

PREPARING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES TO SELF-ADVOCATE FOR FAVORABLE  
POST SCHOOL OUTCOMES: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF  
TRANSITION SERVICES IN HIGH SCHOOLS

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Doctor of Education

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

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to add to the body of knowledge about transition services for students with disabilities, specifically the instruction of self-advocacy skills to high school students with disabilities. This investigation was guided by the conceptual framework of social justice theory (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Odegard & Vereen, 2010; Rawls, 1991, 2001; Zajda, Majhanovich, & Rust, 2006). The study seeks to construct meaning using the social justice theory principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011) in relation to self-advocacy instruction for special education students in high school. The researcher explored the perceptions of special education staff and college students with disabilities about self-advocacy instruction provided in high schools.

This case study examined three public schools and one community college in one Midwestern state. It explored special education administrator and teacher responses regarding self-advocacy instruction in their high schools. Specifically, it explored college students with disabilities responses regarding the self-advocacy instruction they received while in high school. Data revealed perceptions about the level of self-advocacy instruction that students with disabilities receive while in high school. The implications for this research and practice include opportunities that high schools have to teach students with disabilities self-advocacy skills in order to better prepare them for post school success.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

#### **Background**

Students with disabilities have a history of being excluded from public education (Osgood, 2008), in fact there were no laws mandating the inclusion of students with disabilities until the civil rights movement of the 1950s (Yell, Rogers, & Lodge Rogers, 1998). Consequently, the civil rights movement led to equal rights amendments and desegregation laws that enabled students with disabilities to be included in antidiscrimination laws (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Hurwitz, 2008; Keogh, 2007). While these laws advanced opportunities for students with disabilities, there were still gaps in resources for these students. This inequity issue was first addressed through the *Expansion of Teaching in the Education of Mentally Retarded Children Act*, which appropriated funds for the training of teachers to educate students with disabilities (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996; Osgood, 2008; Yell et al., 1998). Later, in 1965, the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* authorized the creation of programs for students with disabilities and additional funding (Coates, 1986; Martin et al., 1996). Then the *Education for the Handicapped Act* (1970) expanded upon the procedures laid out in the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* and became the framework for legislation that followed (Coates, 1986; Yell et al., 1998). According to Yell et al. (1998), the education amendments of 1974 required states receiving federal special education funding to provide equal opportunities for students with disabilities.

As a result of seeking equity, there is a variety of laws that govern the provision of accommodations for people with disabilities: the *Individuals with Disability Education Act of 1990* (IDEA), *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973* (Section 504), and the *Americans*

*with Disability Act of 1990* (ADA) (Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003). While these laws are different in their mandates, they together guarantee rights of people with disabilities in both K-12 institutions and postsecondary institutions (Crow, 2008; Shaw & Dukes, 2013). First, the *Individuals with Disability Education Act of 1990* led the way for providing assistance in K-12 schools in a variety of ways including federal funding and student rights (Coates, 1986; Martin et al., 1996; Yell et al., 1990). The passage of amendments in 1997 and 2004 expanded these opportunities for students with disabilities (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Yell et al., 1998). According to Aron and Loprest (2012), “IDEA established the right of children with disabilities to attend public schools” (p. 99).

*Section 504 of the Rehabilitation act of 1973* was passed in 1973 as a result of efforts of disability activists (Fleisher & Zames, 1998) and provided handicapped persons access to and a benefit from programs or activities receiving federal financial assistance (Coates, 1986; Shaw & Dukes, 2013; Yell et al., 1998; Zirkel, 2009). According to Knapp, Faley, and Long (2006), this law defined a handicapped person as any person who discloses that he or she has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of that person’s major life activities, a person who has a record of such an impairment, or a person who is regarded as having such an impairment. Section 504 also addressed federal funding implications for agencies and agencies that accept federal funding must ensure that they are in compliance with this law, take corrective action if found in violation of the law, and provide services comparable to those provided to persons without disabilities (Martin et al., 1996; Yell et al., 1998). According to Aron and Loprest (2012), Section 504 prohibited discrimination on the basis of disability at both secondary and postsecondary institutions or any institution that received federal funds. It also required that

handicapped people be provided equal opportunity to reach the same level of achievement as non-disabled people (Madaus & Shaw, 2004).

The *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990* (ADA) is another law that impacted the lives of people with disabilities. The ADA expanded Section 504 legislation that had already been created by including both public and private sectors and expanding the definition to include those with mental impairments (Essex-Sorlie, 1994). The ADA provided clear, strong, and enforceable standards addressing discrimination of individuals with disabilities (Rozalski, Katsiyannis, Ryan, Collins, & Stewart, 2010). According to McLeary-Jones (2005), the ADA also gave the federal government the power to enforce the standards set forth in the law. Lastly, the ADA gave Congress the power to redirect funds to support the end of discrimination against people with disabilities (Essex-Sorlie, 1994).

The *Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act amendments of 1990* added a requirement that transition planning for students be included in the student's IEP (Hurwitz, 2008; Martin et al., 1996; Yell et al., 1998) and helps prepare students with disabilities for life after high school. This transition plan is required to address a variety of components including the student's needs, preferences, and interests (Morningstar & Liss, 2008). In addition to these components, transition planning should also include instruction in self-advocacy skills. Self-advocacy means having the supports and knowledge to direct one's own life, including articulating strengths, interests, and preferences, in a way that is personally meaningful (Carter, Trainor, Owens, Sweden & Sun, 2010; Karvonen, Test, Wood, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004; Pennell, 2001).

Since students with learning disabilities are their own advocates on college campuses, it is imperative that students with disabilities be able to disclose their disability as well as practice

self-advocacy skills (Gil, 2007; Foley, 2006; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Schreiner, 2007; Smith, English, & Vasek, 2002). The ability of students to self-advocate has shown to lead to better post-school outcomes and greater financial independence (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003).

Specifically, this study investigated the amount of self-advocacy skills that were integrated into a student's education in high school. The amount of self-advocacy skills provided to students prior to entering college was examined through the lens of social justice theory in order to assess the conditions of academic, career, and personal development of students with disabilities. Additionally, social justice theory was used to assess the instruction of self-advocacy skills as a means for societal and personal liberation from barriers.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Three different critical theories were utilized in this study, critical race theory, ableism, and social justice theory. All of these theories critique social structures by focusing on equality and basic rights; however they differ in one fundamental way. Critical race theory and ableism (Closson, 2010; Wolbring, 2008) focus on the marginalization of specific groups of people whereas social justice theory focuses on equality for all marginalized people (Zajda et al., 2006). It was through the investigation of critical race theory and ableism that the use of social justice theory as a conceptual framework for this study was strengthened.

When investigating social justice, it is difficult to find consensus upon a definition because social justice does not have one single meaning (Young, 1990). According to Novak (2000), much of the literature about social justice does not offer a definition. For those authors that do offer a definition most value principles of equality and basic rights for marginalized populations (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Odegard & Vereen, 2010; Zajda et al., 2006).

However, Rawls (1991; 2001) offered a concept of benefit for all members of society, rather than a value of fairness and equality that focuses on the rights of marginalized individuals.

Social justice for individuals with disabilities has become an issue due to an increase of people with disabilities in our society (Becker, 2005). This increase forced the education system to respond through a variety of laws that provide moral and legal grounding, as well as clear policies that reflect the idea that all students have the equal right to an education (Ben-Porath, 2010). According to Astramovich and Harris (2007), social justice still eludes many people with disabilities, despite the federal government's myriad attempts to create protection for them. Consequently, it is vital to social justice theorists that these unacceptably biased social arrangements are addressed and all people are afforded individual rights, freedom, and equality (Barclay, 2010; Torres-Harding, Steele, Schulz, Taha, & Pico, 2014).

“Social justice and education have been inextricably linked since the court decided the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case” (Pazey & Cole, 2012, p. 259). Both Ben-Porath (2012) and Smith (2012) contended one of the key purposes of education should be increasing participation and achievement among marginalized populations, including those with disabilities. Therefore, social justice within the education system is not new but it has evolved to include issues related to disabilities (Polat, 2011; Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis, 2009). According to Ben-Porath (2012), in order to correct marginalization in the education system, schools must recognize that both the distribution of educational resources and equal access to education fall under the basic principles of social justice.

Furthermore, the examination of individuals with disabilities is supported by social justice theory since social justice involves equity in rights, resources, and treatment of marginalized individuals (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Zajda et al., 2006). According to

Astramovich and Harris (2007), from a social justice perspective, people with disabilities are socially devalued and marginalized. As a result, social justice within the education system has evolved to include students with disabilities and it is through this evolution that social justice has embraced the inclusion of people with disabilities (Pazey & Cole, 2002).

According to Dowden (2009), a student's competency in self-advocacy includes social justice. When founded on the principles of social justice, self-advocacy can be a powerful tool to help minorities succeed in educational settings (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). Dowden (2009), emphasized that social justice can be used to teach self-advocacy skills by helping individuals challenge social barriers that impede their development. Social justice promotes self-advocacy as a means for personal and societal liberation from barriers that impede development (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). Additionally, the ability to self-advocate has been shown to lead to better post-school outcomes and higher levels of independence, which reflects social justice's focus of equity of resources for marginalized people (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) released a report indicating that almost 11% of students in college had a disability. This increase in students with learning disabilities entering college has been increasing over the last 15 years (Foley, 2006). Additionally, almost 70% of high school students with disabilities expected to enroll in a postsecondary institution (Davis, Denney, Baer, & Flexer, 2011). This increase has been attributed to a variety of factors including the acknowledgement that a disability exists into adulthood, changes in federal legislation, and students with disabilities becoming more involved

with their own transition planning (Gerber, 2003; Hetherington, Durant-Jones, Nolan, Smith, Taylor-Brown, & Tuttle, 2010; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003; Sparks & Lovett, 2009).

Although there have been mandated transition services for students with disabilities for some time (Hetherington et al., 2010), their post-school outcomes lag behind those of students without disabilities. Within two years of graduating from high school, 10% of students with disabilities entered a two-year college and fewer than 6% entered a four-year institution (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Leving, 2005). Additionally, according to Gregg (2009), once students with disabilities enter a postsecondary institution, their graduation rate continues to be lower than that of the general population with 28% of the students with disabilities graduating from college, which is approximately half of the graduation rate for students without disabilities. Not only are students with disabilities not graduating from college at the same rate as those without disabilities, those that do are taking longer to graduate. Within six years of completing high school, only 29.4% of students with disabilities had completed college, while 42.2% of students without disabilities had graduated (Sanford, Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2011) within high school and beyond.

Due to the dismal statistics about post-school outcomes for students with disabilities (Gregg, 2009; Sanford et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2005), it is important to plan appropriately to increase their chances for success in college. It is important that students become an integral part of the transition planning process (Williams-Diehm, Brandes, Chesnut, & Haring, 2014). The inclusion of students in transition planning is the first step to teaching them necessary self-advocacy skills, which are vital to success in life (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). Although the ability to self-advocate has shown to lead to better post-school outcomes, many students with

disabilities do not know how to self-advocate and require instruction to do so, which should be a part of every student's transition plan (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003)

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine what transition services were provided to students with disabilities while they were in high school. Specifically, this study focused on the instruction and practice of self-advocacy skills while students were in high school. According to Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003), students who have been taught self-advocacy skills have better post-school outcomes than those who have not received instruction in self-advocacy. However, many students do not know how to self-advocate and require instruction on how to do so, which should be a part of every student's transition plan in high school (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Thus the intent of the research was to assess the level of self-advocacy instruction students with disabilities received while in high school.

The instruction of self-advocacy skills is important for students with disabilities. The ability to self-advocate has been shown to lead to better post-school outcomes including higher levels of financial independence (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). Included in this ability to self-advocate is the ability to be aware of one's disability, an understanding of rights, the ability to communicate needs effectively, and the ability to communicate the needs of a group (Berry, Ward, & Caplan, 2012; Black, 2010; Kleinert, Harrison, Fisher, & Kleinert, 2010; Pennell, 2001; Test et al., 2005). It is through the instruction of these skills that students with disabilities can obtain the ability to self-advocate, thus creating a better life for themselves.

### **Research Questions**

Derived from a synthesis of the relevant literature, four research questions emerged which guided this study:

1. How do high school special education teachers implement the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, into educational programming for students with learning disabilities?
2. What are the perceptions of college students with learning disabilities regarding their instruction in the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, while in high school?
3. According to PK-12 public school special education administrators, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?
4. According to high school special education teachers, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?

### **Design of the Study**

When planning research, one must identify what method will be employed based upon the problem being studied and the audience (Creswell, 2009). While the researcher has the choice of using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods design, there are some differences to consider. Qualitative research is framed in terms of using words to describe, understand, and explain the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2009; Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002; Pathak, Jena, & Kalra, 2013). On the other hand, quantitative research uses statistical representations to answer closed-ended questions (Creswell, 2009; Mays & Pope, 1995). Mixed methods research combines both quantitative and qualitative forms of research in tandem (Creswell, 2009). The researcher must use this information to guide the method of research to be employed.

According to Visnevsky and Beanlands (2004), qualitative research focuses on human experiences from the perspective of the individual. Qualitative methods allow the researcher to examine meaning in participants' own accounts or meaningful patterns in participants' behaviors (Nelson & Quintana, 2005). Phenomenological research, a type of qualitative study, examines a person's first hand experiences (Fossey, et al., 2002; Nelson & Quinana, 2005; Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004). Therefore, to understand the experiences of the participants, a qualitative design was selected for this inquiry.

According to Fossey et al. (2004), qualitative research uses interviews to elicit participant's views of their lives and gain access to their experiences. These interviews may be one-on-one with participants or in a focus group during which a group of people shares their knowledge about a specific subject (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). It is important for the researcher to examine the data in a way that looks for patterns and themes (Fossey et al., 2002). According to Vishnevsky and Beanlands (2004), phenomenological studies provide a rich description of the experiences of the participants, which is used to examine the credibility and comprehensiveness of the study as a whole. Additionally, credibility and trustworthiness of the study is measured by the degree to which the theory is useful and meaningful to the intended audience (Eisner, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the purpose of this study, thick and rich description that is relevant to the intended audience created a trustworthy and credible study.

### **Limitations and Assumptions of the Study**

Qualitative research has been accused of lacking scientific rigor and is merely a collection of anecdotes and personal impressions that is not reproducible (Mays & Pope, 1995). However, according to Pathak et al. (2013), scientific research is based on finding a solution to a problem through a variety of methods. Qualitative research should be recognized as adding a

new dimension to studies that cannot be obtained through the measurement of variables alone (Pathak et al., 2013). It is through the use of good research design, data collection, interpretation, and communication that the researcher can guarantee a rigorous qualitative study (Fossey et al., 2002; Mays & Pope, 1995). Additionally, according to Fossey et al. (2002), while some feel qualitative research lacks rigor because it is not reproducible, qualitative researchers are more interested in the applicability of their findings based on the accounts of the participants. While some scholars may feel that qualitative research lacks rigor, the assumptions made by this researcher ensured a high level of rigor for this particular study. These assumptions include the data were collected and interpreted in a manner that accurately reflects the experiences of the participants. Additionally, it is assumed that the information gathered will apply to other situations similar to the participants' situations.

According to Connelly (2013), every research study has limitations that are important to acknowledge. The researcher identified the following limitations:

1. The study sample was limited to public schools and postsecondary institutions within one Midwest state.
2. The ability of the subjects to be forthright in their responses and correctly interpret the questions as intended.
3. The strength of the qualitative data in terms of reliability and validity was limited by the researcher's own biases.

### **Design Controls**

A qualitative study is used to “describe and explain persons' experiences, behaviors, interactions, and social contexts without the use of statistical procedures or quantification” (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 717). Additionally, according to DiCicco-Bloom, and Crabtree (2006),

“The purpose of qualitative research is to contribute to a body of knowledge that is conceptual and theoretical and is based on the meanings that life experiences hold for the interviewees” (p. 314). The most common type of data collection used by qualitative researchers is the interview (Nelson & Quintana, 2010). This study utilized open-ended, semi-structured interview questions to understand the life experiences of the participants.

The subjectivity of the study due to researcher bias was controlled through the use of triangulation of the data from multiple interview sources as well as the observations during the interview process (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Fossey et al., 2002). Additionally, the researcher relied on the raw data to explain the findings (Nelson & Quintana, 2010). Lastly, the researcher used thick description that will represent the participants’ perspectives (Fossey et al., 2002).

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

The following definitions were given in order to help the reader understand this inquiry:

*College Disability Office Personnel* work in offices on college campuses that provide services and accommodations to students with documented disabilities. These services help students participate fully in the learning experience.

*College Students* are enrolled in either a community college or a four-year postsecondary institution. These students are between the ages of 18 and 25.

*Communication* within the self-advocacy framework refers to the student being able to effectively communicate his or her needs to others (Kleinert et al., 2010).

*Distribution* within social justice theory refers to the equitable allocation of resources and rewards (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011).

*High School* refers to the secondary level of education that typically involves grades nine through twelve. Class time is typically 25 to 30 hours per week (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1992).

*Knowledge of Rights* refers to the ability for a student to know his or her rights, responsibilities, and provisions according to legislative guidelines (Black, 2010).

*Knowledge of self* refers to the ability for a student to be aware of and explain the strengths and weaknesses that exist due to their disability (Berry et al., 2012; Black, 2010; Sebag, 2010; Skinner, 1998).

*Leadership* within the self-advocacy framework refers to the ability of the student to express the needs of others as a group of individuals with common concerns (Pennell, 2001; Test et al., 2005).

*Learning Disability* is a disorder of psychological processing that is involved in learning, perceiving, understanding, and conceptual understanding. It is the existence of a severe discrepancy between intellectual potential and academic achievement (Kavale & Forness, 1996; Lerner, 1997).

*Opportunities* within social justice theory ensure a level playing field for all people.

*Postsecondary Institution* refers to a two-year or a four-year institution that students enter after the completion of high school. Class time is usually twelve to fifteen hours per week (Brinckerhoff et al., 1992).

*Recognition* within social justice theory refers to the acknowledgement that all cultural ways of being are valued (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011).

*Self-Advocacy* refers to the supports and knowledge to direct one's own life, including articulating strengths, interests, and preferences, in a way that is personally meaningful (Carter et

al., 2010). Components of self-advocacy include knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005).

*Social Justice* refers to the fundamental value of fairness and equity in rights, resources, and treatment of marginalized individuals while recognizing the societal inequities and oppression faced by these individuals and the process of acting responsibly to eliminate oppression (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Odegard & Vereen, 2010). Principles of social justice include distribution, recognition, and opportunities (Hyttten & Bettez, 2011).

*Special Education Administrators* are the personnel within a public PK-12 school district responsible for implementing the regulations established in the *Individuals with Disability Education Act of 1990*.

*Students with disabilities* are a group that includes students with health, hearing, physical, speech impairments and learning disabilities (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005).

*Transition Services* are a coordinated set of activities contained in a results-oriented process to improve educational and functional outcomes (Black, 2010).

### **Summary**

Through a variety of laws including *Individuals with Disability Education Act of 1990* (IDEA), *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973* (Section 504), and the *Americans with Disability Act of 1990* (ADA) the rights of students with disabilities has been guaranteed (Crow, 2008; Shaw & Dukes, 2013; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003). Although these laws have guaranteed the rights of students with disabilities, postsecondary outcomes for these students continues to lag behind typical peers (Gregg, 2009; Sanford et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2005). Including students in their own transition planning is a vital step to increasing their success (Williams-Diehm et al., 2014). Additionally, according to Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003), a student's ability

to self-advocate leads to better post-school outcomes. It is for this reason that self-advocacy skills should be a component of every student's transition plan while they're in high school (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

Within Chapter Two, an overview of literature is presented relevant to the present study. Presented in Chapter Three is a description of the research design and methodology, which is followed in Chapter Four by presentation and analysis of the data collected. Contained in Chapter Five are the discussion of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

In 2012 the National Center for Education Statistics released a report indicating that almost 11% of students in college had a disability and of those with a disability, one-third had a learning disability. While this trend may seem to have occurred only recently, there has been an influx of students with LD entering colleges over the last 15 years (Foley, 2006). Studies have found that almost 70% of high school students with LD expected to enroll in a postsecondary institution (Daviso et al., 2011). This increase has been attributed to a variety of factors including the acknowledgment that a disability exists into adulthood, changes in federal legislation, and students with disabilities becoming more involved in their own transition planning (Gerber, 2003; Gerber & Reiff, 1994; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003; Sparks & Lovett, 2009).

The first factor that is associated with students with LD attending college is the affirmation that a disability exists into adulthood. Gerber and Reiff (1994) “established a legitimacy that learning disabilities persist into the adult years and extend throughout adulthood” (p.326). Skinner (1998) added that families had begun recognizing that learning disabilities continue throughout a person’s life span and do not cease once a person graduates from high school. Additionally, a variety of factors such as the inclusion of learning disabilities in adulthood by the American Psychiatric Association and the International Classification of Diseases led to the realization that learning disabilities persist into adulthood (Gerber, 2003).

Another reason students with disabilities were entering college is due to changes that were occurring within postsecondary institutions. Federal legislation mandated that

postsecondary institutions provide accommodations to students with disabilities (Sitlington, 2003). Due to these federal laws, higher education policies and practices fostered a more accessible environment in postsecondary institutions (Association on Higher Education and Disability, 2012). According to Sparks and Lovett (2009), “ the increase in students with LD attending postsecondary programs can be attributed in part to the range of services that colleges now provide for these students” (p. 494). These programs foster independence through enhanced self-esteem, self-advocacy, and self-determination (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). Additionally, college faculty has been found to be willing to help students with learning disabilities (Sparks & Lovett, 2009).

