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Special Education Diploma Acquisition and Transition Planning in Alternative School:

An Authentic, Individualized Approach

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Education.

Hamline University

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To my children, Amelia and Elsa, who did not love that I was attending graduate school but love me unconditionally, and to Ben, who encouraged and reencouraged me to go back to school. You are so important to me and I love you!

“Nothing about us without us.”
-International Disability Rights Slogan

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Students receiving special education services in Minnesota have the opportunity to graduate upon successful completion of their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals, but teams often struggle with the direction such goals should take. Alternative high schools can offer flexibility to students with IEPs in ways that traditional high schools cannot, which presents both opportunity and great responsibility for IEP teams as they work to create a plan for students that is achievable, meaningful, and rigorous. The purpose of this capstone project is to provide alternative school students and their special education teams with a framework for creating organized, transition goal-focused, meaningful, and rigorous plans for graduation.

My research question is: How does an alternative high school authentically individualize transition education and graduation requirements for students receiving special education services? In this chapter I will lay out what led me to this question, who my stakeholders are, why this project is important and necessary, and what I hope to reveal through my research and composition of the planning framework. At the conclusion of this chapter I will outline the remainder of my paper.

Background

When I began teaching special education at an alternative high school after many years as a middle school educator, I was told of one student on my caseload, “He seems like a good candidate for graduating off of his IEP.” I was still working to understand credits and standard graduation requirements, after spending most of my career with a grade level that did not deal with such things. “Graduate off of his IEP?” What did that

mean? I went into information-gathering mode with a list of questions: What does it mean to graduate off of an IEP? Who is eligible? What are the requirements? I asked a special education director, a veteran high school special education teacher, the Internet, and eventually the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), and I obtained the basics: in Minnesota, a student and their IEP team can individualize their high school graduation goals and the student can, upon successful completion of those goals, graduate from high school without needing to earn all of the district's required credits (Minnesota Statute, 2011).

When it came to answering the question of who was eligible, though, and what the graduation-worthy goals should look like, the consensus was... no one knows. Or perhaps more accurately, the who and what are broadly and vaguely defined. The most concise answer came from MDE, which was that "the team decides" and that a students' transition goals in the three areas of postsecondary education and training, employment, and independent living should shape the IEP graduation goals (L. Nida, & V. Weinberg, personal communication, June 15, 2022). That is where the guidance ends, and for students who may have multiple disabilities or significant cognitive disabilities, this may be sufficient. Grey area exists, though, when considering students who have struggled throughout their K-12 education and have diagnoses like Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or educational disability categories like Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD) or Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). If a team decides that they should indeed have the opportunity to bypass some or all of the credit requirements for graduation, there are no guidelines for what they should learn or accomplish, beyond the guidance that their education should be

based on their transition goals. Many 17- and 18-year-olds really don't know what they want to do yet and their goals, understandably, are ill-defined. This makes writing meaningful IEP goals a challenge.

This challenge is what has led me to want to design a tool that special education case managers and teams can use to compose meaningful, individualized annual goals for students, based on their hopes and dreams, their transition goals, career and college readiness standards, and on state academic standards. By following such a framework, students have a better chance of receiving an equitable, appropriate, rigorous education that will prepare them for life after high school.

Since my very first student who did indeed “graduate off of his IEP,” I have taught a few others who also needed this type of individualized plan. They have taught me that every student comes to us with a unique story and unique needs. With each of these students, I have gained expertise and become better at listening to them about their goals and their needs. I have become better at composing goals and objectives that support their futures and challenge them to achieve academic success. I have become more organized in the process as well, better at documenting our IEP team's rationale for particular goals and objectives and corresponding coursework.

Alternative school and special education programming afford us with the rare opportunity to meet unique student needs and to break the mold—we have an exciting chance to create an education that sets students up for success. This opportunity takes work—goal decisions need to be informed by good questions educators have for students regarding their vision for their future, in-depth knowledge of state standards, college entrance requirements, and career training programs. Teams can utilize thoughtful

planning to ensure clear connections between students' IEP goals and objectives and established best practices in career and college readiness education.

Stakeholders

It is imperative that my students and their families be the primary stakeholders in this work. I want the best for my students, which undoubtedly does include earning a high school diploma, but I want that diploma to be earned through meaningful, challenging work, at a student's level and serving their future. Post-diploma outcomes for students with disabilities are poor, and my students deserve more than just checking boxes on a credit accrual sheet or goals that are merely easy to achieve and nothing more. They deserve to have an education that allows them to accomplish their authentic future goals and supports them in having productive lives. It is my hope that this project can encourage this type of work, with student and family voices at the center. Students for whom the pursuit of credits is not appropriate still deserve a thoughtful, planful education.

Student and family voice takes on even greater weight when I think about my place in education as a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman teaching Black students, Indigenous students, students of color, and LGBTQIA+ students. I grew up speaking English and have lived in the Upper Midwest for my whole life. I am a parent of two young children. I am an elder millennial; I grew up without the technology that is ubiquitous today but feel comfortable using it and learning about new tools. I have spent my whole education and the majority of my career in public education. I do not have a disability. For a long time I did not consider most of these identities as significant, but reflecting on the privilege that these aspects of me have afforded helps me be a more

conscious, thoughtful educator who works to center student voices. Particularly when researching and designing my project, which is meant to serve and empower students with disabilities, many of whom have struggled within the system of school, many of whom are BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and English learners, I want to keep my positionality in mind so that I search for and honor the voices of the people who actually matter in this process. I am not disabled and my job is to teach students who are, and to manage their individualized plans and goals. I am acutely aware of the need for me to place students at the center and not inadvertently impose my own visions of a “successful” future onto them. My role necessitates humility, a listening ear, and a commitment to reflection and growth, and over my years as an educator I have become committed to making sure that student and family voices are central. That commitment applies to lesson planning, IEP writing, and to this project as well.

My colleagues and I are also stakeholders. The life of an alternative school special education teacher can be a lonely one—I am the only special educator at my site, and other alternative school special education teachers I have talked with are often in teams of three people or less. Many typical procedures and policies do not apply in an alternative setting, our students don’t fit the mold, and there is no handbook. Many of us have students who realistically will never meet credit requirements before they turn 21 or drop out, and many of us have students for whom slogging through credits and checking the boxes is not beneficial nor educational. We recognize the need for graduating with an IEP-driven diploma, but as islands in the vast educational ocean it is easy to be overlooked in comparison to general education and more “traditional” special education in a larger high school. As a result, alternative school special education has often not

received the support necessary to ensure we are meeting student needs in our unique setting. Alternative school special educators need more assistance in defining our craft while still staying nimble; it is my hope that this project can help lend some of that definition, clarity, and flexibility.

Rationale

The rationale for this project is to give more intentional definition to team decisions regarding graduation via IEP goal completion. This decision and the accompanying goal writing can be a subjective process, especially in an alternative school. For one, in my experience it is common for young people in alternative schools to have interrupted education and difficulty attending school regularly, which makes collecting data and identifying patterns difficult. Additionally, even at 17, 18, or 19 years old, students' education and career goals can be undefined and hard to "work backward from" as MDE suggests teams do when writing IEP goals (L. Nida, & V. Weinberg, personal communication, June 15, 2022). How does a team make strong, well-informed, student-focused, future-focused decisions when writing goals that are so important that students will graduate upon their completion? I hope through this project to give some direction and objectivity to the goal-writing process, with an authenticity that allows students to achieve and not just jump through credit-bearing hoops. I feel a strong sense of responsibility to my students and their families to compose with them an IEP that sets them up for success.

