yield quality outcomes clearly supported by research-based evidence. From this perspective, the Transition Academy was initially developed as a program specific to students with autism but almost immediately began to incorporate students with significant emotional disturbances. The shift allowed the district to use a program designed for a particular purpose to yield outcomes for another student population. One female faculty member discussed the impact of modifying the program parameters:

> I think it's great that it has changed into what it has become because it's a necessity, but I don't know that our programming has kept up with the change. I mean (pause), with curriculum, we've all kind of just figured it out, which is okay, but I just don't think that it's kept up with what the program's turned into.

The participants were in agreement that incorporating more students with significant emotional disturbances within the program has provided more flexibility to meet students' needs. Rainey and Steinbauer (1999) note this element of flexibility with public agencies is an important construct given the associated funding structures. At the same time, there was a consistent belief expressed that this change happened as a consequence of external variables and not from a development within the program. This change, as stated by Kathy Morgan who was involved in the original program design, has also not been supported a comprehensive review of the program's structures through a team process:

Well, when we first started talking about it, I felt like there was a lot of input. I'm glad that you asked me that because I was really talking more about recent experience. You know, what I think when we first started planning the Transition Academy, there was a lot of input. We had administrators on that team. We had teachers on the team. We had a paraprofessional on the team. I mean, it was a good mix of different personnel in that planning process and we brainstormed and we, umm, since that time though, I don't feel like there has been that input from different staff members.

As it connects to program continuity, the participants were in agreement the changes in the student population should have prompted a formal revisiting of the goals and structures of the program.

Program Goals. The program goals were initially focused on creating a short-term placement program for students with autism who demonstrated aggressive or disruptive behaviors. Specialized programs for low incidence student populations that are developed and managed by school personnel, as opposed to private agency placements, generally allow for more cost effective and efficient interventions (Slade et al., 2009). Despite their differing lengths of experience with the program, the participants expressed familiarity with the original intention and goals of the Transition Academy. In line with other participants, Diane Montgomery was involved when initial planning surrounding the program articulated the original program goals:

Originally it was set to be more for the autistic population…and just in discussions of how that program was going to be setup, we actually met a couple of different times at the building facility in which now houses that program talking about layout environment and, you know, just have a setup classrooms and things like that. So, I was involved in like four to five meetings I guess, probably total in regards to setting up the program.

As the program began operations and started accepting students, there was also a growing need for programming designed to support students with significant emotional

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disturbances. Shortly after the program was initiated, the programming focus started to

shift to coincide with other needs in the district, as illustrated by Carla Ramore:

> I think probably what's happened, I think the original program thought was to bring in more of the autism population. But because there's such a need to support these children that are so aggressive that I think there was a switch made to address that type of need. So how do you go about supporting those children? I think as a district we've looked at the philosophy behind Ross Greene and his Lost at School program, The Explosive Child. We've also worked with [Midwest School District's psychological consultant] and he is coming and giving us some support with some of these students and their needs and what might be beneficial for them. So, I think that probably has shaped how the program looks a little bit because our focus has changed. Our focus has changed moving with behaviors of aggressive children rather than just children that may be aggressive, autistic-type children.

The participants shared a similar viewpoint that the change in program goals was logical

given that both the student groups were really an area of focus due to the pattern of

aggressive behavior. Rossi et al. (2004) outlined that it is not unusual for a program to

deviate in a substantive way from the original goals for a variety of possible reasons.

While program variation tend to occur due to negative circumstances (lack of

management, poor program design, facility issues, etc.), the participants in this study

were in agreement this change resulted in a positive in the sense of meeting an identified

need that ran concurrent to the program's intended benefit. This concept was reinforced

by one of the female faculty members:

> For me, I like being able to work intensively on student behavior. I like the low numbers of students that we're able to work with. I think that just gives us the opportunity to focus on, you know, specifically the behavior, especially in my role, that's going to get them back into their school hopefully in the near future.

From this perspective, there is agreement that the program goals specific to broadening

the target population was not processed through a formal method, but developed from an

organic process. Although it went contrary to program continuity, the shift was viewed in a positive light because if offered supports to a group in need.

Procedural Systems. Program goals, while not explicitly revised, were at least universally understood by the participants closely involved with the program. The changes brought about by increasing the number of students with significant emotional disorders was viewed as a natural extension of the program parameters. In a related vein, the participants were in agreement about a marked lack of clearly defined procedural steps specific to student placement. Drawing on conclusions from Riehl (2000), continuity in program methods is a challenging variable for administrators specific to the inclusion of a wide range of students with disabilities in public school settings. In a statement echoed repeatedly across the interviews and focus group, one of the female faculty members summarized the procedure for placing a student:

> A million dollar question. Right now, there's not a real formal process. You know, with my understanding it starts with a student who is in a regular building. Most of the time the student is having difficult behaviors in their building. Having a difficult time in the larger group setting. Oftentimes, we see some more explosive behaviors out of those students in that setting. So then typically we'll meet as a team to kind of discuss options with programming and placement and things like that. Then the team decides if, if it's a good idea to look at a change of placement. Then the team would decide a schedule as to how to get a student over here and the timelines and things like that.

Participants consistently pointed to the lack of an articulated set of standards and criteria surrounding placing a student at the Transition Academy. In reference to placement, the participants noted the lack of standards impacts the process for identifying new students but also returning students back to the traditional school environment. As the male faculty member pointed out:

> I think our biggest question's always been, "what are the guidelines for a student to come and what are the guidelines for a student to leave?" And then, because I

think from there we can kind of set goals on what we need to actually accomplish on a daily basis. Because I think we just kind of get lost in goal setting for our students because we don't know what we need to actually accomplish for them to return.

From both the perspective of faculty working at the Transition Academy and administrators working with students placed in the program, methodology involved in the process seemed confusing and in many instances frustrating to the participants. Carla Ramore outlined the standard perspective from administrators:

> I think that the weakness might be that I'm not really sure how to get a child in to the program. I feel like at times it's been very frustrating because we feel like we've had some very high need students that have run the gamete of what would be considered appropriate for the public school setting. Even though we've done a lot of one-on-one support…maybe they might have the teacher and a paraprofessional working with them and we provided some additional support within that regular classroom. We are feeling that we really are going above and beyond in that direction and wondering why can't we get that student the services they need and a program that's going to focus more on the behavioral needs of that particular child.

The actual commentary about the lack of specific placement criteria was presented at times with laughter by the participants. For these individuals, the staff most closely connected to the program, the shared viewpoint that they have no true perspective on placement was troublesome. As the male faculty member noted about placement during the focus group:

> We have no protocols coming in and then, once we have them here, we have no protocols to get them out or any expectations of what they need to look like. And then, really any idea of kind of like what happened at the school and then what their perception of what a student needs to look like to return. So, we just kind of have them here, we worked with them and then just that kind of it. They're just here and we just keep getting more. [Laughter] And then, we are just like, "Whoa, what's going on here? How do we get them out?"

Within programs of this type, a lack of continuity and commitment to the program

philosophy can lead to frustration and increase issues with staff retention (Jennett et al.,

2003).

       Communication Methods. Across the interviews and focus group, participants

consistently returned to communication methods between the Transition Academy and

the sending/receiving schools as a program weakness. Marshall (2004) emphasized the

need to support communication structures in working through programs designed to

support ostracized populations. In this process evaluation, one of the central constructs

was the idea that communication between Transition Academy personnel and district

schools would be easier that comparative communications between private placements

and district school personnel. Participants on both sides of the program indicated

communication was limited both prior to placements and while students where in the

program. Diane Montgomery expanded on this concern within the focus group

discussion:

> Well, I think one of the things we've talked about all along is communication. I
> mean, I've had students that have come and we don't have that communication
> where we know how they're doing here on a regular basis and things like that. So,
> the communication piece is big.

In some reflections from the group, the lack of communication seemed to originate more

due to the timeline for placing students instead of a lack of actual communication

structures. In essence, the need to expedite the transition of the student limited the time

the staff between facilities would have to collaborate and communicate. One of the

female faculty members who worked both in buildings and at the Transition Academy

noted this:

Also I think another weakness is the timeline. You know, often it's quick. It doesn't give, you know, the staff from both buildings the opportunity to work together on bringing the student over and (pause) I think just the collaboration piece with the two buildings is kind of missing often. We'll just kind of find out about a student who the team at his home school his or her home school decides, you know, that this is the place that they're going to go and then they just kind of show up here. And I kind of feel like we would need a little bit more collaboration you know, with the home building before they come over.

The issue of communication methods presents an issue from the perspective of educational leadership in this scenario. The Transition Academy is constructed to facilitate quick placements for students at times when behaviors have escalated beyond the capability of the building. Part of the nature of the program is that often transitions will happen quickly. While participants noted that this timeline impaired the ability to communicate about students, there was no limitation preventing the staff on either side from communicating after the placements had started. In this way, the dynamic is similar to the approach a district building would take with a private placement student in that they are disconnected from district activities and monitoring. Relative to leadership considerations, Zeichner (2009) described how students in specialized programs may be marginalized because they are not proactively treated by leaders as a part of the comprehensive school program.

Student Outcomes

Across the primary issues to consider, given the process evaluation structure, outcomes for students were largely reported as positive throughout the interviews and focus group. The perception was that there is both an immediate benefit, specific to reducing students' anxiety and disruptive behaviors, and long-term outcomes in terms of students' stability, academic outcomes, and self-management. As Dottie Yew stated, the group shares a belief that the initial transfer serves to relieve pressure on the student:

So for the child who then goes to the Transition Academy, they're removed from that scrutiny. They're removed from that constant pressure to have to perform based upon the standards that are here [referencing typical school setting] and instead they're at the Transition Academy and it's a much more individualized approach to what their needs are. They don't have to fit in with other kids to become a part of something they instead are the something and the program is focused around them.