Lastly, it has been found that students with disabilities have become more involved in their own transition planning while they are still in high school. *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990* mandated that secondary schools provide transition planning for students with disabilities (Hetherington et al., 2010) and it is through this transition planning process that many students with disabilities became involved in planning for post high school activities. Skinner and Lindstrom (2003) found that students with disabilities were increasingly involved in their own transition planning, which was prompted by such legal mandates. These legal mandates provided students opportunities to learn skills that would be necessary once they left high school and opened the door to transition activities for more students. Consequently, transition programming became focused on all students with disabilities, not just those that were severely disabled (Blalock & Patton, 1996). Additionally, transition programming became more student-focused by teaching students skills that would be necessary as adults. According to Gerber (2003), transition programming became more focused on empowerment and independence, both skills that adults need to be successful.

While there has been mandated transition services for students with disabilities for some time (Hetherington et al., 2010), their post-school outcomes continue to lag behind those of students without disabilities and most students with disabilities do not pursue college degrees. Within two years of graduating from high school, 10% of students with disabilities entered a two-year college and fewer than 6% entered a four-year institution (Wagner et al., 2005). Once students with disabilities enter a postsecondary institution their graduation rate continues to be lower than the general population. According to Gregg (2009), only 28% of the students with disabilities graduate from college, which is approximately half the graduation rate for students without disabilities. Additionally, it is taking students with disabilities longer to complete their degrees. Within six years of completing high school, only 29.4% of students with disabilities had completed college, compared to 42.2% of the general population (Sanford et al., 2011). The numbers related to students with disabilities in college is discouraging and these trends continue when looking at employment in adulthood. Brault (2008) found that only 45.6% of adults with disabilities were employed. In spite of mandated transition services for students with disabilities, their post-high school success rate continues to lag behind the general population of students.

Due to the statistics about post-school outcomes, it is critical to plan appropriately for all students with disabilities, however students with learning disabilities have different needs so it is important to consider these differences when doing transition planning. According to Milsom and Diez (2009),

Because the needs of students with LD might differ from those of students with other types of disabilities (e.g. physical accessibility needs such as ramps required for a student who uses a wheelchair would not be relevant for a student who has LD), limiting the scope of research to a specific type of disability is important (p. 316).

While students with physical impairments have disabilities that are visible to most people. However students with learning disabilities do not have disabilities that are evident to the general population. Furthermore the needs of students with LD may not be as readily understood and accepted as other more obvious disabilities (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). In addition to the fact that learning disabilities are not visible to most people, students with learning disabilities are often embarrassed by their disability, frequently deny their learning problems, and may not seek accommodations (Field, 1996). While learning disabilities are not obvious to most individuals, the diagnosis can cause a variety of issues for the individual with the disability. Learning disabilities can cause educational, social, and psychological issues, thus creating the need for specific transition services (Cummings, Maddux, & Casey, 2000). According to Aron and Loprest (2012), it is known that students with learning disabilities require different services than students with other types of disabilities, however relatively little is known about the relationship of the school program to the life outcomes of students with learning disabilities.

Within Chapter Two, a review of related literature examined disability laws in both public school and postsecondary institutions. These laws were examined in both a historical perspective as well as how the current laws impact students while in public school and when they arrive in a postsecondary institution. Additionally, skills and programs that impact student success in postsecondary institutions were examined. These two areas led to a deeper understanding of both why students are entering postsecondary institutions at a higher rate as well as strategies for success for these students.

Additionally, several critical theoretical frameworks were also investigated, specifically ableism, critical race theory, and social justice theory. Through the examination of transition to

postsecondary institutions for students with learning disabilities, it was affirmed that the use of social justice theory was appropriate for the conceptual framework of this study.

### **Exclusion of Students with Disabilities**

Prior to the investigation of educating students with disabilities within the current education system, it is important to investigate the history of the education of students with disabilities. While there were some locations that educated students with disabilities, these students did not receive the same opportunities as other students who did not have disabilities (Osgood, 2008). Additionally, it was the enactment of a variety of different laws that created more opportunities for students with disabilities to be educated within public schools (Yell et al., 1998).

According to Osgood (2008), there were a variety of cities across the United States that developed special education programs for students with disabilities. These were the first efforts of addressing the needs of students with disabilities and expanded throughout the 1920s with most large school systems across the United States having special classes for students with disabilities (Osgood, 2008; Yell et al., 1998). While services for students with disabilities expanded throughout the Great Depression, a gap began to exist due to the lack of resources and the increase of enrollment of students with disabilities (Osgood, 2008). During this time frame the United States still had no litigation mandating the education of students with disabilities.

According to Yell et al. (1998), the civil rights movement of the 1950s led to the equal rights amendments and desegregation laws, enabling students with disabilities to be included in antidiscrimination laws (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Hurwitz, 2008; Keogh, 2007). Although these laws advanced opportunities for students with disabilities, there were still gaps in resources for these students. This issue was addressed through the *Expansion of Teaching in the Education of*

*Mentally Retarded Children Act*, which appropriated funds for the training of teachers (Martin et al., 1996; Osgood, 2008; Yell et al., 1998). Furthermore, in 1965, the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* authorized the creation of programs for students with disabilities and additional funds to address the needs of certain categories of students (Coates, 1986; Martin et al., 1996). Expanding on the procedures laid out in the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, the *Education for the Handicapped Act* (1970) became the framework for the legislation that was to follow (Coates, 1986; Yell et al., 1998), providing many more opportunities for students with disabilities. According to Yell et al. (1998), the Education Amendments of 1974 required states receiving federal special education funding provide equal opportunities for students with disabilities. This was later expanded to include the promise of an Individualized Education Plan for all students with disabilities (deBettencourt, 2002; Hurwitz, 2008; Martin et al., 1996).

While there has been a history of excluding students with disabilities in public education (Osgood, 2008), much progress has been made with a variety of laws (Coates, 1986; Yell et al., 1998) that expanded opportunities for students with disabilities and required states to provide services for these students. Since these laws are crucial to the understanding and examination of current education practices for students with disabilities, each will be discussed.

### **Laws Governing the Education of Students with Disabilities**

There are a variety of laws that govern the provision of accommodations for people with disabilities and it is important that individuals with disabilities understand these laws and how they differ from high school to postsecondary institutions (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Hamblet, 2014). The three laws that govern the provision of accommodations are the *Individuals with Disability Education Act of 1990*, *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973*, and the *Americans with Disability Act of 1990* (Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003). While these laws are very

different in their mandates governing services to people with disabilities, these laws can work together to establish and guarantee the rights of people with disabilities to full participation in both K-12 public schools and postsecondary education (Crow, 2008; Shaw & Dukes, 2013).

### **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**

While much progress had been made toward the education of students with disabilities, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990* (IDEA) led the way for providing assistance in a variety of ways including federal funding and student rights. Additionally, the passage of amendments to this law in 1997 and 2004 expanded these opportunities for students with disabilities. It is through the enactment of this law and its amendments that much progress was made toward the education of students with disabilities.

Early on while states eventually required schools to admit students with disabilities, there was no financial assistance to educate them appropriately (Yell et al., 1998). However, this changed in 1975 when federal legislation was established that created a comprehensive law for educating students with disabilities (Aron & Loprest, 2012; George, 1999; Hurwitz, 2008; Keogh, 2007; Osgood, 2008). Within this legislation, Congress recognized the necessity of providing financial assistance to states for the improvement of programs for the disabled (Coates, 1986), by providing federal funding to assist states in the education of students with disabilities (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996; Yell, 1997; Yell et al., 1998). According to deBettencourt (2002), IDEA continued with this promise of federal funding to state and local education agencies to guarantee the education of students with disabilities. Under IDEA, any state that receives federal financial assistance must meet the guidelines provided by the federal government (Hurwitz, 2008), thereby financial assistance was finally available to states in support of programming for students with disabilities.

Student rights are reflected within IDEA in a variety of ways. First, IDEA required an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for all students with disabilities (Hurwitz, 2008; Martin et al., 1996; Yell, 1997; Yell et al., 1998). According to Yell et al. (1998), the IEP outlined the goals and objectives for the student as well as educational placement, length of school year, and measurement criteria. While the requirement of an IEP was an important step toward student rights, IDEA expanded rights even further. IDEA mandated that students with disabilities had the right to five things: (1) nondiscriminatory testing and placement procedures (2) an education in the least restrictive environment (3) due process and parental involvement (4) a free education, and (5) an appropriate education (Yell, 1997, p. 185). All of these rights were important to ensuring that schools were meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Additionally, the focus of amendments to IDEA was to give students with disabilities greater access to the regular education environment as well as improving accountability for student success (Aron & Loprest, 2012). This access is vital to increased post-secondary opportunities for students with disabilities. Access to the regular education environment has been shown to be a reason that more students seek degrees from postsecondary institutions (Skinner, 1998; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003). It was through the passage of IDEA that student rights were ensured within the public school system.

In relation to student rights, the needs of students transitioning out of K-12 education were additionally addressed through IDEA. A plan for transitioning to post-school activities is essential to ensuring success for students transitioning from high school. A transition plan is a requirement under IDEA and involves a coordinated set of activities that are based on a student's needs, preferences, and interests (Smith et al., 2002; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, & Valdes, 2012). According to Hurwitz (2008), these activities were to include instruction,

community services, and the development of postsecondary training, education, and living arrangements. It is through the use of these activities that schools prepare students for life after high school. These activities should be outcome oriented and promote movement from high school to postsecondary activities (Rehfeldt, Clark, & Lee, 2012; Smith et al., 2002).

Lastly, through the passage of IDEA, much progress has been made regarding the rights of students with disabilities. According to Yell et al. (1998), the passage of IDEA led to much advancement for students with disabilities. Aron and Loprest (2012) agree, “IDEA established the right of children with disabilities to attend public schools” (p. 99). Boundy (2000) continued by highlighting the rights of these students to participate fully in the general curriculum with nondisabled peers as well as the opportunity to receive instruction that is specialized to their needs. After the passage of IDEA hundreds of thousands of students with disabilities were attending public school, three times as many disabled individuals were attending college, twice as many Americans with disabilities were in the workplace, and 90% fewer developmentally disabled children were living in institutions (Yell et al., 1998). This change impacted students while they were in school but also their post-school outcomes and as a result the percent of youth with disabilities participating in postsecondary education improved by almost 20% since the addition of required transition activities (Aron & Loprest, 2012).

With the passage of IDEA (Aron & Loprest, 2012) several positive outcomes have resulted for individuals with disabilities. Federal funding was provided to states and local education agencies to support the education of these students. Also, student rights were addressed through the requirement of an IEP and coordinated transition services. In addition to IDEA, *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973* (Section 504) provided rights to people with

disabilities, including access to rights under Section 504 with direct implications for support in postsecondary institutions.

### **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973**

When investigating Section 504, it is important to understand the history and definition of this law. Section 504 was passed in 1973 due to the efforts of disability activists (Fleisher & Zames, 1998) and provided handicapped persons access to and a benefit from programs or activities receiving federal financial assistance (Coates, 1986; Shaw & Dukes, 2013, Yell et al., 1998; Zirkel, 2009). According to Aron and Loprest (2012), the law entitled children with disabilities to a public education comparable to an education that is provided to those without disabilities. Furthermore, according to Knapp et al. (2006), Section 504 defined a handicapped person as any person who discloses that he or she has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of that person's major life activities, a person who has a record of such an impairment, or a person who is regarded as having such an impairment. While Section 504 addresses the definition of a handicapped person, it also addresses federal funding implications for agencies. Therefore, any agency receiving federal financial assistance must ensure that they are in compliance with this law, take corrective action if found in violation of the law, and provide services comparable to those provided to persons without disabilities (Martin et al., 1996; Yell et al., 1998).

According to Aron and Loprest (2012), Section 504 prohibited discrimination on the basis of disability at both secondary and postsecondary institutions or any institution that receives federal funds. Furthermore, it required that handicapped people be provided equal opportunity to reach the same level of achievement as non-disabled people (Madaus & Shaw,

2004). It is through the guarantee of anti-discrimination and equal opportunities that people with disabilities are afforded rights.

Consequently, Section 504 contained provisions that directly relate to postsecondary education. It has the authority over any public postsecondary institution that accepts federal funds (Crow, 2008; Zirkel, 2009) regarding application procedures, permitting students into programs, and procedures in place to address accommodations. Furthermore, postsecondary institutions cannot make preadmission inquiries about an applicant's disability status (Thomas, 2000) and once students have been admitted to the institution there are requirements that institutions must follow. According to Madaus and Shaw (2004), postsecondary institutions may not exclude qualified students with disabilities from any course or program of study. Postsecondary institutions must also have processes in place to determine if accommodations should be provided, that the accommodations are actually provided, and internal grievance procedures (Simon, 2011).

In summation, Section 504 prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities (Aron & Loprest, 2012) and defined disability while clarifying that any institution receiving federal funds must comply with the law. Additionally, it provided guidance for postsecondary institutions in relation to working with people with disabilities.

### **Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990**

*The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)* is another law that impacted the rights of people with disabilities. ADA can be traced back to years of effort of disability rights advocates and their allies and became the most comprehensive law ever passed to protect the rights of people with disabilities (Fleischer & Zames, 1998; Kihara & Huefner, 2008). The ADA expanded what legislation had already been created. While Section 504 had been in

existence for some time, advocates saw a need to allow people with disabilities equal opportunity in both public and private sectors and to expand the definition to include people with mental impairments (Essex-Sorlie, 1994). The purpose of the ADA is multi layered. First, it established a clear and complete national mandate to end the discrimination of people with disabilities (Swift, Wayland, & Wayland, 1994). While previous laws had required the admission of students to schools and provided people with disabilities access to programs receiving federal financial assistance, the ADA ended discrimination at both public and private entities. The ADA provided clear, strong, and enforceable standards addressing discrimination of individuals with disabilities (Rozalski et al., 2010). These standards rose above what had previously been in place by addressing the needs of people with disabilities in both public and private sectors, regardless of the receipt of federal funds. Additionally, the ADA gave the federal government the power to enforce the standards set forth in the law (McCleary-Jones, 2005). This differed from previous laws that had placed enforcement on the states' interpretation of federal laws and allowed the federal government to enforce standards at private institutions. Lastly, the ADA gave Congress the power to redirect funds to support the end to discrimination against people with disabilities (Essex-Sorlie, 1994), which is similar to previous legislation that had provided financial assistance directly to institutions in support of providing people with disabilities better access.

The ADA is divided into sections called 'titles', one of which directly impacts postsecondary institutions (Essex-Sorlie, 1994; McCleary-Jones, 2005). This 'title' ensures that all people have equal access to facilities and services provided in public entities, including postsecondary institutions (Swift et al., 1994). While this equal access to facilities and services can mean a variety of things to different institutions, there are some specific standards that apply

to postsecondary institutions. According to the Office of Civil Rights this means that educational institutions must provide auxiliary aids and services to students that qualify (Crow, 2008; Kiuahara & Huefner, 2008). In order to qualify for these auxiliary aids and services, students must meet certain requirements. These requirements include identifying as a student with a disability, providing verification about the disability, and requesting specific accommodations (Crow, 2008). Section 504 and the ADA guide the provision of services for individuals that have followed the requirements (Crow, 2008; Essex-Sorlie, 1994; Osgood, 2008). While the ADA provided clear standards regarding discrimination of individuals with disabilities, it faced a revision through amendments in 2008 that reaffirmed the scope of the ADA and revised some parts of the law (Razalski et al., 2010).

While IDEA provided funding for the education of students with disabilities, Section 504 guarantees those public entities receiving federal funds grant access to people with disabilities (Zirkel, 2009). These laws, while they relate to different aspects of a student's education, work together to establish and guarantee the rights of people with disabilities to full participation in both public K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions (Crow, 2008).

### **Transition Planning for Students with Disabilities**

The *Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act Amendments of 1990* added a requirement that transition planning for students with disabilities must be included in the student's IEP (Hurwitz, 2008; Martin et al., 1996; Yell et al., 1998). The transition plan is required to address a variety of components including the student's needs, preferences, and interests (Morningstar & Liss, 2008). It is through the consideration of these components that a comprehensive transition plan can be developed to facilitate the change from high school to college. A well-developed plan will address the wide variety of needs that a student is going to

face, including self-advocacy skills, educational needs, and other demands from the university (Smith et al., 2002).

Students are a vital component of the transition planning team (Williams-Diehm et al., 2014). It has been reported secondary students with disabilities who actively participate in their own education and transition planning are more motivated (Skouge, Kelly, Roberts, Leake, & Stodden, 2007). Student participation in transition planning is just the first step in preparing them for success after high school. The instruction of self-advocacy skills is a vital component to any student's transition plan. Since students with learning disabilities are their own advocates on college campuses, it is imperative that students with disabilities be able to disclose their disability as well as practice self-advocacy skills (Gil, 2007; Foley, 2006; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Schreiner, 2007; Smith et al., 2002). The ability of students to be able to advocate has shown to lead to better post-school outcomes (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003).

For the purpose of this study, self-advocacy means having the supports and knowledge to direct one's own life, including articulating strengths, interests, and preferences, in a way that is personally meaningful (Carter et al., 2010; Karvonen et al., 2004; Pennell, 2001). While self-advocacy is a multi-dimensional construct, it is vital to the success of students with disabilities. Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003) found that students with high self-determination skills (of which self-advocacy is a sub skill) during their senior year of high school demonstrated higher levels of financial independence later in life. However, many of these students do not know how to self-advocate and require instruction in how to do so. According to Janiga and Costenbader (2002), instruction in self-advocacy skills should be a part of every student's transition plan that is developed in high school. While it is clear that self-advocacy instruction should be a part of every student's transition plan, educators need to understand what components make up the

system of self-advocacy. According to Test et al., (2005), there are a variety of components to self-advocacy including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership.

One of the components of self-advocacy, knowledge of self, means that a student is aware of and able to explain the specific nature and characteristics of his or her disability and the strengths and weaknesses that exist due to that disability (Berry et al., 2012; Black, 2010; Sebag, 2010; Skinner, 1998). However, this awareness of a person's disability does not exist without some introspection. To be knowledgeable about self, a true awareness of strengths, needs, interests, preferences, and learning style must exist (Carter et al., 2010). There are a couple of ways to ensure that students obtain a true awareness of their own strengths, needs, interests, preferences, and learning styles. First, students should participate in their own IEP meeting, which will teach them the accommodations they require as a student but also about their specific IEP goals and services (Gil, 2007; Foley, 2006; Schreiner, 2007). Without this direct participation in their own education, students can leave high school without any knowledge of their strengths or needs, thus making it difficult to articulate these to future educators or employers. Additionally, according to Hamblet (2014), transition teams should provide students with a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses as a student and what specific accommodations are needed for success. Students will be unable to advocate for themselves if they are not aware of their learning profiles and what they need in order to be successful. It is for this reason that knowledge of self is the foundation for college students to be able to self-advocate (Berry et al., 2012).

A second component of self-advocacy, knowledge of rights, is the ability for a student to “understand his or her rights, responsibilities, and provisions according to the federal legislative guidelines” (Black, 2010, p. 119). While it is important for students to understand their strengths

and needs, it is also important for them to know their rights. According to Skinner (1998), student's successful navigation of higher education settings necessitates an awareness of legal rights. By the time students with disabilities graduate from high school, they should be able to understand the difference in protections between IDEA, Section 504, and the ADA (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Gil, 2007). Prior to leaving high school, staff should articulate the differences in the laws and ensure that students understand.

Communication is another component of self-advocacy. Communication in the self-advocacy framework involves the student being able to effectively communicate his or her needs to others (Kleinert et al., 2010). While it is important for a student to understand his or her strengths and needs, as well as rights provided through federal laws, it is also important that the student be able to communicate their needs. Without this communication, postsecondary staff will not know the individual needs of the student. Being able to communicate their strengths and needs is a step toward taking ownership for their own learning. Many students with disabilities arrive at college unprepared for the shift from others managing their learning to the management of their own learning (Hong, Gonzalez, & Ehrensberger, 2007). This skill is not always learned without direct instruction from high school staff. However, many students have never been taught to self-advocate and often staff in high school have advocated for the student (Connor, 2012; Hong et al., 2007; Skinner, 1998). According to DaDeppo (2009), "rather than depending on the school system and its representatives to ensure appropriate services and accommodations, an individual with a disability in the postsecondary setting must self-identify as a person with a disability and seek out appropriate accommodations" (p. 123). It is for this reason that the ability to communicate is a component to the self-advocacy framework.

Lastly, leadership is another vital component to the self-advocacy framework. It is important that an individual be able to understand his or her needs, the rights they hold under the federal laws that exist, and to communicate their needs to others (Black, 2010; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003). Additionally, it is important that an individual show leadership, or go beyond communicating about his or her own needs to expressing the needs of others as a group of individuals with common concerns (Pennell, 2001; Test et al., 2005). Furthermore, leadership is the ability for the individual to learn the roles and dynamics necessary for successful functioning within a group (Black, 2010). In order to gain skills in the area of knowledge of self, it is important that students attend their IEP meetings. Attendance at IEP meetings is also a vital component to learning leadership skills because it is through participation in IEP meetings students will be able to practice leadership skills and group dynamics while still in high school, in anticipation that they will be able to translate these skills once they reach college (Black, 2010).

