California State University,

Fullerton

TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE FOR STUDENTS WITH
HIGH-FUNCTIONING AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

In

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

P-12 Leadership

By

Deborah J. Lazer

Dissertation Committee Approval:

Melinda R. Pierson, Chair
Maritza Lozano, College of Education
Expert Practitioner, Audri Gomez, Chapman University

Spring, 2018

ABSTRACT

As growing numbers of young adults with high-functioning autism disorder (HFASD) make the transition to college, the need for effective high school transition programs is increasing. Due to inherent deficits in social skills and executive functioning skills, individuals with HFASD face significant obstacles when making the transition from high school to postsecondary educational environments. This qualitative study chronicled and analyzed the experiences and perceptions on the transition from high school to college through the lens of 10 young adults with HFASD who received explicit social skills and executive functioning training and instruction within the high school setting. The study examines participants' perspectives on the adequacy of such supports and investigates the gaps in transition preparation described by participants.

Study findings centered on participants' social relationships and social functioning, the management of academic responsibilities, and the use of supports and accommodations in the college setting. Some participants also reported inadequate high school instruction in social skills, executive functioning, and self-advocacy, as well as insufficient general college advisement. Results from the study support the development of integrated, high school-based transition programs that incorporate the teaching and learning of social and executive functioning skills, as well as self-advocacy skills throughout the curriculum using a variety of evidence-based practices.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

To all of the extraordinary students whom I have served; I am infinitely

grateful for all that you have taught me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are several people I would like to sincerely thank for their help and support throughout this amazing journey.

First, I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Melinda Pierson, for generously providing me with her indispensable advice, guidance, and encouragement. I would also like to thank Dr. Maritza Lozano and Dr. Audri Gomez for serving on my committee and taking the time to candidly share with me their considerable expertise.

I would like to thank all of my remarkable colleagues in Cohort 9, whose assistance, inspiration, and camaraderie were essential to keeping my momentum strong.

And of course, I would like to thank Mike, my loving and supportive husband, whose patience, optimism, and affection continually renewed and sustained my strength and confidence throughout this process. I am truly thankful for having you in my life.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

College campuses across the United States are experiencing ever-increasing enrollment numbers of students with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder (HFASD). With the support of federal mandates such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), postsecondary educational opportunities have become a practicable option for individuals with disabilities in the United States. The passage of the Rehabilitation Act, Section 504 (1973), and Americans with Disabilities Act, Title II (1990), authorized postsecondary educational access for students with disabilities and prevented discrimination against these individuals based on their disability (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1992). The IDEA (2004) provided requirements for postsecondary transition planning for students with disabilities. With increased supports and intervention programs for school-age children with HFASD, the possibilities and future outlooks, including college attendance, have significantly expanded for this population.

Due to persistent challenges associated with socialization, daily living skills, communication, self-advocacy, and executive functioning, young adults with HFASD face significant obstacles when transitioning from high school to postsecondary educational environments. Often their deficits are magnified in

the college setting, as these young adults are expected to function more independently and with fewer supports than many had available to them during their high school years (Gelbar, Smith, & Reichow, 2014). While many students with HFASD receive transitional supports as part of their individualized education plan (IEP) and individual transition plan (ITP), many do not receive instructional support in other skill areas necessary for college success. With rigorous instructional support in social skills and executive functioning skills during high school, students have numerous increased opportunities to acquire, practice, and generalize such skills; it is presumed that students who received such supports who enter college will be better equipped to manage the myriad new responsibilities and social challenges presented throughout the college setting.

One of the central roles of secondary schools is to prepare students for a successful adult life and transition to the workforce or postsecondary education. Competent adults require skills beyond academics; for some individuals, including those with HFASD, such skills must be explicitly taught within the school setting. This study examines the perceptions of college students with HFASD on the comprehensive social skills and executive functioning supports they received in a specialized educational high school setting and their views on how those supports supported them throughout their transition to, and current experiences with, college.

Background of the Problem

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network (2016) estimates that one in 68

children aged 8 years is currently identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This number represents a 30% increase over previous data reported in 2012 of one in 88 children as being diagnosed with ASD (CDC, 2014). According to the diagnostic criteria listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), the primary characteristics of ASD include "persistent impairment in reciprocal social communication and social interaction . . . and restricted, interests, or activities" (p. 53). Additionally, individuals with ASD may also present with comorbid mental health conditions such as mood and anxiety disorders, depression, and avoidant behavior (Browning, Osborne, & Reed, 2009; Hess, Matson, & Dixon 2010). Directly related to these symptoms often come challenges with executive functioning, including such vital skills as planning, flexibility, and working memory (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Kleinhans, Akshoomoff, & Delis, 2005; Miyake et al., 2000; Narzisi, Muratori, Calderoni, Fabbro, & Urgesi, 2013). Executive dysfunction can impact social and academic performance and significantly impede success in the school environment by impacting an individual's ability to effectively analyze, plan, and organize tasks, develop and manage timelines, maintain flexibility, and multitask (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Kleinhans et al., 2005; Narzisi et al., 2013).

Levels of intellectual ability vary significantly among individuals with ASD (Lord, 2011). Of these children, 46% were found to be in the average or above average range of intellectual ability (IQ > 85); this group is referred to as having high-functioning autism or high-functioning autism spectrum disorder (HFASD).

This latter term is typically used to describe the broader range of children and adolescents with high-functioning autism, Asperger syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorders not otherwise specified (PDDNOS) (Volker et al., 2010). While these individuals demonstrate relative strengths in cognitive and language abilities, they exhibit significant pragmatic language deficits (Landa, 2000). A decade ago, approximately one third of individuals with ASD were identified within the average or above average range of intellectual ability (CDC, 2014). These figures represent a marked increase of HFASD identification among individuals with higher intellectual abilities. As students, these individuals typically perform at higher academic levels (Roberts, 2010). As increasing numbers of students with HFASD participate in our educational system, it is reasonable to expect that increasing numbers of them will continue on to postsecondary educational opportunities upon graduation from high school. Moreover, with the improved identification of individuals with HFASD with no intellectual disability, it is assumed that increasing numbers of students already attending college without a prior identification of HFASD will be diagnosed with this disability (Barnhill, 2014; Van Hees, Moysen, & Roeyers, 2015).

The reauthorized IDEA (2004) mandates a greater emphasis on the role of the high school student in transition planning, in particular when considering postsecondary goals (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, & Valdes, 2012). Special education teachers work with students, parents, and other members of the student's IEP team to create transition goals as part of the student's ITP. The student must be invited to attend the IEP meeting whenever transition goals

are discussed or when decisions are made regarding the transition services

needed to assist the adolescent in meeting those goals (IDEA, 2004). However,

active participation in these meetings has been shown to be limited for students

with HFASD (Griffin, Taylor, Urbano, & Hodapp, 2014; Wagner et al., 2012).

Moreover, postsecondary ITP goals as part of a student's annual IEP meeting,

while certainly a fundamental component of every student's transition-planning

process, are largely valueless if they are not a part of a much more

comprehensive approach to transition planning. For such reasons as inadequate

teacher and staff training, lack of transition program development in high schools,

or staff and time constraints, these supports are often not implemented

thoroughly or with consistency, and many students fail or drop out of college

despite their high cognitive ability (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). Comprehensive

educational and transitional supports need to be in place—both in high school

and in college—to help students with HFASD develop the necessary skills to

succeed in college and beyond (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; VanBergeijk, Klin,

& Volkmar, 2008; Van Hees et al., 2015). These supports should be

multidisciplinary in nature and should include collaborative participation from

teachers, school counselors, other support providers, such as speech

pathologists and school therapists, parents, and students. All IEP goals should

be based on a student's assessed needs, and supports should be developed to

target those specific needs. Student participation in IEP meetings should be

purposeful. Social skills and executive functioning skills instruction should be

provided on a daily basis and should include both didactic instruction and

contextualized opportunities for learning and applying such skills. Academic instruction should be rigorous and opportunities for frequent peer collaboration should be provided. Moreover, college campuses should provide students access to reasonable accommodations in order to further support their needs as they relate to executive functioning or other deficits associated with their disability.

One of the greatest impediments to college success for students with HFASD is the navigation of the social culture inherent to college life. Individuals with HFASD have significant impairments to their social functioning and have limited awareness of the social values, norms, and beliefs required to manage meaningful relationships (Myles et al., 2007). Making and maintaining friends in college is a critical component of college success (Adreon & Durocher, 2007) and is a skill at which individuals with HFASD are intrinsically challenged. Most college campuses have unique customs and social nuances that are a part of the collegiate cultural experience. For students with HFASD these nuances can be particularly challenging to interpret. College students must negotiate a complex social world that may include managing roommate relationships, sexual norms, drug and alcohol consumption, and study groups. Students with HFASD who enter college with little or no prior preparation in college social expectations and norms are faced with tasks that are indeed daunting even for most socially competent students.

Associated with their social deficits, individuals with HFASD often experience underlying executive dysfunction (Narzisi et al., 2013). Executive

functioning impacts one's ability to organize, plan, initiate, and sequence actions, to focus attention, inhibit impulsive and inappropriate responses, utilize working memory to problem-solve, and to be flexible in thought and action (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Kleinhans et al., 2005; Narzisi et al., 2013). Executive functioning skills are vital to helping students plan and attain personal goals and to effectively anticipate events and adjust appropriately to unexpected circumstances in their environment. Students with HFASD are challenged with self-directed organizational abilities and may have difficulties with meeting routine college expectations, such as maintaining a topic of conversation, organizing written assignments, and meeting important deadlines (Retherford & Schreiber, 2015). High school students with HFASD who receive support and training in executive functioning skills will likely be able to generalize these skills to the postsecondary environment.

Problem Statement

There continues to be a need to help high school students with HFASD transition successfully to the college environment (Wolf, Brown, & Bork, 2011). Although students with HFASD have the capacity to perform well academically, there is an increased risk for failure during their college years (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). Reported challenges for these students include difficulties with social skills and organizational and time-management problems (Gelbar et al., 2014). Due to these exceptional challenges, effective postsecondary transition plans must be comprehensive in scope and address all the learning needs of high school students with HFASD.

Research on social and executive functioning skills interventions for youth and adolescents continues to emerge (although the latter area is acutely more limited in the number of studies conducted) and demonstrates the benefits of instruction in these areas on the improved social, social emotional, and academic functioning of students with HFASD (Hillier, Fish, Siegel, & Beversdorf, 2011; Reichow & Volkmar, 2010; Wolf et al., 2011). Most studies, however, take place outside of the school setting, and they rarely include school-based interventions (Auger, 2013; Shattuck et al., 2012). There is a current lack of research examining the efficacy of existing school-based programs, particularly at the secondary level. A primary benefit to students of learning social and executive functioning skills within the school environment is the increased ability for them to generalize the learned skills to additional settings (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012). Students with HFASD are challenged with the generalization of skills across settings (Roeyers, 1996). This problem can be mitigated by teaching the skills within the natural school and classroom environment in a way that addresses the specific skills needed to succeed in an academic and social environment (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012). Although the college setting differs significantly from that of high school and brings with it additional responsibilities, there are many similarities between the settings, such that students can repeatedly practice and familiarize the skills in order to draw upon them at a later time.

The voices of young adults with HFASD attending college who received comprehensive social skills instruction and executive functioning supports in the high school setting have thus far gone unheard. This study addresses this

problem and describes the opinions and perspectives of these individuals about the efficacy of these supports. The ideas of these individuals need to be taken into account when investigating the effectiveness of high school transition programs, since they are the population directly affected by these challenges. The knowledge attained through this study adds to existing data about needed transition supports for the successful transition to postsecondary education for students with HFASD. This research assists in informing professionals and families about best practices when developing high school transition programs for these adolescents.

Purpose Statement

There is a paucity of empirical data that considers students' concurrent and retrospective viewpoints about the transition process from high school to college and how the transitional supports they received while in high school influenced this process. The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe and understand the perspectives on the transition from high school to college through the lens of young adults with HFASD who received explicit social skills and executive functioning training and instruction within the high school setting. The study examines students' perspectives on the breadth, depth, and adequacy of such supports and seeks to contribute to the development of qualitative data regarding the effectiveness of a school-based transition program supporting the needs of students with HFASD.

Research Questions

In order to accomplish this purpose, the researcher posed the following

three research questions:

1. How do social skills and executive functioning instructional supports during high school influence the postsecondary academic success of college students with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder?

2. What are the perceptions of these students regarding the efficacy of the social skills and executive functioning instructional supports they received in high school?

3. What, if any, additional training did these students feel would have been of benefit to their postsecondary transition and current academic experiences in college?

Significance of the Study

This study is important and makes a meaningful contribution to

educational leadership because it serves to inform the advancement of

secondary school-based transition programs to support the development of

social and executive functioning skills for adolescents with HFASD. This research

contributes to the limited body of knowledge that currently exists regarding the

transition process from high school to college for young adults with HFASD by

providing insight directly from individuals served. By furthering the understanding

of how students with HFASD benefit from intensive executive functioning and

social skills supports and training in high school, this research will help teachers,

counselors, and school administrators make decisions regarding best practices

to support these students while they are still in high school. By describing and

understanding students' perspectives, this study will better equip parents to work

with students on practicing and generalizing skills learned within the school

setting that are critical for future college success. Practitioners and parents alike

are provided with targeted strategy considerations for improving the transition process from high school to college for students with HFASD.

<div align="center">**Scope of the Study**</div>

This study explores the perceptions of young adults with HFASD on the successes and challenges they experienced upon their transition to the college environment. All of the participants received social skills and executive functioning instruction in their high school setting. Participants were interviewed using a semistructured format; additional data were collected through observations and artifact analysis.

Assumptions of the Study

There were several assumptions that required consideration as a part of this study. First, it was assumed that all participants in the study answered interview questions fully, candidly, and truthfully to the best of their abilities. In an attempt to ensure such candor, all participants in the study were volunteers and were given the option to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. Additionally, participants were ensured that confidentiality would be preserved at all times. It was also assumed that, through the semistructured interview process, participants would have abundant opportunity to honestly and accurately express their thoughts and perspectives.

The study assumed that all participants were representative of the target population being studied. Every effort was made to confirm that participants were individuals previously diagnosed with HFASD and had received both social skills and executive functioning skills instruction while attending high school.

Attempts were also made to include a mix of socioeconomic background, race, and gender.

Study Delimitations

The sample group in this study was purposefully limited to students with HFASD who attended high school in a specialized academic and therapeutic setting. This selection criterion was based on my familiarity with the transition programming at the site, thus ensuring that participants met the criteria of having received such instruction. All participants received a high school diploma and enrolled in a 2-year or 4-year college upon graduation from high school.

A retrospective, constructivist approach was selected for the study, as I sought to determine the influences of specific transition supports in high school by describing and interpreting participants' shared experiences after having received such supports. Semistructured interviews were conducted to gain a thorough understanding of participants' college experiences—both their successes and struggles—in order to gain insight into how their high school transition program influenced these experiences.

Study Limitations

A major limitation of the study was the restricted data source. Participants in the study were all from the Los Angeles area and received their high school instruction in the same specialized high school. The sample size was small, and all participants were between the ages of 20 and 25. The results of the study may not be generalizable beyond the specific population from which the sample was drawn.

Another limitation was the participants' ability to accurately identify their own learning needs, abilities, and accomplishments. Although additional data were considered as measures of student success (i.e., college transcripts, observations) and the interview questions were designed to explore fully each participants' accurate experience, the intent was to explore participants' *perceptions*. While the data results were comprehensive, it is possible that further examination may have yielded different results. In other words, the constructivist nature of the study itself inhibited replication of the study.

A final limitation of this study was the confined interval of time during which the study was conducted. The conditions occurring during this timeframe may have been dependent on a number of extraneous factors, such as students' current course load or additional unrelated personal circumstances, and could have changed at any time throughout the study. Participants in the study were interviewed about their experiences during this brief snapshot of time.

Definitions of Key Terms

The following descriptions provide definitions of key terms used throughout this study:

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Autism spectrum disorder is a developmental disorder of neurobiological origin generally characterized by deficits in three key areas: verbal and nonverbal communication, social awareness and interactions, and imaginative play (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Executive functioning. Executive functioning refers to the ability to think abstractly and to plan, initiate, sequence, monitor, and stop complex behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

High-functioning autism spectrum disorder (HFASD). High-functioning autism spectrum disorder is a diagnosis of individuals on the autism spectrum who have average to above average intelligence or cognitive abilities, but who struggle with social interaction and communication. For the purposes of this study, HFASD also includes individuals with Asperger syndrome (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Individual transition plan (ITP). The ITP is the section of the IEP that outlines transition goals and services, based on a student's individual needs, strengths, skills, and interests (Wagner et al., 2012).

Individualized education plan (IEP). The IEP is a plan or program developed to ensure that a student who has a disability identified under the law and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives specialized instruction and related services (IDEA, 2004).

Theory of mind (ToM). Theory of mind is the ability to interpret and predict the mental states of others and ourselves, such as beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. Within the context of this study, ToM "refers to the notion that many autistic individuals do not understand that other people have their own plans, thoughts and points of view" (Edelson, n.d., para. 1). Such individuals may also have difficulty understanding others' beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. Deficits in

ToM are directly related to the social and communicative challenges experienced by many individuals with ASD.

Organization of the Dissertation

As the number of young adults with HFASD enrolling in college continues to rise, effective and comprehensive transition programming in high school will become increasingly critical to the future success and progress of these students. As part of the meaningful development of these programs, it is essential to gain insight into the perspectives of the very students who have experienced them. In Chapter 1 of this study, the context of this problem and the purpose of this research are described and defined. Specific research questions are delineated and the scope of the research, including assumptions and limitations, is articulated. Key terms necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the contents of this study are also defined. In Chapter 2, relevant literature is critically reviewed as it pertains to the characteristics and needs of young adults with HFASD, high school transition programs, and transitions to college for these students. Chapter 3 describes the research design and selected data collection and analysis methods. In Chapter 4, the findings of the study are reviewed. In Chapter 5, the results of the study are examined. Interpretations of the results are discussed, implications for policy, practice, and future research are described, and recommendations for further growth are outlined.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Due to inherent deficits in executive functioning and social skills, young adults with HFASD face significant challenges when transitioning from high school to postsecondary education, as well as during their time in college. In order to maximize these students' prospects for a successful college experience, extensive instructional training and support in social skills and executive functioning skills must be present as part of a comprehensive transition program during high school and to prepare them for what lies ahead. The current study investigates the influence of such supports on the postsecondary academic success of college students with HFASD and seeks to gain insight into their perceptions of how these supports fostered their college success or were deficient in any way.

To begin this chapter, the historical and theoretical foundations for this study are reviewed**.** A comprehensive review of research related to the selected area of study is then provided, and areas in which the research is lacking are noted. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the information presented.

Historical and Theoretical Foundations

The historical and theoretical foundations described below are important for the complete integration of concepts and ideas presented throughout this

study. The historical foundation begins by providing a narrative of disability rights and the associated responsibilities of educators as they stand today. The theoretical constructs subsequently provide an in-depth conceptualization of some of the key hallmarks of HFASD, as these characteristics relate to the objectives of this study.

Historical Foundation

Many individuals diagnosed with HFASD receive special education services in high school. However, the legal mandate that public schools serve all students with disabilities is a relatively recent development. Throughout much of America's public school history, educative services to children with disabilities were minimal or nonexistent (Lewit & Baker, 1996; Reschly, 1996). Until the mid-1970s, laws in many states granted school districts the right and discretion to deny services to students with disabilities or any student they regarded as too intellectually limited to benefit from an education. Some students with disabilities were permitted to attend public schools but were placed in regular classrooms with no access to special education services. Other students were served in specialized programs, although the provided services were often insufficient in meeting their needs (Lewit & Baker, 1996; E. Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996; Reschly, 1996).

A succession of new state laws and federal court decisions in the early 1970s, including Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, created numerous state and school district requirements in support of students with disabilities; however, many state and local agencies were not equipped to manage these

new obligations. Students with disabilities continued to be denied an education outright or were placed into programs offering inadequate or inappropriate services (Lewit & Baker, 1996; Reschly, 1996). Only after the passage in 1975 of Public Law 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, did "education for all" policies become a reality (Lewit & Baker, 1996; E. Martin et al., 1996). Public Law 94-142 mandated that all students with a disability receive a free, appropriate public education and provided funding to enable states to manage the cost requirements associated with the implementation of special education programs. Upon its amendment in 1990, Public Law 94-142 was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990); IDEA was again reauthorized in 2004 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act and, among other changes and additions, the reauthorization of the law served to increase transition supports for students with disabilities.

Under IDEA (2004), students receiving special education services in school must have an IEP that delineates specific supports designed to assist the student in preparing for postsecondary life. The postsecondary transition planning process is a critical step in this preparation. According to IDEA (2004), transition planning must begin no later than the first IEP in effect when a student turns 16 and should be reviewed and updated annually. If an IEP team determines it appropriate to establish an ITP at an earlier age, they may certainly do so. It is required that the student be an active participant in planning the established goals contained within the ITP. Further, it is also recommended that students be allowed meaningful opportunities to take on leadership roles

throughout the planning process and during the IEP meeting (J. Martin & Williams-Diehm, 2013; Morningstar & Liss, 2008). Students are invited to attend the meetings and their interests and preferences are to be used as a guide for transition goals and services. Furthermore, the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA required students to be invited to any IEP meeting that includes "consideration of postsecondary goals" (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, p. 3).