I hope through this project to learn more about what leads to student success beyond high school, whether that means in quality of life, in work, or in education, and work backward from that point. It is a well-known fact that people with disabilities are

underemployed and have less success entering and completing college than their peers (Newman, et al., 2011). I have had former students and their families reach out to me asking for help, months or years after they graduated, wondering what supports they might access and how they might find success instead of floundering. Getting a diploma cannot be the end goal of Minnesota high schools, alternative or not—we are not doing our jobs if we are shepherding students into the next stage of their lives with a piece of paper and little to no meaningful life skills.

A Note on Terminology

The American Psychological Association (APA) emphasizes that using a person-first phrase like “a person with Down Syndrome” might be preferable for some individuals, and referring to disability or identity first, as in, “an autistic person,” might be preferable to others (American Psychological Association, 2022). I know from working with disabled students that such a distinction and preference is deeply personal. Following both what I have heard from disabled people and what the APA recommends, in this paper I use “person-first” language and “identity-first” language somewhat interchangeably. I have chosen such terminology, like “students with disabilities,” or “students receiving special education services,” on a case-by-case basis in an effort to be precise, reflective of the cited sources, and respectful of the varied perspectives of the disabled community.

Summary

This project answers, in part, the question: How does an alternative high school authentically individualize transition education and graduation requirements for students receiving special education services? In this chapter, I have discussed my personal

connection to my students' high school graduation outcomes and my journey knowing little about credits and graduation options to today, when I have written IEPs for students who need an alternative to earning credits. I have discussed the importance of this topic to students, their families, and myself and my colleagues. I have introduced the reasons for this project and the role it might play in special education in the alternative high school setting. In Chapter Two, I detail current research surrounding major topics related to my project, including graduation requirements, competency-based education, IEP transition goal writing, and outcomes for students with disabilities. Chapter Three is where I detail my project, composed of a planning framework for students and their teams and an accompanying professional development session. Finally, in Chapter Four, I reflect on my learnings throughout this process, discuss the potential uses of my project, describe limitations of the work, and describe future research possibilities.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

This paper seeks to understand the possibilities available to alternative school students and their educators when a student's IEP team determines that they are eligible to graduate via an IEP-driven diploma. It answers the research question, how does an alternative high school authentically individualize transition education and graduation requirements for students receiving special education services?

I begin this chapter with a discussion of the history and current state of graduation and post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities, highlighting that there remains a gap in the education system's attempts to meet students' needs, and that new approaches are required. In this section as well, I describe diploma options for students with disabilities in Minnesota and nationwide; Minnesota's allowance for an IEP-driven diploma to be a team decision contains ambiguities but also affords teams, particularly those in alternative schools, the possibility of being authentic, creative, and truly individualized in a way for which more prescribed systems do not allow.

In the second section, I discuss promising trends and research-based practices in the area of transition education, as well as cultural and linguistic diversity considerations and the importance of student and family voice. In designing effective transition education and meaningful graduation requirements, it is imperative that varying definitions of success are considered, from traditional, quantitative measures, to the qualitative experiences reported by families and students and the voices not typically heard in research.

Finally, in the last section of this literature review, I draw on research related to, and examples of, competency-based education, including high school examples and that of the Minnesota adult diploma program. I then discuss best practices in writing transition goals and IEPs. Through these sources and the voices outlined in the second section, I lay the foundation for what might make an effective graduation planning tool for a student graduating via an IEP-driven diploma, answering the research question, how does an alternative high school authentically individualize transition education and graduation requirements for students receiving special education services?

Special Education Outcomes

The United States has a long history of underserving and excluding people with disabilities from education and the workplace. In 1986, before the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Harris Poll reported that two-thirds of all disabled Americans between the ages of 16 and 64 were not working (Harris, 1986, as cited in National Council on Disability, 2020). Prior to the Individuals with Disabilities Act passing in 1975, many students were kept from public education—in 1970, only one in five children with disabilities were enrolled in public schools in the U.S. (United States Department of Education, 2023). The passage of the ADA and IDEA were instrumental in expanding the rights of people with disabilities, but even long after the passage of these laws, problems persist. Nationwide and in Minnesota, disabled students have a harder time graduating and people with disabilities are underrepresented in employment and postsecondary education enrollment and completion (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2023; Minnesota Department of Education [MDE], 2023; National Council on Disability, 2020; State of Minnesota, 2022).

The first part of this section will outline statistics regarding graduation rates, employment, and postsecondary education for students with disabilities, and the implications of these figures. The second part will describe diploma options available to students with disabilities and their benefits or detractions. The third part will discuss what role schools might be playing in the disparities seen, asking what schools might be able to do to close some of the gaps.

Graduation, Employment, and Postsecondary Education

The number of students graduating from high school has been rising steadily in the United States. The 4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), which reports students who graduate within 4 years with a standard diploma, was 79% in 2011 and rose to 86.5% in 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014, 2021).

Disabled students' graduation rate has increased even faster than that of the general population; their graduation rate has risen from 59% in 2011 to 70.6% in 2020 (NCES, 2014, 2021).

Although significant, these improvements must be celebrated with some caution and important disparities and clarifications must be noted. As one can see, the four-year graduation rate for students, on the whole, remains notably higher than it is for students with disabilities. Focusing specifically on Minnesota, 65.5% of students in special education graduated with their class in 2022, compared to the rate of 83.6% for all students. When comparing students in special education to not just the whole population but specifically to students not in special education, we find that the gap is even more stark—86.9% of general education students graduated in four years with a standard

diploma (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023), leaving a gap of nearly 22% and more than a third of special education students in Minnesota not graduating in four years.

Nationwide, in 2022 just 21.3% of people with disabilities were employed, while people without disabilities were employed at an average of 65.4% (BLS, 2023). This disparity persisted across age groups. As of 2022, 62% of Minnesota's 2021 high school graduates were enrolled in college and 27% were employed, but only 26% of students exiting special education were in college, 47% employed, and 26% had unknown post-graduation paths. While 37% of all Minnesota 2018 graduates completed a higher ed degree or certificate within 1-4 years, only 12% of special education graduates completed their degree in the same timeline (State of Minnesota, 2022).

Nationwide, some gaps could be due in part to students with the most significant disabilities completing certificates or alternatives to diplomas that do not count toward a graduation rate, an option not available in Minnesota (discussed in the next section). Some students receiving special education services choose to continue their public education through a transition program, and some do graduate but later than the expected four-year timeframe; when these students are accounted for, the graduation rate in Minnesota for the class of 2019 rose from 87.5% in four years to 89.7% by seven years for students not in special education, and from 63% in four years to 78.4% by seven years for students with disabilities (State of Minnesota, 2022). In addition, some students obtain their high school equivalency like a GED. The Current Population Survey, which records labor force statistics and is facilitated by the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, measured that 84.8% of 18- to 24-year-olds with a disability not enrolled in high school had completed a diploma or equivalency (as compared to

93.6% without a disability) (NCES, 2017). In some ways, these statistics are encouraging—a large percentage of people with disabilities end up with a diploma or equivalent—but taking time past four years to obtain that award can have detrimental effects on one’s postsecondary education success and earning power (Uretsky & Henneberger, 2023).