This perception, shared by the participants, connects to social validation that is instrumental within a program development process. As referenced, social validation bridges from the theoretical aspects of a program into how stakeholders actually view the program implementation (Callahan et al., 2007). One of the female faculty members at the Transition Academy echoed this belief in discussing the program's impact on students:

The kids with an emotional disturbance, I think this program has definitely showed where the need lies. Umm, and it's with those kids with ED [emotional disturbance], and you know they come here they just need that anxiety lifted. And so, if they come here and they feel better and they do well.

The collective view that the program offers an immediate source of relief for students and established structured supports for the students is a core issue within the process evaluation.

Environmental Structures. Across the participant group, the physical arrangement of the Transition Academy, specific to setting design and smaller student population, was a key element in generating positive outcomes for students. For many school personnel working with students who demonstrate aggressive behavior, the proximity to other students in the environment can be a primary source of stress and anxiety (Carter & Hughes, 2006). The shared belief is that the Transition Academy setting mitigates this issue by completely changing the environmental structures, while still trying to maintain

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the feel of a traditional classroom environment. As the male faculty member at the

Transition Academy stated in the focus group:

> Because that's my thought, like our environment here is so drastically different from a typical school environment that it's almost like this wasn't the environment and then like we can't reproduce that environment. So, it's like okay that information is coming over [from the sending school] but they're sitting in the room with one other kid or two other kids with three adults around them. So, we're not seeing that's what happening there. So, there's a little bit difference. So, they were in a class of 25 kids, this is what was happening. I have this information now, but we're not gonna see that behavior because they're in the room with two people.

At the same time, within the focus group, one of the female faculty members pointed out

the problematic nature of this environmental difference:

> Yeah, and I think that gets tricky too at the transition back because we've had one student who left, came back and yeah. But I mean, you know, he's doing great here for the most part within this week [Laughter]. Right, but, so of course parents are thinking like, "that's great, it's time [for the student] to go back." Well, the difference here is that this is the better environment and probably always will be. Do you want to try it again and have it fall apart? You know, so I mean it is always gonna be individualized.

The participant group identified the environmental structure as both an asset to program

and an area for potential growth within program development. Specific to service

utilization, the participant's response suggests the Transition Academy may address the

target population, but experience difficulty duplicating the environmental structures of a

traditional school environment. Given the process evaluation model, understanding how

services are effectively utilized represents a valuable outcome that may be gleaned

through similar participant responses (Rossi et al., 2004).

Targeted Outcomes. In considering student outcomes, in particular related to

special education programming and funding, the importance of evidence-based outcomes

is a key aspect of process evaluation (Slavin, 2008). The interviews emphasized a

seemingly disparate view between respondents on how targeted outcomes for students are

established and monitored. The respondents most closely connected to delivering direct

instruction identified academic charting as a primary focus. As one female faculty

member indicated:

> I mean, we take data every day and so, we look at that and then like course
> grades, and the grade work. Most parents within the first week of the child being
> here, they're saying that they've never done this much work before. They can't
> remember the last time they did this – they brought home this much completed
> work. And so, I think I take good cues from the parents that they're saying it.

In considering additional responses, the monitoring of student outcomes for new

enrollees tended to shift quickly from behavioral charting into academic measures.

Again, this perspective tended to be voiced primarily by the instructors working daily

with the students. At the same time, other faculty and the administrators connected to the

program expressed concerns about how targeted outcomes are being monitored for

students. As expressed by one of the female faculty members who provides defined

behavioral supports:

> I don't know that I have a good grip on all the students and how data is being
> taken and progress is being monitored for each student. I have a good idea of a
> few. And I also think too, just in that regard, we have some newer teachers here
> who I don't really think even understand the progress monitoring that the regular
> buildings do or are even aware of it. And so I do think that is an area that we
> need to look at.

As another female faculty member further explained, "If compliance is their number one

goal and that's all they are concerned about, then they're going to do everything they can

to get these kids to comply." The comments from participants suggest questions about

how data collection and monitoring is completed and utilized by staff.

For a program emphasizing behavioral interventions, the different viewpoints

from respondents on what is being measured, academics versus behavioral charting, was

a consistent thread throughout the individual interviews. On a more global scale, the focus group interview shifted the discussion of outcome monitoring to the procedures for moving students between the Transition Academy and the traditional school environment. As described by Jennifer Thomas, the participants discussed methods to improve charting of student outcomes on both sides:

> To me the best thing is to have that form so they can be filled out. As you're going along to say, "These are the things that we've tried." And then, it's not just a check-off system, but then maybe attach examples of what you've done… So, but knowing what we did of how many breaks he had, what kind of approach we use, that probably would've been very helpful to the staff here.

The overall commentary revolved around how the program could develop consistency in measuring student outcomes and connect that process to how the other schools in the district collect data. As outlined by Riehl (2000), this particular aspect of the process evaluation is a reflection on how the program establishes a norm-based process for communicating with different organizations outside the Transition Academy.

Staff Cohesion

Across the participants, and in particular during the focus group discussion, the respondents identified a feeling of disconnect between Transition Academy personnel and other district staff. West et al. (2006) referenced the importance of collaboration with other practitioners as essential to supporting staff working with low-incidence populations. The participants indicated there is a lack of collaborative elements specific to the Transition Academy staff that is isolating to staff assigned there. As the male faculty member at the Transition Academy noted:

> From a staff standpoint, it almost feels like we're our own little island. Like [we are] not really a part of the district. It's that we don't get to do any of the cool stuff like the schools get to and I think that our kids like forget it too. I think the staff kind of loses all that stuff too. [It's] like we're just kind of here.

Jennifer Thomas expanded on this response by sharing the viewpoint of district personnel

working with Transition Academy staff:

> You [the male faculty member] made a great point that you feel like an island but
> I think at school sometimes we feel the same way because we don't know who to
> call. We don't know where to get resources. We don't know where to get help and
> we have this great connection I think within, but there's also a disconnect with
> that you know.

The perspective is also clear from Kathy Morgan in looking at the overall connection of

the program to other district settings:

> I think that support and communication is the main thing. You know, I think it is
> hard to work with challenging students from the time you walk in the door to the
> time you leave and I guess that recognition, appreciation, that communication
> with schools I think would be so beneficial so that they feel more of a part of the
> district. Because I do feel like they probably feel pretty isolated which I think
> could really contribute to them leaving. They need to feel a part of what we're
> doing.

The element of staff cohesion also manifested in discussions about professional learning

communities and how staff members connect for professional growth. The district has a

specific professional learning community subgroup dedicated to teachers working with

autism populations. Despite what appeared to be a natural connection for Transition

Academy faculty and this group, the actual perceptions of the Transition Academy

suggest otherwise. As one female faculty member at the Transition Academy indicated:

> We have like a PLC that we made on our half days with the [autism] rooms but
> honestly that's not that relevant to the group we have here. So, I mean that's one
> thing we will talk about for next year, just like curriculum, is I think a huge piece
> that we need more training on here. You know and we're not going to get it
> through a [autism] room PLC so there's got to be – we have to have something
> else. Because it has turned into – these kids are on grade level or are close to
> grade level. We've got to make sure that we're keeping up with their needs, which
> is much different than the program was intended to be.

The perception of isolation for Transition Academy staff is similar to communication

issues noted previously about procedures. At the same time, the disconnect in this

scenario speaks to how staff perceive their value within the district and connection to a

collaborative effort across the district to help students with significant behavioral issues.

External Validation. Connected to the concept of recruiting and retaining quality

staff, the responses from faculty participants emphasized external validation and support

as fundamental program element that may be lacking. Personnel working with even mild

behaviors associated with autism spectrum disorders experience increased stress levels

(Carter & Hughes, 2006). Given the Transition Academy's focus on more intensive

students with autism spectrum disorders and social/emotional disturbances, the

programming profile would suggest increased stress levels. Yet, consistently, the faculty

reported the need and desire for external feedback as a more pressing issue for the staff

than dealing with intensive behaviors. As explained by one of the female faculty:

> Honestly, I feel like when we have the formal sit-down observations and
> evaluations and things like that, but I kind of feel like that's the only feedback I
> get. That's the only positive feedback I feel like I get. Other than that, I feel like
> we get some negative feedback, you know, when we're doing something wrong or
> when people don't feel like something went as they wanted it to. But I feel like the
> only time I hear good things are during the evaluations.

In a follow-up question about remaining with the program, the same faculty member

expanded on the theme of needing external validation:

> Honestly, it has nothing to do with the students. I love the students. If it was just
> myself and the people that I work with on a day-to-day basis and the students, I
> would absolutely continue here. I kind of just feel like we're flying without a net.
> Like we don't, I don't really know what I'm allowed to do. Then as soon as I tried
> to take on more responsibility, I get asked a question in District Office. I feel like
> if I answer it the right way then I'm like walking on a thin line.

In a related vein, participants discussed the importance of external validation for the growth demonstrated by students. At the heart of the focus group discussion was a dialogue about the readiness of students to return, but reluctance on the part of administrators and delays brought about over concerns with disruptive students possibly returning to their original schools. As explained by the male faculty member from the Transition Academy:

> I think support from administrators and I think kind of going back to that process of getting them out. I think it's probably pretty discouraging for [Transition Academy] staff to see kids that are ready to go and then they don't go anywhere and then you just kind of feel like, "Well, is what I'm doing really working or is it really appreciated? Are we doing the right thing?" Because the whole goal is to get them back and if they never go back, I think it's hard for staff to be motivated and continue doing what they're doing.