As noted by legislation (Skinner, 1998; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003; Smith et al., 2002; Wagner et al., 2012), high schools are required to include transition plans for students with disabilities during the IEP process and these transition plans must address the student's needs, preferences, and interests (Morningstar & Liss, 2008). According to Black (2010), the self-advocacy framework is a logical way to break down the necessary skills related to self-advocacy and the method in which to teach these skills. The instruction of these skills is vital to the success of students with disabilities. Students who have been taught self-advocacy skills have better post-school outcomes (Berry et al., 2012). By using the self-advocacy framework to educate students with disabilities on how to advocate for themselves, educators are helping these students experience more success once they leave high school.

## **Theoretical to Conceptual Framework**

The critical theories of Critical race, ableism, and social justice theory were all investigated for use in examining this research. All of these theories critique social structures by focusing on equality and basic rights, however, they differ in one fundamental way. First, critical race theory and ableism (Closson, 2010; Wolbring, 2008) focus on the marginalization of specific groups of people, whereas social justice theory focuses on equality for all marginalized people (Zajda, Majhanovich, & Rust, 2006). However, it was through the investigation of critical race theory and ableism that the use of social justice theory for this study was strengthened.

### **Critical Race Theory**

According to Closson (2010), “Critical race theory (CRT) was developed to establish the persistence of racism” (p. 261). Delgado and Stefancic (2012) concurred:

Critical race theory sprang up in the 1970s, as a number of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars across the country realized, more or less simultaneously, that the heady advances of the civil rights era of the 1960s had stalled and, in many respects, were being rolled back (p. 4).

It is because advances in civil rights had stalled that new theories and strategies were needed to address racism. Scholars (Rocco, Bernier, & Bowman, 2014) came to the realization that new theories and strategies were needed to fight against subtle forms of racism. Although CRT was a new form of legal scholarship, it was based primarily on critical theory, which emphasized the idea of critiquing social structures and the theories that make them just (Bernstein, 1995). It is through this building upon another theory that the ideals in CRT were established. CRT scholars brought together premises from critical theory and related them directly to racism (Dixon

&Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Additionally, CRT expanded the ideals set forth in critical theory and, “as a critical theory, it promotes a structural approach to addressing the problems of a diverse society, rather than merely expanding access to existing resources and opportunities” (Ortiz & Jani, 2010, p. 176). While CRT changed the approach to addressing issues within society, it also added dimensions to understanding these issues. It added an activist dimension in that it tried to understand the social situation and change it for the better (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In an effort to understand social situations, CRT identified a number of themes. These themes include the notion that racism is normal in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Additionally, it looked at the idea of interest convergence (Closson, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Rocco et al., 2014). Lastly, it identified the notion of differential racism.

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) asserted that racism is normal in our society and “the usual way society does business” (p. 7). Ortiz and Jani (2010), along with other researchers such as Closson (2010) and Delgado and Stefancic (2012) agreed, “race is a social construct” (p. 176). Lynn and Parker (2006) expanded this idea further when identifying that “racism is an ingrained feature of our landscape, it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture” (p. 259). While these researchers found that racism is a natural part of our society, others attempted to explain how it became a natural part of our society as noted by Rocco et al., (2014), racism is a result of the evolution of national, historical, social, political, and economic contexts.

Another theme of CRT is the idea of interest convergence. Interest convergence is the idea that since racism advances the interest of white elites and working-class Caucasians there is little incentive to eliminate it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Not only do Caucasians have little reason to eliminate racism, the interests of minorities are accommodated only when their

interests are the same as the interest of Caucasians (Taylor, 1998). “The power to exclude others is probably the most powerful privilege and benefit given to the holders of Whiteness” (Rocco et al., 2014, p. 463). It is through the idea of interest convergence that power structures between different races are explained. According to Closson (2010), interest convergence explained racial reality and it offered strategy for surmounting racial obstacles through policy changes.

The last theme of CRT is differential racism. Differential racism is the ways a dominant society racializes different minorities at different times according to the labor needs of society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This racialization is related to binary thinking, which focuses on two racial groups, typically whites and one other (Delgado & Stafancic, 2012). While this racism occurs based upon the labor market, it can occur at other times as well. Differential racism also occurs as the needs of society change (Rocco et al., 2014). In relation to differential racism, racial categorization is a moving target (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). The manner in which different races are categorized depends on where society and the labor market places value. This act of categorizing different groups creates the attitude that the racialized group does not deserve the same rights (Rocco et al., 2014).

As noted previously, self-advocacy has shown to increase a person’s success in postsecondary settings, even those individuals with disabilities (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). Knowledge of self in the self-advocacy framework means that a person is able to understand and explain the specific nature and characteristics of his or her disability and the strengths and weaknesses that exist due to the disability (Berry et al., 2012; Black, 2010; Sebag, 2010; Skinner, 1998). According to Keinart et al. (2010), it is only with this knowledge of self that a person can develop his or her voice and be able to effectively communicate his or her needs. Thus the notion of finding ones voice is essential within this inquiry. Consequently, proponents of critical

race theory are also proponents of locating the voice of marginalized populations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Trevino, Harris, & Wallace, 2008). Therefore, minority populations, including minorities with disabilities, have recently been embraced by critical race theorists and included under critical race theory (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Martin et al., 2006).

As noted before, critical race theory was related to self-advocacy in the notion of locating the voice of marginalized populations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Trevino et al., 2008). By focusing on locating a marginalized person's voice, critical race theory embraced self-advocacy's communication component's focus on articulating a person's needs. However, many of the other issues related to self-advocacy such as knowledge of rights, knowledge of self, and leadership are not supported by critical race theory because it focuses on understanding social situation and addressing problems of a diverse society and changing them for the better (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ortiz & Jani, 2010). On the other hand, the self-advocacy framework focuses on individuals being able to articulate their strengths, interests, and preferences in a way that is socially meaningful rather than attempting to understand social situations as critical race theory does (Carter et al., 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Initially critical race theory had its origins addressing the marginalization of black people in the United States, however recently CRT has expanded to address the marginalization of other minorities. While first generation CRT scholars focused on material manifestations of racism, second generation scholars have extended these ideas to address issues of gender, ethnicity, language, culture, sexuality, and other key markers of difference (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Morfin, Perez, Parker, Lynn, & Arona, 2006). The expansion of these ideas has addressed a number of key issues for the marginalized. For those people placed outside of the dominant group, they are

afforded fewer social resources and opportunities and less access to social goods (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). Critical race theory has moved beyond its initial purpose to address these differences in social opportunities for other minority populations (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Morfin et al., 2006). Those that are proponents of CRT are also committed to social justice and locating the voice of the marginalized or those that hold minority status (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Trevino, Harris et al., 2008).

While critical race theory expanded to include other minorities including people with disabilities (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Morfin et al., 2006), it had many themes that did not relate directly to people with disabilities. Critical race theory's themes of interest convergence, the notion that racism is normal in society, and differential racism did not directly support research about students with disabilities. Interest convergence is the idea that racism advances the interest of white elites that there is little interest from those parties to change it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This theme focuses specifically on race and does the notion that racism is normal. The notion that racism is normal in society and is a result of the evolution of national, historical, social, political, and economic contexts includes different races (Closson, 2010; Delgado & Stafancic, 2012; Ortiz & Jani, 2010). Lastly, differential racism identified the ways a dominant society racializes different minorities at different times according to the labor needs of society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This racialization is supported by binary thinking, which typically focuses on two races (Delgado & Stafancic, 2012). Due to most of the themes of critical race theory not directly addressing the needs of people with disabilities it was eliminated as the theory to guide this study.

## **Ableism**

According to Wolbring (2008), ableism is a set of beliefs that reflects the sentiment of certain social groups and social structures that value and promote certain abilities. The abilities that are valued are often defined in terms of disability. Storey (2007) expanded this definition to include prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities that make it difficult for them to be included in society. Additionally, there is a belief that people with disabilities need to be fixed and cannot function as complete members of society due to their disability (Smith, Foley, & Chaney, 2008). It is because of this view of people with disabilities that society perceived them a certain way.

Throughout history there has been a shift in how society viewed people with disabilities. Prior to the advent of modern Western medicine, disability was largely seen from a religious perspective (Yu, 2014). After modern medicine was able to explain disability, it became a social construct positioned around diversity (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008; Connor & Gabel, 2013). This diversity was not always seen as a positive aspect to society and many people with disabilities faced oppression (Lalvani & Broderick, 2013). Society has continued to view people with disabilities as being abnormal, rather than members of a distinct group in society (Olkin & Pledger, 2003; Reid & Knight, 2006). This view that people with disabilities are abnormal leads to negative treatment because their bodies do not fit the cultural norm (Wolbring, 2012). It is this view of people with disabilities that is so engrained in our society that it is hardly ever questioned (Wolbring, 2012).

While people with disabilities are viewed differently than people without disabilities, there are also certain societal arrangements for people with disabilities. "Ableism is a dynamic that plays itself out between people who adhere to normative species-typical body-related

abilities and people labeled as not having these normative abilities” (Wolbring, 2010, p. 78). According to Harris (1985), often people with disabilities are handicapped more by other people, lack of access, and by societal attitudes than they are by their disabilities. These attitudes become institutionalized in the beliefs, language, and practices of nondisabled people and create barriers to equitable participation by the disabled (McLean, 2011). These attitudes are a key component in social life and are manifested in structural disadvantage for the disabled (Agger, 2006; Bronner, 2011). According to Yu (2014), this structural inequality allows for discrimination, exclusion, oppression, and systematic disadvantaging for some members of society and affects their life chances. This structural inequality can also be present in how policies are enforced. Disability arises in the context of life when policies and practices exclude the disabled and impede their access to opportunities (Yu, 2014).

There are certain societal arrangements for people with disabilities, which continue into the education system. Changes in laws that govern education for students with disabilities have increased the need for education staff to develop competence in working with students with disabilities (Smith et al., 2008). According to Storey (2007), as schools are working through these changes in the law ableism may play an influential role in why students with disabilities are often overlooked. Ableism promotes certain abilities, which are not typically exhibited by people with disabilities, which means that ableism is present in schools that promote certain abilities by providing funding or opportunities for those without disabilities more than for those with disabilities (Fleischer & Zames, 2001). The fact that these students are often overlooked leads to other issues for students with disabilities. According to Leigh and Barclay (2000), the social and emotional health of children with disabilities is directly linked to their academic success and any isolation that occurs because of ableism will lead to lower academic

performance. While isolation can lead to lower academic performance, students struggle with other issues related to ableism in schools. When schools uphold negative stereotypes, not only is academic performance lowered, but also stress is increased for those that are being prejudiced against (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008). While these instances are often associated with K-12 education, postsecondary education faces similar issues related to ableism. Disabled students face social, physical, and emotional barriers in postsecondary education which lead to a lack of financial support, difficulty seeking accommodations, and discrimination such as lack of access to facilities (Barnard-Brak, 2010; Holloway, 2001; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). According to Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012), these barriers can impact students with disabilities well into adulthood by shaping students' beliefs, self-concept, and identity. In addition, these students often do not have a voice about what is occurring within their institution because they are often absent from the discourse in the domains of higher education scholarship, research, and practice (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012).

Ableism is directly tied to the study of people with disabilities. The definition of ableism includes prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities (Storey, 2007). Smith et al. (2008) expanded on this definition with the belief that people with disabilities need to be fixed due to how society views their disability. Society views people with disabilities as abnormal, rather than a distinct group in society (Olkin & Pledger, 2003; Ried & Knight, 2006). It is because of how society views people with disabilities that certain structural arrangements are created. These structural arrangements allow for discrimination, exclusion, oppression, and systematic disadvantaging of people with disabilities (Yu, 2014).

While ableism is directly tied to the study of people with disabilities, it is not tied to the self-advocacy framework. Ableism focuses on stereotypes that society creates about people with

disabilities, which lead to structural disadvantages (McLean, 2011; Wolbring, 2010). On the other hand, the self-advocacy framework focuses on the ability to speak up for oneself and assert needs and preferences to overcome these structural disadvantages (Carter et al, 2010). Self-advocacy within the school setting is an essential component to educational plans for students with disabilities (Williams-Diehm et al., 2014). These plans encourage students to learn the skills they need to disclose their disability to others and eliminate barriers to participation (Hamblet, 2014). It is through this expression of needs and preferences through self-advocacy that people with disabilities can take control of their own lives, which leads to higher levels of financial independence (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). Another way that ableism and the self-advocacy framework differ is how people with disabilities have a voice. Ableism assumes that people with disabilities do not have a voice in discourses in many domains of higher education (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). Additionally, the attitudes of society lead to barriers in equitable participation by those with disabilities (McLean, 2011). However, the self-advocacy framework focuses on the acquiring of skills that lead to individuals being able to assert needs and preferences to direct one's own life (Carter et al., 2010).

### **Social Justice Theory**

According to Lewis (2011), social justice theorists believe that living a good life is a right for all individuals. People with disabilities have been found to have discouraging postsecondary completion rates, which impact their ability to earn high levels of financial independence (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). These discouraging completion rates may be due to their inability to adequately self-advocate and challenge forms of oppression that are related to social justice (Gregg, 2009; Ivey & Collins, 2003; Sanford et al., 2011; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003)

When investigating social justice, it is difficult to find consensus upon a definition because social justice does not have one single meaning (Young, 1990). Rizvi (1998) agreed, The immediate difficulty one confronts when examining the idea of social justice is the fact that it does not have one single meaning – it is embedded within discourses that are historically constituted and that are sites of conflicting and divergent political endeavors. (p. 47)

According to Novak (2000), this is exacerbated by the fact that much of the literature about social justice does not ever offer a definition. For those authors that do offer a definition, there are some differences to what they offer, but overall they are very similar in that most value principles of equality and basic rights. First, Fondacaro and Weinberg (2002), offered a definition of a fundamental value of fairness and equity in rights, resources, and treatment of marginalized individuals. Zajda et al. (2006) expanded this definition by adding value in the dignity of every human being. Other authors take a different approach to the definition of social justice. Odegard and Vereen (2010) proposed a definition about the “process of acknowledging systemic societal inequities and oppression while acting responsibly to eliminate the systemic oppression in the forms of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and other biases” (p. 130). This definition differs from the others by recognizing that social justice is a process of acknowledging inequalities rather than just a value of fairness and equality. Rawls (1991; 2001) theory of justice articulated principles of justice are those that are mutually agreed upon by persons under fair conditions and benefit both the more and the less advantaged of society. Rawls theory differed the most from the others in that there is a concept of benefit for all members of society, rather than a value of fairness and equality that focuses on the rights of

marginalized individuals (Rawls, 2001). While the definitions of social justice vary from author to author most agree in the value of equality and basic human rights.

Social justice for individuals with disabilities has become an issue in recent times due to an increase of people with disabilities in our society (Becker, 2005). This increase of the population of people with disabilities can be traced back to one specific reason: medical advancements in developed nations resulting in people with major physical and cognitive disabilities have increased life expectancies (Becker, 2005). While these medical advancements have provided additional life expectancies for people with disabilities, the issue becomes more complex when investigating the education system's response. The United States government has been forced to respond to this increase of people with disabilities in the population. As Ben-Porath (2012) found that the federal government has attempted to address these needs through a variety of laws including the *Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act*, *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act*, and the *Americans with Disabilities Act*, which all provide a moral and legal grounding, as well as clear policies, that reflect the idea that all students have an equal right to an education and that people with disabilities should not face discrimination. Despite the federal government's attempts to create protection for people with disabilities, social justice still eludes many of these people (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). It is vital to the existence of social justice that unacceptably biased social arrangements are addressed and all people are afforded individual rights, freedom, and equality (Barclay, 2010; Torres-Harding, et al., 2014). Grant and Gibson (2013) concurred by stating, "protection and enactment of fundamental human rights are at the core of these twenty-first century calls for social justice. This remains as true in education as in other justice movements" (p. 81).

According to Pazez and Cole (2012), “social justice and education have been inextricably linked since the court decided the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case” (p. 259). This case addressed the rights of marginalized people to experience the same education as other people in the United States. It is this marginalization within our education system that has prevented social justice from occurring for all students. Both Ben-Porath (2012) and Smith (2012) contend that one of the key purposes of education should be increasing participation and achievement among youth, especially those with disadvantages such as language, poverty, and special needs, all of who have an equal right to education. Social justice in our education system is not a new concept. However, it has evolved from issues around race, socioeconomic status, and gender to issues around disabilities (Polat, 2011; Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis, 2009). Pazez and Cole (2012) agreed that while the concept of social justice in our education system evolved, students with disabilities continued to fight against inequities within our schools. Reynolds and Brown (2010) concurred our education system has allowed this marginalization to continue and corrective action must be taken to correct this issue. The question, what can be done to correct this marginalization? According to Ben-Porath (2012), in order to correct this marginalization, schools must recognize that both the distribution of educational resources and equal access to education fall under the basic principles of social justice. This access to education falls under the basic principles of social justice, which include distribution, recognition, and opportunities (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011).

One of the principles of social justice, distribution, involves the equitable allocation of resources and rewards (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). Equitable distribution of resources is not always guaranteed. While all men should have an equal claim to an equal share of all advantages in our society, there are certain groups in our society who have received an unequal distribution of

resources (Ben-Porath, 2012; Honore', 1961; Odegard & Vereen, 2010; Smith, 2012). The principle of distribution encourages the investigation of equitable allocation of resources and rewards to ensure that all men are getting an equal claim.

Another principle of social justice, recognition, refers to the acknowledgment that all cultural ways of being are valued (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). Social justice addresses the marginalization of groups of people and with that marginalization comes a devaluing of their culture within our society and within the education system as well. According to Zajda et al. (2006), this devaluation of culture is likely to make it more difficult for educators to address differences and oppressions in schools and in society. The existence of inequities is evident in society and in education and is also found in many other areas of society. Fraser (2001) contended that people with disabilities have a greater inequality in the areas of economics, social, and political processes than others in society, thus devaluing their culture. Any inequalities that do exist can be addressed within schools and within society. According to Bankston (2010), any inequalities in rights that exist should be arranged in a manner to ensure that all members have some sort of advantage. Barclay (2010) concurred and noted while some may see this as disrespectful, it is not necessarily so if the distribution of rights is based upon overcoming disadvantages posted by a person's impairments. It is by distributing rights based upon overcoming disadvantages that it can be ensured that all members of society have some sort of advantage. It is when rights are distributed equitably that harmony will be present and social justice will prevail (Bankston, 2010; Crethar & Winderowd, 2011). It is through the equal distribution of rights, thus the valuation of culture, that the social justice principle of recognition will become evident.

According to Hytten and Bettez (2011), the social justice principle of opportunities means ensuring a level playing field for all people. Many people with disabilities face unequal opportunities because of the limitations their disability imposes. Honore´ (1961) asserted that opportunity for the underprivileged is an increasingly important element of social justice in modern times. However, opportunities may look different for the underprivileged. Additionally, there may be inequalities in the opportunities that are offered. However, these inequalities should favor the most disadvantaged (Rawls, 1999; 2001). While some may see this as an act of compassion, it is a matter of rights for the disadvantaged (Bankston, 2010). These rights lead to more opportunities for the disadvantaged. It is with the increase of opportunities and the leveling of the playing field that social justice can be achieved (Bankston, 2010; Christensen & Dorn, 1997; Hytten & Bettez, 2011).

The examination of individuals with disabilities is supported by social justice theory since social justice involves equity in rights, resources, and treatment of marginalized individuals as well as finding value in the dignity of every human being (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Zajda et al., 2006). From a social justice perspective, people with disabilities are socially devalued and marginalized (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). According to Pazey and Cole (2012), within the education system social justice has evolved to include students with disabilities and it is through this evolution that social justice has embraced the inclusion of people with disabilities.

The issue of self-advocacy has direct ties to social justice. Self-advocacy involves the ability of a person to articulate his or her own strengths, interests, and preferences (Carter et al., 2010; Karvonen et al., 2004). Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003) found that individuals who are able to self-advocate experience higher levels of financial independence later in life. According to the theory of social justice, living a good life, of which financial independence is a part, is not

just a personal responsibility but also a right for all individuals (Lewis, 2011). This right extends to marginalized members of our society. From a social justice perspective, students with disabilities are considered a marginalized population (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). People with disabilities have been found to have discouraging postsecondary completion rates, which may be due in part to their inability to self-advocate (Gregg, 2009; Sanford et al., 2011; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). In relation to social justice, self-advocacy instruction helps individuals identify and challenge environmental and systemic forms of oppression and liberate themselves from oppressive social practices (Ivey & Collins, 2003). It is through this liberation that students with disabilities can experience success both in school and in postsecondary settings (Astramovich & Harris, 2007).

During the transition from high school to college it is important that students with disabilities develop self-advocacy skills so they are able to advocate for themselves on college campuses (Gil, 2007; Foley, 2006; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Schriener, 2007; Smith et al., 2002). A student's competency in self-advocacy includes social justice (Dowden, 2009). According to Astramovich and Harris (2007), when founded on the principles of social justice, self-advocacy can be a powerful tool to help minorities succeed in educational settings. The social justice paradigm uses self-advocacy to address conditions that impede academic, career, and personal development of individuals (Lewis, 2011). Dowden (2009) expanded upon this paradigm by adding that in education, social justice can be used to teach self-advocacy skills by helping individuals challenge social barriers that impede their development. Social justice promotes self-advocacy as a means for personal and societal liberation from these barriers (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). Moreover, social justice theory focuses on the equity in rights of marginalized populations (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002), while the self-advocacy movement

can be viewed as a form of resilience and resistance to oppression that marginalized populations face (Caldwell, 2010). Additionally, the ability to self-advocate has been shown to lead to better post school outcomes and higher levels of financial independence (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). This increase in post school outcomes and greater financial independence reflects social justice's focus of equity of resources for marginalized people (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002), resulting in its use as the conceptual framework for this inquiry.