Some disparities are perhaps out of day-to-day education practitioners’ control, like the fact that disabled people in the United States face barriers to school completion like stigma and discrimination (in and out of the classroom), and health issues (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, 2018; Yoder, Cantrell, & Hinkle, 2022). In addition, the underfunding of IDEA, a legislative and policy issue, has resulted in limited access to resources and difficulty supporting students with disabilities, as well as students and schools on the whole (National Council on Disability, 2020). Regarding underemployment, the essential public safety net that benefits many people with disabilities is beneficial but can also be a disincentive to work, especially if one can only work limited hours due to their disability or health condition (National Council on Disability, 2020). But the fact of the matter is, special education is also responsible for the inequities we find, and the statistics highlight a need and an opportunity for transition education to be rethought.

Diploma Options and Graduation Requirements

As of 2017, 67% of states have only a standard diploma option (versus a certificate or alternate document) available to youth with disabilities, including Minnesota (Johnson et al., 2019). Diploma options for students with disabilities in other states include a certificate of attendance, an IEP/special education diploma, a certificate

of achievement, or a vocational or occupational diploma (Johnson et al., 2019). Johnson, et al. go on to say that some states offer varying types of diplomas that are available to all students, including those with disabilities, like an honors diploma, and some states require passing exit exams in order to graduate, but most do not, including Minnesota.

One thing that makes assessing graduation rates and school success difficult is the fact that graduation requirements, even to earn a “standard” diploma, are determined by states and sometimes by local education agencies. Required credit hours vary widely from state to state and sometimes from district to district within a state, and the requirements for students with disabilities can vary even further (Klein, 2017; NCES, 2018). For example, Wyoming requires a minimum of 13 credits for graduation, and Florida requires 24 credits. In Florida in 2020, 82.9% of students with disabilities graduated within the expected four years, but in Wyoming only 63% graduated within four years (NCES, 2021). Is it that Florida is doing something better than Wyoming when it comes to educating students with disabilities? Or is it that Florida allows an alternative exit exam but Wyoming, like Minnesota, does not require exit exams and only offers a standard diploma (Johnson et al., 2019)? What about when we look at Maine, which only requires 11 credits, and Mississippi, which requires 24 credits? Maine graduated 74% of students with disabilities in 2020, while Mississippi had only 55.4% graduate (Johnson et al., 2019). In Maine, some graduation requirements can be met through standards achievement (Maine Department of Education, 2019), and Mississippi offers multiple types of diplomas for students with disabilities, some of which likely are not included in the ACGR (Johnson et al., 2019). Problematically, there is not good data regarding how students with alternative diplomas are tracked state to state, nor is there good data on

whether one standard diploma option, like in Minnesota, produces better outcomes (Klein, 2017).

In Minnesota and in 41 other states, allowances are offered in the pursuit of obtaining what still counts as a standard diploma. These allowances account for the fact that some students, due to the nature of their disability, may have difficulty obtaining a standard diploma but still may be able to access grade level standards with accommodations and a certain amount of room for individualized education (Johnson et al., 2019). Some of those allowances across the United States include reducing the number of credits required, alternate courses used in place of required ones, extensions in finishing diploma requirements, and lowered performance criteria in courses and tests (Johnson et al., 2019). Minnesota allows alternate courses and lowered performance criteria in courses and tests. It also offers what is the most common allowance amongst states, that of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) team determining diploma requirements individually (Minnesota Statute, 2011).

Although such allowances contribute to ambiguity in measuring graduation rates and, in some cases, measuring what a student has actually learned in high school, Minnesota's provision for IEP teams to determine individual diploma requirements also affords practitioners the possibility of being authentic, creative, and truly individualized in a way in which more prescribed systems do not allow. In addition, this allowance helps students with disabilities to demonstrate mastery of skills and standards in alternative ways and obtain a standard diploma when they might not be able to otherwise, which may help them pursue educational and employment opportunities not available to them

with a more limiting alternative diploma or certificate of completion (Erickson & Morningstar, 2009; Hartwig & Sitlington, 2008).

Schools' Role in Outcomes

What role do schools play in the employment and educational outcomes of people with disabilities? While the disparities in outcomes can in large part be attributed to policies and conditions outside of the classroom (National Council on Disability, 2020; Yoder, Cantrell, & Hinkle, 2022), and while ambiguity clearly exists that makes tracking successes and failures difficult, the education system and special education have a role to play. Research-based practices are not always widely used in transition planning and instruction (Gothberg et al., 2019), perhaps in part due to funding, staffing, and time constraints, and perhaps because practitioners often are not current with the latest research results. Similarly, transition services are not as robust as they could be, also likely due to funding and time constraints; time and staff shortages can make transition goal writing and teaching an afterthought in the midst of the high school sea of credit accrual and Carnegie hours (the standard measure of student learning for over 100 years) (McMillan & Barber, 2020; National Council on Disability, 2020).

As will be discussed later in this chapter, another factor in disparate outcomes for students with disabilities can be connected to the fact that schools are disproportionately identifying particular racial and cultural groups as being disabled, and structural inequalities that systematically disadvantage those populations. Black and Indigenous students are expelled and suspended more than their representation in the population would predict, qualifying them more often for emotional behavioral disorder special education services than their white peers, and English Learners disproportionately qualify

for specific learning disabilities services in some districts due to tests and measures not recognizing their linguistic and cultural backgrounds and strengths (National Center for Learning Disabilities [NCLD], 2020; U.S. Education Department, Office for Civil Rights, 2021). The culturally responsive teaching skills of general education staff need to be improved (Fielder et al., 2008), and schools need to increase their capacity for Tier 2 and 3 multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) interventions, before considering a special education evaluation (NCLD, 2020). If districts and states are first disproportionately not serving their BIPOC and EL students adequately due to racism and systemic inequities, and then they are overidentifying them for special education services, it stands to reason that these students, in general, will not have as successful outcomes as their white peers (Farkas, et al., 2020).

When considering how alternative high schools might authentically individualize transition education and graduation requirements for students receiving special education services, one must have a clear idea of what gaps exist in preparing students for the future. Graduation rates for students with disabilities lag behind those of students on the whole, as do employment and postsecondary success (BLS, 2023; MDE, 2023; National Council on Disability, 2020; NCES, 2014, 2021; State of Minnesota, 2022). Although not entirely on the backs of schools, the special education system clearly has contributed to these disparities. Minnesota's allowance for students' IEP teams to determine graduation goals opens the door for creativity and individuality, and as one will see in the next section, there is research in the area of transition education from which educators can draw when composing effective plans for students with disabilities.

Promising Trends and Research-Based Practices

There is a healthy, emerging research base outlining evidence-based practices in transition education, and this research can serve as a guidepost when planning a student's individualized education. Quantitative data pulled from longitudinal studies, as well as qualitative data gleaned from student and family interviews and focus groups, sheds light on services, instruction, supports, and transition activities that can be effectively used by educators. The first part of this section will outline evidence- and research-based predictors of post-school success, as well as student reports of what makes for successful transition education. The second part will discuss equity concerns and approaches for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Evidence- and Research-Based Practices

There is a dearth of experimental research regarding predictive factors in disabled students' postsecondary success, but there is significant descriptive literature (Madaus et al., 2021). This area of research is in its infancy, as the education world celebrates rising graduation rates and looks beyond to career and postsecondary outcomes even for general education students (Erickson & Morningstar, 2009). The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) established four levels of evidence in measuring the effectiveness of transition practices: evidence-based, research-based, promising practices, and unestablished practices (Test, 2016, as cited in Madaus et al., 2021). For the purposes of this review, I will outline evidence-based and research-based practices that could be used by IEP teams, as well as qualitative research that incorporates classroom experiences and the voices of students and families.