Diane Montgomery, speaking as an administrator who has both sent and received students from the Transition Academy, echoed this perspective:

> I guess feeling that disconnect… I would think that they would have some feelings of success with students that have transitioned back out and then have done well when they go back to the elementary building. But I know that there's been a few that have tried the transition out and then they come back again and I think that would probably bother some person. Like they didn't give them what they needed if they have to come back again. I think anytime you have that going on in a job or career, where you don't feel like what you're doing is really making a difference, might definitely impact some [staff].

In both examples, the participants are speaking to the impact on staff when there are issues with the transition for students. Again, a stressor for the staff and factors related to staying with the Transition Academy seem to center more on the need for validation as opposed to assistance dealing with the stress of students demonstrating physical aggression.

Support Structures. The participants tended to categorize support structures within overt categories, addressing topics like funding and access to materials/curriculum, and

less tangible supports such as stakeholder input and program direction. Many districts can find it difficult to fund intensive low-incidence programs given the costs associated with legal advice/consultation, facility expenses, and maintaining the low student/staff ratios required (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003). In discussing the tangible, overt support structures, the participants were consistent in reporting that the district provides substantial financial support. Kathy Morgan discussed the tangible supports and specifics related to funding and personnel:

> Well, I think the facility itself helps support [staff]. It's a very open environment; smaller rooms; there are a lot of personnel over there; a lot of support staff help; behavior specialist over there full-time. There's, I mean, I know that they're going through the Collaborative Problem Solving training as well so that they can get that support as well. I think resources – they get the resources that they need and more.

> Beyond the basic funding issues, the participants returned frequently to how stakeholders provide feedback and receive direction on the program. At the core of this discussion was a repeated focus on the lack of administrative presence at the Transition Academy. Given the intensity of the students and the program complexity, most respondents questioned the lack of a direct administrator assigned to the Transition Academy. The participants attached many of the problems with the program (communication delays, lack of clarity in goals, lack of feedback) to the concept that a central administrator is not on site to guide these issues. As explained by Carla Ramore:

> I think it would be really valid and valuable to have an administrator over there to support that team, that core team that's working with those students. I think it's great that you have a behavior therapist, but if you don't have an administrator there and you have some pretty violent kids or aggressive kids or kids that are losing control, there needs to be some additional support there to help them in that regard. And having an administrator there I think is important.

A female faculty member at the Transition Academy helped define this particular support system issue in more detail. She explained that most of the program direction and communication derives internally from the staff, while external administrators primarily address facility issues:

> I think I'd give input data, you know, everyday just changing students' plans or changing their academics or whatever they're working on. Like I said, we kind of collaborate everyday between the paras and the behavioral specialist and things like that. And then like I'm giving input now [to an administrator] or just saying, "Oh we really could use this. We really could use an alarm on the door".

Overall, the participants felt the structural supports from a purely financial vantage point were intact and appropriate. Through the interviews, lack of funding or supplies/materials was never identified as a problem area. The areas of structural support that were identified as problematic tended to connect back to previous themes related to communication and program continuity.

Support structures were also supported as a theme through the review of historical documents and program finances. The key documents reviewed in this area were meeting notes from planning committee sessions held by key district personnel as part of developing the Transition Academy. The sessions were attended by district office personnel and elementary principals with experience hosting Transition Room locations in their buildings. In addition, certified special education personnel familiar with Transition Room programming were included in the committees.

The meeting notes make repeated references to the original goal of the Transition Academy. More than other factors, the notes indicate the primary goal was to provide services for the most severe students with autism spectrum disorders in a more cost effective manner. At the time, the district was solely reliant on private placement

facilities when an individual student's level of aggression exceeded the capacity of personnel in a traditional Transition Room. Based on the notes, the committee members were consistent in their belief that the students could be provided an appropriate educational setting by district personnel within a district operated facility. The issue was that the level of aggression prevented the students from being maintained in the close proximity to other students often found in a Transition Room environment. As the program developed and started to include students with severe emotional disturbances, the central question remained the same in terms of cost effective considerations.

Given the process evaluation model, it is important to consider whether the original program goal of developing a more cost effective service model was met. The statements from the study participants, as referenced previously, indicated positive feedback about the level of financial support provided by the district. The financial documentation, using a simple summative review of operational costs, indicated the district accomplished the primary goal. For the 2011-12 school year, the per student total operational cost for the Transition Academy was $37,191. The figure includes all identified costs that can be isolated for the Transition Academy including, but not limited to: facility expenses (rent, utilities, maintenance, etc.), staff salary and benefits, transportation, and equipment/supply costs. For comparison purposes, the per student cost to the district private placement facilities providing equivalent programming is $44,765. The figure was calculated by combining and then averaging tuition costs and transportation costs for equivalent private placements utilized by the district in 2011-12. When costs are isolated specific to private placements for students with severe autism

spectrum disorders, the cost savings are more pronounced with an annual per student figure of $64,369.

Summary

Chapter Four contains a review of the study design, data collection methods, conceptual framework, research questions and data analysis. The Transition Academy was described in detail and relevant information specific to the participants' background was reviewed. Using the identified data analysis procedures, themes specific to the Transition Academy program evaluation were reviewed. The information derived from semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and review of historical and financial material. A personal journal provided reference points and amplifying details for the researcher to consider as the study progressed. Chapter Five will provide a description of findings, conclusions, limitations, implications for practice and recommendations for future study.

CHAPTER FIVE

Summary, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of the process evaluation was to examine the implementation of a special education program designed to support students with autism and social/emotional disturbances in a large, suburban school district. Social justice theory, as the conceptual framework for the study, is defined as the mechanism by which society assigns responsibilities within our cooperative social efforts (Rawls, 1999). In particular, the efforts of public school districts to meet the needs of the full spectrum of students regardless of the severity of their disabilities (Theoharis, 2007). The exploration of the Midwest School District Transition Academy through this conceptual lens can be used to illuminate the inherent challenges for leaders in program implementation and effective organizational change. When considering program efficacy for low incidence groups, leadership characteristics are identified by the ability of a leader to sustain a coherent program structure (Zabel & Zabel, 2001).

The data collected in the study was derived and triangulated from individual interviews, a focus group, and a review of historical documents specific to the program's development. Participants in the study were provided with an electronic record of the transcripts for the individual interview and the focus group. The use of member checking promotes accuracy and credibility within the data collection (Creswell, 2007). The themes identified in the study were: 1) Program Continuity, with subthemes of: a) Program Goals, b) Procedural Systems, and c) Communication Methods; and 2) Student Outcomes, with subthemes of: a) Environmental Structures, and b) Targeted Outcomes;

and 3) Staff Cohesion, with subthemes of: a) External Validation, and b) Support

Structures. The director of special education for the Midwest School District served as a

peer to review and debrief with the researcher regarding themes derived from the study.

The peer review served to enhance dependability and confirmability via the peer's

perspectives and through a self-review to confirm study findings and retrace data steps

(Mertens, 2005).

Chapter Five summarizes the outcomes derived from the data analysis in

reference to the research questions. In addition, identified implications for practice and

recommendations for additional research will be defined. Consistent with a process

evaluation model, the outcomes provide an opportunity to review program practices and

consider if the program is operating in a manner consistent with the intended design. The

process evaluation model may also suggest new areas to explore within the program

design or existing structures in need of modification (Creswell, 2007).

<div align="center">Summary of Findings</div>

The findings of the process evaluation conducted on the Midwest School District

Transition Academy are defined in this section. The goal of the study, consistent with a

process evaluation model, was to consider how closely the operational methods of the

Transition Academy matched with the intended goals and purpose of the program.

Service models designed for special education students have evolved from predominantly

exclusionary practices to progressively more inclusive models (Carter & Hughes, 2006).

A key element within this process has been focused on the complex task of educating

students with challenging maladaptive behaviors and significant developmental delays

(Riehl, 2000). The goal of gathering a global overview of a program designed specifically

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for students with autism and students with severe social/emotional disturbances served as the guiding impetus for the study. The purpose was to understand the operational efficiency of the Transition Academy, with the hopes of improving program outcomes, but also to contribute a framework outlining how one district has addressed the challenges inherent in supporting these specific low-incident student populations.

In conducting the data analysis, the researcher identified three primary themes connected to the Midwest Transition Academy program model: The Program Continuity, Student Outcomes, and Staff Cohesion. Drawing on the study design and aspects of the conceptual framework, the research questions focusing the study were:

1) What is the process for placing students, measuring progress, and determining program impact for students at the Midwest School District Transition Academy?

2) How does the district develop and retain quality personnel to work with students with significant aggressive behaviors?

3) How does the district fund the program needs for low-incidence populations?

4) What role do administrators and certified staff (teachers and behavior specialists) play in program development for students?

The content in Chapter 4 provided a summary of the themes derived from the data and connected to the research questions. The information, supplemented by reference materials from the literature reviews, provided a framework to interpret the data.

What is the process for placing students, measuring progress, and determining program impact for students at the Midwest School District Transition Academy?

Collectively, a student's placement at the Transition Academy should follow a sequence from identification, to measuring progress, and finally assessing the impact of the program when determining if a student can return to a less restrictive setting. By this

logic, the placement process is one process with a series of three actions spread across time. In considering the first action, the participants were in agreement that the process for placing students lacks clarity and objectively defined standards. Participants suggested that the lack of universally understood placement criteria leads to confusion and frustration in determining why specific students are placed within the program. Drawing from Riehl (2000), program continuity is a key component to quality instructional programming and supports for special education students. The vague criteria and lack of methods was referenced by personnel sending students to the program and by personnel at the Transition Academy as a prominent concern within the overall program model.