### **Summary**

To better understand the background of special education, the history of the exclusion of students with disabilities was explored. Additionally, laws outlining the provision of special education in both public K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions were reviewed and included IDEA, Section 504, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003). While these laws are similar in that they provide opportunity for students with disabilities to participate in K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions, they differ in how these needs are addressed within the institution (Concannon, 2012; Crow, 2008; Yell et al., 1998), needs such as transitional planning for students with disabilities.

Presented next in the literature review was how transition planning for students with disabilities is mandatory for public K-12 institutions (Smith et al., 2002; Wagner et al., 2012) and a well-developed transition plan addresses a variety of student needs including self-advocacy skills and educational needs (Smith et al., 2002). It is because this plan encompasses many areas that student involvement is crucial (Skouge et al., 2007; Williams-Diehm et al., 2014). A student's ability to self-advocate leads to better post-school outcomes for students with disabilities (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). For this reason, the instruction about self-advocacy

skills should be a component of every student's transition plan while they're in high school (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

Additionally, the theories of critical race theory, ableism, and social justice were investigated. These theories all focus on equality and basic rights. Critical race theory added an activist dimension to critical theory in that it tried to understand social situations and change them for the better (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). It goes beyond merely expanding access to existing resources by addressing problems of a diverse society (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). However, the themes associated with critical race theory: the notion that racism is normal in society, interest convergence, and differential racism apply to minorities of race (Closson, 2010; Delgado & Stenfalic, 2012; Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Rocco et al., 2014). Additionally, many of the issues related to self-advocacy such as knowledge of rights, knowledge of self, and leadership are not supported by critical race theory because it focuses on understanding social situations and addressing problems of a diverse society (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). Also, critical race theory attempts to understand social situations and change them for the better (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The self-advocacy framework focuses on individuals being able to articulate their strengths, interests, and preferences in a way that is socially meaningful rather than the mere understanding of social situations (Carter et al., 2010). Another critical theory investigated, ableism, reflects prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities (Storey, 2007). This theory also reflects the sentiment that people with disabilities need to be fixed (Smith et al., 2008). Ableism assumes that people with disabilities do not have a voice in discourses in many domains of higher education (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). Additionally, the attitudes of society lead to barriers in equitable participation by those with disabilities (McLean, 2011). These ideas associated with ableism differ from the self-advocacy framework in that the framework focuses on the acquiring

of skills that lead to individuals being able to assert needs and preferences to direct one's own life, thus overcoming these barriers (Carter et al., 2010). Finally, social justice theory not only supports the study of people with disabilities but also the study of transition, specifically the self-advocacy framework. Social justice involves the rights of marginalized populations, including those with disabilities (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002). According to Astramovich and Harris (2007), self-advocacy is founded on the principles of social justice and can be a powerful tool to help minorities in the school setting. In education, social justice can be used to teach self-advocacy skills by helping individuals challenge social barriers that impede their development (Dowden, 2009). It is through this direct relationship between social justice, disabilities, and self-advocacy that social justice became the guiding conceptual framework for this study.

In Chapter Three, a detailed framework of the research design and methodology are provided. Additionally, the participants, data collection procedures, and triangulation process is provided. In addition, included in chapter four are the findings of the qualitative study. Included in chapter five are the discussion of the results, conclusions, implications, and recommendations that can be utilized for future research.

CHAPTER THREE  
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

**Introduction**

Prior to the introduction of federal laws to protect them, students with disabilities were excluded from public schools (Osgood, 2008; Yell et al., 1998). According to Skinner and Lindstrom (2003), equality for these individuals was addressed through the *Individuals with Disability education Act of 1990*, *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974*, and the *Americans with Disability Act of 1990*. While these laws differ in their mandates governing services to people with disabilities, they work together to establish and guarantee the rights of people with disabilities to full participation in both K-12 public schools and postsecondary education (Crow, 2008; Shawn & Dukes, 2013). Although these laws protect the rights of students with disabilities, their post-school outcomes continue to lag behind their non-disabled peers (Brault, 2008; Gregg, 2009; Sanford et al., 2011).

One factor that has been found to increase student outcomes is self-advocacy (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). The ability to self-advocate, or having the supports and knowledge to direct one's own life, including articulating strengths, interests, and preferences, in a way that is personally meaningful, leads to higher level of financial independence later in life (Carter et al., 2010; Karvonen et al., 2004; Pennell, 2001; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). According to Janiga and Costenbader (2002), instruction in self-advocacy skills should be included in every student's transition plan that is developed in high school. This instruction should include the components of self-advocacy: knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership (Test et al., 2005).

According to Becker (2005), social justice for individuals with disabilities has become an issue in recent times due to an increase of people with disabilities in our society. Social justice is the fundamental value of fairness and equity in rights, resources, and treatment of marginalized individuals while recognizing the societal inequities and oppression faced by these individuals and the process of acting responsibly to eliminate oppression (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Odegard & Vereen, 2010). According to Hytten and Bettez (2011), there are three basic principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities. Social justice directly supports self-advocacy by emphasizing the need for people with disabilities to identify and challenge environmental and systemic forms of oppression and liberate themselves from oppressive social practices (Ivey & Collins, 2003). Additionally, according to Astramovich and Harris (2007), it is through this liberation that students with disabilities can experience success both in school and in postsecondary settings.

The goal of this research study was to examine, through the lens of social justice theory, the level of self-advocacy instruction that was integrated into a student's education in high school. In Chapter Three, the rationale for the use of a qualitative study design is provided, followed by a description of the population and sample. Data collection and instrumentation are explained, along with the resulting methods of data analysis. Finally, the researcher's own biases and assumptions are articulated to provide the reader insight as to the perspectives that might have influenced the study.

### **Research Questions**

According to Fossey et al. (2002), research questions reflect the aim of qualitative research, which is to achieve a depth of understanding about the given topic. The identification of research questions is a critical step in research design because they give direction to the study

and limit the scope of the investigation (Hatch, 2002). These questions should be clearly and explicitly articulated (Fossey et al., 2002). According to Hatch (2002), qualitative research questions will build logically from the researcher's theoretical orientation. It is through this theoretical orientation and a review of related literature that the purpose of this study emerged. The purpose of this study was to determine what transition services were provided to students with disabilities while they were in high school. Specifically, this study focused on the instruction and practice of self-advocacy skills while students were in high school.

The research questions expected to be explored and answered by means of this study were:

1. How do high school special education teachers implement the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, into educational programming for students with learning disabilities?
2. What are the perceptions of college students with learning disabilities regarding their instruction in the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, while in high school?
3. According to PK-12 public school special education administrators, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?
4. According to high school special education teachers, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?

## **Rationale for Use of a Qualitative Case Study**

An important step in planning research is the identification of the method that will be employed to gather data. Factors considered include the problem being studied and the audience (Creswell, 2009). Also, research design involves the intersection of philosophy, strategies of inquiry, and specific methods (Creswell, 2009). In deciding what method to use, the researcher has the choice between quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods designs. When investigating these methods, differences must be considered.

Quantitative research uses statistical representations to answer closed-ended questions (Creswell, 2009; Mays & Pope, 1995). It is a means for testing objective theories by examining relationships among variables (Creswell, 2009). Marshall (1996) expands upon this definition by adding the aim of quantitative research is to test pre-determined hypotheses and produce generalizable results. It is well suited for examining the causal relationship between variables (Marshall, 1996).

Qualitative research describes and explains a person's experiences, behaviors, interactions, and social contexts without the use of statistical procedures (Fossey et al., 2002). It strives to construct or co-create human meanings (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014). Within this desire to create human meanings, qualitative research can be a means for exploring and understanding the meaning groups or individuals ascribe to in relation to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009). According to Hatch (2002), participants are studied in their natural settings while the researcher seeks to understand the world from their perspective. Additionally, according to Nelson and Quintana (2005), qualitative research has been an established practice in the education field. Additional characteristics of qualitative research include the use of a theoretical lens, the collection of multiple perspectives, and the researcher as the key instrument

in the study (Creswell, 2009). Lee and Smith (2012) expand upon this by stating that a qualitative approach has an emergent study design rather than a tightly prefigured one and research may change and be refined as the inquirer learns who and what to ask.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, mixed methods, uses both forms in tandem (Creswell, 2009). According to Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007), mixed methods research is an approach to knowledge that attempts to consider multiple viewpoints, perspective, positions, and standpoints. The design and implementation of mixed methods research are decided based upon which methods best answer the research question (Lee & Smith, 2012). Mixed methods research involves philosophical assumptions in addition to the mixing of qualitative and quantitative methods to strengthen the study (Creswell, 2009).

There are some benefits to choosing a qualitative research design over a quantitative or mixed-methods approach. First, a qualitative approach seeks depth over breadth and attempts to learn subtle nuances of life experiences as opposed to aggregate data (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995). Additionally, “qualitative research is contextual and subjective versus generalizable and objective” (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001, p. 524). Qualitative research also enables the researcher the freedom to be immersed in the research process and consider all possible meanings of the data (Atkinson, Health, & Chenail, 1991). According to Whittemore et al. (2001), another benefit of qualitative research is that the rationale for inquiry is not based on a set of determinate rules (Whittemore et al., 2001).

Case studies are a special kind of qualitative work that investigates a contextualized contemporary phenomenon within specific boundaries (Hatch, 2002). This specification in the unit of analysis helps with the case study design and identification of what the researcher wants to be able to say at the end of the study (Hatch, 2002). Creswell (2009) expanded upon this

definition by offering, in case studies, researchers collect detailed information about a process using a variety of data collection procedures. Additionally, case studies focus on an issue with a program, an event, a person, a process, or an institution selected and provides insight through an in-depth contextual understanding (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007; Merriam, 1988).

The investigation of different types of research led to the decision that this research would be a qualitative case study. Qualitative case studies explain a person's experiences, behavior, interaction, and social contexts within specific boundaries and an in-depth contextual understanding (Creswell et al., 2007; Fossey et al., 2002). Additionally, according to Nelson and Quintana (2005), qualitative research has been an established practice in the research field. An additional factor considered was the evolution of research as the researcher investigated the relevant literature (Lee & Smith, 2012). This approach was appropriate since this study focused people's experiences with transition services within a school setting.

### **Limitations of a Qualitative Case Study**

According to Connelly (2013), every research study has limitations and they are important to acknowledge. The first limitation of this study involves the sample size. This sample was limited to public schools and postsecondary institutions within one Midwest state. Small sample sizes can make it difficult to generalize the findings of the research; however, the goal of qualitative research is to learn about life experiences in depth rather than through a large breadth of the population (Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004; Whittemore et al., 2001). It is with this in mind that the researcher included only those participants that had rich experiences in the area of research (Nelson & Quintana, 2005; Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004). According to Fossey et al. (2002) and Marshall (1996), this could be achieved through a purposeful sampling strategy designed to maximize representation of a range of perspectives on an issue.

Additional limitations include the participant responses elicited by the researcher. Issues to confront included the influence of the researcher on the participants behaviors, or the Hawthorne effect, as well as ability of the researcher to reflect the participants' experiences accurately (Fossey et al., 2002; Kuper, Lingard, & Levinson, 2008). It is through a variety of methods that the researcher ensured that these issues were addressed. Triangulation involves the researcher using multiple methods or perspectives to produce a more comprehensive set of findings (Kuper et al., 2008). By triangulating research, the researcher permitted comparison and convergence of perspectives and examined as many aspects of the issue as possible improve confidence in reporting findings (Fossey et al., 2002; Hatch, 2002). Additionally, the researcher's transparency with data collection was an important principle in the research design (Fossey et al., 2002). This is related to member checking of the data. Member checking involves the researcher showing all or part of the study's findings to participants to determine if they accurately represented their experiences (Kuper et al., 2008; Mays & Pope, 1995). Lastly, thick description provided readers with an idea of the research setting and was detailed enough to answer people's actions and experiences in context (Fossey et al., 2002; Kuper et al., 2008; Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004).

A last limitation to consider was the researcher's biases that are brought to the study. This recognition of the influence of the researcher is called reflexivity (Kuper et al., 2008). Reflexivity acknowledges how a researcher's background influenced the study (Kuper et al., 2008). According to Hatch (2002), it is important to share these influences prior to the initiation of research to make explicit your position in relation to the issues studied.

## Participants

In selecting the participants for this qualitative case study, the researcher used purposeful sampling. This sampling method used participants who share common characteristics and lived in circumstances relevant to the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002; Mays & Pope, 1995). According to Marshall (1996), it is through this sampling method that the researcher actively selected the most productive sample to answer the research questions. Additionally, purposeful sampling sought to maximize the depth and richness of the data to address the research questions (Cleary et al., 2014; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Purposeful sampling was appropriate to use with a qualitative case study. According to Vishnevsky and Beanlands (2004), qualitative researchers are concerned with including only those participants with rich experiences in the phenomena of concern. Additionally, since qualitative research is naturalistic, sampling had to take into account not only the individual characteristics of the participants but also temporal, spatial, and situational influences, or the context of the study (Marshall, 1996). Since the aim of qualitative research is an improved understanding of complex human issues rather than the generalization of results, samples tend to be small using only the number of participants to adequately answer the research questions (Marshall, 1996). The participants in this study each had extensive experience with students with disabilities or were students with disabilities who received services while in high school. Additionally, they each had experience with the instruction that students with disabilities receive at the high school level. This study's participants included special education administrators who supervise transition programming for students with disabilities, special education teachers who had experience with transition planning for students with disabilities, and college students with documented disabilities.

### **Special Education Administrators**

Special education administrators from public schools were chosen to participate in this study due to their experiences with the phenomena studied (Marshall, 1996). These administrators supervised special education programs which enrolled students in K-12 in which transition planning for students with disabilities was included. These participants had also been special education administrators for at least two years. Administrators were also chosen based upon their 2014 special education child count data from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Since it is important to select participants from different sites to illustrate the issue from a variety of perspectives (Creswell et al., 2007), a total of three different administrators was chosen. One was chosen from a school district with a child count of less than 500 students. A second administrator was chosen from a school district with a child count between 501 and 1,000 students. A third administrator was chosen from a school district with a child count over 1,000 students. Once a pool of administrators were identified based upon this criteria, the three selected participants were randomly chosen. Additionally, the researcher ensured that there were also teacher participants from the same school district. If special education teachers from a district were unable to participate, the researcher randomly chose an administrator from a different district.

### **Special Education Teachers**

Special education teachers were chosen to participate in this study due to their direct experiences with the phenomena being studied in this research (Cleary, 1997; Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004). Three different schools were chosen based upon their 2014 special education child count according to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The first site that was chosen had a special education child count of less than 500 students. The

second site that was chosen had a special education child count between 501 and 1,000 students. The last site that was chosen had a special education child count over 1,000 students. Different sites were identified to illustrate the phenomena from different perspectives (Creswell et al., 2007). The sites that were chosen also had participation from the district's special education administrator for this study. A total of 15 (5 from each of the three sites) special education teachers who had been teaching for at least that school year were chosen. These teachers all had experience with transition planning for students with disabilities.

### **College Students with Disabilities**

College students with disabilities were chosen to participate in this study because they enabled the researcher to explore a particular aspect of behavior related to the research questions (Mays & Pope, 1995). These students were between the ages of 18 and 25 and attending a community college. Since community colleges enroll approximately half of all students with disabilities seeking higher education (Cashwell, 2014), research participants attended a community college. Names of prospective participants were gathered from both high school special education staff and administrators of special education. These prospective participants had attended one of the three school districts studied for this research. Students who had attended one of these districts and attended a community college within 50 miles of the high school they attended were approached regarding participation in this study. A total of five students were chosen to participate in this study.

This research was conducted using purposeful sampling of participants. This homogenous group of participants provided richer answers to the research questions, which provided a real extension and elaboration on existing knowledge (Cleary et al., 2014). These participants were chosen because they shared critical similarities related to the research questions

(DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Since qualitative research is concerned with including only those participants that have rich experiences in the phenomena being studied, a purposeful sample was appropriate (Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004).

### **Data Collection and Instrumentation**

During data collection there are ethical considerations that the researcher must make. Ethics in qualitative research extend beyond prescriptive guidelines into a thorough explanation of the ethical consequences of collecting personal experiences and opening those experiences to public scrutiny (Kuper et al., 2008). Additionally, according to Creswell (2009), interviewers must consider how the interview improved the human condition. Ensuring that the intent of the study was communicated completely was important (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) and was achieved through use of informed consent (see Appendix A). The researcher reduced the risk of unanticipated harm, protected the interviewee's information, effectively informed interviewees about the nature of the study, and reduced the risk of exploitation (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). In order to ensure that participant's rights were protected, informed consent was obtained from each of the three special education administrators, from the 15 special education teachers, and from the eight college students (see Appendix A). Also, participants' responses were coded to ensure that confidentiality was protected.

### **Instrumentation**

It was through the process of interviews and focus groups, which are common modes of qualitative data gathering, that data was collected for this study (Fossey et al., 2002). Interviews are one of the most important qualitative data collection methods and provide a useful way for researchers to learn about the world of others (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The interviews allowed open, direct, and verbal communication to elicit detailed narratives and stories (DiCicco-Bloom

& Crabtree, 2006) from a total of three different special education administrators. Additionally, focus groups were used to capitalize on communication between research participants regarding their knowledge and experiences (Kitzinger, 1995). According to Krueger and Casey (2009), focus groups work well to determine the perceptions, feelings, and thinking of participants about a particular topic. For this study, four different focus groups were used. One focus group was comprised of college students with disabilities, while the other three focus groups included high school special education teachers.

### **Interview Protocols**

Since interviews are used in most types of qualitative research (Fossey et al., 2002), special education administrators were chosen to be interviewed for this study. According to Qu and Dumay (2011), research interviews are one of the most important qualitative data collection methods and provide a useful way for researchers to learn about the world of others. With this in mind, three different administrators were chosen based upon the special education child count in their district. Special education child counts for December 2014 were accessed from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The researcher contacted each district's gatekeeper and obtained permission (see Appendix A) for the special education administrator to participate in this study. Once permission was granted from the district gatekeeper, a letter of confirmation, the interview questions (see Appendix B) and a letter of informed consent (see Appendix A) were mailed to each interview participant to confirm the date and time of the interview and to provide time for the participants to review and reflect on the questions. This enabled the researcher to obtain a rich set of data through a well-planned interview (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with prepared questions in a flexible, accessible, and intelligible manner that enabled the participants to reveal responses in their own terms (Qu & Dumay, 2011). These interviews elicited participants' experiences in relation to self-advocacy instruction within their districts. Interview questions related directly back to the study's research questions (Qu & Dumay, 2011) and were grounded in social justice theory and related literature. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes, which fell into the suggested time frame of 30 minutes to several hours (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Interviews were recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. Member-checking, where the researcher had the participants review the findings was used to see if the participants felt they were a reasonable account of their experiences (Mays & Pope, 1995). Participants' were asked to contact the researcher to make necessary changes. Additionally, the researcher took field notes during the interviews to reflect observations, thoughts, and feelings as they went through the data collection process (Nelson & Quintana, 2010). An additional strategy of thick description was used to "include enough textual information to provide readers with a sense of what it was like to have been in the research setting" (Kuper et al., 2008, p. 687).

### **Focus Group Protocols**

Focus groups were conducted with two different groups of people. According to Hatch (2002), focus groups rely on the interactions that take place among participants in the group to generate data. The first focus group was comprised of four to eight college students age 18 to 25 with learning disabilities. These students had attended one of the three school districts studied in this research and had been referred by one of the staff members from a participating district. The use of focus groups with this population was appropriate because focus groups are useful in exploring issues with marginalized populations where people are more comfortable talking with

others who share the same experiences (Fossey et al., 2002). The second focus groups were comprised of five high school special education teachers from each site, with 15 total teachers participating. It was useful to separate these two populations into different focus groups because focus groups should be comprised of individuals that share characteristics (Fossey et al., 2002; Hatch, 2002; Krueger & Casey, 2009). Additionally, it is recommended to avoid mixing people that have different levels of expertise (Krueger & Casey, 2009). An added benefit of using two different groups of people was that triangulation, or the combination of different interviews, was able to add to the study's validity (Nelson & Quintana, 2010). Both sets of focus groups contained the recommended four to eight participants and lasted one to two hours (Kitzinger, 1995; Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Students with disabilities that attended community college were interviewed for this study. Each member of the group received a consent letter and informed consent (Appendix A). The second group of participants was chosen through special education child count data obtained through the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Again, permission was obtained from the districts' gatekeeper (see Appendix A) and each member of the group received a consent letter and informed consent (see Appendix A). For both focus groups, open-ended questions that were grounded in social justice theory and related literature and related directly back to the research questions from an interview protocol (see Appendix B) were utilized. Focus groups were audio recorded and all data considered confidential with access granted to only the researcher and the doctoral advisor.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis involves the organization and interrogating of data in ways that allows researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations,

make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories (Hatch, 2002). According to Kitzinger (1995), this organization and interrogation of the data is done as the researcher draws together and compares discussions of similar themes and examines how these relate to the variables within the sample population. This understanding of the data requires conceptual level processes of exploring the meanings, patterns, or connections among the data (Fossey et al., 2002).