To support independent living skills, self-determination and self-advocacy skills are found to be promising predictors of success, as is youth autonomy (Mazzotti et al., 2021). In addition, well-developed daily living skills and occupational-specific training are more likely to produce a higher quality of life (Test et al., 2009).

To support employment success, participation in career and technical education has been found to be effective, as have paid employment, self-determination and self-advocacy skills, youth autonomy, and student support like career counseling, training for job skills, and acquiring vocational education services in high school (Mazzotti et al., 2021). In addition, high daily living skills are a positive predictor of employment success (Test et al., 2009), showing that there is a close relationship and overlap between transition areas.

To support postsecondary education success, receiving learning strategy instruction, obtaining certain academic accommodations, school connectedness, and participating in a college preparatory curriculum in high school are positive predictors of college graduation (Madaus et al., 2021). In addition, work in goal setting and incorporating those goals into a transition plan and self-determination and self-advocacy skills are strong predictors (Mazzotti et al., 2021), as is the receipt of transition planning services during the year prior to leaving school (Test et al., 2009), and individualized tutoring (Benz et al., 2000). In all three transition areas, inclusion in general education was identified as a research-based predictor of post-school success (Rowe et al., 2021).

When students and their families are surveyed about what most effectively led to their post-school success, they point to their participation in transition planning (Benz et al., 2000), having a supportive staff member, goal setting and other self-determination

components, career development instruction, and non-career courses of interest (Clavenna-Deane & Coates, 2022). Students pointed to high levels of satisfaction with high school instruction or instruction well-matched to their needs as being important in their college success (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2020; Test et al., 2009); they also named accommodations matched with their learning needs, targeted time management and self-advocacy instruction, college visits, help with college applications, encouraging teachers, and personal interests and hobbies as factors in their college success (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2020).

Approaches for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students

Students with disabilities are a diverse group. As discussed previously in this chapter, nationally there is an overrepresentation of particular racial and linguistic groups receiving special education services. Even having a disability itself is a form of diversity, can come with cultural norms and expectations, and places one in a marginalized group. Educators must consider students' cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds when transition planning (Suk et al., 2020); yet research-based practices that support culturally and linguistically diverse students and families are not consistently employed by transition educators (Gothberg et al., 2019). Key research-based practices that have been shown to predict positive outcomes for culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse students include person-centered planning and self-determination coursework (Gothberg et al., 2019; Trainor et al., 2019). Perhaps most important, however, is the incorporation of student and family voices in the transition process. Research points to culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families feeling shut out of the transition process and intimidated by interacting with school personnel (Gothberg et al., 2019; Trainor et

al., 2019), leading to IEP goals that are disconnected from cultural and individual goals, and that are dominated by a white supremacist, ableist idea of success (Suk et al., 2020). The education system has decided to base its measure of student “success” on white cultural beliefs rooted in individualism and self-sufficiency, like being competitively employed and living on one’s own, but this ignores the reality of many cultures, cultures representative of students receiving special education services, that may value things like staying home, living in multigenerational community, or working with one’s family business (Suk et al., 2020). Therefore, a key component of the transition goal-writing process must involve student- and family-centric planning. Utilizing well-trained interpreters, encouraging families to participate in the entire special education assessment and IEP-writing process, making a concerted effort to ask about and understand families’ cultural norms, language, views on disability, and family structures must be incorporated throughout the transition process (Gothberg et al., 2019). Educators can create goals with, not for, students and their families, and they can function as a guide and presenter of options, not as “service brokers or agents of change” (Lamorey, 2002, p. 70).

My research question is, how does an alternative high school authentically individualize transition education and graduation requirements for students receiving special education services? Authentic, individualized planning and instruction come from listening closely to families and their children. Practitioners have limited time, funding, and resources to spend on transition education; this is a reality. That reality makes it all the more urgent that we use our time wisely and incorporate highly productive, culturally responsive practices into our transition planning and instruction for students with disabilities. In the next section, I detail how the research might translate to practice,

incorporating existing models of competency-based education and individualized transition planning.

Competency Based Education, Transition Goals, and Individualized Plans

If a student is to graduate upon successful completion of their IEP goals, as Minnesota Statute allows, then the process must be purposeful and planful. One possible model for thinking about this personalized education is the Minnesota Adult Education adult diploma or high school programs that are competency-based rather than credit-based. These options usually allow for voice and choice from students, promote high student efficacy, and can include traditional coursework, testing, or projects. They can be responsive to student diversity. Some school districts have created similar plans for students with disabilities, but the examples in the literature are few and far between. Recommendations for personalized plans include basing them on the state's College- and Career-Ready Standards, testing requirements, and real-life experiences. The first part of this section will detail competency-based graduation options in adult basic education and some high schools, and the second part of this section will discuss best practices in writing transition plans and goals, including the examination of an existing model of an IEP-driven diploma plan and suggestions in the literature for transition goals and activities.

Competency-Based Diploma Options

Competency-based graduation options, also called proficiency-based or sometimes personalized learning, are becoming more and more popular as high schools trend toward career and technical education (Patrick, 2021; Truong, 2019). Denver Public Schools, for example, allows students to show competency in grade-level standards in a

variety of ways, like traditional coursework, exams like the ACT and the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), or a capstone portfolio (Denver Public Schools, 2017). Ridgewood High School in Illinois utilizes rubrics in competency areas, career pathways, and connections with community employers and colleges, options that allow students to plan their high school path in an individualized way focused on technical and soft skill mastery (Competency education, n.d.). Vermont is incorporating a system of personalized learning that includes opportunities for students to move beyond the prescribed curriculum and pursue project- and work-based learning (Hewitt & Duffort, 2019). These options allow students some amount of flexibility in how they show mastery of standards and how they personalize their education to prepare for a chosen postsecondary path.

In the state of Minnesota, an option for students in adult basic education, beyond just a GED, is an adult competency-based diploma (Hasskamp et al., 2019). This diploma option could be a good model for IEP teams working in alternative schools; many of the learners are nearly or are adults already, some with adult-like responsibilities like parenting, managing expenses, and living on their own. For the Minnesota adult diploma, students must show proficiency in five domains that align with standards drawn from the academic Career and College Readiness Standards, the Transitions Integration Framework, and Northstar Digital Literacy (Hasskamp et al., 2019). Students can show competency in each domain in a variety of ways: past experience (like high school coursework, workplace experience, or postsecondary studies), standardized tests (like the GED and ACT), Adult Basic Education coursework, and project-based learning

(Hasskamp et al., 2019). Extensive planning is done at the outset, and students present their learning plans.

Student diversity can be strongly considered in competency-based education models, by moving beyond credit hours to truly individualized learning. Hasskamp et al. (2019, p. 82) point out that the Minnesota Adult Diploma program is “significantly more responsive to the diverse needs of adult learners,” and encourages student voice and efficacy. Students are more engaged in improving their academic skills, and they show a greater level of student self-management, which we know is an evidence-based practice in transition education (Mazzotti et al., 2021).

Some school districts and states have created competency-based plans for students with disabilities, but the examples in the literature are scarce. Recommendations for personalized plans for students with disabilities include a distinction that personalized learning is not independent learning and that students still benefit from direct instruction and peer involvement, providing multiple pathways for learning and showing proficiency, offering opportunities to learn outside the school, accommodating based on need, and narrowing performance indicators to the most essential (Achieve, 2013; Great Schools Partnership, 2017).