Returning to the placement sequence, after students have been placed at the Transition Academy, the focus logically shifts to how their progress is measured. During individual interviews the participants, drawing on the identified theme of Targeted Outcomes, presented differing perspectives on how student progress is measured. Slavin (2008) identifies evidence based outcomes for students as an essential function within programming for special education students and a process evaluation model. The perspective from participants outside the Transition Academy suggested that progress monitoring would be most closely tied to behavioral standards. In contrast, Transition Academy noted consistently that their focus rapidly shifts to an academic focus shortly after the students begin in the program. Drawing on comments from a behavioral specialist familiar with both settings, "… we have some new teachers here who I don't really think even understand progress monitoring that regular buildings do or are even aware of it." In essence, responses from administrators that sent students suggested

progress monitoring should be closely connected to behavioral indicators and minimized the focus on academics. The certified special education teachers within the program focused on academics with behavior charting as a secondary focus.

In the final phase of the placement process, the focus shifts to identifying the overall program impact for specific students and how to gauge readiness to return to the traditional school environment. When the participants were brought together in the focus group, the differing viewpoints on progress monitoring resurfaced, but the focus of the participants shifted to how progress monitoring at the Transition Academy is used to return students. As Kathy Morgan, an administrator noted:

> I kind of like the idea of what was mentioned about some sort of a checklist because I think the documentation that maybe proof of the things that we were doing would be very helpful to show the different strategies, the different approaches that were tried. I still think they're probably needs to be a connection between the building and staff here, be it the behavior therapist or somebody, that can sit down with that person so that conversation can be had about what's in the IEP? Is there a behavior plan?

The participants also suggested the program impact is also determined by steadily increasing expectations to match the outcomes expected in the traditional school environment. Also, related to Student Outcomes and the impact of the program, the participants consistently reported both immediate and long-term benefits to the students placed at the Transition Academy. The participants' agreement on positive student outcomes connects to the concept of a process evaluation structure and addresses whether the program is meeting the intended goals (Rossi et al., 2004).

How does the district develop and retain quality personnel to work with students with significant aggressive behaviors?

Drawing from the literature review and process evaluation structure, there are specific challenges associated with retaining and developing quality personnel in

programs for students with significant aggressive behaviors (Carter & Hughes, 2006;

Hastings, 2002; Lecavalier et al., 2006). Embedded throughout the data analysis, the

predominant theme identified from participants related to staff development and retention

was Staff Cohesion. West et al. (2006) noted that collaboration with other practitioners is

essential for staff working with low-incidence populations. Participants noted there is a

clear lack of collaboration and communication between Transition Academy staff and

other personnel within the Midwest School District. The male faculty member

referenced, "…it almost feels like we're our own little island." The viewpoint was

expressed by participants that this isolation may related to overall staffing issues across

the district and time constraints experienced by groups on both sides of the equation.

Given the intensity of student situations at the Transition Academy, participants

emphasized that feelings of isolation would likely contribute to staff members leaving the

program. This contention is supported somewhat by the fact that seven of the twenty staff

members (including paraprofessionals) assigned to the Transition Academy did not return

following the most recent school year. Although some of the personnel left due to

promotions or other opportunities, the concerns about feeling isolated may have

contributed to other departures.

Closely connected to the concerns about staff isolation, was additional feedback

from participants about the need for external validation. Somewhat counter to

expectations, the certified staff deemphasized the impact of aggressive student behavior

on their willingness to remain with the program. Instead, the faculty participants

emphasized a lack of positive feedback as a source of concern. The specific types of

positive feedback related to how the staff members were performing but also recognition from external sources that students were making progress.

Referring to staff performance, as defined by one of the female faculty members, "…I feel like the only time I hear good things are during evaluations." As illustrated by Carter and Hughes (2006), positive feedback for staff routinely working in stressful settings can positively enhance their overall attitude toward the job demands. There was a strong inclination within the participants to note that the lack of frequent feedback specific to job performance may be attributed to the lack of an on-site administrator. The importance of external validation specific to student growth represented a distinctly different issue related to staff retention. As explained by one of the female certified faculty members:

> I do think there's gonna be those kids that it's obvious they're ready to go, you know, like we don't have any behaviors or very, very low rates of behavior but yet we're still keeping them here. So, you know, so I mean I kind of think, yeah, it's understandable that some of these kids, I mean I think most people have come to the understanding that some of these kids are gonna be here for a long time and that's okay. But then, there's those ones that we know like are ready and then we just sit and wait.

The participants frequently returned to the theme of feeling students were ready to return, but then the process appeared to stagnate and students stayed. The certified faculty participants reported that they perceived this was due to communication problems, but also noted reluctance on the part of district personnel and traditional school settings to bring the students back. The issue, per the participants, led to frustration about whether personnel outside the Transition Academy were effectively recognizing the growth demonstrated by students. Yet again, the issues of communication again and clear

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procedures are connected to identified problems. The participants indicated these issues were challenges that could impact their willingness to stay with the program long-term.

How does the district fund the program needs for low-incidence populations?

The financial considerations, related to a process evaluation model, for funding a program for low-incidence student populations connected strongly with the identified theme of Support Structures. The framework of social justice theory and literature review information on funding structures for special education point to funding and district support issues as potential barriers to implementing and maintaining quality programs (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003; Chasson et al., 2007; Marshall, 2004; Slade et al., 2009; Theoharis, 2007). The participants consistently emphasized funding supports as a relative strength for the Transition Academy. In addition, in considering how social justice theory focuses on addressing marginalize groups, they also noted the flexibility of the district in reshaping the program to be inclusive of students with severe emotional disturbances when this was identified as a population in need. As explained by Dottie Yew, one of the administrators:

> I truly think through input that we provide I think – again the original purpose was maybe to deal with more that the highly autistic child that was not functioning well, but I think that because our district administrators have listened to teachers and building administrators and listened to what our realities are and what our needs are that it has allowed the program to change, to take in, and to try to meet the needs of any student that we're sending because if they haven't been successful in the regular setting, then the Transition Academy's goal to me seems to be try to help them get control of what's not, not working and be able to transition back.

The willingness of the Midwest School District to broaden the program parameters was an important issue specific to program funding. The decision led directly to more students

in the program and, in turn, necessitated additional expenditures for staff, operational

costs, and eventually an expansion of the facility space in 2012.

Within a process evaluation, another issue related to how the district funds the

program is the question of whether the program is cost effective (Browder & Cooper-

Duffy, 2003). Programs for low-incidence student populations can be prohibitively

expensive for many districts because they generally require lower staff/student ratios and

accompanying specialized equipment and facilities. Financial documentation for the

Transition Academy was collected as a cross-reference for staff perceptions and validated

the opinion that significant financial expenditures were made to support the program. As

one of the female faculty members reported:

> I haven't seen an issue with resources. I've ordered them all, so, I don't know how
> that happens in a building. Like if they contact, you know, curriculum and
> purchasing and everything… I mean we had an empty building hence we had like
> put stuff in it.

From the perspective of cost-effective considerations, the program is meeting established

goals by providing an equivalent service at a cost savings compared to private placement

facilities used by the district. In particular, specific to students with autism, there were

substantial savings accomplished while simultaneously keeping students in programming

directly associated with district personnel.

*What role do administrators and certified staff (teachers and behavior specialists) play in
program development for students?*

The participants noted that the Transition Academy is a comprehensive program,

but one that is relatively early in terms of implementation. Rainey and Steinbauer (199)

pointed out the importance of public agencies maintaining flexibility when it relates to

funding programs and structures. Considering the themes derived from the participants,

the role of administrators and certified staff in program development has been varied. The

challenge has been to remain flexibility in order to serve changing student needs, but

simultaneously attempt to develop program continuity. In early planning phases for the

program, participants reported high levels of involvement by administrators and teachers

with a vested interest or association with the program. Diane Montgomery, one of the

administrators, was involved from the earliest steps in the planning process and she

discussed the changes of the program over time:

> Well, I think the biggest thing is that it changed from the initial planning stages of
> students with autism...through conversations with staff, I'm sure at building level
> as well as district level, the need for working with these students with such
> volatile, you know, emotions and things that the Academy has picked up that need
> which has been probably the most difficult need to meet at the building level. So,
> there have definitely been changes with that.

The response highlights the influence of staff input prior to the program opening and then

again in response to the emerging needs of students with severe emotional disturbances.

From a process evaluation perspective, the change in program continuity was

perceived as a positive and necessary outcome by participants in the study. Program

deviations, as explained by Rossi et al. (2004) are not atypical, but tend to occur in

response to negative issues. In contrast, for the Transition Academy, the participants

consistently agreed that the changes were inconsistent with the original goals or the

program, but appropriate with respect to student supports and program efficiency. At the

same time, the participants also noted that the program change, in terms of student

population, did not prompt a comprehensive review of how the program operates. The

new student population was essentially grafted into the existing structure without seeking

collective input into what program changes were necessary in response.

Conclusions Derived from the Findings

For purposes of the study, a qualitative research format was selected to examine the implementation and evolution of a special education program designed to support students with autism and social/emotional disturbances in a large, suburban school district. The intent was to of provide a perspective on existing practices in a large-scale program by using emerging themes to understand the program as a whole (Creswell, 2007). Instead of proving or disproving a specific hypothesis, the research sough to offer insight into how one district is addressing the programming challenges connected with these student populations.