Once the data had been gathered for this study, the transcription of the interviews was conducted and field notes were completed. Coding of the transcripts was conducted in a systematic manner (Kitzinger, 1995). Since important information was found in the data, it was important to systematically ask the right questions of the data so that information was revealed (Hatch, 2002). A two-part coding process was employed to label the segments of data to identify themes (Fossey et al., 2002). First, open coding was conducted. This involved the researcher examining the units of analysis and formulating basic, noninferential descriptions of the phenomena being studied, then grouping them into general categories that described the participants' experiences (Nelson & Quintana, 2010). Next, the researcher employed an axial coding method that created inferential descriptions of the processes being observed and giving them meaning that was relevant to the research questions (Nelson & Quintana, 2010). Meanings, patterns, and connections among data were coded, thus giving an understanding of the data in relation to the research questions (Fossey et al., 2002). As an additional level of data triangulation (Creswell, 2009), field notes were interpreted in relation to the findings in the transcriptions.

## **Summary**

Presented in Chapter Three was the information related to the design and methodology used to explore the level of self-advocacy instruction given to high school students with learning disabilities. A rationale was given to justify the use of a qualitative case study. The population and sample were described, as well as data collection and instrumentation. Finally, the procedures for the data analysis were articulated. Within Chapter Four, the data analysis and research findings are presented. Contained in Chapter Five is a discussion of the research findings, conclusions, and implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this investigation was to assess the level of self-advocacy instruction students with disabilities received in high school. According to Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003), students with high self-advocacy skills demonstrate higher levels of financial independence later in life. However, many students do not know how to self-advocate and require instruction on how to do so. This study was investigated through the lens of social justice theory, which values principles of equality and basic rights (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Rawls, 1991; 2001; Zajda et al., 2006). According to Lewis (2011), the investigation of self-advocacy skills is supported by social justice theory because living a good life, of which financial independence is a part, is a right for all individuals. Additionally, social justice directly supports the study of people with disabilities because social justice theory involves the equity of rights, resources, and the treatment of marginalized individuals as well as finding value in the dignity of every human being (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Zajda et al., 2006). From a social justice perspective, people with disabilities are considered a marginalized population (Adams et al., 1997). Self-advocacy instruction helps individuals identify and challenge environmental and systemic forms of oppression and liberate themselves from oppressive social practices, which will enable students with disabilities to experience success both in school and in a postsecondary setting (Astramovich & Harris, 2007; Ivey & Collins, 2003).

Presented in this chapter is a review of the study design, data collection methods, conceptual underpinnings, research questions, and process of data analysis. Additionally, descriptions of each setting and an introduction of the educator participants will be presented.

Discussed in the second section, are the themes that emerged from the data analysis, including sub-themes for each area. This chapter concludes with a summary of findings.

### **Study Design**

This qualitative case study explored the amount of self-advocacy instruction students with disabilities received while they were in high school. The school districts that participated in this study were chosen based upon their special education child count and their provision of services to high school students with disabilities. The school districts were purposefully sampled because of their common characteristics and lived circumstances relevant to the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002; Mays & Pope, 1995). Additionally, the participants had extensive experience with students with disabilities who received services while in high school.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Before beginning onsite interviews, the researcher secured permission (see Appendix A) from the district gatekeepers to conduct research in their districts. The researcher then completed the University Institutional Review Board application by providing information about the purpose of the study. Following approval from the University of Missouri – Columbia (see Appendix C), the researcher traveled to each site to begin collecting data. The researcher presented informed consent to each administrator and teacher (see Appendix A) prior to interviews. Following interviews, each participant was afforded the opportunity to member-check the transcripts to see if they felt they were a reasonable account of their experiences (Mays & Pope, 1995). Additionally, the researcher took field notes during the interviews to reflect observations, thoughts, and feelings while collecting data (Nelson & Quintana, 2010). The data were triangulated through on-site audio recorded interviews, which were member checked, and field observations of interactions among focus group participants.

## **Conceptual Underpinnings**

This study was viewed through the lens of social justice theory, which most authors define as valuing the principles of equality and basic rights. Social justice theorists believe that living a good life is a right for all individuals (Lewis, 2011). However, according to Becker (2005), recently social justice has become an issue for individuals with disabilities due to the increase of people with disabilities. Additionally, according to Pazey and Cole (2012), social justice and education have been linked since the decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* case. It is this marginalization in our education system that prevented social justice from occurring for all students. This marginalization has evolved from issues around race, socioeconomic status, and gender to issues around disabilities (Polat, 2011; Theoharis, 2007, 2009). According to Ben-Porath (2012), correcting this marginalization requires schools to recognize that both the distribution of educational resources and equal access to education fall under the basic principles of social justice. This access to education falls under the basic principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011).

## **Research Questions**

Based on the conceptual underpinnings and relevant literature, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do high school special education teachers implement the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, into educational programming for students with learning disabilities?
2. What are the perceptions of college students with learning disabilities regarding their instruction in the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, while in high school?

3. According to PK-12 public school special education administrators, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?

4. According to high school special education teachers, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?

### **Process of Data Analysis**

Data analysis was done in a manner to identify patterns, themes, and relationships through triangulation of multiple resources. Each participant received information about the study as well as an informed consent outlining his or her rights during the research process.

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim then shared with participants to verify accuracy. All data were examined and assigned the following codes (see Appendix D): Administrator 1 (A1), Administrator 2 (A2), Administrator 3 (A3), Teacher 1 (T1), Teacher 2 (T2), Teacher 3 (T3), Teacher 4 (T4), Teacher 5 (T5), Teacher 6 (T6), Teacher 7 (T7), Teacher 8 (T8), Teacher 9 (T9), Teacher 10 (T10), Teacher 11 (T11), Teacher 12 (T12), Teacher 13 (T13), Teacher 14 (T14), Teacher 15 (T15), Student 1 (S1), Student 2 (S2), Student 3 (S3), Student 4 (S4), Student 5 (S5). The transcripts were read multiple times to ensure accuracy and consistency with the coding.

### **Settings**

School districts of differing sizes were chosen, all located within one Midwestern state. School sites were chosen based upon their 2014 special education child count data from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. One school site had a special education child count of less than 500 students, one had a special education child count between

501 and 1,000 students, and the last school site had a special education child count over 1,000 students. All of these schools offered programs for students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. A description of each is provided.

*Site 1: Valley View School District.* The first site for this qualitative case study was a suburban school district, which will be heretofore referred to as Valley View School District (pseudonym) for the purposes of this study. The school district is located in a community of approximately 8,300 residents, which is made up of rural areas as well as small neighborhoods. It is primarily a middle class community where both parents in a household work. Valley View School District (pseudonym) serves students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade on five campuses in addition to the central office building. Their total school population is approximately 2,080 students, which has declined over the past four years from approximately 2,150 students.

Valley View School District (pseudonym) serves approximately 220 students through special education services in grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth. The school district has a graduation rate for students with disabilities of 85%, while they show a dropout rate for students with disabilities of 1.5%. Additional data show that 53.8% of special needs students enroll in higher education after graduation.

Valley View High School (pseudonym) has a student population of 677 students, with 93.4% of the student population being white. Approximately 17% of the student population qualifies for free or reduced lunch. At Valley View High School (pseudonym) approximately 97.2% of the overall school population graduates, with an overall dropout rate of .3%. Upon graduation, approximately 40% of students enter a four-year postsecondary institution, while approximately 32% of student enter a two-year postsecondary institution.

*Site 2: Washington School District.* The second site for this qualitative case study was a suburban school district, which will be heretofore referred to as Washington School District (pseudonym) for the purposes of this study. This school district resides in a community of approximately 21,700 residents, which is comprised of neighborhoods with few families living in a rural setting. Washington School District (pseudonym) serves students in grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth in a total of 11 school buildings. The total school population is approximately 4,680, which is a decline from approximately 4,760 four years ago.

Washington School District (pseudonym) serves approximately 650 students with disabilities in grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth. It has a graduation rate for students with disabilities of 78.6% and a dropout rate for students with disabilities of 1.6%. Additionally, 35.6% of students with disabilities enroll in higher education.

Washington High School (pseudonym) serves approximately 978 students, with 72.8% of the population being white and 13.3% of the population being black. Approximately 44.6% of the population is eligible for free or reduced lunch. Overall, approximately 82.2% of the Washington High School (pseudonym) population graduates, with an overall dropout rate of 4.7%. Upon graduation, approximately 28% pursue a degree at a four year postsecondary institution while approximately 32% pursue a degree at a two year postsecondary institution.

*Site 3: Franklin School District.* The final site for this qualitative case study was another suburban school district, which will be heretofore referred to as Franklin School District (pseudonym) for the purposes of this study. This school district resides in an area consisting of approximately 95,000 residents, incorporating four different communities into one school district. These communities are comprised of residential areas as well as rural areas. Franklin School District (pseudonym) serves students in grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth in a total

of 27 school buildings. The school population is approximately 17,700, which is an increase from approximately 17,500 students four years ago.

Franklin School District (pseudonym) serves approximately 1,560 students with disabilities in grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth. It has a graduation rate for students with disabilities of 81.6% and a dropout rate for students with disabilities of 1.2%. Approximately 55.7% of students with disabilities enroll in higher education.

Franklin School District (pseudonym) has three high schools. These high schools serve an average of 1,889 students, with approximately 76.3% being white and approximately 11% being black. Approximately 15.8% of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Across the three high schools, approximately 93.6% of the overall population graduates high school, while approximately 1% of the overall population drops out of high school. Approximately 53.7% of their graduates attend a four year postsecondary institution, while approximately 26.9% of their graduates attend a two year postsecondary institution.

### **Participants**

Since it is important to select participants from different sites to illustrate the issue from a variety of perspectives (Creswell et al., 2007), three different groups of participants were chosen for this research study. These participants were chosen through purposeful sampling, which is a sampling method that uses participants who share common characteristics and have lived in circumstances relevant to the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002; Mays & Pope, 1995). The use of purposeful sampling, according to Marshall (1996), enables the researcher to actively select the most productive sample to answer the research questions. Each of these groups had experience with transition of students with disabilities. The first group of participants were Directors of Special Education who had been Directors for at least two years.

Additionally, they were in districts that offered transition programming for students with disabilities. The second group of participants were special education teachers and had experience with transition planning for students with disabilities. Lastly, college students with disabilities were chosen for this study.

*Administrators.* The first administrator, Dan Wright (pseudonym), had been an administrator at Washington School District (pseudonym) for two years. His prior experience in special education was limited. He was previously a teacher with little interaction with students with disabilities. He was also an Elementary Principal as well as a Superintendent. In the Washington School District (pseudonym) he served as an Assistant Superintendent overseeing special education programs, Section 504 implementation, and he helped the transportation department with decisions about school cancellation. The second administrator, Susie Smith (pseudonym), had been an administrator at Valley View School District (pseudonym) for over five years. She had over 29 years' experience working with students with disabilities in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. The range of students with disabilities with whom she worked varied from students with mild disabilities to those with very severe disabilities. Within the Valley View School District (pseudonym) her responsibility was solely for the administration of the special education department. The third administrator, Carol Gibbs (pseudonym), had been an administrator in Franklin School District (pseudonym) for 15 years. Prior to becoming an administrator, she had 15 years' experience as a special education teacher with students in pre-kindergarten through the age of 21. At the Washington School District (pseudonym), she was responsible for special education and Section 504 program implementation.

*Teachers.* The teacher focus groups at each school district contained at least five teachers. At the Valley View School District (pseudonym), five teachers participated in the

focus group. These teachers all worked at the high school and were involved in transition activities for students. All teachers interviewed were females and all had dedicated their teaching careers to working with students with special needs, with none of them having taught exclusively regular education students. Some of the teachers were involved in co-teaching situations, in which they worked with a regular education teacher to lead instruction with a combination of regular and special education students in the class. Others worked in classrooms that contained exclusively special education students.

At the Washington School District (pseudonym), five teachers participated in the focus group. These teachers all worked at the high school, with one leading the transition activities for students with disabilities in their high school. There were four females and one male teacher that participated in the focus group. These teachers had all dedicated their teaching careers to working with students with disabilities. While some worked in classrooms with exclusively students with disabilities, others worked in co-teaching situations in which a regular education teacher and a special education teacher lead instruction for a class of students that were combined regular and special education students.

At the Franklin School District (pseudonym), five teachers participated in the focus group. While this district contains multiple high schools, these teachers were all from one high school. They had all exclusively worked with students with disabilities. Some worked in a co-teaching situation, in which they lead instruction with a regular education teacher for classes that are mixed with both regular and special education students. Others worked in classrooms that only had special education students. All were responsible for creating transition plans for students with whom they worked. All the teachers in the focus group were females and all had been in special education at least seven years.

*Students.* Five students participated in a focus group for this research study. All five had been identified with a disability prior to enrolling in a postsecondary institution and had received services for their disability while in high school. Each student was also enrolled in a high school in the Franklin School District (pseudonym), the Valley View School District (pseudonym), or the Washington School District (pseudonym). All of these students were enrolled in a postsecondary institution at the time of the interview.

### **Themes**

Using the data and the predetermined codes, the following themes emerged: 1) *Opportunities for Students to Self-Advocate While in High School* with the subthemes of: a) *Asserting Rights as Students with Disabilities*, and b) *Ethos Opportunities for Students with Disabilities*; and 2) *Opportunities for High Schools to Provide Instruction in Self-Advocacy* with the subthemes of: a) *Instruction that Supports Students with Disabilities Asserting Rights*, and b) *Coursework that Supports the Instruction of Self-Advocacy for Students with Disabilities*. These themes provide an understanding of opportunities provided to high school students with disabilities that will promote the development of self-advocacy skills from the perspective of district level administrators, high school teachers, and students with disabilities.

### **Opportunities for Students to Self-Advocate While in High School**

**Asserting rights as students with disabilities.** In this study, there was an overwhelming amount of information regarding students' opportunities to self-advocate in relation to their disability. Self-advocacy is an important skill for individuals with disabilities. Students become their own advocates on college campuses, thus it is necessary that they be able to disclose their disability and practice self-advocacy skills (Gil, 2007; Foley, 2006; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Schreiner, 2007; Smith et al., 2002). School staff and students emphasized the importance of

self-advocacy. Carol Gibbs, the Franklin School District Administrator stated, “If you can advocate for yourself and others, that’s going to be a high predictor for leadership.” Additionally one of the students expressed a desire to have schools “...stop babying the SPED kids, because in college they have to start learning how to study and going for help.” While there was consensus on the importance of self-advocacy instruction, there were differing opinions about how this was being achieved within the high school setting. School staff appear to have felt that they work closely with students to ensure that self-advocacy skills are being learned, while students felt that responsibility often fell to them alone.

Skouge et al., (2007) reported that students with disabilities who actively participate in their own education and transition planning are more motivated. School staff expressed that they worked closely with students to help them learn self-advocacy skills while they’re in high school. Staff expressed a joint effort by both teachers and students to address the importance of self-advocacy skills while students are in high school. One teacher from the Valley View School District stated:

Those conversations [about self-advocacy] happen almost daily. The kid comes down and frustrated because they didn’t do well on a test and then they do ask [the] teacher to have it written into [their IEP]. They do ask for your notes, did you have your study guide today, ahead of time? Those kinds of things that trying to keep sense to do that for themselves instead of coming to us and going to fail my test.

While another teacher from the same school district said, “They’ll come in and say, ‘Do I have this service in my IEP, I can’t remember?’ We’ll look it up and I’ll say, ‘Yes, you have that. Yes, you can ask for that.’”

Teachers not only expressed that they were helping students be their own advocate while in high school, but also once they left high school. Staff shared that instruction regarding what to expect from colleges was occurring, thus better preparing students for college life. One teacher from the Washington School District stated:

My ones that I know are college bound, we'll talk about how your IEP stops when you walk across the stage, and how 504 is going to take over and we'll explain what that is, and what procedures they'll need to do to get those accommodations in college, but I'll only discuss those with the kids I know are going off in that direction.

Self-disclosure about a person's disability and the strengths and weaknesses associated with it is an important component of self-advocacy (Berry et al., 2012; Black, 2010; Sebag, 2010; Skinner, 1998). One teacher from the Valley View School district addressed the issue of students self-disclosing about their disability once they arrive at college and her role in educating them about the process:

We talked about self-advocacy that they have to self-identify. A lot of time they're like, I just walk in and tell people I have depression. It's like, there are ways to do that and there are terms that you use, that you have an emotional issue and things like that.

It is important that students participate in their own IEP meetings. This participation teaches them the accommodations they require as a student but also about their specific IEP goals and services (Gil, 2007; Foley, 2006; Schreiner, 2007). Students expressed that staff worked with them in the development of their IEP, especially in relation to the accommodations and supports needed in classes. One student stated:

We would go through [my IEP] and they would ask me if we needed to change something because it's realistically, primarily pointed to me, to my education. I would

say, well, I need more help with this and then we would fix it so it would help me more on what I needed help on.

However, the nature of a student's disability was rarely discussed except within in the IEP meeting. Discussions regarding disabilities did not occur with classroom teachers or in the context of how it may impact a particular course. One student said, "They only time we got to talk about our learning disabilities was when we were in our IEP meetings." Additionally, when another student was asked if he had any conversations about his disability, he responded, "Probably with my mom I did." While these statements were in relation to disability, students expressed the same concerns about self-advocacy instruction. Students shared that they are left on their own, or must work through their families, to learn how to self-advocate. When asked how their teachers ensured that accommodations were being made, one student responded, "When I knew they weren't following [my IEP], I would talk to them after class or go to them before school and everything." Another student stated that, "If we needed a new accommodation, [mom] would talk to us about it. Okay, you need to tell this..." Another student said, "Any time that I needed a certain accommodation to use, I would go and tell the teacher, and the teacher would let me use it, the way I needed to use it." One of the teachers from the Washington School District acknowledged that at times students take on the role of self-advocacy without working through staff:

I have one student, case in point, he's taking the SAT tomorrow without his accommodations because he wants to see how he'll do, and then he'll be taking the SAT with his accommodations with the school, and in April he's going to compare those scores, and he said, if my score is just the same or higher, then I want out.

Students who have been taught self-advocacy skills have better post-school outcomes (Berry et al., 2012). Students and school staff recognized the importance in the instruction of self-advocacy skills, however they differed in opinions about how it was being addressed. While staff expressed that they were supporting students in self-advocacy instruction, students shared that they were often left to work on their own, or with their families, to learn how to self-advocate.

**Ethos opportunities for students with disabilities.** Students and staff both acknowledged the importance of school culture in relation to students with disabilities. According to Cummings et al. (2000), learning disabilities can cause educational, social, and psychological issues, thus creating a need for specific transition services. Although students and staff acknowledged the importance, they saw opportunities differently. One Washington School District teacher said:

I've got kids on my caseload, one who is one of my officers for student council and one of my kids on my caseload is one of our officers. I've got cheerleaders. We've got kids who are on the sports teams.

Additionally, when asked how accepted into the school culture students with disabilities are, another teacher from the Valley View School District responded, "Completely, our high school kids, I think, are amazing." Another Valley View School District teacher responded, "Basically the same as anyone else. All the marketing, DECA, Ag classes, and stuff have a lot of our special ed kids that are officers and stuff." A teacher from the Franklin School District responded, "There are a lot of kids being asked to dances and such." Staff also felt that students were included who did not fit into established criteria for extracurricular activities. One of the Valley View District teachers said:

I think our staff is very good about making opportunities available for kids that don't necessarily have all the qualifications they need to join something without accommodations that they go above and beyond.

Another teacher from the same district agreed, "If there is somebody specific who wants to be a cheerleader, or in the band, they are very open to that kind of thing."

However, students shared that they were not as accepted into the school culture. One student was asked if he self-disclosed his disability to other students, "No, because it added more bullying and so we didn't." Additionally, another student suggested he wasn't accepted into sports because his disability required him to get additional assistance after school. He stated, "I would wait after school to get help sometimes. I got approached and [coaches] said, "if you're not going to participate in our practices, then you need to turn in your jersey.'" Although he faced this equity issue about participating in sports, he felt that, "In high school they primarily had lower standards for kids with learning disabilities."

Students and staff acknowledged the disposition of the community for students with disabilities in high schools. Staff shared that students with disabilities were regularly included in many aspects of the school community including extracurricular activities and school dances.

However, students shared a different perception about the opportunities in high school. It was expressed that as a group, students with disabilities had lower expectations than other students in the high school. Additionally, students found it difficult to manage the need for additional assistance due to a disability and the time required to participate on a team. Additionally, students with disabilities were hesitant to disclose their disability due to the threat of bullying.

## **Opportunities for High Schools to Provide Instruction in Self-Advocacy**

**Instruction that supports students with disabilities asserting rights.** School staff approached self-advocacy instruction on a case-by-case basis helping individual students work through specific situations. One Washington School District teacher acknowledged this, “For me, it was something based on that student’s situation, and when something comes up for them to have those specific conversations.” A staff member from the Valley View School District, when asked what their school does for self-advocacy instruction responded, “not nearly enough. They do it more on a one-on-one basis.” Additionally, another teacher from the Franklin School District acknowledged, “I have explicit lessons on if a certain problem happens, who is the right person that you go to for that?” One teacher from the same district acknowledged that direct instruction regarding who to ask for help is necessary:

I have them ask, ‘who is the person that would be the most logical person besides me?’ We talk that out so they know that it’s not one person that you’re limited to, having access to try to solve problems.

