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Dissertation

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR TRANSITION PLANNING? MAPPING TRANSITION RESPONSIBILITIES AMONGST SCHOOL PROFESSIONALS

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

2021

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my thanks and gratitude to my family, friends, mentors, and colleagues who have supported me and who have played an important role in my academic accomplishments. I am especially grateful to my kind, thoughtful, and wise committee who have patiently guided me through this journey. I would also like to honor the participants of this study who offered their time and candor in the midst of a global pandemic. Finally, thank you to Katie Baulier, Tashnuva Shaheen, and Kristabel Stark, fellow doctoral students who were thought partners and motivators in this project.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR TRANSITION PLANNING?

MAPPING TRANSITION RESPONSIBILITIES AMONGST

SCHOOL PROFESSIONALS

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ABSTRACT

Students with disabilities experience better postsecondary outcomes when they are engaged in high-quality transition planning and services during high school. Yet, many secondary schools fall short of their transition-related responsibilities. Delivery of effective transition practices depends upon the coordinated efforts of the personnel who implement them. Yet, we know little about the transition-related responsibilities various professionals are currently fulfilling in schools or why professionals might be conceptualizing and enacting their roles in particular ways. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine how transition responsibilities were divided amongst professionals in one secondary school and the factors shaping the division of responsibilities. Using cultural historical activity theory as a conceptual foundation, I qualitatively analyzed interviews with 10 professionals and the cases of three focal students within one secondary school. I found that transition activities primarily focused on college admission. Guidance counselors led future planning, while special educators and the IEP process played only a limited role. Professionals tended to enact their transition-related responsibilities independently and collaborated primarily when students were struggling.

Findings suggest multiple opportunities for improving transition practices at the organizational level.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, multiple policy and research efforts have focused on addressing well-documented gaps in post-high school outcomes between students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities. Several reauthorizations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004; 1997) have mandated that schools enact transition planning and services to better prepare students for adult life and have increased accountability for students' postsecondary outcomes. Additionally, research efforts have focused on the identification of evidence-based practices (EBPs; e.g., Test, Fowler et al., 2009) and predictors of postschool success (e.g., Test, Mazzotti, et al., 2009), as well as the development of research-based models to structure transition efforts (e.g. Kohler, 1996). Despite these policy mandates and research efforts, students with disabilities continue to lag behind their peers without disabilities across adult outcomes including employment, postsecondary education, community engagement, and independent living (Newman et al., 2011).

Why do these disparities persist? Unfortunately, research suggests that many secondary schools are failing to meet their transition responsibilities (e.g., Hetherington et al., 2010, Landmark & Zhang, 2012). Enacting transition planning and services requires a collaborative effort that involves students, families, and multiple professionals both within and outside of secondary schools (Blalock et al., 2003). Additionally, transition practices must be coordinated within schools, fundamentally social organizations, shaped by norms, expectations, values, and resources (Youngs et al. 2012). Yet we know little about how professionals share responsibility for transition or the

organizational factors that may be shaping their enactment of these responsibilities. To attend to this gap in the literature, this qualitative study utilized cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) to examine how professionals in one secondary school conceptualize the individual and contextual factors that shape the division of responsibilities and the enactment of transition planning and service delivery.

Implementation of Transition Practices in Schools

Under IDEA (2004), transition planning and service delivery is mandatory for all students with disabilities beginning at age 16. There are multiple required components of transition planning and service delivery including (1) administering assessments to identify students' strengths, needs, interests, and preferences; (2) developing post-secondary goals based on these assessments; (3) developing a plan that includes course of study, related services, and community experiences all focused on preparing the student to be successful after high school; and (4) enacting a coordinated set of activities focused on preparing the student to achieve their postsecondary goals. Additionally, IDEA requires that students and families participate as key members of the transition team and the decision-making process (20 U.S.C. 1416(a)(3)(B)). School compliance with these regulations has been associated with improved postsecondary outcomes (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2014).

Researchers have identified a number of best practices that support the provision of high quality transition services (Mazzotti et al., 2016; Test et al., 2009). The Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 (Kohler et al., 2016) is a research-driven model that includes five domains: student-focused planning, student development,

interagency collaboration, family engagement, and program structure. Transition practices aligned with these domains can significantly impact employment, postsecondary education, and independent living outcomes (Haber et al., 2016).

However, many secondary schools continue to fall short on compliance with IDEA transition mandates and implementation of evidence-based best practices (Everson et al., 2001; Landmark & Zhang, 2012). For example, in an analysis of 212 Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in Texas, Landmark and Zhang found that only 41.5% of IEPs were fully compliant with IDEA transition requirements and only about half of research-supported best practices were evident in the IEPs. Less than half of the IEPs had measurable postsecondary goals in the required goal areas; IEPs also often lacked evidence of interagency collaboration, work experiences, or self-determination training/skill development. Similarly, Powers et al. (2005) found evidence-based practices (such as references to a student's cultural values/background, self-determination training, career planning, and mentoring) in less than 10% of IEPs sampled from two large urban districts. In a qualitative study examining the transition experiences of 13 youth with disabilities and their families, participants described being only minimally involved, under-supported, and under-prepared for transition. Participants felt that their goals and perspectives were not valued and that schools did not provide opportunities to develop important transition skills such as job skills, work experiences, and self-determination training (Hetherington et al., 2010). Multiple other studies report similar concerns with the quality of implementation of transition planning and services in secondary schools (e.g., Benitez et al., 2009, Geenen et al., 2003, Trainor, 2005). Thus,

improving implementation of transition planning and services is a potential pathway for improving student outcomes.

Who is responsible for transition? A muddled picture of service delivery.

This study will explore one important pathway to for improving implementation by examining how responsibilities for transition planning and service delivery are shared amongst professionals. Delivery of high-quality transition planning and services depends upon the coordinated efforts of the personnel who implement them (Blalock et al., 2003). When transition responsibilities were mandated (and later expanded) under IDEA, scholars identified a need to clarify and adapt professional roles to meet these expanded responsibilities and to ensure professionals were well-prepared to meet students' transition needs (e.g., DeFur & Taymans, 1995; Knott & Asselin, 1999). The Council for Exceptional Children's Division of Career Development and Transition (DCDT) has outlined important roles in transition for a range of secondary professionals including general educators, school counselors, paraeducators, related-service providers, special educators, transition specialists, and more (Blalock et al., 2003). For example, *general educators* are tasked with providing "appropriate transition services within the context of their teaching roles" such as connecting academic content to authentic life experiences or promoting self-determination through providing choices (p. 215). *School counselors* are encouraged to take an active role in providing college, career, and scheduling guidance rather than expecting special educators to carry out these responsibilities for students with disabilities. *Transition specialists* are tasked with responsibilities such as coordinating with adult agencies, identifying and facilitating work experiences, and evaluating

transition programs. Scholars note that transition activities should be embedded within and undergirding all educational activities; For example, students' postsecondary goals, interests, and needs should connect to course planning, academic content standards, and skill development. As a result, engagement from and collaboration amongst multiple professionals is essential (Blalock et al., 2003).

In practice, however, we know little about the transition-related responsibilities various professionals are currently fulfilling or why professionals might be conceptualizing and enacting their roles in particular ways (Lillis & Kutscher, 2021). Research on transition implementation has tended to focus on what practices are being implemented (e.g. Landmark & Zhang, 2012; Mazzotti & Plotner, 2016), with less emphasis on who is implementing these practices, how transition responsibilities may fit within that individual's broader role, or collective conceptions of how the work of transition should happen within a school or district. The few studies that provide insights into transition roles and responsibilities suggest multiple concerns including (1) lack of clearly defined roles, (2) misalignment with expert recommendations, (3) lack of participation by key professionals, and (4) lack of training to fulfill transition-related responsibilities.

Lack of clearly defined roles. Only a few studies provide insights into how transition responsibilities are shared amongst professionals. These studies suggest wide variability in how transition responsibilities are shared, as well as potentially overlapping and ambiguous roles. For example, Zhang et al. (2005) surveyed 105 middle and high school lead teachers and 37 transition personnel in South Carolina about how transition

services were provided in their districts and what services students received. The 37 transition personnel who participated in the survey held a range of job titles (e.g., transition coordinator, transition facilitator, special education coordinator, job coach) and 92% reported having additional responsibilities (e.g., teaching, administration). Not surprisingly, participants identified a range of personnel as responsible for coordinating transition programming in their districts including transition coordinators (44.4%), special education directors (19%), and classroom teachers (9.2%). Almost a quarter (23.9%) of respondents reported multiple personnel were responsible for coordinating transition services, raising the concern that responsibilities for transition may not be clearly delineated amongst these various professionals. Moreover, the specific responsibilities of the designated coordinator of transition services varied widely. Similarly, in a national survey of 343 secondary special educators and transition coordinators, Li et al. (2009) found 13% of respondents held both transition coordinator and special educator roles and found wide variability in the specific transition practices professionals reported enacting. Lillis and Kutscher (2021) qualitatively examined the roles and responsibilities of seven transition coordinators in Massachusetts. They found that transition coordinators lacked clear guidelines for defining their roles and had substantial autonomy to determine their responsibilities and set priorities. Participants described meaningful differences in how their roles were conceptualized and enacted.

At the state level, the titles, credentialing opportunities and licensure requirements for transition professionals also vary widely (Simonsen et al., 2018). For example, only 16 states offer a credential specific to special education transition, and only one of those

states requires professionals in a transition specialist role to hold the credential (Simonsen et al., 2018).

Finally, there is also evidence that the quality and frequency of delivery of transition services vary based on student characteristics such as the types of disabilities that professionals report their students to have (Benitez et al, 2009; Landmark & Zhang, 2012, Lillis & Kutscher, 2021). For example, Landmark & Zhang examined IEP documents for 212 students with disabilities in Texas for evidence of compliance with transition requirements (e.g., measurable postsecondary goals) and implementation of research supported practices (e.g., self-determination skills training). Using multiple logistic regression, the researchers examined whether disability and ethnicity variables predicted compliance. They found some significant differences in compliance and practices based on students' disabilities and ethnicities. For example, students with emotional disabilities were least likely to have IEPs that addressed all required service areas; students with learning disabilities were less likely to have evidence of family involvement and self-determination in their IEPs; African American students were less likely to have fully compliant IEPs. Lillis and Kutscher found that some transition coordinators took on much more substantial roles with students with low incidence disabilities, relying on school counselors to meet the transition-related needs of students with high incidence disabilities.

Misalignment with expert recommendations. Both Li et al. (2009) and Zhang et al. (2005) found that special educators were being assigned as coordinators of transition services in contrast with DCDT's recommendations. Blalock et al. (2003)

argued that special educators' roles should focus on student development and planning activities rather than job development or interagency collaboration, tasks that require more flexibility during the school day. Yet, Li et al. and Zhang et al. found that special educators were at least occasionally taking on these roles. In contrast, Li et al. also expressed concerns about special educators' limited involvement in tasks such as transition assessment and instruction. Lillis and Kutcher (2021) also found that transition coordinators were sometimes asked to take on responsibilities such as teaching and case management; the transition coordinators who took on those responsibilities felt they interfered with their ability to enact other responsibilities, such as community engagement and job development, that they felt were more central to their role.

Lack of participation by key professionals. A few studies have examined the extent of participation in transition activities for specific professionals, such as school psychologists (Lillenstein et al., 2006) and occupational therapists (Mankey, 2011) and found that these professionals currently play a limited role in transition despite having expertise to contribute. The authors of these studies hypothesized lack of knowledge, lack of collaborative structures, lack of time, or role conceptions that do not include supporting transition as possible explanations. However, because these studies were based on self-report surveys, they were unable to provide more detailed insights as to what might be getting in the way of participation for these professionals. Moreover, the transition-related roles of many professionals such as school counselors or general educators, have not been examined at all.

Lack of training to fulfill transition-related responsibilities. Researchers have demonstrated that, across multiple roles, educators lack the knowledge, training and experience needed to deliver evidence-based transition practices (e.g., Benitez et al., 2009). Lack of training is exacerbated by the limited attention to transition in educator preparation programs and the lack of state level licensure or credentialing opportunities (Simonsen et al., 2018). This is a important concern because having qualified professionals trained to enact transition planning and services is an important driver of high-quality implementation (Benitez et al., 2009; Morningstar & Benitez, 2013). Professionals who have more preservice training and professional development hours related to transition competencies feel more confident in their abilities to deliver transition planning and services and are more likely to engage in these practices (Benitez et al., 2009; Morningstar & Benitez, 2013).

Study Purpose

While these studies provide some important insights into what transition practices are being implemented and to some extent who is implementing them, they are limited in what they can tell us. This research is primarily self-report surveys, focused on the enactment of specific practices by individuals. More in-depth, contextualized investigations are needed to better understand how various professionals think about their role in transition and the factors influencing who takes up which responsibilities and for what purposes. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine how transition responsibilities are divided amongst professionals in one secondary school and the factors shaping the division of responsibilities. Specifically, I examined the following research

questions:

1. How do professionals in a secondary school conceptualize the activity system through which they collectively provide transition services?
2. How do the school's professionals describe the division of responsibilities for transition among them?
3. How do professionals conceptualize the individual and contextual factors that shape the division of responsibilities and the enactment of transition planning and service delivery?

Study Design

To fully answer these research questions, I conducted a qualitative study using a single case-study design. I purposively selected one secondary school as the site for this research. I then identified three focal students, all 12th graders who differed in their primary disability identification and support needs. I interviewed 10 school-based professionals serving in a range of professional roles (e.g., general educators, special educators, transition specialist, guidance counselors) who engaged with the focal students during their 12th grade year. These semi-structured interviews explored how each professional broadly conceptualized their role in preparing students for postsecondary success and specifically examined each professional's work with the focal students. Using Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as the conceptual foundation, I inductively analyzed the interviews, mapping out the school's activity system for transition planning and service delivery. CHAT is a framework for understanding complex relationships within social organizations such as schools (Engestrom, 2000). In

this analysis, I used CHAT to examine the organizational dimensions (e.g., school norms, the division of responsibilities, available resources) that shaped the school's model for transition planning and service delivery.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

In this chapter, I review the transition literature relevant to this dissertation. First, I provide background information on postsecondary outcomes for individuals with disabilities and describe the required transition practices that schools must implement under IDEA. Second, I synthesize the research on the types of transition practices that support postsecondary success for students with disabilities, the extent to which schools are currently implementing these practices, and the factors that facilitate the implementation of high quality transition practices in schools. Finally, I examine roles and responsibilities in transition including (1) how the roles of transition specialists, special educators and transition teachers have been defined and delineated, (2) what we know about how transition responsibilities are actually being conceptualized and distributed in school settings, (3) the extent to which the transition-related roles of other school-based professionals (i.e. occupational therapists, school psychologists) have been examined, and (4) how and how well practitioners are prepared to perform their transition responsibilities.

Postsecondary Outcomes for Individuals with Disabilities

Postsecondary outcomes for individuals with disabilities remain a significant concern; there are significant gaps between individuals with disabilities and their peers without disabilities across adult outcomes. The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), funded by the U.S. Department of Education, is a recent and widely cited source of data on postsecondary outcomes for people with disabilities. This study

collected data on a nationally representative sample of student with disabilities over a 10-year period, from 2001–2009, and provides a comprehensive national picture of the experiences and outcomes of young people with disabilities. All of the study participants were between the ages of 13–16 in 2000, and ages 21–25 at the end of the study. Students were randomly selected from each disability category and statistical summaries from the NLTS2 generalized to students receiving special education services in the United States. The study is a follow up to the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) that was conducted from 1985–1993 (Newman et al., 2011).

Analysis of the NLTS2 indicates that young adults with disabilities continue to lag behind their same age peers across key outcome areas including postsecondary education, employment, independent living, and social and community involvement (Newman et al., 2011). For example, students with disabilities are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education than their peers without disabilities (60% vs. 67%), and of students who do enroll in postsecondary education, students with disabilities are less likely to graduate than their peers without disabilities (41% vs. 52%). These gaps are even greater for students with certain disabilities (e.g., students categorized as having emotional disturbance or autism) and for students who are lower income (Newman et al., 2011). Although these rates have improved significantly since the 1990's, when less than a third of young adults with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education, these disparities are still concerning. Additionally, young adults with disabilities are more likely to attend community colleges or vocational or technical programs as compared with their peers without disabilities who are much more likely to attend four-year

colleges. Students who received special education services in high school are unlikely to disclose their disability in college. In fact, only 19% of college students with disabilities receive accommodations such as additional time for exams. In contrast, 87% of these students received some type of accommodation in high school and would likely be able to access similar supports in college (Newman et al., 2011).

Findings from NLTS2 also show significant disparities in employment outcomes. For example, although young adults (ages 19–23) with disabilities are as likely to have a paid job as their peers without disabilities, their mean hourly wage is almost $4.00 less ($9.40 vs. $13.20). Additionally, employment varied widely across disability categories (ranging from 30–79%; Newman et al., 2011). Employment disparities seem to increase over time with the overall unemployment rate for people with disabilities far exceeding that for people without disabilities. In the 2010–2012 period, only 29.1% of working-age people (ages 16–64) with disabilities were employed, compared with 70% of people without disabilities (ODEP, 2020). Finally, young adults with disabilities are less likely than their same age peers to live independently (45% vs. 59%; Newman et al., 2011).

Federal Transition Guidelines

The provision of transition services was first mandated in the 1990 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The 1997 and 2004 revisions of IDEA served to refine and further clarify requirements related to secondary transition, and increased the specific transition-related actions that schools must take (Prince et al., 2013). Under IDEA 2004, transition planning must occur for all students eligible for special education services beginning at age 16. Transition

requirements include measurable postsecondary goals, age appropriate transition assessments, coordinated transition activities that support the student's postsecondary goals, transition related annual goals in students' IEPs, linkages to appropriate adult agencies, and a transfer of rights at the age of majority. Students must be invited to IEP team meetings if their postsecondary goals or transition services will be discussed. Additionally, transition services include instruction, related services, community experiences, employment opportunities, and other supports that may facilitate the student's transition to adult life (Prince et al., 2013). These services must be articulated in the student's transition plan and should support the student's postsecondary goals.

Reauthorizations of IDEA since 1990 have also trended toward increasing accountability for transition processes and postsecondary outcomes. Under IDEA 2004, the language in IDEA changed from a "outcomes-oriented process" to a "results oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child" (Etscheidt, 2006, p. 28). Additionally, four state performance indicators were added, requiring states to specifically report on transition efforts and outcomes. Indicator one assesses whether graduation rates are improving, indicator two assesses dropout rates, and indicator 14 requires schools to track and improve postsecondary outcomes. Indicator 13 specifically assesses compliance with IDEA transition mandates (Mazzotti et al., 2014).

Best Practices in Transition

In the 1990's, Kohler and her colleagues (e.g., Kohler, 1996) developed the Taxonomy for Transition Programming, a research-based model to conceptually organize

best practices in transition. The taxonomy was developed through a multi-stage process including multiple reviews of the literature, concept mapping, and social validation by a national group of transition experts. It was designed for practical use by educators and policy-makers and it organized research-supported transition practices into five categories: student-focused planning, student development, interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration, family involvement, and program structure. Student-focused planning includes activities that engage students in planning and decision-making about their futures (e.g., facilitating the development of short and long-term goals based on the student's vision for the future). Student development includes activities that promote skill development across multiple domains including academic, employment, social, delf-determination and independent living skills. Interagency collaboration involves developing structures for coordination and collaborative service delivery among schools, state agencies, and community organizations. This collaboration facilitates access to a wider range of supports and creates a more integrated system so that students can make a more seamless transition from the supports they received through school to the supports they will access through other avenues as adults. Family involvement involves empowering families to participate in a wide array of roles such as assessment and decision making and providing training to support such participation. Finally, program structure includes program features such as strategic planning, evaluation, policies, and philosophies that organize services and promote outcomes-driven, effective service delivery (Kohler & Field, 2003). The Taxonomy for Transition Programming has played a critical role in framing our understanding of best practices in transition and

continues to guide the development of secondary transition programs (Karpur et al., 2014).

Scholars have continued to use Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming as a tool for organizing evidence-based transition practices. For example, in 2009, the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC) conducted a systematic review of evidence-based practices in secondary transition using Kohler's Taxonomy to organize the findings (Test, Fowler, et al., 2009). This review of experimental studies found 32 evidence-based practices. Twenty-five of these practices fell within the student development category and included instructional practices in life skills, employment skills, and functional academic development. Three evidence-based practices fell in the student-focused planning category and reflected instruction to support students in participating in the development of their IEPs. One evidence-based practice, designed to educate families about transition issues, fell into the family involvement category. Three evidence-based practices were related to program structures and these included providing community-based instruction, extending programming beyond secondary school, and implementing *Check & Connect* with students with disabilities. No evidence-based practices were found in the area of interagency collaboration. Although many effective strategies were identified through this review and others (e.g., Cobb et al. 2013; Landmark et al., 2010), it is important to note that the studies in these reviews exclusively measured short term outcomes such as skill acquisition that were assessed before secondary school completion. In their review of secondary transition studies, Cobb et al. (2013) found no experimental studies that assessed outcomes after secondary school

completion.

However, correlational studies have helped to fill in these gaps by identifying predictors of post-school outcomes. This correlational literature provides additional guidance to practitioners for developing programs, evaluating programs, and improving the quality of IEPs. For example, NSTTAC conducted a second literature review of correlational literature which identified 16 evidence-based in-school predictors of post-school outcomes (Test, Mazzotti, et al., 2009). All 16 predictors significantly correlated with employment after high school, 11 significantly correlated with participation in postsecondary education, and 5 significantly correlated with independent living outcomes. Predictors include career awareness, community experiences, exit exam requirements/high school diploma status, inclusion in general education, interagency collaboration, occupational courses, paid employment/work experience, parent involvement, program of study, self-advocacy/self-determination, self-care/independent living skills, social skills, student support, transition program characteristics, vocational education, and work study.

Rowe et al. (2015) conducted a Delphi study to operationalize these predictors to make them more accessible to practitioners and policy makers. Haber et al. (2016), conducted a meta-analysis to further examine the strengths of the various predictors identified by Test, Mazzotti et al. Haber et al. found an overall Pearson correlation between predictors and post-school outcomes of $r=.19$ (95% confidence interval $r=.12$ to $r=.25$, $p<.001$), a small but significant effect. Additionally, this meta-analysis provides a more nuanced understanding of which predictors are associated with which outcomes for

which populations and under what conditions. For example, Haber and colleagues found differing effects by outcome variable (e.g., predictors that were associated with education outcomes did not consistently predict employment or independent living outcomes). They also found some differences in outcomes based on demographic characteristics such as gender and ethnicity. Additionally, they found a significant relationship between interagency collaboration and education outcomes ($r=.13$, 95% confidence interval $r=.01$ to $r=.24$, $p<.05$), a predictor much less frequently studied and less emphasized by Test, Mazzotti, et al. (2009), but with potential to have a significant impact on outcomes. Haber et al. argue that these findings can be used to help educators determine the most appropriate interventions based on their specific populations and the post-school outcomes they hope to address. They also express some concerns about the limitations of existing correlational research such as lack of demographic data in some studies, lack of studies in nontraditional settings, and lack of specification of disability beyond IDEA categories. However, their findings show consistently positive relationships between predictors and outcomes and generally support the application of the predictors for policy and practice.

In 2016, Mazzotti et al. provided an updated review of the correlational literature. In their review, Mazzotti et al. focused on secondary analyses that utilized data from NLTS2. Eleven articles met their inclusion criteria. These studies provided additional evidence for nine of the predictors identified by Test, Mazzotti et al. (2009) and also provided evidence for four new predictors including parent expectations, youth autonomy/decision making, travel skills, and goal setting.

Overall, although there are some important gaps in the literature, there is significant evidence to indicate that specific transition-focused interventions, experiences, and program design elements within secondary education programs can positively impact postsecondary outcomes. Practitioners and policy makers can look to Kohler's taxonomy (Kohler et al., 2016), as well as the predictors identified in the correlational literature to assist in program design and evaluation. The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT), amongst other resources, has incorporated these evidence-based practices into multiple resources such as data instruments and toolkits on a wide range of transition-related topics. NTACT's website also has descriptions of evidence-based practices that were developed for practitioners and include the population with whom the practice has been successful, strategies for implementing the practice, lesson plan starters and other resources (Mazzotti et al., 2014).

Implementation of Transition Practices in Schools

Research on how well secondary transition practices are being implemented in schools is primarily focused in three areas: compliance with IDEA transition requirements, the extent to which the best practices found in the literature are incorporated into transition programs, and the experiences of students and families with transition. This body of research demonstrates substantial disparities between evidence-based practices and policy mandates on the one hand and what is actually happening in schools on the other.

Compliance with IDEA and Implementation of Best Practices.

Multiple studies have examined the extent of implementation of required and

recommended transition practices by looking for evidence of these practices in IEPs or supplemental transition planning forms. For example, Grigal et al., 1997 examined transition planning documents for random sample of 94 high school students, ages 18–21, in one large southeastern school district. They developed a protocol (modified from a previous study) to examine compliance with IDEA transition mandates, assess the quality of written goals, and examine designation of personnel and timelines. They found that the majority of transition plans did include goals in the required areas of education/training, employment, independent living, and recreation, and were therefore in compliance with this aspect of IDEA transition mandates. However, goals were often vague, were not updated annually, and did not incorporate best practices in transition. For example, goals often did not include timelines and did not specify who was responsible for taking the lead on specific action steps. Goals related to best practices such as self-determination or decision-making were not present in any transition plans. Overall, transition planning documents were not considered conducive to good quality transition planning.

More recent studies have shown similar results (Everson et al., 2001; Powers et al., 2005). Powers et al. (2005) coded 399 IEPs from two large urban school districts. Many of the IEPs they examined did not have postsecondary goals in one or more important goal areas. For example, although goals in integrated employment appeared most often, only 63.7% of transition plan had goals in this area. Goals related to postsecondary education and independent living appeared in 44.6% and 40.4% of transition plans respectively. Powers et al. also found that 63.1% of transition goals had minimal or no detail on the specific targets to be attained. Evidence of effective practices

was described as "disappointing" (p. 56). For example, reference to the student's cultural values/background, self-determination education, career planning, and mentoring all occurred in less than 10% of IEPs. Powers et al. also noted some significant differences by disability type, projected diploma type, and district residence. For example, students with developmental disabilities were the least likely to be present for their IEP meeting, have postsecondary education goals, or have recreation and leisure goals that reflect their interests. Powers et al. found only a few significant differences on transition plans related to race/ethnicity or gender. Hispanic students were more likely to their cultural values or background on their transition plan, however most (82%) of these references were solely to address issues related to language proficiency. There were no significant differences in number of goals or goal quality between girls and boys. However, Powers et al. note that very few employment goals countered gender stereotypes (33.5% conformed to gender stereotypes, 46.7% were gender neutral, and 6.8% of girls'/5.9% of boys' plans countered gender stereotypes).