Theoretical Foundation

A pronounced impairment in social functioning is one of the primary features of individuals with ASD, including those with HFASD. Socialization deficits are a dominant source of impairment for individuals with HFASD regardless of cognitive or language ability (Carter, Davis, Klin, & Volkmar, 2005). Additionally, social challenges do not diminish upon a child's developmental progression and may, in fact, increase due to increased social complexities present in the adolescent milieu. Moreover, as they grow older, individuals with HFASD may become more and more aware of their own social shortcomings (Tantam, 2003).

Theory of mind is described as the ability to interpret and predict the mental states of others and ourselves, such as beliefs, attitudes, and emotions, and, in typically developing children, ToM consistently develops throughout childhood and adolescence (Apperly, Warren, Andrews, Grant, & Todd, 2011; Bock, Gallaway, & Hund, 2015). Deficits in ToM are directly related to the social and communicative challenges experienced by individuals with HFASD (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985). Several decades ago, Baron-Cohen and

colleagues conducted a study that showed that the capacity of children with autism to ascribe mental states to other individuals was substantially impaired. The researchers found that 80% of children with autism were unable to accurately infer the thoughts of others, while mentally impaired children, as well as typically developing children of lower mental age, were able to do so.

Executive functioning is a theoretical construct that is used to broadly describe the cognitive processes needed for the management of purposeful, goal-directed behaviors. Executive functioning in adults consists of three distinct, yet interconnected, components: working memory, inhibition, and flexibility (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Kleinhans et al., 2005; Miyake et al., 2000; Narzisi et al., 2013; Rabin, Fogel, & Nutter-Upham, 2011). Research has shown that executive functions play an important role in both academic success and social success (Best, Miller, & Jones, 2009; Miyake et al., 2000). Studies also show that executive functioning is related to ToM as the three components develop in early childhood (Carlson & Moses, 2001; Hughes & Graham, 2002); the two theoretical constructs are related in that interpreting mental states requires an individual to simultaneously conceptualize different perspectives and to have the ability to consider and understand others' perspectives and beliefs (Riggs, Greenberg, Kusche, & Pentz, 2006). In other words, the cognitive processes enabled through executive functions are needed to facilitate ToM.

The social impairments in individuals with HFASD can be varied and often include challenges with speech and language, linguistic conventions, and interpersonal interactions (White, Keonig, & Scahill, 2006). Frequently identified

problem areas include deficits in social pragmatics (e.g., conversational turn-taking, discourse management, and perspective-taking), prosody (e.g., the use of appropriate voice inflection and volume), a tendency to fixate on topics of interest, difficulty expressing and understanding empathy and emotions, and challenges with interpreting nonliteral language, such as sarcasm and metaphor (Krasny, Williams, Provencal, & Ozonoff, 2003; Landa, 2000; White et al., 2006).

Review of the Scholarly Empirical Literature

The empirical research reviewed below seeks to address key areas of importance and discovery relevant to this study. Gaps in the current literature are also addressed.

Postsecondary Transition

The transition to college for students with mild disabilities has been explored in the literature (Sitlington, 2003; Webb, Patterson, Syverud, & Seabrooks-Blackmore, 2008), including those with learning disabilities (Durodoye, Combes, & Bryant, 2004; Milsom & Hartley, 2005), and attention-deficit disorders (Schwiebert, Sealander, & Bradshaw, 1998). The current literature supports a widened interest in the special needs of students with HFASD and their transition from high school to postsecondary education (Fleischer, 2012; Gelbar et al., 2014; Madriaga, 2010; Madriaga & Goodley, 2010; Pinder-Amaker, 2014; Sanford et al., 2011; Shattuck et al., 2012; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011).

Similar to their typically developing peers, students with HFASD are increasingly wanting to pursue postsecondary education because of the

substantial benefits a college degree offers (Webb et al., 2008). Students with

HFASD transitioning from high school to the college setting face exceptional

challenges due to the deficits in social, communicative, and executive functioning

skills they experience as part of their disability. In postsecondary environments,

students are expected to act with more independence; they need to assume

increased personal responsibility and must have the ability to self-advocate

independently. The transition also brings with it greater academic demands,

more responsibility for one's own learning process, and the need for self-initiated

social interactions. These new pressures and demands present considerable

challenges for students with HFASD (Pinder-Amaker, 2014).

As shown in a number of qualitative case studies involving young adults

with HFASD, frequently reported problems include difficulties with social

navigation, organizational and time-management challenges, and self-advocacy

skills (Fleischer, 2012; Gelbar et al., 2014; Madriaga, 2010; Madriaga & Goodley,

2010; Van Hees et al., 2015), all of which can significantly and detrimentally

affect academic performance. Pinder-Amaker (2014) concluded that, although

students with HFASD have the intellectual potential to perform well academically,

they are at an elevated risk for academic and personal failure throughout college.

Similarly, Sanford and colleagues (2011), Shattuck and colleagues (2012), and

Taylor and Seltzer (2011) noted that, when compared to other disability

categories that do not include cognitive deficits, students in college with HFASD

have decreased graduation and employment rates.

Transition Planning

Despite federal mandates requiring the development and implementation of ITPs as a part of the IEP process to be in place for all high school students with disabilities (IDEA, 2004), there is limited empirical research indicating best practices for effectively supporting students with HFASD for transition to postsecondary education. Most of these studies primarily focus on students' participation in the transition process (Heatherington et al., 2010; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Garner, & Lawrence, 2007). While this is an important step in the overall transition process, and research indicates that students with HFASD are increasingly attending IEP and transition planning meetings (J. Martin & Williams-Diehm, 2013; Morningstar & Liss, 2008; Wei, Wagner, Hudson, Yu, & Javitz, 2016), their participation is often relatively meaningless due to a lack of guidance and understanding into the purposes and procedural processes of the meetings (Griffin et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2012). By encouraging students to actively engage in the IEP process, including participating in IEP meetings, they can better understand the connections to their own future outcomes and can build self-determination skills that will benefit them far beyond high school.

Also, essential to effective transition planning is the development of student-directed goals for the passage from high school to college and the inclusion of those goals into the transition plan, related activities, and support services. There is scant existing research that examines the relationship between the purposeful participation of students with HFASD in their transition process and postsecondary outcomes for these students. Chiang, Cheung,

Hickson, Xiang, and Tsai (2012) used backward logistic regression analysis of the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 to explore the predictive factors of participation in postsecondary education for students with autism upon their exit from high school. Notably, the researchers found that increased post-high school transition goal setting of college attendance for students correlated with an increase in students' postsecondary participation. In a study using propensity score techniques on data collected from Waves 1 through 5 of the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2, Wei et al. (2016) found that both active participation in the transition-planning process during high school and having a primary transition goal of college attendance was positively associated with enrollment in a 2- or 4-year college among the sample of youth with HFASD. Research examining postsecondary participation and success rates for students with HFASD has found that high school experiences have a significant impact on a student's likelihood of enrollment in postsecondary education, as well as on their ability to succeed in the college environment (Chiang et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2016).

The majority of scholarly articles examining best practices in transition planning to enable students with HFASD to develop the knowledge and skills needed for a successful postsecondary transition are explanatory or advisory in nature and offer little empirical evidence to inform recommendations for practice. None of these studies used experimental trials of particular transition planning methodologies (Dente & Coles, 2012; Kucharczyk et al., 2015; Wehman et al., 2014; Webb et al., 2015). Suggested practices indicated in these articles include

fostering self-determination in students with HFASD, providing instruction in social skills training, preparing students for a demanding academic environment, teaching students to self-advocate for their needs, and helping students understand their rights as persons with a disability.

A notable study was conducted by Pinder-Amaker (2014) in which she applied a bioecological model to highlight the benefits of offering a coordinated system of services and programs to most effectively support students. The study found that the thorough integration of elements from both secondary school and college systems while the student with HFASD is still in high school could result in greater academic and mental health outcomes once the student enters college. A comprehensive high school transition program would benefit from the addition of such coordinated elements to more thoroughly support the needs of students with HFASD.

Social Skills Instruction and Training

Social skills training as part of a comprehensive transition program for adolescents with HFASD is readily available; however, research shows that the effectiveness of these programs in improving the social outcomes for these students varies widely (DeRosier, Swick, Davis, McMillen, & Matthews, 2011; White et al., 2006). Additionally, among those programs with potential, most took place outside of the school setting. There is evidence of somewhat limited generalizability beyond the laboratory/clinical settings (DeRosier et al., 2011; Reichow & Volkmar, 2010; White et al., 2006). Reichow and Volkmar (2010) reviewed 66 studies of evidence-based social skills interventions and identified

several empirically supported methods for the successful treatment of social deficits in autism. Suggested effective treatment options included applied behavior analysis, the use of naturalistic methods, parent training, peer training, social skills groups, visual supports, and video modeling. Intervention strategies for treatment options involving adolescent-aged individuals included group and single-subject approaches. While this analysis showed significant supporting evidence for successful treatment options for social deficits in individuals with autism disorder, it did not determine any single treatment option to be more effective than another (Reichow & Volkmar, 2010).

A notable, empirically supported social skills program is the *Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relationship Skills (PEERS®),* which was developed at the University of California, Los Angeles. Based on cognitive behavior therapy, PEERS® is "focused on teaching the skills necessary for making and keeping friends and managing peer conflicts and peer rejection" (Laugeson & Park, 2014, p. 85). Using randomized controlled trials, PEERS® has demonstrated efficacy in improving the social functions of adolescents with HFASD through treatment methods that include didactic instruction, role-play, cognitive strategies, behavioral rehearsal, performance feedback, homework assignment and review, and parent involvement within a small group treatment format (Laugeson & Park, 2014). Mandelberg et al. (2014) have articulated the significance of the latter treatment option in maintaining both generalizability and durability of the learned skills.

Many of the most effective social skills treatment options, including some listed above, rely on a constructivist approach to learning (Moore-Gumora, 2014; Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012; Walker & Berthelsen, 2008) in which participants construct their knowledge of the world (i.e., the use of socially appropriate skills) by interacting with it (Creswell, 2014). Through the use of participatory action research, Ostmeyer and Scarpa (2012) were able to determine the effectiveness of such a model in their study of an inclusive elementary school classroom whose members included both neurotypical students and students with HFASD. Quantitative data indicated gains in social functioning for the students with HFASD. For the purposes of the current study, it should also be noted that Ostmeyer and Scarpa (2012) were studying elementary age children, although it is reasonable to surmise results would be comparable for a similar study on adolescent students.

Through the active engagement of social interactions within the natural milieu, students are able to both acquire and practice these skills; in many ways this concept is similar in theory to Pinder-Amaker's (2014) bioecological model for transition planning, in that it encourages authentic interactions as a means of developing critical skills and knowledge. This is one of the key reasons that school placement of students with HFASD continues to be a subject of interest among both educators and parents (Lauderdale-Littin, Howell, & Blacher, 2013). With a continuum of educational programs available, there is often much debate about which types of programs are most beneficial for students with HFASD (Tissot, 2011). The move toward full inclusion of students with disabilities in the

general education classroom continues to be promoted by many professionals as the most appropriate educational placement for students with disabilities. Fisher and Meyer (2002) point to increases in adaptive functioning and Whitaker (2004) and Walker and Berthelsen (2008) showed an increase in the length of social interactions with typically developing peers.

Although this assertion is becoming more commonplace, there are many educators and parents who question whether the inclusion model is best for meeting the significant educational and social needs of students on the autism spectrum (Leyser & Kirk, 2004). Proponents of a more restrictive placement for students with autism, including those with HFASD, emphasize the need for a more highly structured learning environment in order to meet the educational and social needs of some students (Mesibov & Shea, 1996) and debate whether specialized learning models can be efficiently implemented within the inclusive classroom setting (Marks, 2007). They also highlight the need for specialized instruction, including in areas such as social skills and executive functioning, to maximize student development and the positive results that have been demonstrated from such specialized instruction (Reed, Osborne, & Corness, 2006). Additionally, although adolescents with HFASD often report a desire for peer friendships, they more frequently suffer from loneliness, peer rejection, and social isolation than do their neurotypical peers, especially when they are integrated into mainstream classrooms (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000).

Executive Functioning Instruction and Training

The research examining evidence-based practices for teaching executive functioning skills in adolescents with HFASD is extremely limited. One randomized controlled trial conducted by de Vries, Prins, Schmand, and Guerts (2015) used computerized executive functioning training to determine its effects on working memory and cognitive flexibility in children with HFASD. Results of the study showed no significant differential intervention effects, therefore limiting its usefulness for application in a school-based setting. It can be hypothesized, however, that a constructivist approach to teaching executive functioning skills may be useful in this arena, since the cognitive processes for social functioning and executive functioning are intricately linked.

Student Perceptions

It is also important to explore students' perceptions on their college experiences in order to gain a more complete understanding of the unique obstacles they face in such a challenging environment. Fleischer (2012) used a case study methodology to investigate how three male students with Asperger syndrome perceived some of the supports they were granted within their university environment; despite the supports, all three students reported feelings of social alienation and pressure. Gelbar and colleagues (2014) systematically reviewed several articles researching the current evidence base for supporting students with HFASD within the postsecondary environment. As part of the review, 18 case studies were examined; participants reported a range of challenges, including self-management and organization, social difficulties,

anxiety, and housing concerns. Van Hees et al. (2015) used a grounded theory approach to study the challenges and support needs of 23 college students with HFASD and found they struggled with new situations and unexpected changes, social relationships, doubts about disclosure of their disability, and mental health problems, such as anxiety, loneliness, and depression. Such studies delineate the need for further investigation into effective college supports for students with HFASD. Although it is unknown what types of supports the participants in the studies received while in high school, this research also alludes to the importance of proactive instruction and training for students with HFASD before they enter the college environment.

While active, student-directed participation in the transition planning process is fundamental to a successful postsecondary transition for students with HFASD, as are the activities, instruction, training, and support services that flow from it, no studies have been conducted to date that have retrospectively explored the perceptions of college-age consumers of these services on their high school transition planning activities and training and the subsequent effect on their college experience. In order to more thoroughly evaluate the effectiveness of school-based transition programs, the current study investigates the lived experiences of students with HFASD who participated in such programs and who enrolled in postsecondary education. As Kurth and Mellard (2006) have stated "Listening to [students with disabilities'] experiences and involving them not only in the accommodation process, but also in the process for systemic change on the whole is advantageous and likely to be highly effective" (p. 83).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the current study was derived from the notion that high school students with HFASD need comprehensive and meaningful transition supports that include both social skills and executive function training in order to be academically successful in college. The growing reality of postsecondary school as a practicable and realistic option for students with HFASD calls for targeted instruction in these skills in a manner that allows them to be generalized to the college setting. Therefore, a critical follow-up to this consideration is the idea that consumers of these transitional supports should also have a voice into the effectiveness of the supports and their subsequent further development within high school transition programs.

Even with the supports defined through IDEA (2004), many students with HFASD continue to struggle in the college environment (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). While IDEA (2004) requires an ITP to address postschool activities such as postsecondary education, independent living, vocational training, and community participation, it does not in any way mandate instruction or training in "soft skills," such as social skills and executive functioning skills. Additionally, while many postsecondary institutions are increasingly equipped to provide reasonable accommodations for students with many disabilities (VanBergeijk et al., 2008), colleges and universities struggle with how to support the expanding number of students with HFASD on their campuses (Barnhill, 2014). It is therefore incumbent upon high schools, in particular school programs specifically designed

to serve students with HFASD, to develop and offer intensive transition programs that include instruction and training in these areas.

The students in this study received their high school instruction within an educational setting designed to serve students with social and communicative challenges such as those faced by students with HFASD. In addition to highly structured academic instruction, the school was also charged with teaching social skills and executive functioning skills and with offering therapeutic, language, behavioral, and other supports. All students had IEPs and played significant roles in the development of their ITPs. While in high school the students participated in their IEP meetings and actively assisted in planning their transition from high school to college. Missing from this blueprint is a follow-up investigation into the students' perceptions of how these supports assisted them throughout the transition process and whether they felt there were additional instructional strategies or treatment options that would have proven potentially beneficial to their academic success and progress in the postsecondary environment.   In listening to college-age students' reflections, ideas, and opinions about the effectiveness of the social skills and executive functioning supports they received through their high school transition program, educators and other practitioners are able to make informed decisions regarding the further development and implementation of such programs. Below is a diagram illustrating the conceptual relationships as described above.
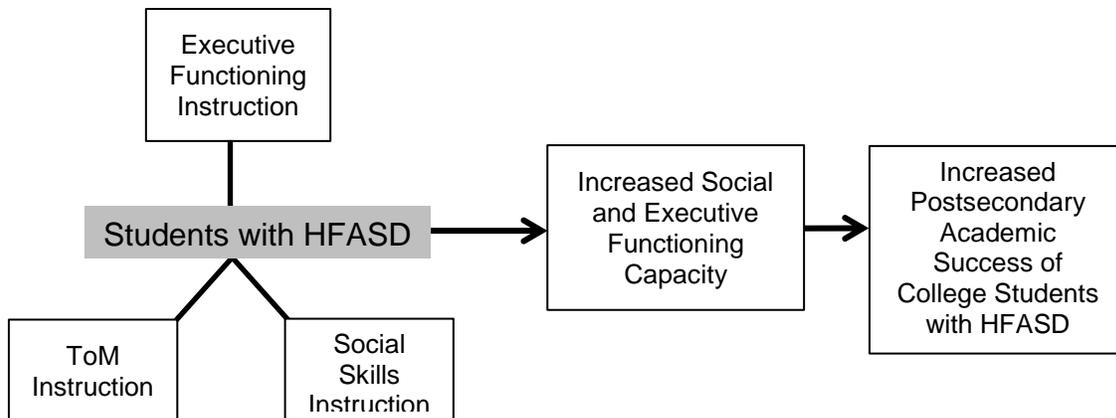
Figure 1. Relationship of comprehensive social skills and executive functioning support on college success of students with HFASD.

Chapter Summary

One of the pivotal roles of a high school education is to prepare students for a successful adult life upon graduation. With increasing numbers of high school students with HFASD making the transition to postsecondary education, it is necessary for secondary schools to develop and implement transition programs for these students that include much-needed social skills and executive functioning instruction and training. Social deficits can lead to academic and social underachievement in college (White et al., 2006), as can the associated executive functioning challenges.

The purpose of IDEA (2004) is to "ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living" (IDEA, 2004, 34 CFR 300.1(a)). The spirit of this mandate suggests that students be prepared in all ways possible and to not be strictly limited to what is delineated

within the confines of an IEP document itself. The educational environment where students with HFASD learn has a substantial effect on their academic and social development.

Current literature examines many of the inherent challenges faced by students with HFASD as they pursue a college degree. Executive functioning and ToM impairments are critical areas of deficit for students with HFASD. There is considerable research examining the role of transition programming in secondary schools and how comprehensive programs can assist students in overcoming some of their challenges. Many of these studies emphasize the importance of student participation in the transition process but point to the often-diminished role students actually play. The literature investigating social skills training for adolescents identifies a number of promising treatment options, although most have been studied primarily within the confines of a clinical setting. A constructivist approach to social skills training has been shown to be effective in helping students generalize the skills to additional settings and to maintain durability of the learned skills. Similar literature explicitly studying executive functioning training is insufficient to draw definitive conclusions about best practices for treatment; however, due to the inherent connections between executive functioning and ToM cognitive processes, it is plausible to consider that constructivist approaches to executive functioning training may be beneficial as well.

Finally, in looking at student perceptions of their college experiences, many report struggles with social relationships, mental health difficulties, and

self-management. However, no current research exists that examines the

perspectives of students who were the recipients of comprehensive transition

planning during high school on their personal postsecondary academic

experiences. This retrospective study addresses this significant gap in the

literature by exploring college students' perceptions on the adequacy of the

supports they received in high school and contributes to the development of

qualitative data regarding the effectiveness of school-based transition programs

supporting the needs of students with HFASD.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD OF INQUIRY

As more and more high school students with HFASD make the decision to pursue postsecondary degrees, the need to understand these students' unique college preparatory needs is becoming increasingly urgent (Glennon, 2001; Wolf et al., 2011). Individuals with HFASD often experience significant deficits in social and executive functioning and may need explicit and targeted instruction in associated skills to bolster their chances of succeeding in a college environment (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of these specific interventions on the college experiences of young adults with HFASD, it is necessary to listen to these students' accounts of such experiences and to explore their perceptions and interpretations about the usefulness or inadequacy of the preparation they received in high school.

The purpose of this qualitative, retrospective study was to describe and understand the perspectives on the transition from high school to college through the lens of young adults with HFASD who received explicit social skills and executive functioning training and instruction in high school. The study examines students' perspectives on the breadth, depth, and adequacy of such supports and seeks to contribute to the development of qualitative data regarding the effectiveness of a school-based transition program supporting the needs of students with HFASD.

The specific research questions that guided this study were:

1.   How do social skills and executive functioning instructional supports during high school influence the postsecondary academic success of college students with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder?

2.   What are the perceptions of these students regarding the efficacy of the social skills and executive functioning instructional supports they received in high school?

3.   What, if any, additional training did these students feel would have been of benefit to their postsecondary transition and current academic experiences in college?