Vermont has an option for a Proficiency-Based Graduation Requirements Access Plan (PBGR-AP), a way of connecting a student’s IEP transition plan and their pathway to meeting proficiency-based graduation requirements (Vermont Agency of Education, 2018). Students identify with their team their core values, interests, strengths, and short- and long-term postsecondary goals with corresponding action plans (annual goals). They then work with their team to connect these action plans to the Proficiency-Based

Graduation Requirements, laid out in a grid. Then they reflect and identify transition services and supports that might promote the learning laid out in the goals. Vermont's graduation rate for students with disabilities is slightly higher than that of Minnesota (69% compared to 65%), so it is possible this is a more successful approach (NCES, 2021).

Best Practices in Writing Transition Plans and Goals

Another way to look at competency-based education for students with disabilities is to tie everything back to their transition goals in the three transition areas of postsecondary education and training, employment, and independent living skills. Grade-level standards supporting these goals can be incorporated into a student's plan and should be whenever possible, as most students with disabilities can and should meet standard graduation requirements with supports (Achieve, 2013). Besides traditional academic content, transition plans and goals can be based on states' College- and Career-Readiness Standards (Achieve, 2013) and can have the aim of connecting students to Vocational Rehabilitation and other public and private agencies (National Council on Disability, 2020), including cultural organizations (Achola, 2019).

Sometimes students' transition goals may not align with their abilities, current reality, or academic standards. Peterson et al. (2013) suggest an approach of "triangulating" annual IEP goals, by connecting students' postsecondary goals, industry and societal standards, and standards or perhaps proficiencies/competencies. Practitioners can carefully assess students' interests and abilities, write transition goals, then conduct further assessments in each of their goal areas. After that, teams can conduct a gap analysis, identify standards that align with the skills mastered and those still in need of

instruction and practice, and then write annual goals (Peterson et al., 2013). This approach nicely mirrors Vermont’s PBGR-AP template. It could be a good fit for students in alternative schools, as alternative high schools have often narrowed their focus to the most essential learning targets or credits; IEP goals could be aligned with those, instead of having to wade through pages and pages of standards.

It should be noted that any transition plan must be highly individualized. Research should absolutely be consulted and form the basis of an educator’s approach, but participants in qualitative surveys consistently emphasized the importance of individualized supports and approaches that matched their needs—more than having a broad array or a “compliance checklist of experiences,” a tailored approach is most appreciated by students and their families (Kutscher et al., 2020, para. 53; Test et al., 2009).

One Minnesota school district that composed a planning tool that meets the criteria of being highly individualized and tied to transition goals is Eastern Carver County Schools. If a student is determined to be a good candidate for an IEP-driven diploma, students and their IEP teams set transition goals in each of the three transition areas, and then create a list of tasks, experiences, coursework, or specific academic assignments that instruct in and nurture the development of the skills needed to meet the transition goals (Eastern Carver County Schools Special Services Department [ECCS Special Services Department], n.d.). Items could be applying for Vocational Rehabilitation Services, writing an essay on mental health struggles and how they affect the individual day to day, obtaining a state ID or a driver’s license, or exploring college options (ECCS Special Services Department, n.d.). At the conclusion of the student’s

education, they must have gathered a portfolio of evidence of having completed these tasks and have completed an exit presentation to their IEP team and guests of their choosing. The process mirrors that of the Minnesota Adult Diploma process, centering transition goals instead of academic standards, although coursework that supports the students' goals should still be included.

As far as what might appear on that list of activities, the PACER Center compiled a useful collection of ideas for incorporating success guideposts for transition success into personalized learning plans (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, 2018; PACER Center, 2019). Examples of transition activities include taking coding classes, developing a resume, identifying and practicing advocating for accommodations that could be used on the job, training in decision-making skills, and connecting students and families with community and cultural resources (PACER Center, 2019). Students have continued to be focused on credit accrual instead of learning as the end goal (Yeager & Morgan, 2022), surely a product of the long-held standard of Carnegie hours and checklist-like graduation requirements, but they have identified several influential transition activities in surveys. Connecting them to students who have made the transition to college or the workplace, particularly if those students share the same disability, was highlighted by students in a recent study (Yeager & Morgan, 2022). In addition, students said that being taught about their disability and college disability services were effective, as well as the opportunity to take college-level courses (Yeager & Morgan, 2022). Students desired practical experiences explicitly connected to their goals, general education courses like business over special education support courses, and support in completing college applications (Yeager & Morgan, 2022).

Clearly, when it comes to answering the question, how does an alternative high school authentically individualize transition education and graduation requirements for students receiving special education services, specifics of what a student will need to achieve and how they will get there are at the heart of the matter. A balance between the twin goals of post-school preparation and academic completion must be found, and IEP annual goals must be relevant to both graduation requirements set forth by the state and by students' own self-determination (Benz et al., 2000). This is a challenge for any practitioner and their students. Triangulation of IEP goals is a good approach, and individualizing accommodations, carefully selecting research-based practices, and looking to competency-based examples can help educators construct a meaningful IEP-driven diploma program.

In the next section, I give my rationale for the research synthesized in this literature review. I also connect the literature to my research question.

Rationale

The rationale for this project is to give a more intentional framework to team decisions regarding IEP-driven diplomas, and the research discussed in this review provides such a framework. Laying out clearly the gaps that remain in graduation, employment, and postsecondary education rates for students with disabilities highlights that there is a need for new approaches in transition education. Minnesota's IEP-driven diploma option affords teams with an opportunity to move beyond the confines of the credit-bearing system and into truly individualized transition education, but this move should not happen without close examination of research-based practices and, perhaps most importantly, student and family voice. In particular as a white educator, it is

imperative that I make student and family perspectives the center of transition planning, and research supports this approach.

Lastly, the research shows that I do not have to reinvent the wheel. There are innovative examples of competency-based education and IEP-driven diploma plans right here in Minnesota, and even more if I cast my net nationwide. I can use these examples to craft an approach that fits the needs of my students in alternative high school. In asking the question, how does an alternative high school authentically individualize transition education and graduation requirements for students receiving special education services, the research shows me that there has been good work done in this area but also that a large gap remains, both in research and in practice.

Summary

Through this literature review and through this project, I seek to answer the question, how does an alternative high school authentically individualize transition education and graduation requirements for students receiving special education services? Each major topic related to this question has been explored through a synthesis of the related literature. Gaps exist in preparing students for the future—graduation rates and rates of post-school success for people with disabilities lag behind the general population. The blame for these gaps can be found in societal inequities at large, but also within the education system. Researchers have identified effective instructional practices and tools that predict post-school success, but student and family voice, also found in research, must be considered and centered in any planning process, particularly when defining goals and the definition of success for culturally and linguistically diverse students. A balance must be sought between rigorous, state- or district-defined graduation

requirements and students' meaningful goals, a balance that may be able to be found through competency-based diploma programs and planful IEP-driven diplomas.

After reviewing the literature, I see a gap my project can fill and a contribution to the conversation on students with disabilities and their best chances for success. In Chapter Three, I will describe the project I have designed—a framework that IEP teams can use to write effective, personalized, and rigorous IEP-driven diploma plans, as well as a corresponding professional development teaching educators about the model.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

This project seeks to answer the question, how does an alternative high school authentically individualize transition education and graduation requirements for students receiving special education services? Students receiving special education services in Minnesota have the opportunity to bypass credit requirements and graduate upon successful completion of their goals in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP), commonly called an IEP-driven diploma. The goals in such an IEP must be carefully considered. Alternative high schools can offer flexibility in designing and meeting these goals that traditional high schools cannot, which presents both opportunity and great responsibility for IEP teams as they work to create a plan for students that is achievable, meaningful, and rigorous.