Landmark and Zhang (2012) attempted to update this research by reviewing IEPs and transition plans for compliance with the updated transition requirements under IDEA 2004. Their final sample of 212 participants was identified using a random stratified sampling strategy of 14–22-year-old students in one region in Texas. Unfortunately, this study also found low levels of full compliance with IDEA and limited implementation of best practices in transition. For example, only 44.8% of IEPs had measurable postsecondary goals in all of the required areas. Using multiple logistic regression analysis, Landmark and Zhang also found significant relationships between both

disability category and ethnicity and the likelihood that a transition plan was fully compliant with IDEA. For example, students with emotional disabilities were least likely to have transition plans that addressed all transition services. Being African American, having an emotional disability, and having a learning disability were all negatively associated with family involvement in the transition planning process.

One more recent study by Trainor et al. (2016) showed slightly more promising results. Researchers conducted a secondary analysis of the NLTS2, including only participants with high incidence disabilities (learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, and ADHD). They used a complex samples model to calculate descriptive statistics for NLTS2 items pertaining to teachers' reported implementation of transition planning and programs and student/family reports of transition planning and services they experienced. They found that transition planning was occurring for most of the students in this sample and that these students completing coursework and transition-related instruction aligned to their postsecondary goals. However, the researchers were cautiously optimistic about these findings. They noted that the data was based on self-report rather than direct observation. Additionally, only about half of transition plans contained goals related to competitive employment or postsecondary education, a concerning finding that is more in line with other research. Authors note the limitation that due to the small sample size, it was not possible to explore differences at the intersection of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability. Further research is needed to explore differences in access to high-quality transition services amongst these subgroups.

Student and Family Experiences with Secondary Transition.

Student and family involvement are considered to be essential to effective transition planning (Hetherington et al., 2010; Kohler & Field, 2003). Yet, research on student and family experiences with transition suggests that students and families often do not feel meaningfully included or valued in the transition planning process. In their document analysis of transition plans, Powers et. al (2005) found that students did not sign their IEP in 24% of cases despite the requirement that students be invited to their IEP meetings and the extensive research that supports students taking active roles in these meetings. Powers et al. also found that transition services, such as supported work experiences, were often inconsistent with students' postsecondary goals. Collet-Klingenberg (1998) conducted a qualitative case study of transition program at a secondary school in Wisconsin nominated by a district transition specialist as one of the better programs in the district. The program served 10 high school students with learning disabilities. Even within this model program, Collet-Klingenberg noted the lack of student and parent involvement in the IEP process and a disconnect between students' postsecondary goals and the types of vocational activities they were engaged in. For example, although parents and students attended IEP meetings, they were described as having a passive role. Collet-Klingenberg did not provide demographic details about the race/ethnicity or gender of study participants.

A few qualitative studies have explored student and family transition experiences more deeply. DeFur et al. (2001) conducted focus groups with 28 parents of adolescents with disabilities in Virginia to learn about their transition experiences. The researchers'

purposive sampling strategy sought specifically to include participants who represented cultural minorities. In the final sample, 75% of participants were African American, 18% were Caucasian, and 7% were Asian. Participants' reported a range of primary disabilities for their children; the most frequent primary disability categories were learning disability (29.1%) and Mental Retardation (25%). Through these focus groups, a number of barriers to participation were identified by parents. These included attitudes of teachers and administrators that made families feel isolated, not listened to, and not knowledgeable enough to participate. Other barriers included participants feeling treated differently due to race or ethnicity and the stigma of special education conveyed through a focus on the student's limitations, labeling, and segregation in school.

Trainor (2005) conducted a qualitative investigation examining the self-determination perceptions and behaviors of 15 adolescent males with learning disabilities, examining their perceptions of their own roles in the transition planning process as well as the influence of their parents and teachers. Participants in the study included four African American students, six European American students, and five Hispanic American students; students were receiving services as a student with LD, were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch programs, and attended school at a participating site in a Southwest Metropolitan School District. Trainor's analysis showed that students' responses in the focus groups did not match the postsecondary goals listed in their transition planning documents. Participants felt uninvolved in the transition planning process and that their attempts to demonstrate self-determination while supported at home were often thwarted at school. Trainor noted only subtle differences amongst this

group of diverse participants.

Hetherington et al. (2010) conducted adolescent interviews and parent focus groups to better understand their experiences in the transition planning process. Youth were 13 members of a self-advocacy group in Western New York with various disabilities (10 female and 3 male participants, 9 participants were Caucasian, not Hispanic, 2 were Caucasian and Hispanic, 1 was African American, and 1 was Pakistani and Caucasian); Parents of nine of the youth participants joined in the focus group. Results show similar concerns to those found in earlier studies (DeFur et al., 2001; Trainor, 2005). One theme that emerged from this analysis was “passive planning.” Although slightly more than half of the students recalled participating in an IEP meeting at some point during high school, all but one of the students did not recall being involved in transition planning. Hetherington et al. (2010) argued that simply being present at an IEP meeting is quite different from being actively involved with transition planning. A theme that emerged for parents in this study was “feeling like an outsider.” Parents did not feel like their schools engaged them in the transition planning process. They felt brushed off at meetings and that important information was shared too late. Students and families both felt that the schools did not provide an appropriate transition curriculum. For example, they expressed frustration with the lack of self-determination instruction and career development.

Research suggests that families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may feel particularly marginalized in the transition planning process and face additional barriers to participation. Geenen et al., (2003) conducted focus groups

with adolescents and their families from Native American, African American, and Hispanic communities and identified seven themes related to participants transition experiences including insensitivity/discrimination, lack of accommodations and contextual barriers. Utilizing these findings, they developed a survey to explore the extent to which a larger sample of 308 participants experienced similar barriers. They found that minority families "often encountered insensitivity and discrimination, typically conveyed as disrespect, disregard, or ignorance" (p. 35). This type of experience was common at the individual level, when interacting with teachers and administrators, and at the systems level. Discrimination often translated into students receiving fewer or poorer quality services. Additional research also suggests that the negative attitudes of professionals are a barrier (Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Olivos et al., 2010). These studies note that cultural insensitivity has led professionals to blame families for their child's difficulties, misunderstand their concerns, disregard their input, and not value their voice in the special education process. Olivos et al. (2010) further argue that school personnel often see themselves impartial professionals acting in the child's best interest and are unaware of their biases or how those biases may impact family involvement in transition.

Taken together, these studies suggest that while some attempts have been made to involve students and families in transition planning, these efforts are often superficial and there is substantial room for enhancing meaningful participation. While students and families may now be more likely to be invited to and attend meetings related to transition, they do not feel their voices are heard and instead feel isolated from the process.

Facilitating Implementation of High Quality Transition Practices.

Despite concerns about poor compliance with IDEA and infrequent implementation of best practices, research that focuses on how to facilitate implementation of high quality transition programs is limited.

A few qualitative studies have examined model transition programs to identify key elements that enable success. Furney, Hasazi and Destefano conducted 2 separate studies of transition implementation (e.g., Furney et al. 1997; Hasazi et al., 1999). The first study examined transition implementation at the state level in three states that were identified as exemplary in their efforts to develop and implement transition practices. They reviewed relevant policy documents and interviewed relevant stakeholders, primarily professionals who represented a state-level perspective. They found seven themes that contributed to success. These themes included (1) shared values and beliefs such as inclusion and social responsibility created an environment that facilitated implementation, (2) direct policy approaches by the state, (3) collaborative leadership that included state leaders and local advocates, (4) collaborative structures that promoted systemic change, (5) change efforts guided by research and program evaluation, (6) capacity building through a variety of activities such as professional development, and (7) the linking of transition efforts with other educational reform initiatives (Furney et al., 1997).

A second study by Hasazi et al. (1999) expanded on their previous research by conducting case studies in nine states to examine local implementation of transition policies and practices as well as the factors that were shaping implementation. Using

expert recommendations, researchers identified five model sites and four that were making progress but were also experiencing challenges (called representative sites). Sites were purposively selected across geographic regions and across urban, suburban, and rural locations. The researchers conducted multi-day site visits at each site that included observations, interviews, and document reviews. Cross case analysis showed some important differences between the model sites and the representative sites. For example, the model sites had clear values related to self-determination and family involvement. These values led to system wide strategies such as instructional practices and meeting structures that incorporated these values. While the representative sites expressed a commitment to families, efforts to support this commitment lacked cohesion and there was no systemic approach. A similar disparity was observed in the area of interagency collaboration. The model sites had a clear, systemic approach with written agreements, monthly planning meetings, and jointly funded positions. The representative sites had some evidence of interagency collaboration, but it was not comprehensive. Three common challenges faced by the model sites included lack of capacity to provide appropriate services to specific disability groups, difficulty addressing the needs of 18-to 21-year-old students and conflict between standards-based reform efforts and the transition services they wanted to provide. Recommendations for practitioners that resulted from this study included promoting self-determination through specific instructional practices, systemic professional development opportunities, clarifying roles and responsibilities in transition, and expanding post-school options for specific populations of students.

McMahan and Baer (2001) conducted a survey to identify predictors of compliance with IDEA and implementation of best practices. Survey participants were 186 school, agency, and family stakeholders who participated on transition teams as part of a systems change project for transition implementation in Ohio. Respondents were surveyed regarding their perspective on policy compliance (e.g., parent notification, IEP content) as well as the frequency of implementation of specific practices (e.g., interviewing students about their goals for the future). The authors used Pearson correlation coefficients to examine the relationship between a range of demographic variables, compliance, and the frequency of implementation of specific practices. The strongest predictor they identified for implementation of best practices was the existence of an interagency transition team. Other significant predictors included the type and number of hours of training related to transition. Authors highlighted the need for training that did not focus solely on compliance, as well as specific training related to interagency collaboration.

Expert recommendations provide some additional guidance for school leaders planning and organizing the implementation of transition practices. Mazzotti et al. (2014) created a table linking each of the 16 correlational predictors of postsecondary success (Test, Mazzotti, et al., 2009) to specific recommendations for state and district level program implementation. Morningstar et al. (2016) created a program assessment tool called the Quality Indicators of Exemplary Transition Programs Needs Assessment-2 (QI-2). This tool is based upon an extensive review of the literature, underwent expert review, and was field tested. Using this tool, practitioners can rate themselves on 47

items organized into 7 domains including (1) Transition planning, (2) Transition assessment, (3) Family involvement, (4) Student involvement, (5) Transition-focused curriculum and instruction, (6) Interagency collaboration and community services, and (7) systems-level infrastructure. This tool expands on previous quality indicators (Brewer, 2006; Morningstar, 2006) and provides a resource for schools and districts to monitor transition programming and improve the quality of implementation.

Who is engaged in the delivery of transition services?

Many of studies described above address the importance of leadership, collaboration, and the dedication of key personnel in the delivery of high quality transition programs (e.g., Hasazi et al., 1999; MacMahon & Baer, 2001). The professionals who are designing and delivering transition programs are clearly essential to successful implementation. Yet, there is not clear guidance as to who should be responsible for all of the various components of transition. The following research suggests that there are number of concerns related to role clarity and professional preparation for implementing transition services.

Roles and Responsibilities in Transition

Defining the Transition Specialist Role. When transition responsibilities were mandated (and later expanded) under IDEA, researchers began to define professional transition competencies and identify who would take on these new responsibilities. Researchers identified the "transition specialist" role as one that was emerging in the field and focused on describing the knowledge and skills professionals would need to fulfill this role. The first study to attempt to identify and validate competencies

specifically for transition specialists was conducted by DeFur and Taymans (1995). DeFur and Taymans described transition as a “new professional field” without a defined body of knowledge (p. 39). They argued that, to meet the transition needs of young people with disabilities, new professional roles must evolve. Additionally, because interagency collaboration is such an important aspect of transition process and transition services are provided by professionals within different disciplines (e.g., special education, vocational rehabilitation), a common set of professional competencies would be beneficial. Finally, they argued that validated competencies would also provide professional preparation programs at institutions for higher education with clearer direction for transition curriculum. Thus, DeFur and Taymans set out to identify transition specialist competencies that would be applicable within vocational rehabilitation, special education, and vocational education settings. They first identified and classified a list of competencies by reviewing personnel preparation grants from the Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) as well as relevant transition literature. This process identified a list of 116 competencies in 12 categories. DeFur and Taymans then surveyed a national sample of practitioners on each of the 116 competencies and calculated descriptive statistics to determine how important participants felt each competency was to the role of a transition specialist.

Defur and Taymans’ (1995) findings offered valuable insights into the way the transition specialist role was being conceptualized in the field. In particular, they found that transition specialists viewed the role to be much more focused on interdisciplinary

skills, such as service coordination amongst a range of professionals, rather than direct service to young adults with disabilities. The highest rated competencies were focused on "coordination, communication, and collaboration of transition services rather than direct client services" (p. 46). Additionally, the competency domain called, "curriculum, instruction, and learning theory" was rated lowest by practitioners, further suggesting that transition specialists tended to focus more on systems level collaboration and coordination as compared to instruction or direct service delivery. Those direct services that were higher-rated tended to focus on job related-services such as job assessment and support. Defur and Tayman's study set the foundation for later studies that would refine and clarify these competencies.

In 1998, Asselin et al. expanded on Defur and Tayman's (1995) investigation of the role of transition coordinators using the Developing a Curriculum (DACUM) model, a method used to identify the essential skills of a particular position by conducting a focus group of individuals who are currently working in the occupation. Asselin et al. notably entitled their paper, "Transition Coordinators Define Yourselves." Their study identified 21 different job titles for transition coordinators, including transition resource coordinator, transition supervisor, transition planner and transition specialist. Through the focus group process, "the group decided by consensus that the title "transition coordinator" was the most appropriate description of their occupation (p. 12). The group also identified nine major categories of responsibilities that they engaged including intra-school linkages, interagency linkages, assessment and career counseling, transition planning, education and community training, family support, public relations, program

development and program evaluation. They then identified 71 specific tasks that fell within these 9 categories.

Based on these studies focused on identifying transition competencies, the Council for Exceptional Children's Division on Career Development and Transition (CEC-DCDT) issued a set of "Transition Specialist Advanced Preparation Standards" in 2000. These standards were revised in 2013 and described the knowledge and skills transition specialists should have, organized within the following domains: a) use valid and reliable assessments to minimize bias; (b) make sure that knowledge from generalized and specialized curricula is used to develop and improve programs and services; (c) continually facilitate and improve general and special education programs; (d) conduct, evaluate, and use inquiry to guide practice; (e) provide leadership to formulate goals, advocate for effective policies and evidence-based practices, and create positive work environments; (f) use foundational knowledge of ethics and practice; and (g) collaborate with stakeholders to improve programs and services (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2013). As a leading voice in the field of transition, CEC-DCDT has promoted these standards for initial licensure programs, job descriptions and guidelines for credentialing for transition specialists (DCDT, 2013).

Distinguishing Competencies of Special Educators and Transition Coordinators. As standards for transition specialist were being developed, some researchers identified a need to distinguish the roles of various professionals in transition, in particular to differentiate responsibilities between transition specialists and other secondary special educators who may also play an important but distinct role in

transition. Knott and Asselin (1999) argued that there was a need to identify transition competencies specific to special education teachers rather than transition specialists. They noted that there was limited research about how special educators participated in transition planning and delivery. They surveyed a purposive sample of 236 secondary special educators in Virginia (92% response rate) who taught students with mild and moderate disabilities to better understand their levels of knowledge, levels of involvement, and perceptions of importance for various aspects of transition planning and service delivery. Analysis included descriptive statistics for perceptions of knowledge, involvement, and importance as well as correlational analysis between demographic variables (i.e. training, teaching experience) and perceived knowledge, involvement and importance. Teachers rated their transition knowledge as medium to low, with higher ratings for foundational knowledge, such as transition requirements under IDEA, but tended to lack knowledge in more in-depth concepts such as interagency collaboration, despite perceiving these areas as important. Teachers also rated themselves as having low to moderate involvement in transition-related tasks. They reported being more involved responsibilities associated with IEP development, such as developing postsecondary goals and involving students and families in the IEP process. Lower ratings focused on employment related activities, self-determination, the selection of transition-related curricula, and tasks related to program evaluation. Teachers rated all of the transition areas as having medium to high importance. The tasks viewed as most important were direct service activities focused on IEP development such as involving students and families in transition and individualized transition planning. The lowest rated items were

transition curriculum/instructions/learning theory and legal/historical foundations in transition. Knott and Asselin's study (1999) identified lack of knowledge and training in transition as an important concern. It also highlighted some important distinctions in the roles of transition coordinators and secondary special educators, with special educators focusing more on the direct-service activities involved in the IEP process and transition specialist focusing more on interagency collaboration, the coordination of services, and employment-related activities.

Blanchett (2001) also highlighted the distinction between the skills and competencies needed to coordinate and facilitate transition services and the skills needed to deliver instruction that will prepare students for a successful transition to adult life. Similar to Knott and Asselin (1998), Blanchett argued that there was a need to validate transition competencies specific to special educators providing direct service to transition-age students. To define these competencies, Blanchett first conducted a literature review and identified 29 competencies. She then categorized these competencies and used them to develop a survey that was completed by 74 special educators in Pennsylvania who were involved in transition planning. Potential respondents who met the criteria were nominated by regional executive directors from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The survey asked practitioners to rate the importance of various transition competencies, rate the extent to which their university coursework had prepared them for transition work, and define (in open-ended questions) the responsibilities of special educators in transition.

Blanchett's (2001) findings are similar to Knott and Asselin (1999), in that special

educators rated most competencies as important. The two most important competencies were money management and involving parents. Leisure/recreation was the only domain that was not considered important. These findings also mirror Knott and Asselin's research, in that special educators tended to report much more involvement in some transition-related activities than others. Specifically, special educators were more involved in IEP development activities such as writing transition plans (92%) as compared with employment related activities such as job coaching (36%). Blanchett argued that these results suggest important differences in the competencies needed for transition specialists who facilitate transition and special educators who may be tasked with preparing students for their transition through various educational activities. At the same time, Blanchett found that 50% of respondents identified the special educator as the main person responsible for transition. For the other 50% of respondents, a wide range of participants were identified as primarily responsible including transition specialists, district administrators, or multiple professionals, thus suggesting substantial variability in how districts were choosing to divide responsibilities for transition.

Morgan et al., (2014) sought to update earlier efforts to define competencies for transition teachers. For their study, Morgan et al. defined transition teachers as direct service providers responsible for, "assessing skills, teaching young adults in appropriate settings to increase academic and functional skills related to transition, and providing transition-related services to prepare young adults for postsecondary education, employment, and independent living" (p. 150). They distinguish this role from that of transition specialists who plan and coordinate transition services across settings. Morgan

et al. reviewed the literature to identify an updated set of transition competencies and surveyed transition experts and practitioners regarding the importance of these competencies. 100 national experts were selected from a pool of transition leaders who had served as an editor or reviewer in one of two refereed journals (52% response rate). 473 practitioners in 5 states (Florida, Kansas, Minnesota, Oregon, and Wisconsin) were identified using internet searches of state and district websites (49% response rate). The primary finding of this study was that experts and practitioners were in agreement in their ratings of the importance of the transition competencies, with only a few exceptions. The largest discrepancy between experts and practitioners regarded the importance of implementing evidence-based transition practices; 88% of experts compared to only 51% of practitioners viewed this as essential. Experts were also more likely to view consideration of cultural and linguistic diversity in assessment and ensuring transition practices are consistent with families' cultures, beliefs, practices and values as essential. In contrast, practitioners were more likely to view teaching daily living skills as essential (73% vs. 46%). The nature of the study design did not allow for further investigation of these differences. The authors noted that, while this study aligned with earlier research suggesting that the roles of transition teachers differ substantially from that of other special educators, further research was needed to distinguish between the various roles in transition (i.e. transition teachers vs. transition coordinators). They also noted that further research was needed to further clarify the importance of the various competencies.

In summary, studies regarding roles in transition have focused primarily on identifying the transition-related knowledge and skills needed by professionals in three

different roles (transition specialist, transition teacher, and special educator). The efforts have led to DCDT's Transition Specialist Advanced Preparation Standards, a set of transition competencies that can be used by personnel preparation programs designing transition coursework and by districts planning for transition specialist roles (DCDT, 2013). Additionally, some important distinctions were made between transition specialists, who tend to focus more on coordination activities such as interagency collaboration and job development and transition or special education teachers who focus more on student development. These distinctions have further guided expert recommendations about the roles various professionals should play in transition (Blalock et al., 2003). With the exception of Asselin et al. (1998), who conducted a focus group, these studies were all surveys which asked practitioners to report on their use of or perceptions about specific practices. Thus, they are limited in what they can tell us about how professionals conceptualize their transition roles more broadly, how they collaborate to meet transition responsibilities or how organizational contexts may shape the practices they enact or perceive as most important.

The division of transition responsibilities in schools. Four studies, while not focused on identifying transition competencies, used survey methods to better understand how responsibilities related to transition are currently being divided amongst professionals in schools. Taken together and examined over time, these studies suggest that there is wide variability in who delivers transition services, with continuing concerns and ambiguity about what roles various practitioners do and should take on.

Conderman and Katsiyannis (2002) surveyed 199 randomly selected secondary

special educators in Wisconsin (66% response rate) regarding the range of their instructional and transition responsibilities. They found that secondary special educators fulfill many diverse roles both in and outside of the classroom. This includes co-teaching, consulting, developing IEPs, and diverse instructional responsibilities. As it relates to transition, 35% of special educators in the sample reported being responsible for coordinating work experiences, 45% were the primary contact for arranging transition services with community agencies, and 50% delivered vocational instruction. Other providers of these services included work experience coordinators, vocational teachers, parents, and IEP team designee, and in some cases no one. Transition coordinators were not identified as playing any role in this study. Researchers expressed concern about the wide variety of responsibilities special educators are taking on, potentially without sufficient training or support and with limited research exploring how special educators are experiencing these expanded roles.

A 2005 survey sent to all high school, middle school, and junior high school special education department coordinators, lead teachers and transition personnel in South Carolina (105 middle and high school lead special education teachers and 37 transition personnel responded) indicated that a range of professionals may be responsible for transition in a given school (Zhang et al., 2005). Respondents were asked to identify the person responsible for coordinating transition programming in their school or district. The responses included transition coordinator (44.4%), multiple personnel (23.9%), special education director (19.0%), classroom teacher (9.2%), guidance personnel (1.4%), and other (n =2.1%; Zhang et al., 2005). Respondents were also asked

to rate how well their school or district addressed 15 different components of transition. More than 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their district addressed the following components: IEP and transition planning, career information, functional skills curriculum, transition education for compliance to special education legislation, and independent living skills curriculum. By comparison there were a number of transition components that respondents did not feel their district addressed well or did not feel their district addressed at all. More than 20% of respondents reported that their district did not address supported employment, internships, and job coaching. Researchers expressed concern that, when multiple personnel are responsible for transition (as was true in almost a quarter of schools), responsibilities may not be clearly assigned and may not end up getting done. They also expressed concern that special educators may not have the time, knowledge, or resources to be responsible for transition.

Li et al. (2009) surveyed 343 randomly selected secondary special educators or transition coordinators who were members if the Council for Exceptional Children. The majority of participants (70%) were special educators, while 17% were transition coordinators. Interestingly, 13% of participants played the role of both transition coordinator and special educator indicating another unique way of dividing transition responsibilities. This study found special educators to be minimally involved in transition, except for transition planning. They did not take an active role in tasks such as transition assessment or instruction, interagency collaboration, or job development. Researchers found that in-service training was associated with increased involvement in transition. They argue that special educators need to be more involved in transition rather

than less. For example, they point out that by taking an active role in assessing transition competencies, teachers will be better prepared to provide the most appropriate instruction in their classrooms.

Benitez et al. (2009), surveyed 557 middle and high school special educators in 33 states. They identified their sample by randomly selecting secondary special educators with primary teaching responsibilities for students with high-incidence disabilities from a national education-marketing database. While their primary focus was on special educators' perceptions of their proficiency in transition-related competencies, they also asked respondents about the role they currently played in the delivery of transition services. Overall, special educators in this survey reported delivering transition services "rarely" to "occasionally" (a mean of 2.70 out of 4, where 1 represents *never* and 4 represents *frequently*, p. 8). Participants reported being most likely to implement services within the transition planning domain and least likely to implement services with the collaboration domain. There was variability amongst teacher groups (based on the disabilities of the students they reported teaching) in the frequency of implementation of various services.

One qualitative study also explored the roles transition coordinators take up in schools. Lillis and Kutscher (2021) qualitatively examined interviews with seven transition coordinators in Massachusetts exploring their conceptions of their roles and the factors they felt shaped their ability to enact transition programming effectively. They found that transition coordinators often entered into positions that were not clearly defined and had substantial autonomy to develop their own role. Transition coordinators

varied in their direct service responsibilities and their roles evolved over time. Transition coordinators dedicated substantial energy toward developing relationships and promoting "buy-in" for transition, encouraging other stakeholders to collaboratively engage in their efforts to improve practices.

Findings from these studies do not necessarily present a clear pattern of how transition responsibilities are being divided amongst professionals. They suggest that schools and districts vary widely in terms of how transition responsibilities are assigned and shared. While scholars have identified competencies and attempted to make delineations amongst roles (i.e. special educator vs. transition teacher vs. transition specialist), these studies suggest that those delineations may or may not align with how practitioners are experiencing their roles. Additionally, there are at least some contrasting views on the roles that special education teachers can and should play in transition.

Roles of Other School-based Professionals in Transition. While most studies about professional roles and responsibilities in transition have focused on special educators and transition coordinators/specialists, a few studies have addressed the potential role that other school-based professionals might play in transition.

Two studies have focused on the role of occupational therapists in transition. Spencer et al. (2003) surveyed special education directors from every school district in Kentucky (104 of 181 responded) about the roles that occupational therapists play in transition in their districts. Special education directors reported limited involvement of occupational therapists in transition. Occupational therapists provided less than 20% of all transition services; involvement tended to focus on support with assistive technology,

task modification or IEP participation, with much more limited involvement in work-related tasks (i.e. job placement, job preparation, or on-site job coaching). About 35% of respondents felt that additional occupational therapy services were needed during transition. Respondents identified a wide range of reasons for lack of involvement including lack of understanding of the role of occupational therapy in transition, lack of demand from parents or teachers, financial constraints, and seeing special educators as responsible.

Mankey (2011) surveyed all licensed occupational therapists in Arkansas (447 of 976 responded) about their involvement and beliefs about involvement in transition planning and found similar results. Occupational therapists reported low levels of current involvement in transition and tended to view their role in transition as limited. For example, 63% of respondents said that they had not assisted special educators in the transition planning process. Only 21.4% said that they should play a role in secondary transition and only 5% felt they had time to work with students who are transitioning from school. Only 6.3% of respondents felt knowledgeable about their role in secondary transition. At the same time, almost half (45.5%) of occupational therapists saw themselves as having expertise that would be beneficial to the transition planning process. Mankey argued that these findings suggest that occupational therapists may see their role as specialized and task-oriented and may need support to better understand how occupational therapy fits within a larger process of secondary transition.

One study examined the role of school psychologists in the transition process. Lillenstein et al., (2006) surveyed school psychologists and transition coordinators

randomly and evenly selected from the three geographic regions of Pennsylvania regarding their perceptions of how involved school psychologists currently are in transition and how important it is for them to be involved. 125 of 450 school psychologists and 66 of 225 transition coordinators responded to the survey. The survey examined four categories of involvement: consultation, assessment, direct services, and program planning/evaluation. Authors reported descriptive statistics from this survey. An important finding from this study was that both transition coordinators and school psychologists perceived the importance of involvement as greater than the current level of involvement on all tasks. There were 3 tasks that both groups agreed that school psychologists currently perform frequently: reevaluations to meet transition needs, functional behavior assessments, and input for placement and support. School psychologists reported that they should play a greater role across all categories, but in particular in personality/career assessments. For transition coordinators, the greatest difference between current and desired involvement was in providing workshops on how to use assessment data for transition planning. The majority of school psychologists reported that they needed more knowledge about transition planning to participate effectively in the process and that high caseloads also precluded additional involvement.