This chapter begins with a delineation of the study methodology, including the philosophical assumptions of this methodology. The research design within the framework of the selected methodological approach is then detailed, followed by a description of the specific research methods used in the study. This description includes pertinent details about the setting of the study; participants; methods of data collection, including instrumentation and procedure; and data analysis, including a complete discussion of the validity and trustworthiness of the study and the role of the researcher. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Qualitative Research

This study uses a qualitative methodology. Although definitions of qualitative research can encompass many characteristics, for the purposes of the current study it is important to conceptualize qualitative research as an approach that enables the researcher to capture the lived experiences and voices of real people in genuine settings and to listen directly to participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Hatch, 2002). Qualitative research employs the researcher as the key instrument for data collection. In a qualitative study, it is up to the researcher to process and interpret these data (Creswell, 2013; Hatch, 2002),

which necessarily positions them as an integral part of the investigation. As part of the data analysis, the researcher uses both inductive and deductive processes (Creswell, 2014) in order to explore new theories, ideas, or themes and to look at causality based on this emergent information. Finally, qualitative research allows for flexibility in design and implementation.

The major components of this type of study including the collection and analysis of data, the development and refinement of research questions, the advancement of theory and ideas, and the recognition of validity threats in conjunction with the active commitment to question alternative explanations are continuously evolving and occurring concurrently (Maxwell, 2013). Qualitative methodology does not always lend itself to a step-by-step linear approach; while it is less constrictive in its methodology than some quantitative approaches, it forces the researcher to regularly and thoroughly reexamine both the data and the trustworthiness of the investigation.

There are a number of philosophical foundations that can be assigned to qualitative research that are contingent upon the research design as well as on the purpose of the research and questions being examined (Creswell, 2014; Hatch, 2002; Maxwell, 2013). This study applied a critical realist paradigm as described by Maxwell (2013) in which a combination of philosophical perspectives was useful in helping to answer the essential questions being asked in the study. A critical realist viewpoint posits the existence of a reality that is unconnected to our perceptions (Maxwell, 2013). However, subscribers to this viewpoint also maintain a constructivist worldview that presumes that each of us

constructs our view of the world based upon our perceptions of it and that there is no singular, absolute truth (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). Applied to the current study, while the existence of a finite theoretical perspective regarding best practices for addressing the transitional needs of students with HFASD is established based on existing research, it was nonetheless critical to examine the perspectives of the young adults whom these practices are meant to help.

An interpretive framework was also relevant to this study. The goal of an interpretive approach to research is to understand the meaning behind actions and experiences of individuals within a given social context (Creswell, Shope, Plano Clark, & Green, 2006). Interpretive frameworks are subjective in that they rely on the distinct experiences and perspectives of individuals. It was the experiences and perspectives of the participants in this study that were thoroughly examined in order to understand the reasons behind their functioning in the college setting. Were their actions (or lack of action) deliberate or with a purpose, and were they in response to skills they were taught in high school? Or were participants' inaction, or idleness, due to a lack of them having attained the necessary skills to be successful in college?

Through the use of these philosophical paradigms, the researcher can obtain the perspectives of individuals experiencing a particular phenomenon, as well as question the existing knowledge surrounding the phenomenon and possibly add to this existing body of knowledge. The goal of this study is to utilize these critical realist and interpretive frameworks to investigate the effectiveness of what is currently known about high school transition programs

for students with HFASD through the perceptions of the students who participated in such programs.

Qualitative methodologies enable researchers to gain both complex and subtle meaning from the subjects or events they are examining in ways that more positivistic approaches may not (Creswell, 2014). Research questions can be explored in depth and with attention to small but significant details; interviews can be adjusted to specific situations, and questions can be guided by the researcher to explore emergent subject lines (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Moreover, the researcher can explore perspectives from relatively few individuals; although findings may not always be generalizable to larger populations, they may be transferred to other, similar settings (Creswell, 2014; Hatch, 2002). However, qualitative researchers must also be distinctly aware of the challenges their role as the researcher may bring to a study. Their presence in the process of gathering data is often unavoidable and can inadvertently influence subject responses or other data such as observations or participation in events being examined. For these reasons, the quality of research is susceptible to researcher bias and is largely dependent on the skills and astuteness of the researcher (Creswell, 2013; Hatch, 2002).

The qualitative, dialectical approach selected for this study allowed me to borrow tenets from different epistemologies and perspectives that were useful for advancing the understanding of how to approach the research questions. As stated above, qualitative research focuses on the examination of participants' meaning about a particular problem or issue (Creswell, 2014). This approach

enabled me to respectfully endorse the perspectives of the individuals at the center of the study and to more clearly understand how the quality of the transition programming they received in high school had affected their particular realities; this information adds to what was already known about the needs of students with HFASD as they transition into postsecondary environments. The data in qualitative research is based on the human experience; in this way, the information gathered from this study is inherently compelling and more powerful than quantitative data would have been in the exploration of this specific topic.

Research Design

The research questions posed in this study do not fit squarely within the confines of many of the most commonly used qualitative research designs, such as a narrative or case study, as described by Creswell (2013, 2014) and others (Hatch, 2002; Maxwell, 2013). Rather, the current study design is what Merriam (1998) described as generic qualitative research through which researchers "seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved" (p. 11). Plano Clark and Creswell (2010) term this design as a "thematic approach to qualitative research" (p. 233) in which researchers collect qualitative data, search for thematic meaning, and formulate conclusions based upon these data. Although it does not employ the use of specific assumptions as do many of the more common forms of qualitative research (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Richards & Morse, 2007), generic, or basic, qualitative research is considered a discrete category within this paradigm and can serve as a researcher's identified research method (Merriam, 1998).

Generic qualitative research is further divided into subcategories, one of which is called interpretive description (Kahlke, 2014). It is this subcategory that best describes the current study. Interpretive descriptive qualitative research was developed by Thorne and colleagues (Caelli et al., 2003; Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997) in order to advance research methods within the field of nursing; however, this research method has since been applied across disciplines, including within the broader educational domain (Kahlke, 2014). Interpretive description takes a broad perspective and may draw from other design methods, such as grounded theory, natural inquiry, and phenomenology (Thorne, 2008). Data collection from multiple sources is encouraged in order to substantiate findings, although participant interviews are often the starting point for data collection and serve as the central resource for information gathering (Hunt, 2009; Kahlke, 2014). Data analysis is an iterative process that is conducted throughout the data collection process; it is a recursive, rigorous, constant-comparative process that seeks to develop general themes in order to gain a broad understanding of the data, rather than an in-depth analysis of small details (Hunt, 2009; Thorne et al., 1997). These analyses should "serve to locate the findings within the framework of the existing body of knowledge and in locating explanatory factors that might arise from the analysis within that larger perspective" (Thorne, Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004, p. 4).

Research Methods

In this section, the specific research methods that were employed to apply interpretive description methodology in this study are detailed. The setting of the

study is described, followed by descriptions of the study sample, data collection

methods and data analysis, and the steps taken to ensure validity and

trustworthiness.

Setting

The young adults who participated in this study received their high school

education in a specialized school designed to educate and support students with

social and communicative disabilities. Although the participants are alumnae of

the school and are therefore no longer enrolled, for the purposes of this study it is

important to understand the context in which they received their high school

education since it is the efficacy of this specific transition program and its impact

on students' academic success in college that is being explored.

Valley Academy[1] is a nonpublic school and is a nonprofit, nonsectarian

agency and is certified by the State of California to provide special education

services to students based on their IEP. Valley Academy is located in the

greater Los Angeles area of Southern California and serves students in Grades

Kindergarten through 12. The elementary and middle school programs are

administered as separate programs from the high school; a separate, designated

principal directs each of the two programs, although the administrators frequently

collaborate on the overall direction and vision for the school. Moreover, the

entire Valley Academy shares a common head of school, curriculum coordinator,

elective teachers, and therapeutic service providers. The current study

_____

[1] A pseudonym was assigned to ensure confidentiality of participants.

specifically focuses on participants who received a diploma from Valley Academy High School.

With a nonpublic school designation, Valley Academy is considered to be a more restrictive school setting along the continuum of special educational services than is a general education classroom, resource services, or special day class placement within a general education school environment. Student placement at Valley Academy is determined consequent to home school or parent referral and may be based upon a number of factors, including academic, social, and social–emotional needs. Moreover, a return to a less restrictive school placement continues to remain the eventual objective of some students at the school, according to individual progress made within the program. Approximately two to five high school students return to their home school placement each school year.

The school services students from approximately two dozen local school districts; as a result, students may live in the neighborhood in which the school is situated or may travel from up to 60 miles. At the time of this study, the high school's enrollment fluctuated from 90 to 119 students. The student body is racially varied: students at the school identify as 40% White, 40% Hispanic/Latina/o, 10% African American, 5% Asian, and 5% multiple races. Students' socioeconomic status is also varied: 17% of the students qualify for the free or reduced lunch program. Additionally, approximately 82% of the student population is male, due to the higher prevalence of males with HFASD (Myles et al., 2007). Students' special education eligibilities at Valley Academy High

School vary, although a majority of the students (approximately 85%) have an educational eligibility of Autism.

Curriculum. The curriculum at Valley Academy High School is rigorous and is based on the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). For students who wish to pursue a 4-year college degree upon graduation, the school offers University of California-approved college-prep and honors courses and Advanced Placement courses. The school also offers a variety of elective courses in several areas of interest ranging from the humanities to technology and engineering. A comprehensive transition program is an important focus of Valley Academy High School's curriculum.

Social skills instruction. The social skills instruction is delivered within the context of a 45-minute course that takes place five days a week. Instruction varies but consists of transition activities, student interest groups, and an evidence-based social skills program developed for children and adolescents with HFASD. The social skills program is designed to help students develop fundamental social skills such as social initiation and social response, how to make and keep friends, how to collaborate with peers, how to manage frustration and conflict, how to develop coping strategies and sustain tolerance in challenging situations, and how to advocate appropriately for their needs. Inherent deficits in ToM (Apperly et al., 2011; Bock et al., 2015) are also addressed; social skills lessons associated with ToM deficits focus on teaching students to develop and maintain an awareness of how others think and feel,

how to understand emotions and to predict the behavior and emotional state of others, and how their own behavior impacts how others think and feel. Additionally, Valley Academy staff are trained to facilitate the application of students' learned social skills through contextualized learning opportunities as they arise within the high school environment.

Transition activities. Students are assessed both informally and formally and data is collected to monitor and track individual student's needs, interests, and preferences as they relate to postsecondary goals. Transition assessments are used to assist in the development of meaningful IEP goals and to help guide students toward their post-high school endeavors. Transition activities include college exploration and how to determine and seek out available accommodations in a particular program. Activities and lessons also include instruction in understanding and managing other expectations associated with college life and postsecondary employment and living experiences. Students and parents work closely with teachers and the high school college counselor to plan postsecondary goals and to navigate the college application process.

Executive functioning instruction. Executive functioning training and support consists of daily assistance with organization of schoolwork and personal belongings, and learning to keep track of important materials, to organize information for written assignments, and to manage digital data and files. Students are provided instruction in time management and daily planning and prioritizing. Students are taught strategies to help them initiate nonpreferred tasks, to sustain attention to tasks, and to manage impulsive behaviors and

strong emotions. Students are taught to develop personal management systems that are specific to their needs and that are potentially transferable to their postsecondary needs.

The singular nature of the comprehensive social skills and transition programming at Valley Academy is decidedly unlike the programs offered in the majority of school programs serving students with HFASD. Due to these specialized characteristics, applicability to a less restrictive school setting should be considered when making assumptions about the generalizability of student progress within such a program, as well as when making conclusions based upon the presumed benefits of such programs. Implications for practice pertaining to these concerns, including potential methods to integrate some of the practices into a general education setting, will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

Valley Academy is an appropriate location for this study because the school provides a college-prep academic program as well as embedded instruction and supports in social skills and executive functioning skills. Additionally, many of the students and alumnae of the school are diagnosed with HFASD, allowing for the acquisition of a sufficient sample size for the study. Conversely, the unique nonpublic nature and relatively small size of the school also serves as a limitation for the study. Participants in this study each received their high school instruction at Valley Academy; therefore, the results of the study may not be generalizable beyond the specific population from which the sample was drawn.

The decision to select study participants who received their high school education in a nonpublic school in no way serves as an endorsement of, or position statement about, this relatively restrictive model of special education services for students with disabilities. Rather, graduates from this school program were selected as participants based upon the qualities of the program itself, namely the social skills and transition programming developed by the school to serve students with HFASD. Whether in general or special education settings, the most effective interventions for students with disabilities incorporate the use of intensive, sufficiently individualized interventions. Since Valley Academy systematically employs the use of such interventions, alumnae of the program were considered as appropriate candidates for inclusion in the current study.

Sample

Participants in this study were identified through a criterion sampling strategy in which each individual was selected based upon specific qualifications, or criteria (Creswell, 2013). For the purposes of the current study, these criteria included participants' prior involvement in the transition programming at Valley Academy, receipt of a high school diploma, their current or prior enrollment in a 2- or 4-year college, and a diagnosis of HFASD. Participants in this study constituted a homogenous sample group, as they were a specific subgroup of young adults who possessed the requisite characteristics needed for participation in the study (Hatch, 2002; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). These typologies of purposeful sampling were useful to the current study as they allowed for the in-

depth investigation of individual perspectives of a relatively small number of participants (Creswell, 2013; Hatch, 2002). In order to gain substantive and meaningful insight into the perceptions of the study participants as they related to the current study's purpose, it was necessary to thoughtfully select individuals with HFASD who were sufficiently immersed in the transition programming at Valley Academy and who had subsequent opportunities to draw on those skills in a postsecondary environment.

To recruit the sample, an electronic letter was sent to approximately 20 alumnae of Valley Academy asking them to participate in the study by agreeing to an interview, researcher observation at their college site (if applicable and practical), and researcher review of college transcripts and other artifacts. All alumnae who responded affirming their participation in the study were selected. Seven individuals responded to the original request and were selected as participants in the study. Through snowball sampling, three of these participants recommended three additional individuals who successfully met the study criteria and were subsequently selected as participants. In total, 10 individuals participated in the study and ranged in age from 20 - 25 years of age. The study sample comparatively represents the current gender and ethnicity demographics of Valley Academy. Table 1 illustrates the age, gender, ethnicity, and current postsecondary levels of the study sample.

Table 1

Demographics of Study Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Postsecondary experience
Amanda	20	Female	Caucasian	Attending 2-year college
Antonio	24	Male	Hispanic	Attending 4-year college
Daniel	21	Male	African American	Dropped out of 2-year college
Darren	25	Male	Caucasian	Dropped out of 2-year college
Emily	21	Female	Caucasian	Attending 2-year college
Henry	22	Male	Asian	Attending 4-year college
Kyle	21	Male	Hispanic	Attending 2-year college
Lawrence	25	Male	Caucasian	Graduated 4-year college
Rick	23	Male	Hispanic	Attending 2-year college
Roshelle	22	Female	Caucasian	Attending 4-year college

In order to ensure they understood the purpose and methods of the study, participants were provided with an informed consent form prior to the interview process. It was made explicitly evident to the participants that their involvement in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw from it at any point without consequence. Participants each received a $25 Visa gift card for their contributions; participants were informed they would receive the gift card regardless of whether they completed all parts of the study.

Data Collection and Management

In this section, the specific methods that were used to collect data for this study, as well as the ways in which the data was managed, are described. This section begins with a description of the instrumentation that was used, the steps that were used to collect the data, and the management methods that were used to collect and archive the data throughout the course of the study.

Interviews. The semistructured interview was the primary form of data collection for the current study. Interviews were conducted at a site chosen by each participant or at a location mutually agreed upon by the participant and myself. An interview format was selected for the study in order to enable me to solicit information from participants in a way that allowed for a comprehensive investigation of the research questions while allowing the interviewees the freedom to express their thoughts, opinions, and ideas comfortably and without stricture. Moreover, as surmised by Hatch (2002) and Maxwell (2013), through the interview process the participants were able to provide insights into events or connections that I was unaware of and added rich and powerful context to direct observations. As the exploration of the participants' high school and college experiences was an essential component of this study, this notion was of utmost consideration when selecting the interview as a primary source of data collection. Rubin and Rubin (2012) point to the importance of designing interview questions in such a way as to avoid limiting the options for responding or otherwise restricting the ways in which an interviewee can answer a given question or probe. The authors also emphasize the need to use language that is clearly understood by the conversational partner.

As the subjects interviewed for the current study were young adults without my educational and professional background, all attempts were made to carefully adhere to these guidelines in order to elicit a meaningful dialogue throughout the interview process. The goal of the interview was to focus on the experiences and knowledge of the participants in the study. The interview

protocol consisted of approximately 30 questions; although, due to the interview's

semistructured nature, the questions posed to each participant varied

significantly according to the natural flow of the conversation. The questions

were designed to obtain information about students' experiences in high school

and college as they related to learned social and executive functioning skills and

how those skills potentially impacted participants' transition to college. Specific

questions pertained to students' abilities to self-advocate, manage assignments

and other college responsibilities, and to handle the college social environment.

Examples of interview questions include "Did you have opportunities [in college]

to practice using the social skills you learned about at Valley Academy?," "Are

there things you learned in high school about self-advocacy that have helped you

in college?," "Did you feel like what you learned about organization in high school

helped you with staying organized now?", "Some students struggle in the college

setting; are there other things that are hard for you socially?," and "Can you think

of any other supports you wish you had received at Valley Academy that you

think would have helped you now?" Participants were asked to provide concrete

examples to illuminate their personal experiences. (See Appendix A for a

complete sample of the interview protocol.)

Observations. In addition to the semistructured interviews, observations

were conducted at the various college locations of seven study participants.

Only participants who were currently attending college were observed. During

these observations, field notes were taken with the intent to document participant

interactions with peers, professors, school personnel, and others. Additionally,

participants' abilities to manage their assignments, attend in class, and navigate the campus were noted and documented to the extent that I could recognize and interpret these specific actions and behaviors. An observation protocol was used to assist in collecting data and field notes specific to the above-mentioned criteria. (See Appendix B for a sample of the observation protocol.)

Artifacts. Pertinent documentation and artifacts were collected for analysis; these documents and artifacts consisted of participants' college transcripts, samples of student work, students' binders and notebooks, and evidence pertaining to how participants tracked their assignments and/or managed their personal calendars, such as through use of online syllabi and smartphone apps.

Procedures. Institutional Review Board permission was gained prior to sample recruitment. In alignment with Review Board recommendations and requirements, participants' identities were kept confidential; names, college of attendance, and any other distinguishing information was kept confidential in order to protect the privacy of individuals involved in the study. Upon their agreement to participate in the study via electronic communication or telephone call, a date, time, and location was selected for the conduct of the interview. The specific location was based upon participant preference and was mutually agreed upon. All interviews were conducted in person and lasted from 25 to 64 minutes in length. Prior to participation, each participant was provided, read, and completed an informed consent form to ensure they clearly understood the purpose and methods of the study. (See Appendix C for a sample of the consent

form.) The interviews consisted of approximately 30 questions but varied throughout the sample group based upon responses provided by the participants and the natural progression of the dialogue. During the interviews, I took extensive notes, and all interviews were digitally recorded for later transcription. Specific permission to record each interview was explicitly obtained and included as a condition of participant consent to the interview. Upon the conclusion of each interview, participants were provided the opportunity to inquire about the research. Each participant was also given my contact information to allow for any follow-up questions or the option to withdraw their consent to participate in the study.

For the participants who are currently enrolled in college, written permission was obtained to observe them in their college setting. One observation was conducted for each participant; these observations took place in the college classroom(s), and/or elsewhere on the college campus. The observations lasted from approximately 45 minutes to 2 hours in length and made note of participants' personal interactions as well as their abilities to manage assignments, attend in class, and navigate the college campus.

Documents and other relevant artifacts, such as transcripts, work samples, and personal organizational systems, were collected from study participants. Written permission was granted to allow access to these documents and artifacts. Not all participants elected to share personal material elements with me, and their decision to abstain from this portion of the data collection process was recognized and respected.

All data collection took place over the course of 2 months. Following the initial data collection, member checks were conducted with participants to verify accuracy of the information obtained. Participants were emailed written drafts of the study and asked to comment on portions relevant to their interview responses. All participants confirmed the written information was accurate and reflective of their experiences.

Data management. I recorded the interviews using a digital voice recorder, and they were transcribed by a professional transcription service. In order to maintain confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned to their names in the transcripts. Recordings, written notes from interviews, and hard copies of transcriptions are stored in a locked and secure location in my personal residence. All interview recordings will be retained for 5 years following completion of the study. Digital copies of transcriptions and all data files compiled throughout the processes of data collection and analysis are stored in a password-protected data file located in a Cloud-based storage system and, as with the interview recordings, will be preserved for 5 years following completion of this study. Hard copies of transcriptions, written notes from interviews and observations, and collected documents and artifacts will also be retained for 5 years.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In this section, the steps used for analysis of collected data, as well as the rationale for selecting these methods, are discussed. This is followed by a

discussion about the validity and trustworthiness of the research and about the role of the researcher in this study.

Data analysis. Creswell (2013) emphasized the critical import of considering the processes of data collection, data analysis, and report writing as interrelated parts of the overall research design that should be conducted more or less simultaneously throughout a research study. In the current study, a series of analytical steps were taken that occurred not as distinct phases of the study but as processes that developed concurrently as the project moved forward. Participant interviews were the primary source of data collection in this study. Immediately following each interview, I listened to the audio recording and hand wrote additional notes and memos as deemed necessary. The audio recordings were then immediately transcribed by a professional transcription service; all participants were assigned a pseudonym in order to maintain confidentiality. Each transcript was entered into an electronic file storage system. A qualitative data analysis software program called Dedoose was used throughout the analytical process to facilitate progress and to serve as an organized storage file system in which material could be easily located and reorganized as needed.