Although the ability for students to self-advocate has been shown to lead to better post-school outcomes (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003), teachers acknowledged that students are accustomed to others advocating for them. One teacher from the Valley View School District noted, “I’m trying to teach them to respond instead of me to respond, because I want them to get ready for that in the real world.” Another Washington School District teacher said, “In general, a lot of the students are used to teachers doing things for them.” While teachers acknowledged that students are often used to others advocating for them, one teacher from the same district was trying to teach students to self-advocate:

I will help you. If you have a problem with a teacher I will help you, but by the time you're a junior, if you have a problem with a teacher and you want my assistance, the first step has to have been that you talked to them first.

Students agreed that often others advocated for them or instructed them about what to say during particular situations. One student said that self-advocacy instruction, "...mostly came from home....we would talk about what we need to work on...work on setting goals to achieve them." Another student agreed that his family helped with the self-advocacy instruction: "My family is just there just to like be there and say, 'Wait. Wait. Hold on. You need this and this.'" When asked about how much instruction the school provided in self-advocacy, he responded, "They did not prepare me for college or anything."

Another component of a person with a disability being a self-advocate is the knowledge of their legal rights. According to Skinner (1998), a student's successful navigation of higher education settings necessitates an awareness of legal rights. Students should be able to understand the difference in protections afforded to them through different laws (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Gil, 2007). According to both school staff and students, this is an area that is lacking in high school. One teacher said, "The only thing we're lacking is probably is telling the students more the legal part of their rights." When asked how much her school teaches students regarding the laws that support individuals with disabilities, she responded, "Very little." When asked about instruction regarding laws, Susie Smith administrator in the Valley View School District said, "We don't do anything as a group. Our case managers talk to them at IEP time and tell them why." Students agreed with school staff regarding the amount of instruction about legal rights. One student said he would like school staff to "Tell us more about the laws that are

outside of, what we're allowed to have outside of our IEP when we leave for college and what we can't have." Another student said, "Basically I taught myself those laws."

Instructionally, staff shared that they were addressing self-advocacy on a case-by-case basis, helping students through specific situations as they arose. Students need direct instruction about how to handle specific situations related to self-advocacy. According to the students, this instruction often came from family members rather than school staff. However, an area that all research participants felt was lacking was instruction in legal rights for people with disabilities. While some had direct instruction about laws as students were prepared for college, this is an area that was often not addressed, leaving students to find answers through their own research.

**Coursework that supports the instruction of self-advocacy for students with disabilities.** According to Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003), many students do not know how to self-advocate and require direct instruction on how to do so, which will lead to greater independence later in life. School staff offered a variety of opportunities through coursework for students to learn self-advocacy skills. Schools offered courses call "transition class" that focused on a variety of skills. One teacher from the Washington School District said of their transition class, "...they kind of look into all the different options after high school. You know, four year college, trade school, things like that. Then, we work on self-advocacy and learning to be independent..." Another teacher from the same district said, "They work on resumes. They work on interview skills." These types of course offerings are important since many students arrive at college unprepared to manage their own learning (Hong et al., 2007). The Valley View School District offered a club with a similar focus as the transition class. A teacher describes this club:

We had a transition club where she meets with seniors that are going off to college so they're looking at which college you want to go to, what are the admissions, and then we will end up contacting the office of disabilities and making contact for those students, and make them make those contacts.

The Franklin School District offered a course that focused on behavior skills that will enable students to be successful after high school. One teacher from this district describes this course, "We have social development classes...which really helps them transition into different things."

Another teacher from the same district expands about this course:

I think academic and behavior development is one of them because we're focusing on taking responsibility for their own grades and their own planners and preparing. Keeping time in their schedules to prepare for their extracurricular activities plus their tests and their other responsibilities at school.

These courses were offered to provide students some exposure to skills necessary for postsecondary success. However, according to school staff, they were not the only courses students had access to that provided instruction in self-advocacy.

Students had the opportunity to participate in other coursework that supported instruction in self-advocacy. These courses were not specific to students with disabilities, rather offered to all students in the school. One Valley View School District teacher said, "The students also get to access all of the programs that our regular education students access during their advisory class." Another teacher from the same district said:

We try to get them enrolled in classes that maybe would help, you want to be an automotive or an opportunity in automotive class. Maybe you want to look into being a chef, we're going to get you upstairs in those classes.

While these classes are offered to all students, one Valley View School District teacher shared that she took the opportunity to visit with students and enroll them in appropriate courses:

I pull each individual student over, because we have about three to four weeks to set up schedules... I'll pull them each aside. Where do you want to be? What do you want to do when you graduate? We actually talk about that individual every year.

The Franklin School District administrator expressed a similar desire to know each student's needs and preferences, "We do what a lot of people do such as service inventory. We do two or three different kinds of inventories for our students." Another administrator from the Valley View School District expressed that they do something similar, "A lot of times the teachers will talk about it before hand, we have a lot of informal surveys."

Students expressed access to a variety of courses while in high school. One student said that she was in college algebra and most students had participated in class-within-a-class situations where special education and regular education students are enrolled in the same class. One student said, "We would have them for science classes and history classes and LA." However, some students perceived that they had to fight to be included in courses that students without disabilities took. One student said, "They tried to put me in a special education study hall. I forced myself and said, 'No, I'm fine to use my IEP as much as possible.'"

Although many interviewed suggested that there were frequent opportunities to address self-advocacy instruction through coursework, there were some that acknowledged schools could do a better job. One Washington School District teacher expressed frustration with the lack of curricular opportunities for students, "We base the IEP off the student, but we do not base the school curriculum to always meet that. It's not all possible to provide them with coursework

towards what they want to do.” Another teacher from the same district expressed a similar frustration:

I think we have kind of struggled to find out what is the best transition for each of our kids, based on what we can actually provide them. What realistically can we do for these kids and I think a lot of times we struggle because there aren't the classes, or there aren't the resources, but to have to tell, you can't tell the parents you can't do this for their child. You just do the best that you can, and unfortunately we're limited by money. If it was up to us we would have all these elaborate things.

On the other hand, one Washington School District staff member suggested that her school had provided these opportunities for some students but not for those that were college-bound:

We're trying to get more involved with that. We've really been limited, we really focused more, at times, on our self-contained classroom to where we would really get them involved with a scene if they needed a sheltered workshop, a job coach working with them and Job Olympics, which is all different types of jobs that they would do in the classroom.

Staff expressed that they offered a variety of coursework in which students can obtain instruction in self-advocacy skills. Some of these courses focused exclusively on transition related activities or on behavioral components necessary to be successful. Other courses were offered to all students, regardless of an existing disability. While these courses exist, it was acknowledged that there could be more offered to students to assist with self-advocacy instruction.

## **Summary**

Within Chapter Four, the study design, data collection methods, conceptual framework, research questions, and process for data analysis were discussed. In addition, a description of each research site and an introduction of the participants was presented. Also presented in Chapter Four, through the social justice theory lens, were the emerging themes of participants regarding the level of self-advocacy instruction for students with disabilities at high school.

Discussed in Chapter Five are the findings and conclusions on the data analysis. Additionally, presented in Chapter Five are the implications and recommendations for future study.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

#### **Introduction**

This qualitative case study examined the self-advocacy instruction that students with disabilities received during high school. The researcher used the conceptual lens of social justice theory, which values the principles of equality and basic rights (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Zajda et al., 2006). Through data analysis of the perceptions of school staff as well as college students with disabilities, the researcher sought to determine to level of self-advocacy instruction high schools provide to students with disabilities. The data were examined to identify meanings, patterns, and connections thus giving a meaning to the data in relation to the research questions (Fossey et al., 2002). Additional triangulation (Creswell, 2009) of the data was created through the use of field notes interpreted in relation to the findings in the transcripts. From the data, two themes emerged: 1) *Opportunities for Students to Self-Advocate While in High School* with the subthemes of: a) *Asserting Rights as Students with Disabilities*, and b) *Ethos Opportunities for Students with Disabilities*; and 2) *Opportunities for High Schools to Provide Instruction in Self-Advocacy* with the subthemes of: a) *Instruction that Supports Students with Disabilities Asserting Rights*, and b) *Coursework that Supports the Instruction of Self-Advocacy for Students with Disabilities*.

Within Chapter Five, a summary of the findings and conclusions that are based on the data will be analyzed will be discussed. Additionally, the implications for practice and recommendations will be presented. Guiding the analysis was a conceptual framework informed by the literature on social justice (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Rawls, 1991; 2001; Zajda et al., 2006). Through a qualitative case study, the researcher was able to describe and explain a

person's experiences, behaviors, interactions, and social contexts, as well as construct or co-create human meanings (Cleary et al., 2014; Fossey et al., 2002).

### **Summary of Findings**

Within this section, the finding of this research study examining the level of self-advocacy instruction to high school students with disabilities will be provided. The focus of this research through the lens of social justice was to determine the level of self-advocacy instruction provided to high school students with disabilities. According to Test et al. (2005), there are a variety of components to self-advocacy including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership. Using these components is a logical way to break down these necessary skills related to self-advocacy and the method in which to teach these skills (Black, 2010). By using this framework, educators are teaching students with disabilities how to advocate for themselves, thus enabling them to experience more success.

Social justice values equality and basic human rights (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Rawls, 1991; 2001; Zajda et al., 2006). According to Becker (2005), social justice for people with disabilities has become an even bigger issue in recent times due to the increase of people with disabilities in our society. In order to address this need for social justice for people with disabilities, educators must recognize that both the distribution of educational resources and equal access to education fall under the basic principles of social justice (Ben-Porath, 2012).

According to Hytten and Bettez (2011), this access to education falls under the basic principles of social justice, which include distribution, recognition, and opportunities.

The following two themes related to self-advocacy instruction for students with disabilities emerged as data were analyzed: *Opportunities for Students to Self-Advocate While in High School*; and *Opportunities for High Schools to Provide Instruction in Self-Advocacy*.

Within the context of this study, as developed from the conceptual framework, these research questions served as a guide for this study:

1. How do high school special education teachers implement the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, into educational programming for students with learning disabilities?
2. What are the perceptions of college students with learning disabilities regarding their instruction in the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, while in high school?
3. According to PK-12 public school special education administrators, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?
4. According to high school special education teachers, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?

Within Chapter Four, the researcher presented a summary of the major concepts gathered from the data. Additionally, the literature review served as a guide to interpret the data.

*How do high school special education teachers implement the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, into educational programming for students with learning disabilities?*

In the review of literature, Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003) found that students with high self-determination skills (of which self-advocacy is a sub skill) during their senior year of high school demonstrated higher levels of financial independence later in life. Data analysis showed that high school special education teachers perceived that they implemented the characteristics of self-advocacy through their instruction. While the special education teachers did express that

they implemented instruction in self-advocacy, they acknowledged that this instruction happened in an isolated manner on a case-by-case basis. Additionally, they shared that they did a better job instructing on some of the characteristics than they did with instruction in other areas of self-advocacy.

Within the self-advocacy framework, knowledge of self means that a student is aware of and able to explain the specific nature and characteristics of his or her disability and the strengths and weaknesses that exist due to that disability (Berry et al., 2012; Black, 2010; Sebag, 2010; Skinner, 1998). One teacher from the Washington School District acknowledged that students generally are not knowledgeable about their disability, “There are others that have no idea what their disability is, don’t want to talk about it.” Another teacher from the same school district acknowledged a few students are able to discuss their disability, “I have a couple of students who are able to talk about their disability, who understand their disability, and I think those conversations with those students start at home.” On the other hand, one teacher from the Valley View School District acknowledged a good job was being done at school to teach students about their disability, “I’m pretty open with my students in the sense that this is where you’re functioning at, these are the things that are going on.”

Another component of self-advocacy, knowledge of rights, is the ability for a student to “understand his or her rights, responsibilities, and provisions according to the federal legislative guidelines” (Black, 2010, p. 119). Special education teachers acknowledged that they visit with students about the laws that govern the provision of services to people with disabilities, however, overall this is done on a case-by-case basis, “For me, it was something, based on that student’s situation, and when something you know, comes up for them to have those specific conversations,” said a teacher from the Washington School District. On the other hand, staff

suggested that little emphasis was placed on teaching students about laws for people with disabilities. When asked how much instruction students received, one teacher from the Valley View School District replied, “Very little.” While another teacher from the same district said, “We don’t do anything as a group. Our case managers talk to them at IEP meetings and tell them why.”

Communication is another component of self-advocacy. Communication within the self-advocacy framework involves the student being able to effectively communicate his or her needs to others (Kleinert et al, 2010). Again, teachers acknowledged that instruction in the component of communication within the self-advocacy framework was done on a case-by-case basis. One teacher from the Valley View School District said, “I’m trying to teach them to respond instead of me to respond, because I want them to get ready for that in the real world.” Another teacher from the Washington School District said that they are teaching students to communicate by “...helping them solve their own problems by communicating and remaining calm and being respectful.”

Lastly, leadership within the self-advocacy framework involves the student going beyond merely communicating about his or her own needs to expressing the needs of others as a group of individuals with common characteristics (Pennell, 2001; Test et al., 2005). Leadership is an area that was not addressed often by staff, although the Franklin School District Administrator acknowledged the importance, “If you can advocate for yourself and others, that’s going to be a high predictor for leadership.”

Based upon the responses gathered during this research, the characteristics of self-advocacy were implemented within the school system, but on more of a one-on-one basis rather than as a whole group implementation. As discussed in the literature review, the ability of

students to self-advocate is vital for success later in life. Students with high self-determination skills during their senior year of high school demonstrated higher levels of financial independence later in life (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). This ability to self-advocate is a skill that must be taught to many students and should be a part of every student's transition plan while in high school (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

*What are the perceptions of college students with learning disabilities regarding their instruction in the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, while in high school?*

The review of literature investigated the importance of self-advocacy skills for students with disabilities. Students become their own self-advocates on college campuses, making the instruction of self-advocacy skills a vital component to a student's high school education (Gil, 2007; Foley, 2006; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Schriener, 2007; Smith et al., 2002). According to Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003), the ability for students to self-advocate has been shown to lead to better post-school outcomes.

Based upon the literature review, self-advocacy means having the supports and knowledge to direct one's own life, including articulating strengths, interests, and preferences, in a way that is personally meaningful (Carter et al., 2010; Karvonen et al., 2004; Pennell, 2001).

According to data collected, college students with disabilities had a specific perception to the level of self-advocacy instruction they received in high school in relation to each of the components of the self-advocacy framework. These components include knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership.

The instruction that college students received while in high school about knowledge of self, or the awareness and ability to explain the specific nature and characteristics of their disability and the strengths and weaknesses associated with it (Berry et al., 2012; Black, 2010;

Sebag, 2010; Skinner, 1998) was limited to specific events of their high school career. One student said, “The only time we got to talk about our learning disability was when we were in our IEP meetings.” Another student said that he would “...get excited when it comes to my IEP because I want to show that I’m an individual and I’m an advocate for myself...”

Knowledge of rights is the ability for a student to understand the rights afforded to him or her based upon federal legislation (Black, 2010). Overall, students interviewed did not conclude that schools prepared them with the knowledge of rights they needed. One student said that he “Basically...taught myself those laws.” When asked what schools could do to better prepare students with disabilities for college he responded, “Tell us more about the laws...what we’re allowed to have outside of our IEP when we leave for college...” Students acknowledged the need for this instruction, however were left to research it on their own because they did not get instruction in the laws governing people with disabilities while in high school.

Communication is another characteristic of self-advocacy. It refers to the ability for students to be able to effectively communicate his or her needs to others (Kleinert et al., 2010).

In reference to their IEP, students acknowledged that they were given opportunity to communicate their needs. One student said,

We would go through it and they would ask me if we needed to change something because it’s realistically primarily pointed at me, to my education. I would say, well, I need more help with this, and then we would fix it so it would help me more on what I needed help on.

Another student relied on his mother to help him prepare to effectively communicate, “If we needed a new accommodation, [mom] would talk to us about it. Okay you need to tell this...”

However, one student expressed that she got “excited when it comes to my IEP because I want

to show that I'm an individual and I'm an advocate for myself and I wanted to say what I need..."

The last characteristic of self-advocacy, leadership, refers to the ability to be able to express the needs of others as a group of individuals with common concerns (Pennell, 2001; Test et al., 2005). One student reported the desire to work with other students with disabilities to fight for their needs. She said, "I know if we stick together it would help." Students expressed some opportunities to show leadership, however many of these did not involve advocacy for students with disabilities. One student reported that he was a student representative to his city council. Another reported that she had leadership opportunities in school organizations. However two students did note opportunities they had to express the needs of students with disabilities to a group. One student "...did an essay about disabilities... and did a little [speech] in that language arts class." Another student reported that she had conversations with other students with disabilities about extracurricular activities that worked well with students with special needs.

The perceptions of college students with disabilities regarding their instruction on the characteristics of self-advocacy varied depending on the characteristic. Students expressed they had a high level of knowledge about their needs in relation to their disability. They also expressed they had the opportunity to communicate the needs associated with their disability, which is important as the shift from someone else managing their education to managing it themselves occurs (Hong et al., 2007). While students expressed the ability to communicate the information they had about their own disability, they did not have knowledge of the rights that are afforded to people with disabilities and also did not have the opportunity to develop leadership skills, both of which are important characteristics of self-advocacy, and should be a

component in the education of high school students with disabilities (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

*According to PK-12 public school special education administrators, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?*

As expressed in the literature review, social justice within the education system has evolved from issues around race, socioeconomic status, and gender to include students with disabilities (Polat, 2011; Theoharis, 2007, 2009). There are basic principles of social justice which support the equal access to education. According to Hytten and Bettez (2011), these basic principles include distribution, recognition, and opportunities.

The social justice principle of distribution involves the equitable allocation of resources and rewards (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). According to public school special education administrators, distribution of resources and rewards typically takes the form of course offerings within the education setting. Carol Gibbs from the Franklin School District expressed “We have social development classes... but between [that class and] our Trans Lab [they] really help them transition into different things.” Also, she expressed an effort to determine the best courses for students by doing a “... service inventory. We do two or three different kinds of inventories for our students.” Dan Wright from the Washington School District acknowledged that the district had multiple resources for students with disabilities and they “...just have so many resources and we just bring everyone to the table.”

Another principle of social justice, recognition, refers to the acknowledgement that all cultural ways of being are valued (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). As noted in the literature review, Fraser (2011) contended that people with disabilities have greater inequality in the areas of economics, social, and political processes than others in society, thus devaluing their culture.

Public school special education administrators expressed that students with disabilities are accepted into the school culture. Susie Smith from the Valley View School District said, “They’re just invited to do everything.” Dan Wright expressed that they have students at one elementary school who “...get up and talk in the assembly about their disability.” However, Susie Smith acknowledged that they do not include students with disabilities in any education about the political processes that impact students with disabilities and “...do not do [any instruction about] laws as a group.”

According to Hytten and Bettez (2011), the social justice principle of opportunities refers to ensuring a level playing field for all people. It is through the leveling of the playing field that social justice can be achieved (Bankston, 2010; Christensen & Dorn, 1997; Hytten & Bettez, 2011). Susie Smith said her school district “...always involved them in [deciding accommodations]” which allowed students opportunities to share what they need to access their education in an equitable manner. Dan Wright expressed that in his district students share their needs “...in IEP meetings.” Additionally, Carol Gibbs shared that “... [casemanagers] make sure that the teachers are following their accommodations.” All of these experiences provide opportunities for students with disabilities to have access to the same resources and rewards that other students have.

According to the public school special education administrators, students with disabilities participated in many practices that supported the principles of social justice. Students were offered the same courses and social opportunities as other students, thus supporting the principle of distribution. Additionally, students were recognized for being themselves and what that can bring to the school setting. Lastly, the opportunities students were given enabled them to participate in the same activities as other students within the school.

*According to high school special education teachers, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?*

Within the literature review, social justice as it applies to students with disabilities was discussed. From a social justice perspective, people with disabilities are socially devalued and marginalized (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). Pazez and Cole (2012) assert that while the concept of social justice within our education system has evolved, students with disabilities continue to fight against inequities within the school system. This equal access to education falls under the basic principles of social justice, distribution, recognition, and opportunities (Hyttten & Bettez, 2011).

The equitable allocation of resources and rewards, or distribution (Hyttten & Bettez, 2011), has not always been guaranteed for all members of society. According to the participants in this study, schools offered a variety of resources and rewards for students with disabilities. A special education teacher in the Washington School District expressed that “The students also get access to all of the programs that our regular education students access...” However, another Washington School District teacher expressed, “...a lot of times we struggle because there aren’t the classes, or there aren’t the resources...”

According to Hyttten and Bettez (2011), recognition as a social justice principle acknowledges that all cultural ways of being are valued. A teacher in the Valley View School District perceived that that the student body involved students with disabilities “Completely, our high school kids, I think, are amazing.” One teacher in the Franklin School District acknowledged that “There are a lot of kids being asked to dances and such.” Additionally, a teacher in the Valley View School District shared that course offerings have helped the valuation

of all cultures, “Co-teaching has really made a big difference for the kids as far as social justice goes because their peers see them as their peers.”

Opportunities as a principle of social justice refers to ensuring a level playing field for all people (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). Within the ethos context, teachers expressed that students with disabilities are involved in the school. A Washington School District teacher said, “I’ve got kids on my caseload, one who is one of my officers for student council, and one of my kids on my caseload is [another] one of our officers. I’ve got cheerleaders. We’ve got kids who are on sports teams.” A teacher from Valley View School District said, “All the marketing, DECA, Ag classes and stuff have a lot of our special ed kids that are officers...”