Agran et al. (2002) examined the extent to which vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors played a role in the transition process in schools. The authors argued that having representatives from adult services agencies, especially VR, is extremely important to a successful transition since these individuals will likely be the ones providing support after students leave high school. Agran et al. surveyed of VR

counselors (62 respondents) and special educators (54 respondents) in Utah. Special educators were secondary special education teachers and administrators randomly selected from a list of individuals who attended the Utah Transition Conference. The survey was sent to all 132 rehabilitation counselors who were members of the Utah state rehabilitation association. They found limited collaboration between VR counselors and schools. For example, 60% of VR counselors reported not having attended a single IEP meeting in the past year, despite having transition aged-students on their caseload. Almost half of special educators (42%) noted that they invited VR counselors to the IEP meetings less than 25% of the time. Half of special educators reported never having received any information from a VR counselor. These findings suggest that, at the time of this study, VR counselors were playing a limited role in transition planning and there was limited collaboration between school-based personnel and VR counselors. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, passed by Congress in 2014, significantly increased the requirements for state VR agencies to provide services to transition-aged youth. For, example, 15% of each state's funding for VR services must go to transition services for youth with disabilities. WIOA also identified specific Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) that VR agencies must provide for youth. These new federal requirements, along with emphasis from researchers on interagency collaboration, may mean that VR counselors are or will play a larger role in transition planning and service delivery in schools since this study was conducted. However, additional research is needed to assess their current roles.

One qualitative study examined the roles of six VR counselors who were jointly

funded by the state VR agency and the local education agency to serve as school-based transition specialists (Plotner & Dymond, 2017). Participants were based within a public high school, but supervised by an administrator from VR. The focus of the study was to better understand the roles these professionals played in developing and implementing transition curriculum. Researchers conducted one semi-structured interview with each of the participants. They coded the interviews first using open coding and then working collaboratively to identify themes. Study participants felt that the unique nature of their position (i.e., being located in the school and jointly funded) allowed for substantial collaboration. Plotner and Dymond found that these professionals were able to influence the curriculum that students received by helping teachers access vocational curriculum. In their roles, participants also worked directly with students in the classroom, helping to teach transition-related skills. This small study suggests that jointly funded positions may have some promise for improving collaboration between VR agencies and schools in the transition process. It also suggests some responsibilities that individuals in these positions may take on. However, further research is needed to better understand the roles of VR counselors in facilitating transition and the structures that might support their work in schools (Plotner & Dymond, 2017).

These studies suggest that there are multiple school-based personnel with expertise to contribute to the secondary transition process. However, current involvement for occupational therapists, school psychologists, and VR counselors is limited. Lack of involvement may be related to lack of understanding about their role in the transition planning process (i.e. how the process works or how their expertise may be relevant)

and/or lack of time or structures to promote collaboration. However, since these studies are primarily self-report surveys that took place within a single state, they are limited in what they can tell us. Participants were not asked about the range of individual or organizational factors that may be shaping their involvement in transition. Additionally, there are potentially other school-based professionals who might have a role to play in transition but whose role has not been examined. Notably absent from the research on roles and responsibilities in transition are school counselors. School counselors play a primary role in preparing all students for their transition to postsecondary education and employment (American School Counselor Association, 2014) and would therefore naturally play an important role for transition for students with disabilities. However, perceptions about the role of school counselors in transition, their knowledge and skill to take on these roles, and the transition-related roles they currently perform have not been examined.

Personnel Preparation

This section synthesizes the research focused on personnel preparation related to transition. This research includes (1) studies examining professionals' perceptions of their preparation experiences and the extent to which they feel prepared to enact transition planning and services, (2) studies examining the relationship between professionals' training and the practices they enact, and (3) the types of training experiences professionals are able to access including preservice training, in-service training, and credentialing opportunities.

Perceptions of Training/Preparation Experiences. Multiple studies have demonstrated that special educators and other school-based transition professionals feel they do not have adequate knowledge of transition practices and limited training and professional development opportunities. Additionally, these studies suggest only limited improvements over the past 20 years. Knott and Asselin's 1999 survey, described earlier in relation to transition competencies, also surveyed teachers to rate their transition knowledge. Special educators rated their knowledge as medium to low in most of the competencies, with somewhat higher ratings for foundational knowledge about transition and lower ratings for more in-depth areas such as knowledge about adult service agencies, the referral process, or various models of transition. Similarly, Blanchett et al. (2001) also asked participants about their perceptions of preparation and training to successfully prepare students with disabilities for transition (in addition to their perceptions of the importance of specific transition competencies). 45% of special educators who participated in this survey felt somewhat unprepared or highly unprepared to deliver transition services. Only 7% felt highly prepared for their transition responsibilities.

More recently, Benitez et al. (2009) surveyed 557 middle and high school special educators in 33 states regarding their perceptions of their proficiency in transition-related competencies in six different domains. Across all survey items, educators reported feeling "somewhat unprepared to somewhat prepared" (M=2.69 out of 4, where 4 represented "very prepared," p. 8) to plan and deliver transition services. Practitioners level of satisfaction with their training experiences averaged 2.59 of 4 (with 4

representing “very satisfied,” p.8). Practitioners felt most prepared to implement transition planning (M=3.15) but less prepared to implement other types of activities such as interagency collaboration (M=2.49) or transition assessment (M=2.52). Importantly, correlation coefficients revealed significant and large correlations between level of preparation and frequency of implementation of practices (r=.72) and satisfaction with training and frequency of implementation (r=.65). Thus, practitioners who felt more prepared and more satisfied with their training reported planning for and delivering transition services more frequently.

Morningstar and Benitez (2013) found similar results, with the average preparation rating on 46 transition competencies as somewhat unprepared to somewhat prepared (M=2.69 out of 4 where 4 represents very prepared). ANOVA tests revealed small but significant between-group differences (effect size $\eta^2 = .046$), with those who described “transition” as their primary teaching responsibility feeling slightly more prepared (M=3.08) than teachers who worked with students from specific disability groups (e.g. LD, M=2.61; Low incidence, M=2.53; and combination, M=2.66).

The most recent survey of transition services providers that addressed perceptions of knowledge and skills was conducted by Mazzotti and Plotner in 2016. This study surveyed a range of professionals engaged in transition work including middle and high school special educators, transition specialists, school administrators, vocational coordinators, rehabilitation counselors, and other disability professionals. Researchers used a snowball sampling strategy and recruited 592 participants across five states. The survey addressed participants’ access to training and feelings of preparation specifically

around the implementation of evidence-based transition practices. Researchers analyzed the data using descriptive statistics. More than half of participants (56.3%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that their professional development experiences had fully prepared them to implement evidence-based practices. Participants noted limited opportunities for professional development or training; 51.8% were seldom or never provided professional development to implemented secondary transition evidence-based practices through their district, 67.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they gained knowledge of evidence-based practices in their educator preparation programs.

Overall, these studies indicate that many professionals across multiple roles continue to lack adequate training opportunities to develop their transition competencies and feel only moderately prepared to engage in these practices.

Importance of training. A few studies present evidence to suggest that level of training or confidence in transition competencies may relate to the degree to which professionals implement certain transition practices. Morningstar and Benitez's study (2013) examined the relationship between training experiences and implementation of evidence-based practices. A Pearson correlation showed a significant and large positive correlation between the frequency of implementation of evidence-based practices and how prepared teachers perceived themselves to be ($r=.72$, $p<.01$); "the more prepared teachers perceived themselves to be to plan and deliver transition practices, the more frequently they reported performing these activities" (p. 56). The authors conducted a regression analysis to examine which preparation experience variables (years teaching, number of transition courses, number of staff development hours, and certification status)

predicted the frequency of implementation of transition practices. They found that preparation experience was a significant predictor of frequency of practice implementation, accounting for 18% of the variability in frequency of implementation. The most important contributors were transition courses and staff development hours; years teaching was not a significant predictor. Benitez et al. (2009) also found a significant positive correlation between teachers who perceived themselves as prepared to deliver transition services and those who delivered those services on a more regular basis. On the other hand, Mazzotti and Plotner (2016), in their study about the extent of implementation of EBPs, found that 70% of participants were always, often or sometimes implementing EBPs despite a third of participants not having access to resources or professional development and more than half of participants feeling dissatisfied with their training experiences.

Despite some mixed results, these studies overall suggest that training experiences matter, as professionals who have had more training opportunities and feel more prepared to deliver transition services are more likely to do so (Benitez et al., 2009; Morningstar & Benitez 2013).

Preservice preparation opportunities. A number of studies have examined secondary transition offerings within educator preparation programs. These studies have addressed three main areas: (1) the extent to which transition content is offered within educator preparation programs (EPPs), (2) what content is being offered, and (3) what seems to drive these offerings.

Studies that have examined the extent to which EPPs offer transition content in

their programs have generally expressed concern that opportunities to learn transition competencies are limited and not required for initial licensure in special education. Anderson et al. (2003) conducted a nationally representative survey of instructors and department chairpersons from 573 institutions of higher education (IHEs) that offer special education programs regarding their transition course offerings and their views about the importance of teaching various transition competencies. They noted that both instructors and department chairpersons who participated in the survey viewed all of the transition competencies as important. However, most transition curriculum was infused into existing courses rather than being provided through stand-alone courses. Only 45% of respondents offered one or more courses dedicated to transition competencies. Instructors who participated in the survey felt they were able to devote more time to transition competencies when stand-alone transition courses were offered. Anderson et al. expressed concern that transition content may get only limited attention if it is incorporated into other courses and that it may be taught by instructors who lack transition expertise. In contrast, they noted that preservice educators need different types and amounts of transition content depending on the roles that they will take on. They argued that further research is needed to better understand the nature of the content being taught to whom and whether it provides educators with sufficient knowledge and skills.

Morningstar et al. (2018) attempted to update the work of Anderson et al. (2003) and found that little had changed in term of transition coursework being offered. They contacted EPP program coordinators or designated contacts for special education programs at 688 programs affiliated with the Council for the Accreditation of Educator

Preparation that offered special education programs. Based on responses from 140 faculty members at IHEs in 43 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington D.C., they found that only 46.2% of programs offered a stand-alone course in transition. Respondents from programs that offered at least one course in transition were more likely to agree that their program was preparing their graduates to enact transition programming across the seven transition domains identified by CEC-DCDT. Although they noted that there was not a clear pattern for how transition content was being delivered, the most common approaches were reading and lecture, while field experiences in transition were much less common. Similarly, in a study of 107 high ranking IHEs that had either graduate or undergraduate programs in special education, Williams-Diehm et al. (2018) found that only 36% (31 graduate programs, and 8 undergraduate programs) offered a stand-alone, credit-bearing course on secondary transition that was required for initial licensure.

Morningstar et al. (2018) and Williams-Diehm et al. (2018) both addressed the question of what transition content is being offered within EPPs. Both studies suggest that skills within certain transition domains such as transition planning for IEPs, family and student involvement, and instruction received significant attention, while other domains such as collaboration, evaluation and leadership received more limited or no attention. These findings are aligned with studies that examined perceptions of knowledge and skill by practitioners, which reported that practitioners felt most prepared in transition planning domains and least prepared in areas such as interagency collaboration (e.g., Benitez et al., 2009).

As a part of the survey of EPPs, Morningstar et al. (2018) asked respondents to

rate the degree to which various transition competencies were included in course content. The area most likely to be taught was "involving families during transition planning" (89% of programs) and "self-advocacy and self-determination" (88%). Areas that received less attention included "instruction in leadership and advocacy" (64%), "embedding transition practices within general education" (64%), and "career development and work-based learning" (66%).

Williams-Diehm et al. (2018) examined 24 syllabi from stand-alone transition courses to better understand which transition competencies were being covered. They noted that only 21% of syllabi referred specifically to the CEC-DCDT Transition Specialist Standards. Williams-Diehm et al. also examined the extent to which the five domains and twenty subdomains of the Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0, a framework for transition planning, was incorporated into syllabi. They found that about 85% of subdomains were addressed, with the bulk of time being spent on only a few areas, primarily student-focused planning and student development. They argued that while a range of domains and subdomains were addressed, the substantial focus was on meeting the legal requirements for transition planning as compared to promoting evidence-based instructional strategies. For example, topics such as interagency collaboration and employment were addressed less often and less thoroughly. Williams-Diehm et al. note that it is difficult to draw conclusions from their findings because a syllabus does not provide the full picture of the content being taught and because of the limited number of programs they examined.

Plotner and Simonsen (2018) addressed the question of what factors might impact

transition course offerings at IHEs. They first examined patterns in funding for transition-focused personnel preparation projects by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) between 2001 and 2016 and noted a decline in funded projects. They then interviewed 10 primary investigators from these funded projects regarding key issues and trends. Plotner and Simonsen identified three important catalysts for including transition coursework at EPPs. The first catalyst was state credentialing opportunities. Interview respondents noted that the lack of state certification or credential options reduced the motivation for students to pursue specialized coursework in transition. Without student demand, the IHEs had limited incentive to offer more robust training such as stand-alone courses or practicum opportunities in this area. A second catalyst was federal funding. Participants noted that when OSEP funding for a program ended, there were limited incentives to keep the program going. Finally, faculty expertise or interest in transition was also seen as a factor that impacted whether or not transition coursework was offered. Of note, in their national survey of IHEs, Morningstar et al. found that only 45% of programs had a faculty member who specializes in or conducts research in transition. This factor may be related to the limited access to transition content at many IHEs.

In-service preparation opportunities. I found no studies specifically focused on the availability or content of in-service training opportunities related to transition. In their survey of practitioners regarding practitioners' perceptions of their confidence and use of evidence-based transition practices, Mazzotti and Plotner (2016) included an item asking the extent to which participants received professional development opportunities on

transition through their school or district. They found that more than half of respondents (51.8%) were seldom or never provided with these professional development opportunities. Benitez et al. (2009) also asked about hours of staff development in their survey of practitioners regarding perceptions of preparation and implementation in transition. They found that practitioners had an average of 28 hours of professional development devoted to transition, with wide variability in responses (ranging from 0–50 hours), and 14% of respondents reporting no opportunities for in-service training in transition.

These surveys included a range of professionals (e.g. special educators working with a diverse range of students, transition specialists, special education administrators) and therefore limit the extent to which we can draw conclusions about professional development opportunities for specific groups. They also do not provide detail about the range of transition competencies being prioritized through in-service trainings. They do suggest wide variability in professional development opportunities focused on transition.

Credentialing opportunities. Simonsen et al. (2018) recently examined the status of state-level licensure and credentialing opportunities in secondary transition. In special education, only eight states offer a transition licensure, certificate or endorsement. In some states, endorsement opportunities do exist for other transition professionals working in Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies (VR) or as Career-Technical Education (CTE) educators. However, 36 states offer no credentialing opportunities for any professionals who support students with disabilities in their transition from high school into adult life. Even in cases where licensure or credential options are available,

professionals working in transition are generally not required to hold these credentials in order to practice. Michigan is the only state that requires transition coordinators to hold a specific credential. Furthermore, no state education agencies were able to provide the percentages of transition professionals within the state who held a transition related credential demonstrating that it not something that states typically track. One additional finding was the wide variety of professional titles held by individuals working in transition, highlighting the variability in the way these roles are defined.

Simonsen and colleagues (2018) also investigated whether or not states included transition-related state standards and/or course requirements as a part of initial licensure requirements for beginning professionals. They found that, while 33 states required some transition-related coursework and/or state standards for initial licensure, this coursework was often only required for certain categories of special educators (i.e. severe disabilities endorsement or secondary special educators). Only 11 states have transition-related professional standards for all special educators. As noted earlier, lack of state-level credentialing or licensure requirements reduces the demand for these courses as therefore reduces the incentive for IHEs to offer transition coursework (Plotner & Simonsen, 2018).

Conclusion

Research and policy efforts provide substantial guidance for schools and districts to improve their practices to support students with disabilities as they transition into adult life (e.g. Kohler et al., 2016; Test, Fowler et al., 2009; Test, Mazzotti et al., 2009). However, studies examining the implementation of transition practices have shown that

schools are not meeting their transition responsibilities required under IDEA or implementing evidence-based practices consistently (e.g. Landmark & Zhang, 2012). Research focused on defining the roles of transition professionals has largely focused on identifying specific competencies, or set of knowledge and skills, needed to support transition planning and service delivery (e.g. Blanchett 2001, DeFur & Taymans, 1995). The identification of transition competencies have helped to define the roles that transition specialists can play in schools and to delineate between the roles of transition coordinators/specialists, transition teachers, and special educators. Based on this research, CEC-DCDT, the main professional body for the field of transition, adopted a set of standards for transition specialists which they hope will be utilized to create job descriptions for transition specialists and to inform state-level licensure and credentialing opportunities (DCDT, 2013).

More broadly, the story of how transition responsibilities are shared amongst transition professionals is somewhat murkier. Studies that have attempted to distinguish between transition specialists and special educators suggest that the transition responsibilities of special educators might be more focused on the direct-service activities such as the transition components of IEP process (i.e. developing postsecondary goals) while the role of transition specialists might be more focused on domains such as interagency collaboration, the coordination of services, and employment-related activities (i.e. Blanchett, 2001). These studies also suggest that special educators focused primarily on transition have substantively different roles that other special educators (Morgan et al., 2014). Yet various state and national surveys that have asked who is taking responsibility

for transition-related tasks cloud this picture. These studies suggest that a wide range of personnel may be the primary person responsible for transition (Zhang et al., 2005), that in some cases the same individuals may play the role of both transition specialist and special educator (Li et al., 2009), and that the roles of special educators in transition vary widely (Benitez et al., 2009; Li et al., 2009; Zhang et al. 2005). Because these studies are quantitative in nature, we are limited in our ability to understand nuances within these roles, such as how professionals collaborate around transition in a particular school or district or the contextual factors that influence how transition responsibilities are divided amongst professionals.

A similar limitation exists regarding the roles of other school-based professionals such as occupational therapists, school psychologists, school-based VR counselors, school counselors, and others. A limited research base suggests that these professionals currently play a small role in secondary transition, but that they believe they may have expertise that would be valuable to the transition process (i.e. Lillenstein et al., 2006; Mankey, 2011). These studies also suggest that lack of knowledge about transition and lack of clarity about their role may contribute to lack of participation. However, more research is needed to better understand these professionals' conceptions of their roles. Additionally some roles, such as the role of school counselors, have not been examined at all. Finally, professionals who have had more training and professional development experiences and feel more prepared are more likely to enact evidence-based practices in transition (Morningstar & Benitez, 2013). Yet, many professionals report not having access to such training and not feeling prepared to engage in transition practices (e.g.

Benitez et al., 2009). Preservice, in-service and credentialing opportunities for transition remain limited.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Methods

In this chapter, I describe the qualitative case-study design I used to answer the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. How do professionals in a secondary school conceptualize the activity system through which they collectively provide transition services?
2. How do the school's professionals describe the division of responsibilities for transition among them?
3. How do professionals conceptualize the individual and contextual factors that shape the division of responsibilities and the enactment of transition planning and service delivery?

Conceptual Framework

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) served as the conceptual foundation for this qualitative investigation. CHAT is a useful framework for understanding the multi-faceted and complex processes of professional work because it can provide insights into the relationships among people's actions, their cognition (what they think and feel), and the contexts in which they operate (Engestrom, 2000). In CHAT, the unit of analysis is an activity system, a model of collective activity that includes multiple actors with different roles, positions, and viewpoints. An activity system is comprised of six components: subject(s), objects, tools, a community of others, rules, and division of labor. Subjects are the actors within an activity system; subjects engage in individual

actions but work toward a collective object. The object is the desired outcome of the activity system; this object may be perceived differently by different subjects and is impacted by the ways that constructions of the object have changed over time. Tools may be both material and/or conceptual instruments that are used to achieve the object. The community of significant others are individuals and groups who share an interest in the object of the activity system. Rules are the implicit and explicit norms that regulate the activity system. Finally, the division of labor includes the division of work, power, positions, access to resources, and rewards amongst the various subjects within the activity system (Engestrom, 2000). In this study, the unit of analysis is one high school's activity system for transition planning and service delivery; broadly conceptualized, this includes the school's actors and actions that collectively support students' with disabilities successful movement from secondary education to post-school activities including postsecondary education, employment, community participation, and independent living. Figure 1 provides a model of a sample activity system for transition planning and service delivery.

CHAT is a useful framework for exploring the organizational and social context within which transition planning and services are enacted by various professionals. CHAT has been used to study the roles of special educators (Leko & Brownell, 2011), collaborations to support students with disabilities (Gomez-Najarro, 2020), and implementation of IEPs in inclusive secondary settings (Bray & Russell, 2018). Similarly, transition planning and service delivery can be understood as an activity system with the object of meeting federal transition requirements under IDEA and

supporting successful postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities. Mapping this activity system provided a structure for exploring and analyzing who the various subjects are within the activity system, how roles, responsibilities, and power are divided amongst these individuals, how the knowledge and beliefs of individual subjects influence their actions and perceptions of the objects, and the context in which these individuals operate. In other words, CHAT is a helpful framework for exploring the complexity of transition planning and service delivery in the school context.

CHAT is also appropriate for this investigation because of its focus on understanding historically evolving activities. Federal transition requirements first appeared in IDEA in 1990 and these requirements were adapted and enhanced through the 1997 and 2004 reauthorizations of IDEA. Since then, Massachusetts has further clarified transition expectations through state regulations, advisories, and transition planning tools. As a result, schools have had to adjust their processes to account for evolving conceptions of what secondary transition means and what transition planning and services should look like; this process occurs within the context of specific organizations with particular norms, structures and routines that shape how these policies are interpreted and taken up. Thus, transition planning and service delivery can be understood as an evolving system that is adapting over time based on cultural and historical factors within particular contexts.

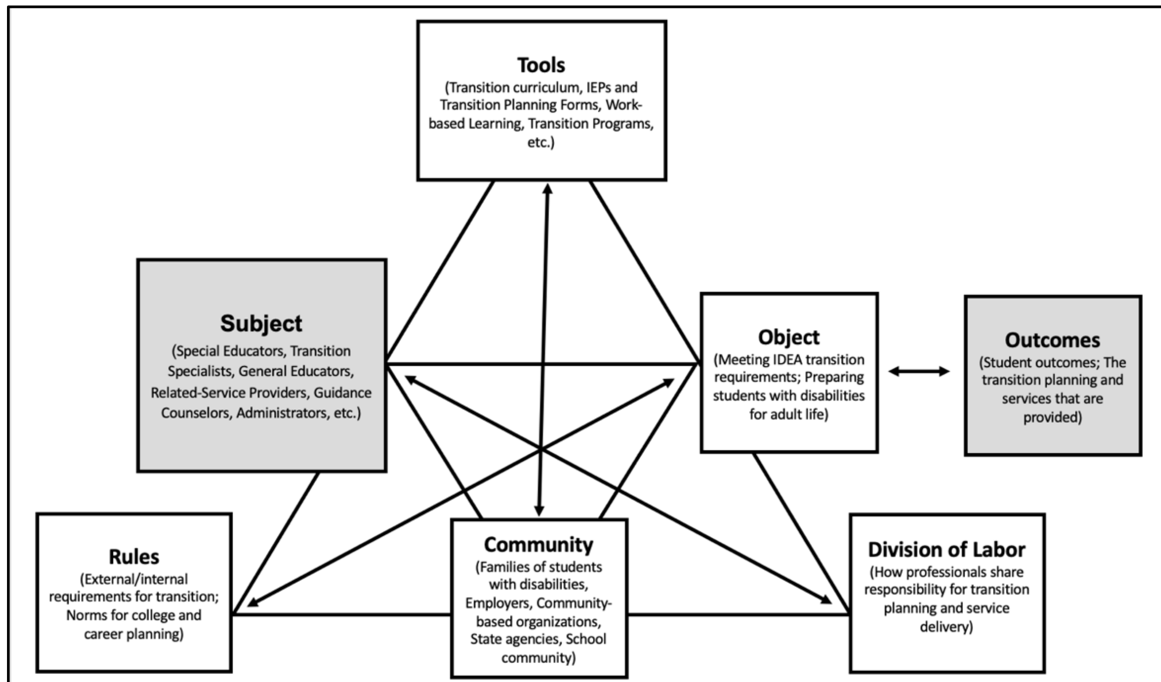

Figure 1. Sample Activity System for Transition Planning and Service Delivery.

Context and Participants

This study takes place in a small, suburban high school in Massachusetts. Chestnut High School serves approximately 800–900 students each year. Demographically, approximately 88% of Chestnut's student population is White; Asian students are the second largest enrollment group making up about 5% of the student body. Chestnut has significantly fewer economically disadvantaged students than the state overall (5% vs. 30%) and fewer students with disabilities (10% vs. 19%). From 2015–2019, the percentage of Chestnut graduates who immediately enrolled in postsecondary education ranged from 85% to 91%, compared to a 69–70% enrollment rate for the state overall. The vast majority of students enrolled in four year colleges, with only about 0–2% of graduates enrolling in two-year colleges, compared with the state average (about 15%). At Chestnut, the percentage of students with disabilities who enroll

in college immediately after high school is slightly lower than the overall student population, (ranging from 72–87% from 2015–2019), but significantly higher than the state average (ranging from 50–52% in the same period; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.). The town of Chestnut is also predominantly White (>90%). As of 2019, about 74% of Chestnut residents older than 25 held a Bachelor's degree or higher and the median income for residents 25 and older was about $100,000 (United States Census Bureau, n.d.).

In selecting a research site, I eliminated districts with more than two high schools as these larger districts likely have larger, more layered, and more complex staffing models. I prioritized identifying a district that was supportive of my research efforts, and in particular a district in which a point person was willing to assist with logistics and recruitment efforts. This was important because developing a rich, in-depth case study depended upon multiple personnel being willing to describe their work in detail. District support was even more salient as I began recruitment in April 2020, soon after the schools closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Through networking, I met Adrian, the transition program specialist in Chestnut, and she agreed to assist with study logistics in her district. There were no direct benefits to the district for participating in the study.

My approach to this investigation was to ask a school-based professional from the research site to identify three focal students who were completing their 12th grade year; each focal student would have a different primary disability (a student with an emotional/behavioral disability, a student with autism spectrum disorder, and a student with a specific learning disability). The school-based professional would assign each

student a pseudonym and assist with identifying the constellation of professionals who were part of that student's activity system for transition planning and service delivery. Identifying focal students provided a tool for bounding the activity system, offered a concrete way for professionals to describe their actions and responsibilities, and allowed me to explore how Chestnut's activity system functioned in relation to students with different needs. 12th graders were selected as older students are more likely to have had more robust transition planning and services. The disabilities I selected are among the most common disability categories and were likely to represent students with a range of transition and support needs. By having a school-based professional assign pseudonyms to each student, I was able to protect the students' confidentiality; students were not participants in the study and their identities were unknown to the research team.