To begin preliminary data analysis, each transcript was read in its entirety several times. Throughout this process, important ideas were identified and items that were sensed to be notable or meaningful in some way were handwritten in the right margin. As this process continued, salient components from the narratives were grouped and specific relationships among items in the text were

identified. Differences among narratives were also noted. Interim data analysis included the identification of patterns and themes that emerged. A structural coding process, as described by Saldaña (2016), was used to examine these data for "commonalities, differences, and themes" (p. 98). Significant words, phrases, and passages from the text were categorized using this coding process, and subsequently examined to identify major and minor themes from the transcribed interviews.

Field notes from my observations were analyzed using a similar process to determine emerging patterns and themes from the data. During observations, event settings were described in detail, and all interactions and behaviors of participants were noted in detail, including both verbal and nonverbal communication. All documents and artifacts collected from the study participants were also examined; written memos were created describing these material elements and any general themes and patterns that developed. These memos were then structurally coded in a similar manner as described above. As with the interview data, relevant themes for observations and artifact analysis emerged upon data collection. These themes included information related to socialization, executive functioning, self-advocacy, and the quality of the college preparation and advisement received in high school.

Upon completion of the first cycle coding process, pattern coding was utilized to further synthesize meaning from the data corpus and from the interim analysis resulting from the structural coding. Patterns and themes were filtered

and sorted for relevancy to the research questions, and matrices were created to further assist in analyzing contextual relationships.

Procedures to ensure validity and/or trustworthiness. Various measures were undertaken to validate the findings and to ensure trustworthiness throughout the data collection and data analysis processes of this study. Qualitative research is, by definition, interpretive (Hatch, 2002; Maxwell, 2013; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). It is therefore incumbent upon the researcher to explicitly and deliberately employ strategies during data collection and analysis to establish accuracy and credibility in the findings (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010).

Every attempt was made to remain cognizant throughout the project of my potential bias and preconceived value judgments regarding the purpose, setting, participants, and findings of the study. These viewpoints were reflected upon and set aside, or "bracketed" during the analysis process. Plano Clark and Creswell (2010) note this as an essential and common practice used among researchers when conducting subjective, qualitative research and one that is useful in constraining the researchers' perspectives and keeping them from overshadowing those of the participants.

Triangulation of data sources was another method used in the current study to ensure trustworthiness. Throughout the data collection, validity threats were carefully considered and examined. Through the collection of multiple sources of data from a variety of participants, critical information was verified and expanded upon. Validity threats were subsequently minimized or made unlikely by the information gathered from these multiple data sources. However, as

Maxwell (2013) emphasizes, it is the quality and meaning of the evidence gathered through the triangulation process, rather than the process itself, that leads to increased validity of the research findings. It was my intent throughout this study to collect rich, valuable data from a multitude of sources in order to further validate findings.

Finally, once findings in the study were analyzed and summarized, member checks were conducted with all participants to check for accuracy. Participants were provided a summary of the findings and allowed 2 weeks to respond with critiques or affirmations as to whether the findings were consistent with, and representative of, their expressed thoughts in the initial interviews. All participants confirmed the written information was accurate and reflective of their experiences. Hatch (2002) articulates this process as one in which participants themselves can have the opportunity to not just verify the researcher findings but possibly extend this knowledge as well. In the current study, member checking was a way to ensure participants' accounts of events were fair, complete, and delineative of their experiences.

Role of the researcher. As stated above, all qualitative research is subjective, and it is up to the researcher to process and interpret the data in ways that ensure accuracy and validity (Hatch, 2002; Maxwell, 2013; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Researchers are necessarily an integral part of the investigation and bring with them related experiences, personal goals, biases, and other unavoidable characteristics that both drive and influence the research. Plano Clark and Creswell (2010) maintain "all [qualitative] researchers should be

self-reflective about their role in the research, how they are interpreting the findings, and their personal and political history that shapes their interpretation" (pp. 286-287).

I have strong connections to the topic of the current study that are indicative of a professional who has worked within the field of special education for several years, in particular with students with HFASD. I also had a prior relationship with each of the participants in the study and served as their high school principal during their time at Valley Academy. It is indeed possible that participants felt obliged to report positively during the interviews on the social skills and executive functioning training they received while in high school; moreover, they may have experienced discomfort from sitting through an interview with their former principal. This may be particularly true if they were currently struggling in college or had already dropped out. Before, during, and after each interview, I made every attempt to make the participants feel at ease and free to share their experiences honestly and openly. It was also made explicitly clear to participants that their own identity, and the identity of the school, would remain confidential. Similarly, participants may have been uncomfortable or felt intimidated by having me present during observations at their college sites, possibly causing them to behave or act in ways different from those that were typical for them. As in the interviews, efforts were made to enable all participants to feel comfortable throughout this process, and they were encouraged to act as they usually would.

At the time of this study, I had worked at Valley Academy for over 10 years in various capacities, including as a high school teacher and high school principal, and throughout that time I worked to improve and enrich the future outcomes of the students by helping to develop the academic, social skills, and transition programming at the school. Therefore, I have developed opinions and ideas about the nature and quality of the program. I have observed many of Valley Academy's high school graduates struggle as they moved on to college, while others ultimately succeeded. It is this relationship to the students (both current and former), to the school, and to my ideals as a professional that informed this study and drove the research.

The act of being reflexive throughout the data collection and analysis allowed me to maintain an awareness of potential influence and biases. At the same time, as Peshkin (1993) notes, "Qualitative researchers can create meaningful interpretations from acquired data by providing insights that change behavior, refine knowledge, identify problems, clarify complexity, and develop theory" (p. 24). This was the ultimate goal of this study and a key reason for selecting a qualitative methodology as its foundation.

Chapter Summary

As young adults with HFASD transition from high school into postsecondary educational institutions, there continues to be a need to investigate how the transitional supports they received in high school, specifically social skills and executive functioning instruction, influence their academic success in college.

Of particular importance are the perceptions of the students themselves about their experiences in high school relative to this instruction and how those skills have translated into their college experiences. This interpretive descriptive qualitative study seeks to listen to the voices of these young adults in order to gain clarity and understanding as to the efficacy of the transition supports they received at a specialized high school designed and certified to serve students with HFASD. Through the use of semistructured interviews, observations, and document and artifact analysis, the ideas, opinions, and experiences of these individuals were obtained and carefully analyzed in detail in order to determine how, or whether, such supports influenced their postsecondary experiences. The study employs a critical realist and interpretive framework to construct meaning from the participants' own experiences. Study findings contribute to the development of qualitative data regarding the effectiveness of school-based transition programs supporting the needs of students with HFASD as they transition to college.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness and adequacy of

social skills and executive functioning transitional supports for high school

students with HFASD, as deduced from the postsecondary transitional

experiences of students who received such supports while in high school. As

stated in Chapters 1 and 3, the following three research questions were posed in

order to accomplish this purpose:

1.   How do social skills and executive functioning instructional supports
      during high school influence the postsecondary academic success of
      college students with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder?

2.   What are the perceptions of these students regarding the efficacy of the
      social skills and executive functioning instructional supports they received
      in high school?

3.   What, if any, additional training did these students feel would have been of
      benefit to their postsecondary transition and current academic
      experiences in college?

Data were gathered using semistructured interviews as the primary source

of information collection. A total of 10 face-to-face interviews were conducted,

with each interview lasting from 25 to 64 minutes. Additionally, observations of

47 to 114 minutes were conducted at the college sites of seven participants.

Field notes were taken during the observations, and portions of the participants'

comments were documented verbatim, so as to preserve as accurate an account

of the transpired events as possible. Data from artifactual evidence in the form of

college transcripts, work samples, or examples of participants' methods of

maintaining personal organization were also obtained from all 10 participants.

Table 2 summarizes the sources of data collected from each participant.

Table 2

Data Collected from Study Participants

Participant	Interview	Observation	Document/Artifact
Amanda	X	X	
Antonio	X	X	X
Daniel	X		
Darren	X		
Emily	X	X	X
Henry	X	X	X
Kyle	X	X	X
Lawrence	X		
Rick	X	X	
Roshelle	X	X	X

This chapter is organized according to specific themes that developed

from the words of the participants in the study and throughout the process of data

analysis; each of these themes, and the patterns of experiences they reveal, is

directly relevant to the three research questions stated above and in previous

chapters. Participants' comments are provided verbatim in an attempt to capture

the true intent and meaning of their words to the greatest extent possible.

The first section of the chapter describes how participants applied the

social skills they were taught in high school to their college environment,

including the perceived effectiveness of, or association with, those learned skills on their college experiences. Participants' challenges with managing college social relationships are also described; some participants shared their reflections about ways they were working to improve their own social functioning. Throughout this section, data gathered from observations at the college sites of participants enrolled in college at the time of this study are also included as accordant with the theme.

The second section offers a description of participants' experiences as they relate to executive functioning skills, as indicated through interviews, observations, and artifact analysis. Participants described the similarities and differences regarding academic expectations and workload between high school and college. They also talked about the strategies and methods they used to manage their college responsibilities, including some they carried with them from high school. Participants described how they planned their college course schedules, as well as if and how they used the various supports and accommodations available to them at their college sites; two participants talked about advocating for their needs directly to their college professors. Some of the participants also shared their personal methods of organization and task planning, as well as online resources they used in their classes.

The third section of this chapter details participants' thoughts and ideas about gaps or inadequacies in the transition supports they received in high school as they pertained to their postsecondary experiences. Specific themes include inadequate social skills, executive functioning, and self-advocacy

instruction in high school, and insufficient college preparation and advisement in high school.

The final section of the chapter provides a summary of the study findings.

Social Skills

One of the greatest obstacles faced by individuals with HFASD when transitioning from high school to college is the complex navigation of the social culture that is characteristic of college settings. Establishing meaningful relationships and maintaining friends in college is a critical component of college success (Adreon & Durocher, 2007) and is a skill at which individuals with HFASD are intrinsically challenged. During the interview process of this study, participants were asked to describe their social experiences while transitioning from high school to college. A range of responses was provided; participants frequently commented on the positive aspects of their social development resulting from their high school instruction in this area, as well as on some of the challenges they continued to encounter within the college environment. They also provided detailed descriptions of college social life as it pertained to both academic circumstances and to the social milieu. During several observations at the college sites of participants, data were also collected that furthered the examination of participants' ability to maneuver throughout the social atmosphere of a college campus.

Meeting People and Making Friends

Five participants detailed positive social relationship-building encounters and considered their knowledge of social practices, as learned through social

skills instruction and experiences in high school, sufficient to enable their

success during their postsecondary transition following completion of high

school.

Roshelle recalled that, upon her initial enrollment in college courses, she

would come to know the people in her classes by talking about a common topic

of interest, such as the class itself, or about current events. She reported, "We'd

talk sometimes, and sometimes we would bond over nerdy subjects, or the news,

like, 'Hey, did you hear about this?,' or we'd talk about the class." Roshelle

specifically connected her social abilities in college to what she was taught in

high school:

> The social skills have helped me to realize that if I want to talk to
>
> someone, we need to talk about common interests and stuff especially.
>
> That's what relationships are built on. It's been reiterated in the social
>
> skills classes many times.

During a researcher visit to Roshelle's college site, she was observed to engage

in conversation with a female classmate after she had arrived early to her class.

After entering the classroom, she sat in the front row directly in the center of the

row. There was one female student in the room who was also sitting in the front

row. She greeted Roshelle and the two of theme engaged in small talk for about

ten minutes. Although it was not clear to the researcher what they were

conversing about or if it was directly related to the class, the two of them

appeared relaxed and seemed to be enjoying the interaction. When the female

peer opened a book on her desk, Roshelle took her textbook out of her backpack

and also quietly began to read. This brief social interaction was reflective of

Roshelle's ability to engage peers in conversation based on shared

circumstances.

Similarly, Henry described making friends in his classes and identifying

with them based on their shared fields of study. He also connected his

knowledge of social strategies to training he had received in high school:

Well, since my time at [Valley Academy] I've learned to make friends at

[college] through the classmates in my classes. Sometimes I see them

again in other classes I take in my major and we start to hang out more

and maybe study or eat   something. Whatever the classes I take now, I

know lots of people in those classes cause I have connections with them.

I have the confidence to make friends, it started at [Valley Academy] and

evolved once I got to college.

Likewise, when he started college, Kyle was able to make friends by

seeking out peers with similar interests, both in his classes and in a political club

he joined during his freshman year. As he stated, "There are people there like

me that I can really relate to . . . we have lots of things to talk about that we're

into." He later elaborated,

Starting in college it was really hard making friends sometimes. I really

had to remember how to do it and keep trying. People pretend to be your

friend but they're not really your friends, you know? And then once I got

into the [student club] I was able to make friends there better because

they had similarities like me . . . I was able to connect well. It was like in

[Valley Academy] clubs [student-directed activity groups designed to

facilitate social interactions based on shared interests].

One evening at Kyle's college site, he was seen engaging in four verbal

interactions with peers in his class before, during, and after the class ended. All

of the exchanges were brief and were directly related to the course content,

except for the final exchange in which he briefly said goodbye to a classmate.

Lawrence found it easier to talk to people in his relatively small classes

within his college major (as compared with larger, lower-level courses) and, in

particular, when they had a common theme or project around which to center

their conversation. He reported,

Some of the classes had over 100 people in them, and it was

overwhelming. . . . My major [courses] were much smaller, maybe 30

people in there and it was a lot more easy and, also, I was more social

because we talked about our different research that we were gathering for

a project we were doing.

Rick also talked about meeting new people in his classes. He remarked,

"I'm pretty, I guess, friendly with people in class . . . in different classes that I've

taken. Now in classes, in a major with people that also have the same interests,

I think we've all become friends in a way." Rick was also observed to interact

with peers in his class. While perched on the edge of a planter box just outside

of his classroom, he chatted with two male peers; their conversation centered on

the potential topics for the lecture that day, as well as a written assignment that

was due in a few weeks. At one point in the conversation, he was overheard

saying, "I haven't started [the paper] yet, but I plan to next week. . . . It should be no big deal."

These examples demonstrate participants' abilities to effectively apply social skills learned and practiced in high school to the college setting. Participants were able to recall specific strategies taught to them in high school and subsequently use those strategies to initiate new friendships based on common areas of interest.

Meeting People Through Peer Collaboration

Three participants were able to develop relationships with peers in their classes through the formation of study groups and connected these experiences to ones they had in high school.

Henry compared his college peer collaborative experiences with those of his high school English class. He stated,

[In English] we always had to do those group projects and presentations. I'm glad I had that practice cause now I can do that no problem. . . . We meet up, like, for projects and with groups, and I'm, like, always assigning everyone the different roles.

During a visit to his college site, Henry was scheduled to give a group performance in one of his classes. There were five people in his group, and when it was time for them to present, they all dressed in costume and Henry served as the narrator for their presentation. He appeared very confident throughout the 10-minute performance and clearly seemed to be enjoying

himself, as evidenced by his wide smile. His group worked comfortably together, and it was obvious they had spent substantial time collaborating on their project.

Emily also talked about working with peers and reported on ways in which they would communicate with one another between classes:

We do a lot of group projects and have a lot of study groups. We text each other like before [in high school], we have each other's numbers, so we text each other if we need any clarification or we need to meet up on campus for any reason.

Antonio attributed his positive collaborative efforts with skills attained in high school as well. He stated,

I study with a lot of my peers all the time. In fact, I don't mean to brag or anything, but a lot of the students come to me for studying. It's kind of like at [Valley Academy] when we had to do the group formations only I can pick my group now thankfully!

These three participants were comfortable working with unfamiliar peers in their college settings and directly attributed their abilities to do so to similar experiences in high school. They each recalled specific examples from high school in which they had been required to collaborate during group projects and detailed the ways in which they were able to generalize acquired skills from those experiences to their current circumstances.

Seeking Out Familiar Relationships

Three participants stated that they prolonged high school friendships in college, or actively sought out peers they were moderately acquainted with in

high school, but with whom they were now more interested in establishing a friendship. By doing so, they were able to cultivate meaningful relationships without having to develop them with wholly unfamiliar peers.

Emily recalled, "I ended up looking up people I kind of knew [from high school] or was just Facebook friends with . . . that I knew were also going to [college] . . . and we started hanging out more."

Kyle remarked that he "reunited with a former student from [Valley Academy] and we're actually better friends now."

Roshelle said, "I have some friends from [Valley Academy] who also have autism . . . we took some classes together at [college] and are still keeping in touch a lot."

By seeking out prior relationships, these participants demonstrated social initiative. They were each able to recognize the value of pursuing friendships with individuals with whom they had a common background and were, therefore, able to provide themselves with opportunities for meaningful social connections.

Social Experiences With Friends

The college-going experience offers many social opportunities, and several participants described their involvement in routine social activities with their friends that are very characteristic of a typical college setting. Two of these participants also referenced their high school experiences when talking about these social interactions. When explaining what he does with his friends, Antonio shared quite a few examples. He said,

Usually we just eat at one of the school eateries or nearby, or we go to the gym or something, and just hang around. Sometimes we go off campus, things like that. It's like what I would do with my friends in basketball and soccer at [Valley Academy] only we couldn't go off campus there.

When asked to elaborate specifically about the off-campus activities, he shared, "Usually [we] just eat lunch, like maybe go to Dave and Buster's, or go to Buffalo Wild Wings and watch a hockey game, or something." During a researcher visit to his college campus, Antonio was observed grabbing a bite to eat at the campus food court. As he was ordering his food at the counter and waiting for it to be prepared, he chatted amicably with the young woman behind the counter. When his food was ready, he remained at the counter and talked with her for about five more minutes before taking his tray to a nearby table and sitting down alone to eat. Antonio later revealed to the researcher that he had known the woman since the previous summer when he had held a part-time job in the same restaurant.

Roshelle shared that she and her friends,

[We] will talk to each other, same as we did [in high school], we'll walk around the mall, or hang out at one of our houses, and we'll talk to each other about what's going on in our lives. We also really love to watch horror movies!

Daniel talked about engaging in similar activities with his friends: "We would generally go to concerts together, hang out at each other's houses, go hiking, play video games, [and] watch movies."

Kyle described the various social activities he engages in with his friends:

We go out, see some movies. Mostly me and my friends from [student

club], we go to the movies, grab a bite to eat after the meeting,

bowling...any outdoor activities or movie nights at someone's house or

game nights. Just something that keeps us entertained.

Similarly, Emily stated that she and her friends, including her boyfriend,

"go to the movies and the mall, [we] hang out, watch TV. Sometimes we go

swimming if it's hot enough."

These participants were able to initiate and maintain relationships based

on similar interests. Two of the participants referenced specific high school

experiences, and all were able to employ skills learned or practiced in high

school throughout their regular high school social activities.

Social Struggles

The ability to continually navigate the social culture inherent throughout

the college environment requires social competence and the resourcefulness to

adapt to unfamiliar challenges and obstacles. One participant reported socially

struggling with the initial transition from high school to college and found she

yearned for the familiar social relationships she had enjoyed at Valley Academy:

Emily disclosed, "I missed high school, honestly. At first, I was thinking to myself,

I want to go back to high school. . . . I missed everybody."

Another participant reported difficulty with maintaining or advancing social

relationships beyond casual interplay. Darren stated,

I would make some friends, but it's just a matter of reaching out to them in person. It's hard for me to do that all the time. Texting someone or calling someone occasionally, it's fine, but I'm very shy of talking to people. I think part of it is I don't like the sound of my own voice. I usually won't Skype or talk on the phone unless I really, really have to. People kind of just drop away then.

Amanda mentioned the unexpected qualities of some of the people in her college classes and how she was uncomfortable interacting with them. She stated,

I thought they would be younger and mature. I don't like the ones that talk to me, so I sit on the other side [of the classroom]. It's kind of weird with the older people too . . . yeah there was this older guy who was twice my age, he was calling me a lot for a project. But I told him to stop and he did.

During visits to Amanda's college site, she was not observed to engage in any social interactions or to speak with any peers or to her professor. At the start of the observation, she sat at an outdoor table with one other person also seated at the table. The two of them did not engage one another. Amanda browsed her phone for about 35 minutes, before putting on her backpack and walking to class. When she arrived at her classroom, the door to the room was propped open and Amanda entered the room and sat down in the third row of desks. There were nine other students in the classroom, two of whom were seated immediately in front of, and adjacent to, Amanda's desk. She did not acknowledge them and

continued to browse her phone until the professor entered the room. She then put her phone in a side pocket of her backpack and took out a spiral notebook and pen.

Kyle talked about his ongoing struggles with preserving appropriate social boundaries with friends; at the same time, he talked about how these challenges contributed to his ability to self-reflect and to alter his behavior in a manner that ultimately benefited his social relationships:

Sometimes I struggle with boundaries and not knowing when to . . . let it go. Sometimes I get very anxious if I don't hear from someone after a long period of time and I'll text them over and over . . . like, too much. I used to do that with social media. I've been off social media for about six months now. I just felt like . . . this isn't good for my mental health and I'm going to lose friends. Especially after I had some problems with the opposing gender and they blocked me. But we've talked, and I don't blame them for blocking me. Just because they blocked me doesn't mean they possess ill will towards me . . . it's all good now.

Kyle later stated, "I sometimes have a tendency of going on a tangent and talking about one thing. But I know I'm not supposed to do that, so I try not to or to stop if I start."