The use of qualitative methodology and limiting the focus to studying one specific program led to the selection of a program evaluation study model. Mertens (2005) provides extensive detail on program evaluation standards for study utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy derived from *The Program Evaluation Standards*. Through a program review, the study explored efficacy challenges to the development of educational programming for students with autism or emotional disturbances. Consistent with Rossi et al. (2004), a process evaluation model allowed analysis of provisions specific to program implementation within the Transition Academy. The process evaluation model, as a subset of program monitoring, incorporates perspectives on how the program operates and achieves outcomes. The data collection structure focused on using multiple sources of data to triangulate information and isolate the emerging themes identified via: interviews, a focus group, historical documents, financial records, and a personal journal maintained by the researcher during the study (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Mertens, 2005; Rossi et al., 2004). The research questions and

identified themes, considered through the lens of social justice theory, suggested specific conclusions derived from the study's findings on the implementation and evolution of a special education program designed to support students with autism and social/emotional disturbances.

Program Continuity

The data collected in the study, specific to a process evaluation structure, led to the conclusion that the Midwest Transition Academy is a program in flux. The core programming goal of the Transition Academy has changed markedly since the inception of the program, but the research determined there has not been a subsequent review of program structures. Rossi et al. (2004) noted that program continuity is fundamental to building toward quality outcomes in program design. The shift in programming focus from exclusively targeting students with autism to a more expansive program model including students with severe emotional disturbances substantively altered program continuity. The change in program focus was necessary, given the emerging needs of students within the school district, and consistent with tenets associated with social justice leadership specific to educational leaders addressing marginalized groups (Theoharis, 2007).

Following the change in program continuity, there were multiple reports and statements that indicated procedural systems and communication structures were not revised to reflect the new reality of the program. The administrators and faculty members repeatedly indicated they had no clear understanding of the mechanism for how students are placed at the Transition Academy. In a similar vein, there were frequent references to communication problems between the various school district personnel and facilities

involved with the program. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the procedural systems and communication methods are deficient in helping promote the overall goals of the program.

Tracing the narrative provided by interviews and the focus group, it can be concluded that the procedural and communication deficits were not purposefully ignored. As Riehl (2000) noted, program continuity is a particular challenge for administrators in public school settings due to the myriad demands placed on their time. It was evident that the identified deficits were primarily the result of lack of on-site leadership at the Transition Academy and district level administrators being unable to keep pace with program needs while also trying to fulfill their other assigned responsibilities.

From the collected data, it was concluded that the change in the student population parameters rapidly accelerated the growth rate of the Transition Academy program. The Midwest School District total student population is close to 19,000 and the district operates 15 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, and 4 high schools. Although the Transition Academy was designed primarily for elementary students, it has also hosted older students. The two district administrators who served in a gatekeeper function for the program lacked sufficient time to provide quality procedural systems and communication supports. As one of the female faculty members said, "We have one administrator trying to cover the entire district and running everywhere while the other administrator tries to cover the gaps." Depicted in Figure 1 is the role of district administrators in the placement process between the traditional school settings to the Transition Academy.
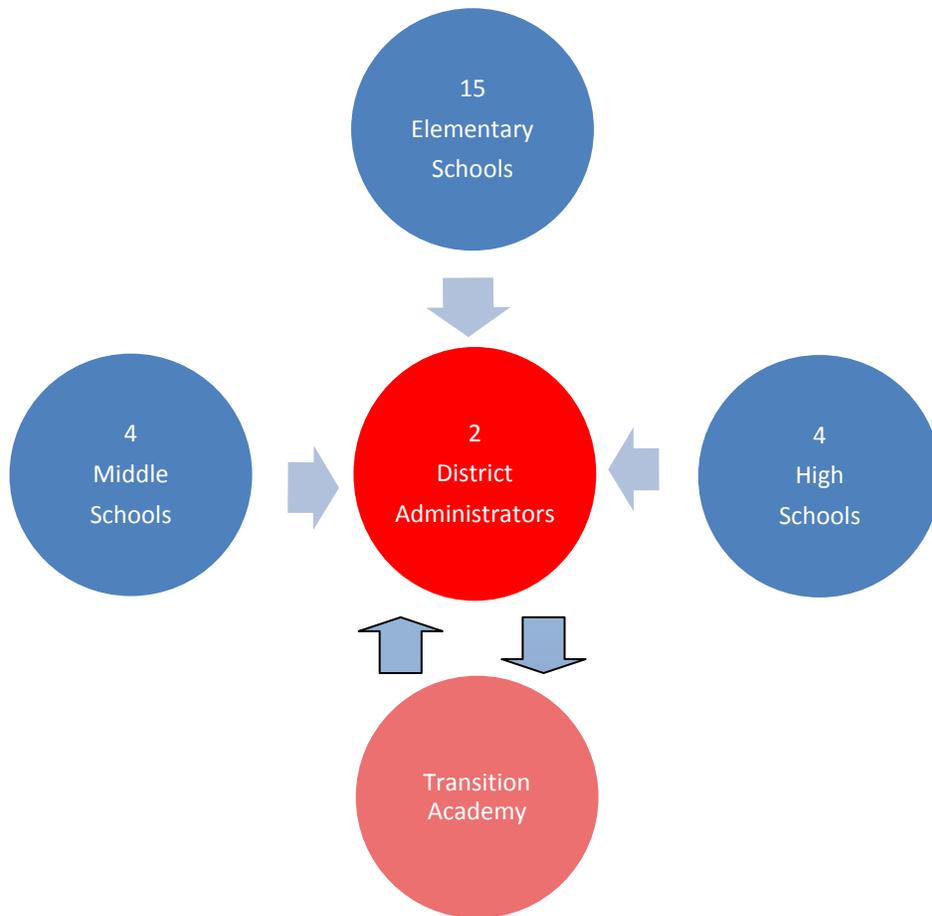
Figure 1: The Role of District Administrators in the Placement Process

The figure illustrates the challenge faced in regulating movement into and back out of the Transition Academy. In this construct, the task of managing student placements at the Transition Academy is merely one part of the responsibilities assigned to the two district administrators. It is evident from the collected data that the district personnel lacked the time to revisit procedural and communication systems. In turn, these deficits led directly to delays in student movement through the program and frustration on the part of staff related to program continuity. It should be noted that staff recognized this problem was not due to a lack of willingness on the part of the district administrators, but simply a function of two people trying to manage services in a very large district.

Student Outcomes

At the core of the Transition Academy program is the goal for students to be successful and experience positive outcomes. From a process evaluation framework and social justice perspective, it can be concluded that participants felt the program met the primary mandate to benefit students. Conceptually, the program was designed with what may be considered competing goals of providing quality programming but doing so in a cost effective manner. Social validation bridges the theoretical underpinnings of a program and considers how stakeholders actually view the program implementation (Callahan et al., 2007). From this viewpoint, the data supported the finding that students experienced improved outcomes in terms of reduced behavior issues and increased academic output.

In considering student outcomes, one important conclusion noted specific to the program was the marked influence on students that the environmental structures at the Transition Academy provided. Although it may seem simplistic, a fundamental outcome supported by the data is that removing students from the environmental pressures and demands associated with traditional school settings yielded a positive impact in the eyes of the administrators and faculty. The smaller scale, in terms of student population, combined with more flexible classroom spacing and a lower staff/student ratio provided an environment tailored to reduce anxiety while simultaneously increasing the frequency of individual care and attention from school personnel. Specific to the process evaluation model, understanding how services are effectively used by program participants, in this case students, represents a valuable outcome (Rossi et al., 2004). Environmental structures were given only minimal attention in relation to program development, but

ultimately in can be concluded they played a key role in helping students succeed within the program.

At the same time, when considering student outcomes, there is an implicit expectation that student success be in some way quantifiable. In particular, special education protocols are closely tied to the construct of defining annual, measurable goals and then charting students' progress toward the goals. The data supported that environment structures were beneficial for students, but this conclusion must also connect to program structures for measuring student progress. In considering student outcomes, the importance of evidence-based outcomes is a key aspect of process evaluation (Slavin, 2008). The data collected indicated distinct opinions on what quantified student success and what elements of student performance are important to measure.

The opinions were divided between the administrators sending the students to the program and certified faculty working directly with the students at the Transition Academy. The analysis indicated administrators prioritized the charting of behavioral growth while Transition Academy focused on academic achievement as the key indicator of student success. Based on the data, it can be concluded that the disparity in viewpoints is the reflection of a basic inverse relationship. For administrators, students are sent to the Transition Academy when behavioral issues overwhelm the academic performance of the student in the traditional setting. Carla Ramore, one of the administrators, described the administrators' perspective, "You would probably be looking at how that child is making changes in their behavior and their interactions with adults and the peers that are there." Conversely, for Transition Academy personnel, the structure of the program often reduces behavioral issues and allows them to focus on academic outcomes. Based on this

data, it can be concluded that evidence-based measures of student performance are collected as part of the program, but participants familiar with the program differ on their perspective on the specific information to be prioritized in data collection.

Staff Cohesion

The lack of staff cohesion between Transition Academy personnel and the district at large was represented by participants as though the Transition Academy was a private placement independent of the district. In considering the data, it was evident that the administrators were unfamiliar with the daily operations of the Transition Academy and tended to view the Academy as simply another external placement location instead of an extension of the district. West et al. (2006) identified collaboration with other practitioners as fundamental to supporting staff working with low-incident student populations. Based on the data collected, it can be determined that the Transition Academy personnel consistently viewed themselves as a program apart from the district as a whole. As noted previously, the male faculty member at the Transition Academy effectively summarized this perception in describing the Transition Academy as "an island".

At the root of both perspectives are the issues of communication and external validation. In addition to the previously noted concerns with communication systems, the findings indicated personnel at the Transition Academy do not feel they receive positive feedback for their efforts. From a process evaluation perspective, this perceived lack of feedback indicated the Transition Academy personnel fail to receive the reinforcement needed to sustain their motivation to work with highly challenging students with tendencies toward aggressive behaviors. Beck and Gargiulo (2001) noted that personnel

working with special education students tend to experience stressors in the classroom at a heightened level in comparison with general education teachers.