The purpose of this capstone project is to provide alternative school students and their special education teams with a framework for creating and tracking IEP-driven diploma goals, a framework that is student-centered, culturally responsive, and in line with state standards whenever possible. In addition to the framework, this project includes a professional development session meant to educate IEP team members about the use of the framework, while also gaining their perspective on the process and utilizing their expertise and experience to further refine the framework.

This chapter begins with a detailed description of my project, in which I outline what the framework will entail and how it will be useful in individualizing the high school education of students graduating via an IEP-driven diploma. In this section I also

describe the plan for my accompanying professional development. I then move into the research-based rationale for my project's format. Next, I describe the setting and participants, connecting their roles to the reasons for my project. Then, I outline the timeline for creation and implementation of the project, with a focus on a revision process necessary for any good teaching. In the next section, I detail some of that revision process through a discussion of the assessment tools I will use to measure whether the framework and professional development are impactful. Finally, I close this chapter with a summary of key points and a look ahead to Chapter Four.

Description of Project

My project has two components. I have designed a framework and accompanying forms and worksheets that special education case managers can use to guide their work with students who are graduating via an IEP-driven diploma. I have also designed a professional development session to be used at special education and alternative education conferences.

The framework includes identification of short-term and long-term transition goals in the three transition areas: independent living, postsecondary education and training, and employment. It also includes opportunities for students to express their hopes and dreams, skills, values, and interests. Suggested assessments and activities for defining these aspects are linked where appropriate. Culturally responsive transition planning is emphasized; primarily, this means person-centered planning and development of self-determination skills need to be incorporated, and student and family voices need to be at the center through frequent communication, student-led planning meetings and progress reporting, and frequent invitations for families into the IEP process (Gothberg et

al., 2019; Trainor et al., 2019). The framework is structured to remind practitioners to create goals with, not for, students and their families, with an effort to ask about and understand families' cultural norms, language, views on disability, and family structures (Gothberg et al., 2019).

The framework includes assessment options that apply to the three transition areas, and a student-led planning and tracking form. Suggested transition activities and objectives in each of the three transition areas is included, as well as space to account for traditional high school coursework, grounded in the assumption that most students in special education can achieve grade-level standards with the appropriate level of support (Achieve, 2019). IEP goals and accompanying activities are tied back to students' transition goals but also to grade-level credit requirements and standards wherever possible. The planning and tracking form will help guide students and their teams in the process, help plan and allot time per transition activity or course, and assist students in structuring a final portfolio and presentation, through which they will summarize their learnings and their secondary school journey.

The professional development component of my project has the purpose of sharing basic information about IEP-driven diplomas, teaching special education case managers and other IEP team members how to use the framework, and collaborating with special education colleagues. The framework can be used by any special education team wishing to add definition to their IEP-driven diploma process, but particular interest will be paid to staff from alternative schools. The professional development session will be an hour long and will include time for questions and answers, as well as reflection and collaboration.

The session will begin with a few questions for participants, namely asking them to share their role or position and their experience with IEP-driven diplomas; I will use this information to guide how in-depth I go into some of the background information. I will then give a short explanation of the IEP-driven diploma option in Minnesota, including references to the Minnesota Statute that allows for it and guidance from the Minnesota Department of Education regarding its use. Then the session will move into a rationale for, and description of, the framework and what gap in special education practice it is trying to address, namely that the IEP-driven diploma process can be subjective and educator-driven, versus authentically student-driven and stemming from student and family goals and academic standards. Then I will describe how I have used the framework, using individual students' stories (names and identifying information will be changed and protected) as anecdotal evidence of the framework's effectiveness. I will describe start to finish how I use the framework. Next, I will open the session for questions and answers. After that, I will ask participants to work in small groups with a case study to create an IEP-driven diploma plan using the framework, and groups will share out and collaborate. Finally, we will close the session with one more round of questions and answers and an invitation to participate in follow up surveys that I can use to refine the framework over time. Participants will be able to take with them electronic copies of the slides, copies of the case studies, and example and blank framework materials.

This section detailed my project components, including a planning framework for students and their IEP teams and a professional development session. In the next section, I summarize the rationale for the format of the project.

Research-Based Rationale

A detailed description of the research base for this project can be found in Chapter Two, and in this section I highlight sources particularly helpful to me in planning project components. A key source for me in creating this project was Vermont's use of Proficiency-Based Graduation Requirements Access Plans (PBGR-AP), a way of connecting a student's IEP transition plan and their pathway to meeting proficiency-based graduation requirements (Vermont Agency of Education, 2018). Students and their teams begin with their values, interests, and strengths, build short- and long-term postsecondary goals from those, and write annual goals in the form of an action plan. They then work with their team to connect these action plans to the Proficiency-Based Graduation Requirements, laid out in a grid. Then they reflect and identify transition services and supports that might promote the learning laid out in the goals. In my project, I use this structure as inspiration but have made changes to ensure it fits with the Minnesota education system and an alternative school setting.

Another important source was Peterson et al.'s (2013) writing on triangulating IEP goals. The authors suggest an approach of "triangulating" annual IEP goals—connecting students' postsecondary goals, industry and societal standards, and standards or proficiencies and competencies. In looking to design my project in particular for alternative high school special education teams, this approach is a good fit—alternative high schools have often narrowed their focus to the most essential learning targets or credits and IEP goals could be aligned with those key learnings, instead of having to wade through pages and pages of standards. In addition, alternative school students are often older than a typical high school student and may already be

living aspects of adult lives that other high school students are not yet living, like parenting, holding full-time jobs, and sometimes living on their own. A focus within students' plans on industry and societal standards is particularly apt when we are talking about students who are already participating so fully in industry and society.

The professional development session is grounded in research-based best practices in professional development and Malcolm Knowles's principles of andragogy. The session is content-focused and specific to high school special education teams' needs, with clear connections to practice and takeaways that can be put into practice immediately (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). As suggested by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), extensive modeling is included; that is one reason why I want to put the framework into practice for a full school year before attempting to share the resource and teach others how to use it. I want to show how to use the tool with some level of authenticity and experience. Also as suggested by Darling-Hammond et al., there is time built in for reflection and collaboration, and time to practice using the framework. Participants will have time to work in small groups, dialoguing with each other and problem-solving together (Knowles, 1992). In addition, as also suggested by Knowles (1992), I may develop the presentation further to include a panel of other educators or even students and families who have used the framework, maximizing interaction in the presentation and giving space for nuance and multiple perspectives.

Setting

The setting for the use of the framework is primarily special education in alternative high schools in Minnesota. It certainly could be used more expansively, but effort has been made to have the project align with Minnesota credit requirements and

Minnesota statute. Alternative schools offer flexibility in how and when students earn credit and complete goals, and the framework will take that into account. Traditional high schools could use the framework as well, and they would need to keep in mind their typical timelines for graduation, as well as scheduling, staff availability, and course offerings.

The setting for the professional development will be in-person conferences for alternative school teachers and special education teachers in Minnesota. It could be adapted to be used virtually or even asynchronously.