Emily reported that her friends have expressed she can be difficult to converse with on occasion; she states, "I guess some people have noticed that I interrupt people way too much. I'm glad they tell me though, so I know and can catch myself. . . . I tell them I'm working on that." She later stated, "When I work

in groups on projects and stuff, I have to watch myself. . . . I can kind of dominate and overtake things."

Roshelle reflected on her internal battles with self-confidence, "I'm still learning how not to compare myself to others. That's the hardest part. I try really hard not to let it keep me from doing the things I know I need to do . . . but I'm actually improving a lot."

Each of these five participants recounted continuing social struggles in their college environments. Although the challenges described by each of them differed significantly, they are indicative of potential deficiencies in their high school social skills instruction. These participants also revealed varying abilities to employ ToM thought processes when reflecting on their circumstances and attempting to self-correct their mistakes.

Executive Functioning

Executive functions play an important role in both the academic and social success of students at all ages (Best et al., 2009; Miyake et al., 2000), including young adults in college. College students with executive functioning challenges can encounter difficulties with time management, task planning and prioritizing work, resisting distractions, problem-solving, and flexible thinking (Kleinhans et al., 2005). During face-to-face interviews, participants in this study were asked to reflect on the various executive functioning skills they had been taught in high school and if they continued to use any of those same practices in college. Participants were also asked if they felt these skills aided their transition from high school to college. Researcher observations were conducted at the college

sites of some participants; those results, as they relate to the executive functioning capacity of participants, are also outlined below.

Additionally, five participants shared their school binders and/or the technological methods they use to manage their college workload. These data are also included in the current section of this chapter.

Comparing and Contrasting High School and College

Five participants talked about the variances in academic practices and study methods to which they had to adjust during their transition to college. Antonio described his initial experience:

It was a bit of a shock, kind of. I don't think shock is really the right word, but it was different. The work was a lot more challenging, because you had to be way more independent and as I mentioned, you know, how like the subject matter wasn't watered down or politically correct like it was in high school. The professors weren't there to say, "alright homework is due next week" or something, like they would remind you of when a test is just out of common courtesy, but that was only every once in a while.

When specifically asked about how the college academic workload differed from that in high school, Antonio responded, "It's a lot about just being in a different environment, different amounts of detail required, different study habits, and stuff like that." When asked to elaborate, he stated, "In high school you can just read it once or twice and I can get an A on the test, but while in college you honestly need to be obsessed with it. And I mean that literally." Antonio later expanded on this idea when he stated, "Cause I remember at [Valley Academy] I could just

bang through the homework no problem, and studying for the tests I could just read it a couple of times and nail it on the test."

Henry talked about his confidence with the material but mentioned the unfamiliar methods of test taking and homework completion, as well as the occasionally increased workload:

My first semester, it was like I knew the material, like it was familiar. Later on, in later semesters, some of the material's familiar from what I learned in high school, it's pretty much the same thing, but just an extra little bit [of] college level in terms of tests, online homework, stuff like that. They have Scantrons, like written forms, and sometimes the test is completely online, so you have to do it through that . . . in terms of term papers, slightly more [are assigned].

Amanda briefly remarked on the differences in course structure at her college and how the college format benefited her. She commented, "You can actually do the homework on the internet, which is so much better cause I don't have to have the books and don't lose the papers."

Roshelle reported an increase in the college academic workload and commented on her ability to successfully manage her responsibilities:

I'd say it's definitely more studying for college, but that's because the material is more condensed. It depends on the class, but for some odd reason, I'm still able to get it done. I think it's because I do better with shorter deadlines.

Emily also talked about how academic college expectations departed from those in high school:

It wasn't homework every day [in college]. We had projects, and we had tons of reading from our textbook. You just had to keep track and know to do it. In English classes I had to write tons of papers and read a couple of depressing books, actually. Which I found interesting.

Darren commented on his struggles academically in college:

Well, it just seemed like there was, I was just not prepared, because it just seemed like the homework felt overwhelming. Some of it I did, some of it I didn't, or I did it incorrectly. I just couldn't figure out how to keep up or to make myself do it on time.

It was clear from their responses that some of the participants felt better prepared for the college academic rigor and responsibilities than did others. The degree to which participants discerned the postsecondary responsibilities facing them upon making the transition to college varied significantly and is indicative of gaps in their high school transitional planning.

Generalizing Strategies From High School to College

Seven participants talked about specific methods or strategies they used in college to track their assignments, maintain a personal schedule, or otherwise manage their college academic responsibilities. Four participants specifically referenced organizational strategies they had been taught in high school and equated them to their current ability to maintain an effective system of organization. Several also shared artifactual evidence in the form of their

personal binders, daily planners, course syllabi, or electronic calendars or apps on their smartphones.

Emily shared her personal methods of keeping track of her responsibilities and assignments:

I look at the syllabus all the time and, you know, the study guides. I also have folders that I put my assignments in because I don't want them to get all wrinkly. That's something I picked up at [Valley Academy]. But sometimes I still stuff everything in my backpack. I still have a habit of doing that.

Emily shared with the researcher two binders that she used for the two courses in which she was currently enrolled. Each one had the corresponding course syllabus neatly hole punched and inserted at the front, and each contained a good deal of lined paper, as well as notes she had taken either by herself or with the assistance of a peer note taker. The syllabi were marked up with notes in the margins next to assignments, and completed assignments were crossed out in pen. There were also various other handouts slipped into the front pockets of the binders. In her backpack, Emily also had a red plastic pouch that contained about a dozen pens, pencils, and highlighters; she remarked that she preferred to keep an ample supply on hand so she wouldn't be caught unprepared.

Antonio also described his system for organizing his assignments and recalled that it was a system with which he was familiar:

It's basically the exact same thing I've been doing since ninth or 10th grade like we had to do at [Valley Academy]. I put each class in with

color-coded folders or color-coded notebooks, cause I'd like go okay, the green one is [college course], the red one is [college course], and the blue one is just for personal papers or something like that. So I put each assignment based on color basically. I also use my phone now for reminders. That's different I guess from the little planners [Valley Academy] always gave the students at the beginning of the semester, they always helped me stay on track and stuff.

Antonio also showed the researcher his binder that he used for all of his classes. It was about 4-inches think and had an image of his college logo on the front. Each course had a separate tab with a different colored folder at the front of each section containing the course syllabi and other important documents for the class. There were also several sheets of lined paper in each section along with notes he had taken.

Similarly, Amanda mentioned the required use of a daily planner while in high school and commented on her continued use of that strategy by using her smartphone. She stated, "The homework planner at [Valley Academy] was helpful cause you just write down the homework and you look in it yourself and you do it. I still do that but on my phone." She also talked about keeping her assignments organized and how she was currently struggling in that regard. She explained, "They [high school teachers] helped me throw out the junk papers in my backpack and binder and keep the ones that were very important. Now I keep everything, but stuff goes missing or I lose track of it."

Rick mentioned his challenges with organization in high school, but that he developed some strategies, even if minimally used in high school, that he was able to apply in his college setting. He stated, "I think [I learned] most of it from [high school]. Especially with organization, because in high school, I wasn't very organized. But I remembered some of what that was." When asked to elaborate on the strategies he recalled from high school, Rick responded, "just keeping binders I guess and writing down everything."

Lawrence also referred to some of his struggles in high school and how those experiences enabled the growth of skills he could use in college:

On occasion during busy times at [Valley Academy], I would get a little lost. I would have to write down everything in my homework planner if I had various tasks, rather than try to remember everything. I guess being at [Valley Academy] prepared me because they helped us organize a little bit as well, and then that led [me] to be more aware of the assignments in college.

Roshelle recounted her struggles with organization in high school, as well as her ongoing difficulties in this regard. She describes methods her former high school teachers would use in their attempts to aid her development of organizational strategies:

I had trouble, it was a problem. Especially [former high school teacher], and my therapist, she'd get frustrated. I wouldn't have my binder organized or even bring it from home or whatever. I wasn't organized enough by their standards. They would try to get me organized. They'd

put little reminders on my folders and stuff, and to turn in my homework. I

used to forget a lot, especially with print homework, it's more difficult. It's

kind of difficult unless the teacher reminds you. Luckily at my college, the

professors remind me to turn in my work. They have to…even

neurotypical students will forget sometimes.

Kyle remarked that keeping track of his assignments and turning in

homework was not a challenge for him in high school or college. He shared, "I

was always pretty good at organizing and deadlines and whatnot. I just have it in

the back of my head like nothing. I've never had struggles with that." He

subsequently showed the researcher two reminders he had scheduled on his

phone; one was for an upcoming midterm and the other was for a final exam. It

appeared he had only scheduled reminders for one of his current classes.

Each of these participants was cognizant of the importance of maintaining

a system of organization in their college environments, and four of them were

able to explicitly generalize learned organizational skills from high school to

college.

Strategies and Methods Used

The data also revealed further information about strategies five

participants used in order to continue management of their ongoing academic

responsibilities as they proceeded through college. Although the participants

described situations and circumstances not experienced in high school, they

were able to appropriately employ executive functioning and self-advocacy skills

to enable their college success.

Henry mentioned his use of online resources and course syllabi as a means of remaining up-to-date on his course responsibilities:

Sometimes they have a certain class online, and they have reminders, like there's a certain site where you can see all of your assignments and what the due dates are. [The professors] also give you syllabi that have all the necessary info. Sometimes it changes, depending on the professor and timing, but it's pretty accurate.

Henry logged on to his course website and showed me lists of assignments and where he was expected to post responses to his professor's questions and peers' comments. He also pointed to areas on the website in which his professors uploaded their lecture presentations and said he often referenced these notes for tests.

Antonio shared that, in order to remain disciplined, he would use self-talk and motivational videos. He stated, "Usually, I'm like 'Do you want to fail a class, or do you want to excel?' I also watch a lot of motivational videos. Whether it's off YouTube or a John Burk video, or something like that."

Roshelle was quite thoughtful in strategies she employed to manage her workload. She reported, "I like the [college] schedule, because it gives me time to do my homework in between. I often utilize my off days, when I don't have class, go to the library at [college] and do my homework." She later explained,

I get distracted by the noise, as I pretty much always have been distracted by external noises. Even internal noises, even though I've been getting a little better at that, like with my own thoughts in my head. What helps me

is I'll put on a timer for an hour and a half . . . I'll block my tasks, like

categories. I'll categorize my tasks, which I've found very helpful these

last few months or so. It really helps get the job done. I mean, I can't do

everything, because some things are just meant to be done at certain

times or certain places that I'm not always at. Another trick that I do is I'll

say, "When I'm here, I'll do this, so I can do this later." I use that little

formula.

During a subsequent researcher observation at the library on Roshelle's college

campus, she again indicated that she frequently visited the library to complete

her schoolwork. She stated, "I come to the library once it opens, pretty much,

which is around 7:40. Usually I'll study, or I'll catch up on personal work." During

the observation, Roshelle exhibited her use of some of the strategies she

described during the interview. Once she was seated at a table, she put on

headphones and used her phone to turn on some music. She continued to use

her phone for about two minutes, pulled out a small binder, and began to write.

After 20 minutes, she stood up from her seat, pulled a bottle of water from her

backpack, and took a drink. She then sat back down, used her phone for a

minute or so, and then pulled a textbook from her backpack and began to read.

After another 20 minutes, she packed up her things and walked to the restroom.

Immediately following that portion of the observation, Roshelle explained,

I'll pull out my phone and put on my music and then get my Any.do to-do

list. I'll open up Any.do, and I'll put on a timer, and I'll do one block of

tasks until the timer ends, or until I'm done with that block. Then I'll give

myself a three-minute stretch break in between, just to stretch, or drink

water, or whatever, or even message back people, if there's anyone who

needs a message, and I'm not hungry or thirsty or need to go to the

bathroom or anything.

Lawrence talked about the methods he used to prioritize his academic

tasks:

I managed to get most of my work turned in on time. Usually, when I

would hear about [an assignment], I'd see what I could do to, at first, start,

and then if I have to continue, I'll do that later. Usually, I would get the

smaller stuff out of the way that way. Usually, this led to getting the

hardest stuff at least started at first, and then, hopefully, eventually, I finish

by the time a project is due.

Later in the interview, Lawrence expanded on his strategy:

I continuously looked at the syllabi and, also, I would have notes to

specifically mark the really important dates when I had exams or certain

long-date assignments. . . . I would be sure to notify myself that that's the

deadline, and I have to do certain things within that time.

Aside from the strategies such as the ones described above, two

participants developed relationships with their professors, often disclosing their

disability in the process, as a means to self-advocate for their specific learning

needs.

Lawrence explained, "I would occasionally mention [my diagnosis of HFASD] to my professors . . . so they might understand some traits of some things of me better . . . and so they could understand my accommodations."

Antonio also stated that he often alerts his professors to his disability if he finds himself struggling in a class. He stated, "Basically, if something's not going right, [I] walk up and talk to them. I'll just be honest and tell them my situation."

These participants demonstrated executive functioning and self-advocacy skills that were appropriate to the college setting and that indicated a self-awareness of their individual needs in this regard. While none of these individuals referenced specific skills taught in high school, their descriptions were indicative of skills taught and practiced at Valley Academy.

Planning Course Schedules

During the interviews, participants were asked to describe the manner in which they determined the number of classes to sign up for within a given grading period. Three participants specifically sought the assistance of an academic counselor to assist them in developing an educational plan. The counselors aided them in selecting courses that served as necessary prerequisite courses or that fulfilled their degree requirements, advised them on a manageable workload, or directed them toward professors who would likely be sensitive to their particular needs.

Roshelle initially attempted to select courses on her own but eventually chose to meet with an academic counselor who guided her decisions. She revealed, "I really should have met with a counselor when I started there, but I

didn't. I made a mistake. I ended up picking a [course] class twice, and failing twice, that I didn't need."

Emily described her experience:

I talked with my counselor and it's based on my schedule, or based on the requirements for the degree, or whatever you want to receive. And then I'd go from there. I can do two [courses] at a time; I've had pretty good experience with that. I tried three, but two or one is better depending on my schedule.

Henry explained his strategy:

It's like based on prerequisites, like for general ed, if you can choose a fun class that's comfortable and be able to fulfill that requirement, then you do it, and based on timing and schedules like, "Okay, what's a good time to start each day of classes?" I also talk to my counselor about the best professors that work with her and me and are easy to talk to.

Before he dropped out of college, Darren selected his college courses based on his personal interests. He stated, "I took [a particular course] because I was actually interested in that. It's a fairly simple thing, either you want to do something, or you don't, what's the big mystery?"

Four participants said they chose their academic course load according to what they believed they could manage. Lawrence recalled,

Towards the beginning, I was able to take up to 12 credits or four classes. As the levels got increased, for 300 or 400 levels, it was a little more

difficult, so I needed a little more time, so I ended up taking around nine [credits] each semester towards the end.

Daniel said, "Well, I usually [took] maybe three, but no more than four [courses]." When asked to expand on his reasoning, he stated, "Well, for one, because I don't want to overwhelm myself, two, more study time. If I take like two or even three classes, less headaches."

Antonio used various methods to determine his course selections, including some of those already described above. When he initially began college he said, "I just thought they were interesting. At least at [2-year college] I just took whatever class was interesting and whatever was transferable, literally everywhere, I was just careful about that." He later stated, "Yeah . . . I can do a full load and do just okay in all of them, or I just take a few at a time and do great in all of them."

Rick spoke about the struggles he initially faced when transitioning to college; he specifically talked about signing up for too many classes and becoming overwhelmed. He explained, "Right. At first it was class load. I thought I would just jump right in. . . . I think for most people that doesn't work. I ended up dropping most of them a few times and then stopping [college] for a while." He later continued, "That was the first time. Then I started out small, I started taking two classes, which was better."

While enrolled in high school, participants were not tasked with designing their academic schedules. Some participant responses reflected a lack of awareness on how to thoughtfully select an academic course load that was

manageable, thus demonstrating a lack of knowledge about this particular responsibility.

Using Disabilities Services

Several participants discussed their current or previous affiliation with the Disabilities Services Office at their respective colleges. Many of the participants actively sought academic accommodations and supports through this entity, although the range of services the individual participants used varied significantly. One participant did not elect to use any additional services through the Disabilities Services Office.

Lawrence expressed that he routinely used both testing accommodations and in-class accommodations. He shared, "I would use testing accommodations, like alternative [setting] and extended time, and in-class accommodations like shared notes."

Emily also used a combination of accommodations and specified,

The accommodations I received are note-taking, so someone in the class can take notes for me, because I have this issue, where, I'm not really an auditory learner, I'm more of a visual learner. Because if I see it on the board, I'll write it down, but I won't compute it if someone is saying it to me.

When she was subsequently asked if there were any other accommodations that she used, Emily stated, "Extra time on tests . . . in the Disabilities Office, and they give, I think, more time on the test."

Henry described his experience:

Sometimes at [college], they have this special thing, like you can request accommodations for certain tests, you schedule an appointment to take it not in class, but in a private room at a certain part of the campus, where you can have extended time on it. . . . they call it half time, so like they add 50% of what your normal time is for an exam.

He later told me, "There's also note-takers, shared notes, but I'm barely using that. It's not something I really need."

Roshelle explained that she was currently relying less on accommodations that she had previously used, "When I was at [2-year college], I would have a note-taker for most of my classes . . . but these days at [4-year college] I don't use that as much."

Antonio seemed to have a comprehensive awareness of the array of accommodations available to him and used a wide range of them to support his academic progress. In talking about the Disabilities Services Office, he said, "It's just a safety net, sort of, and they give me priority registration as well." When asked what additional accommodations he used, he stated, "Extended time, calculators because as you know statistics is really tough [also] spelling assistance, whether it's spell check, Dragon, or something like that." Antonio later expanded on this and said, "[I also use] priority seating, like being able to sit in the front of the class. I don't use note-taking though, I always write my own."

Three participants used support services more sporadically or did not experience the same levels of support from the services they received. When asked if he used such services, Rick responded,

Not the first time at [college]. The second time, I did. I didn't think . . . feel like the particular person they gave me didn't care. . . . Yeah, she was kind of hostile, I guess, and maybe a little dismissive. But overall, [it] was an attitude of . . . it kind of felt like she just wanted to get it over with. I ended up just using a note-taker sometimes.

When Daniel was asked about his use of support services or accommodations, he said,

Well I would never go take my tests there, because it feels weird for me, and because they let us go in there with backpacks, that's like automatic, they use that to cheat. I personally prefer to be in a classroom setting, because in high school, they didn't have that, where they let the kids go in a different room.

When asked about services he opted to use, he stated, "I used a note-taker." Amanda shared that she used a note-taker as well, but she stated, "I actually have to ask a different person each day and sometimes they don't want to do it." Darren shared some of the stigma he felt about having to use in-class accommodations. He recalled, "I had a person take notes for me, but you know that didn't really, for me it was just adding onto the shame of like, 'Wow, I can't even take my own notes . . . you know?" Darren was also unaware of the range of accommodations available to him; when asked if he had ever tried to record his professor's lectures, he replied, "I never thought of that, that would have been good. . . . I could always rewind."

Kyle was also seemingly unaware of the supports and accommodations available to him, although he affirmed that he had registered for services. When asked what services or accommodations he had used, he replied, "Beats me." When pressed to expand on this thought, he stated, "Nah, that's something I never need, that's why."

Participants' use of the Disabilities Services Office at their respective college sites varied substantially, as did their perceptions of its usefulness. Moreover, participants demonstrated differing levels of understanding as to the purpose of the Disabilities Services Office as well of the available supports to which they were entitled.

Student-Perceived Gaps in Transitional Instruction

During the face-to-face interviews, participants were asked to consider any areas of their transitional instruction in high school that they felt were incomplete or inadequate in terms of according them the requisite knowledge in preparation for their postsecondary transitions. The responses were varied and encompassed a range of ideas. Some of the participants reported shortfalls in social skills or executive functioning instruction, while others remarked on deficiencies in more generalized transitional instruction regarding the fundamentals of navigating college obligations and the college process in general.

Inadequate Social Skills Instruction in High School

Three participants reported on areas in which they felt the social skills instruction they received in high school was ineffective.

Darren felt that his high school social skills instruction was out of context and lacking in authenticity:

> Because it's not just about social skills, because social skills only teach you so much in the context of the cultural and ethnic and socioeconomic sort of bubble that you're in. Like this ain't an inner city public school. . . . We weren't as exposed to the real life scenarios out there. . . . I mean in public school there's kids selling drugs, and there's gangs and there's bullying.

He later added that he was not particularly fond of some of the instructional approaches to teaching social skills that were used when he was in high school. He stated, "Also, I didn't really care for the cheesy role-playing."

Antonio also commented on what he perceived to be an insular, abstracted approach to the social skills instruction he received in high school. He stated, "I wish things weren't as politically correct, honestly. . . . Rather than say 'That's inappropriate' or 'Don't say that, that could hurt someone's feelings' or something . . . cause out beyond that gate, the world is not politically correct, at all."

Roshelle also commented on her high school social skills instruction and felt it would have been of benefit to have more opportunities for practical application of the learned skills. She stated, "I think it was just the way [social skills] was taught. It was just all about the lessons, just the way it was supposed to be, so just putting them into practice more often would be good."

These three participants were candid and thoughtful in their responses. Each of them revealed areas of social skills instruction they had received at Valley Academy that they felt could be improved upon or eliminated and gave specific examples to support their opinions.

Inadequate Executive Functioning Instruction in High School

Two participants reported on areas in which they felt the executive functioning instruction they received in high school was inadequate.