In June 2020, Adrian was asked to identify three focal students who met the study's criteria. Once the focal students were selected, Adrian developed a list of all professionals who had worked with one or more of the focal students in the past year. I explained that the list should include a wide range of professionals and provided examples, including general educators, special educators, related service providers, guidance counselors, and team leaders. Based on these criteria, Adrian identified 13 professionals and emailed them an introduction to the study that included the names and pseudonyms of the focal students. I was not included in this email to protect the identities of the focal students, but followed up with each potential participant in a separate email. Of the 13 professionals identified, nine agreed to participate in the study. Adrian also participated in the study. Thus, there were 10 participants in total, 8 female and 2 male

educators. Three general education teachers and one speech language pathologist declined to participate. Individuals who participated in the study were entered into a raffle to win a $50 gift amazon gift card; one such gift card was distributed after all data were collected. Table 1 provides the pseudonyms and primary disability of each of the focal students. Table 2 provides a list of participants including their title, the focal student(s) with whom they worked and their years of experience. I provide more detailed information about professionals' roles and responsibilities in the findings. I refrained from providing additional demographic information about participants in order to protect their confidentiality.

Table 1. Chestnut Focal Students

Pseudonym	Disability
Clay	Specific Learning Disability
Liana	Emotional Disability
Randall	Autism Spectrum Disorder

Table 2. List of Participants

Pseudonym	Job Title	Focal Student(s) with whom they worked	Years in current role
Adrian	Administrator (Transition Program Coordinator/Out of District Coordinator)	Randall	1
Alex	Guidance Counselor	Clay	18
Barry	English Teacher	Clay, Randall	4
Claudia	Administrator (Interim Chair Coordinator)	Clay, Liana, Randall	1
Dana	Special Educator (Learning Specialist)	Clay, Liana, Randall	13
Ellen	School Psychologist	Randall, Liana	1
Francine	Special Educator (Learning Specialist)	Clay, Liana, Randall	6
Gia	Special Educator (Transition Specialist)	Randall	1
Jamie	Guidance Counselor	Randall	7
Rudy	Guidance Counselor	Liana	14

Data Collection

Between June and August 2020, I conducted one semi-structured interview with each of the 10 participants. I conducted and recorded the interviews via zoom. Zoom software transcribed the interviews and a research assistant edited each transcript for accuracy. Interviews lasted 47 minutes on average. The interview was divided into three sections (See Appendix A for full interview protocol). In the first part of the interview, I asked participants a set of brief, background questions designed to get an overview of each professional's role and professional experience. For example, I asked participants to describe their primary responsibilities, how long they have been in their current role, and whether they had had coursework, training, or professional development related to secondary transition.

In the second part of the interview, I asked participants a series of open-ended questions designed to explore their beliefs about successful transitions, their conceptions of their role in postsecondary planning, and their perspective on how postsecondary planning happens at Chestnut. For example, I asked participants what they think are the most important thing schools can do to prepare students for their next step after high school. I also asked participants whether there were schoolwide goals for what happens to students once they leave high school and how those goals are communicated to staff and students. In this section, I encouraged participants to think broadly about secondary transition (e.g. preparing students for their next step rather than solely transition planning activities that are required under IDEA and occur within the formal transition planning process). In addition, I also probed to better understand how norms, messaging, and

experiences may differ for students with and without disabilities.

Finally, the third section of the interview addressed participants' work with the focal students. These questions prompted participants to talk more specifically about the focal students with whom they worked and therefore to describe their work in more detailed and concrete ways. For example, I asked participants to describe the ways that they interacted with the focal students both within and outside of the formal transition planning process. As needed, I probed to clarify each professional's involvement in specific aspects of transition planning such as attending IEP meetings, with whom they collaborated and how they came to understand their transition-related responsibilities. Participants were asked to only use the students' pseudonyms in the interviews to protect their confidentiality. For participants who worked with multiple focal students, I asked the entire set of questions for one student and then repeated the questions with the second and third student as needed. I asked participants to describe how their roles varied with the different focal students or with the roles they might typically play in transition planning and service delivery.

I maintained this general three-part structure across interviews. However, consistent with an inductive approach (Charmaz 2014), I followed participants' leads when ideas emerged and asked follow-up questions for clarification and to deepen my understanding of participants' perspectives. For example, when describing his perspective on the most important things a high school can do to prepare students for their next step, one participant shared a tension between community expectations and his own goals for students. I probed to further explore the participant's perspective on this

topic. I also probed to ask professionals whether they engaged in specific responsibilities where appropriate. For example, when a participant explained that she served as a case manager and wrote students' IEPs, I asked whether she also wrote students' transition plans. In a few limited cases, earlier interviews informed questions or probes in later interviews. For example, once a few participants described participating in multiple IEP team meetings for Randall, I probed later participants to explore their roles in these meetings. However, I was careful not to share participants' perspectives with one another and did not raise specific themes with participants to allow each participant's perspective to emerge independently.

I used CHAT as a framework for developing the interview questions, ensuring that each component (e.g., tools, rules, object) was addressed. For example, I asked about normative expectations about students' postsecondary plans and how those expectations were conveyed to explore the rules guiding the activity system. Questions about supports and barriers participants experienced in their work with the focal students provided insights about the tools that were important in shaping their work. Because the division of labor was particularly important in addressing the research questions, multiple questions addressed participants' conceptions of their own role and the roles of others in secondary transition.

Additionally, the interviews took place with the unusual backdrop of school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Chestnut High School adapted and served students through remote learning from March–June 2020, the focal students' senior year of high school. I conducted interviews for this investigation in June–August of 2020.

Although I did not adjust my interview protocol, I encouraged participants to share about how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted their work with students as it came up in relation to the interview questions. When it came up, I asked participants to compare their experience with what might have occurred in a more typical year. I discuss the participants' conceptions of the impact of Covid-19 in relation to research questions where appropriate in the findings.

Data Analysis

CHAT provided a deductive framework for this analysis, with CHAT components (e.g., tools, rules) serving as *a priori* categories guiding our exploration of the data. To enhance trustworthiness and credibility, two fellow doctoral students participated in the analytic process, providing additional perspectives on the data. We shared our positionalities and engaged in peer debriefing throughout the analysis to ensure we were bracketing our biases and accurately representing participants perspectives (Trainor & Graue, 2014).

In our first round of coding, we analyzed each interview inductively; we coded line-by-line using gerund and in vivo codes, staying close to the data and remaining open to all possible interpretations (Charmaz, 2014). At this stage, we also wrote analytic memos to note our initial impressions of the activity system and its components. Next, we sorted our initial codes, first individually, and then as a team, examining how they fit within the six CHAT components. We then collaborated to combine and re-sort these codes, developing a coding structure with the six CHAT components as parent codes; the codes we developed inductively became child codes underneath each component. For

example, we grouped initial codes such as “ensuring students graduate with a strong work ethic” and “preparing students for ‘real life’ stuff” as participants’ perspectives on the object (or goal) of the activity system and developed a child code called ‘skills students need.’ Other initial codes such as ‘students should determine their own pathway’ and ‘going to the right place’ informed a separate child code within the object component that we named ‘desired postsecondary outcomes.’ We viewed some initial codes as fitting within multiple CHAT components and these codes helped to inform multiple child codes. We also wrote memos about these overlaps, noting possible relationships between components of the activity system. Finally, we added two additional parent codes. The parent code ‘characterizing students’ included child codes for each focal student, as well as child codes for characterizing students with disabilities generally and characterizing the student body. We also included ‘outcomes’ which is part of the CHAT model but not one of the six components, and which captured participants perspectives on the effectiveness of transition practices and their understanding of students’ actual postsecondary outcomes (as opposed to the object, which captured desired outcomes). By employing both deductive and inductive approaches, we developed a more nuanced framework for understanding how participants in this specific context made sense of their activity system for transition planning and service delivery. Once we developed this coding structure, we coded multiple interviews collaboratively to refine our definitions and ensure that the team had common understandings of the codes. We then recoded all interviews using NVivo software.

Subsequently, we compiled case summaries. For each participant, one team

member carefully reviewed the coded data to describe how that participant conceptualized each component of the activity system, using multiple quotations to support interpretations. Another team member reviewed the case summary and provided critical feedback. We then discussed case summaries as a full team, closely examining ways that participants' perspectives aligned and diverged from one another and developing assertions about the nature of the activity system. We also developed matrix displays and CHAT models to explore each focal student's case and Chestnut's activity system as a whole. Finally, through an iterative process of analytic writing and discussions with the research team, I refined the assertions and the CHAT models, ensuring they were supported by the data.

Positionality

I am a white woman, special education researcher, and former educator. My perspective on secondary transition is influenced by my personal history, my professional experiences, and my knowledge of secondary transition research. I attended a four-year university immediately after high school; my own transition was supported by privilege associated with race, class, and ability identification. Professionally, my work engaging with students with and without disabilities in their transition to college and employment has also informed my work, deepening my understanding of the diversity of transition experiences. Through my research, I have developed a stronger understanding of effective practices in secondary transition and also deepened my convictions related to student self-determination, inclusion, and equitable access to postsecondary opportunities. My professional experience and knowledge of secondary transition

supported the development of rapport with study participants, offered insider knowledge to frame interview questions, and supported my understanding of the data. My beliefs, knowledge and experience also created the potential to bias my interpretations based on preconceptions. I allowed my knowledge of secondary transition to inform my understanding of the data. For example, I considered the practices participants described engaging in in relation to the domains of transition practices identified in the literature. However, through journaling and peer debriefing, I worked to explore and bracket my own beliefs and personal experiences, to limit their influence on the findings. For example, through peer debriefing, we discussed examples of when our own teaching experiences might be influencing our interpretations of the data and held ourselves accountable by interrogating our understandings, returning to the data, and searching for disconfirming evidence.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

I took several steps to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. First, two first-year doctoral students with concentrations in special education participated in data analysis to provide additional perspectives on the data. We began our analytic process with researcher reflexivity, examining our beliefs, values, and potential biases through reflective writing and discussion. We met regularly throughout analysis to interrogate our interpretations and provide critical feedback, working to ensure our understandings reflected participants' perspectives and holding each other accountable for potential biases. Finally, I included rich, detailed descriptions and quotations throughout the findings to support interpretations of the data (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Findings from this study focus on Chestnut High School's activity system for transition planning and services, or the actors and actions engaged in preparing students with disabilities for adult life. Under IDEA, transition planning and services includes the wide range of activities that help students identify postsecondary goals and develop the academic and functional skills to achieve them; such activities may take place in multiple settings and engage professionals in multiple roles. In this study, my understanding of Chestnut High School's activity system emerged through exploring the perspective of school professionals who engaged with each of the three focal students. I examined professionals' conceptions of their roles and how they felt their shared work supported students' successful transition to adult life. The focal students (*Clay, Liana,* and *Randall*) provided concrete examples for participants to discuss their transition-related activities and their cases provided a tool for exploring how the activity system functioned differently for students with different goals and needs. My findings describe salient dimensions of Chestnut's activity system based on participants' diverse perspectives and illuminate how the activity system both shaped, and was shaped by, participants' conceptions of their roles and responsibilities.

I first provide a brief description of the actors in Chestnut's activity system and their professional roles, noting who participated in the study and whose perspectives are missing. I then present the findings in four parts: (1) I describe participants' conceptions of the object of Chestnut's activity system for transition planning and service delivery, articulating how professionals collectively conceptualized the purposes of transition-

related activities; (2) I explain how responsibilities for enacting transition planning and services were divided among Chestnut's professionals, describing participants' conceptions of their roles and how they shared responsibilities with others in relation to the perceived goals of the activity system; (3) I present CHAT models to describe the division of responsibilities and transition-related activities for each of the three focal students; and (4) I present a CHAT model representing Chestnut High School's activity system for transition planning and services and describe the salient factors shaping the division of responsibilities and enactment of services. Participants' actions were shaped by their perceptions of what students needed in order to attain what they viewed as the object of transition planning, and by the affordances and constraints of the activity system. The school's focus on college admission structured the tools and division of labor, and substantially influenced the transition planning and services students were able to access.

Overview of the Activity System

Table 2 provides a list of participants including their title, the focal student(s) with whom they worked and their years of experience. Chestnut's activity system for transition planning and service delivery included professionals in the following roles:

(1) ***Guidance counselors***; Each of the three focal students was assigned to a different guidance counselor. All three guidance counselors (pseudonyms *Alex*, *Jamie*, and *Rudy*) participated in the study.

(2) ***General educators***; Although all three focal students took most of their classes in general education settings, only one general education teacher

participated in the study. *Barry* taught 12th grade English to focal students Randall and Clay.

(3) ***Special educators***; Three special educators participated in the study. *Dana* served as the learning specialist and liaison/case manager for seniors. She was responsible for writing IEPs and transition plans for all three focal students, and for ensuring the IEPs were adhered to. The three focal students also participated in her skills development class, in which students with disabilities received academic support, and specially designed instruction to address IEP goals and skills required to access the general education curriculum. For focal students Liana and Clay, Dana was the only special educator they interacted with as seniors. Focal student Randall, worked with one additional special educator; he participated daily in a transition skills class with *Gia*, who provided small group and individualized support to students with higher levels of need. Finally, *Francine* was the case manager and skills development teacher for high school juniors. She worked with all three focal students during their junior year and was included in the study to provide an additional perspective on the activity system.

(4) ***Administrators***; Two participants served in administrative roles. *Claudia* was the Interim Chair Coordinator who was responsible for overseeing the IEP process. She led the IEP meetings for all three focal students. *Adrian* served as both Transition Program Coordinator and Out of District Coordinator. She participated in Randall's IEP meeting. She described her transition role as

"evolving" but focused on the design and sequencing of transition programming in the district. No other administrators were described as actively involved in transition planning for the focal students.

(5) ***Related Service Providers***; *Ellen*, the school psychologist, provided individual counseling for both Randall and Liana and was part of their IEP teams. Randall also received services from a Speech-Language Pathologist who did not participate in the study.

(6) ***Paraprofessionals***; Randall received support from a one-to-one paraprofessional, *Kate*, who did not participate in the study.

Conceptions of the Object of the Activity System

The object of an activity system is its desired purpose or goal. In general, transition planning and services address the goal of facilitating students' successful movement from secondary education to post-school activities, but schools may conceptualize this purpose differently or highlight particular aspects. In this section, I address my first research question, describing how professionals in Chestnut conceptualized the object of the activity system through which they collectively provided transition services.

My analysis revealed that Chestnut's professionals conceptualized the object of the activity system (i.e. their goals related to transition) in three primary ways: (1) future planning (helping students choose and plan for their next step after high school), (2) helping students develop the skills they needed to succeed after high school, and (3) ensuring students are supported in order to successfully complete high school.

Future planning was the most well-defined and well-supported object of Chestnut's activity system. Participants consistently noted that for most students, including students with disabilities, attending college was their next step. College was highly valued in the community, and was a focus of future planning at school. As Alex explained, going to college was "ingrained in the kids before they even walk in the building" and therefore most future planning at Chestnut was oriented toward helping students select and apply to colleges. Future planning beyond college admission was less clearly articulated and less well-supported by the activity system. For student not planning to attend college, professionals focused on identifying the right postsecondary placement, though many felt the activity system lacked the knowledge or resources to support students pursuing other goals. Participants rarely mentioned planning for the supports students would need to be successful in their next step (e.g. connecting students to adult services or college counseling services). Career development was not a focus and was primarily discussed for students not planning to attend college.

While planning for college was a well-defined object of the activity system, goals related to skill development, beyond academic preparation for college, were not clearly defined or well-supported by the activity system. For example, although the learning specialists, Dana and Francine, felt they should be teaching some transition skills, they felt they lacked "clear expectation[s]" for which skills they were supposed to focus on (Francine) and felt pressured by the school's "college focusing, academically rigorous" culture (Dana). Therefore, they oriented their work toward towards academics. Other participants mentioned a wide range of potentially important attributes and skills (e.g.,

financial literacy, conflict resolution, independence), but skills were idiosyncratically defined (i.e. there was no clear consensus around these goals), and only a few participants described teaching or promoting non-academic skills as central to their role. Many described ways the tools of the activity system did not support a focus on non-academic skills (e.g., no time in the schedule to discuss "where students are at socially and emotionally" or for "social emotional skill building," Ellen). Thus, non-academic skill development was often a more peripheral object of the activity system.

Finally, participants also discussed providing or advocating for supports to ensure students graduated and could move on to their next step. This included roles such as tracking graduation requirements, helping students select the right classes, access their accommodations, or complete assignments, or providing emotional support. This object tended to be most prominent when students were struggling. For example, Jamie and Rudy both explained that, as guidance counselors, a primary role in IEP meetings was to report "any concerns" and "if [students are] working toward meeting all graduation requirements" (Rudy). Many professionals reported primarily collaborating with one another when students were experiencing difficulties.

Professionals often foregrounded one of these objects as central to their own role, and assigned other objects to their colleagues. Additionally, professionals' conceptions of the object of transition planning varied across the three focal students. For each focal student, conceptions of the primary object of transition played an important role in shaping the division of responsibilities. The next section addresses professionals' general conceptions of the division of responsibilities. Following that, I focus specifically on each

of the focal students (Clay, Liana and Randall), describing the division of responsibilities and enactment of transition activities in each of their cases.

Division of Responsibilities

In CHAT, the division of labor describes what actions are being taken by whom in pursuit of the object. Professional work in Chestnut's activity system for transition involved (1) engaging in future planning for and with students, (2) providing or advocating for supports and (3) supporting skill development. Future planning was led by guidance counselors with limited support from special educators, administrators, and related service providers. Responsibilities related to skill development and support were less clearly defined and shared across multiple stakeholders.

In this section, I address my second research question: How do professionals describe the division of responsibilities among them? I describe participants' conceptions of roles and responsibilities for each of the following stakeholder groups: guidance counselors, special educators, administrators, related service providers, paraprofessionals, students, and families. I organize each section by describing participants' actions and beliefs toward three objects: future planning, skill development, and providing/advocating for supports.

Guidance Counselors.

Three guidance counselors participated in the study: Rudy, Jamie, and Alex. Guidance counselors in Chestnut were alphabetically assigned a caseload of students, who they supported throughout their four years of high school. Guidance counselors' roles were primarily oriented toward future planning, but they also played an important

role both providing and advocating for supports so that students successfully completed high school.

Future Planning. The guidance counselors felt they were responsible for leading postsecondary planning for students on their caseload. At Chestnut, future planning and college planning were largely synonymous, and guidance counselors facilitated this process. They described two primary ways they engaged in future planning with students. First, they led large group presentations for juniors about postsecondary planning, which primarily focused on the college application process. As Rudy explained, “Because we have such limited time…we talk briefly about gap year programs, military, employment…but it's like one slide in our presentation. Then we spend most of our time talking about college planning.” Additionally, they met individually with students to help them select a list of colleges to apply to and complete their applications.

All three guidance counselors emphasized the specific object of helping Chestnut students find the “best match for them” rather than adhering to the “expectation that you have to go to the most selective school you possibly can” (Jamie). For students with disabilities, they focused on helping students find “colleges that have good support programs so that their services can continue at the college level” (Jamie). Guidance counselors met individually with students and families, working to help them “determine their interests and their values” (Rudy) and find the right fit, including exploring alternatives to college, as appropriate. For example, Alex described encouraging families to visit colleges with stronger support programs and being candid with families about their options. He explained, “It may look good and it may sound good, because it's

matches the typical Chestnut…expectation. But is that really the best place for your kid who has a learning disability?" Guidance counselors provided families with a "guide to post-secondary planning for students with disabilities" (Rudy), a pamphlet which provided information about the different levels of support colleges offer, questions to ask colleges about their disability resources, and alternative postsecondary options besides college. However, guidance counselors found it difficult to combat broader messaging from the community which placed a high value on attending elite colleges. For example, Rudy described having "more individualized conversations" to encourage students to pursue their own path, but explained that the "conversation at large" was focused on college, and therefore, "most kids feel like they have to do that as the next step." Alex described spending substantial time encouraging families to combat the typical Chestnut expectations and select a college that was a better fit for their child's needs.

In order to help students with disabilities find a "fit college" (Alex), guidance counselors sought opportunities to learn about college programs and campus resources designed to support students with disabilities and to learn about the aspects of the college application process that were unique to students with disabilities. These efforts were largely self-directed and independent. For example, Alex described attending multiple professional development sessions at local colleges about, "how to help support students with learning differences at the collegiate level" or "what leniencies they have…The SAT, ACT can be optional if you're on an IEP [or] 504." Jamie noted that she had "expertise" in helping students with disabilities find "colleges that have strong academic supports…finding a college environment that fits." She described "learn[ing] a little bit

more every year" through her work researching colleges with students and families. Rudy conducted online research to better understand the range of postsecondary options, but described feeling alone and unsupported in this effort. She explained,

> We don't have a lot of opportunity to…go visit these schools and get a ton of information…Like what are the good programs that are out there?...The families are really looking for more guidance in terms of next steps…It almost feels like it's the blind leading the blind sometimes.

Rudy felt guidance counselors got little support to identify appropriate college programs or to learn about alternative postsecondary pathways besides college. Jamie echoed this sentiment, and felt particularly lost on how to support students and families in non-college pathways. She explained, "I just don't know what the vocational training looks like or what the fifth year programs looks like."

Guidance counselors reported that their primary collaborators in future planning were families, especially if a student was planning to attend college. For example, Alex and Rudy described working closely with their focal students' families to plan for college, and reported almost no collaboration with anyone else. Rudy reported good communication and "work[ing] as a team with families" as a strength of future planning at Chestnut.

In contrast, collaboration with special educators to identify postsecondary options, complete applications, or discuss postsecondary supports seemed much more limited. Instead, guidance counselors primarily reported providing information to special educators so that special educators could write students' transition plans. As Jamie

explained, “usually the Learning Center teacher will ask me what the kid’s future plans are, because again, oftentimes they're applying to college, or gap year program, or military so they'll…ask and then they include that in the form.”

In some cases, guidance counselors did report more engagement with the special education to plan for students who weren’t planning to attend college. Jamie noted that when a student’s path is more uncertain, “that's more of a conversation…at the IEP meeting.” Rudy described seeking guidance from the special education department chair about appropriate postsecondary options for a particular student. However, Rudy felt that even for students not planning to attend college, guidance counselors were still responsible. She explained, “I don't feel like much of that happens through special education.” Rudy wondered whether there could be a clearer “delineation of roles” between guidance counselors and special educators to support students with disabilities in planning for their next step. She felt that it was challenging for her to understand what supports students would need moving forward since, in contrast to the special educators, she didn’t “have a good understanding of a student's needs and what they have experienced throughout high school.”

Other participants also reported that guidance counselors took the lead in postsecondary planning and were largely complimentary of guidance counselors’ commitment and individualized attention to their students. For example, Barry noted that guidance counselors were “able to have a more invested relationship in their students.” Special educators largely perceived the object of future planning as the guidance counselors’ role and, therefore, did not engage in future planning themselves.

Skill Development. Guidance counselors felt that the rigor of Chestnut's curriculum prepared them well academically for college. As Alex explained, "the greatest asset Chestnut kids have when they cross the stage and graduate is they are leaving with a work ethic…They're master time managers because of that expectation of seven full classes." Guidance counselors listed organization, time management, and oral and written communication skills amongst the skills students gained at Chestnut that would help them succeed in college. For students with disabilities, they described the learning specialists (special educators who taught the skills development classes) as primarily responsible for helping students develop their academic skills. As Jamie explained, most of her students primarily needed "academically based support and…they get that support through their learning center period."

Guidance counselors listed other, varied skills such as independence, self-advocacy, resiliency, or practical life skills as important for successful transition. For example, Jamie felt social-emotional skills were more important than academic skills when preparing students from postsecondary success. She explained,

> Something that high schools in general need to work on…is…preparing kids for…life circumstances that can be really challenging and things that they've never experienced. You know, we shipped students off to go to college and they've never had to live with a roommate or done their laundry or anything like that…how to manage a tough boss or colleague or professor. Some kids may pick that up on their own, but I think those are things we need to directly teach.

Guidance counselors supported and encouraged the development of some skills through

their one-on-one interactions with students. For example, Rudy described helping her focal student, Liana, better understand and advocate for her needs through individual conversations over multiple years. However, guidance counselors otherwise felt they had limited opportunities to explicitly teach the social-emotional or practical skills they felt were important. Jamie described the challenge of trying to “borrow” time within a rigorous academic schedule to teach non-academic skills. She explained that there was an advisory program, but “advisory is short. It's every two weeks, for about 20 minutes.” Alex described developing a “vision of the graduate” which outlined skills Chestnut wanted its graduates to have such as resilience in the face of adversity. But he felt attention to these skills was insufficient. He felt students who exhibited “grit and perseverance” were not “champion[ed] enough,” their approach to the advisory periods once every two to three weeks was not optimal, and that the skills highlighted in the vision of the graduate should be more prominent around the school. Thus, while guidance counselors viewed non-academic skill development as an important object, they felt they had limited tools to support it.

Providing/Advocating for Supports. Guidance counselors listed providing social-emotional support to students as one of their primary responsibilities. Alex explained, “at the end of the day, being a non-academic support system for students in the building is probably the primary job description.” Guidance counselors met this responsibility by being available for students to check-in and get support as needed. For example, Rudy and Jamie interacted almost daily with their focal student because the focal student would come to them for support.

For students with disabilities, guidance counselors also reported being actively engaged in the IEP process and advocating for students to get the academic supports they needed. For example, all three guidance counselors reported consistently participating in IEP meetings. At IEP meetings, they reported progress toward graduation requirements or any specific concerns, and also advocated for supports they felt were important. Rudy and Alex both explained that they were sometimes the only person at the IEP table who knew the student's history and needs across multiple years; they provided this context at the meeting and pushed for specific supports moving forward. Alex also advocated for students to attend their IEP meetings. He explained, "How am I supposed to build a relationship with a kid, advocate for a kid if we're excusing them from their meeting about their learning disability? It just it boggles my mind." Alex also occasionally advocated to general educators for students to get their accommodations in the classroom. He expressed concern that no specific person was responsible for holding teachers accountable for providing students with their accommodations, noting, "no one really owns it." He said he would sometimes play this role if he could, explaining, "I have a little cache, where I can talk to some people, but there are some staff members that are just, they're sticks in the mud."

Guidance counselors were also responsible for creating students' schedules and used course selection as a tool for supporting students' academic success. The reported both ensuring students had access to challenges courses where appropriate and helping students balance their schedules so they weren't overwhelmed. For example, Jamie listed helping students select courses and meet graduation requirements as part of her core

responsibilities. Alex explained that teachers would sometimes suggest students with disabilities take lower level courses where they could access all their accommodations. He felt, “That's very stagnant thinking. A kid can perform well in [an advanced] class if accommodated oftentimes, and sometimes they can't. And then you look at a change.” Rudy noted working hard to encourage her focal student to take a more balanced course load so that she would happier and less overwhelmed.

Special Educators.