Participants

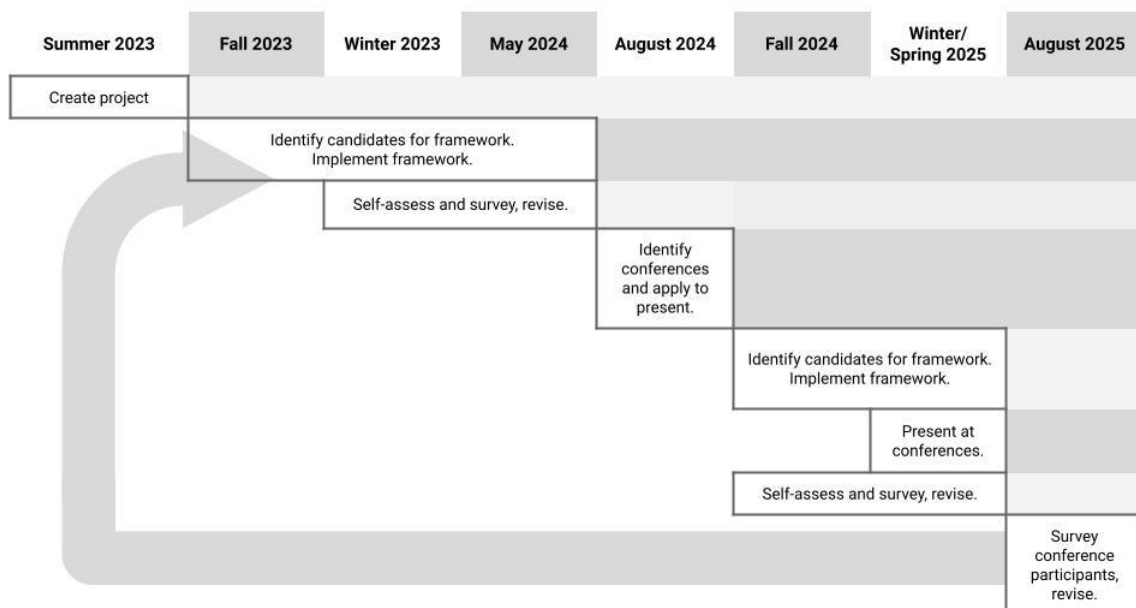
My participants are primarily special education case managers and alternative high school students receiving special education services. Likely the number of students served each year by this project will be small, due to the low numbers of students utilizing this graduation option in general and the small number of students who attend alternative schools. Additional stakeholders in the IEP-driven diploma process are families of the students served and others on special education IEP teams like administrators, special education supervisors, and general education teachers. As stated above, alternative school special educators are in a particularly unique position and are the educators most considered in this project, as they are often working with students who are on a longer or alternative timeline for high school graduation; these teachers would be the most likely to be able to use this framework and the accompanying professional development.

Timeline

Chapters One, Two, and Three of this project were written in the Spring of 2023. In Summer 2023, the project materials were compiled and composed, and a reflection was written in the form of Chapter Four.

Regarding implementation of the project, the timeline is as follows (see Figure 1 for a visual representation of the timeline):

1. Fall 2023 - I will assess my own caseload and identify potential candidates for the use of the framework. In the same term, I will begin implementation with identified students.
2. Winter 2023 - I will self-assess and survey students and families regarding the use of the framework and its effectiveness, and I will revise as necessary.
3. May 2024 - I will self-assess and survey again, and revise as necessary.
4. August 2024 - I will begin identifying conferences and begin applying to present.
5. Fall 2024 - I will assess my caseload and identify potential candidates for use of the framework and I will implement the framework again. Perhaps partner with a neighboring district to expand the reach of the project.
6. Winter/Spring 2025 - I will present at identified conferences. I will continue to self- and student-assess regarding the effectiveness of the framework process. In addition, I will survey conference participants. Revisions will take place based on stakeholders' feedback.
7. August 2025 - I will send a follow-up survey to stakeholders to gain their feedback on whether they used or plan to use the framework and whether or not they have any suggested changes.

Figure 1*Project Timeline*

I will continue to repeat steps 1-7 as long as desired or necessary. It is imperative that given the small number of students this framework will be used with (likely two or fewer per year, per school), feedback from stakeholders and other professionals is taken into account and revisions are made as individual students and case managers notice gaps in the process or create useful additions.

Assessment

Surveys will be an important tool in assessing the effectiveness of the project. I will survey students and their families regarding the process, and I will survey practitioners who participate in my professional development. I would like to survey practitioners six months after they have taken the professional development course to see if they are using the framework and if they have found any success. “Success” could be measured in a variety of ways—student engagement with the framework, successful

earning of diplomas, students staying enrolled instead of dropping out—so I will gather both quantitative (graduation rates, students staying enrolled) and qualitative (teacher and student perception of the framework’s impact) data.

Summary

This chapter outlined what my project entails—a framework and accompanying materials for special education case managers working with students who are graduating via an IEP-driven diploma and a professional development presentation that introduces teachers to the framework, explains how to use it, and asks for feedback and collaboration regarding the real-world application of the framework. My plan is to use the framework myself for one school year and obtain student and family feedback before presenting on it; it is only a useful tool if it has been put to the test and students and their families find it helpful and worthwhile.

In the next and final chapter, I will reflect on my learnings, revisit key literature, explain some possible limitations and key implications and benefits of my project, and where I plan to take the project from here.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection and Conclusion

Introduction

This project grew from a gap I saw in the literature and a need to be more organized and student-centered in Minnesota’s IEP-driven diploma process. It also grew from the opportunity I want to take with alternative education—we have the space to truly be alternative and individualized in a way that traditional education often does not have, and we should take advantage of that opportunity. Graduating upon successful completion of one’s IEP goals should be a result of intentionality and high standards, and should be based in research that supports the best outcomes for students as they leave K-12 education. I set out to explore the question, how does an alternative high school authentically individualize transition education and graduation requirements for students receiving special education services?

In this final chapter, I will first summarize what I have learned throughout this project and my review of the associated literature. I will then discuss limitations of the project. Next, I will discuss possible implications of my project and where I might take this work in the future. Finally, I will describe the benefits this project could bring to my own practice and the wider education community.

Learnings and Important Literature

Through my literature review I found that special education and, more broadly, society, need to serve disabled people better. Although disheartening, these findings were validating as I considered creating a better system grounded in evidence-based practices. Graduation and postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities are worse than for

students without (BLS, 2023; NCES, 2014, 2017, 2021; State of Minnesota, 2022).

Research-based practices that support culturally and linguistically diverse students and families are not consistently employed by transition educators (Gothberg et al., 2019), and transition education can be lost in the race to earn credits and conform to the antiquated system of Carnegie hours (McMillan & Barber, 2020; National Council on Disability, 2020). These findings were consistent with what I have observed in traditional and even alternative education, and I knew that my project was needed.

As I reviewed the literature connected to my project, my focus shifted from primarily competency-based instruction to evidence- and research-based practices in the area of transition education and promoting positive and equitable postsecondary outcomes. An IEP-driven diploma is meant to be centered in students' postsecondary transition goals (rather than academic standards), and I found that, although limited, there is research around predictive factors of disabled students' postsecondary success, and I could draw on this while designing my framework. Self-determination skills, employment practice, and career education were found to be promising predictors of success (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Test et al., 2009), as were receiving specific instruction in learning strategies, obtaining and self-advocating for academic accommodations, and inclusion in general education (Madaus et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2021), so I made sure to incorporate these into my framework and suggested transition activities. Families and students surveyed in the literature identified their own participation in transition planning as a key component of postsecondary success (Benz et al., 2000), and research on effective culturally and linguistically responsive transition planning supports family involvement as highly effective (Lamorey, 2002; Suk et al., 2020). These findings only

solidified my resolve to make student voice the central focus of the framework. In some ways this focus allows me to fight against what many see as the education system's white-centric, individualistic measures of student "success" (Suk et al., 2020). The framework, if used correctly, can help educators co-create goals and instruction *with* students and their families, instead of *for* them.