Daniel talked about the general misperceptions he had about college, and how he was unequipped to manage his impulses in order to initiate tasks and to prioritize his academics:

Yeah, and plus I thought college was like the typical party, like what you see in movies, but boy, was I wrong, and reality slapped me in the face really hard. [I] failed, got a D and an F first semester. I just wanted to have fun and didn't study. The first year I dropped a few classes and didn't think it would really matter.

As she did in high school, Amanda continued to have difficulty organizing her materials in college; she acknowledged losing or misplacing important notes and then neglecting to follow up with her professor or classmates to rectify the situation:

I know I don't organize [my course materials] and need to do better. I could have used more follow up with that in high school by my teachers. They helped sometimes but not that much. I think I know how, but I guess

I just don't do it. I could always ask someone for the notes again, but I

haven't.

When she was asked to expand on this idea, Amanda seemed to lack the

confidence to take the specific steps necessary to aid her in such a situation.

She stated, "I don't think I should ask anyone since I'm the one who lost them . . .

and it's not their problem, it's mine. It's better if I just figure it out. . . . Why should

I bother them?"

Both of these participants provided honest recollections of their struggles

with executive functioning in their college settings and revealed specific areas of

knowledge and skills in which they were lacking. Moreover, in Amanda's case,

she continued to lack the skills necessary to remedy her situation.

Insufficient Self-Advocacy Instruction in High School

Four participants specifically talked about their inability or reluctance to

sufficiently self-advocate for their needs upon their transition to college. Some of

them also revealed the ways in which they worked toward overcoming their

challenges in this area.

Roshelle articulated quite expansively about the necessity of self-

advocacy instruction in high school. She pointedly remarked,

Having a more intensive program on self-advocacy would have been

really helpful for me. For me, part of it's the fear of looking stupid. As you

know, people who have [anxiety], they've got to ease themselves into it so

they can be comfortable. . . . Even now I get afraid of asking for help

sometimes. It's not easy to do, although I've been getting better. At first, I

tried to figure out everything by myself, before asking for help, but that

didn't really work out, I've noticed. What's also helped me is realizing that

some things need more help than others.

Later in the interview, Roshelle described how her skills in this regard are

improving:

Today, at the end of class, I told my professor that I needed help. That

was one of the more recent times and rare times I've asked for help, that I

advocated for myself. It's more of a common thing in recent times, in the

past month or so, than it was beforehand. Now I'm starting to get the

hang of asking people for help when I need it.

Although he did not expound as much on his opinion regarding self-

advocacy instruction in high school, Rick shared a sentiment similar to

Roshelle's. When he was asked what he would have liked to learn more about in

high school, he stated,

Honestly? To advocate or speak up more . . . I thought for a long time, I

just had to go along with things or figure them out on my own, I never said

anything. I think just speaking up about what I needed and advocating for

myself would have been a good thing.

Emily described similar challenges with self-advocacy in college and in

asking for help when it was needed:

At first, I didn't ask my professors for help with anything. I would just ask

my mom. . . . She taught me how to email them or to ask them during their

office hours if you can make an appointment. This wasn't something I was taught in [high] school . . . it was just my mom.

Darren also talked about his difficulty asking for help when he was in college. When asked if he knew where to go to for assistance with classes or guidance he stated, "Not at all. I had to learn that almost completely on my own and by then it was too late. None of that came in high school."

These participants' responses demonstrate a desire for guidance in how to effectively self-advocate for their needs. Each participant pointedly remarked on the lack of such instruction and guidance in high school.

Insufficient College Preparation and Advisement

Three participants indicated that they would have benefited from a more comprehensive approach to transitional instruction while in high school; they talked about feeling unprepared for college when it came to understanding the range of tasks and the scope of responsibilities they would need to manage, as well as where to seek out resources and support services if needed.

Daniel remarked that he was ill prepared when it came to financial literacy:

If you fail the class or drop, you'd better be sure to pay that off. Because I took too long to pay it off and I was close to it getting to collections, and that means I would have had to sell my guitars. I ended up paying it back about two months ago, so I want to say I'm returning [to college] by spring semester. But [I] really had no idea about any of that.

Daniel went on to explain that he felt he would have benefited from starting college equipped with a more thorough understanding of alternative options to

pay for his postsecondary education and to alleviate his financial burden. He stated, "I could have used, like, more information about scholarships, more about grants, financial aid. . . . It wasn't that good for me, in my college experience."

Daniel also stated that he would have liked more prior information about the transfer process from a 2-year college to a 4-year college. He stated, "and also educating us about becoming transfer students, like, who should [transfer] and when they want to transfer. Yeah, the process of transferring, I wish I knew more about that then."

Roshelle commented on her limited knowledge about how to navigate on-line college resources:

It was very difficult my first year at [college]. I got good grades, but otherwise it was just difficult. I was the first person in my immediate family to go to college since the age of the Internet. You know, it's all this Internet stuff related to college, even the applications, and the library stuff, and signing up for classes and stuff. . . . I really needed help with that.

Although his remarks were more nuanced, Henry also commented on the importance of maintaining a support system as a means of social–emotional backing, as well as a source of guidance and oversight:

Make sure you have a good support group, like make sure you have enough strength, support, and have an idea of like knowing where to go. Strategize, be smart . . . if it's too big of a step, like do one thing at a time. Planning for things ahead of time is really important. . . . It's hard to know

ahead of time what can happen, but it would help to talk about the

possible things, so you can have an idea of what maybe to expect.

While each of these participants had ready and continual access to a

college counselor in high school, they identified area in which they felt

unprepared for college.   Each of their responses marks important areas to be

considered as part of a high school transition program.

Chapter Summary

Through the use of face-to-face interviews, observations, and document

analysis of 10 participants, data were collected and subsequently analyzed for

emergent themes relevant to the three research questions stated at the

beginning of this chapter and in Chapter 1.   Significant findings include

information regarding the influence of social skills and executive functioning

instruction in high school on the postsecondary transition of the participants in

the study. The results include detailed descriptions regarding participants'

college experiences with reference to their social relationships and social

functioning. The findings also include participants' recounts of their abilities to

employ executive functioning strategies to manage their college responsibilities,

including academic organization and planning and the use of supports and

accommodations in the college setting. The findings specify participants'

perceptions about gaps or inadequacies in their high school instruction that they

felt hampered their postsecondary transitions. Significant themes include

inadequate social skills, executive functioning, and self-advocacy instruction in

high school, and insufficient college preparation and advisement in high school.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

As growing numbers of individuals with HFASD are making the transition from high school to college, the need for effective high school transition programs designed to target the specific needs of these students is correspondingly expanding (Wolf et al., 2011). Among the primary challenges encountered by individuals with HFASD are deficits associated with social and executive functions. As stated in Chapter 2, frequently reported problems among adults with HFASD include difficulties with social navigation, organizational and time-management challenges, and self-advocacy skills (Fleischer, 2012; Gelbar et al., 2014; Madriaga, 2010; Madriaga & Goodley, 2010; Van Hees et al., 2015), all of which are paramount to success in the college setting. Consequently, students with HFASD who may have the intellectual potential to perform well academically are nonetheless at an elevated risk for academic and personal failure throughout college (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). Inherent social and executive dysfunctions persist and often intensify in the college setting due to the increased expectations associated with the college experience and the fewer number of supports available to students with special needs (Gelbar et al., 2014).

This study examines the transition experiences from high school to college of young adults with HFASD and specifically seeks to investigate the impact on those experiences of the social skills and executive functioning instruction they

received while in high school. The study examines participants' perspectives on the quality of these supports and aims to contribute to the development of purposeful data regarding the effectiveness of a school-based transition program supporting the needs of students with HFASD. Three research questions were developed in order to fulfill the purpose of the research:

1. How do social skills and executive functioning instructional supports during high school influence the postsecondary academic success of college students with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder?

2. What are the perceptions of these students regarding the efficacy of the social skills and executive functioning instructional supports they received in high school?

3. What, if any, additional training did these students feel would have been of benefit to their postsecondary transition and current academic experiences in college?

This qualitative study uses a critical realist and interpretive framework in order to construct meaning from the actions, experiences, and perspectives of the young adults who participated in the study. Ten individuals with HFASD were recruited for study participation, all of whom received their high school education in a specialized school designed to serve students with social and communicative disabilities. Through face-to-face interviews, college-site observations, and artifact analysis, data were collected and subsequently analyzed for patterns and themes relevant to the research questions.

Summary of Findings

This study provides an exceptional glimpse into the lived experiences of young adults with HFASD who made the transition from high school to college. Each of the participants graduated from a high school program in which they received intensive social skills and executive functioning instruction, in addition to

a rigorous academic curriculum. Throughout the interview process, each of the participants chronicled a distinct narrative detailing their successes and struggles in college and the opportunities and obstacles they encountered. They shared their insights about being a college student with a disability and some of the challenges with which they were confronted. Importantly, the participants also shared their perceptions on the impact of the social skills and executive functioning instruction they received in high school on their postsecondary transition experiences, as well as their thoughts about areas in which their high school transition preparation was insufficient or ineffective. Common themes disclosed by the participants centered on social relationships and social functioning, the management of academic responsibilities, and the use of supports and accommodations in the college setting. Some participants also reported inadequate high school instruction in social skills, executive functioning, and self-advocacy, as well as insufficient general college advisement.

Interpretations

Each of the participants in this study experienced their postsecondary transition singularly and exclusive to their individual circumstances. However, important similarities in their experiences were revealed and warrant further examination.

Social Functioning in the College Setting

Individuals with HFASD demonstrate marked deficits in social functioning (Carter et al., 2005); these social challenges often increase with developmental

progression due to the expanded social complexities present in the adolescent and adult milieu.

Participants in the current study described their social experiences in college; the narratives they provided offered a brief look into some of the everyday events faced by college students with HFASD. Emily, Kyle, and Roshelle sought out familiar acquaintances they had known in high school or elsewhere as a means to establish relatively new friendships without having to approach wholly unfamiliar people. These individuals were also able to successfully meet and develop relationships with previously unknown peers, but they nonetheless felt the need to maintain old connections in order to retain a sense of familiarity or to preserve affiliations with people who had similar social challenges. In order to initiate personal interactions with new peers, several participants (Roshelle, Henry, Kyle, Lawrence, and Rick) identified their strategy for doing so as finding an area of common interest, namely specific areas of study and a campus club. Roshelle, Henry, and Kyle specifically recalled learning this strategy in high school as part of their social skills training and instruction and were able to successfully generalize the skill to their current environment. Similarly, Henry, Emily, and Antonio were able to develop relationships with peers in their college classes through collaboration on group projects or in study groups and also connected these experiences with similar opportunities they had had while in high school. Five participants (Antonio, Roshelle, Daniel, Kyle, and Emily) described the social activities they engaged in with their college peers; their depictions were quite typical of what one expects to

find within a college environment and were indicative of their ability to functionally participate in the college social milieu.

Through intensive social skills instruction, many of the difficulties experienced by individuals with HFASD can be ameliorated (DeRosier et al., 2011; White et al., 2006).

As discussed in Chapter 2, most intensive social skills training programs take place in a one-to-one setting outside of the school environment with limited generalizability beyond the clinical settings in which the training takes place (DeRosier et al., 2011; Reichow & Volkmar, 2010; White et al., 2006). There is some research, however, indicating that a constructivist approach to learning social skills, in which individuals learn to effectively utilize socially appropriate skills by interacting with the naturalistic world around them, is an efficacious treatment option (Moore-Gumora, 2014; Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012; Walker & Berthelsen, 2008). Since individuals with HFASD are challenged with the generalization of social skills across settings (Roeyers, 1996), it benefits them to learn such skills within the school environment (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012).

The current study examines how students with HFASD who received social skills instruction within the context of their high school environment were later able to apply those learned skills to the college setting. The findings indicate participants' ability to do so. In several instances, participants described situations in which they were able draw on specific strategies they recalled as having been taught to them and subsequently had opportunities to meaningfully apply during their time in high school, in particular how to initiate a conversation

and how to meet new people. It can be surmised that having been provided opportunities to learn and to repeatedly practice interpersonal skills in the presence of their peers in a naturalistic environment while in high school, they were afforded the capacity to generalize the skills beyond high school and into the college setting.

Many participants in the study reported social challenges upon their postsecondary transition. Darren described his difficulty with sustaining relationships due to his discomfort with verbal communication, and although he was aware of his weaknesses in this regard, he was unwilling or unable to persist in his relationships. Amanda was uncomfortable interacting with particular individuals in her classes and pointedly avoided social contact with others in her environment, including a college professor. Kyle disclosed his ongoing struggles with maintaining appropriate boundaries on social media with female associates, as well as his tendency to monopolize conversations about his personal interests or opinions. Emily also discussed her communicative challenges and described her propensity to interrupt others during conversation or to dominate during discourse.

Each of these challenges as described by the participants is characteristic of the social challenges associated with HFASD. Although each of the participants received explicit instruction during high school in all of these specific areas of deficit, their challenges persisted in the college setting. Nonetheless, for the most part these individuals were cognizant of their deficits and able to reflect on the ways in which they could potentially overcome some of their difficulties.

Their abilities to engage in introspective thought is a demonstration of their capacity to employ ToM thought processes that were likely gained through effortful learning, presumably in large part attributable to intensive social skills instruction in high school.

Participants in this study remarked on social successes and challenges primarily relating to interpersonal interactions, social pragmatics, and fixating on topics of interest. There are a number of additional social impairments commonly inherent to individuals with HFASD that were either not experienced or not mentioned by the participants in this study; such deficits may include difficulty expressing empathy and emotions and challenges with interpreting nonliteral language, among others (Krasny et al., 2003; Landa, 2000; White et al., 2006). It is possible that the participants in the current study encountered challenges in these areas but elected not to mention them. It is also conceivable that they did not struggle in these areas due to their own innate characteristics and development, or perhaps due to having overcome such deficits through social skills instruction and practice in high school and elsewhere. A reasonable determination includes a combination of all these potentialities.

Executive Functioning and Self-Advocacy in the College Setting

The majority of individuals with HFASD have some degree of impaired executive function (Narzisi et al., 2013). Executive function is a broad term that refers to the cognitive processes that enable the regulation, control, and management of thought and action, including working memory, inhibition, and cognitive flexibility (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Kleinhans et al.,

2005; Miyake et al., 2000; Narzisi et al., 2013). Executive functions play a critical role in both academic and social success (Best et al., 2009; Miyake et al., 2000) and, as the transition to college brings with it increased responsibility and independence, deficits in executive function can substantially impair a person's ability to progress in the college setting. Self-advocacy is also important for college success, and the ability to self-advocate is dependent to large extent on an individual's capacity to employ executive functioning skills, including the ability to recognize when help is needed (Schreiner, 2007).

Participants in the current study described varying amounts of success and challenge when confronted with the need to employ executive functioning skills within the college environment. Over half of the participants (Antonio, Henry, Amanda, Roshelle, Emily, and Darren) specifically noted the significant differences in academic practices to which they had to adjust upon their college transition. Some of these participants commented on the increased academic rigor, but the primary emphasis was on the increased independence they gained in college and the subsequent need for self-management. The majority of participants (Emily, Antonio, Amanda, Rick, Roshelle, Kyle, Lawrence and Henry) described the methods and strategies they used to track their assignments and to manage their personal schedules and other responsibilities. Several in this group (Emily, Antonio, Rick, Lawrence, and Roshelle) referenced specific strategies they learned and used in high school that they brought with them to college and adapted to their current settings. Lawrence and Antonio

acknowledged that they benefited from the disclosure of their disability to their college professors, as a means of explanation and self-advocacy.

Many of the participants were keenly self-aware of their executive dysfunction and had developed clear strategies and action plans in order to maintain their self-discipline and motivation and to seek help when needed; this strong sense of self-awareness was intrinsic to their ability to adapt to the college setting. Executive functions and ToM are intricately connected constructs, as the cognitive processes enabled through executive functions are needed to facilitate a person's ability to interpret the mental states of others and of themselves (Riggs et al., 2006). These individuals had developed acute ToM through instruction and practice in high school, thus providing them with the capacity to self-reflect and to problem-solve.

Other participants struggled with executive dysfunction in college, particularly in the areas of planning, time management, and organization. Darren, who ultimately dropped out of college, revealed the difficulty he had with the college workload and with managing a schedule to complete his assignments. He was unable to employ the skills needed to plan his study schedule and to finish his assignments on time; he was also seemingly disinclined to seek assistance from his professors. Rick, who also dropped out of college but later returned, talked about the adverse decision he made to initiate his college experience by signing up for more courses than he could realistically manage. Similarly, Daniel was ill informed about the realities of college rigor and responsibility and found he was unequipped to manage his time or to handle the

workload; he failed or dropped several classes during his freshman year. Amanda found herself struggling with the same organizational difficulties she had experienced in high school and, while she was well aware of her challenges in this area, was unable to take the steps necessary to improve her situation.

In the above examples, the participants revealed a significantly reduced agency to resolve the executive functioning deficits they faced. Rick and Daniel, however, were able to eventually modify their behavior in response to new information—an essential feature when exercising executive functioning skills and strategies. As previously discussed, self-awareness is vital to self-regulation, as is the ability to effectively use internal and external cues in order to determine when and how to initiate and maintain goal-directed actions (Rabin et al., 2011). By having the capacity to recognize and act on these cues, these two participants were able to facilitate positive change.

Several participants in the study discussed their affiliation and use of the Disabilities Services Office at their respective colleges. The degree to which participants used the services varied significantly, as did their perceptions and opinions as to the usefulness of such services. Several participants (Lawrence, Emily, Henry, Roshelle, and Antonio) were cognizant of their own challenges and knowledgeable about the accommodations available to them in order to support their individual needs. Rick, Daniel, and Amanda reported they found the disabilities services lacking, although two of these individuals declined to actively pursue additional services beyond what was initially and readily offered. Darren

and Kyle openly acknowledged a lack of awareness as to the range of support services potentially available to them.

In order for participants to self-advocate for their needs, they needed to have a clear recognition of their weaknesses and deficits and a willingness to acknowledge a need for support in those areas. Effective self-advocacy also requires skilled communication, which is certainly an area in which some of the participants may also exhibit deficits; however, it was apparent that certain participants were less willing to seek supports either due to feelings of stigmatization, irrelevancy, or both.

Student-Perceived Gaps in Transition Instruction

During the interview process, participants in the study were asked to consider any areas of their high school transition programming that they felt were incomplete, inadequate, or altogether missing in terms of maximizing their potential for a successful postsecondary transition. Participant responses indicated four significant themes that merit further discussion: inadequate social skills instruction in high school, inadequate executive functioning instruction in high school, insufficient self-advocacy instruction in high school, and insufficient college preparation and advisement in high school. While many participants remarked on positive attributes of all the above areas, it was clear that some participants deemed important components of each these areas to be significantly lacking in their high school transition program.

Inadequate social skills instruction in high school. Darren remarked on the unrealistic and contrived nature of the social skills instruction he had

received in high school. He felt the scope of the instruction was overly narrow and unreflective of real life and that the content was filtered in such a way as to obviate discussions about more complex subject matter or challenging situations that students frequently encounter and must maneuver in high school. Antonio expressed a similar sentiment; he felt that the high school social skills instruction he received was excessively distilled of realism and lacking in genuineness. Roshelle lamented the lack of opportunity she had in high school to practically apply the skills she was taught; she commented on the method of instruction and how the focus was primarily on "lessons" rather than on ways to naturally practice the skills.

Social skills are most effectively taught and acquired in contextualized, real-life scenarios. The above participants indicated the social skills instruction they received in high school was decontextualized or overly contrived and, to some extent, failed to meet their expectations and their needs. Although the social skills instruction they received in high school presented students with naturalistic opportunities for both acquisition and practical application of skills, it fell short of addressing the needs of these particular participants and was therefore incomplete in scope.

Inadequate executive functioning instruction in high school. Two participants in the study specifically mentioned their executive functioning deficits and how they may have benefited from more support in this area while in high school. Daniel remarked on his impulsivity and his inability to initiate and

prioritize tasks. Amanda mentioned her extreme disorganization and how she wished her high school teachers had offered her more support in this arena.

Similar to social skills, executive functioning skills need to be assessed on an individual basis and are best taught within the context in which they are expected to be used. In the above instances, the participants in the study required more intervention than they received in high school and were thus unable to acquire the needed skills for success in their college settings. Daniel was eventually able to learn from his initial difficulties and managed to rectify his situation; however, Amanda continued to struggle with her executive dysfunction.

Insufficient self-advocacy instruction in high school. Four participants in the study disclosed their inability or unwillingness to self-advocate for their needs in the college setting and explicitly mentioned their lack of preparation in this area. Roshelle talked about her anxiety about asking her college professors for help and how she was actively working on her skills in this area. Rick and Darren both shared that they had lacked knowledge of self-advocacy when transitioning to college and were largely unaware of when and how to ask for help when it was needed. Similarly, Emily shared that she had learned self-advocacy skills from her mother rather than from her high school teachers.

The topic of self-advocacy, while not specifically or wholly affiliated with social skills or executive functioning skills per se, was a recurring theme throughout the data corpus and is integral to the postsecondary success of all college students. Due to the extraordinary needs of college students with

HFASD and the social and executive functioning deficits inherent to this population, the ability to self-advocate becomes even more imperative to college success; unfortunately, the ability for these individuals to do so effectively is inevitably diminished. Participants revealed in the above accounts that they indeed struggled to advocate for their needs in college. The high school attended by these students was, by design, a restrictive educational model. It is possible that, due to its insulated design, students at the school were not permitted ample opportunity to practice self-advocacy skills when encountering difficulty. Rather, participants potentially overrelied on school staff, and possibly parents, to ensure that their individual needs were being sufficiently and appropriately addressed. In other words, it is possible that participants' high school teachers did not demand that their students self-advocate independently before relaying expectations or offering assistance and were too quick to provide their students with help when needed.