Within the literature review, both Ben-Porath (2012) and Smith (2012) contended that one of the key purposes of education should be increasing participation and achievement among youth, especially those with disadvantages. The investigation of the principles of social justice for high school students with disabilities showed that high school special education staff perceived that students have access to many different courses and social opportunities through the school. However, some expressed that those opportunities could be expanded to include more students, especially through offering more courses.

### **Conclusions**

A qualitative research study was chosen to understand the level of self-advocacy instruction that high school students with disabilities received. This study sought to explain people’s experiences, behaviors, interactions, and social contexts (Fossey et al., 2002).

According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research can be used to explore and understand the meaning groups or individuals ascribe to in relation to a social or human problem. Participants are studied in their natural environments while the researcher seeks to understand the world from

their perspective (Hatch, 2002). Additionally, Nelson and Quintana (2005) assert that qualitative research has been an established practice in the education field.

Within this qualitative research, a case study method was employed. According to Hatch (2002), case studies are specific kinds of qualitative work that investigate a contextualized contemporary phenomenon within specific boundaries. Through case studies, researchers collect detailed information about a process using a variety of data collection procedures while focusing on an issue with a program, an event, a person, a process, or an institution (Creswell, 2009; Creswell et al., 2007; Merriam, 1988). Additionally, a deep contextual understanding can be provided through the use of a case study (Creswell et al., 2007). Accordingly, the following conclusions are based on the study's findings of perceptions of school staff and students in relation to self-advocacy instruction as examined through the lens of social justice.

### **Opportunities for Students to Self-Advocate While in High School**

*Opportunities that students have to self-advocate while in high school* was the first overarching theme identified based upon the data. The two subthemes also identified as important components of *Opportunities for Students to Self-Advocate* were: Asserting Rights as Students with Disabilities and Ethos Opportunities for Students with Disabilities. From the data it can be concluded that staff and students find self-advocacy to be a valuable skill and students should be given opportunities to self-advocate. While both staff and students agree with Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003) and expressed that this was an important skill that will lead to better post school outcomes, there were differing opinions about the opportunities provided to students.

Students should participate in their own IEP meeting in order to learn the accommodations they require as a student and their specific IEP goals and services (Gil, 2007;

Foley, 2006; Schreiner, 2007). Students and staff both expressed that students' level of involvement in IEP meetings was consistent. IEP meetings were typically where students were given the opportunity to self-advocate regarding courses and accommodations. Dan Wright from the Washington School District said that "Students lead those [IEP] meetings so they have to participate." Additionally, one of the students said that during the IEP meeting:

We would go through it and they would ask me if we needed to change something because it's realistically pointed to me, to my education. I would say, well, I need more help with this and then we would fix it so it would help me more on what I needed help on.

It is through this participation in IEP meetings that students were given the opportunity to advocate for themselves and learn what they need in relation to their disability.

Another aspect of self-advocacy is the knowledge about one's disability and the ability to share what is needed in relation to this disability. Since students with disabilities are their own advocates on college campuses, it is important that they be able to disclose their disability as well as practice self-advocacy skills (Gil, 2007; Foley, 2006; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Schreiner, 2007; Smith et al., 2002). One staff member from the Washington School District said that there are students "...that have no idea what their disability is, don't want to talk about it." While teachers noted this lack of ability and willingness for students to self-disclose, students expressed there were community implications to self-disclosure. When asked if he would self-disclose, one student responded, "No, because it added more bullying and so we didn't." While the research noted in the literature review emphasized the importance of self-disclosure for students with disabilities, the data showed that this is often not occurring in high schools and that students feel pressure not to self-disclose due to group implications.

It became evident through the data that students with disabilities self-advocated while in high school, however this happened more on case-specific instances. One of the teachers from the Valley View School District said that case-specific self-advocacy happened almost daily, “They’ll come in and say, ‘Do I have this service in my IEP, I can’t remember?’ We’ll look it up and I’ll say, ‘Yes, you do have that. Yes, you can ask for that.’” Students agreed that self-advocacy happened based upon certain circumstances. One student said, “Any time that I needed a certain accommodation to use, I would go and tell the teacher, and the teacher would let me use it, the way I needed to use it.” Another student agreed, “If I knew they weren’t following [my IEP], I would talk to them after class or go to them before school...”

Students and staff acknowledged the importance of self-advocacy. The data analysis showed that students are involved in their own IEP meetings, are encouraged to provide input, and often readily do so. However, students do not openly discuss their disability either at IEP meetings or in any other portion of their high school experience. While students found it difficult to disclose their disability, they used case-specific opportunities to advocate for what they need within their coursework and with their accommodations.

### **Opportunities for High Schools to Provide Instruction in Self-Advocacy**

The second overarching theme identified based upon the data was *Opportunities for High School to Provide Instruction in Self-Advocacy*. Two subthemes also identified as important components were: Instruction that Supports Students with Disabilities Asserting Rights and Coursework that Supports the Instruction of Self-Advocacy for Students with Disabilities. From the data it can be concluded that staff address the instruction of self-advocacy on a case-by-case basis rather than addressing it with a large population of students, however there were some instances of courses geared directly at teaching students transition-related skills. Also, there

were components about the instruction of laws that are often not addressed or addressed with only certain students.

Many students with disabilities do not know how to self-advocate and require instruction on how to do so. According to Janiga and Costenbader (2002), instruction in self-advocacy skills should be a part of every student's transition plan that is developed in high school. The data findings through this research show there is instruction occurring regarding self-advocacy, however this instruction is approached on a case-by-case basis. One teacher in the Washington School District said that he works with students by "Just helping them solve their own problems by communicating and remaining calm and being respectful." When a Valley View School District teacher was asked what the district does to teach self-advocacy skills to students with disabilities, her response was, "Not nearly enough. They do it more on a one-on-one basis."

While the majority of instruction happened on a case-by-case basis, there were some instances of course offerings that specifically address self-advocacy. One teacher in the Franklin School District said that in this course she has "...explicit lessons on if it's a certain problem that happens, who is the right person that you do to for that." She also said that within that course she gave "...instruction on test-taking strategies, and study skills, and organization." A staff member from the Washington School District said that they "...did a class last year where show worked with her students...on self-advocating." Susie Smith, the special education administrator in the Valley View School District said that "All of the special services kids have advisory time with their casemanager." This time would give the teacher an opportunity to have one-on-one time with students to address issues and prepare them for future needs.

According to Skinner (1998), a student's successful navigation of higher education settings necessitates an awareness of legal rights. High school graduates should be able to

understand the difference in protections between IDEA, Section 504, and the ADA (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Gil, 2007). While the review of literature emphasized the importance of the instruction of legal rights, this is an area that is often neglected by high school staff. When asked what her district did to instruct students about their legal rights, Susie Smith, special education administrator for the Valley View School District said, “We don’t do anything as a group.” One of the teachers from the same district agreed, “The only thing we’re lacking is probably telling the students more the legal part of their rights.” Students agreed that they would like to see more instruction about laws. One student said that he would like schools to “Tell us more about the laws that are outside of, what we’re allowed to have outside of our IEP when we leave for college and what we can’t have.” Another student said, “Basically I taught myself those laws.”

Based upon the findings, high school students with disabilities and staff members both agree that self-advocacy instruction is a vital part of the high school experience. This instruction was primarily delivered on a one-on-one basis as specific situations arise. While there is coursework regarding transition-related needs, it is offered on a limited basis. An area of need as noted by both staff and students is instruction about the laws that govern provisions for people with disabilities. This was an area that was not addressed, leaving some students to do the research on their own.

### **Limitations**

Every research study has limitations and they are important to acknowledge (Connelly, 2013). The first limitation of this study involved the study design. This study employed a qualitative case study design which sought to describe a person’s experience by understanding the meaning groups or individuals ascribe to in relation to a social or human problem, while using a variety of data collection procedures (Creswell, 2009). While qualitative case studies

explain a person's experiences, behavior, interaction, and social contexts within specific boundaries (Creswell et al., 2007; Fossey et al., 2002) the sample size for participants can be small. This sample was limited to public schools within one Midwestern state. Small sample sizes can make it difficult to generalize findings; however the goal of qualitative research is to learn about life experiences in depth rather than through a large breadth of the population (Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004; Whittemore et al., 2001). It is for this reason that the researcher chose participants that had rich experiences in this area of research, which was achieved through purposeful sampling designed to maximize a range of perspectives on an issue (Fossey et al., 2002; Marshall, 1996; Nelson & Quintana, 2005; Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004).

An additional limitation was the ability of the researcher to reflect the participants' experiences accurately (Fossey et al., 2002; Kuper et al., 2008). This was addressed through the use of triangulation, or the use of multiple methods or perspectives to produce a more comprehensive set of findings (Kuper et al., 2008). This triangulation permitted the researcher to compare and contrast perspectives and examine as many aspects of the issue as possible (Fossey et al., 2002; Hatch, 2002). Also, the researcher employed member checking, or the sharing of findings with the participants to ensure they accurately represented their experiences (Kuper et al., 2008; Mays & Pope, 1995) to ensure transparency.

Lastly, the researcher acknowledged personal biases that were brought to the study. Reflexivity, or the recognition of the influence of the researcher (Kuper et al., 2008), is important to note in studies. The researcher has worked in the field of special education for over 15 years. This experience has included the implementation of programs and services for public high school students with disabilities.

## **Implications for Practice**

The implications for practice found in this study address the needs of students with disabilities in high school. The findings indicate self-advocacy instruction for students with disabilities occurs primarily on a situational basis. The findings supported the need for high school transition programming for students with disabilities to include instruction in self-advocacy skills (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Additionally, the findings indicate students have opportunities to practice self-advocacy skills while in high school, another vital component to the transition process (Connor, 2012; Hong et al., 2007; Skinner, 1998). These opportunities to self-advocate, again, are situational based upon the student's needs and prior support from high school staff. Since these opportunities are situational, it is vital that high school staff meet with students one-on-one to work through issues regarding self-advocacy. These meetings between staff and students can address issues regarding self-advocating on a daily basis, but also how students can advocate for themselves during IEP meetings. Research and practice about how to self-advocate upon arrival at a postsecondary institution can also occur during these meetings.

The study findings also show that students are actively involved in their own IEP meetings. This is a vital component to self-advocacy instruction because secondary students who actively participate in their own education and transition planning are more motivated (Skouge et al., 2007). Students and staff reported that students are given the opportunity to participate in their own IEP meetings and that preparation for these meetings occurs. Students and staff agreed that students are given the opportunity to express their needs and concerns while in IEP meetings and the team members use this information to plan appropriately for the student.

The findings from this research show that students are in need of instruction about the rights they're afforded as individuals with disabilities. According to Skinner (1998), without the

knowledge of their legal rights, students will not successfully navigate higher education settings. Students and staff both acknowledge this is an area that is not addressed with students with disabilities. Additionally, students with disabilities need practice and support in expressing the nature of their own disability and the needs associated with this disability. This is important because the shift to managing their own learning occurs and students must be able to articulate their needs to post-secondary staff (Hong et al., 2007). High school staff can be responsive to students who self-advocate by reinforcing their efforts to express the needs associated with their disability and working with them to ensure that appropriate accommodations are in place in their classes. High school leadership also needs to support students' efforts by allowing them the opportunity to self-advocate and holding staff accountable to meeting the accommodations agreed upon.

This study also has implications for practice for post-secondary institutions. Federal legislation mandated that post-secondary institutions provide accommodations to students with disabilities (Sitlington, 2003). Since the provision of accommodations is a mandated activity, post-secondary institutions should evaluate how they are disseminating information to students and to staff. It is necessary that students know where to go on campus to obtain accommodations in relation to their disability. Additionally, it has been found that college staff is willing to help students with learning disabilities (Sparks & Lovett, 2009). Because of this willingness, it is necessary that post-secondary staff know how to access information regarding students with disabilities and the accommodations for their specific course. In relation to teacher preparation programs, post-secondary institutions should ensure that all prospective educators be aware of the laws associated with the education of students with disabilities and how the implementation of these laws occurs at public schools. Additionally, teacher preparation programs should

address the characteristics of a variety of the high incidence disabilities and how to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the classroom.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

The results of this study should contribute to the current body of knowledge that already exists about self-advocacy instruction for students with disabilities. Since college students with disabilities graduate at a lower rate than their peers without disabilities (Gregg, 2009), it is important that research continue to investigate the cause of this discrepancy and ways that it can be addressed.

The first recommendation for future research would be to investigate how college students with disabilities advocate for themselves while on college campuses. College student participants in this study expressed that they did have opportunities to self-advocate while in high school. Since college students become their own advocate on college campuses (Gil, 2007; Foley, 2006; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Schreiner, 2007; Smith et al., 2002), it is important to investigate how they are advocating for themselves. Future research would be needed to see how those skills were transferred to a college setting.

Since the ability of students to be able to advocate has shown to lead to better post-school outcomes (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003), an additional recommendation for future study is to investigate the outcomes for students who developed self-advocacy skills in an educational setting that had a strong self-advocacy program. These outcomes could be compared to the outcomes of students that participated in a program in which self-advocacy was not a priority to see how the outcomes for the students in the two different programs differed.

This research could be used as a guide for high schools to develop curriculum for students with disabilities to learn the components of self-advocacy. Once this curriculum was

implemented, additional research could be done to determine what impact the change in curriculum had in preparing students with disabilities to display the components of self-advocacy.

Lastly, research regarding student outcomes could be done. According to Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003), students who are able to self-advocate demonstrate higher levels of financial independence later in life. Future research could be done following a student from high school through college to post college to determine if the level of self-advocacy instruction received corresponded to a higher level of financial independence than students who did not receive self-advocacy instruction.

### **Concluding Overview**

This qualitative case study examined the level of self-advocacy instruction high school students with disabilities received. It was through the lens of social justice that responses from school staff and students with disabilities were analyzed to determine self-advocacy instruction in high schools. The responses of the research subjects indicated that many of the principles of social justice, distribution, recognition, and opportunities (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011), are reflected in the practices of high schools in educating students with disabilities. However, there is a need to ensure that all ways of being are valued by both staff and the student body.

Through interviews and observations, the researcher found that students with disabilities have opportunities to practice many of the components of self-advocacy: knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership (Test et al., 2005). The findings of this study identified a need for schools to offer more opportunities for students with disabilities to learn about their legal rights. Additionally, there is a need for students with disabilities to have

the opportunity to learn about their own disability and be able to express the needs associated with that disability.

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## APPENDIX A

### *Informed Consent*

1. District Gatekeeper Permission for Director of Special Education Participation Letter
2. Administrative Permission for Director of Special Education Participation
3. Recruitment Script for Special Education Administrator
4. Letter of Informed Consent – Director of Special Education Participant
5. Recruitment Script for College Student
6. Letter of Informed Consent – College Student Participant
7. District Gatekeeper Permission for High School Special Education Teacher Participation Letter
8. Administrative Permission for High School Special Education Teacher Participation
9. Recruitment Script for Special Education Teacher
10. Letter of Informed Consent – High School Special Education Teacher Participant

**District Gatekeeper Permission for Director of Special Education  
Participation Letter**  
<Name of District>

Dear <Title><First Name><Last Name>,

I would like to request your permission to invite your Director of Special Education in your school district to participate in a research study entitled *Preparing students with disabilities to self-advocate for favorable post school outcomes: A qualitative case study of transition services in high schools*. The study is being conducted by Leigh Gruber, doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri – Columbia.

I am examining the level of self-advocacy instruction students with disabilities receive in high school. This study is part of my dissertation research for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri – Columbia.

For the study, a sampling was selected of Directors of Special Education who have lead for two or more years and are currently employed in school districts that have high schools that serve students with disabilities. I am seeking your permission as the Gatekeeper administrator of the

<Name of District> School District to contact <Title><First Name><Last Name>, Director of Special Education for the purpose of inviting him/her to participate in a 90 minute individual interview session on-site. A copy of the interview protocol and the Director of Special Education informed consent forms are attached for your review.

Participation in the study is completely voluntary. The participants may withdraw from participation at any time they wish without penalty, including in the middle of or after completion of the interview. Participants' answers and the district's identity will remain confidential and separate from any identifying information. The researcher will not list any names of participants, or their corresponding institutions, in her dissertation or any future publications of this study.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns about participation either by phone at (816) 519-5499 or by electronic mail at [leighw2@yahoo.com](mailto:leighw2@yahoo.com). In addition, you are also welcome to contact the dissertation advisor for this research study, Dr. Barbara N. Martin, who can be reached at 660-543-8823 or by email at [bmartin@ucmo.edu](mailto:bmartin@ucmo.edu).

If you choose to allow me to contact the Director of Special Education in your district regarding participation in this study, please complete the attached permission form. You should retain a copy of this letter and your written consent for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,  
Leigh Gruber  
Doctoral Candidate

**Administrative Permission for Director of Special Education Participation**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, grant permission for the Director of Special Education in my district to be contacted regarding participation in the study *Preparing students with disabilities to self-advocate for favorable post school outcomes: A qualitative case study of transition services in high schools* conducted by Leigh Gruber, doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri – Columbia.

By signing this permission form, I understand that the following safeguards are in place to protect Directors of Special Education choosing to participate:

- All participation is voluntary, and may be withdrawn at any point before culmination of the study.
- All responses will be used for dissertation research and for potential future journal publications.
- All identities and affiliations will be kept confidential in all phases of the research.
- The interviews will take approximately two hours to complete.

Please keep the consent letter and a copy of the signed consent form for your records. If you choose to grant permission for the Director of Special Education in this study, please complete this *Administrative Permission for Director of Special Education Participation Form*, scan, and email it to Leigh Gruber as soon as possible.

I have read the material above and any questions that I have posed have been answered to my satisfaction. I grant permission for the Director of Special Education to be contacted and invited to participate in this study.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Title/Position: \_\_\_\_\_

School District: \_\_\_\_\_

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Please return to Leigh Gruber  
Phone: (816) 519-5499  
Email: leighw2@yahoo.com

## Recruitment Script for Special Education Administrator

Name of Person: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Time Called: \_\_\_\_\_

Better Time to Call: \_\_\_\_\_

Hi, my name is Leigh Gruber and I'm a doctoral student through the University of Missouri. I'm working on a study about transition services provided to students with disabilities while in high school. This study involves research. I'm interested in interviewing Directors of Special Education regarding the transition services provided to students with disabilities in high schools within their school districts. I would be interested in meeting with you one-on-one to get your input on this topic. I can be flexible about the day and time we meet. The meeting should only last about 90 minutes. Will you be able to accommodate this request? If so, where and when would be convenient for you to meet?

Date of Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

Time of Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. If any issues arise with this meeting please contact me at 816-519-5499 or [leighw2@yahoo.com](mailto:leighw2@yahoo.com).

## Letter of Informed Consent – Director of Special Education Participant

[DATE]

Dear [participant]:

Thank you for considering participation in a research study titled *Preparing students with disabilities to self-advocate for favorable post school outcomes: A qualitative case study of transition services in high schools*. This study is part of my dissertation research for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri – Columbia. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a Director of Special Education in a district that has a high school that serves students with disabilities. Information gathered should be beneficial to PK-12 educational leaders who responsible for bolstering the achievement of students with disabilities. The district [gatekeeper] has approved participation of [the employing institution].

### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to assess the level of self-advocacy instruction students with disabilities received in high school.

The following questions guide this qualitative study:

1. How does high school special education staff implement the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, into educational programming for students with learning disabilities?
2. What are the perceptions of college students with learning disabilities about their instruction in the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, while in high school?
3. According to PK-12 public school special education administrators, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?
4. According to high school special education teachers, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?

Before you make a final decision about participation, you must know how your rights will be protected:

## INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT FOR DIRECTOR OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

### PARTICIPANT

- Participation in the study is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time. If later you do not wish the data you provided to be used, inform me; your wish will be honored before culmination of the study. Your refusal to participate will have no adverse consequences. For any questions about your participation in this research, please contact me at (816) 519-5499 or by e-mail at [leighw2@yahoo.com](mailto:leighw2@yahoo.com). You may also contact my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Barbara N. Martin, at (660) 543-8823 or by e-mail at [bmartin@ucmo.edu](mailto:bmartin@ucmo.edu).
- As an interview participant you must be at least 18 years old and your name and answers will remain confidential; only my dissertation supervisor and I would have access to identifiable data. Any materials identifying specific individuals, district, or school will be kept locked and destroyed seven years after the completion of this project. Data collected from the school participants will be coded for qualitative analysis, and summarized for reporting. Results may be published in *Dissertation Abstracts* and in professional journals at any time, protecting your anonymity and confidentiality.
- Your control as to which interview items you choose to answer ensures that there will be no identifiable risk for you greater than that encountered in your everyday life. If you have further questions regarding research participants' rights, please contact the Campus Institutional Review Board at (573) 882-9585.

If you elect to participate and make your professional perspective count as part of this study, please keep this letter for future reference, if you wish. The individual interview will take no more than two hours to complete and will be audio recorded. Your participation is very valuable. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Leigh Gruber  
Doctoral Candidate  
University of Missouri - Columbia

## Recruitment Script for College Student

Name of Person: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Time Called: \_\_\_\_\_

Better Time to Call: \_\_\_\_\_

Hi, my name is Leigh Gruber and I'm a doctoral student through the University of Missouri. I'm working on a study about transition services provided to students with disabilities while in high school. This study involves research. I got your name from [name of high school special education teacher] and they said you might be interested in participating in this research study. I want to visit with college students with disabilities to determine what transition services are provided to students in high school. The meeting will be:

Date of Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

Time of Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

There will be refreshments provided during the meeting. Will you be able to join the meeting?

No \_\_\_\_\_ Okay, thank you for your time.