Chestnut high school had two distinct special educator roles. “Learning specialists” were each assigned a caseload of students by grade level. Learning specialists were the “liaison” for the students in the grade they were assigned, which included writing and overseeing the implementation of students’ IEPs and providing direct instruction and academic support through a “skills development class.” They also did some co-teaching in academic classes. The learning specialist for juniors (Francine) and the learning specialist for seniors (Dana) participated in the study. Dana and Francine focused primarily on two objects: skill development (primarily addressing academic skills) and academic support. Another special educator, Gia, had a distinct role that involved two elements. First, she had what she described as her “transition specialist” role. For several periods a day, she provided individual and small group instruction to “the severe kids in the high school who need more heavy-duty transition skills.” This role was focused on explicitly teaching transition skills. The other part of Gia’s role was co-teaching science classes. Unlike Dana and Francine, she did not have her own caseload of students. Gia’s hybrid role was new at Chestnut the year the study took place. For the

previous eight years, she had taught the school's "substantially separate program" working with the same group of students with "more severe" disabilities for the entire day. Gia explained, "this past year, when all my kids aged out, we sort of switched roles a little bit." In her transition specialist role, Gia was oriented toward the object of skill development, focusing primarily on teaching a specific set of transition skills.

Future Planning. Francine and Gia described having a small role helping students plan for their next step. Francine explained that she interviewed students about their goals and future plans in order to complete their transition planning form. She also described engaging in future-oriented conversations with students throughout the year asking, "What kind of goals do you want in the future?" and "What kind of skills do [you] need to have in order to reach those goals?" However, Francine worked with students as juniors but not as seniors, and she described how this limited her role in students' future planning. For example, with focal student Liana, she explained, "I didn't work with her senior year. So I don't know what kind of resources were given to her and her family for future plans." She listed guidance counselors as the professionals responsible for ensuring students were connected to appropriate resources at the college they planned to attend. In contrast, while guidance counselors described helping students select colleges with the right supports, they did not mention working with students to connect to specific resources after they had selected a college.

Gia's role in future planning involved (1) career exploration or career-focused discussions during her transition skills classes and (2) participation in IEP meetings. For example, Gia reported doing career exploration activities (e.g. interest inventories) during

one-on-one sessions with Randall his junior year. Additionally, she noted the importance of talking with students who were "not on [the college] path" about matching careers to their interests and skills. However, she described the transition skills class as more focused on employment skills (e.g. writing a resume) than future planning. She explained that because she did not have her own caseload, "it was more the learning center teacher" who talked with students about their vision for the future, whereas she focused more on "direct teaching" of transition skills. Gia attended IEP team meetings and participated in discussions about potential postsecondary options, but noted that her primary role was to discuss the "transition skill piece."

Dana, the learning specialist who worked with seniors, described an even more limited role in future planning. She explained,

> It's really hard to say what I see my role is, other than getting them through…the high school process and hope that all the skills you've given them will then transfer over to their post-secondary life, whatever it is that they do.

She placed the primary responsibility for future planning on guidance counselors, explaining, "it's the role of the guidance department to work more towards that, as far as post-secondary planning." She did not describe discussing students' postsecondary goals as part of the IEP process. For focal students Liana and Clay, whose IEP meetings were later in the year, she felt there was very little to discuss since they had already decided where they planned to attend college.

Skill Development. The service delivery model structured special educators' approach to helping students develop the skills they would need to succeed in the future.

Dana and Francine addressed skill development through their skills development classes and Gia taught transition skills in her small group transition classes.

Both Francine and Dana reported focusing primarily on academic skills in their skills development classes such as reading, writing, study skills or organizational skills. However, in recent years, transition had become more of a focus in the district and they had begun to incorporate transition skills lessons into the skills development class when time permitted. Special educators had collaborated the previous summer to develop a transition curriculum, "kind of figuring out, okay, what are the skills that these kids will need and how do we want to go about it" (Francine). Despite having created this curriculum, both Dana and Francine reported feeling uncertain about which transition skills they should focus on with their students.

Francine was enthusiastic about teaching transition skills, explaining that she believed "life skills" were more important than academic skills for postsecondary success. She highlighted money-related skills as particularly important, noting it all "stems from the money" but also mentioned a wide range of skills such as dressing for a job, buying a car, and writing a thank you note after an interview. Francine felt overwhelmed by the long list of transition skills students needed to learn and was uncertain about which ones to prioritize. She felt "a lot of pressure" and explained, "I could definitely use more professional development…like what does the school expect." She noted in general that expectations related to transition had shifted a lot due to a "revolving door with our bosses." She had limited training, professional development, or guidance related to transition. Therefore, Francine relied on her collaboration with

colleagues, such as Gia who had more background in transition, and her own personal experiences (e.g., not wanting students to end up with extensive student loan debt like she did) to decide what to teach in the limited time she had.

Dana similarly felt she didn't have the training or guidance to teach transition skills or a clear understanding of which skills she should teach. She explained, "as a learning specialist, it's not like we've not been trained in transition curriculum or transition skills, and so it's pretty challenging." Dana questioned whether teaching transition skills was even appropriate for her students. She explained,

> The majority of the students I work with, they might have ADHD or they might have a minor learning disability. So partly I feel that there isn't as great of a need for transition skills for them…I wasn't directly taught them…they just evolved over time through experience. A lot of our students, that would work for them.

Like Francine, she relied on her personal experience to inform her practices. She wished she had "some type of curriculum" to help her better understand how to prepare students with disabilities for postsecondary success. She felt the curriculum they had developed was "not really formal" and noted that it was difficult to find resources appropriate to her students. Dana also described how the object of teaching transition skills was in conflict with her primary role of supporting academic success She felt that it was hard to find the time to "focus on transition" because "our goal is partly to have the students make it through high school and meet all the requirements there." She worried, "we don't do enough" to prepare students but didn't feel equipped with the tools (e.g. curriculum, professional development, time) to focus on this object.

Similar to guidance counselors, Francine and Dana did describe valuing and promoting independence and self-advocacy through the skills development class. This was one specific area of focus for non-academic skill development, but was primarily addressed individually, through conversations with students. For example, Francine and Dana described self-advocacy goals for two of the focal students and encouraged them to talk directly with their teachers about their needs and accommodations, rather than having special educators do it for them. Additionally, Francine noted that she might decide to focus on self-advocacy for one of her groups if she noticed, “they've been…babied…like their parents do everything for them.”

Gia expressed greater confidence about her knowledge related to transition and described teaching transition skills as her primary role in the activity system. When asked to describe her role in transition, she explained, “my role as is actually getting in and doing the direct teaching of those concepts for my small group…making sure that they really master those skills.” She taught transition skills to a small group of students twice a week. She described her student population as,

> The severe kids in the high school who need more heavy-duty transition skills. The kids who we sort of see probably not going off on the college path…more likely to either go to some sort of a program…or going straight into the workforce…They're often kids who are on the spectrum, or kids who are more cognitively delayed, that kind of a thing. Just a little lower functioning.

Gia described teaching a range of skills primarily related to employment and financial literacy. She explained,

> This year, for instance, we did resumes, we did understanding cover letters…we wrote resumes. We went over how you go onto an 'indeed.com' and search for a part time position…We did a lot of banking stuff. We did a lot of budgeting…all of those financial skills, credit cards, savings accounts. How do you write a check? We did all that stuff.

She contrasted the transition instruction she provided with Francine and Dana's curriculum, explaining that her instruction was more "hands on and one-to-one and focused." Gia wished she had the flexibility to get students into jobs in the community, but because of the limitations of the high school schedule, "it was more about preparing them" for jobs they would have in the future. She also provided additional one-on-one instruction for some students in her students from this group, in areas such as hygiene, writing, or preparation for state assessments.

Providing/Advocating for Support. Dana and Francine provided academic support during the skills development classes such as helping students plan assignments or editing essays. They also described being responsible for ensuring that students' IEPs were being implemented. For example, Francine described checking in with Clay's teachers and "keeping some data around that and just making sure that he's doing okay in each of his classes." She collected reports from teachers before IEP meetings. Francine coordinated with Liana's teachers to reduce Liana's workload to a more manageable level. Similarly, Dana reported communicating with Liana's teachers to explain why she needed particular accommodations. Both Dana and Francine noted that they tended to collaborate more with teachers and guidance counselors if students were struggling. Gia

did not report a specific responsibility related to providing or advocating for supports. She did say that she used the IEP meeting or other occasions to address students' negative feelings about their disability. She explained, "I think we often go to IEP meetings and kids will say things like, 'Oh, I just, I don't want to be in that room, people think I'm stupid.' And it's like, having conversations about…understanding their disability, and knowing that it doesn't make you stupid." She felt it was important to "involve [students] in the conversation," so they would feel less stigmatized.

General Educators.

Only one general educator participated in the study. Barry taught 10th and 12th grade English. Barry's perspective on his role in the activity system for transition planning and service delivery is included here, as well other participants' conceptions of the roles of general educators that were articulated in the interviews. General educators' primary object was to teach academic skills. They were also expected to provide accommodations for students with disabilities, and to collaborate with other professionals if students were struggling.

Future Planning. Barry felt encouraging students to reflect on themselves and their future goals was integrated into the English curriculum. For example, for sophomores, he encouraged them to expand their perspective by taking electives and determining what they liked rather than having others decide for them. He connected this to the curriculum explaining, "sophomore year world literature, perspective is a big part of it." For seniors, he encouraged them to reflect on who they are and "the realities of those different paths…Are you locked in something that you had planned as your goal

freshman year, but that's not you anymore?" He viewed personal reflection as a big part of the senior curriculum.

Barry described his role in the more concrete steps of future planning as minimal. Because guidance presentations about college typically happened during English class, Barry attended the presentations, and circulated to offer assistance as needed. Barry explained that he might notice "a student who like visibly is having a hard time," because they weren't planning to attend college and didn't want others to know. In that case, he might follow up with that student to check in. Barry felt that students who did not plan to attend college were "made the outsider," and on occasion, he took initiative to support those students. He explained,

> I've occasionally connected students with former students that had success like not going to a four year school…That's something that I don't really normally do, but if I hear a student that has this passion that is not connected to school, I'll try to make it happen.

Barry sometimes attended IEP meetings, either because he was invited (which depended on the schedule), or occasionally, because he wanted to attend to support a student. Because he attended Randall's IEP meeting, he had more knowledge regarding Randall's plans after high school, but did not articulate any specific role in developing those plans. Additionally, no other professionals articulated a specific role for general educators in future planning.

Skill development. Barry taught the academic skills in his content area. Additionally, he felt self-advocacy was an important skill and that Chestnut did a good

job of instilling this skill in students with disabilities. He described how students demonstrated self-advocacy skills in his class, noting their "ability to immediately be like…'Can you rephrase that. I don't get this.'" While he did not explicitly teach self-advocacy skills, he felt he fostered self-advocacy and independence through his interactions with students. For example, he explained that it was in Randall's IEP that he could "leave the classroom at certain points." He asked Randall to "give me a little wave or say hey," as a way for him to be "more in control of that particular action." He described how he might address any concerns directly with a student like Clay, rather than engaging other professionals, saying something like, "'You're…falling short here. Is there anything I can do to help you or like are you just being lazy'…Like 'Oh, Mr. B, I'm just being lazy.'" Francine's conception of the role of special educators aligned with Barry's conception. She felt that across Chestnut High School, general educators had gotten better at promoting self-advocacy. She explained, "teachers are now like making students talk to them, like if you have an issue don't have mom or dad call, send me an email. Come talk to me in person. Set up an appointment."

Barry did not describe teaching or supporting specific IEP or transition-related goals with the focal students. However, he did describe his goal with Randall as trying to "build trust" and helping Randall "feel comfortable." He explained that if Randall felt comfortable with him, it might transfer to him trusting and feeling comfortable working with other students in the class. This aligned with Barry's belief that social interaction was Randall's main challenge and that this would likely be what was difficult for him in college. Other professionals did not articulate a specific role for general educators in

teaching or promoting transition-related skills.

Support. Participants shared two ways general educators were expected to support students with disabilities in their classes. They implemented students' accommodations and communicated with the learning specialists, especially if students were struggling. For example, Dana described being in "constant contact" with senior mathematics and English teachers to discuss students about whom there were concerns. She also communicated with Liana's teachers to ensure they understood the rationale for and would implement "the accommodations she was entitled to." Alex felt strongly that general educators should ensure that students with disabilities can access their accommodations, and that if accommodated, many students could succeed in more challenging classes. However, he believed that teachers varied in their willingness to implement accommodations, with some teacher who went "above and beyond" and others who felt that students who needed accommodations should be placed in lower level courses. Alex also felt that responsibility for holding teachers accountable for providing these accommodations was unclear. He explained, "we have department heads and the special ed[ucation] liaisons and then the chair…It's like kind of an orphan."

Barry described limited direct communication with special educators and a limited role in providing accommodations. He explained that Clay did not have "any challenge beyond…his capability to control" and, therefore, he didn't need to collaborate with anyone besides Clay or provide any specific supports. For Randall, Barry relied heavily on Kate, Randall's one-to-one paraprofessional to "be sort of a liaison" and implement any support plans (e.g. weekly planner) developed by special educators. He

explained that approaches to support Randall "did look different, I suppose, as, as the year went along, but who initiated those changes, I could tell you. Beyond the fact that…Kate was responsible for implementing those changes, and me." Barry did express that communication across departments regarding students with disabilities and their needs could be improved. He explained that sometimes it was difficult to gather important information from IEPs and that it would be helpful to have "a relationship with the guidance counselors or the special ed[ucation] department" to be able to have more informal conversations to learn about the students. He said sometimes it felt like a "telephone game" where lots of people are involved and you may get an email but it is only "a piece of the larger information."

As noted above, general educators also participated, when asked, in IEP meetings. When asked about his role in the IEP process, Barry explained that "Typically those plans are already calculated, if not in place by the time I hear about them," but that he felt comfortable asking questions or raising issues if there was something that concerned him.

Administrators.

Two administrators participated in the study. Claudia referred to her role as "interim chair coordinator" and was only in her role for one year. She was responsible for leading the IEP process for high school seniors and middle school students. She conceptualized her role as focused on future planning and student support. Adrian had a dual role of transition program coordinator and out of district coordinator. Adrian was new to her transition program coordinator role the year the study took place and explained that the transition program coordinator role was "evolving." Adrian's role

was oriented toward all three objects of the activity system, but most focused on students with low incidence disabilities who would continue to receive special education services until they turned 22. Besides Claudia and Adrian, administrators were mentioned infrequently during interviews.

Transition Program Coordinator. Adrian described herself as having a systems level role, focused on support, skill-development, and future planning, but with limited direct service responsibilities with students. She was the first person in the district in her role and had "flexibility to create" the position. She explained her role broadly as,

> Shaking the trees, fleshing out, what are we doing and making it more intentional and sequenced and mindful, and then connecting it with…the expectations…of the state, and…also…what our school culture is all about.

Because she was new to the role, much of her focus was on better understanding the district's current practices and needs. For example, she "met with all the department chairs" to better understand the postsecondary planning that was happening for all students. She had identified the sequencing and structure of transition practices as one area of need. For example, she wanted transition planning for students with disabilities to be understood, "not as a separate…entity but…as a school district, have a culture of preparing all of our students to become independent, and agents…in their future." As a result, she was working with a small team to integrate a college and career planning tool that could be used across the high school. She also planned to provide training to special education staff and administrators to help them improve their transition practices. She mentioned helping professionals better understand the transition planning form "to really

make it work as opposed to just checking the box," and supporting staff to have important conversations about transition earlier, rather than when students were seniors. An additional core responsibility was the "development of programs and delivery of programs for students who are 18 to 22, who continue to need an educational program." Not surprisingly, given that she was so new to her role, Adrian was only mentioned a few times by other professionals. Claudia felt that Adrian would be "a really positive addition" that she hoped would improve transition practices. Both Dana and Jamie mentioned that Adrian had been part of a few meetings for Randall, and was involved in discussions about offering a fifth year. Jamie and Alex both noted that they had only interacted with Adrian a few times.

Interim Chair Coordinator. As Chestnut's interim chair coordinator, Claudia was only part of Chestnut's activity system for transition planning and services for one year. In her previous role as the executive director of a collaborative, she had created a transition program to serve 18–22 year old students from multiple districts. She described having extensive coursework and training related to secondary transition, and noted that she provided professional development to districts as part of her previous role. Claudia described her primary responsibilities in Chestnut as "overseeing the procedural processes involved with the IEP and the teachers." She reviewed students' IEPs and would help teachers develop IEP goals if they were stuck. In terms of transition planning, Claudia explained that she didn't see her role as different from any other team member. She clarified,

> Everybody working with the student has an obligation to hear what they're saying and to think about…what's the coursework that's going to get them there? What are the kinds of community activities that will help get them there? What kind of support are they going to need once they get there?... Supporting somebody's dream and helping it become a reality in a way that that it meets their strengths.

Claudia enacted this role primarily through leading team meetings. She also stepped in occasionally to provide additional support. For example, for focal student Randall, she called multiple team meetings focused on supporting Randall to successfully complete high school and planning for what he would do in the upcoming year. She also stepped in to provide day-to-day emotional support for Randall because she felt others were frustrated with him and that he needed an advocate. Claudia also noted that for seniors whose IEP meetings were late in the year, Chestnut did not typically schedule a final IEP meeting. Claudia pushed to have "summary of performance" meetings for these students because she felt it was important to "to wrap up the year."

Related Service Providers.

Two related services providers were eligible to participate in the study: a speech-language pathologist and a school psychologist. The school psychologist, Ellen, participated in the study. Though a speech-language pathologist was also part of Randall's team, she did not participate in the study and her specific role or responsibilities was not discussed in any of the interviews. Thus, this section focuses on Ellen's role in the activity system. She participated in activities related to all three objects, but her primary responsibilities were social-emotional support and skill

development.

Future planning. Ellen was part of the IEP team for her students and felt there was great collaboration across team members to brainstorm "ideas of how to transition kids, whether it be dual enrollment or hooking them up with services after high school." She participated in multiple future planning meetings for Randall and discussed his goals for the future in their one-on-one meetings. Although she wasn't certain if it was "necessarily expected of [her] role," Ellen felt strongly that it was important for "students who had been receiving counseling throughout high school… [to] figure out how to access college counseling centers and understand that this support should continue even though their IEP doesn't follow them." She mentioned offering support to families at IEP meetings if they had questions about how to set up these services. Ellen explained that she would like to develop a "deeper understanding" of various aspects of the transition planning process such as how to apply for adult services and "what are the things we're talking about when we're going through the transition planning form." She felt the team as whole needed to more knowledge about alternatives to college and how to apply for them. Ellen felt the IEP meeting was an important, but sometimes underutilized opportunity to have important conversations about students' futures. She explained, "we really don't have transition planning meetings until students are seniors" and the team sometimes "tiptoed" around challenging conversations about "how much support their student is getting in the moment and how much that is going to impact them at the next step." Ellen described taking or being asked to take on this responsibility saying, "I do sometimes see my role as figuring out how to say those things."

Skill Development. Ellen engaged in direct counseling services for students with IEPs to address specific goals. She was new to her position in Chestnut, and when asked about her role in transition planning, she explained, “I'm still kind of figuring out.” She went on to say,

> A lot of what I did this past year was work with students on building independence, but not necessarily…academic independence or functional independence…More like social-emotional independence, like building confidence that they can make decisions and recognizing the importance of sort of owning their own reactions to the world and generally feeling capable to take on the next step, sort of building that self-concept. That has been my most important role.

Ellen wrote IEP goals for the students on her caseload, and explained that for seniors, “if they have a social emotional goal we update the benchmarks to reflect something that is transition-related, usually independence.” For example, for Liana, she described helping her better understand her disability-related needs and advocate for them with her teachers so that she would later be able to self-advocate in college.

Support/Advocacy. In addition to her one-on-one counseling sessions, Ellen was available to support her students as needed and collaborated with other professionals to do so. For example, for Randall, she described brainstorming how to help him feel less socially isolated at school and problem-solving day-to-day challenges as they arose. She perceived herself as an active member of his team, and part of that role was collaborating to determine how to best meet his needs at school.

Paraprofessionals.

Kate was a one-to-one paraprofessional working with Randall, and was the only paraprofessional discussed by participants in the study. She did not participate in the study; however, multiple other participants described her role in Randall's case. Her role was only described in limited ways, but seemed primarily oriented toward academic support. She helped Randall with assignments during classes, implemented the accommodations and modifications in Randall's IEP, and played an important role communicating across professionals about Randall's current needs or plans to support him. For example, Dana noted Kate was often the one who assisted Randall with his assignments in the learning center. Ellen noted that Kate took charge of a log that tracked daily issues that came up with Randall and went back and forth between home and school. As noted above, Barry, Randall's English teacher, relied heavily on Kate to keep him informed about issues that arose with Randall and to implement any specific learning strategies.

Students.

Though students did not participate in the study, professionals described them as having roles and responsibilities in the activity system. This section describes participants' conceptions of students' roles.

Future Planning. Guidance counselors described sharing responsibility for future planning with students. For example, Rudy described her role as "guiding [students] along that process of self-discovery" but explained, "we ask them to do a lot of that independent research and then support them as they work through the process." Students

were expected to explore their interests and skills, research colleges, and complete applications.

Students' roles in future planning through the IEP process were less clear. A few participants, including Alex, Claudia, Gia and Francine, described promoting student participation at IEP meetings and the importance of supporting the student's vision for their future. For example, Gia felt it was important to have students attend their IEP meetings "from a really early age…Talking about what they see themselves doing, what they want to do, and understanding…it's their path and not ours." Gia and Francine both mentioned that Chestnut had a series of future-oriented questions they discussed with students when writing their transition plans to ensure that the student's "voice is a part of the IEP." However, students were not described as having any specific role or responsibility at IEP meetings. Adrian expressed concern that, while students were being invited to meetings, the district was not yet "truly encouraging and supporting student driven future planning." She hoped to expand conceptions of involving students in transition planning beyond compliance (e.g. inviting the student) to more meaningful engagement such as person-centered planning and having students eventually lead their meetings.

Skill Development. Students' primary role in skill development was to be engaged and put forth effort. Many professionals connected students' progress and success at Chestnut to their work ethic. For example, Francine explained how Clay and Liana improved their skills in her class. Both were "willing to try" new strategies and "never complained" or were resistant. In contrast, Randall's lack of engagement was

often described as a barrier to skill development. Alex explained that at Chestnut, students with disabilities took a full and challenging course load, and that if they worked hard and were "supported appropriately," they would graduate with strong academic skills.

Support/Advocacy. A primary role for students with disabilities at Chestnut was being able to advocate for their own needs by communicating directly with their teachers and seeking support when they needed it. Independence and self-advocacy were often described as goals for students because they were skills students would need in college. For example, Ellen, the school psychologist, helped Liana decide the best way to approach her teachers; Ellen explained to Liana that advocating for herself might be more challenging but even more important in college. Some professionals described supporting or encouraging students to advocate with teachers, but others described self-advocacy more as an expectation. For example, Barry, a general education English teacher, explained how he expected students, especially students like Clay who had it "together," to be able to let him know if they were having a difficult time and needed support. Alex valued, and responded positively, to students taking responsibility for getting support on their own rather than having their parents step in. A focus on student self-advocacy was often coupled with the concern that parents "stepping in and…removing any…obstacles," didn't give students an opportunity to try things on their own (Jamie).

There was also a sense from some participants that most students with disabilities at Chestnut had limited support needs, would develop skills independently and could overcome their disability with hard work. For example, Alex explained that by "leaning

into their education…working hard to overcome dyslexia, attention deficit," students could succeed and would develop the academic skills to be successful in college. Jamie noted that most of her students only needed "academically-based support and…they get that support through their learning center period." Dana felt, "the majority of the students I work with, they might have ADHD or they might have a minor learning disability," and therefore they did not need to be explicitly taught transition skills.

Families

Although no parents participated in the study, professionals described them as taking on important roles in the activity system as well. This section outlines participants' conceptions of the roles of families. I discuss skills development and support together in this section because, for parents, roles related to these two objects were intertwined.

Future Planning. Participants felt parents were an important, but often problematic, influence on future planning at Chestnut. First, participants expressed that, in general, messaging from parents created the expectation that students should go to elite colleges after high school. For example, Gia explained that it was a "very high achieving district" and that "there's a certain amount of pressure on kids in the district. They're supposed to be going to college…taking all these AP classes and going off to a really great schools." Alex similarly expressed, "There's no rule book that says they all got to go to college when they turn 18, but that's just the climate of the community and the time and…that's not going to waver." He felt this culture made it difficult to explore other postsecondary options. Thus, parents influenced the types of postsecondary options that were valued.

As professionals worked individually with students with disabilities to plan for life after high school, parents were important, but sometimes overbearing partners. All three guidance counselors described parents as their main collaborators in the helping students plan their next step after high school (primarily college planning). Rudy explained how guidance counselors, “work as a team with families.” Both Alex and Rudy described productive collaborations with their focal students’ families throughout the college planning process. However, guidance counselors, and other professionals, noted that it was challenging to work with parents if the parents had different ideas than they did about the best next step for students. Adrian expressed concern that there was a “deference to parents that needs to shift.” She felt they needed to focus more on what the student wanted rather than what the parents wanted. Multiple professionals expressed this concern in relation to Randall, noting that his parents really wanted him to go to college, and this complicated their conversations about transition.

Skill Development and Advocacy/Support. In Chestnut, parents were sometimes described as providing too much support for students in ways that inhibited their skill development. As Jamie explained, “if a kid is having a tough time in a class, it's…the parent calling and trying to…switch classes or get a tutor…There's not a lot of…the kid going in and advocating.” This dynamic was particularly evident in Randall’s case, in which many participants (including Claudia, Ellen, Gia, and Jamie) felt Randall’s parents did not hold him accountable for meeting his responsibilities at school. Claudia explained, “for them it was easier just to say, ‘Yes, stay home, sleep in. Don't go, don't do homework’ because it wasn't worth the battle.” Alex felt that some families with

resources just "take advantage of the supports given to them and they're never happy." These families "take time and resources away" from other students who needed supports but whose parents had fewer resources to advocate for them.

Mapping the Activity Systems for Each Focal Student

In this section, I describe how transition planning and services were enacted for each of the three focal students (Clay, Liana, and Randall). For each focal student, I first discuss participants' conceptions of their roles in relation to the three objects (future planning, skill development, and support), and then describe the salient dimensions of the activity system (e.g. tools, community) that shaped conceptions of roles and the enactment of transition planning and services. Clay, Liana, and Randall had unique goals, interests, strengths, and challenges that shaped participants' conceptions of the specific object of transition planning and their role in it. Each case helps to illuminate the affordances and constraints of the activity system more broadly.

Clay

Clay had a specific learning disability. Professionals in Clay's activity system included general educators, special educators, his guidance counselor, and the team chair. Most of Clay's classes took place in general education settings. However, only one of his general educators, Barry, participated in the study. His guidance counselor, Alex, and his junior and senior year special educators, Francine and Dana, all participated in the study. Claudia, the team chair, described playing a very limited role in Clay's transition planning.

Future Planning. Clay planned to attend college after he graduated from Chestnut and he had clear, specific criteria for the type of college he wanted to attend. Alex, Clay's guidance counselor, took the lead in helping Clay plan for this goal. In addition to leading group presentations for juniors focused on the college application process, Alex met individually with Clay to discuss his college options and answer questions about the application process.