Based on the data collected, the fundamental issue for staff in terms of maintaining of cohesive program has little to do with the level of aggression from students and more to do with the type and frequency of feedback/encouragement provided by supervisors. In other words, the staff didn't mind working with aggressive students or managing physical violence, but they desired recognition for their commitment to this student population and acknowledgement of the positive outcomes they had achieved. In comparison with reviewed research literature, this data represents a departure specific to programs geared toward low-incidence student populations (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Hastings, 2002; Lecavalier et al., 2006). The prevailing picture on staff cohesion and retention points to student aggression as a key stressor for staff, but the Transition Academy personnel generally minimized this concern and instead focused on recognition for the impact they have on student outcomes. Building on the themes identified in program continuity and student outcomes; the primary conclusion derived from the data specific to staff cohesion is that communication elements appear to be at the heart of identified concerns within the program.

<div align="center">Limitations</div>

Across the available research designs, every format has specific strengths and inherent weaknesses relative to the selected design (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2005). The process evaluation model, due to the fundamental focus on a specific program, has particular challenges specific to generalization of findings (Rossi et al., 2004). Consistent

with this understanding, the researcher acknowledges the following limitations associated with the study.

Specific to this study, the fundamental concern is specific to generalization of findings given the unique characteristics associated with a process evaluation study on an individual program. The process evaluation model, as a subset of program evaluation, doesn't seek to provide a step-by-step procedure for implementing a program design. At best, the process evaluation model can suggest issues to consider relative to program design specific to a narrowly prescribed set of circumstances (Rossi et al., 2004). For this reason, it must be stated that the findings of the study present a limited perspective specific to unique constructs associated with the Midwest Transition Academy setting and personnel. As noted previously, the current design, due to the complexity of factors involved, does not compensate for the variations noted in programming and should be considered accordingly in considering the information for other locations and within the process evaluation model.

Connected to Transition Academy personnel was a limitation as to whether respondents would feel comfortable sharing their perceptions of a program directly tied to their employment standing. The most overt limitation is that participants were sharing their perspective, via interviews and the focus group, with the researcher who was also the district administrator responsible for oversight on the program. Per Rossi et al. (2004) it is not unusual for program evaluators to have a direct connection to the programs under study. At the same time, the question of veracity in relation to staff interviews remains an issue.

Relative to the research design, the goal was to structure a study that illustrated the Transition Academy as a comprehensive program. A process evaluation model allows the researcher to consider how closely a program follows the intended goals and focus imbedded in the program design (Creswell, 2009, Mertens, 2005, Rossi et al., 2004). However, compared to studies that utilize quantitative methods and multi-site qualitative studies, there is no empirical statistical verification of significance (quantitative) or comparative analysis with other programs (qualitative, multi-site) available in this type of process evaluation (Creswell, 2007).

An additional limitation is the potential for researcher bias due to personal experiences related to special education programming. The researcher was initially trained as a school psychologist and has worked 10 years as a school administrator with responsibilities closely connected to special education programming. While this personal experience provides a foundation for understanding the data gleaned from the study, it also represents a potential bias that may have unduly shaped the direction of the study and participants in the process (Creswell, 2009).

<div align="center">Implications for Practice</div>

The information gathered from the study indicate the Transition Academy is providing effective programming specific to student outcomes, but is also experiencing problems associated with procedural systems, communication methods, and staff validation. Based on these findings, the researcher identified specific implications that are applicable to Transition Academy practices and other programs designed for low-incidence special education populations similar to the program.

Social justice theories, connected to educational programming, emphasize the importance of providing quality supports to marginalized populations (Rawls, 1999; Theoharis, 2007). Prevailing research focuses on the stressors for personnel associated with programming for special education students demonstrating significant aggression. While the present study does not discount the impact of student aggression on programming considerations, it does suggest that an equally important consideration is the feedback and validation staff receive for working with these students who demonstrate tendencies toward aggression. An implication specific to program development and the Transition Academy would be to embed opportunities for staff to receive direct feedback and praise specific to their efforts outside the framework of formal evaluations.

A closely connected implication, related to program design, is to include a more direct supervisory element as part of the program. The presence of an on-site administrator provides opportunities for more direct feedback to staff and would promote communication with settings outside the program. Specific to the Transition Academy, an on-site administrator could also help resolve procedural issues that inhibit students' movements in and out of the program. As referenced previously, one primary complication in the program design was the limited availability of district personnel serving in the gatekeeper role. By providing an on-site administrator, the Transition Academy personnel would be less likely to encounter communication delays and associated frustrations when trying to facilitate placements in the program.

The final implication focuses on a comprehensive review and consideration of procedural elements associated with the program. The most predominant theme

throughout the study was the lack of formal procedures for placing students in the program and agreement on how to quantify progress in relation to returning to the traditional school environment. The lack of a formal, articulated set of standards for student placements leads directly to confusion about program parameters and frustration for participants on both sides of the process. Given the intensive legal issues associated with special education placement considerations, the lack of a defined process is also a potential liability for the district in terms of compliance with mandated procedures. A school district seeking to develop an equivalent programming model should carefully consider eligibility criteria and formally educate key district personnel on the process.

<center>Recommendations for Future Study</center>

The outcomes form this research study build on the available body of knowledge connected to programs for students with autism or severe emotional disturbances. The current research on programs of this type, in particular the dual student populations addressed at the Transition Academy, are limited and generally focused on student specific interventions. Given this consideration, there is ample opportunity for research studies to consider these types of programs and improve on program structures to the benefit of students and staff alike. Drawing on findings from this study, specific recommendations for additional research are recommended in the following areas.

The primary recommendation for future research would be to seek out a comparable program and conduct a similar program evaluation study. The limited ability to generalize from a single program evaluation would benefit from a study focused on similar programming elements. Riehl (2000) noted that program continuity is a problematic area within public education settings and a comparison program would

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afford the opportunity to see how different districts approach a similar program within defined funding constraints. In addition, because the Transition Academy includes two relatively distinct student populations, a program evaluation on a similar model would help isolate if identified concerns are specific to the Midwest School District program or represent a more global challenge inherent within programming for these student populations. The current study also utilized a social justice framework in considering outcomes and an additional program evaluation would allow for different theoretical considerations to be addressed.

A second research approach, based on quantitative methods, would also be appropriate to consider the statistical significance of student outcomes. Consistent with a qualitative approach, the narrative on student progress and achievement in the current study is based primarily on subjective reports by personnel directly invested in the program. A quantitative approach could identify key indicators associated with student achievement in programs comparable to the Transition Academy. The current study indicated participants in the program have different perspectives on what is important to assess for students within the identified populations. A quantitative study could shed light on these variables and also contribute to the process of determining when students are ready to reintegrate into the traditional school environment.

The final recommendation would to be to consider a longitudinal study of the Transition Academy to monitor the evolution of the program over time. Although there were identified flaws, the participants were consistent in noting positive outcomes for students and strong environmental and financial supports. A longitudinal study would provide insight into how the relatively new program adjusts to the changing demands of

the student population. The study could also monitor how recommendations to correct the identified flaws are implemented and gauge their success. Despite the fact it has only been operational for a very short period of time; the Transition Academy has already experienced significant changes both in programming and staffing. A longitudinal study would allow researchers to revisit the setting and compare the existing program with new procedures implemented in the years to come.

<div align="center">Concluding Overview</div>

The intent of the study was to examine the implementation and evolution of a special education program designed to support students with autism and social/emotional disturbances in a large, suburban school district. At its core, a process evaluation model was used to analyze existing practices and provide insight into how one district is addressing the programming challenges connected with these student populations. Drawing on the tenets of social justice theory, the study considered how leaders provide programming and supports for a low-incidence population of students with unique and challenging special education needs. The findings and conclusions identified in the study highlight a program that was meeting students' needs, but struggling to facilitate communication between stakeholder groups. In addition, although environmental structures and financial supports were identified as positive, there were concerns about Transition Academy personnel feeling isolated from other district personnel and programming. It was suggested, based on the identified themes, that the concerns may stem from staffing limitations at the district level and limited opportunities for key personnel to dialogue about the students and their progress.

The conclusions and identified themes also indicated that the program model was effective from a financial viewpoint. The program operates at a per pupil cost that is less than comparable private placement programs and has the added benefit of keeping students connected with personnel employed directly by the school district. The program model allows for more flexible transition opportunities for students and increased access to personnel familiar with students' needs during transition planning. Concerns related to staff attrition, partially confirmed based on retention figures following the most recent school year, suggested improvements in procedural, communication, and supervisory elements are essential to improving program continuity in the years to come.

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Appendix A

Gatekeeper and Informed Consent Documents

1. Gatekeeper Consent Form

2. Invitation to Participate Letter

3. Participant Consent Letter

4. Informed Consent Form

FORT ZUMWALT SCHOOL DISTRICT

DISTRICT ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES

110 Virgil Street
O'Fallon, Missouri 63366

Honored for "Distinction in Performance" by the State Board of Education

Telephone:	(636) 272-6620		Dr. Bernard J. DuBray
Metro:	(636) 240-2072	April 12, 2012	Superintendent of Schools
Fax:	(636) 272-1059		
Web Site:	www.fz.k12.mo.us		

To Whom It May Concern.

This letter is written in order to authorize Mr. Paul Myers to conduct a doctoral study using data from the Fort Zumwalt School District's Midwest Transition Academy. This study will be conducted in partial fulfillment for Mr. Myers doctoral degree at the University of Missouri-Columbia. The intent of the study is to examine the implementation and evolution of the special education program designed to support students with autism and social/emotional disturbances in a large urban school district. Mr. Myers has my permission to perform this study and his findings should prove beneficial to other large school districts encountering similar special education populations.