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ Great. I'd like to send you a letter just to confirm everything. What email address should I use to send this letter? \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. If any issues arise with this meeting please contact me at 816-519-5499 or [leighw2@yahoo.com](mailto:leighw2@yahoo.com).

## Letter of Informed Consent – College Student Participant

[DATE]

Dear (Participant):

Thank you for considering participation in a research study titled *Preparing students with disabilities to self-advocate for favorable post school outcomes: A qualitative case study of transition services in high schools*. This study is part of my dissertation research for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri – Columbia. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a college student aged 18 years or older with a documented disability in your college’s accessibility office. Information gathered should be beneficial to PK-12 educational leaders who responsible for bolstering the achievement of students with disabilities. The college [gatekeeper] has approved participation of [the institution].

### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to assess the level of self-advocacy instruction students with disabilities received in high school.

The following questions guide this qualitative study:

1. How does high school special education staff implement the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, into educational programming for students with learning disabilities?
2. What are the perceptions of college students with learning disabilities about their instruction in the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, while in high school?
3. According to PK-12 public school special education administrators, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?
4. According to high school special education teachers, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?

Before you make a final decision about participation, you must know how your rights will be protected:

## INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT FOR COLLEGE STUDENT PARTICIPANT

- Participation in the study is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time. If later you do not wish the data you provided to be used, inform me; your wish will be honored before culmination of the study. Your refusal to participate will have no adverse consequences. For any questions about your participation in this research, please contact me at (816) 519-5499 or by e-mail at [leighw2@yahoo.com](mailto:leighw2@yahoo.com). You may also contact my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Barbara N. Martin, at (660) 543-8823 or by e-mail at [bmartin@ucmo.edu](mailto:bmartin@ucmo.edu).
- As an interview participant you must be at least 18 years old and your name and answers will remain confidential; only my dissertation supervisor and I would have access to identifiable data. Any materials identifying specific individuals, district, or school will be kept locked and destroyed seven years after the completion of this project. Data collected from the school participants will be coded for qualitative analysis, and summarized for reporting. Results may be published in *Dissertation Abstracts* and in professional journals at any time, protecting your anonymity and confidentiality.
- Your control as to which interview items you choose to answer ensures that there will be no identifiable risk for you greater than that encountered in your everyday life. If you have further questions regarding research participants' rights, please contact the Campus Institutional Review Board at (573) 882-9585.

If you elect to participate and make your professional perspective count as part of this study, please keep this letter for future reference, if you wish. The individual interview will take no more than two hours to complete and will be audio recorded. Your participation is very valuable. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Leigh Gruber  
Doctoral Candidate  
University of Missouri - Columbia

**District Gatekeeper Permission for Special Education Teacher  
Participation Letter**  
<Name of District>

Dear <Title><First Name><Last Name>,

I would like to request your permission to invite your high school special education teachers in your school district to participate in a research study entitled *Preparing students with disabilities to self-advocate for favorable post school outcomes: A qualitative case study of transition services in high schools*. The study is being conducted by Leigh Gruber, doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri – Columbia.

I am examining the level of self-advocacy instruction students with disabilities received in high school. This study is part of my dissertation research for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri – Columbia.

For the study, a sampling was selected of special education teachers who have taught for five or more years and are currently employed in school districts that have high schools that serve students with disabilities. I am seeking your permission as the Gatekeeper administrator of the <Name of District> School District to contact <First Name><Last Name>, special education teacher for the purpose of inviting him/her to participate in a two hour focus group session on-site. A copy of the interview protocol and the special education teacher informed consent forms are attached for your review.

Participation in the study is completely voluntary. The participants may withdraw from participation at any time they wish without penalty, including in the middle of or after completion of the interview. Participants' answers and the district's identity will remain confidential and separate from any identifying information. The researcher will not list any names of participants, or their corresponding institutions, in her dissertation or any future publications of this study.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns about participation either by phone at (816) 519-5499 or by electronic mail at [leighw2@yahoo.com](mailto:leighw2@yahoo.com). In addition, you are also welcome to contact the dissertation advisor for this research study, Dr. Barbara N. Martin, who can be reached at 660-543-8823 or by email at [bmartin@ucmo.edu](mailto:bmartin@ucmo.edu).

If you choose to allow me to contact special education teachers in your district regarding participation in this study, please complete the attached permission form. You should retain a copy of this letter and your written consent for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Leigh Gruber  
Doctoral Candidate

## **Administrative Permission for High School Special Education Teacher Participation**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, grant permission for the Director of Special Education in my district to be contacted regarding participation in the study *Preparing students with disabilities to self-advocate for favorable post school outcomes: A qualitative case study of transition services in high schools* conducted by Leigh Gruber, doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri – Columbia.

By signing this permission form, I understand that the following safeguards are in place to protect Directors of Special Education choosing to participate:

- All participation is voluntary, and may be withdrawn at any point before culmination of the study.
- All responses will be used for dissertation research and for potential future journal publications.
- All identities and affiliations will be kept confidential in all phases of the research.
- The interviews will take approximately two hours to complete.

Please keep the consent letter and a copy of the signed consent form for your records. If you choose to grant permission for the Director of Special Education in this study, please complete this *Administrative Permission for High School Special Education Teacher Participation Form*, scan, and email it to Leigh Gruber as soon as possible.

I have read the material above and any questions that I have posed have been answered to my satisfaction. I grant permission for the Director of Special Education to be contacted and invited to participate in this study.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Title/Position: \_\_\_\_\_

School District: \_\_\_\_\_

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Please return to Leigh Gruber  
Phone: (816) 519-5499  
Email: leighw2@yahoo.com

## Recruitment Script for Special Education Teacher

Name of Person: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Time Called: \_\_\_\_\_

Better Time to Call: \_\_\_\_\_

Hi, my name is Leigh Gruber and I'm a doctoral student through the University of Missouri. I'm working on a study about transition services provided to students with disabilities while in high school. This study involves research. I got your name from [name of Director of Special Education] and they said you might be interested in participating in this study. I want to visit with high school special education teachers that work with students with disabilities to determine what transition services are provided to students in high school. The meeting will be:

Date of Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

Time of Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_

There will be refreshments provided during the meeting. Will you be able to join the meeting?

No \_\_\_\_\_ Okay, thank you for your time.

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ Great. I'd like to send you a letter just to confirm everything. What email address should I use to send this letter? \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. If any issues arise with this meeting please contact me at 816-519-5499 or [leighw2@yahoo.com](mailto:leighw2@yahoo.com).

## Letter of Informed Consent – Special Education Teacher Participant

[DATE]

Dear (Participant):

Thank you for considering participation in a research study titled *Preparing students with disabilities to self-advocate for favorable post school outcomes: A qualitative case study of transition services in high schools*. This study is part of my dissertation research for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri – Columbia. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a college student aged 18 years or older with a documented disability in your college’s accessibility office. Information gathered should be beneficial to PK-12 educational leaders who responsible for bolstering the achievement of students with disabilities. The district [gatekeeper] has approved participation of [the institution].

### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to assess the level of self-advocacy instruction students with disabilities received in high school.

The following questions guide this qualitative study:

1. How does high school special education staff implement the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, into educational programming for students with learning disabilities?
2. What are the perceptions of college students with learning disabilities about their instruction in the characteristics of self-advocacy, including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership, while in high school?
3. According to PK-12 public school special education administrators, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?
4. According to high school special education teachers, how are the principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities, reflected in transition practices at the high school level?

Before you make a final decision about participation, you must know how your rights will be protected:

## INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER

### PARTICIPANT

- Participation in the study is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time. If later you do not wish the data you provided to be used, inform me; your wish will be honored before culmination of the study. Your refusal to participate will have no adverse consequences. For any questions about your participation in this research, please contact me at (816) 519-5499 or by e-mail at [leighw2@yahoo.com](mailto:leighw2@yahoo.com). You may also contact my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Barbara N. Martin, at (660) 543-8823 or by e-mail at [bmartin@ucmo.edu](mailto:bmartin@ucmo.edu).
- As an interview participant you must be at least 18 years old and your name and answers will remain confidential; only my dissertation supervisor and I would have access to identifiable data. Any materials identifying specific individuals, district, or school will be kept locked and destroyed seven years after the completion of this project. Data collected from the school participants will be coded for qualitative analysis, and summarized for reporting. Results may be published in *Dissertation Abstracts* and in professional journals at any time, protecting your anonymity and confidentiality.
- Your control as to which interview items you choose to answer ensures that there will be no identifiable risk for you greater than that encountered in your everyday life. If you have further questions regarding research participants' rights, please contact the Campus Institutional

If you elect to participate and make your professional perspective count as part of this study, please keep this letter for future reference, if you wish. The individual interview will take no more than two hours to complete and will be audio recorded. Your participation is very valuable. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Leigh Gruber  
Doctoral Candidate  
University of Missouri - Columbia

## APPENDIX B

### *Interview Protocols*

1. Special Education Administrator Interview Protocol
2. College Student Focus Group Interview Protocol
3. High School Special Education Teacher Focus Group Interview Protocol

## Special Education Administrator Interview Protocol

Administrator: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Start Time: \_\_\_\_\_

### Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions focusing on self-advocacy instruction for students with learning disabilities. My name is Leigh Gruber, and I will be conducting the interview. In order to ensure accuracy, I will be audio recording the interview.

There is 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 one to one and a half hours and we will not be taking a formal break. Please let me know if you need to leave for any reason. Let's begin by finding out more about each other.

Questions	Research Questions
Opening Questions: 5 min.	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell me your name.</li> <li>2. Tell me about your experiences working with students with learning disabilities.</li> </ol>	Learn about participant
Introductory Question: 5-10 min.	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Discuss the transition-related opportunities that are provided to students with learning disabilities in your school district. <i>Probe: Are there any work experiences, supported college visits, services through vocational rehabilitation, or on-the-job training opportunities?</i></li> </ol>	Q2
Transition Questions: 5-10 min.	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. How do IEP teams address a student's needs, preferences, and interests as part of their transition plan? <i>Probe: How are these addressed during and after the IEP meeting?</i></li> </ol>	Q1

5. How do IEP teams ensure that the students participate in IEP meetings?	Q1, Q2
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Key Questions: 30-40 min.

<p>6. As an administrator, how have you addressed self-advocacy instruction within your district?  <i>Probe: How have you addressed self-advocacy instruction to other administrators? To other special education staff?</i></p>	Q1, Q2
<p>7. Tell me how students with disabilities are instructed regarding their disability and what may be necessary for them to address their needs associated with the disability.</p>	Q3, Q4
<p>8. Describe how the high school(s) in your district address the gap in postsecondary achievement between students with disabilities and typical students.  <i>Probe: Are there additional programs or resources offered to students with disabilities?</i></p>	Q3, Q4
<p>9. Describe the opportunities high school students with disabilities have to discuss their own disability with others including disclosure of their own strengths, weaknesses, and needed accommodations.  <i>Probe: Are they able to at their own IEP meetings? Are there support groups within the high school specifically for students with disabilities?</i></p>	Q1, Q2
<p>10. Tell me about the instruction students with disabilities receive regarding laws, including Section 504, the ADA, and IDEA, and their rights according to these laws.  <i>Probe: Discuss any instruction that occurs regarding how these laws impact them in college.</i></p>	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4
<p>11. How are students with disabilities included in the high school's culture?  <i>Probe: Is there any direct instruction on how to participate in group dynamics? What awards, recognition, etc. do they have the opportunity to receive?</i></p>	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4
<p>12. How does high school staff address the needs of students with disabilities to ensure required accommodations are made?  <i>Probe: Describe the opportunities for students to advocate for their own accommodations.</i></p>	Q1, Q2

<p>13. Describe the resources that are afforded students with disabilities. <i>Probe: What resources are offered that are different than those for students without disabilities?</i></p>	Q3, Q4
<p>14. What opportunities are provided to students with disabilities to develop leadership skills?</p>	Q1, Q2
<p>15. Social justice involves equity in rights, resources, and the treatment of marginalized individuals. Describe how your high school(s) exemplify the meaning of social justice for students with disabilities.</p>	Q3, Q4

Ending Questions: 5-10 min.

<p>16. What would you envision the ideal transition program that addresses self-advocacy instruction to look like? <i>Probe: What resources do you believe would have to be allocated to this program?</i></p>	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4
<p>17. Is there anything else you would wish to tell me that I have not asked?</p>	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4

## College Student Focus Group Interview Protocol

College: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Start Time: \_\_\_\_\_

### Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions focusing on self-advocacy instruction for students with learning disabilities. My name is Leigh Gruber, and I will be conducting the interview. In order to ensure accuracy, I will be audio recording the interview.

There is 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.

Our session will last about one and one half to two hours and we will not be taking a formal break. Please let me know if you need to leave for any reason. Let's begin by finding out more about each other.

Questions	Research Questions
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Opening Questions: 5-10 min.

1. Tell us your name and where you attended high school.	Learn about participants
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Introductory Question: 15-20 min.

2. Discuss the transition-related opportunities that were provided by your high school. <i>Probe: Did any of you participate in work experience, supported college visits, services through vocational rehabilitation, or on-the-job training?</i>	Q2
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Transition Question: 10-15 min.

3. Thinking back to high school, discuss how your IEP team addressed your needs, preferences, and interests as part of your transition plan. <i>Probe: How were your needs, preferences, and interests addressed after the IEP meeting?</i>	Q1
4. How did high school staff ensure your participation in your IEP team meetings?	Q1, Q2

Key Questions: 50-60 min.

5. Tell me about the instruction your received about your	Q3, Q4
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disability and your needs associated with your disability.	
6. What programs or courses were offered to students with disabilities to address learning differences? <i>Probe: Were there smaller classes offered? Were courses with two teachers offered? Was there a separate study hall to address your needs?</i>	Q3, Q4
7. What opportunities did you have to discuss your disability with others, including your strengths, weaknesses, and needed accommodations?	Q1, Q2
8. Describe the instruction you received about different laws including Section 504, the ADA, and IDEA, and your rights according to each of these laws. <i>Probe: Discuss the instruction you received about how these laws would impact you at college.</i>	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4
9. How would you describe your level of involvement in the overall school culture? <i>Probe: Describe any instruction you received on navigating group dynamics. Describe any awards or recognitions that students with disabilities received.</i>	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4
10. Describe how your teachers ensured that your necessary accommodations were being made. <i>Probe: Describe any opportunities you had to discuss your accommodations with staff.</i>	Q1, Q2
11. Describe any leadership opportunities you had in high school.	Q1, Q2
12. Social justice involves equity in rights, resources, and the treatment of marginalized individuals. Describe how your high school exemplified the meaning of social justice in relation to students with disabilities.	Q3, Q4

Ending Questions: 10-15 min.

13. What do you envision the perfect high school program to prepare you for advocating for yourself in college look like? <i>Probe: Are there any additional resources that you feel that program would need?</i>	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4
14. Is there anything else you would wish to tell me that I have not asked?	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4

## High School Special Education Teacher Focus Group Interview Protocol

High School: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Start Time: \_\_\_\_\_

### Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions focusing on self-advocacy instruction for students with learning disabilities. My name is Leigh Gruber, and I will be conducting the interview. In order to ensure accuracy, I will be audio recording the interview.

There is 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 among professionals.

Our session will last about one and one half to two hours and we will not be taking a formal break. Please let me know if you need to leave for any reason. Let's begin by finding out more about each other.

Questions	Research Questions
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Opening Questions: 5-10 min.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell me your names and your experiences working with students with disabilities.</li> <li>2.</li> </ol>	Learn about participants.
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Introductory Questions: 15-20 min.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Discuss the transition-related opportunities that are provided to students with learning disabilities in your high school. <i>Probe: Are there any work experiences, supported college visits, services through vocational rehabilitation, on-the-job training opportunities?</i></li> </ol>	Q2
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Transition Questions: 10-15 min.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. How do high school IEP teams address a student's needs, preferences, and interests as part of their transition plan? <i>Probe: How are these addressed after the IEP meeting?</i></li> </ol>	Q1
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. How do IEP teams ensure that students participate in their own IEP meetings?</li> </ol>	Q1, Q2

Key Questions: 50-60 min.

<p>6. How has self-advocacy instruction been implemented in your high school?  <i>Probe: What discussion have you had about self-advocacy instruction with other staff? Administration?</i></p>	<p>Q1, Q2</p>
<p>7. Discuss how students with disabilities are instructed regarding their disability and what may be necessary for them to address their needs associated with their disability.</p>	<p>Q3, Q4</p>
<p>8. Describe how your high school addresses the gap in postsecondary achievement between students with disabilities and typical students.  <i>Probe: Are there additional programs or resources offered to students with disabilities?</i></p>	<p>Q3, Q4</p>
<p>9. Describe the opportunities high school students with disabilities have to discuss their own disability with others including disclosure of their own strengths, weaknesses, and needed accommodations.  <i>Probe: Are they able to attend their own IEP meetings? Are there support groups within the high school specifically for students with disabilities?</i></p>	<p>Q1, Q2</p>
<p>10. Tell me about the instruction students with disabilities receive regarding laws, including Section 504, the ADA, and IDEA, and their rights according to these laws.  <i>Probe: Discuss any instruction that occurs regarding how these laws impact them in college.</i></p>	<p>Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4</p>
<p>11. How are students with disabilities included in the high school's culture?  <i>Probe: Is there any direct instruction on how to participate in group dynamics? What awards, recognition, etc. do they have the opportunity to receive?</i></p>	<p>Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4</p>
<p>12. How do you address the needs of students with disabilities to ensure required accommodations are made?  <i>Probe: Describe the opportunities for students to advocate for their own accommodations.</i></p>	<p>Q1, Q2</p>
<p>13. Describe any additional resources that are afforded to students with disabilities.  <i>Probe: Are there any additional or different courses that are offered to students with disabilities?</i></p>	<p>Q3, Q4</p>
<p>14. What opportunities are provided to students with disabilities to</p>	<p>Q1, Q2</p>

<p>develop leadership skills?</p> <p>15. Social justice involves equity in rights, resources, and the treatment of marginalized individuals. Describe how your school exemplifies the meaning of social justice for students with disabilities.</p>	<p>Q3, Q4</p>
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Ending Questions:10-15 min.

<p>16. What would you envision would be the ideal transition program that addresses self-advocacy instruction to look like? <i>Probe: What resources do you believe would have to be allocated to this program?</i></p>	<p>Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4</p>
<p>17. Is there anything else you would wish to tell me that I have not asked?</p>	<p>Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4</p>

## APPENDIX C

University of Missouri – Columbia Institutional Review Board Approval

December 15, 2015

Principal Investigator: Leigh Gruber, EdD

Department:

Your Exempt Application to project entitled Preparing Students with Disabilities to Self-Advocate for Favorable Post School Outcomes: A Qualitative Case Study of Transition Services in High Schools was reviewed and approved by the MU Institutional Review Board according to terms and conditions described below:

IRB Project Number	2003194
IRB Review Number	206799
Initial Application Approval Date	December 15, 2015
IRB Expiration Date	December 15, 2016
Level of Review	Exempt
Project Status	Active - Open to Enrollment
Exempt Categories	45 CFR 46.101b(2)
Risk Level	Minimal Risk
Internal Funding	Personal funds

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, adverse events, and deviations must be reported to the IRB within 5 days.
3. All changes must be IRB approved prior to implementation unless they are intended to reduce immediate risk.
4. All recruitment materials and methods must be approved by the IRB prior to being used.
5. The Annual Exempt Form must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval at least 30 days prior to the project expiration date. If the study is complete, the Completion/Withdrawal Form may be submitted in lieu of the Annual Exempt Form
6. Maintain all research records for a period of seven years from the project completion date.
7. Utilize all approved research documents located within the attached files section of eCompliance. These documents are highlighted green.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB at 573-882-3181 or [irb@missouri.edu](mailto:irb@missouri.edu).

Thank you,  
MU Institutional Review Board

## Appendix D

### *Data Codes*

A1	Administrator Participant 1
A2	Administrator Participant 2
A3	Administrator Participant 3
T1	Teacher Participant 1
T2	Teacher Participant 2
T3	Teacher Participant 3
T4	Teacher Participant 4
T5	Teacher Participant 5
T6	Teacher Participant 6
T7	Teacher Participant 7
T8	Teacher Participant 8
T9	Teacher Participant 9
T10	Teacher Participant 10
T11	Teacher Participant 11
T12	Teacher Participant 12
T13	Teacher Participant 13
T15	Teacher Participant 14
S1	Student 1
S2	Student 2
S3	Student 3
S4	Student 4

S5 Student 5

## VITA

Leigh Gruber was born in Kansas City, Missouri to Wayne and Karen Wittmeyer. She graduated in 1992 from Camdenton High School in Camdenton, Missouri. In 1996, she received a Bachelor of Science degree in Special Education from the University of Missouri – Columbia. She later earned a Master of Arts in Teaching from Lindenwood University, an Educational Specialist in Administration from the University of Central Missouri, followed by a Doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri – Columbia in 2016.

Leigh's work experiences encompassed many roles. She began her career as a Special Education Teacher at the Linn County Alternative School, followed by Special Education teaching positions in Westran Public Schools, Columbia Public Schools, and the Lee's Summit R-7 School District. She was a Special Education Process Coordinator for ten years in Lee's Summit R-7 School District. She has been the Director of Special Services in the Harrisonville School District and is currently the Director of Student Support Services for the Fort Osage School District. Research interests include postsecondary transition for students with disabilities.

Dr. Gruber currently resides in Kansas City, Missouri, with her husband, Shawn Gruber.