Alex described Clay as proactive, personable, resourceful, and self-reliant. Alex felt Clay took initiative in his college planning process. He described an instance in which he suggested Clay call a college to ask a question, remarking "[Clay] would call. Like he wouldn't pawn that off on mom or dad." Alex explained how Clay's initiative inspired his own efforts, and facilitated a collaborative future planning process,

> I think the relationship grew organically. Having worked with the older brother who was…articulate, approachable. Clay acted in the same manner…it was just one of those relationships that was very positive…Every time we met I felt like he left with something — He'd go, 'All right. I appreciate that.'— with an action plan and he would follow through on the action steps and sometimes — you don't get a lot of that…So when you do get it…you want to work with that.

Alex felt that because Clay "jumped in with both feet and did his research," he selected "the right place" and would likely make a smooth transition to college.

For future planning, Alex reported coordinating primarily with Clay's mom, explaining that she might call with a question or he would reach out to "[walk] mom through the process." For example, he reached out to Clay's mom to explain that because

of Clay's disability, Clay would receive a waiver for his foreign language requirement that would be recognized by state colleges.

Other participants described limited if any involvement in Clay's future planning. Dana, his case manager and skills development teacher, explained,

> By the time I started working with him, he was almost completely independent. [He] didn't really need any assistance with the college planning process…There was not really anything I did as far as transition planning… because he kind of had it all together.

Barry, Clay's English teacher, described his participation in Clay's transition planning as, "almost not at all." He shared, "I couldn't tell you the specifics of where [Clay] was applying and whether or not he was accepted or if he ended up choosing to you know go to college at all." Francine described talking with Clay about his goals to complete his transition planning form during his junior year, but, because she was not assigned to Clay as a senior, she was not involved in planning for college or identifying college resources. She explained that his parents and guidance counselor were aware of his needs so, "hopefully he has some good resources at the school that he's going to." Claudia, the team chair, noted, "I met [Clay] on zoom one time for 30 minutes."

In general, special educators and the formal IEP and transition planning process seemed to play a limited role in Clay's future planning. Dana noted that Clay's IEP meeting took place in April, with "only a month left for his high school career." She explained, "I wrote [his IEP], but it is not much to say because he'd already been accepted to college." Claudia had a different perspective. She recalled that Clay's IEP

"ran through to June" and expressed concern that there wasn't a plan to meet to close out the year. She chose to hold what she called a "summary of performance meeting" to review Clay's postsecondary plans and provide a space for questions. She explained,

> I felt like we needed to. [Clay's family] had a lot of questions at that meeting for the guidance counselor…about finishing up and what it looked like…the idea that they should have copies of the assessments or how to get copies…was sort of a new idea for them.

She contrasted her perspective with Dana's, saying "the liaison wasn't happy with me that I made her…have a meeting…because in her mind, he was gone…There was no more procedural things to do."

Only Alex and Francine mentioned the transition planning form or how it was used. Alex provided information to complete the form, noting that the learning specialist would ask him, "'Has Clay participated in the junior future planning night? Has he taken his essay SAT's, his ACTS? Has he visited a school?'" Francine reported talking with Clay during his junior year about his goals and plans to write the transition plan and prepare for the IEP. She explained,

> We wrote goals together…We have a transition planning form that we do with kids to talk about what their goals are in general for the year…what they want to do after high school. So I just make sure that their voice is a part of the IEP. And then, at the IEP meeting…I encouraged Clay to speak up for himself and talk about what he wanted from the IEP.

Support and Skill Development. Only Alex described advocating for academic supports for Clay. Alex explained how Clay's ability to fit in with the other students, work hard, and be articulate caused his needs to be overlooked when he first came to Chestnut. For example, he expressed frustration with Clay's freshman history teacher who didn't know Clay had a disability and "didn't accommodate" and as a result, "he struggled." When Clay was re-evaluated as a sophomore, the team considered determining him ineligible for special education services. Alex disagreed. He felt Clay was utilizing and continued to need his accommodations. Due to turnover in the special education department, Alex felt he "was the only one at the table" who understood Clay's history of not being adequately supported. He explained, "first time in my career I was like 'I'm not signing that.'" In general, Alex felt strongly that students like Clay, who "quietly go through and just do the right thing" often don't get the supports they deserve because "labor intensive families and parents that have the funds [and] take time and resources." He noted, "that's where I feel like our role is to try to advocate."

Francine was Clay's special educator his freshman and junior year, and interacted with him through the skills development class. She felt that by junior year he had developed strong self-advocacy skills and could independently communicate with teachers to address issues and ask for support. She explained, "he didn't even need me to…play any part in that." In terms of transition skills, she "continue[d] to work on those self-advocacy pieces," and also helped Clay develop strategies to cope with test anxiety. In terms of support, she noted that she would email his teachers to "just make sure that he's doing okay in each of his classes." She didn't collaborate with Alex because Clay,

"worked so hard and…had it…all together."

By senior year, participants who worked directly with Clay (Alex, Barry, and Dana) felt he had even fewer, if any, skill deficits or transition-related needs. As a result, they did not engage in skill development activities, support provide supports, or collaborate with one another. For example, Dana described her role with Clay in this way,

> He was so independent…Sometimes he would ask me to proofread an English paper or whatnot…[It] was partly more of like a guided study for him by the end, because he did not need any real support services from me.

Dana was surprised Clay was still on an IEP and did not have any transition-related goals for him. Barry similarly described Clay as "not [having] any challenge beyond, beyond his capability to control." Barry explained that while in some cases, he might choose to attend an IEP meeting to make sure a student was "being heard" or was "represented well," Clay was "a pretty forthright guy. I don't think he would have a problem at all advocating for himself."

Barry further noted that if any issues arose in the classroom, he would address them with Clay directly, rather than communicating with other professionals. He said, "especially as…together as Clay is…I would talk to Clay." Dana and Alex also reported not needing to communicate with one another because Clay was "a pretty self-reliant, resourceful kid, " (Alex) and there were "no concerns" (Dana). Alex contrasted Clay's case with examples of other students who struggled more and therefore sparked more collaboration between departments. Thus, because professionals perceived Clay as

independent and capable, they assigned Clay primary responsibility for seeking support; they also did not engage in skill development activities.

Chestnut's Activity System in relation to Clay. Figure 2 is a representation of the salient dimensions of Chestnut's activity system in relation to Clay. The professionals who interacted with Clay were primarily his general educators, one special educator each year, and his guidance counselor. The primary object of Clay's activity system was college admission; beyond college admission, participants did not identify any objectives related to transition. This conception of the object shaped which professionals interacted with Clay and the roles they took on.

Clay's guidance counselor, Alex, took responsibility for future planning with Clay. He leveraged his positive working relationship with Clay and Clay's family as well as Clay's industriousness to engage in what Alex described as productive and effective college planning. Other participants viewed Clay as needing relatively little academic support or skill development, and therefore described limited engagement in his transition. The tools special educators used to support Clay consisted of the skills development class and the IEP process. While Francine described utilizing the IEP process as an opportunity to discuss Clay's goals and plans with him, and encouraged him to participate in his meeting, Dana perceived the IEP process as relatively unimportant given that Clay was doing well and had already been accepted to college. The skills development class became a study hall in which Clay could ask for support if he needed it.

Participants described Clay's outcome positively. They had few concerns about

Clay's transition to college. Clay exhibited skills that were valued at Chestnut: independence and self-advocacy. Alex noted that Clay was, "a tremendous success story." Only Claudia questioned whether Chestnut had provided Clay with all of the tools and resources he needed for postsecondary success. She used the summary of performance meeting at the end of the year to check if he "need[ed] anything more from the school," and felt Clay and his family still had many questions.

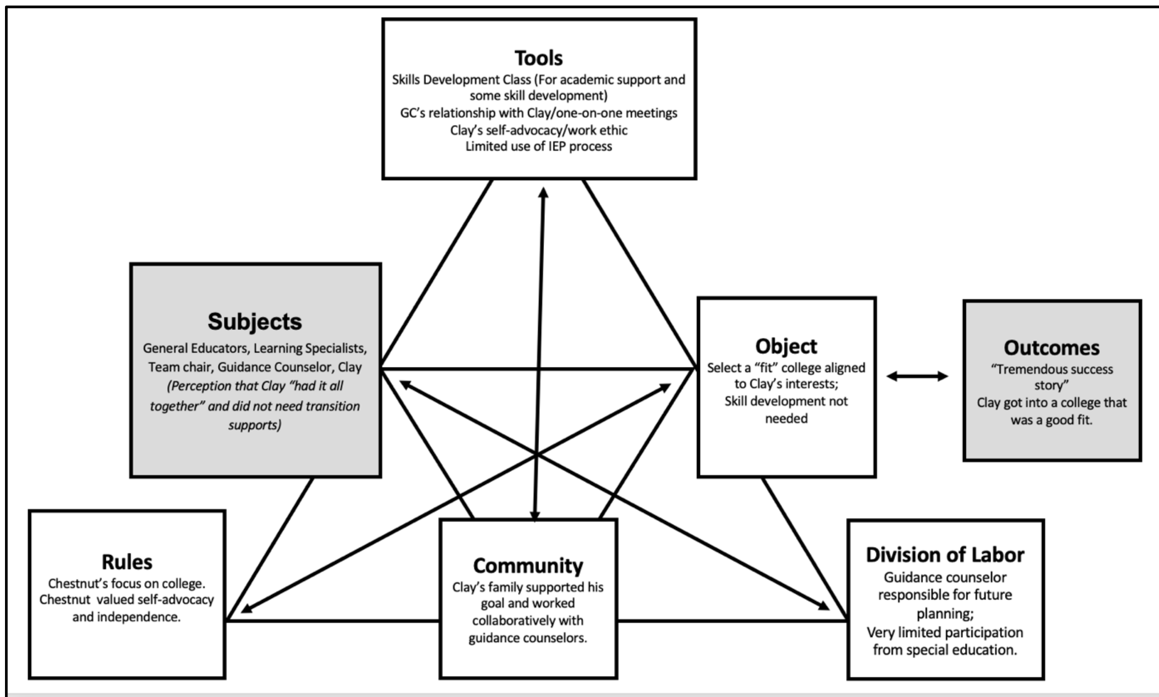

Figure 2: Chestnut's Activity System for Clay

Liana

Liana was diagnosed with an emotional disability. Like Clay, Liana took all of her academic classes in general education settings; however, none of her general education teachers participated in the study. The other professionals involved in her case, including her guidance counselor (Rudy), special education teachers (Dana and Francine), the

school psychologist (Ellen) who she met with bi-weekly one-on-one, and the team chair (Claudia) who oversaw her IEP process, all participated in the study.

Future Planning. Similar to Clay, Liana planned to attend college immediately after high school. Rudy, Liana's guidance counselor, took primary responsibility for her college planning. Rudy's object for Liana was helping her select a college that would support her learning needs. She described working with Liana over several years to help her "get a better sense of who she was and what was going to be an appropriate fit type of school for her." She noted that by sophomore year Liana had started talking about colleges and had "some incredibly lofty goals." She described her work with Liana in this way:

> We had to do a lot of talking around goal setting…She was looking at extremely competitive schools. We had to do a lot of reality-based things in some very small doses over the course of about a year and a half…Really asking her to…reflect…Well if that's truly a goal, we want to talk about how we can get there and do we need to be at these super high level schools in order to get to that end goal. Then sort of even rethinking like, are you sure you really want science? Like, you are down here taking all of your tests in our office because it's very overwhelming to you and we need to really break down: 'Okay, What's happening right now? Can you imagine…this intense level of study as you continue?'

Rudy felt that by her senior year, Liana had become "a lot more thoughtful about the process." She noted that Liana took ownership by completing her college essays and applications "very independently" and staying "on top of deadlines."

Rudy reported that her only collaborator in Liana's future planning was Liana's mom. She described feeling lucky that Liana's mom was "really on board" with Rudy's sense of what type of school would be a good fit for Liana. She explained, "Mom totally got it, knew that that original list and those lofty goals weren't appropriate …so that made it a lot easier to feel like you can have those realistic conversations." Rudy contrasted this with cases when "we don't have that parent buy-in piece, because that happens frequently. The parent sees their child perhaps in a very, very different way than we do…It's so much harder."

In terms of future planning responsibilities amongst other professionals, Rudy felt "transition planning was college planning. To my knowledge, there wasn't anything else that happened beyond that." Other participants' conceptions of their own roles aligned with Rudy's perception that she was solely responsible for future planning with Liana. Dana, Francine, and Ellen all reported limited or no role in Liana's college decision-making and application process. Francine recounted talking with Liana about her short-term and long-term goals, and the skills she needed to reach those goals, throughout Liana's junior year. Although she felt Liana would need to be connected with supports after high school, she explained, "I didn't work with her senior year. So I don't know what kind of resources were given to her and her family for future plans." She noted that the "guidance counselors are really good with that." However, Rudy did not report taking responsibility for coordinating supports for Liana at the college she selected.

Dana explained that she only participated in one IEP meeting for Liana and that "at that point, she was pretty well into the process already." Dana said she coordinated

occasionally with Rudy but only to check about how she was doing, not about future planning. Ellen shared that college was amongst the topics she would discuss with Liana in their meetings. However, she explained, "there was not much collaboration about specific transition goals, and part of that was because…She knew which colleges she wanted to apply to pretty early, and I believe was accepted…So she sort of had a handle on her transition." Claudia led Liana's IEP meeting. As she did in Clay's case, she expressed concern about whether the team was meeting Liana's transition needs. She followed up with Dana after Liana's IEP meeting to ask, 'Are we really doing everything we need to do to prepare her with this level of anxiety?'" She expressed concern about the severity of Liana's mental health history which included multiple hospitalizations, and felt, "the liaison [Dana] had like no clue…It wasn't even on her radar." Thus, similar to Clay's case, future planning was focused on college admission and was the guidance counselor's responsibility.

Support and Skill Development. Liana's guidance counselor also reported playing an important role advocating for Liana to receive special education services, similar to the role Alex had played for Clay. She explained that Liana was "evaluated her freshman year and found not eligible, but there was clearly always a little bit more that she needed." She noted concerns about Liana's reading, her processing speed, her anxiety and perfectionism, and the high levels of support she needed from her teachers. Rudy continued to push for additional services and, after an "uptick in behaviors" Liana was re-evaluated and determined eligible for an IEP. Similar to Alex's sentiments regarding Clay's case, Rudy noted that, because of turnover in the special education department,

she was the “consistent person who'd seen the history” and could, “provide some of that background information and what [Liana’s] needs were moving forward.”

In general, participants felt Liana needed more support than Clay to succeed academically and they described some specific goals for skills she needed to develop to succeed in the future. Rudy described Liana as “very motivated” and “quite possibly the hardest working kid I have ever worked with,” but noted she was also “incredibly anxious” and needed “reassurance constantly.” Rudy reported that during Liana’s junior year, “I would see Liana…on almost a daily basis,” to check-in, problem solve issues that arose, and “certainly a lot around testing and perseverating on having everything totally correct.” She also consistently pushed Liana to take a more balanced course load so she wouldn’t be overwhelmed.

Francine echoed concerns about Liana’s “high anxiety” and need to “get things perfect.” She interacted with Liana through the skills development class during her junior year. She described her primary goal with Liana as helping her manage her time so she wasn’t spending so long trying to perfect each assignment. For example, she would set a timer and “Whatever you get done. That's what we grade.” She noted that Liana’s “teachers were on board with [modifying her workload] because everybody was concerned about this anxiety.” She also described helping Liana develop note taking strategies and study using a study guide rather than “study[ing] every single little piece of information.” Finally, she noted that Liana had some difficulty with reading comprehension, “So that would be another thing that I worked on with her.” Francine felt that by the end of her junior year, Liana had made progress. But she expressed concern

that Liana needed such a high level of support and that she might struggle in college without it.

Participants who worked with Liana as a senior generally felt she was in a much better place and needed fewer supports. Rudy explained, “We lightened her load her senior year in terms of the academics…that was a very positive thing for her.” Her role with Liana shifted to focus primarily on future planning. Dana described self-advocacy and independence as goals for Liana. She explained that in the past, Liana had been dependent on the learning center but that she “wanted her to be more independent, so I didn't want to do too much for her, but just basically to give her the skills to communicate with the teachers.” Dana said that while earlier in the year she would help Liana plan her assignments, and select and request accommodations, “By the end, it was just to do homework and whatnot.” Liana was able to coordinate with her teachers and manage her assignments independently.

Ellen described her role with Liana as very limited compared to other students she worked with, and noted that Liana had “a fantastic senior year.” Her goals with Liana were focused on confidence and self-advocacy. She met with Liana bi-weekly to address these goals. Ellen explained that sometimes Liana would come with a specific issue she wanted to address and they would brainstorm solutions. “Otherwise, it was just sort of like ‘Things are good. Everything's good.’” She said there were a few times that she and Liana discussed how to communicate her needs to adults and Ellen connected their work together to skills she would need in college. She explained, “All of those conversations were sort of like, ‘this is how you're going to approach your current high school teacher,

but here's why it will matter when you get to college.'" Ellen described time as "the only barrier" in her work with Liana. She explained,

> What I was tasked with, through her IEP, to work on is extremely important stuff, but also so is passing all of your classes and getting good grades and your attendance in class…There's not that much time for working with me or anyone else on specific transition related goals if you're also going to get high grades.

Thus, for Ellen the goal of ensuring Liana succeeded academically was in conflict with the goal of helping her develop other transition-related skills.

As noted earlier, Claudia expressed some concerns about Liana's transition related needs due to Liana's history, and took two actions as a result. First, Claudia increased Ellen's involvement, adjusting the service on Liana's IEP from consultation to direct, counseling services. Second, Claudia wrote a note to Liana after her IEP meeting inviting her to "stop by and say hello." Liana visited her on one occasion and "talked about how hard it was." Claudia gave her a stone she could keep as a reminder that "I've got your back." She told Liana there were things the school could do to support her. But Claudia said she "never saw [Liana] after that."

Participants notably described limited collaboration in their work with Liana. Ellen explained that because Liana was very independent, and already had a plan for college, "her case was actually one of the lesser collaborative cases I was on." Rudy reported no collaboration with anyone during Liana's senior year. Dana noted that she did communicate with Liana's teachers at the beginning of the year, "because the accommodations that she had in her IEP were sometimes more than the teachers felt used

to or felt comfortable allowing." She also said Rudy would occasionally check in with her if Liana was having a difficult time. However, by the middle of the year, Liana was much more independent.

Chestnut's Activity System in relation to Liana. Figure 3 represents the salient dimensions of Chestnut's activity system in relation to Liana. The professionals who interacted with Liana were primarily her general educators, one special educator each year, her guidance counselor, and the school psychologist. Claudia, the interim team chair, also played a role in her case. Professionals described a few objects in Liana's case including (1) choosing a fit college, (2) succeeding academically without feeling anxious or overwhelmed, and (3) developing self-advocacy skills. However, by senior year, once Liana' was perceived to be doing well emotionally and academically, selecting a college was the primary object.

Similar to Clay, Liana's guidance counselor took responsibility for her future planning. Rudy leveraged her relationship with Liana over multiple years, and support from Liana's family, to encourage Liana to choose a "fit" college rather than an "extremely competitive school." Liana received support and skill development through regular, one-on-one check-ins with her guidance counselor as needed, bi-weekly meetings with Ellen, and the skills development class. Junior year, Francine focused primarily on academic skills (reading comprehension, note-taking, study skills, time-management) during the skills development class. Senior year, both Dana and Ellen focused on self-advocacy and independence, encouraging Liana to communicate more independently with her general education teachers about her needs. Professionals

described their work with Liana as fairly independent from one another. The IEP process helped connect Liana to academic and social emotional support, but it was not described as a tool for future planning.

Perceptions about outcomes for Liana were somewhat more mixed than they were for Clay. While many felt Liana made progress toward her goals, a few expressed concerns about whether Liana had been provided with sufficient supports to prepare her to successfully transition to college. Ellen noted limited time to work on transition-related skills due to Chestnut's rigorous schedule and focus on academics (a conflict between two perceived objects of the activity system). She worried about whether or not Liana would "advocate for herself at the college level…rather than getting to a point where she's having an emotional breakdown" before she asked for support. Claudia also wondered whether Chestnut should have provided more support to prepare Liana, given her disability-related needs. Adrian, the transition program coordinator, assessed the case from her more removed vantage point. She felt Liana probably needed more "orientation" to the supports she could get in college, but that professionals at Chestnut, "need more help to understand what to do." Interestingly, Adrian was the only one to mention that Liana had a vocational rehabilitation counselor who would continue to provide support after high school. She "remember[ed] feeling like, 'Oh, thank god. Okay. They seem to have this under control to some extent.'" Rudy was in touch with Liana after graduation and said "she's working hard and she's doing well in her classes" She felt Liana ended up in a college that was a good fit, but also noted it may have helped Liana that school was remote this past year.

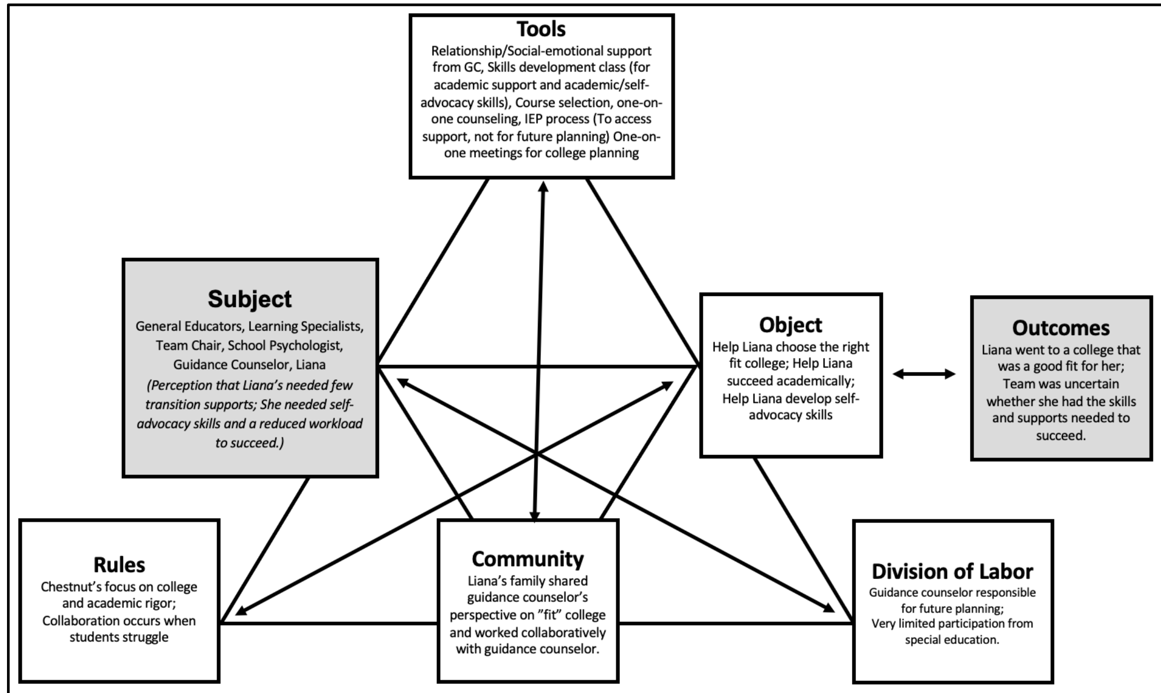

Figure 3: Chestnut's Activity System for Liana

***Randall*.**

Randall's primary disability is autism spectrum disorder. Professionals in multiple roles were part of Randall's activity system. Like Liana and Clay, Randall also took most of his classes in general education settings. He worked with two special educators each year, the school psychologist, speech-language pathologist, guidance counselor, and a one-to-one paraprofessional. Participants in the study included Barry (Randall's senior English teacher), Gia (special education/transition skills teacher), Francine (Case-manager and skills develop teacher junior year), Dana (case-manager and skills development teacher senior year), Ellen (school psychologist), Jamie (guidance counselor), Claudia (the interim chair coordinator), and Adrian (transition program coordinator). Missing voices in this study include Randall's other general educators, the

speech-language pathologist, and paraprofessional (Kate).

Future Planning. Unlike Clay and Liana, Randall's plan for what he wanted to do immediately after high school was uncertain. Professionals described his plans as "in flux" (Barry) or "depends on the day" (Dana). Randall vacillated between wanting to attend college and wanting to work. Dana explained,

> It [was] hard to say what he wanted or what his parents wanted…He wanted to go to traditional four year college, and sometimes he wanted to take a couple classes, and sometimes he didn't want to go to college and he just wanted to work…it was always changing.

Randall's uncertainty about his next step was one important factor shaping the division of responsibilities for transition. For Clay and Liana, their guidance counselors took the lead. In contrast, Jamie, Randall's guidance counselor, reported a limited role in Randall's future planning. She described engaging in conversations with Randall about his goals after high school, but said "he was just so focused on what was happening right now…Thinking about the future just made him really anxious." She explained that her work with Randall centered primarily around addressing day-to-day issues and that, "once I knew that he wasn't really going to do the college application process, I was kind of out of that a little bit."

Without clear leadership from the guidance office, responsibility for postsecondary planning for Randall was more ambiguous. The person who seemed to take the most ownership for Randall's postsecondary planning was Claudia, the interim chair coordinator. She explained, "I reconvened the team probably more than any other

team…I would say six or seven times…to try to like figure out what we were going to do." Claudia described discussing multiple postsecondary options at these meetings including, "a fifth year to build some of the skills that he was going to need" and dual enrollment, to allow him to "go to [community college] and take one class while he was still in high school." Claudia reported taking a more active role in Randall's case both because his plans were uncertain and because she perceived others to be "frustrated" and "done with him… that's why I started to sort of be his advocate."

Many other professionals described being involved in multiple meetings, and helping to brainstorm a plan for Randall, but they reported limited responsibilities for future planning outside of attending the meetings. For example, Dana, Randall's case-manager and special educator, explained, "My role was to attend meeting after meeting after meeting." She further said, "I don't even know how most of the meetings originated. I just knew I would get an email being invited." Adrian noted that she attended Randall's meeting, but had no direct involvement besides trying to "understand what they had done." She explained that because she joined the conversations later, she couldn't reverse course but could use what she learned to develop better systems in the future.

Additionally, sometimes participants' perceptions of each other's roles were misaligned. Gia listed Randall's guidance counselor (Jamie) as taking charge of the dual enrollment options, though Jamie did not list this amongst her responsibilities, suggesting responsibility for this task may have been unclear. Gia delineated her role as specifically focused on skill development rather than future planning. Gia felt the learning specialist (Dana) was responsible for helping students develop their postsecondary vision.

However, Dana did not report playing this role with Randall. Ellen, the school psychologist, felt lack of leadership was a challenge for transition planning in Randall's case. She explained,

> It wasn't clear who was the lead…We all sort of had these little pockets of knowledge about him that we were constantly sharing, but there was no clear point person, and I think that was overwhelming for all of us, including Randall and his parents.

Professionals expressed multiple, but varied, conceptions of the challenges to developing a postsecondary plan for Randall. First, both Claudia and Adrian noted that important conversations about Randall's future had happened much too late. Claudia explained, "we were waiting until…he was on the doorstep out to be talking about staying another year." Ellen and Jamie both expressed that their own lack of knowledge or training about postsecondary options besides college made it difficult to discuss other options with Randall's family. Jamie explained,

> I just feel like that there would have been some value to be able to really walk him through what…a fifth year really means…just making families feel like we have some set, concrete plans, with information about different options, instead of kind of more of a vague…

Jamie's sentiments aligned with her perspective more broadly that she lacked guidance and training to support students who weren't taking a traditional college path.