If I can be of other assistance in this matter, please contact me.

Sincerely,
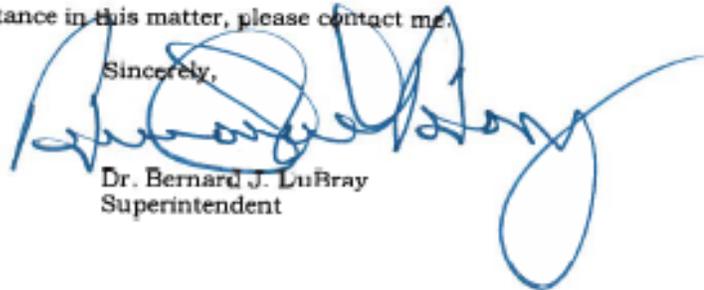
Dr. Bernard J. DuBray
Superintendent

BJD:wp

Invitation to Participate Letter

April 12, 2012

Participant Name
Participant Address

Dear (Insert Participant Name):

Special education services in the public school environment represent a wide range of diverse programs designed to meet students' needs. The evolution of program requirements has placed an increasing burden on school districts as they strive to provide appropriate services. As a result, school districts face the challenge of balancing the obligation to meet legal obligations under federal law against budget constraints for school districts' programs.

The intent of this letter is to seek your participation in a study that examines the implementation of a program for students with autism or severe social/emotional disturbances in a suburban school district. The study will provide an opportunity to consider how one district has implemented programming in terms of overall effectiveness and program quality. The study will consider stated program goals and how they are met through staffing considerations, procedures, and financial expenditures.

Your participation in the process would involve the following activities:

☐ Participation in a focus group with colleagues, to last no more than 60 minutes, to be conducted on a prearranged date between May 1, 2012, and May 30, 2012. The focus group is designed to solicit information specific to programming effectiveness and overall quality.

☐ Participation in one audio-recorded interview, to last no more than 60 minutes, to be conducted on a prearranged date between May 1, 2012, and May 30, 2012. A component of the interview process will include discussions specific to program parameters, staffing considerations, and the role of stakeholder groups.

The enclosed informed consent form further describes this research and the protocol that will be used to protect its participants. If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign and return the enclosed informed consent form in the self-addressed, stamped envelope. A response by April 26, 2012, is sincerely appreciated.

Upon receipt of your response, I will contact you to schedule an appropriate interview time and provide you with information specific to participating in the focus group. If you do not wish to participate in this study, an e-mail response declining participation would also be appreciated.

If you would like to receive more information about the study, please feel free to contact me at pdmvf2@mail.missouri.edu or call me directly at (636)-294-8678 or my faculty advisor, Dr. Paul Watkins, at pwatkins@semo.edu, or at Southeast Missouri State University, College of Education, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, One University Plaza, Cape Girardeau, MO 63701. You may also contact the MU Campus Institutional Review Board at 483 McReynolds Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, (573)-882-9585, umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu if you have questions regarding your rights as a participant.

I understand the demands on your time as an educational professional are significant. Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in this study and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Paul Myers
Doctoral Student
Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis
University of Missouri-Columbia

Participant Consent Letter

This form requests your consent to participate in a study titled, "A Program Evaluation: Midwest School District Transition Academy". The study will examine the implementation of a program for students with autism or severe social/emotional disturbances in a suburban school district.

The dissertation research project will be conducted by University of Missouri-Columbia student researcher Paul D. Myers and supervised by Dr. Paul Watkins, dissertation committee chair and Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis faculty member.

Project Description: This program evaluation study will provide an opportunity to consider how one district has approached programming, in terms of overall effectiveness and program quality, for students with autism or severe social/emotional disturbances. The study will consider stated program goals and how they are met through staffing considerations, procedures, and financial expenditures.

Potential Benefits: The growth of low incidence special education populations, specifically in the area of autism spectrum and social/emotional disorders, highlights an emerging issue for school districts from programming and funding perspectives. The study will add information to the literature specific to the development and implementation of programs targeting the areas of autism spectrum disorders and social/emotional disturbances.

School districts, based on both best practice considerations and educational mandates, invest significant funds to prepare staff members and facilities to meet the instructional needs of students with autism. Inefficient program implementation and staff retention issues represent a potential threat to that investment. In addition, staff attrition adversely impacts continuity of service and the educational progress of students when employment changes result in the hiring of less qualified or trained staff. A program evaluation study specific to the Transition Academy will provide insight into possible changes that would create a more efficient and effective environment for students and staff in the Midwest School District.

Potential Concerns and Risks: Potential concerns include the exploration of a politically sensitive topic (services for students with special education needs) in light of budgetary considerations. There is a potential concern that study results may incorrectly be interpreted to suggest that budget constraints should be the driving force in determining special education services. There are no specific risks identified specific to participation in this study.

Confidentiality: All information regarding this study will be kept confidential in accordance with legal and ethical guidelines. All information associated with participants will be kept in locked files accessible only to the researcher and will be destroyed seven years after completion of the project. Every effort will be made to protect the accuracy of the data and confidentiality of the participants. The focus group and interview

components will include procedures to assign a random identification code and pseudonyms used for qualitative data to protect participants' identities when reporting findings. All identifying information will be expunged and any findings disseminated will be in summary form.

Participation is Voluntary: Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can freely withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences and information related to you will be destroyed immediately. You are also free to skip any interview and/or focus group question that you feel uncomfortable answering.

Results of the Study: The results of this study will be used to fulfill an Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis dissertation requirement.

Questions?: Please contact the student researcher, Paul D. Myers, at pdmvf2@mail.missouri.edu or directly at (636)-294-8678. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Paul Watkins, at pwatkins@semo.edu, or at Southeast Missouri State University, College of Education, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, One University Plaza, Cape Girardeau, MO 63701. You may also contact the MU Campus Institutional Review Board at 483 McReynolds Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, (573)-882-9585, umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu if you have questions regarding your rights as a participant.

Written Consent Form

Please check the appropriate line to indicate that you have read and understand the informed consent and letter of explanation:

☐ I give consent to participate in this study to consider how one district has approached programming, in terms of overall effectiveness and program quality, for students with autism or severe social/emotional disturbances. The study will consider stated program goals and how they are met through staffing considerations, procedures, and financial expenditures.

☐ I understand I will participate in the study through the following:

— participation in a focus group discussion with colleagues

— completion of a structured, individual interview

☐ I would like additional information before giving consent. Please contact me at:

_____.

☐ I do not give consent to participate.

Please bring a signed copy of the informed consent to your structured interview and give it to Paul D. Myers prior to the start of the interview. A copy of this entire consent document will be provided to you for your records. If you need additional information prior to agreeing to participate, please contact me at pdmvf2@mail.missouri.edu or call me at (636)-294-8678.

Printed Name (first, middle initial, last):_____

Signature:_____   Date:_____

A copy of this entire Written Consent Form will be made and provided to you.
Please keep a copy for your records.

Appendix B

University of Missouri – Columbia Campus Institutional Review Board Approval

Campus Institutional Review Board
University of Missouri-Columbia

April 18, 2012

Principal Investigator: Myers, Paul D
Department: Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

Your Application to project entitled *Midwest School District Transition Center: Dissertation study as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education.* was reviewed and approved by the MU Campus Institutional Review Board according to terms and conditions described below:

IRB Project Number	1202103
Initial Application Approval Date	April 18, 2012
IRB Expiration Date	April 18, 2013
Level of Review	Exempt
Project Status	Active - Open to Enrollment
Regulation	45 CFR 46.101b(2)
Risk Level	Minimal Risk

The principal investigator (PI) is responsible for all aspects and conduct of this study. The PI must comply with the following conditions of the approval:

1. No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB approval date or after the expiration date.
2. All unanticipated problems, serious adverse events, and deviations must be reported to the IRB within 5 days.
3. All modifications must be IRB approved by submitting the Exempt Amendment prior to implementation unless they are intended to reduce risk.
4. All recruitment materials and methods must be approved by the IRB prior to being used.
5. The Annual Exempt Certification Form must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval at least 30 days prior to the project expiration date.
6. Maintain all research records for a period of seven years from the project completion date.
7. Utilize the IRB stamped document informing subjects of the research and other approved research documents located within the document storage section of eIRB.

If you have any questions, please contact the Campus IRB at 573-882-9585 or umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu.

Thank you,

Charles Borduin, PhD
Campus IRB Chair

Appendix C

Interview and Focus Group Protocols

1. Administrator's Interview Protocol

2. Faculty's Interview Protocol

3. Focus Group Protocol

Administrator Interview Protocol

Participant Identification Code:_____

Date: _____

Beginning Time: _____ Ending Time:_____

Location: _____

Introduction:

Good afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions focusing on your perceptions and experiences specific to the Midwest Transition Academy program. My name is Paul Myers, and I will be conducting the interview. In order to ensure accuracy, I will be audio taping the interview.

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. If you want to follow-up on a question or give an example, feel free to do so. I want this to be more of a conversation between professionals. Our session will last about 45 to 60 minutes and we will not be taking a formal break. Let's begin with some discussion about your background.

Questions	Research Question(s)

Opening Questions: 5 min.

1. Tell me your name and your position in the school district? 2. Can you please tell me a brief history of your association with the Transition Academy?	Learn about participant Q2

Introductory Questions: 5-7 min.

3. What is your understanding of the placement process for bringing students to the Transition Academy?	Q1
Probe: What type of students is the program serving?	Q1
4. Based on what you know or have observed, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the placement process?	Q1

Transition Questions: 5-10 min.