Insufficient college preparation and advisement in high school.
When they were asked about areas of their high school transition program that were inadequate, three participants mentioned not having received generalized information that is conducive, and indeed invaluable, to a smooth postsecondary transition. Daniel talked about his financial illiteracy upon entering college and his deficient knowledge of scholarships, grants, and other resources to aid with college expenses. He also wished for more information regarding the transfer process from a 2-year college to a 4-year college. Roshelle commented on her limited knowledge about how to navigate the myriad online college resources to

which she was exposed, and she reported being overwhelmed with the task. Henry discussed the critical importance of maintaining a support group and knowing where to seek help when needed.

The above examples, while subjective, were mentioned by participants as areas of need important to them and no less meaningful to the participants than other items discussed in this study. Daniel and Roshelle specifically alluded to the challenges they faced because their ignorance of these realities, and both felt they would have benefited from this information prior to beginning college.

Implications

The following implications are derived from the interpretations of the findings presented above and extend these interpretations to include steps for action in terms of special education policy and practice for high school students with HFASD.

Implications for Policy

Students with HFASD are increasingly desirous of a postsecondary education because of the benefits a college degree offers (Webb et al., 2008); however, the pressures and demands inherent to this experience present considerable challenges for students with HFASD (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). High school transition programs for students with HFASD must be comprehensive in scope and designed to address the holistic needs of this student population. Although current federal mandates require transition planning for all high school students with disabilities (IDEA, 2000), many high school programs are relatively limited in scope and do not include individual transition planning as part of a

larger, integrated school-wide transition program with embedded support services throughout.

The development of student-directed IEP goals for the passage from high school to college and the inclusion of those goals into a student's transition plan, related activities, and support services is essential; however, these goals cannot be addressed in isolation from the larger school environment and experience. Transition planning must extend far beyond the IEP process. In order to maximize the effectiveness of a high school transition program and to increase the likelihood of students acquiring and generalizing learned skills beyond the high school setting, high school transition programming for students with HFASD must be joined with all facets of the school experience; importantly, they should include explicit, targeted instruction in social and executive functioning skills, as well as related skills such as self-advocacy and self-management.

Moreover, it is important for high school counselors to play an expanded role alongside the rest of a student's IEP team, in order to further systematize the supports needed for students with HFASD to commence successfully into postsecondary education. As with all high school students, those with HFASD should be provided with clear and useful information regarding the support services available to them in the college setting, as well as other critical information needed to succeed in the college environment, such as funding options and testing and admission requirements. Since individuals with HFASD inherently lack the enterprise to problem-solve, equipping them with as much pertinent information as is reasonable upon entering college will strengthen their

chances of success and is immensely critical to their continued advancement. This process should be recursive in design and coordinated with all stakeholders involved in a particular student's impending postsecondary transition.

Research investigating postsecondary participation and success rates for students with HFASD indicates that high school experiences have a crucial impact on a student's likelihood of enrollment in postsecondary education, as well as on their ability to succeed in the college environment (Chiang et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2016). However, there is little existing research that examines the relationship between the purposeful participation of students with HFASD in their transition process and postsecondary outcomes for these students. The current study further points to the critical need for deliberate, holistic programming for this student population that includes students' ongoing, active, and meaningful participation as part of a thorough and integrated high school learning experience. Current educational policy, while broadly addressing the transition needs of secondary students with disabilities, could benefit from expansion in the above areas and throughout the existing secondary educational system serving students with HFASD.

Implications for Practice

To facilitate the success of young adults with HFASD in their postsecondary transition, it is of primary import to not only develop but also rigorously implement high school transition programs that address the distinct needs of this student population.   Attention needs to be given to the essential components of high school transition programs for students with HFASD.

Individuals with HFASD frequently exhibit social and executive functioning deficits; therefore, a comprehensive high school transition program designed to serve students with this disability must include explicit and thorough instruction in these areas. Moreover, college students with HFASD must be able to contend with their ongoing challenges and deficits; consequently, self-advocacy is a skill that must be taught and practiced throughout a high school transition program as well.

  Social skills instruction. Social skills instruction must be targeted to every student. While it is unrealistic to expect any social skills curriculum to address every single need of each individual in a particular program, it is critical to provide ongoing assessments of students' social needs and to afford authentic opportunities for learning to the greatest extent possible. Moreover, multiple and varied opportunities for practical application of learned skills need to be provided outside of a classroom setting; these opportunities should include impromptu, uncontrived "teachable moments" as much as is practical in a high school environment. Teaching social skills in context promotes learning under naturalistic conditions, subsequently facilitating retention and advancing generalization to alternative settings (Moore-Gumora, 2014; Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012). The current study demonstrates the significance of a multifaceted approach to teaching social skills, including didactic instruction, role play, and contextualized learning, in order to maintain both generalizability and durability of the learned skills.

Executive functioning instruction. Executive functioning instruction must also be targeted to an individual's specific needs, and as with social skills, these needs should be routinely assessed and appropriate instruction must be delivered as necessary. Educators who can identify impairments to executive functions within an individual student will be able to institute instruction to develop new skills and to build supports and strategies to compensate for areas of deficit. Students with HFASD are challenged with the generalization of skills across settings (Roeyers, 1996). The current study shows that contextualized learning is useful for acquisition of learned executive functioning skills. It can be surmised that the most effective learning of such skills takes place when presented in genuine situations to which the skills must be applied. This study further indicates that strategies must be initiated with a high level of direction repeatedly presented within the school setting and in a structured, consistent manner. The acquisition and generalization of executive functioning skills and strategies should be facilitated by a multitude of opportunities to apply and adapt what has been learned to a variety of real-life situations.

It is critical that executive function instruction for students with HFASD as part of a high school transition program also include the development of self-regulation and self-management skills. As with other executive functioning strategies, students should exercise their developing skills through numerous, directed opportunities; however, it is imperative to provide opportunities for students to direct their own actions with decreasing teacher supervision in order

to promote the independence necessary for a successful postsecondary transition.

Self-advocacy instruction. This study has shown that the ability of an individual to self-advocate is crucial for college success and, due to the communicative challenges inherent in students with HFASD, this is often an area of weakness for these students. High school students with HFASD must be made aware of their learning styles and preferences as well as strengths and challenges related to their disability (Schreiner, 2007). Upon entering college, these students need to be armed with knowledge of how their disability may impact their learning, what accommodations they may need in college to be successful, how and where to communicate those needs appropriately and effectively, and their rights and responsibilities under the law as a college student with a disability. Each of these skills requires self-advocacy which, as part of a comprehensive high school transition program, must be taught and practiced within a contextualized, authentic setting.

It is also vital for high school students with HFASD to meaningfully participate in their IEP meetings during which transition plans are discussed in detail with multiple team members present (J. Martin & Williams-Diehm, 2013; Morningstar & Liss, 2008; Wei et al., 2016). These meetings can serve as excellent opportunities for students to practice self-advocacy skills while expressing their needs relating to their disability. It is critical that educators take the time needed to explain the purposes and procedural processes of these meetings to every student, so that their participation is truly impactful and

valuable to their future postsecondary experience (Griffin et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2012).

Comprehensive treatment approach. Teaching social skills, executive functioning strategies, and self-advocacy to high school students with HFASD should include a combination of pedagogical strategies, including didactic instruction, role play, performance assessment and feedback, and multiple, varied opportunities to practice all skills in genuine situations. A multidisciplinary team approach is essential and should include input from a student's teachers, school counselor, other service providers, parents, and the student. The fundamental aim of developing these important skills is to enable every individual to perform at their maximum potential with as much independence as possible, and it is only through a comprehensive approach that this goal is truly attainable.

School counseling and information sharing. Finally, as part of a comprehensive high school transition program, attention needs to be given to the complete provision of general information required for a postsecondary transition. With so much regard paid to the treatment and development of the skills described above, it is vital to remain cognizant of more conventional matters and responsibilities and to avoid the omission of essential, practical knowledge necessary for entering college. It is important to share, with both students and their parents, information about the college admission process, financial aid, scholarship and grant information, housing information, and information pertaining to the transfer process. College site visits are encouraged for high school students with HFASD in order to provide awareness and insight into some

of the expected adjustments involved in a postsecondary transition. Collaboration with the respective Disabilities Services Offices may also further assist students with site visit activities, as well as the pending transition process (Wolf et al., 2011). A proactive approach such as this may further provide transitioning college students with much needed supports and strategies through the establishment of contact before the start of the first college term (Glennon, 2001).

As greater numbers of high school students with HFASD are pursuing postsecondary degrees, it is becoming increasingly important to understand, and actively address, the college preparatory needs of these students (Glennon, 2001; Wolf et al., 2011). School leaders must work together with educators, counselors, and policy makers to develop comprehensive and effectual transition programs for these students that include high-quality social skills, executive functioning, and self-advocacy instruction and practice, as well as appropriate and complete counseling services.

Implications for Future Research

When reviewing the findings of this study, it is important to note that it included a significantly restricted data source with only 10 individuals participating in the study. Future research examining the transition process from high school to college for young adults with HFASD might include a greater number of participants than were included in the current study, as a bigger sample size would allow for greater generalizability to the larger population of students with HFASD. Moreover, it would be beneficial to investigate the

transition from high school to college for students with HFASD who attend a less specialized high school setting. The majority of high school students with HFASD do not attend a nonpublic school setting such as the one attended by participants in this study; it is, therefore, important to investigate transitional supports and programming that may be implemented successfully within the context of a more typical high school setting.

Additional research studying the effects of social skills instruction that takes place primarily in a school setting would also benefit the further understanding of social skills acquisition for students with HFASD. With most social skills programs taking place within the confines of a clinical setting (DeRosier et al., 2011; Reichow & Volkmar, 2010; White et al., 2006), more information is needed about how students with HFASD can best learn critical social skills within a contextualized, real-life school environment while also being provided with the necessary didactic instruction. Similarly, additional scholarly research looking at how best to teach executive functioning skills to high school students is currently lacking. This study supports a constructivist approach to teaching social and executive functioning skills, in combination with explicit instruction, and consistent assessment of skills and performance feedback. Additional studies would further strengthen knowledge about these approaches to teaching such skills.

Recommendations

The following three recommendations were developed as a result of reviewing literature relevant to the current study and from the study's findings

and are meant to further support the needs of high school students with HFASD in preparation for their transition to postsecondary education.

Designing High School Curriculum for All Students

In order for students with HFASD to receive the extensive exposure and guidance needed to develop the social, executive functioning, and critical thinking skills that are necessary for college readiness, curriculum and transition programming must be in place in high schools. Adding to the complexity of this endeavor is that systems must be designed that address the specific needs of every individual in a particular school, rather that implementing a one-size-fits-all approach. A further complication is feasibility of such program expansion to meet the significantly varying needs of students. This is particularly challenging within large, comprehensive high schools that serve large numbers of students with widely differing backgrounds and needs. It is important to design transition programs that attend to students' needs in critical areas but that do not lose sight of the academic rigor that is also essential for college success; therefore, it is imperative to establish priorities on how to spend valuable time and resources.

With the current emphasis on the development of 21st-century skills throughout the high school curriculum, specific curricular strategies and lessons can be designed that maximize the development of such skills through the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal constructs already embedded within the existing Common Core State Standards. The teaching of these skills must not necessarily be domain specific, but rather considered from a more generalized perspective, as a part of an integrated, holistic learning experience.

The teaching of social, executive functioning, and self-advocacy skills can be incorporated into general education lessons. Academic, social, and executive functioning skills are not independent and mutually exclusive of one another. To advance in the school setting, students need social and executive functioning skills to collaborate, plan, adjust the course when things do not go as planned, and so on; when such situations occur, they should be used as valuable teaching moments. In this way, students with HFASD will have increased opportunities to both acquire and maintain vital skills for college success that are in addition to the supplemental training and instruction they receive through specific transition programming and supports. Such integrated curricular and transition programs can be developed across school settings with the goal of maximizing *every* student's potential, including those with HFASD.

Teacher Capacity and Development

The capacity for all high school teachers—not only those who teach special education—must be expanded to include competencies associated with the development of skills beyond the academic domain. The reinforcement of 21st-century skills and their integration with the academic content is not necessarily a common element of curriculum and instruction regularly employed by teachers (National Research Council, 2011); often the focus of instruction remains on academic components and knowledge. Consequently, the teaching of the 21st-century skills that are embedded in the current standards will necessitate alterations in curriculum and teacher practices that will require a considerable amount of teacher development (National Research Council, 2011).

High school teachers will need support both to understand the essence of these 21st-century skill constructs and to learn how to establish and foster them in their students. Moreover, it will be useful to instruct teachers in ways to connect these concepts to overall social and executive functioning needs for students.

Adding to teachers' burden is the reality that special education teachers are often not taught *how* to deliver effective social skills and executive functioning instruction to students, whether as part of an isolated program or within a contextualized environment. All of these concerns have ramifications both for teacher preparation programs and for teacher in-service professional development and deserve ample consideration.

Role of the High School Counselor

As mentioned previously, it is essential for high school counselors to begin to play an expanded role in supporting the transition needs of students with HFASD. While many high school counselors are skilled in college and career planning with neurotypical students, it is beneficial to further extend these skills to constructively facilitate the transition to college for students with HFASD. Implementing appropriate interventions for students with this disability will require school counselors to have a strong knowledge of the challenges associated with HFASD; an understanding of disability-related topics, including legal implications; and a familiarity with postsecondary support programs (Krell & Persusse, 2012). They should also be prepared to actively participate in the development of appropriate IEP and planning goals. High school counselors may also collaborate with postsecondary disability service providers to further enable a

smooth transition to college. Training in disability-related topics and special

education issues is not currently a part of counselor preparation programs

(American School Counselor Association, 2009); therefore, acquiring a proficient

understanding of these matters could prove challenging for many school

counselors.

This degree of overall knowledge and collaboration is not current standard

practice for school counselors in supporting students with HFASD in preparing

for college transition (American School Counselor Association, 2009). However,

the findings of this study, coupled with the growing numbers of students with

HFASD making the transition to college, point to the need for additional school

counselor preparation in these areas. Moreover, this information suggests that

instruction regarding the college transition for students with HFASD would be a

relevant professional development topic for high school counselors.

Summary of the Dissertation

College campuses across the United States are serving increasing

numbers of students with HFASD. These students are faced with exceptional

academic and social barriers to postsecondary success (Glennon, 2001; Pinder-

Amaker, 2014; Wolf et al., 2011) and require significant and targeted instruction

and training in the social and executive functioning skills intrinsic to their college

transition and advancement (Glennon, 2001; Wolf et al., 2011). There is limited

research that considers students' views and opinions about the transition from

high school to college and how the transitional supports they received in high

school impacted their experiences. This qualitative study examined 10

individuals' perceptions about the social skills, executive functioning, and other supports they received in high school on their college transition and sought to contribute to the development of effective school-based transition programs for high school students with HFASD.

Study findings highlighted areas of strength in the transition instruction the participants received in high school, as well as significant gaps in that instruction. Common themes shared by participants centered on social relationships and social functioning, the management of academic responsibilities, and the use of supports and accommodations in the college setting. Participants also reported on inadequate high school instruction in social skills, executive functioning, and self-advocacy, as well as insufficient general college advisement.

The results from the study support the development of integrated high-school based transition programs that incorporate the teaching and learning of social and executive functioning skills, as well as self-advocacy skills, throughout the curriculum using a variety of evidence-based practices. This undertaking is particularly challenging in comprehensive high schools serving students with widely varying needs. School leaders, educators, and counselors can adopt and employ numerous college readiness interventions and teach useful strategies for the benefit of all students in the school, including those with HFASD. This latter group brings with them additional obstacles to surmount and necessitates the need for additional support to succeed.

Teacher capacity can be significantly expanded in order to better support integrated, comprehensive transitional programming for all students, especially

those with HFASD. The results from this study also present guidelines for high school counselors to administer targeted college readiness counseling to students with HFASD so they are thoroughly prepared in readiness for their postsecondary transition.

Recommendations, derived from the lived experiences of the participants in this study, as individuals with HFASD who made the transition to college, provide guidance on advancing in these important endeavors.

Collectively, the results and recommendations from this study provide a platform for school leaders, educators, and future researchers to develop and thoughtfully examine evidence-based transition programs for high school students with HFASD. Provided with an equitable chance to succeed, and with rigorous and meaningful supports in place as part of a comprehensive high school transition program, the outcomes for young adults with HFASD who make a postsecondary transition can be extraordinarily favorable.

REFERENCES

Adreon, D., & Durocher, J. S. (2007). Evaluating the college transition needs of individuals with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders. *Intervention in School & Clinic, 42*(5), 271-279.

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

American School Counselor Association. (2009). *The ASCA national model: A framework for school counseling programs* (2nd ed.) Alexandria, VA: Author.

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-336, §§ 12131-12165, 104 Stat. 328 (1990).

Apperly, I. A., Warren, F., Andrews, B. J., Grant, J., & Todd, S. (2011). Developmental continuity in theory of mind: Speed and accuracy of belief–desire reasoning in children and adults. *Child Development, 82*, 1691-1703.

Auger, R. W. (2013). School counselors and children's mental health: Introduction to the special issue. *Professional School Counseling, 16*(4), 208-210.

Barnhill, G. P. (2014). Supporting students with Asperger syndrome on college campuses: Current practices. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities.* doi:10.1177/1088357614523121

Baron-Cohen, S., Leslie, A. M., & Frith, U. (1985). Does the autistic child have a "theory of mind?" *Cognition, 21*, 37-46.

Bauminger, N., & Kasari, C. (2000). Loneliness and friendship in high-functioning children with autism. *Child Development, 71*, 447-456.

Best, J. R., Miller, P. H., & Jones, L. J. (2009). Executive functions after age 5: Changes and correlates. *Developmental Review, 29*, 180-200.

Bock, A. M., Gallaway, K. C., & Hund, A. M. (2015). Specifying links between executive functioning and theory of mind during middle childhood: Cognitive flexibility predicts social understanding. *Journal of Cognition and Development, 16*, 509-521.

Brinckerhoff, L., Shaw, S., & McGuire, J. (1992). Promoting access, accommodations, and independence for college students with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 25*(7), 417-429.

Browning, J., Osborne, L. A., & Reed, P. (2009). A qualitative comparison of perceived stress and coping in adolescents with and without autistic spectrum disorders as they approach leaving school. *British Journal of Special Education, 36*(1), 36-43.

Caelli, K., Ray, L., & Mill, J. (2003). "Clear as mud": Toward greater clarity in generic qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 2*(2), 1-24.

Carlson, S. M., & Moses, L. J. (2001). Individual differences in inhibitory control and children's theory of mind. *Child Development, 72*, 1032-1053.

Carter, A. S., Davis, N. O, Klin, A., & Volkmar, F. R. (2005). Social development

    in autism. In F. R. Volkmar, R. Paul, A. Klin, & D. Cohen (Eds.), *Handbook*

    of autism and pervasive developmental disorders: Vol. 1. Diagnosis,

    development, neurobiology, and behavior (pp. 312-334)*.* Hoboken, NJ:

    John Wiley & Sons.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC]. (2016). Autism and

    Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network.

Chiang, H.-M., Cheung, Y. K., Hickson, L., Xiang, R., & Tsai, L. Y. (2012).

    Predictive factors of participation in postsecondary education for high

    school leavers with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental*

    Disorders, 42(5), 685-696.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among*

    five approaches (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed*

    methods approaches (4th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. W., Shope, R., Plano Clark, V. L., & Green, D. O. (2006). How

    interpretive qualitative research extends mixed methods research.

    Research in the Schools, 13(1), 1-11.

Dente, C. L., & Coles, K. P. (2012). Ecological approaches to transition planning

    for students with autism and Asperger's syndrome. *Children and Schools,*

    34(1), 27-36.

DeRosier, M. E., Swick, D. C., Davis, N. O., McMillen, J. S., & Matthews, R.

  (2011). The efficacy of a social skills group intervention for improving

  social behaviors in children with high functioning autism spectrum

  disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 41*, 1033-

  1043.

De Vries, M., Prins, P. J. M., Schmand, B. A., & Geuts, H. M. (2015). Working

  memory and cognitive flexibility-training for children with an autism

  spectrum disorder: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Child*

  Psychology and Psychiatry, 56(5), 566-576.

Durodoye, B. A., Combes, B. H., & Bryant, R. M. (2004). Counselor intervention

  in the postsecondary planning of African American students with learning

  disabilities. *Professional School Counseling, 7*(3), 133-140.

Edelson, S. M. (n.d.). *Theory of mind.* Retrieved from Autism Research Instituted

  website: https://www.autism.com/understanding_theoryofmind

Fisher, M., & Meyer, L. H. (2002). Development and social competence after two

  years for students enrolled in inclusive and self-contained educational

  programs. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 27*,

  165-174.

Fleischer, A. S. (2012). Alienation and struggle: Everyday student-life of three

  male students with Asperger syndrome. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability*

  Research, 14(2), 177-194.

Gelbar, N. W., Smith, I., & Reichow, B. (2014). Systematic review of articles describing experience and supports of individuals with autism enrolled in college and university programs. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 44*(10), 2593-2601.