While crafting the professional development session, I found myself reading more about best practices in teaching adults and conducting professional development from Malcolm Knowles and Darling-Hammond et al. They reminded me that I needed to take the time to craft a session that honored prior knowledge and experience, as well as sufficient time to practice and collaborate (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Knowles, 1992). In creating the framework, I leaned on work already happening in the world of proficiency-based education and special education. Educators are designing and implementing individualized plans with and for students and their families, and I found this work invaluable as I designed my framework. In particular, the work of Eastern Carver County Schools in the area of IEP-driven diplomas was essential in thinking about the physical template for the framework (ECCS Special Services Department, n.d.)—their structure of a fillable spreadsheet and suggested transition goals appeared easy to use and I did not want to reinvent the wheel, although I do plan to create the framework in multiple formats to promote accessibility and offer options for teams. The work of the state of Vermont in the area of proficiency-based education shaped my thinking around what questions to ask students and how to structure the framework's connection to standards (Vermont Agency of Education, 2018). These two sources allowed me to maintain a focus on individualized transition goals while not losing sight

of the fact that most disabled students are able to and should be expected to meet academic and career-based standards.

Overall, I learned through researching and working on this project that culturally responsive, student-centered planning and instruction has research-backed positive results for students. I learned that the most effective transition planning and instruction involves families and students along every step of the way, and that my framework had to incorporate and promote this aspect in order to be equitable and inventive. Culturally responsive, student-centered planning is good for all students, and I am happy that my project is designed to assist educators in balancing high academic expectations, student and family voice, industry standards, and research in the area of postsecondary success.

This section detailed my learnings throughout the process of investigating and designing the project, including a summary of particularly influential research found through my literature review. In the next section, I discuss the possible limitations of the project.

Limitations

This project is grounded in an assumption that educators have flexibility in how and what they teach, and an assumption that they have enough time to utilize the framework for transition planning and transition instruction implementation. It is designed with a small, urban alternative school in mind, to be used with perhaps one or two students per year who are following the unusual path of graduating via an IEP-driven diploma. This is obviously quite limiting when thinking about how one might utilize the framework in a larger, more prescribed environment like a traditional high school. High school special educators are busy, often with only one preparatory period per day that

must be used to prepare lessons for multiple classes, often in multiple subjects and at multiple levels. The time it might take to walk through the framework with a student, one-on-one, administer transition assessments that correlate, monitor progress, check in, and communicate frequently with families could very well be impossible given our current education system. In a small enough setting, though, or with supportive scheduling, this project has potential to be used by any high school.

Another limitation of the project is the small size of intended use. Most students receiving special education services graduate upon successful completion of all required credits, not via their IEP goals, and as mentioned above this framework might only be used with one or two students per year, per school. This small number of participants will make it difficult to track how effective (or ineffective) the framework is, and given the individualized nature of special education services, the framework would most certainly need to be adapted for each individual student, further limiting any possible research or data collection.

Although these limitations exist, the framework is likely to be useful in small alternative high schools. Alternative school special education programs need systems like this to be focused and research-based in their efforts to be individualized and truly “alternative” in their educational efforts, and I anticipate using the framework with great success with the students and in the school for which it was designed.

This section summarized the limitations of the project, primarily that it is best suited for alternative settings and that it will serve small groups of students. In the next section, I discuss the possible professional and research implications of the project, and further opportunities for development and research.

Implications and Further Opportunities

Implications of my project certainly include the possibility of a standardized approach in Minnesota for planning and managing IEP-driven diplomas. There is potential through my professional development for this framework to spread throughout the alternative education community in the state. I would love to see an opportunity to collaborate with the Minnesota Department of Education on the framework and offer it as a resource for high school special education programs. Perhaps even it could be lifted up as best practice for teams utilizing the IEP-driven diploma option, at least for students in alternative education settings.

Likely the most important implication, potentially observed as soon as the approaching school year, is that of student empowerment and more equitable involvement in the transition process. We may not know for quite some time if the framework is effective in improving postsecondary outcomes for students, but I feel confident that students and their families who are involved in the use of the framework will feel more heard and respected throughout the IEP-driven diploma process.

Possible future research projects are vast. Use of the framework could be tracked and students could be surveyed long term to see if the framework and resulting focused IEP goals had any impact on their postsecondary outcomes. Data could be collected regarding use of the IEP-driven diploma option and whether the framework was used, and one could track whether it had any measurable impact on graduation rates. One recommendation I would have, however, is that we do not lose sight of the micro-level data that is perhaps most important; that of the individual student and their experiences in school. As I learned through my literature review, students credited feeling satisfied with

their instruction and being encouraged by teachers, as well as their ability to self-advocate and be involved in the transition process, with their college and employment success (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2020; Test et al., 2009); it should not be ignored that even though a potentially very small sample size may limit the ability to collect data on the effectiveness of the framework, the “street data” of individual students’ experiences should be measured and accounted for (Safir & Dugan, 2021).

This section discussed possible future research, considerations given the small number of students for which the framework will be used, and the importance of student voice and opinion when considering impact. In the next section, I discuss my utilization of the project and the possible benefits to the education community as a whole.

Implementation and Benefits to the Education Community

I see myself utilizing the timeline described in Chapter Three and taking this project slowly for the first few years. As noted above, I need time and numbers of students to utilize and refine the framework before presenting it to other educators. When I present on the project, I want to be able to answer questions as a practitioner, not just as a researcher. I also want to have a collaborative mindset and approach, inviting professionals to learn about the framework, refine it with me, utilize it, and refine it further.

The project has the potential to benefit the special education community in Minnesota, utilized by educators working with students who are graduating via an IEP-driven diploma. I also see the framework potentially being used as a guiding process for all transition educators, possibly outside of Minnesota. In addition, it is my hope that practitioners in other states will find my project online and use it in the way I used

examples of competency-based education plans and Minnesota's adult diploma program—as inspiration and as a resource, as they design something that would work within their state's laws and regulations, for their students, and within their settings.

This section described my own planned utilization of the project as well as the potential benefits to the educational community in Minnesota and beyond. In the next and last section, I close the chapter and this paper with a summary of my reflections.

Conclusion

This project grew from an excitement around the opportunities afforded us in alternative education, from a frustration around the subjective nature of the IEP-driven diploma process in Minnesota, and from my desire to better serve my students. I have learned much from the literature I have reviewed, the people I have talked with, and the effort I have put into designing the IEP-driven diploma planning framework and accompanying professional development. Research I read confirmed some of what I knew to be true: that we are underserving disabled youth, especially youth in marginalized communities and who are linguistically and culturally diverse. Research surprised me in revealing that student involvement and self determination are truly at the heart of what leads to postsecondary success. Research led me down a path of designing a framework with student hopes and dreams at the very top, guiding practitioners to work from those long-term goals in crafting annual goals in IEP-driven diplomas.

My hope is that I intentionally and thoughtfully implement this project, relying on my colleagues in alternative education and our students to revise it as we practice and learn. I plan to keep student voice and family involvement highlighted in this work, as we know from research and from experience that student self determination and autonomy is

central to their success. It is my greatest desire that this project will prompt all utilizing it to do the same, keeping central in our practice and in our hearts the cultural and individual goals of our students.

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