5. Based on what you know or understand, how does the program measure students' progress?	Q1
Probe: How do you believe this compares to measure progress for students in a typical school program?	Q1
6. From your perspective, how does input from personnel in the district (faculty, administrators) shape the program?	Q4
Probe: How do you believe input from personnel has altered the program over time?	Q4

Key Questions: 10-15 min.

7. Based on what you know or have observed, how does the district support Transition Academy personnel in terms of working with aggressive students?	Q2
Probe: How might supports for Transition Academy personnel differ from those in other school district settings?	Q2
8. Is there any particular support that you feel helps Transition Academy staff in terms of working with aggressive students?	Q2, Q4
Probe: What kinds of additional supports do you feel would be helpful?	Q2
9. Based on you know or have observed, what factors do you believe would influence staff members' willingness to continue working at the Transition Academy?	Q2, Q4
Probe: What are some issues specific to the program that may make staff want to leave at some point?	Q2
10. From your perspective, how do you feel the stated process for placing and monitoring students compares with day-to-day procedures?	Q1, Q4
Probe: How might these processes look different based on input from district personnel?	Q1, Q4
11. In reflecting on the program as a whole, how do you feel it functions compared to the stated goals of the program?	Q1, Q4

Ranking Activities 1 & 2: 5 min.

1. Based on your own perceptions, please rank the following program elements relative to each other in order of importance (1 being most important, 5 being least important): • The program maintains a process for identifying students for the program. • The program actively seeks to develop and retain quality personnel. • The program implements a process for monitoring student progress once in the program. • The program receives adequate funding to support program initiatives. • District personnel have the ability to shape the direction of the program. 2. Based on your own experiences, please rank the same program elements relative to each other in order of program consistency (1 being most consistent, 5 being least consistent): • The program maintains a process for identifying students for the program. • The program actively seeks to develop and retain quality personnel. • The program implements a process for monitoring student progress once in the program. • The program receives adequate funding to support program initiatives. • District personnel have the ability to shape the direction of the program.	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4 Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4

Ending Question: 5 min.

12. Is there anything else you would wish to tell me that I have not asked?	Q1, Q2, Q4

Thank you for your time today. I will be sending a copy of the transcription to you via email. If you have any corrections or changes, at that time, please let me know. Again, this interview will be confidential and you will not be identified in the research or further publications.

Faculty Interview Protocol

Participant Identification Code:_____

Date: _____

Beginning Time: _____ Ending Time: _____

Location: _____

Introduction:

Good afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions focusing on your perceptions and experiences specific to the Midwest Transition Academy program. My name is Paul Myers, and I will be conducting the interview. In order to ensure accuracy, I will be audio taping the interview.

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. If you want to follow-up on a question or give an example, feel free to do so. I want this to be more of a conversation between professionals. Our session will last about 45 to 60 minutes and we will not be taking a formal break. Let's begin with some discussion about your background.

Questions	Research Question(s)

Opening Questions: 5 min.

1. Tell me your name and your position in the school district?	Learn about participant
2. Can you please tell me a brief history of your association with the Transition Academy?	Q2
Probe: What appealed to you about working in a setting like the Transition Academy?	Q2

Introductory Questions: 5-7 min.

3. What is your understanding of the placement process for bringing students to the Transition Academy?	Q1
Probe: What type of students are you serving?	Q1
4. Based on what you know or have observed, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the placement process?	Q1

Transition Questions: 5-10 min.

5. How do you determine when students are making progress in the program?	Q1
Probe: How do you believe this compares to measuring progress for students in a typical school program?	Q1
6. From your perspective, how does input from Transition Academy personnel shape the program?	Q4
Probe: How do you believe input from Transition Academy personnel has altered the program over time?	Q4

Key Questions: 10-15 min.

7. Based on what you know or have observed, how does the district support you in terms of working with aggressive students?	Q2
Probe: Was there any particular training that made you feel more capable in terms of working with aggressive students? How would you describe the professional development supports provided by the district?	Q2
8. How has the district provided feedback regarding strategies for working with Transition Academy students?	Q2
Probe: What kinds of additional feedback and supports do you feel would be helpful?	Q2, Q4
9. Based on your experiences so far, what factors would influence your willingness to continue working at the Transition Academy?	Q2
Probe: What are some issues specific to the program that may make you want to leave at some point? How you feel you give input about these program issues?	Q2, Q4
10. From your perspective, how do you feel the stated process for placing and monitoring students compares with day-to-day procedures?	Q1, Q4
Probe: How might these processes look different based on input from Transition Academy personnel?	Q1, Q4
11. In reflecting on the program as a whole, how do you feel it functions compared to the stated goals of the program?	Q1, Q4

Ranking Activities 1 & 2: 5 min.

1. Based on your own perceptions, please rank the following program elements relative to each other in order of importance (1 being most important, 5 being least important): • The program maintains a process for identifying students for the program. • The program actively seeks to develop and retain quality personnel. • The program implements a process for monitoring student progress once in the program. • The program receives adequate funding to support program initiatives. • District personnel have the ability to shape the direction of the program.	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4
2. Based on your own experiences, please rank the same program elements relative to each other in order of program consistency (1 being most consistent, 5 being least consistent): • The program maintains a process for identifying students for the program. • The program actively seeks to develop and retain quality personnel. • The program implements a process for monitoring student progress once in the program. • The program receives adequate funding to support program initiatives. • District personnel have the ability to shape the direction of the program.	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4

Ending Question: 5 min.

12. Is there anything else you would wish to tell me that I have not asked?	Q1, Q2, Q4

Thank you for your time today. I will be sending a copy of the transcription to you via email. If you have any corrections or changes, at that time, please let me know. Again, this interview will be confidential and you will not be identified in the research or further publications.

Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Code:_____

Date: _____

Beginning Time: _____ Ending Time:_____

Location: _____

Introduction:

Good afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions focusing on your perceptions and experiences specific to the Midwest Transition Academy program. My name is Paul Myers, and I will be conducting the focus group. In order to ensure accuracy, I will be audio taping the focus group.

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. If you want to follow-up on a question or give examples, feel free to do so. I want this to be more of a conversation between professionals. Our session will last about 60 minutes and we will not be taking a formal break. Let's begin with some discussion about your backgrounds.

Questions	Research Question(s)

Opening Question: 5 min.

1. Tell me your names and your position in the school district?	Q2

Introductory Questions: 5-7 min.

3. How does the program identify students to place at the Transition Academy?	Q1
Probes: What type of students is the program serving? How does the program promote consistency in the placement process?	Q1
4. Based on what you know or have observed, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the placement process?	Q1
Probe: In your perception, what factors influence the placement process?	Q1

Transition Questions: 5-10 min.

5. Based on what you know or understand, how does the program measure students' progress?	Q1
Probe: How do you believe this compares to measuring progress for students in a typical school program?	Q1
6. From your experience, what sources of input influence or shape the shape the program?	Q4
Probe: Based on what you know or have observed, how has input from these sources altered the program over time?	Q4

Key Questions: 10-15 min.

7. Based on what you know or have observed, how does the district support Transition Academy personnel in terms of working with aggressive students?	Q2
Probe: How might supports for Transition Academy personnel differ from those in other school district settings?	Q2
8. Is there any particular support that you feel helps Transition Academy staff in terms of working with aggressive students?	Q2
Probe: What kinds of additional supports do you feel would be helpful?	Q2, Q4
9. Based on you know or have observed, what factors do you believe would influence staff members' willingness to continue working at the Transition Academy?	Q2
Probe: What are some issues specific to the program that may make staff want to leave at some point?	Q2, Q4
10. From your perspective, how do you feel the stated process for placing and monitoring students compares with day-to-day procedures?	Q1, Q4
Probe: How might these processes look different based on input from district personnel?	Q1, Q4
11. In reflecting on the program as a whole, how do you feel it functions compared to the stated goals of the program?	Q1, Q4

Ending Question: 5 min.

12. Is there anything else you would wish to tell me that I have not asked?	Q1, Q2, Q4

Thank you for your time today. I will be sending a copy of the transcription to each of you via email. If you have any corrections or changes, at that time, please let me know. Again, this focus group will be confidential and you will not be identified in the research or further publications.

Appendix D

Interview and Focus Group Observer Notes

Interview and Focus Group Observer Notes

Time	Jottings	Comments

Appendix E

Review of Program Document Form

Review of Program Document Form

Date: _____

Name of Document: _____

Type of Document: _____

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Appendix F

Coding Assignments for Participants

1. Administrator 1 (AD1)

2. Administrator 2 (AD2)

3. Administrator 3 (AD3)

4. Administrator 4 (AD4)

5. Administrator 5 (AD5)

6. Faculty 1 (FA1)

7. Faculty 2 (FA2)

8. Faculty 3 (FA3)

9. Faculty 4 (FA4)

VITA

Paul D. Myers was born in Huntington, Indiana, to James and Marcia Myers. He graduated in 1990 from Ulysses High School in Ulysses, Kansas. In 1994, he received a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas. He subsequently earned a Master of Science in School Psychology from Emporia State University in 1995, an Educational Specialist in School Psychology from Emporia State University in 1996, completed certification requirements in Elementary Education Administration from Lindenwood University in 2002, followed by a Doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri – Columbia in 2012.

Paul's work experience has been focused on leadership and programming specific to special education settings. Paul began his career as a school psychologist at the East Central Kansas Cooperative in Education in Baldwin City, Kansas. He has spent the last 14 years as a school psychologist, middle school assistant principal, middle school building principal, and assistant superintendent for special services. His research interests include special education and social justice theory as they connect to educational leadership.

Dr. Myers currently resides in St. Peters, Missouri, with his wife, Kristen Myers and their two sons, Sam and Noah.