Claudia, Ellen, Gia, and Jamie described Randall's parents' as "holding on to the idea of college" (Jamie) and felt their lack of follow through or clear vision made it

difficult to move forward with different postsecondary options. For example, Claudia explained how Randall resisted dual enrollment because it fell outside of his typical school schedule. She felt, “nobody pushed him…The family was just not willing to…work around that with him.” Gia placed responsibility most squarely with Randall’s parents. She explained that the team had been willing to explore dual enrollment, even though Randall, “can’t even get through the school day” (as explained below). However, Randall’s parents didn’t “know how to handle him” and “didn't follow through. There's only so much you can do.” Finally, school closures due to Covid-19 also came up as a challenge in Randall’s postsecondary planning. Some participants noted how they would have likely had more conversations if schools hadn’t shut down and that it became much more difficult to engage Randall’s family remotely.

Support and Skill Development. Professionals on Randall’s team described him as having many social-emotional and behavioral challenges that made it difficult for him to succeed in school. This often oriented professionals toward the object of triaging day-to-day challenges and meeting graduation requirements rather than skill development or future planning.

Jamie explained that Randall had difficulty “regulating his emotions,” and that his outbursts made it difficult for him to fit in socially. She explained, “he was so afraid to have an outburst, that he would oftentimes have to leave class every time he got frustrated and come into my office to try to calm down, or have the outbursts, just with me.” Throughout high school, Jamie provided “safe space” for Randall to calm down and “process things so that he [could] continue with his day.”

Ellen and Claudia both described sharing responsibility with Jamie for providing emotional support as needed during Randall's senior year. Ellen explained, "There were many weeks where he was down in my office or my colleague Jamie, the guidance counselor's office, daily, sometimes multiple times a day, for emotional support." Ellen also had scheduled meetings with Randall twice a week, at which they discussed social challenges as well as his future plans. Claudia said that sometimes she would be called and told Randall was "out of control" and asked if he could sit with her for a few minutes. She "tried to just be a supportive, friendly person to him" because others "were just seeing the behavior" rather than listening to his concerns.

Claudia, Jamie, and Ellen all noted Randall's difficulty fitting in with peers and making friends as something that was very difficult for him and caused him to feel unhappy at school. In addition to listening to and supporting Randall individually, they mentioned a few other actions to help Randall socially. Claudia shared an incident where one of Randall's general education teachers came to her for help because students in his class were teasing Randall and he wasn't sure what to do. She asked if anyone had ever provided "disability awareness training…[to] talk about disabilities and…acceptance" but explained, "nobody had ever thought of doing that." Claudia led a training about disability in each of the sociology classes, being sure not to single Randall out. She said that she wasn't sure if anything came of it, but the students were "amazingly receptive." Ellen mentioned that the team had brainstormed about how to address Randall's social isolation, "'How can we help him be more appropriate with this peer?' Or 'Is there a basketball league in town?'" However, it seemed that these efforts were subsumed by

other day-to-day challenges at school and no other professionals discussed them. Barry, Randall's English teacher mentioned collaborating with Kate, Randall's paraprofessional, to plan for group projects, considering, "where do we think Randall can fit and how do we support him in that group."

While professionals saw Randall as having substantial social-emotional and behavioral challenges, they felt academically he was "a very bright kid" (Francine). All three special educators focused primarily on the behavioral aspect of Randall's challenges (rather than social or academic), prioritizing getting him to complete his work. Francine explained,

> I think the biggest challenge was to get him to work. He did not see the value in school…or participating in any type of assignment. It was a chore just to get him to do that…It was constantly modifying the behavioral plans because he his mood would change from day to day…It was a lot of behavioral management with him.

Francine reported that developing systems to help Randall complete his work, such as incentives and breaks, was a primary role she played. Similarly, Dana reported that her main goal with Randall in the learning center was work completion. She explained, "academically, he didn't really need support. It was more like the strategies to stay focused and to organize to do the academic work." Gia engaged with Randall primarily through her transition skills class. She reported that when she could "get him to focus, he could do the work," but that he was often absent or resistant.

Unlike Clay and Liana's cases, professionals on Randall's team reported constant communication and collaboration about Randall. In addition to the multiple team

meetings held throughout the year, there were daily emails and check ins to assess how Randall was doing, problem solve day-to-day challenges, and discuss how they were "going to get him to the end of the year" (Ellen). Kate, Randall's paraprofessional, was described as playing an important role in keeping everyone informed about Randall's status. Ellen explained that Kate managed a daily communication log which included, "For every class…what is his progress right now, what's the homework, what kind of social or emotional issue did he face." The log was a tool to, "know if he's going to come down and need to check in. Do we need to collaborate on helping him solve problems." Barry explained that he didn't need to seek information from special educators about Randall because he "trusted Kate, whom I saw every day, to like give me the headlines." Overall, communication regarding Randall was frequent and seemed to address immediate concerns.

While substantial attention seemed placed on supporting Randall day-to-day and helping him complete school, opportunities for him to develop skills in his areas of need were less clearly articulated, more informal, and not targeted to his specific needs. Gia perceived herself, and was seen by others, as the point person for helping Randall develop transition-related skills. Randall participated in her transition skills class which covered, "banking, resume writing, interview skills, like all that kind of stuff." Gia described Randall's behavioral challenges as an impediment to learning transition skills, rather than thinking of social skills or emotional regulation as the transition skills that he needed to be explicitly taught. She also noted that it was difficult to teach Randall the skills he would need in a job setting because "we couldn't provide a job coach." She

explained, “I can talk about it until I'm blue in the face with him but I can't go with him to work right now because we're at the high school level and he's got a full schedule of classes.”

Both Francine and Dana felt uncertain about their role in teaching transition-related skills, and noted that academics were more prioritized in the skills development classes. With Randall, they both prioritized work completion, though Francine noted on occasion helping Randall to work through a challenge he was having at his job. Ellen and Jamie described helping Randall problem solve social or emotional challenges at school and at work as they arose. Ellen noted that the team discussed concerns that they were providing too much support. They wanted to “promote his emotional regulation.” But discussions focused on when it was “appropriate to allow him to come down” for support rather than teaching skills for emotional regulation. Both Jamie and Ellen questioned whether Chestnut was able to provide the supports or skill development opportunities to meet Randall’s needs. Ellen explained,

> He really missed out on some social emotional skill building because he was placed in such an academically rigorous environment that was so challenging for him. That didn't leave a lot of time for building those other really important social-emotional skills.

Jamie considered whether a program with “more staff who are kind of trained to handle and manage and connect with…students like him” would have been better for him.

Chestnut’s Activity System in relation to Randall. Figure 4 represents the salient dimensions of Chestnut’s activity system in relation to Randall. A diverse set of

professionals interacted with Randall in relation to transition, including general educators, two special educators each year, his guidance counselor, related service providers, special education administrators (Adrian and Claudia), and a paraprofessional. For Randall, there was no clear postsecondary goal to orient future planning toward and only limited opportunities for skill-building. Most efforts were focused on helping Randall get through each day and complete school.

Because Randall was not following the typical college application process, his guidance counselor played a much smaller role in his future planning. Instead, Claudia, the interim chair coordinator, played a more active role, convening his IEP team multiple times to discuss potential postsecondary options. Other professionals participated in planning meetings, but lacked clearly delineated responsibilities. Due to Chestnut's focus on college, multiple professionals noted that the team lacked the knowledge and experience to facilitate timely and effective conversations with Randall's family about other postsecondary pathways.

Support for Randall included multiple meetings, daily collaboration amongst team members, the transition skills class, the skills development class, a one-on-one paraprofessional who was with Randall in all of his classes, counseling services, and the availability of one-to-one emotional support as needed. These tools were leveraged primarily to triage daily challenges and help Randall complete school, with a more limited focus on future planning and skill development.

Randall chose to graduate rather than staying on for a fifth year as many on the team hoped he would do. While professionals felt they had worked hard to support

Randall, they had differing opinions regarding the outcome and what additional tools could have been beneficial. Claudia noted that they helped Randall meet his own goal of graduating and moving on and that he left knowing people cared about him. However, she felt that having conversations much sooner about a fifth year option and what that could look like could have persuaded Randall's family to consider that option. Other challenges included the covid 19 pandemic which made it much more difficult to communicate with Randall, Randall's parents' focusing on college and not holding Randall accountable, lack of knowledge about a fifth year or other alternative postsecondary options, and whether Chestnut had the right resources to support Randall at all.

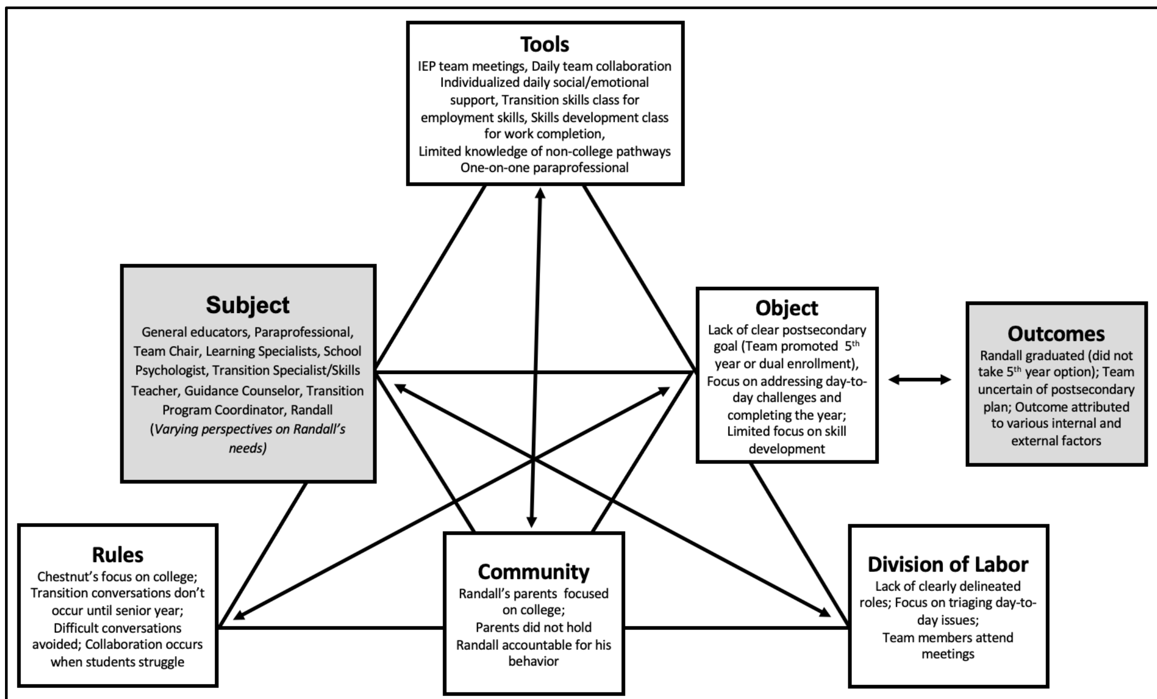

Figure 4: Chestnut's Activity System for Randall.

Chestnut High School's Activity System for Transition Planning and Service Delivery.

This section addresses the third research question: How do Chestnut's professionals conceptualize the individual and contextual factors that shaped the division of responsibilities and the enactment of transition planning and service delivery? By synthesizing across the focal students' cases and participants' broader conceptions of how responsibilities related to transition were shared amongst professionals at Chestnut, I describe the salient dimensions of Chestnut's activity system for transition planning and service delivery. Figure 5 is a visual representation of the activity system.

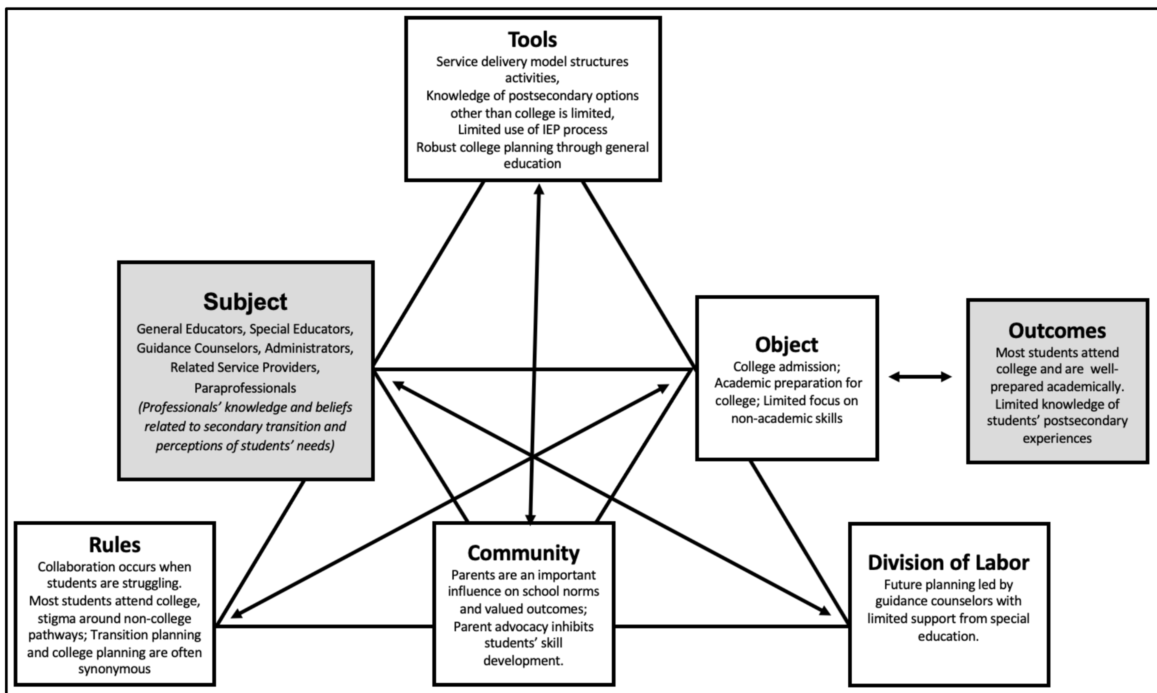

Figure 5: Chestnut's Activity System for Transition Planning and Service Delivery.

A Community Focused on College.

All participants felt strongly that the community's focus on college played an important role in the activity system. This community pressure oriented the activity system toward college admission as a primary object and limited resources to pursue other future planning or skill development goals. First, the community's focus on college created an environment in which students felt pressured to pursue this goal. As Rudy explained, "that becomes the conversation…Seniors can't go to any function or like go into the grocery store without having a conversation with someone about like: 'Oh! Where are you applying?" Gia similarly expressed,

> I think especially some of the special education kids in the school who…might be going to [community college], or maybe just it would be better if they worked, but I think they feel a certain amount of pressure and lack of confidence because everybody around them is so focused on being high achievers.

Barry described students pretending to complete steps of the college application process or seeming upset during guidance presentations because they didn't feel comfortable saying they didn't want to go to college. In Randall's case, professionals felt that Randall felt pressured by his parents to attend college, whereas he really wanted to consider other options. Gia explained,

> "at one point, [Randall said] 'Sure, I want to go to college,' and, I think that was just coming because his parents were pushing it. But we were like, 'Okay, so if this is what you all want to do, we're going to help you figure out how to do it appropriately.'"

Thus, from her perspective, Randall's parents' desire for him to attend college shifted the team's discussions and the future planning actions that the team took.

Pressure to attend elite colleges became infused into the school's culture and created an environment in which it was difficult to support other postsecondary options or focus on non-academic skills. For example, Rudy explained how because most students were going to college, "we talk briefly about gap year programs, military, employment…but it's like one slide in our presentation. Then we spend most of our time talking about college planning."

Alex explained how Chestnut's focus on college limited the school's other offerings. He said,

> We don't have vocational programs. We're getting better with our support services for students that struggle with mental health issues. But when it comes to…other programming that other schools have, most kids are going to two- and four-year schools.

He went on to explain the difficulty of making changes to the schedule, saying "every time you make that little change, if a kid doesn't get into Tufts or BC, sometimes the parents think, "Well, it's because you guys are getting soft on grades.'"

Other professionals also described feeling pressured to help students meet the rigorous academic requirements at Chestnut, leaving little time for other activities. For example, Dana explained, "it's just really hard…with the school being so college-based, college focusing, academically rigorous." She felt she had limited time to focus on transition-related skills in the skills development class "when there's so much other stuff

going on." Ellen similarly described lack of time due to the rigorous academic schedule as a barrier to her ability to support Liana, noting, "Given the current scheduling of the Chestnut High School, there's not that much time for working with me or anyone else on specific transition-related goals." Thus, professionals felt both they and their students felt pressured to meet the high expectations set by the community. This oriented their work towards college admission and academic success.

Subjects: Beliefs about Transition Skills and Students' Transition-related Needs.

Perceptions about transition skills and students' transition-related needs also played an important role in the types of transition-related activities that took place at Chestnut. First, a common sentiment amongst professionals at Chestnut was that most students with disabilities at their school had limited support or transition-related needs. This was evident in Gia's explanation of Chestnut's service delivery model. She explained that Chestnut identified a small subset of the school population, who she called the "transition kids." These were students who were "probably not going off on the college path" and therefore required instruction to address "more heavy-duty transition skills." Gia's description suggests that the school differentiated between students who had transition-related needs and those who did not (most students). In alignment with this perspective, Dana described most of her students as having "minor" disabilities, and felt they "could function at the level that their peers that are…not on IEPs could." Thus she felt they did not need to be to explicitly taught transition skills. Jamie described her "typical" student with a disability as needing primary academic supports, which they got from special educators. Thus her role was "less hands on" and primarily focused on

selecting a college with the right supports. Other professionals, such as Alex and Barry described students controlling or overcoming their disabilities with hard work. This perspective was prominent in Clay's case. Participants viewed Clay as having it "all together" (Dana) and "the model of what you would want" for a student with a disability (Alex). He was not perceived as needing support with his transition.

Relatedly, the special educators (Dana, Francine, and Gia) seemed to view transition skills as a specific set of skills focused on employment or independent living. For example, Dana contrasted between academic or organizational skills and transition skills. She explained, "a lot of the goals are either academic-based or study and organization. So you see that through their academics, not through transition skills." She viewed academic skills development and preparing students for transition as competing demands on her time. Francine distinguished between "true transition" skills (such as using a credit card or learning to cook simple recipes) and "bigger overarching skills that you'd need for college," such as independence and self-advocacy. Both Dana and Francine felt uncertain about which skills, amongst a long list of transition skills—from laundry, to buying a car, to sending a thank you note after an interview—they should teach to their students. Gia delineated the skills students needed based on the postsecondary pathway they were likely to pursue. For example, collegebound students should understand their needs and how to access accommodations in college. Students "not on that path" need guidance to match their interests and skills to an appropriate career path. She explained,

> I find that with transition kids it's like, "Oh, I want to be a police officer." Well, this morning, you had an…outburst where you try to punch somebody in the face…so being a police officer may not be the best fit. How do you have those conversations with those kids about their skill level, what they want to do, what they think they can do, or what they're capable of?

Thus, only students not planning to attend college needed to engage in career planning. She taught a specific set of skills in her transition skills class, and viewed Randall's social and behavioral challenges as impediments to participating in her transition class, rather than a potential focus for skill development. She explained, "When we would do transition skills and I can get him to focus, he could do the work. It was more…getting him to focus in on what we were doing…We were doing…banking, resume writing, interview skills, like all that kind of stuff."

Francine and Dana also described lack of training or support related to transition, which caused them to rely on personal experiences and online resources to decide which skills were important. They developed a transition curriculum on their own, "just the learning specialists, trying to put something together with any resources we could find. It wasn't anything that was…led by someone that was more knowledgeable" (Dana). Dana furthered that the resources she found weren't helpful, explaining, "a lot of the transition curriculums that you see out there are learning how to get across the street or do your laundry and my students know how to do that."

For professionals other than special educators, perceptions of the types of skills students needed to succeed after high school varied and lacked a clear focus. For

example, Rudy explained,

> We're always looking to make sure that we're sending off into the world kids who are well-educated, communicative, with skills based in the 21st century. People who are ready to take on that next step. I don't think they have delineated the specific language yet for what those exit skills are.

Jamie listed “social-emotional, real world skills, like how to do your laundry, how to manage conflict…how to manage a tough boss or colleague or professor” as important skills that Chestnut should spend more time explicitly teaching. She felt this was becoming “more of a theme” but there was “no direct curriculum.” Alex highlighted other skills such as digital literacy; he also felt that non-academic skills such as grit and resiliency were discussed amongst professionals as important, but had “lost focus” and were not highlighted enough in messaging around the school or in the school’s activities.

Taken together, participants’ beliefs that most students didn’t need to be taught transition-related skills, lack of clarity or shared understandings regarding what non-academic skills were important, and lack of structured opportunities or tools to engage in non-academic skill development, led to few activities in relation to this object.

The Object of the Activity System: Finding the Right Fit Program.

With pressure from the community for students to attend elite colleges, and lack of clear focus regarding non-academic skill development, future planning, and in particular, selecting the right college was the most well-defined, and well-supported object of the activity system. Guidance counselors navigated community pressure by helping students individually to find the right fit college, rather than aligning to

community expectations, and they defined this specific goal as central to their work. For example, Jamie described

> Trying to find the best match for that kid…just making sure that there's no expectation that you have to go to the most selective school you possibly can…reassuring kids and families that this is about you and what you're going to enjoy where you're going to find personal success.

Clay and Liana were both described as success stories by their guidance counselors because they chose the right college for them. Additionally, participants seemed to view Clay and Liana's transition planning and services as completed once they had been accepted to college. For example, Dana felt there was little to discuss at Clay or Liana's IEP meetings since they had already decided where they planned to attend college. Other than Claudia's decision to hold an end of year meeting for Clay to provide a space for Clay's family to ask questions about the transition, no participants described engaging in other next steps for Clay or Liana (e.g. planning for supports in college, career development activities).

For Randall, who was uncertain about his next step, the team shifted its focus to finding the right program or postsecondary placement, such as a fifth year at Chestnut or dual enrollment. Some team members felt they struggled more to support Randall, at least in part because they were not knowledgeable about the range of postsecondary options that might be a good fit for Randall. For example, Ellen felt, "If we could have brought some more knowledge about training programs, employment opportunities, it would have given everyone another focus that could have been more productive."

With the focus on college admission, activities designed to address other aspects of secondary transition were much more limited. For example, career planning or planning for supports students may need after high school (e.g. disability services, counseling services) were seldom discussed. Career planning came up rarely, and primarily for students who weren't planning to pursue a traditional college path. For example, Gia described doing some career interest inventories and researching careers with Randall during his junior year. In her descriptions of the types of skills students with disabilities need to succeed after high school, only the "transition kids" who were not planning to attend college needed guidance to select a career path based on their interests and skills. No other professionals brought up specific career exploration or planning activities.

Planning for postsecondary supports also came up rarely. Francine mentioned that guidance counselors were good at connecting students to the resources they would need, but none of the guidance counselors discussed this as part of their role outside of selecting a college with the right supports. In relation to the focal students, only Adrian mentioned that Liana had been connected to a vocational rehabilitation counselor who would help Liana plan for the supports she would need in college. Adrian felt both Randall and Clay need more "orientation" to understand how supports would change for them in college and how to access the resources they would need. Additionally, Claudia noted that in Clay's case, his family still had many questions about the process for getting his accommodations in college when the team met at the end of the year, a meeting the team typically would not have held. In relation to Randall, Claudia described explaining

to Randall's family that they would need to plan for additional supports if Randall went to college, but described it more as a family responsibility to take those actions. She explained,

> I think we worked with the family to talk about what are the kinds of needs he's going to have when he goes off to college, that he can't just…walk in and expect that everything is going to be fine for him…They need to reach out to disability services…I don't know if they were going to end up doing that.

The Division of Labor: Guidance Counselors Led Future Planning.

The division of responsibilities in Chestnut aligned to the focus on future planning and the primary goal of college admission. Guidance counselors took the lead in future planning, which was synonymous with college planning in most cases. Guidance counselors led large group presentations for postsecondary planning, primarily focused on college, and met individually with students to help them select a list of colleges and complete applications. To better support students with disabilities, they sought information or attended trainings to learn more about college programs that support students with disabilities and shared these options with families.

In contrast, other professionals described having much more limited roles in future planning. For example, the learning specialists, Dana and Francine, described focusing primarily on academics rather than transition. While Francine described discussing students' future goals with them in order to write their transition plans, Dana did not mention this and felt she had no clear responsibility related to transition. Gia felt her role focused specifically on transition skill development for a small subset of students

who were not planning to attend college. Ellen, the school psychologist, was uncertain about her role in transition. She described being a member of IEP teams, and offering supports (e.g. "If you have specific concerns about how to hook up your student with counseling after high school…feel free to reach out to me."), but noted that the special education teacher typically took the lead. Claudia took a more active role in some cases than in others, but primarily saw her role as overseeing the procedural aspects of the IEP process.

The focal student cases illustrate this division of responsibilities. For Clay and Liana, their guidance counselors took responsibility for helping them plan for their next step after high school; guidance counselors' primary collaborators were Clay's and Liana's families. Other professionals reported limited involvement. In Randall's case, responsibility for future planning was less clear. Jamie, Randall's guidance counselor, described limited involvement because Randall wasn't completing the typical college application process. Claudia described taking more of leadership role in Randall's case, calling multiple team meetings and providing day-to-day support to address Randall's social-emotional needs. However, to many, leadership on Randall's IEP team felt ambiguous.

It is worth noting that Adrian was newer to Chestnut's activity system for transition planning and service delivery the year the study took place. She conceptualized her role to focus primarily on creating better systems to support transition planning, such as aligning general and special education systems for future planning. She planned to provide training and support and to enhance the transition activities that Chestnut offered.

She anticipated her role to be more focused on supporting staff than on direct work with students. However, she was directly responsible for transition services for 18–22 year-old-students in the district who continued to be eligible for special education services.

Tools: Aligning to and Reinforcing the Object of the Activity System

Service delivery model. At Chestnut, students' schedules and the service delivery model created structures that helped to determine the types of transition-related activities that professionals enacted.

First, special educators defined students' needs and their roles with students in relation to the special education classes they taught, and they primarily engaged with students with disabilities through these classes. The skills development class that Dana and Francine taught was primarily designed for academic support. Thus, teaching transition skills within this context was challenging. Gia focused specifically on transition skills through her small group class, but was constrained by the school schedule so she could not provide additional activities such as job-coaching. She also felt the students who took the transition skills class needed very different types of skill development opportunities than other students with disabilities at the school. Additionally, learning specialists at Chestnut were assigned as students' case managers for only one year. Dana explained how this facilitated communication with general educators to provide academic support. She said, "We used to have multiple grades and follow the students all four years, but that was pretty tricky to be in touch with all of those teachers and all of that curriculum. So now it's just grade specific." However, this approach also seemed to disconnect special educators from students' broader academic trajectories and future

planning. For example, Dana noted how only working with students for one year limited her ability to develop relationships with families and narrowed her role in transition planning for both Clay and Liana.