Glennon, T. J. (2001). The stress of the university experience for students with Asperger syndrome. *WORK: A Journal of Prevention, Assessment, & Rehabilitation, 17*(3), 183-190.

Griffin, M. M., Taylor, J. L., Urbano, R. C., & Hodapp, R. M. (2014). Involvement in transition planning meetings among high school students with autism spectrum disorders. *The Journal of Special Education, 47*(4), 256-264. doi:10.1177/0022466913475668

Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Heatherington, S. A., Dirant-Jones, L., Johnson, K., Nolan, K., Smith, E., Taylor-Brown, S., & Tuttle, J. (2010). The lived experiences of adolescents with disabilities and their parents in transition planning. *Focus on Autism and other Developmental Disabilities, 25*, 163-172.

Hendricks, D. R., & Wehman, P. (2009). Transition from school to adulthood for youth with autism spectrum disorders. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 24,* 77-88.

Hess, J. A., Matson, J. L., & Dixon, D. R. (2010). Psychiatric symptom

    endorsements in children and adolescents diagnosed with autism

    spectrum disorders: A comparison to typically developing children and

    adolescents. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities, 22*, 485-

    496.

Hillier, A. J., Fish, T., Siegel, G. H., & Beversdorf, D. Q. (2011). Social and

    vocational skills training reduces self-reported anxiety and depression

    among young adults on the autism spectrum. *Journal of Developmental*

    and Physical Disabilities, 23, 267-276.

Hughes, C., & Graham, A. (2002). Measuring executive functions in childhood:

    Problems and solutions? *Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 7*, 131-142.

Hunt, M. R. (2009). Strengths and challenges in the use of interpretive

    description: Reflections arising from a study of the moral experience of

    health professionals in humanitarian work. *Qualitative Health Research,*

    19(9), 1284-1292.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. §1400 (2004).

Kahlke, R. M. (2014). Generic qualitative approaches: Pitfalls and benefits of

    methodological mixology. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 13*,

    37-52.

Kleinhans, N., Akshoomoff, N., & Delis, D. (2005). Executive functions in autism

    and Asperger's disorder: Flexibility fluency and inhibition. *Developmental*

    Neuropsychology, 27, 379-401.

Krasny, L., Williams, B. J., Provencal, S., & Ozonoff, S. (2003). Social skills interventions for the autism spectrum: Essential ingredients and a model curriculum. *Child & Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 12*, 107-122.

Krell, M., & Perusse, R. (2012). Providing college readiness counseling for students with autism spectrum disorders: A Delphi study to guide school counselors. *ASCA: Professional School Counseling, 16*(1), 29-39.

Kucharczyk, S., Reutebuch, C. K., Carter, E. W., Hedges, S., El Zein, F., Fan, H., & Gustafson, J. R. (2015). Addressing the needs of adolescents with autism spectrum disorder: Considerations and complexities for high school interventions. *Exceptional Children, 81*(3), 329-349.

Kurth, N., & Mellard, D. (2006). Student perceptions of the accommodations process in postsecondary education. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 19*, 71-84.

Landa, R. (2000). Social language use in Asperger syndrome and high-functioning autism*.* In A. Klin, F. Volkmar, & S. Sparrow (Eds.), *Asperger syndrome* (pp. 125-158). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Lauderdale-Littin, S., Howell, E., & Blacher, J. (2013). Educational placement for children with autism spectrum disorders in public and non-public school settings: The impact of social skills and behavior problems. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities, 48*(4), 469-478.

Laugeson, E. A., & Park, M. N. (2014). Using a CBT approach to teach social skills to adolescents with autism spectrum disorder and other social challenges: The PEERS® method. *Journal of Rational-Emotive and Cognitive-Behavior Therapy, 32(1)*, 84-97.

Lewit, E. M., & Baker, L. S. (1996). Children in special education. *The Future of Children: Special Education for Students with Disabilities, 6*(1), 139-151.

Leyser, Y., & Kirk, R. (2004). Evaluating inclusion: An examination of parent views and factors influencing their perspectives. *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education. 51*, 271-285.

Lord, C. (2011). Epidemiology: How common is autism? *Nature, 8*(474), 166–168.

Madriaga, M. (2010). 'I avoid pubs and the student union like the plague': Students with Asperger syndrome and their negotiation of university spaces. *Children's Geographies, 8*(1), 39-50.

Madriaga, M., & Goodley, D. (2010). Moving beyond the minimum: Socially just pedagogies and Asperger syndrome in UK higher education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 14*(2), 115-131.

Mandelberg, J., Laugeson, E. A., Cunningham, T. D., Ellingsen, R., Bates, S., & Frankel, F. (2014). Long-term treatment outcomes for parent-assisted social skills training for adolescents with autism spectrum disorders: The UCLA PEERS® program. *Journal of Mental Health Research in Intellectual Disabilities, 7(1)*, 45–73.

Marks, S. U. (2007). Can "special" programs for children with autism spectrum

disorders be inclusive? *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe*

Disabilities, 32, 265-268.

Martin, E. W., Martin, R., & Terman, D. L. (1996). The legislative and litigation

history of special education. *The Future of Children: Special Education for*

Students with Disabilities, 6(1), 25-39.

Martin, J. E., and Williams-Diehm, K. (2013). Student engagement and

leadership of the transition planning process. *Career Development and*

Transition for Exceptional Individuals, 36(1), 43-50.

Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd

ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

Merriam S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in*

education. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Mesibov, G. B., & Shea, V. (1996). Full inclusion and students with autism.

Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders. 26, 337-346.

Milsom, A., & Hartley, M. T. (2005). Assisting students with learning disabilities

transitioning to college: What school counselors should know.

Professional School Counseling, 8, 436-441.

Miyake, A., Friedman, N., Emerson, M., Witzki, A., Howerter, A., & Wager, T. D.

(2000). The unity and diversity of executive functions and their

contributions to complex "frontal lobe" tasks: A latent variable analysis.

Cognitive Psychology, 41, 49-100.

Moore-Gumora, C. (2014). A study of students on the autism spectrum
transformation in a high school transition program. *Educational Leadership and Administration, 25*, 77-91.

Morningstar, M. E., & Liss, J. M. (2008). A preliminary investigation of how states are responding to the transition assessment requirements under IDEIA 2004. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals, 31*, 48-55.

Myles, B. S., Lee, H. J., Smith, S. M., Chou, Y., Swanson, T. C., & Hudson, J. (2007). A large-scale study of the characteristics of Asperger syndrome. *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities, 42*, 448-459.

Narzisi, A., Muratori, F., Calderoni, S., Fabbro F., & Urgesi, C. (2013). Neuropsychological profile in high functioning autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 43,* 1895-1909. doi:10.1007/s10803-012-1736-0

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Common Core State Standards*. Washington, DC: Authors.

National Research Council. (2011). *Assessing 21st century skills: Summary of a workshop.* Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. doi.org/10.17226/13215

Ostmeyer, K., & Scarpa, A. (2012). Examining school-based social skills needs and barriers for students with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders using participatory action research. *Psychology in the Schools, 49*(10), 932-941.

Peshkin, A. (1993). The goodness of qualitative research. *Educational Researcher, 22*(2), 23-29.

Pinder-Amaker, S. (2014). Identifying the unmet needs of college students on the autism spectrum. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry, 22*(2), 125-137.

Plano Clark, V. L., & Creswell, J. W. (2010). *Understanding research: A consumer's guide.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.

Rabin, L. A., Fogel, J., & Nutter-Upham, K. E. (2011). Academic procrastination in college students: The role of self-reported executive function. *Journal of Clinical and Experimental Neuropsychology, 33*, 344-357.

Reed, P., Osborne, L., & Corness, M. (2006). Brief report: Relative effectiveness of different home-based behavioral approaches to early teaching intervention. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders. 37*, 1815-1821.

Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504. PL 93-112. 29 U.S.C. §794. (1973).

Reichow, B., & Volkmar, F. R. (2010). Social skills interventions for individuals with autism: Evaluation for evidence-based practices within a best evidence synthesis framework. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 40,* 149-166.

Reschly, D. J. (1996). Special education for students with disabilities; Analysis and recommendations. *The Future of Children: Special Education for Students with Disabilities, 6*(1), 4-24.

Retherford. K. S., & Schreiber, L. R. (2015). Camp campus: College preparation for adolescents and young adults with high-functioning autism, Asperger syndrome, and other social communication disorders. *Topics in Language Disorders, 35*(4), 362-385.

Richards, L., & Morse, J. M. (2007). *Readme first for a user's guide to qualitative methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Riggs, N. R., Greenberg, M. T., Kusche, C. A., & Pentz, M. A. (2006). The meditational role of neurocognition in the behavioral outcomes of a social-emotional prevention program in elementary school students: Effects of the PATHS curriculum. *Prevention Science, 7*, 91-102.

Roberts, K. (2010). Topic areas to consider when planning transition from high school to postsecondary education for students with autism spectrum disorders. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 25*, 158-162. doi:10.1177/1088357610371476

Roeyers, H. (1996). The influence of non-handicapped peers on the social interactions of children with pervasive developmental disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 26*, 303-320.

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2012). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Los

    Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

Sanford, C., Newman, L., Wagner, M., Cameto, R., Knokey, A. M., & Shaver, D.

    (2011). *The post-high school outcomes of young adults with disabilities up*

    to 6 years after high school: Key findings from the National Longitudinal

    Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) (NCSER 2011-3004). Menlo Park, CA: SRI

    International.

Schreiner, M. B. (2007). Effective self-advocacy: What students and special

    educators need to know. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 42*(5), 300-304.

Schwiebert, V. L., Sealander, K. A., & Bradshaw, M. L. (1998). Preparing

    students with attention-deficit disorders for entry into the workplace and

    postsecondary education. *Professional School Counseling, 2*(1), 26-32.

Shattuck, P., Narendorf, S. C., Cooper, B., Sterzing, P. R., Wagner, M., & Taylor,

    J. L. (2012). Postsecondary education and employment among youth with

    an autism spectrum disorder. *Pediatrics, 129*(6), 1042-1049.

Sitlington, P. L. (2003). Postsecondary education: The other transition.

    Exceptionality, 11(2), 103-113.

Tantam, D. (2003). The challenge of adolescents and adults with Asperger

    syndrome. *Child Adolescence and Psychiatric Clinics of North America.*

    12, 143-163.

Taylor, J. L., & Seltzer, M. M. (2011). Employment and postsecondary educational activities for young adults with autism spectrum disorders during the transition to adulthood. *Journal of Autism Developmental Disorders, 41*(5), 566-574.

Tissot, C. (2011). Working together? Parent and local authority views on the process of obtaining appropriate educational provision for children with autism spectrum disorders. *Educational Research, 53*, 1-15.

Thorne, S. E. (2008). *Interpretive description.* Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Thorne, S., Kirkham, S. R., & MacDonald-Emes, J. (1997). Interpretive description: A noncategorical alternative for developing nursing knowledge. *Research in Nursing and Health, 20*, 169-177.

Thorne, S., Kirkham, S. R., & O'Flynn-Magee, K. (2004). The analytic challenge of interpretive description. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 3*(1), 1–11.

U.S. Department of Education. (2007). *IDEA regulations: Secondary transition*. Retrieved from https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/Secondary_Transition_2-1-07.pdf

VanBergeijk, E., Klin, A., & Volkmar, F. (2008). Supporting more able students on the autism spectrum: College and beyond. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 38,* 1359-1370.

Van Hees, V., Moyson, T., & Roeyers, H. (2015). Higher education experiences of students with autism spectrum disorder: Challenges, benefits, and support needs. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 45,* 1673-1688. doi:10.1007/s10803-014-2324-2

Volker, M. A., Lopata, C., Smerbeck, A. M., Knoll, V. A., Thomeer, M. L., Toomey, J. A., & Rodgers, J. D. (2010). BASC-2 PRS Profile for students with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 40,* 188–199.

Wagner, M., Newman, L., Cameto, R., Javitz, H., & Valdes, K. (2012). A national picture of parent and youth participation in IEP and transition planning meetings. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 23*(3), 140-155. doi:10.1177/1044207311425384

Walker, S., & Berthelsen, D. (2008). Children with autism spectrum disorder in early childhood education programs: A social constructivist perspective on inclusion. *International Journal of Early Childhood, 40(1)*, 33-51.

Webb, K., Patterson, K., Syverud, S., & Seabrooks-Blackmore, J. (2008). Evidenced based practices that promote transition to postsecondary education: Listening to a decade of expert voices. *Exceptionality: A Special Education Journal, 16*(4), 192-206.

Wehman, P., Schall, C., Carr, S., Targett, P., West, M., & Cifu, G. (2014). Transition from school to adulthood for youth with autism spectrum disorder: What we know and what we need to know. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 25(1)*, 30-40.

Wehmeyer, M. L., Palmer, S. B., Soukup, J. H., Garner, N. W., & Lawrence, M. (2007). Self-determination and student transition planning knowledge and skills: Predicting involvement. *Exceptionality: A Special Education Journal*, *15*, 31-44.

Wei, X., Wagner, M., Hudson, L., Yu, J., & Javitz, H. (2016). The effect of transition planning participation and goal-setting on college enrollment among youth with autism spectrum disorders. *Remedial and Special Education, 37(1)*, 3-14.

Whitaker, P. (2004). Fostering communication and shared play between mainstream peers and children with autism: Approaches, outcomes, and experiences. *British Journal of Special Education, 31*, 215-222.

White, S. W., Keonig, K., & Scahill, L. (2006). Social skills development in children with autism spectrum disorders: A review of the intervention research. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 37(10)*, 1858–1868.

Wolf, L. E., Brown, J. T., & Bork, R.K . (2011). *Students with Asperger syndrome: A guide for college personnel.* Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Background Information:

1) *What college do you attend?*

2) *Why did you choose this college?*

3) *How long was it after you graduated from high school before you started college?*

4) *How long have you been attending college?*

5) *Tell me a little bit about your living situation. [Dorm? At home? Apt?]*

> *a) What factors helped you decide to (live with your mom, live in the dorms, live with a roommate)?*

6) *Tell me a little bit about your diagnosis of (Asperger's Syndrome, autism).* [PROMPT: *How do you feel about it? Do you share your diagnosis with others?*]

High School Experiences:

7) *Think back to your time at Valley Academy. What do you remember learning about in your social skills classes?* [PROMPT: *Some examples might be how to interact with others, how to work in groups or on a team, or how to accept criticism.*]

8) *Did you have opportunities to practice using the social skills you learned about at Valley Academy? Can you give me some examples?*

9) *How about your personal organization? Tell me about how your teachers at Valley Academy helped you with that?* [PROMPT: *Some examples*

might be keeping track of your homework assignments, turning in

assignments on time, or keeping your papers and binder neat and

orderly.]

10) *What do you remember about learning about self-advocacy? [PROMPT:*

Some examples might be asking your teachers for help, asking your

counselor for help, or letting your friends know if they you needed them to

act differently.]

College Experiences:

11) *Tell me a bit about starting college. What was that experience like for*

you?

12) *How are classes different?*

13) *How has the work differed between high school and college?*

14) *How has studying differed between high school and college?*

15) *Are you registered at the office for students with disabilities?*

   a) [IF ANSWER IS NO] *Can you tell me why you decided not to*

   register there?

   b) [IF ANSWER IS YES] *How has that been for you?*

   c) What services and accommodations have you used/are you

   using in your classes?

16) *Tell me about the classes you have taken/are taking at (name of college).*

17) *How did you decide which classes to sign up for?*

18) How many classes do you usually take during a (quarter, semester)?

a) What are some of the factors that help you decide how many classes to take at a time?

19) Have you ever signed up for a class that you didn't complete?

a) [IF ANSWER IS YES] *Can you tell me why you didn't complete that class?*

20) What types of grades have you been earning in your classes?

21) How do you feel about those grades? Are you satisfied…?

22) Have you had a hard time in any classes? What do you do if you are having a hard time academically in a class?

23) Are there things you learned in high school about self-advocacy that have helped you in college? [PROMPT: *Do you know who to go to for help if you need it? Do you know how to ask for help?*]

24) Tell me a bit about how you keep yourself organized [PROMPT: *Some examples might be keeping track of your schedule, managing your assignments, and finding time to study.*]

25) Did you feel like what you learned about organization in high school helped you with staying organized now? [PROMPT: *How so?*]

26) Do you ever work in groups or study with other students?

a) [IF ANSWER IS NO] *Why is that?*

b) [IF ANSWER IS YES] *What is that like?*

27) Have you made friends at (name of college)?

a) [IF ANSWER IS NO] *Why do you think that is?*

b) [IF ANSWER IS YES] *What types of things do you do with your friends?*

28) *Some students struggle in the college setting. Are there other things that are hard for you socially?*

29) *Can you think of any other supports you wish you had received at Valley Academy that you think would have helped you now?* [PROMPT: *What are they?*]

Conclusion:

30) *Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences in high school or college?*

APPENDIX B

OBSERVATION AND FIELD NOTE PROTOCOL

Participant:

Location:

Date:

Time observation begins:

Time observation ends:

Description of setting:

Description of events, interactions, and behaviors (including both verbal and

nonverbal communication).

APPENDIX C

RESEARCH STUDY CONSENT FORM

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY FULLERTON

Study Title: Transition from High School to College for Students with High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder

Researcher: Deborah Lazer, Doctoral Candidate, Dept. of Educational Leadership

You are being asked to take part in a research study carried out by Deborah Lazer. This consent form explains the research study and your part in it if you decide to join the study. Please read the form carefully, taking as much time as you need. Ask the researcher to explain anything you don't understand. You can decide not to join the study. If you join the study, you can change your mind later or quit at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of services or benefits if you decide to not take part in the study or quit later.

What is this study about?

This research study is being conducted to help understand the perspectives on the transition process from high school to college for young adults with Asperger's Syndrome or autism who received social skills and executive functioning (organizational) support while in high school. The results will contribute to the development of improved high school transition programs supporting the needs of students with Asperger's Syndrome or autism.

You are being asked to take part because you are an individual with Asperger's Syndrome or autism who received social skills and organizational support while in high school, and then continued on to college.

Taking part in the study will take about 30 – 45 minutes for the interview portion and up to 1 hour for a possible observation at your school.

You cannot take part in this study if you do not have a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome or autism, if you did not receive social skills and organizational supports in high school, and if you did not attend college. Additionally, you cannot take part in this study if you do not agree to participate in a recorded interview.

What will I be asked to do if I am in this study?

If you take part in the study, you will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview lasting approximately 30 – 45 minutes. The interview will take place at a location of your choice. You may also be asked to allow yourself to be

observed in your college setting for approximately 1 hour. The total time of your involvement is expected to be approximately 30 – 100 minutes.

The interview questions will inquire about your Asperger's Syndrome or autism and your experiences in high school and college. The questions will specifically ask about the social skills and organizational supports you received in high school and how they affected your college experiences.

You may refuse to answer any question during the interview.

You will be asked to share your unofficial academic records and any other documents, such as your personal calendar or course work that you think is helpful to the researcher in understanding your college experience.

The interview will be audio recorded in order to provide an accurate transcription of the information you report.

Are there any benefits to me if I am in this study?

If you take part in this study, you will potentially help future high school students and young adults with Asperger's Syndrome or autism prepare for, and experience, a successful transition to college.

Are there any risks to me if I am in this study?

The potential risks from taking part in this study may include emotional discomfort as you answer the questions. You may choose to end the interview or withdraw from the study at any time.

Will my information be kept anonymous or confidential?

The data for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. No published results will identify you, and your name will not be associated with the findings. Under certain circumstances, information that identifies you may be released for internal and external reviews of this project.

A pseudonym will be assigned to your name in the interview transcript, as well as in all written documents associated with this study, including the published dissertation.

All recordings and written notes from interviews, and hard copies of the transcription will be stored in a locked and secure location. Digital copies of transcriptions and all data files collected throughout the processes of data collection and analysis will be stored in a password protected data file located in a cloud-based storage system.

Only the researcher will have access to the data.

The interview will be audio recorded in order to provide an accurate transcription of the information you report. This is a requirement for participation in the study.

The data for this study will be kept for 5 years.

Are there any costs or payments for being in this study?

There will be no costs to you for taking part in this study.

You will receive a $25.00 Visa gift card for taking part in this study. If you decide to quit the study you will still receive the $25.00 Visa gift card. The gift card will be given to you following the interview.

Who can I talk to if I have questions?

If you have questions about this study or the information in this form, please contact the researcher:
Deborah Lazer
dlazer@csu.fullerton.edu
323-578-3056

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or would like to report a concern or complaint about this study, please contact the Institutional Review Board at (657) 278-7640, or e-mail irb@fullerton.edu

What are my rights as a research study volunteer?

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to be a part of this study. There will be no penalty to you if you choose not to take part. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time.

What does my signature on this consent form mean?

Your signature on this form means that:
- You understand the information given to you in this form
- You have been able to ask the researcher questions and state any concerns
- The researcher has responded to your questions and concerns
- You believe you understand the research study and the potential benefits and risks that are involved.

Statement of Consent

I have carefully read and/or I have had the terms used in this consent form and their significance explained to me. By signing below, I agree that I am at least 18 years of age and agree to participate in this project. You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep.

Name of Participant (please print) _____

Signature of Participant_____Date _____

Signature of Investigator_____Date_____

If you are requesting permission to audio or videotape; create a second signature line for that. An individual could conceivably be willing to participate, but not to be included in an audio or videotape.

Your signature below indicates that you are giving permission to audio/video tape your responses.

Signature of Participant_____Date_____