In contrast, guidance counselors worked with the same group of students across their four years of high school. This reinforced their roles as leaders in the future planning process. As Alex explained, "my role as a guidance counselor is a four year journey with the kids and usually the families." He described how having multiple years with students provided more opportunities for meaningful conversations about students' next steps, saying "sometimes it takes all four [years]…not to convince people, but just to get them to look at maybe this would be a better path for your kid." Alex and Rudy also felt that their history with students often gave them an important role in IEP meetings. Other professionals noted guidance counselors' commitments and strong relationships with students as a key strength of the high school.

However, guidance counselors felt they had limited time with students built into the school year, which restricted the types of activities they could engage in. For example, Chestnut had an advisory program, but guidance counselors described it as short and infrequent and therefore advisory provided little space for a more comprehensive curriculum. As Jamie explained, "There's no…specific written curriculum…I think that's something that we really want to do in the guidance department…But it's more of a matter of trying to find time in the day that we can borrow to do that." Rudy also described having to "beg, borrow, and steal time from other departments to have face time with kids." Thus, in their limited time, they focused on

planning for college since “that's what the majority of students are doing.” As a result, guidance counselors leveraged their more flexible schedules to meet individually with students; these individual conversations were where the majority of their work with students occurred. Randall and Liana regularly sought support from their guidance counselors to address challenges they were having in school. Rudy and Alex both described reciprocal relationships with Liana and Clay in the future planning process; both the guidance counselors and the students took initiative. Rudy and Alex felt the students’ efforts helped facilitate a successful outcome.

The IEP Process: An Underutilized Tool for Transition Planning. The IEP process, including IEP meetings and documents such as the transition planning form, were consistently described by Chestnut professionals as either relatively unimportant or an underutilized tool. First, multiple participants felt that conversations related to transition tended to occur too late, making it difficult to plan effectively. Ellen expressed, “In my experience this past year, we really don't have transition planning meetings until students are seniors. And at that point, sometimes it feels really crunched…which can be kind of stressful.” Claudia and Adrian both described how important transition-related conversations for Randall had begun too late. Adrian explained, “If we believe that someone's going to need a fifth year or more,…that conversation has to be up front, documented,…not nebulous.” She felt it was important to prepare families in advance, and to plan more concretely, so students and families understood what the student would be doing during their fifth year. Ellen also felt that teams sometimes “tip-toed” around difficult conversations during IEP meetings, “not giving [families] the full story of how

much support their student is getting…and how much that is going to impact them at the next step."

A second concern noted by a few participants was limited student involvement in IEP meetings. For example, Alex expressed frustration that students weren't always included in IEP meetings. He felt sometimes students were excused if the meeting was going to be contentious, and noted, "that's been a major, major issue for me through a couple of regimes that we've had." Adrian felt that while students were invited to their IEP meetings to meet procedural requirements, special educators in Chestnut didn't use strategies to meaningfully include students such as student-led IEP meetings or person-centered planning. She also described being "overrun by parent agenda" rather than "truly encouraging and supporting student driven future planning."

As case-managers, Francine and Dana were responsible for writing students' IEPs and transition plans and participating in IEP meetings. Francine described engaging students in the transition planning process by discussing their future goals and plans with them, ensuring their voice is part of the IEP, and encouraging them to speak up at the meeting. In contrast, Dana did not describe talking with students about their IEP or transition plan. She described Clay's and Liana's IEP meetings as playing a minimal role in their future planning since they had already been accepted to college. For Randall, she described participating in multiple meetings that she did not call and did not feel were particularly useful.

Collaboration. Collaboration amongst professionals was also described as a tool within the activity system, though perceptions of how or how well professionals

collaborated to support transition varied. Broadly, some professionals described a positive culture of collaboration in Chestnut. For example, Ellen said she had worked in multiple districts and the Chestnut was “one of the most professional and collaborative.” In contrast, Adrian felt there were “all these silos.” She explained, “I just feel like there's been a culture here of like, everybody is accountable and expected to do what they need to do for themselves.” She felt her work involved improving coordination and alignment between systems.

When participants described collaboration as part of their work, they primarily discussed coordinating or communicating to discuss students who were struggling. For example, most professionals described limited collaboration in relation to Liana or Clay, because they were both doing well. As Alex explained, he collaborated very little with special educators in relation to Clay because Clay was “a pretty self-reliant, resourceful kid.” In contrast, Alex described more collaboration between himself and the special education team regarding a freshman student who was having difficulty transitioning to high school. He explained that because the parents were frustrated, professionals needed a “united front” to determine how to work with the family. Professionals in multiple roles engaged in daily communication and multiple meetings to discuss Randall because of the challenges he was having at school.

Collaboration regarding future planning seemed limited to students who didn’t plan to attend college. Ellen felt,

> I think our special education teams work really closely and well together, …especially for our students where transition planning is sort of a bit more

> involved…I think we collaborate really well across regular education, special education, and I also think that we do a good job brainstorming ideas of how to transition kids, whether it be dual enrollment or hooking them up with services after high school.

Randall's team came together multiple times to discuss postsecondary options such as a fifth year or dual enrollment, though professionals experienced these efforts differently. In contrast, there was little, if any, collaboration to support Liana and Clay in their future planning. In her assessment of Liana's case, Rudy described this as typical, and noted that even for students planning to pursue other postsecondary pathways, "it still comes down to the guidance office…What are those next steps?"

Professional Development/Training. Knowledge and training related to secondary transition or postsecondary options was a resource that participants consistently described as lacking in the activity system. Only Gia, Claudia, and Adrian reported having more extensive training or experiences related to secondary transition. Many participants described how lack of training inhibited their work. For example, Dana and Francine felt uncertain about what transition skills to teach, and felt that they had been left to figure it out on their own. Jamie, Rudy, and Ellen all felt they needed to better understand postsecondary options besides college so that they could better support students and families to select the right choice. Jamie and Ellen noted how in Randall's case, their inability to discuss his potential options in more concrete ways made it difficult for Randall's family to consider options other than college. Adrian felt in general that professionals in the district needed training in multiple areas in order to improve

transition practices.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study examined how transition planning and services were enacted in one secondary school. CHAT provided a dynamic lens for understanding the complex ways professionals conceptualized and shared responsibility for preparing students with disabilities for their next step after high school. I found that, although Chestnut's activity system focused on three objects (future planning, skill development, and support), most transition activities at this school were oriented toward college admission and academic success. While professionals at Chestnut valued skills in non-academic domains (e.g. self-advocacy, financial literacy), subjects in the activity system lacked shared understandings, and had limited tools to support skill development. Guidance counselors led future planning, with limited engagement from special educators or the IEP process. Special education teachers focused primarily on student development activities, prioritizing academics, and helping students meet Chestnut's rigorous academic expectations. Professionals collaborated primarily when students were struggling, but otherwise acted independently toward their particular object. Participants' roles varied in relation to individual students, and their conceptions of the object of transition planning for that student.

This study aligns with previous research on the implementation of transition practices in schools in several ways. First, several studies have found that special educators (Benitez et al., 2009; Li et al., 2009) and other professionals (e.g. school psychologists; Lillenstein et al., 2006) report minimal involvement in transition. Low levels of transition involvement have been associated with limited access to professional

development or training opportunities, and practitioners not feeling prepared to deliver transition services (Benitez et al., 2009; Morningstar & Benitez, 2013), as well as the misperception that certain high incidence disabilities are "mild in nature" and therefore students with these disabilities need little support transitioning to their next step (Bassett & Dunn, 2012, p. 3). In this study, both transition knowledge and perceptions of students' needs played a role in shaping professionals' practices. Most professionals in this study reported having little previous training or coursework related to secondary transition, and few opportunities for professional development. Many described how lack of knowledge or professional experience limited their ability to enact transition-related practices. Additionally, the perception that most students at Chestnut had high-incidence disabilities, and therefore few transition-related needs, was pervasive, and also played an important role in shaping the types of transition activities professionals engaged in.

Moreover, as has been suggested by other research, this study reflects the complex ways that professional roles related to transition are often defined and enacted (e.g. Lillis & Kutscher 2021; Zhang et al., 2005). For example, in Chestnut, one special educator identified as the school's transition specialist when she was fulfilling specific responsibilities, but also took on other roles. Her "transition specialist" role specifically targeted skill development, rather than the broader constellation of responsibilities that transition scholars have outlined as part of the transition specialist role (e.g. program development, interagency collaboration; Blalock et al., 2003). In contrast, Chestnut's "transition program coordinator" role was involved program development and coordinating responsibilities that were more aligned to how scholars have defined the

transition specialist role (e.g. Knott & Asselin, 1999). However, the transition program coordinator also served as the out of district coordinator and held direct services responsibilities for students ages 18–22 who continued to be eligible for special education services. This division of responsibilities aligns with previous research suggesting that the title “transition coordinator,” “transition specialist,” or “special educator” provides only limited information about the transition-related roles professionals may be fulfilling (e.g. Simonsen et al., 2018).

Additionally, though both studies are qualitative investigations with small samples, Chestnut’s transition program coordinator’s conception of her role mapped closely to Lillis and Kutscher’s findings (2021) about the transition coordinator role. In their investigation of transition coordinators’ experiences of their roles, Lillis and Kutscher found that transition coordinators often had ambiguously defined responsibilities and substantial autonomy to define their roles and set priorities. When positioned as leaders and supported by administrators, transition coordinators felt they could drive systems change and improve practices through activities such as professional development and improving structures to support transition. Chestnut’s transition program coordinator described a similar experience and similar aspirations for her role.

Finally, this study aligns with previous research regarding the types of transition practices that are more or less likely to be enacted. In multiple studies, practitioners have reported primarily engaging in practices in a few domains (e.g., transition planning, instruction); practitioners report engaging in activities in other domains such as interagency collaboration, assessment, or program evaluation significantly less frequently

(Benitez et al., 2009; Morningstar & Benitez, 2013). Additionally, student involvement in transition planning is often reported to be minimal, and focused on complying with federal transition requirements (e.g. inviting students to meetings) rather than on practices that support meaningful engagement (e.g. providing instruction to prepare students to lead IEP meetings; Hetherington et al, 2010; Landmark & Zhang, 2012). Participants in this study reported similar patterns of engagement in the various domains of transition planning. Additionally, though some professionals reported valuing student involvement and supporting students' visions for their future, they did not report engaging in more structured efforts to prepare students for participating in the IEP process, and multiple participants identified meaningful student engagement as an area of concern.

This study also expands on previous research in several ways. While most studies examining transition implementation have surveyed individual practitioners about their enactment of specific practices (e.g. Benitez et al., 2009; Mazzotti & Plotner, 2016), this study investigated how transition practices were enacted across a range of professionals within one secondary school. This approach afforded an opportunity to situate each professional's transition-related role within a broader organizational context, illuminating how the intersections of these roles shaped service delivery and highlighting several individual and organizational factors that may shape the division of responsibilities for transition and the enactment of services.

Practitioners in this study conceptualized their roles in transition in light of multiple organizational factors. First, participants defined their transition-related roles in

relation to their expectations of others and their understandings of the broader purpose of their roles. For example, learning specialists felt they had a limited role in future planning in part because they felt guidance counselors effectively managed that responsibility, and in light of their perception that their core responsibility was to meet students' academic needs. The transition specialist taught transition skills and assigned responsibility for IEP development and students' participation to the learning specialists.

Professionals in Chestnut tended to narrowly define their specific role in transition, and assign other responsibilities to each other. This approach limited opportunities to share expertise and sometimes led to misalignment or role ambiguity. For example, guidance counselors described having expertise related to college planning, but lacking important knowledge about students' academic needs or alternative postsecondary options (knowledge held by special educators or administrators) that could better support their work. However, guidance counselors were responsible for future planning, and there was no clear expectation for special educators collaborate in this process outside of IEP meetings. Participants sometimes assigned a responsibility to another professional, yet that professional did not report engaging in the assigned task. These findings highlight the complexity of engaging in effective transition programming at the organizational level, which includes both a sense of shared responsibility for student outcomes and a clear delineation of roles (Blalock et al., 2003). Findings speak to the importance not just of clearly understanding one's own role in transition, but of having shared understandings across professionals, and a clear understanding of how transition work fits within the context of professionals' broader roles.

Relatedly, professionals sometimes experienced different transition-related goals as being in conflict with one another or with their other responsibilities. Special educators reported struggling to integrate transition skills into their skills development classes, given their focus on ensuring students were successful in their classes. Other professionals reported a similar tension, particularly between supporting academic success and engaging in skill development activities. Findings align with scholars' concerns that secondary special educators may be overloaded by their diverse responsibilities (Blalock et al., 2003). Additionally, in this study, participants prioritized goals that were most aligned to the school's dominant values and resources. Participants felt that pressure for students to excel academically and be accepted into good colleges made it difficult to engage in other types of activities. Findings suggest that school norms may, implicitly or explicitly, shape which types of transition-related skills and outcomes are valued and supported, and as a result shape how professionals conceptualize and enact their roles.

Chestnut's service delivery model and organizational routines further shaped roles and transition activities. First, Chestnut's service delivery model helped to shape participants' conceptions of students, their roles, and the types of activities they were most able to provide. Special educators primarily interacted with students through classes that were scheduled into the student's day. Their conceptions of the primary purpose of these sessions (e.g. academic support, vocational skill development) shaped the activities they prioritized and their conceptions of their roles in preparing students for transitioning. Chestnut delineated one specific, small group of students as the students who were most

in need of transition skills, and designated a specific time and place for that skill development to occur. Additionally, learning specialists' involvement with students was limited to one year, lessening their sense of ownership over student's future planning. In contrast, guidance counselors' multi-year relationship with students, and more flexible schedules shaped their roles as advocates for student supports and leaders in future planning. However, because they had limited time and space to do so, guidance counselors only engaged in skill development informally and idiosyncratically.

Additionally, professionals at Chestnut described few structured opportunities to collaborate with one another. The lack of organizational routines to promote more consistent collaboration seemed to reinforce participants' focus on their individual responsibilities, and the tendency to collaborate primarily when students were struggling. Lack of routines for collaboration also inhibited the integration of knowledge and expertise.

Further, multiple organizational factors coalesced to limit the role of the IEP process in transition planning. First, findings illuminated a range of school norms as potentially important factors shaping the IEP process. These included a tendency to avoid sensitive conversations at IEP meetings, waiting until students were seniors to discuss future plans, not seeing the IEP as a transition planning tool for students who were going to college, and beliefs about parents' goals overshadowing students' visions for their future. Additionally, other factors, such as when during the year a student's meeting took place, the division of responsibilities (which limited special educators' conceptions of their roles in future planning) and lack of training to support professionals'

understandings of effective planning practices, also seemed to play a role. This suggests that efforts to improve transition planning may need to consider organizational norms and perceived barriers in addition to imparting knowledge about evidence-based practices.

Another important factor shaping Chestnut's activity system for transition planning and service delivery was participants' understandings of what constituted transition skills and their perceptions of their students' transition-related needs. While transition scholars have identified a range of skill domains that support transition readiness (Kohler et al., 2016; Morningstar et al., 2017), professionals at Chestnut had no clear framework for defining skills for postsecondary success, and tended to conceptualize "transition skills" much more narrowly. Special educators emphasized self-advocacy and a subset of employment and independent living skills. Skills such as social skills and academic engagement, identified in the literature as important for postsecondary success (Morningstar et al., 2017), were not identified as transition skills. Thus, in Randall's case, his disengagement from school and social and behavioral challenges were seen as impediments to learning transition skills rather than important transition skills themselves. Additionally, while professionals at Chestnut identified self-advocacy as an important skill for transition, transition scholars have situated self-advocacy within the broader construct of self-determination, which includes multiple sub-skills such as goal-setting and attainment, self-awareness, and decision making (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). Chestnut's narrower focus on self-advocacy limited the types of skills they attended to or addressed in their work with students. Learning specialists felt overwhelmed by the potentially wide range of skills they could teach and confused about

which skills were most important for their students.

Overall, professionals at Chestnut largely relied on personal experiences and professional judgment, rather than a specific framework or assessment tools to determine which transition skills to prioritize. While IDEA requires that transition planning be based upon age appropriate transition assessments, professionals rarely discussed transition-related assessment in relation to their goals or work with students. Thus, transition assessment did not seem to be a prominent organizational routine. This likely contributed to professionals' difficulty pinpointing which transition skills to focus on.

Finally, while previous research has shown disparities in the quality of transition services across students with different disabilities (e.g., Landmark & Zhang, 2012), this study highlights some of the individual and organizational factors that may be shaping these disparities. In Chestnut, role ambiguity was most prominent in Randall's case because Randall was not pursuing the postsecondary pathway that was most prominent amongst students and most valued in the community. Additionally, professionals' individual and collective perceptions about students with disabilities generally and the focal students specifically seemed to play a role in transition planning and service delivery. In general, most students with disabilities at Chestnut were perceived to have mild disabilities and therefore few transition needs. In particular, professionals' characterizations of Clay, that he was personable, articulate, nice and hard-working, seemed to enhance the collective perception that he could manage his disability related-needs independently and did not need transition services. In contrast, Randall was characterized as challenging and resistant. Several professionals noted Randall's

particularly high level of need in comparison to other students, and a few described staff burnout as an issue in Randall's case. Perceptions of Randall and his family seemed to play a role in professionals' involvement and approach to his case. For example, several professionals felt that Chestnut did not have the expertise or resources to support Randall's social and behavioral needs. Thus, conceptions of disability generally, and attributions of specific characteristics to individual students may both have played a role in transition planning and service delivery in Chestnut.

Thus, although this study only examines one school context, findings suggest a complex set of factors shape the types of transition activities that schools engage in. Professionals in this study tended to independently enact transition-related activities in domains in which they felt they had clearly defined responsibilities aligned to the purpose for which they felt responsible and when they felt they had the time and expertise to perform those roles effectively. This nuanced understanding of why professionals engaged in particular types of transition activities suggests new avenues for improving implementation of transition practices.

Limitations

Findings from this study should be interpreted with the following limitations in mind. Qualitative research is not intended to be generalized to the larger population. This study took place in one state, in a school district that does not represent the full sociodemographic diversity of the state or the country. Not all members of Chestnut's activity system participated in the study. For example, only one general educator participated; other general educators may have had different perspectives on their roles in

secondary transition at Chestnut. Additionally, because this study focused on professionals' conceptions of their roles, I did not include the focal students or their families as participants in the study. Their perspectives may provide additional insights into professional roles' in future research. I interviewed participants only once, at one specific point in time, which may have skewed their perspective. Finally, this study took place in June–August of 2021, after schools had closed in March due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants described some ways that school closures shaped practices in ways that were different from other years; however, the pandemic may have influenced findings in other ways that were not clearly articulated in the data.

Implications for Research

Though exploratory in nature, this study illustrates the complex ways responsibilities for transition may be shared and how professionals' conceptions of the division of responsibilities may shape the types of services that are enacted. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring how a larger and more diverse sample of schools share responsibility for transition planning, including schools of different sizes, with different demographics, and in different states. This research could continue to explore both how transition-related roles are being defined and how individual factors (e.g., knowledge, beliefs, conceptions of the purpose of transition) and organizational factors (e.g., service delivery models, school norms and values) shape professionals' conceptions and enactment of their roles. Such research might further articulate the range of factors that shape transition implementation in schools and suggest new opportunities for intervention.

Additionally, this study suggests directions for further research related to specific roles. For example, this study provides evidence that guidance counselors may play a particularly important role in transition planning. Yet, to my knowledge, no transition studies have explicitly focused on guidance counselors. Further research may provide deeper insights into the factors shaping guidance counselors' participation in transition planning and the supports they feel they need to effectively fulfill these roles. Additionally, research on the roles of guidance counselors may support efforts to integrate transition planning and services for students with disabilities with broader college and career planning efforts, rather than having separate processes in general and special education (Morningstar et al., 2017).

Moreover, the roles of transition coordinators warrant further exploration. In this study, the transition program coordinator's conception of her role aligned with Lillis and Kutscher's findings (2021) that transition specialists may play an important role in improving transition implementation and driving systems change. However, both studies qualitatively examined the transition coordinators' conceptions of their own roles. Quantitative or mixed-methods studies might explore how the addition of a transition leader (e.g. transition specialist or coordinator) into a school system impacts the types of practices that are enacted, other professionals' knowledge and skills, students' and families' transition experiences, or student outcomes. Such research may support schools and districts to invest in such positions and suggest strategies for conceptualizing the transition specialist role to maximize the impact of the position.

Finally, future research might explore several avenues for improving transition

implementation at the organizational rather than individual level. For example, intervention studies might examine how developing shared priorities for transition, or specific routines for collaboration, shape professionals' conceptions of their roles, their enactment of specific types of transition activities, or students' transition experiences.

Implications for Practice

Improving Systems for Transition

This study situates transition activities within an organizational context and, though it is not possible to generalize these findings, the study does suggest some organizational factors that schools can attend to, to improve transition practices. First role ambiguity was one factor shaping the enactment of transition activities at Chestnut High School. School leaders may improve transition practices by clarifying transition roles and responsibilities across professionals, developing shared understandings of who is responsible for what and how those responsibilities may differ for students' particular needs. Further, while professionals at Chestnut each had knowledge and skills to contribute toward transition planning, they lacked routines for collaboration that would promote shared knowledge. As a result, professionals interacted mainly to address challenges. School leaders may consider strategies for promoting more consistent coordination amongst professionals to promote collaborative transition planning and program development even for students who are not in crisis.

Additionally, Chestnut's implicit norms and values also shaped professionals' enactment of their roles and the types of transition-related activities students were able to access. Professionals at Chestnut felt pressured to pursue particular objectives: ensuring

students succeeded academically and planning for college. In contrast, non-academic skill development was less valued and less supported. Therefore, professionals engaged in fewer activities to support skill development. Additionally, students at Chestnut who wanted to pursue postsecondary pathways were described as feeling stigmatized and embarrassed about their plans. It may be important for school leaders to consider what implicit or explicit messages they are sending to both professionals and to students about the types of outcomes or skills that are valued. Additionally, Chestnut's practices align with the tendency to dichotomize college and career planning (i.e., students choose one or the other) rather than integrating career goals with planning for postsecondary education. School leaders may consider adopting a broader framework for college and career readiness (e.g., Morningstar et al., 2017) that supports a wider range of skills and outcomes, and finding ways to ensure that a variety of postsecondary options are valued. By developing a broad and shared vision for college and career readiness across general and special education, and aligning resources and activities to that vision, schools can support students with diverse goals and better equip students with the range of skills they will need for postsecondary success.

Training/Professional Development

While multiple studies have highlighted the importance of training and professional development experiences for promoting effective transition practices (e.g., Morningstar & Benitez, 2013), this study suggests some potential avenues for targeting training to meet specific professionals' needs. For example, guidance counselors in this study desired specific information about the range of postsecondary options that may

support students with disabilities. They had difficulty matching their students' needs with the supports available at different postsecondary education programs, and their primary source of information about college supports was the colleges themselves. Preservice training and professional development may target these specific areas to better support guidance counselors in their work with students with disabilities. Additionally, while many professionals at Chestnut understood the importance of self-advocacy and wanted to promote it, they could have benefitted from training focused on deepening their understanding of the components of self-determination and a better understanding of how they could explicitly target specific sub-skills of self-determination within their specific contexts. Training professionals as teams may support a more holistic understanding of this core skill and how it might be taught and supported across settings. Finally, findings from this study suggest some potential misconceptions about what types of skills may be considered transition skills and who needs to learn them. Professional development may help professionals better conceptualize the range of skills that relate to transition and support professionals in targeting skills that link to students' postsecondary goals and needs, rather than feeling overwhelmed by the need to teach everything.

Conclusion

Scholars have emphasized that effective transition programming depends on coordinated efforts within schools and across systems. A wide range of professionals including general educators, special educators, transition specialists, related-service providers, and others must collaborate toward shared goals in order ensure that students with disabilities are prepared to achieve their postsecondary goals. In this study, CHAT

provided a useful lens for exploring collaborative efforts for transition within one school, focusing on professionals' conceptions of their roles and the factors that shaped the roles they took up. Professionals' conceptions of their roles in transition were shaped both by individual and contextual factors, including knowledge and beliefs, school norms, shared values, and the resources to pursue particular goals. Although further research is needed to better understand how these factors shape transition implementation in different contexts, findings highlight the importance of both shared responsibility for transition and a clear division of responsibilities, as well as shared understandings of the purposes for which transition planning and services are enacted. Findings support a focus on school level strategies to improve implementation of transition practices.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interviews will be semi-structured. I will ask questions naturally in the course of conversation and use probing questions (e.g. Can you tell me more about that? Why?) to delve more deeply into participants' perspectives and experiences. Questions may also be asked out of order to follow the flow of the conversation.

Introductory Script:

The purpose of this study is to better understand the how responsibilities for transition planning are divided amongst professionals in secondary schools and what factors shape this division of responsibilities. I'm going to ask you some questions about your responsibilities at your school and how these responsibilities may relate to preparing students with disabilities for life after high school.

I'm going to record the interview and transcribe it. No one besides the study team will have access to the recording or transcription. This interview should take about 1 hour to complete. Please feel free to ask any questions during the interview or let me know if something is not clear. There are no right or wrong answers. If you feel uncomfortable answering any of the questions, please let me know and we can move on to other topics. You can refuse to answer any questions and may end the interview at any time.

Background information (keep brief):

1. What is your current title?
2. In your current position as X, what are your primary responsibilities?
3. How long have you been in your current role?
4. How long have you been in this school?
5. Have you had coursework, training, and/or professional development about secondary transition? [probe if necessary about these experiences]

Broad Questions:

1. What are the most important things a school can do to prepare students for their next step after high school?
2. What do you see as the role of [interviewee's title… i.e. math teachers, guidance counselors etc.] in preparing students for their next step?
3. What is one thing you think this school does really well in preparing students for their next step? What is one area for improvement?
4. Are there any schoolwide goals for what happens to students when they exit high school?
    a. Probe: How are those goals communicated to staff and students?
    b. Probe: Are there specific messages for students with disabilities?

Focal student questions:
In order to help me to better understand your responsibilities, I'd like to structure the next part of our conversation around a single focal student. Please remember to use the pseudonyms you were provided when talking about the focal students. Which of the 4 focal students do you work with. For participants with multiple focal students, note that we will go through the questions for each student. It may feel a little repetitive but it is important to be systematic in order to better understand transition processes in this school.

1. As you think about [focal student] preparing for their next step, what do you think are some strengths/challenges that they have?
    a. Probe: What can you tell me about [focal student's] goals for the future?
2. How, if at all, have you participated in the transition planning and IEP process for this student?
    a. Probe regarding attending IEP meetings? Providing specific supports or services that are on the IEP?
    b. Probe: What expectations does this school have for [interviewee's role] for participation in transition planning and the IEP process? Do you feel supported in meeting these expectations?
3. Outside of the formal transition planning process, how do you see your role in preparing [focal student] for their transition to their next step?
4. What supports and barriers do you experience in meeting the goals you have with this student?
5. Thinking back to strengths and challenges you identified, who are some other people you see as playing key roles in transition planning for [focal student]?
    a. Probe for some specific roles (general educators, special educators, related service providers, guidance counselors, administrators, anyone else)
6. How would describe the collaboration around meeting this student's goals in this school? Do you think those other individuals have similar goals as you do for the student?

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